

# A Letter to the “King of the Forest”. Contemporary Magic Practice in Russia

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This paper is largely based on our recent fieldwork conducted in Vologda region (*oblast'*) in the Russian North. I selected some examples of stories about wizards that could be of use in this context – stories about their reputation and their practices. One of the magic practices appeared to me so interesting, in respect of the social role of a wizard in the village community, that I decided to limit myself to its description. I want to tell about the magical practice of sending letters to the forest king or *leshyi* discovered by us and our colleagues, ethnographers from the St. Petersburg Institute of Ethnography in the northeast of the Vologda region.<sup>1</sup>

People resort to this magical practice when a human or a domestic animal gets lost in the forest. It should be noted that it is very easy to get lost in the forest of the Russian North. Between settlements widely separated from each other and connected by very few roads, there are forests that stretch for hundreds of kilometers. For example, when, during one of our expeditions, my six-year-old son and my colleague's seven-year-old-son set off for a walk beyond the village, the local people saw this as a threat to their lives.

I came into contact with the magical practice of searching for lost people or animals for the first time in the following circumstances. In 2007, when we arrived in a village in Siamzhenskii District of the Vologda region, we learned that a few days before this a man had disappeared from the village. The man had left home early in the morning and had not returned. He was found dead in the woods a few weeks later. To avoid questions, I should say: his death was not violent. During the weeks of the searches the local people used all available tactics, both rational and irrational. The police and an army helicopter were called in, the villagers scoured the edge of the woods. At the same time, fortune-tellers tried to narrow down the search by their speculations. One of the villagers went to the church in the district centre to ask for special prayers to be

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<sup>1</sup> Stepanov 2009; Safieva and Stepanov 2007.

said and a local witch, as we were told secretly, carried out a special ritual for the safe return of someone lost in the forest. A member of our group, Andrei Stepanov, had been working the previous year in nearby Verkhovazhskii District and he had already heard about this type of ritual and had asked about it in detail. During this critical moment for the life of the village, we ourselves refrained from direct questions about the ritual. Later on, we recorded numerous interviews and the ritual was described both by those who acted as customers and by those who performed it.

Now let us turn to the description of the ritual. Here I am using interviews from our archive, the archive of St. Petersburg State University, as well as the publications of A.V. Stepanov and his personal oral testimonies, since he has been engaged in the research of this topic in the “field” for several years.<sup>2</sup> I will describe the situation, that was recorded by camera, in which the ritual specialist shows the researcher how she usually performs this ritual. When the actual magic act takes place, however, she never allows witnesses to be present.

So, I will now turn to the ritual itself. If an animal (a cow, a calf, a dog, a sheep) or a human gets lost – they have not returned from the pasture, or have gone into the forest and not returned home in time, the owners, in the case of an animal, or the family, if a person is involved, after they have carried out the usual search turn to a ritual specialist, i.e. a witch.

Here I have to give some explanations, which will be useful to us later on. Our village informants distinguish between two types of witch or wizard. There are those who know some spells and are able, for example, to stop bleeding or to cure toothache. But there are also those who not only “know” magic tricks and texts, but who also know in the sense of “are familiar with”, i.e. deal with supernatural powers and it is to them the villagers will go in order to remove a jinx or to get a herdsman’s spell. Everybody knows that they can do both “good things” and “bad things”. Furthermore, rumour suggests that these wise-folk cannot help but inflict magical damage because of the devils who serve them. And the devils must be kept busy at all times, otherwise they may start tormenting their master. To keep the devils under control, such wise-folk send them “to count the needles on a fir-tree”, i.e. ask them to do meaningless work, so they won’t be a nuisance.

So, this witch who consorts with evil spirits does the following: she takes a piece of birch bark or paper and, standing beside the chimney of the stove, scribbles something on it with charcoal, as if writing a letter (1). While doing this she pronounces the magic text asking the forest master, the forest king, to return the object that is being searched for.

Let me also explain the magical significance of the locus chosen for the ritual. The Russian stove (2) is often a place where rituals take place. It serves as a communication

<sup>2</sup> Stepanov 2009; Safieva and Stepanov 2007.

device between the human and the spirit worlds. For example, after a funeral people shout into the stove that the deceased is no longer in the house. Here too grandmothers washed babies, creeping into the oven and reading prayers over them. In the same locality, we recorded a story in which one wizard transferred his knowledge to another, also making use of the stove. The initiator stands in the house at the mouth of the stove and speaks "words" into the stove, while the one being initiated sits on the roof by the chimney and "gathers them in".

When the bark letter is ready, it is handed over to the customer. The latter should go to a crossroad or to the place where the person or the animal was last seen, and throw it behind him, back-handed and with his left hand. According to other accounts, the customer can also do this by the gates which separate his yard from the street.<sup>3</sup> This magic ritual has been recorded not only by us, and not only in the XXI century. On the map we can see that it has been recorded in numerous provinces of the European part of Russia. The oldest ethnographical references date to the second half of the 19th century.

I will also describe a fragment of our video. The woman (she was over 90 years old when this was filmed) shows how she usually performs this ritual. She takes a piece of bark and a piece of charcoal, approaches the stove and scribbles on the birch bark. Her words are not very clear, but, nevertheless, it is noticeable that her speech changes when she is pronouncing the magic text. It speeds up and becomes rhythmic. The final words are pronounced with a rising intonation as if summoning the lost animal:

"I take a piece of charcoal. I'll scribble it down like this. I'll put it here and I scribble it down: 'I, servant of God, Anna, will get up without saying a blessing, will go out without crossing myself-not out by the door, not out through the door, not out by the gate, not out through the gate-out into the deep, dark forest. 'King of the forest, King of the forest, release my little cow, release her and chase her away, send her home as quick as you can'. There are others (i. e. other wise-women) who can get people found ... So that's what I write. Then you throw the paper and say 'Come home as quick as you can'. So, that's what you write. That's all there is to it."<sup>4</sup>

In my title and in the paper itself I have avoided using the real name of this ritual, because it immediately raises considerable astonishment among ethnographers. The local people call it "writing the kabala".

