



MARIYA LESIV

THE RETURN OF  
ANCESTRAL GODS

Modern Ukrainian Paganism as an Alternative Vision for a Nation

THE RETURN OF ANCESTRAL GODS

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Modern Ukrainian Paganism as  
an Alternative Vision for a Nation  
*Mariya Lesiv*

# The Return of Ancestral Gods

Modern Ukrainian Paganism  
as an Alternative Vision for a Nation

MARIYA LESIV

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THE RETURN OF ANCESTRAL GODS



# Introduction

## FIRST ENCOUNTERS

On the pleasant summer day of 24 August 2006 I happened to be in Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine. The day was characterized not only by its enjoyable weather but also by its special significance for Ukrainians the world over as it marked the fifteenth anniversary of Ukraine's independence from the Soviet Union. Many celebratory activities were taking place in various parts of central Kyiv.

While observing the festivities, I spotted a procession of approximately one hundred people. Their clothing and various symbolic objects caught my attention. While some members of the group wore casual everyday clothes, the majority were dressed in traditional Ukrainian village costumes or modern outfits designed to evoke village dress. They carried national symbols: the blue and yellow flag of Ukraine and variants of the Ukrainian state emblem – the trident. These symbols were combined with other elements less familiar to most Ukrainians. The participants of the procession wore paper headgear with a trident incorporated into a stylized sun. A similar stylized sun was also added to Ukrainian state flags. This symbol represents Dazhboh, the Sun-God of old Slavic mythology. The group's banners and posters featured various nationalist messages and slogans glorifying the gods and goddesses of the old Slavic pantheon. These people were contemporary Ukrainian Pagans. Specifically, they were representatives of the Native Faith Association of Ukraine (hereafter Native Faith) (see figure 0.1). I followed their procession out of curiosity.

While walking, the Pagans chanted: "Out with Jehovah! Glory to Dazhboh!," "Glory to our native gods!," and "There should be native



0.1 A procession of the Native Faith Association followers in Kyiv, 24 August 2006. A stylized image of Dazhboh (Sun-God) is depicted on their banners and Ukrainian state flags. In the background, a banner with the slogan “Glory to Our Native Gods!” is visible.

language and native faith in our native land!” Their destination was the monument to Taras Shevchenko (1814–61), a famous nineteenth-century poet.<sup>1</sup> As I learned later, many contemporary Ukrainian Pagans consider Shevchenko to be their prophet and the messiah of the Ukrainian nation. The Native Faith members were going to honour him on this important day.

As we approached the monument, another Pagan group was already surrounding it, also chanting “Glory to our native gods!” “Ancestral Fire of the Native Orthodox Faith” (hereafter Ancestral Fire) was inscribed on their flags (figure 0.2).<sup>2</sup> The adherents of Native Faith had to wait until Ancestral Fire’s ritual of honouring Shevchenko had concluded before they could begin their own ceremony. As an outsider, I wondered why these people were split into separate groups as they seemed to proclaim very similar ideas.



o.2 Adherents of Ancestral Fire of the Native Orthodox Faith near the monument to Taras Shevchenko, Kyiv, 24 August 2006. Ukrainian state flags and banners feature an eight-pointed star (a symbol known as an *alatyr*) encircled with the name of the group.

I also wondered why the name of Lev Sylenko was not mentioned in these ceremonies. Sylenko appeared to be well known as the founder of a religion known as *RUNvira*, or the Native Ukrainian National Faith (hereafter *RUNvira*), in the Ukrainian diaspora in North America. Over a decade prior to my 2006 encounter, while in Ukraine, I accidentally encountered a book entitled *Sacred Teaching: Sylenko's Faith in Dazhboh (Sun-God)* devoted to *RUNvira* (see Sylenko 1995). Sylenko insisted that a true Ukrainian identity could be built on the basis of pre-Christian ancestral traditions. He restructured old Slavic polytheistic beliefs and proclaimed faith in one god, Dazhboh. When Sylenko's ideas reached Ukraine they did not fit the mainstream national discourse of that time. The late 1980s to early 1990s were characterized by the revival of (Orthodox) Christianity in Ukraine, as a response to Soviet secular ideology and as a symptom of rising national consciousness.

