

THE IMAGE OF SLAVIC FOLKLORE IN AMERICA: THE NEED FOR OBJECTIVISM IN RESEARCH

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Abstract: Artykuł sygnalizuje problem podstawowy dla wszelkich badań naukowych i ich upowszechniania – obiektywizm poznawczy. Przykład recepcji folkloru słowiańskiego w Stanach Zjednoczonych zaproponowany przez N. Kononenko w monografii *Slavic Folklore. A Handbook* jest tutaj bardzo ilustratywny. Wskazuje on z jednej strony na powszechne w slawistyce amerykańskiej utożsamianie kultury słowiańskiej („słowiańskiego świata”) z rosyjskim kręgiem kulturowym (efekt koniunktury politycznej) oraz z drugiej strony na dominację indywidualnych etnicznych preferencji autorki nad zobiektywizowanym przekazem (również wyraźne faworyzowanie oprócz folkloru rosyjskiego, także ukraińskiego). Zaproponowanie amerykańskiemu odbiorcy „jednego modelu” folkloru słowiańskiego równoznaczne z modelem rosyjsko-ukraińskim pozostaje w sprzeczności z ideą równoprawności kultur wszystkich narodów słowiańskich, jest przykładem zmodyfikowanego kulturowego neopanslawizmu. Ów „jeden model”, bynajmniej nie zdeterminowany optyką kulturową (myślenie kategoriami „Bloku Wschodniego”), utwierdza tegoż odbiorcę w tym błędnym przekonaniu.

Key words: model folkloru słowiańskiego, slawistyka amerykańska, obiektywizm poznawczy.

One example of a politically conditioned commonplace truth is the dominant position in American Slavic studies of research from the field of Russian culture and literature, as well as the resultant erroneous perception (even in the twenty-first century!) of other Slavic cultures through the same prism as part of the area of Soviet and Russian domination. This tendency may be seen in many publications in this area addressed to Americans; they consolidate this point of view. One such publication, *Slavic Folklore. A Handbook* (SFH; Kononenko, 2007),¹ by Natalie Kononenko (K), a Canadian folklorist with Ukrainian roots, will be the subject of the present discussion. Its issue by Greenwood Press (popular on the American market, also the publisher of an encyclopedia on folklore and the

¹ Cf. other works by the same author: *The Turkish Minstrel Tale Tradition*, New York 1990; *Ukrainian Minstrels: And the Blind Shall Sing*, New York-London 1998.

folkways of various peoples²), as a handbook in the Greenwood Folklore Handbooks series³, obviously determines the form of its publication, uniform for the whole series, but not the substance of its content, conceptually determined by the respective author. In the case of Slavic folklore this was not an easy task, as it requires consideration of an extensive range of material, a multiplicity of forms and issues, and degrees of complexity and diversity within the individual Slavic ethno-regions and subregions. K appears to be well aware of this fact, which, however, is not reflected in the publication of interest to us. Very clearly reflecting her obvious personal research preferences, she has aimed her study at introducing Anglophone readers interested in Slavic folklore to “the marvelous world of Slavdom”, attempting thereby to convince them that Slavic folklore deserves to be widely known, as it is distinctive in world culture, cf. Mussorgsky’s opera *St. John’s Eve*, also known as *Night on Bald Mountain*, named after an important annual ritual and based on Gogol’s folk-inspired story, and which has also provided the music for the Disney animated film *Fantasia*. We also find it adapted in the movie *Saturday Night Fever*. Mussorgsky’s music was also used by Michael Jackson in his best-selling album *HIStory*. Moreover, as K emphasises, SFH “stresses the advantage of the new access to the Soviet Bloc and seeks to cover new trends, both in the folklore itself and in folklore scholarship” (Kononenko, 2007: ix).

