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IVAN KUPALO: RITUAL IN POST-SOVIET UKRAINE

an illustrated lecture by **Dr. Natalie Kononenko**
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Photo: Natalie Kononenko

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Ritual is essential to human existence. Ritual tends to be a time outside time and thus a period out of the ordinary. Normally prohibited behaviors are sanctioned, making ritual a natural arena for experimentation. If suppressed by political or cultural forces, it can lie dormant for generations but then, at the opportune time, reemerge. *Ivan Kupalo*, the mid-summer celebration of St. John the Baptist, an ancient festival with deep pre-Christian roots, is a ritual that virtually disappeared during the Soviet period, but is now celebrated across Central Ukraine. One can see how the celebration of holidays such as Easter and Christmas would be a logical consequence of the reestablishment of religion after the fall of the Soviet Union, but why *Ivan Kupalo*?

Why has this festival reemerged and why is it so popular? Ukrainian independence and the lifting of the prohibition against religious observances which followed cannot adequately explain this revival.

Ivan Kupalo became and has remained popular because it was one of the rituals through which Ukrainians, among others, began carving out a non-Soviet space and establishing a non-Soviet identity. Two celebrations of *Ivan Kupalo* which we witnessed and recorded in 2001 provide excellent case studies for the process of breaking away from Soviet social engineering and establishing an identity meaningful to the citizenry of Ukraine, one based on indigenous culture.

There were three components to the *Ivan Kupalos* that we recorded: 1) a staged reenactment of an ancient crop fertility rite, 2) a fair with an assortment of goods for sale, and 3) a dance party for the young. All three elements were part of the *Ivan Kupalos* celebrated in pre-Soviet Ukraine. The crop fertility ritual was extensively recorded in the many folklore collections of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The dance party can be interpreted as the modern version of a courtship opportunity for the young. Ritualized courtship occasions are documented in both descriptions of *Ivan Kupalo* and in accounts of wedding practices. Fairs are less well documented, most likely because they were not considered ritual, though their presence can be surmised from available sources.

All three components have returned and have done so with vigor. The process of revival began in the 1960s and 70s when the reintroduction of indigenous ritual was first allowed. During that period, the crop fertility rite was enacted, but almost obscured by Soviet elements, such as parades featuring the outstanding workers of the village and the fruits of their labor. Courtship opportunities such as dances were likely allowed, as long as the young were modest in clothing and behavior; though dances are not described in published accounts. The fair did not exist, although it is reported that some

villages staged Gogol's *Sorochinskaia iarmarka* (The Fair at Sorochinsty) as part of their festivities. The 1980s marked another turning point and rituals revived in that period are closer to their pre-Soviet prototypes.

The contemporary situation is strikingly un-Soviet. Merchants at the fairs do a brisk business, and we observed marketing strategies that would make any capitalist proud. Hundreds of young people participate enthusiastically in the dances and they dress as they please; no one criticizes their revealing garments. The appeal of the fairs and the dances is easy to understand. But what about the reenactment of the agrarian ritual? What purpose does it serve? We cannot know whether, in the past, the ritual was believed to affect crop fertility, but it is certain that such a belief does not exist today. In fact, agrarian rituals offer a striking contrast to life cycle rituals, where there is deep faith in ritual efficacy. In the case of weddings, for example, people sincerely believe that failure to perform the rite properly will have disastrous consequences. These beliefs are openly expressed now that Soviet prohibitions against them are no longer in force. In the case of *Ivan Kupalo*, however, the failure of a ritual bonfire to ignite was not read as a portent of upcoming agricultural disaster. If the crop fertility rite has no crop fertility purpose, why perform it? As Bogatyrev rightly points out, people will not perform meaningless acts. It is my contention that the agrarian ritual is enacted, not for crop fertility, but to assert an indigenous cultural identity. Ancient crop rituals make agriculture primary and thus express rejection of the factory model that the Soviets sought to apply to everything, farming included. In addition, it is likely that the appearance of the western-seeming fairs and dance parties was facilitated by the crop ritual, since in that it celebrates wealth and fertility, both among people and crops. *Ivan Kupalo*, therefore, offers modern villagers a link to their pre-Soviet Ukrainian past and a way to try out possibilities for a post-Soviet future.

Natalie Kononenko received her PhD from Harvard University and is currently Professor of Slavic Languages, Literatures, and Folklore at the University of Virginia. This fall she will assume the Peter and Doris Kule Chair of Ukrainian Ethnography at the University of Alberta. Kononenko has conducted field work in Ukraine and Turkey. She has written on Ukrainian, Turkish, and Russian oral narrative and poetics and her book *Ukrainian Minstrels* won best book prizes from the Kovaliv Foundation and the American Association of Ukrainian Studies. She is currently studying ritual and hopes to complete a book on weddings, funerals, and birth customs shortly.

