

BOOK REVIEWS

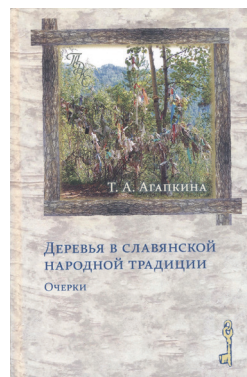
SLAVIC ARBORETUM IN THE LIGHT OF ETHNOLINGUISTICS

Tatiana Agapkina 2019. *Derev'ia v slavianskoi narodnoi traditsii: Oчерki*. Moscow: Indrik. 656 pp. In Russian.

The year 2019 saw the publication of an ethnolinguistic¹ monograph by Tatiana Agapkina, *Derev'ia v slavianskoi narodnoi traditsii: Oчерki* (Trees in the Slavic Folk Tradition: Essays), dedicated to the ethnobotanical fragment of the Slavic traditional culture. The book had been awaited by the academic humanitarian scholars and readers for a long time: the author started to publish her first articles on the mythopoetic dimensions of trees, their role in the folk beliefs system and their symbolism already in the mid-1990s. Some 'portraits' were included in the fundamental five-volume dictionary of Slavic antiquities (Agapkina 1999, 2009, 2012; Agapkina & Usacheva 1995); more detailed versions of these articles appeared in journals and collected works (Agapkina 1996, 1998). T. Agapkina belongs among scientists for whom the theme they study is always linked with the publication of a fundamental monograph (Agapkina 2002, 2010), so the publication of her most recent work dedicated to the Slavic arboretum in ethnolinguistic interpretation is quite logical.

In the introduction, which precedes two sections of the book, T. Agapkina presents the analytical apprehension of her earlier studies, including an analysis of the procedures employed in the descriptions of specific realities according to a certain scheme familiar to ethnolinguists who study demonology (Vinogradova et al. 1989) or, following A. Gura, animals (Gura 1997). These methods are specific to her earlier studies. According to T. Agapkina, adherence to the scheme in drawing a tree 'portrait' frequently brings about duplication of the data that rely on a superordinate term; therefore she makes a formal retreat from this principle in the book under current comment (pp. 17–18). However, the exposition of real, ontological and 'cultural' properties of trees, which precedes the principal part of the monograph, still contains a scheme of a kind, because such a tool allows not only to classify components of the Slavic arboretum in its entire system, but also to see mechanisms of selection and the extent of symbolization of their characteristics.

The ethnocultural data of trees in Slavic traditional cultures are so extensive and manifold that the author has to apply many restrictions. Every ethnolinguistic study urges covering of many spheres of spiritual and material culture, but trees are exceptionally rich in interconnections. In the monograph, the restrictions are introduced at the very beginning. The author states that the parts of trees, such as trunks, branches, fruits, etc., are not specially investigated (though apples and nuts are described to a certain extent). The reduced choice of the material influences the very list of the trees studied (the portrait of a birch is not included in the gallery), the rejection of several mythological topics, ritual acts and complexes (wedding customs), and the set of symbolic notions



(the tree of life, the tree of knowledge). Agapkina's self-restraint, laconism, and precision can be traced through the whole monograph. It shows in her stylistics: the author often resorts to enumeration and concise description of either the principle properties of trees or the themes and plots connected with the Slavic arboretum. Types of fir tree decorations on the day when a conscript is given a send-off (pp. 90–91), folklore genres related to the theme of the continuation of human life in a tree (pp. 527–528), the conclusion and final ideas, as well as many other things are presented in such a shortened, 'epitomic' way, as T. Agapkina defines it.

Vegetative portraits presented in the first section are based on the classifying properties of trees briefly described in the chapter on classification. A set of properties for each tree, and, what is dominant, their hierarchy, are very different regarding the degree of their involvement in various spheres of traditional culture. It can be said that the tree leads the author and dictates the structure of the article or the 'portrait'. The gallery of portraits begins with the oak, the main representative of the 'world tree' (Toporov 2011) and the tree as such, and ends with the apple tree, in the mythological image of which fruitful and feminine symbols dominate. Essays are different by their length, ranging from very detailed ones (dedicated to oaks, fir trees, thorny trees, and bushes) to quite short ones dedicated to maples, sycamore maples, and ash trees. The 'portraits' also differ by their structure and availability (or absence) of a final generalization that concludes the portrait of a tree. The main and most outstanding properties of a tree, real as well as symbolic ones, show up in every essay, as well as in the most relevant folklore and ritual spheres where a tree is featured. In accordance with that, in every essay-portrait rubrics and subheadings are given, some peculiarities of the tree are distinguished, as well as its place in a certain folklore genre or in a specific ritual complex. Even the technical dressing of such diversified descriptions of trees presents a considerable difficulty. Various techniques are employed in the book: letter spacing, italics, semi-boldface italics, etc.