So, then, in what way can SFH grab the attention of Slavic culture researchers and folklorists? Even a cursory reading gives the reader the impression that the Russo-Ukrainian perspective, as the one she knows best, is dominant throughout the entire book. It may be asked, however, whether that constitutes an acceptable argument, like another one cited by K, that Russian studies are predominant in the Anglophone world among the interests of those who know Slavic languages, and that is why there are so many Russian-language examples and citations in SFH. Moreover, according to the author, for this culture the Anglophone source and research base is the most extensive which she was able to use. Undoubtedly, it must be acknowledged that she is right here, which does not mean that English-language research, as would appear from the cited works on other Slavic peoples,

² See, e.g., *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of World Folklore and Folklife*, vol. 1-4, ed. W.M. Clements, Westport, CT 2007 (Volume 3, dealing with Europe, includes a short monograph on Polish folklore by A. Brzozowska-Krajka: “Poles”); *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of African American Folklore*, vol. 1-3, ed. A. Prahlad, Westport, CT 2005; *The Greenwood Library of American Folktales*, vol. 1-4, ed. T.A. Greek, Westport, CT 2006; *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales*, vol. 1-3, ed. D. Haase, Westport, CT 2007; *Encyclopedia of Women’s Folklore and Folklife*, ed. L. Locke et al., Westport, CT 2008.

³ The following works have also appeared in this series: *Folk and Fairy Tales* (2004), *Myth* (2004), *Proverbs* (2004), *Campus Legends* (2005), *Fairy Lore* (2005), *German Folklore* (2006), *Greek and Roman Folklore* (2006), *South Asian Folklore* (2006), *Chicano Folklore* (2006), *Story* (2006), *Arab Folklore* (2007), *Caribbean Folklore* (2007), *Children’s Folklore* (2008), *Foodways and Folklore* (2008). In 2008 the same publishing house’s World Folklore Series also brought out a collection of 50 traditional Polish tales: *Polish Folktales and Folklore*, by M. Michałowski and A. Pellowski.

is vestigial.⁴ And this is where the main doubts over the scholarly objectivity of this book arise: neither the substantive content of SFH, nor any other studies of Slavic folklore, or of any other cultural circle can be the effect of the political conditions, whatever its priorities! It is rather that the ethno-cultures of all Slavic peoples should be treated as equal.⁵

In reading the individual sections of SFH, non-specialists, and it is mainly them that K sees as her readers, will become more and more firm in their conviction that there exists a single, specific cultural construct applicable to the whole of Slavdom ("Slavic lands", "the Slavic world", "Slavic territories", Slavic women", all Slavs), a single model, a single philosophy, along with a system of values inscribed into selected genres of oral and ritual folklore, a single lifestyle authenticated by selected objects of material culture, as support for this model is overwhelmingly exemplified by Russo-Ukrainian items. Apart from the text of SFH, this identification is shown by the graphic conception of the very cover, with a motif from a Russian fairytale. The iconographic material cited in the main body of text strengthens that tendency: only one out of 29 illustrations apparently "goes beyond" the Russo-Ukrainian cultural sphere: "Water Mill in Poland", a photo taken from the 1912 edition of Charles Holme's *Peasant Art in Russia* (!).⁶ This aspect of K's treatment, with her Russo-Ukrainian preferences, was also emphasised by the American reviewer of the present publication in "Folklorica", the periodical for American Slavists and folklorists (Haney, 2008:186-188).

The nonspecialist readership of *Slavic Folklore* being guided by K through the twists and turns of Slavic folklore, from the mythology of the Slavs, followed by definitions and classifications, then examples and texts, proceeding to scholarship and approaches and finishing on contexts, follows a tendentious course, and so weakly grounded in the theory of folklore as to give us the impression that K is unaware of the whole substantial areas of the poetics of folklore and research, including genre studies (except for the application of Tale Type Numbers considering the ATU system after *The Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography Based on the System of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson and Updated by Hans-Jörg Uther*, Helsinki 2004).