What does the loss of livestock and people in the forests of Vologda region have in common with the secret teachings of Judaism? Where could Russian villagers who grew up under the Soviet regime, have learnt about Kabbalah?

A closer study of the materials allows us to understand that this has nothing to do with the esoteric Jewish tradition. The magical practice of drawing humans or

<sup>3</sup> ED DTxt07-050\_Vol-Verch\_07-08-16 ZamiatinaAD

<sup>4</sup> FA DV07\_Vol-Verch\_001.

animals out of the forest uses as a tool for interaction between people and spirits the old Russian legal practice of the XIV–XVII century – the so-called *kabala* patents or letters. The word *kabala* came into the Russian language from the Tatars with the meaning of a promissory note. Examples of the business writings of medieval Russia mention both ordinary promissory notes and *kabala* service patents; under the latter, the interest accrued on a debt should be covered not by money but by service. These were documents arranging property contracts between people, specifically the conditions for loans. Money or property could be provided to the debtor on various terms. *Kabala* conditions in a loan had their own specific characteristics, entrenched in the Russian language with the idiomatic expression “to fall into *kabala*”, that is to become personally dependent due to an outstanding debt. One person receiving a loan promised to return the interest on the debt through personal service that is to work for the lender. *Kabala* patents or notes confirmed the existence of such a contract. They were usually drafted by a third person, a representative of the prince or tsar, an official.

How then could this socio-economic and legal practice be transferred to the relationships between spirits of nature and human beings? Let us consider the logic used in these situations, using an example with an animal.

Let’s say a calf gets lost in the woods. If it is not found in the usual way, the issue is transferred to a different jurisdiction, i.e. to the department of super-social and super-physical relations of the community. And in the rural community the person responsible for maintaining a permanent relationship with supernatural powers is the witch or wizard. The witch qualifies this event as the loan initiative of the forest spirit. The spirit takes something that does not belong to it, the calf belongs to someone else, some particular person. The witch notifies the forest king that his action is being defined as an entry in a loan relationship. He has borrowed the calf, and will be obliged to pay off the interest accrued for example, by performing some service for the lender. If he does not want to do that, if he does not want ‘*kabala*’ relations, he should return what he took as soon as possible.

The communicative act, the addressee of which is the spirit of the forest, is called *kabala*, i.e. the act of entry into a *kabala* deal. The actual texts to be pronounced when the wizards are producing the letter might contain any of the following:

Devil, devil, have your game but give it back.<sup>5</sup>

Imps, little spirits, throw away my calf.<sup>6</sup>

It wasn’t you who fed my dog, it wasn’t you gave my dog a drink, give me back my dog.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> FA СЯМDTxt1-6.

<sup>6</sup> FA СЯМDTxt1-26.

<sup>7</sup> FA СЯМDTxt1-91.

Forest king, chase Vitia home, fast as you can, fast as you can.<sup>8</sup>  
 F... (Effing devil) devil- return our livestock.<sup>9</sup>  
 Devils, go devilling, imps, go imping. Give our goat back.<sup>10</sup>  
 Forest devil, return my animal if you took it. If you don't give it back  
 then I will take you to court and send you to jail.<sup>11</sup>

These are the imperatives or appeals to the forest spirit, sometimes with the use of obscene language. The speaker orders the addressee to return the things sought: to give back, to drive home, to return. The appeal may also threaten the addressee with a court appearance and jail if he does not comply with what is required.

The practice described here allows us to see how the social network of a contemporary north Russian village is organised.<sup>12</sup> Both people and spirits are equal members of this network. The legal owners of peasant households may enter into a socially regulated relationship with the owners of “spaces” (in this particular case with the owner or spirit of the forest) regarding such matters as property and territory. The spirits of the forest as well as of other spaces (the *vodianoi* or water spirit, the house spirit *domovoi*, the bath-house spirit *baiannik* and so on) are not gods. Nobody serves them or sacrifices to them, they are not sacred. They are subject to the same rules as humans. But since they are still not human beings there must be an intermediary between the human and the master of the forest – the witch or wizard, who performs the same function as that performed by a Russian civil servant in the XVII century. Like a notary public, she/he executes the deals and assists in other social and proprietary interactions of the community members, or, like a foreign affairs official files a note of protest as in cases of breaches of international law. Therefore, Russian villagers maintained in the past and still maintain today relations with the metaphysical powers of nature, organizing them through the categories and rules of law. Wizards, who “know things” and “who know or are familiar with spirits”, act as their representatives in these relations. This is one of their social roles in the village community.

## ABBREVIATIONS, ARCHIVES

EA – Electronic archive “Russian Everyday Life” (Propp Centre): <http://daytodaydata.ru>.

FA – Folklore archive of the Philological Faculty of St. Petersburg State University.

<sup>8</sup> FA Вепх20а-5.

<sup>9</sup> FA СЯМDTxt1-122.

<sup>10</sup> FA СЯМ20-25.

<sup>11</sup> FA СЯМDTxt1-86.

<sup>12</sup> *Olson and Adonyeva* 2013, 221–254.

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