In the first section the author permanently makes comparisons, either explicit or implicit, which is the most important procedural principle. Due to this methodology, properties of a tree and its place in phraseology in the folklore and rites of every Slavic culture become clearer. T. Agapkina, as it were, occasionally returns to some facts and reminds her readers what they have already learnt. For instance, when describing the cult character of fir trees, she returns to similar characteristics of the oak. Comparison and differentiations assume opposition, such as real–symbolic, for example. The quaking aspen as a plant is more connected with demonology (symbolic properties), while fruiterers as a whole manifest predominantly real, not symbolic properties, etc. When collating mytho-poetic images of trees, the author transcends the borders of the Slavic world: for some trees parallels from Baltic, German, Finno-Ugric, and other cultures are given.

In the second section of her work, T. Agapkina offers another, broader perspective of the study: she proceeds from the spheres of traditional culture where trees are invoked. The section begins with a detailed analysis of the 'world tree', which involves "various spheres of macrocosm" in interaction and exerts influence on the entire mythology of trees (p. 391). The universality of this image and many-sidedness of its expressions (notions of the centre, of the vertical, and of the beginning) help to explain contradictory properties of every single tree. Here T. Agapkina is striving to provide generalizations:

she writes about classes of phenomena, about their parallelisms. For instance, she demonstrates the connection of the arboretum with all mythological characters, a roll-call of humaniform and vegetative spheres as well as demonstrates the systemic role of trees in funeral-commemorative rites. T. Agapkina has succeeded in connecting and organizing very dissimilar facts and presents them in general, at the same time drawing the reader's attention to important and interesting details.

Although it is evident from what was written above, I would like to emphasize that T. Agapkina introduces a whopping amount of material into scientific discourse. She quotes practically all folklore genres: riddles, calendric and wedding songs, lamentations, charms, proverbs, wishful clichés, aetiological legends, idioms, and many other things. Also hagiographical descriptions and historical records are used, not to mention the impressive ethnographic corpus of data. The bibliography comprises over 1,200 sources and studies, and the index covers more than 80 pages. Literature includes the rarest Slavic publications as well as frequent regional ones that are hard to access. These publications are of extreme value. No doubt it is the result of consistent work with sources. For decades, even if she did research work on other topics, T. Agapkina collected material for this particular book. In fact, its index is a glossary of folk culture, which helps not only to work with the book, but it can be used as a guide for different investigations by other researchers. At the very end of the book, the author defines, in her own laconic style, three directions of further studies of the Slavic arboretum. These directions are: to explore the portraits of the trees that are missing in the monograph, to perform an analysis of the tree as a cultural concept, and to continue studies of the real peculiarities of trees with botanical types taken into due account.

The book urges its readers to ponder over the material presented to them, to compare it with ethno-botanical and other data, to look for parallels. As a specialist in Bulgarian ethnography, I noticed certain lexical, folkloric or ritual details which could be added to the portraits of the trees. For example, the Bulgarian popular and religious rite performed in front of "The Holy Virgin Golden Apple" icon could be mentioned. On Saturday, in the fifth week of the Lent, young women eager to conceive or childless married couples bring red apples over to the church. Perhaps this rite and other details are not included in the book, due to limits imposed on its volume.

This monograph is definitely interesting and useful for humanitarians of various specialties. Considering its vast scope, cohesive structure and logic of study, it can serve as a model for young researchers. This book will facilitate further studies in the sphere of the complex discipline of ethnolinguistics. It can serve as a methodological pattern for the ethnolinguistic investigation of similar ethnobotanical and very different folk-cultural themes.

Irina Sedakova

Note

¹ On Moscow Ethnolinguistic School founded by Nikita I. Tolstoi see Tolstoi & Tolstaia 2013. For a classic example of an ethnolinguistic study see Tolstaia 2001 [2005].

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