⁴ Out of works including materials on strictly Polish culture, ritual and folk customs, K mentions only S. Hodorowicz Knab, *Polish Customs, Traditions, and Folklore*, New York, 1993; and M. Pokropek, *A Guide to Folk Art and Folklore in Poland*, Warsaw, 1980; disregarding, startlingly, S. Benet, *Song, Dance, and Customs of Peasant Poland*, New York, 1951, 2 ed. 1996 with a preface by Margaret Mead.

⁵ This cultural and linguistic equality is characteristic of the activities of the International Committee of Slavists and the regularly organized Congresses in individual Slavic countries, the most recent being the XIV International Congress of Slavists, held in Ochrid in Macedonia in 2008. All Slavic languages are official at these Congresses.

⁶ Such a labelling appears startling today; nevertheless for 1912 this would have been technically true, as most of Poland was ruled by Tsarist Russia at the time. It should also be noted that during this period West Europeans lost overall awareness of Poland, cf. General Montgomery's notorious question during the Warsaw Rising as to whether people spoke German or Russian in Warsaw (see Davies N., *Rising '44. The Battle for Warsaw*. London, 2004, p. 22), based undoubtedly on his memories from WWI as a young man, when Germany took Warsaw from Russia.

K begins her introductory remarks on the history and religion of the Slavs by stating that the term “Slavic” is primarily linguistic in nature, and by claiming that the term “Slavic folklore” is difficult to define. Nevertheless, consideration of the three Slavic linguistic subgroups (East Slavic, West Slavic, and South Slavic)⁷ does not indicate the principal relationship of language and culture, but the relationship between language and the political affiliations of the Slavic peoples during their history in their heartlands, and, fragmentarily, in the diaspora. She goes on to offer a simplified reconstruction of the pre-Christian pantheon of the Slavs based exclusively on the oldest Russian sources (*The Book of Veles*, *the Primary Chronicle*, and *the Lay of Prince Igor*). K rightly points to Christianity as the dominant religion of all Slavs until the present, as well as the question of “dual belief”. Nevertheless, astonishingly, K leads the reader down the blind alley of religious uniformity right from the start, disregarding some of the principal branches within Christianity: Roman Catholicism, typical for example for Polish culture and folklore, as well as Greek Catholicism in Western Ukraine (the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church). This also entails further consequences, resulting in a paradigm based on a Russo-Ukrainian world view (Russified, Eastern Orthodox Ukrainian) being attributed to the whole of Slavdom, as well as in the statement, paradoxical not only from a Polish perspective, that the Slavic countries “opened to Western culture only after the collapse of the Soviet Bloc.”(!)

The treatment of Slavic folklore as monolithic is also revealed in the definitions and classifications proposed by the author. She simply states that:

“Slavic folklore has many genres and many forms. There are songs and stories, riddles, proverbs, incantations, and many other forms of verbal lore. Rituals connected to family life, such as weddings and funerals, are important in Slavic folklore, as are the songs and laments that go with them. There are rituals connected to the calendar year, such as the greeting of spring and the celebration of the harvest. Religious rituals such as Easter and Christmas also feature prominently in folk consciousness. These too have their own songs, dances, and costumes. Folk housing and clothing and folk crafts, often called material culture, determine the physical world. Certain types of material culture, especially embroidery and *pysanky* or Easter eggs, have become emblematic, so that they act as the symbol for a Slavic group, especially in the diaspora where Slavs are in the minority. An example is the giant *pysanka* in Vegreville, Alberta, Canada, that represents Ukrainian Canadians” (Kononenko, 2007:15).