Although this view of Christianity and national identity continues to dominate in present-day Ukraine, alternative forms of spirituality

and visions for a nation, such as Paganism, are also actively developing. Moreover, contemporary Ukrainian Paganism turns out to be very diverse in terms of its leaders and groups, ideologies, beliefs, and practices, appearing somewhat “chaotic” at first sight. Since the 2006 encounter, through conducting extensive fieldwork and consulting numerous primary and secondary published sources, websites, and archival documents, I have studied Ukrainian Paganism in both Ukraine and the Ukrainian North American diaspora.

#### TERMINOLOGY

The closest Ukrainian equivalent to the English term “paganism” is *pohanstvo*. However, the majority, if not all, Ukrainian Pagans reject this word due to its derogatory connotation within Christianity. *Pohanstvo* is associated with the Ukrainian adjective *pohanyi*, meaning “bad.” Another Ukrainian term equivalent to “paganism” is *iazychnytstvo*. Pagans’ opinions regarding the meaning of *iazychnytstvo* vary. The representatives of Native Faith accept the term in reference to themselves, but other followers of the movement find this word problematic – again due to the negative connotation imposed upon it by the Christian Church. The only term that the majority of Ukrainian Pagans accept is *Ridna Vira*, which means “Native Faith” and which is included in the official names of many Pagan groups. Consequently, Ukrainian Pagans often refer to themselves as *ridnoviry*, meaning “native believers.” While I use the terms “Native Faith” and “Native Believers” to address this phenomenon in Slavic languages, in English I use the terms “Paganism” and “Pagans.”

In English, the term “Paganism” does not necessarily carry a negative connotation. Both the followers and researchers of present-day Paganism have worked to “cleanse” the term of unfavourable associations, and it is now commonly used with regard to the conscious revival of old polytheistic beliefs and practices. Many scholars use the prefix “neo-” while discussing this religion, emphasizing its new aspects rather than its continuity with the past. However, a more dominant tendency leans towards the terms “contemporary Paganism” or “modern Paganism,” these being preferred by many of the movement’s insiders.

The term “paganism,” when spelled with a lowercase “p,” usually refers to both ancient and contemporary forms of religion that

managed to resist conversion to monotheism. In contrast, when spelled with an uppercase “P,” it refers to those people who were raised in monotheistic traditions but made a conscious choice to part with them and to revive old (pre-Christian) beliefs (Davy 2007, 2).<sup>3</sup> Since Ukrainian Pagans consciously reject Christianity and develop their spirituality on the basis of old polytheistic worldviews, I capitalize the term “Paganism.” In addition, the use of an uppercase “P” respectfully places contemporary Paganism on the same level as other widely recognized religions. I use a lowercase “p” when referring to old pre-Christian beliefs and practices.

#### IN THE FIELD: COLLECTING AND REFLECTING

##### *Personal Background*

Present-day ethnographers agree that the researcher’s background and identity are reflected in both the collected data and in her or his interpretation.<sup>4</sup> My case is no different. In the field, I often felt simultaneously native and non-native. Many scholars who work in similar situations define themselves as “halfies” and report being emotionally engaged in their research because they share the same background as the people they study. These experiences, in turn, often shape writing strategies and theoretical frameworks (see Skultans 1998; and Lindquist 2006).

I was born, raised, and received most of my secondary education in western Ukraine while that country was still part of the Soviet Union. I completed the early part of my postsecondary studies in the context of post-Soviet Ukraine. This was a time of sharp socio-political turmoil. Among other changes, I witnessed and experienced a major shift in ideology – from communist to nationalist – that took place at the state level over a very short period of time. This was especially true for western Ukraine, which historically has been associated with a higher level of national consciousness than has eastern Ukraine. I witnessed how history was being rewritten and how collective memories of the past were being reconstructed so that emphasis was placed on the colonialist oppression of Ukraine. These new interpretations of the past provided a foundation upon which many individuals and emerging organizations, including various branches of Ukrainian Paganism, constructed new identities and new visions for a nation.

*Insider versus Outsider*

During the course of my research, I could relate to Ukrainian Pagans on many levels. I mention three factors in particular that facilitated my research. First, I could identify with Ukrainian Pagans through visible symbols such as embroidered clothing. Folk (peasant-inspired) embroidery is one of the most important features of contemporary Ukrainian Pagan dress. However, within Ukrainian society, the same kind of embroidery has become a significant symbol of national belonging on a much broader level.