Unfortunately, readers do not learn what K means by “Slavic group[s] in the diaspora” (if she has decided to extend her already large amount of material presented by including Slavic diaspora folklore – that is definitely a separate

⁷ Actually, from a strictly linguistic point of view a six-way division (East Slavic/Lechitic/Czechoslovak/ Sorbian/South-West Slavic/South-East Slavic) makes much more sense, see H. Birnbaum, *The Dialects of Common Slavic*, in *Ancient Indo-European Dialects*, eds. H. Birnbaum, J. Puhvel, Berkeley 1966, p. 153-197; L. Janda, C. Townsend, *Common and Comparative Slavic: Phonology and Inflection with special attention to Russian, Polish, Czech, Serbo-Croatian and Bulgarian*, Columbus 1996. Nevertheless the East-West-South split is well established in non-linguistic Slavic scholarship, and will be maintained here.

research topic). They do not get any, even basic information on other Slavic diasporas, and, like K herself, are unaware of the cultural diversity of “this group” (for example, the oldest and most numerous Slavic diaspora, the Polish community in America, is no cultural monolith, and surely never was). She does, however, become convinced that the Ukrainian diaspora can serve to represent all Slavs (?!). This sort of simplification does not add credibility to her presentation.

K’s depiction of the classification of the genres of Slavic folklore is imprecise and methodologically incoherent, certainly in that she is trying to connect the findings from “Slavic” folklore genre studies with American findings (or at least this is the impression she gives), where we get a split into prose and poetic genres, minor forms of folklore, ritual and customary folklore, material culture. Various types of legend⁸ may be distinguished among prose genres: religious, historical, contemporary (urban), “memorates” and “fabulates”, and then folk tales – animal tales, magical, short stories from everyday life, and anecdotes. And poetic genres include epic poems, Russian epics or *byliny*, Ukrainian epics, i.e., *dumy*, South Slavic epics, i.e., hero-tales in songs, also historical songs, religious (psalms), ballads, and lyric songs. Among the minor forms we may distinguish proverbs, riddles, and incantations, also defined as “charms”.

And what type of information do readers get on these genres? For example, K interprets the difference between ballads and lyric songs thus: “the ballad tells the story of a common human problem, such as the conflict between parents and children, and a lyrical song expresses the emotions, that the conflict generates. Lyric songs are typically descriptive rather than narrative” (Kononenko, 2007: 45-46). We also learn from SFH that the features of Slavic folklore genres are difficult to define, as forms of folklore are unstable and they “overlap” (Kononenko, 2007: 45). That is only part of the truth. We would expect to find the rest, i.e., the specific features of the given genres (monographic studies of individual genres do exist!), if not in the main text, at least in the appended glossary, unfortunately the theoretical substance is this book very slight either.

In this study the predominant pattern of Russo-Ukrainian culture seems to be most prominent in relation to ritual and customary folklore, which K yokes together with material culture (a controversial classification!). It is in this spirit that K discusses life cycle rituals: courtship, wedding, funeral, birth, and baptism, as well as calendar rituals, vaguely presented: Christmas (in Eastern rite), Easter, with Ukrainian *pysanky* (decorated Easter eggs) playing the “main role”, recalls the Bulgarian *Martenitsa* festival (celebrated in early March), the celebrations of the Feast of Ivan Kupala (summer solstice). It is in the same spirit that she presents material culture, i.e., the overall characteristics of the “Slavic home”, with Russian examples, again as if they were representative of the whole of Slavdom, and national costumes, naturally with Ukrainian embroidery. What is most

⁸ By “legend” K means a true story, usually told as a short prose narrative. She also stresses that it is a catch-all term in North America, often applied to all true narratives, in contrast to Slavic research where it is linked to religious stories about God and the saints wandering the earth, see Glossary (p. 180).

surprising here is that K uses a periodisation of Slavic folklore which takes its definitions from political, not cultural, discourse, thus she speaks of Soviet or post-Soviet (former Soviet bloc) states, or restrictions on traditional folkways during the Soviet period. Here she assumes erroneously that the political (and cultural) situation specific to the Soviet Union was typical of all states politically part of that bloc. Thus we constantly receive a single standard of Slavic culture, a single set of policies regulating the development of that culture, and unidirectional change, along with the above-mentioned single religion! Although K mentions two calendars in Central and Eastern Europe, the Julian (Old Style) and Gregorian (New Style), she does not explain their religious significance, stating only that “the church [sic] has kept the Julian calendar” (Kononenko, 2007: 59 – which church? – AB-K, RAO). And she assigns the selected elements of the ceremonial year to the Julian calendar, which would be justified if SFH were titled: *East Slavic Folklore. A Handbook*. In such case a considerable number of the reservations and critical remarks presented here would lose much of their force or be eliminated altogether.

We can also perceive the consistent East Slavic (Russian-Ukrainian) orientation of his book in the examples and texts being cited by the author. Although the twenty-three examples and texts point to a diversity of genres in Slavic folklore, they only slightly show them as representing the individual Slavic ethno-regions, and enriching the readers’ knowledge of them. Most of the commentaries attached to these texts include superficial summaries thereof, with no consideration of folk symbolism. Regarding ceremonial texts such presentation leads to banalisation, e.g., in the case of the *kolęda* (carol): “In the middle of the yard there stands a sycamore” from Żegota Pauli’s collection (Pauli, 1972: 5).

The folkloristic material and research presented in SFH offer valuable information for those interested in East Slavic ethnic cultures and marginalise the ethno-cultures of other “Slavic countries.” And this should not imply that the folkloristic research conducted into them does not merit display. Anglophone readers of SFH, however, do not possess this awareness. Nevertheless, we may appreciate K’s taking some note of Polish collectors of folklore and of Polish folkloristics, including her mention of, e.g., the name of Oskar Kolberg (without citing the title of the whole collection), albeit emphasising that he documented not only Polish material, but also the songs, tales, customs, and beliefs from Ukraine, Belarus, and non-Slavic Lithuania. Unfortunately, for want of precision K did not add that the range covered by this massive collection is contiguous with the pre-Partition borders of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. From the citation from an article by one of the present authors (Brzozowska-Krajka, 1999: 1-3) Anglophone readers also obtain some information on tendencies in modern Polish folklore research which K remembered to recognise as convergent with Russian (which was not the author’s intention).

The “contexts” cited by the author also fit very well into SFH’s character as propaganda biased in favour of East Slavic (Russo-Ukrainian) folklore. It involves some elements of folklore in the art, literature, music, and film of the “Slavic peoples”, i.e., adapted folklore (*fakelore*), though K, is unaware of this concept,

although it is derived from the researches of the leading American folklorist Richard Dorson (Dorson, 1950: 335-343). And here we find some information which might appear astonishing, e.g., the statement that there are two main sources expressing themselves in old Slavic literature, music, and painting: the church and the folk, and that church art, which created the model for literary expression, “came from Byzantium [and] was foreign” (Kononenko, 2007: 145), thus providing a uniform pattern of artistic inspiration, erroneously applied to the whole of Slavdom. Russianists and Ukrainianists will certainly find much of interest in the wide-ranging discussions of elements from the folklore of these two favoured cultures to be found in the works of Pushkin, Lermontov, and especially those of Gogol/Hohol (a Ukrainian writer, according to K, who was born in Ukraine, but wrote in Russian; Kononenko, 2007: 126), as well as Dostoevsky, etc., and in the music of Mussorgsky, Glinka, Rimski-Korsakov, etc., and in those from the “Soviet” and “post-Soviet” epochs, as such periodisations are used by K (also in reference to other Slavic peoples!). She also draws attention to culture and popular literature in Russia and children’s literature, as well as the saturation of Ukrainian art with folklore, because, as K states “Ukraine was under Russian domination in the east and Polish domination in the west, the gentry was either Russified or Polonised”, and goes on to explain that “Many people with literary ambitions, like Gogol, chose to write in Russian or Polish. Ukrainian was the language of the common people” (Kononenko, 2007: 165). And again, the uninitiated reader hardly even gets a semblance of information, without going deeply into culture, religion, cultural differences, influences, etc..

In general, K devotes little space to other Slavic peoples (cultures), though we notice remarks on folkloric inspirations in Polish literature and arts: with Kochanowski and his *Laments* (Stanisław Barańczak and Seamus Heaney’s English translation), which she recognises as a combination of a classic panegyric with folk laments; Mickiewicz’s *Dziady* (cited in the English-speaking world as *Forefathers’ Eve*, not *Ancestors’ Eve*) and comments that this work “is centred on a holiday that is important in the folk calendar, a time for the return of the dead” (Kononenko 2007: 168); and Mickiewicz’s *Pan Tadeusz*, set in a rural scenario with folk customs and beliefs (K does not note the differences between Polish peasant and noble cultures). She also emphasizes Mickiewicz’s anti-Russianism. K also mentions the Nobel Laureates Sienkiewicz and Reymont, and then Fredro, Apolito Korzeniowski (not Joseph Conrad’s father, but Józef Korzeniowski, the author of *Karpaccy górale!*), Słowacki, Krasiński, Tetmajer, Bryll and Morcinek – in a sequence which does not reflect their importance in Polish literature; as well as the composers Chopin and Szymanowski (the source of all this information was Czesław Miłosz’ *The History of Polish Literature*, Berkeley 1983). Apart from the Polish context, there are vestigial references to Czech literature, as well as South Slavic literature and art.

Apart from the glossary already mentioned the bibliography is a substantial addition to SFH. It encompasses exclusively works in English (in individual sections, however, the texts listed are also cited in Russian and Ukrainian), as well as selected Internet resources. All these useful elements of SFH are also

dominated by its overarching idea – the popularization among Anglophone readers of Russian and Ukrainian folklore and culture from the earliest times to the present (the pre-revolution and post-revolution, Stalin, Khrushchev and Brezhnev epochs, and the post-socialist epoch). There is also another aspect to this popularisation – it constitutes a type of motivation to take an interest in the “Slavic lands”, which, as K notes, found themselves behind the Iron Curtain for a prolonged portion of the twentieth century, and were under the influence of the Soviet Union as part of the Soviet Bloc (a dual isolation: geographic and political). Thus, in her opinion, the “Slavic Lands” were *terra incognita*, a forbidden albeit fascinating area, and “Western (read “American”)” researchers had no access, and its actual folklore was “restricted” and “monitored”. After the collapse of the USSR it became possible to do research in archives, do field work, in a word, these lands became a “new region of opportunity for Western folklorists”.⁹ But then all the time K erroneously assumes that the Russian situation was and is typical of all Slavic peoples. Only on occasion may her generalisations be partially accepted, e.g. those concerning urban legend or the flagging of threats involved in globalisation. Nevertheless, there are differences within the individual ethno-regions even in these cases.¹⁰

Thus, SFH provides an example of modified cultural neo-Panslavism. We perfectly well understand that its formula assumes a certain degree of simplification; nevertheless “Western”, and all other readers deserve a reliable and objective, lore on the cultures of the other “Slavic lands”, both in their heartlands and in the diaspora (and the latter not just in the role of a background). Thus, such a study still awaits its own researcher, or rather collective of specialists, cooperating on an international level.

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⁹ Folklorist expeditions to Russian territory, organized by individual scholars or associations are currently becoming attractive for American researchers, as is also individual field work by American folklorists; cf. e.g., the announcement by American Friends of Russian Folklore searching for volunteers to take part searches “for our June expedition to the Cossack region”. Location: Russia, Rybinskiy Khutor, Serafimovich District, Volgograd Province, Dates: June 1-13, 2010, complete information, as well as other planned expeditions, at:

<http://www.russianfolklorefriends.org/home.html> K’s fieldwork expeditions in Ukraine are also a source of her Ukrainian materials.

¹⁰ Cf. “Revista d’etnologia de Catalunya” 2009, Núm. 34, which includes a series of articles devoted to the cultural aspects of globalisation in various Slavic countries, for a Polish perspective, see A. Brzowska-Krajka, *Globalizació i regionalisme: perils i oportunitats per a la cultura popular (des del punt de vista polonès)*, pp. 44-51.