One example illustrates how an embroidered piece of clothing helped me to establish a close connection with a Pagan community. While preparing for a trip to the village of Bohoiavlenske (Oleksandrivka) in eastern Ukraine to attend the Tri-Annual Council of RUNVira in 2008, I was told by a RUNVira adherent that every attendee would wear an embroidered shirt. I brought such a shirt with me and wore it on the first day of the event. First, I did this out of respect for the community; second, since I always prefer to remain a relatively silent participant observer, I hoped that this shirt would help me to blend in with other people.

It was natural for me to wear an embroidered shirt, both as an expression of belonging to my culture and as a response to aesthetically pleasing designs. However, the shirt served me much better than I expected. Although it had a different meaning to me than it did to the Pagan participants of the RUNVira Council, it became an important bridging tool for all of us. Approximately seventy people arrived in Bohoiavlenske from across Ukraine. The majority were long-standing RUNVira followers who had known each other for many years. As soon as I put on my shirt, it immediately functioned to break the ice with those Pagans who wondered what I was doing there. Individuals who, initially, gave me questioning if not distrustful looks began to approach me, greeting me warmly and calling me *posestra* (sister), which is how they address female members of their community. The embroidered shirt enabled me, almost immediately, to become accepted as an “insider.”

The second factor that helped me relate to Ukrainian Pagans and that facilitated the research process is that my first language is Ukrainian. Moreover, I speak the type of Ukrainian characteristic of western Ukraine. Since this part of the country is associated with a very strong national consciousness, which is very important for

many Ukrainian Pagans, my origins presented me in a favourable light. Similarly, my native fluency in Russian, a result of Soviet schooling, helped me in conducting research among Russian Pagans who belong to the Ukraine-based but more pan-Slavic-oriented Ancestral Fire.

The third factor that made me welcome in Ukrainian Pagan communities is biological in nature and is related to Pagans' racist sentiments. Several Pagans mentioned to me that I was one of them and that I could not belong to any other ethnic group because, according to them, my face looked typically Slavic.

I mention these three factors, all of which facilitated my fieldwork, neither to suggest that an outside scholar would be less successful in conducting research among Ukrainian Pagans nor to imply that his or her work would be less valuable; rather, I simply hypothesize that their findings might differ from mine. While they would have access to the same published materials, outsiders might experience difficulties conducting fieldwork among Ukrainian Pagans. Fieldwork helps reveal many aspects of Paganism that cannot be traced exclusively through published sources and archival materials. Although some Pagan communities are more inclusive than others, many adherents of this religion clearly distinguish between insiders and outsiders, largely because of their ethno-nationalist orientation. I often heard Ukrainian Pagans state that they did not represent any prophetic or messianic religion and, thus, did not see any need to engage in missionary activities in order to attract more people. They view Paganism as their ethnic ancestral faith, something into which one must be born (as opposed to something to which one might convert). Thus, "strangers" are often treated with some degree of suspicion. As an insider who was born into this culture, I was able to avoid such treatment.

Although one's place of birth and ethnic background often serve as tools to determine who does and does not belong within Ukrainian Paganism, the categories of "insider" and "outsider" are sometimes not so clear. In one situation, I was perceived with a great degree of mistrust. In May of 2008, in Kyiv, I attended a public lecture by a RUNVIRA leader who spoke about a national identity crisis in Ukraine, offering his own interpretations of its causes and outcomes. Approximately twenty people attended the lecture. Since I was a new face in the audience, the lecturer approached me in a very friendly manner at the end of the event and inquired about my

opinion of his talk. As soon as I introduced myself and mentioned that I was pursuing a doctoral degree at a Canadian university, the expression on his face changed, becoming very cold. The lecturer questioned whether or not I was born in Ukraine and then had no further interest in talking to me.

One of the key points of the lecture was that Ukrainians had lost their sense of self because, under the pressure of urbanization, they had lost their connection with their land. This was considered dangerous because, historically, the ancestors of contemporary Ukrainians, as agriculturalists, had been closely attached to the soil. With the breaking of this attachment came the loss of indigenous culture, which was deeply rooted in the agricultural way of life. Present-day Ukrainians are disconnecting with their land even further by selling it to foreign investors.

At the outset, since I was listening attentively to his talk and taking notes, the lecturer perceived me as someone who shared his point of view. However, as soon as he discovered my connection to Canada, I was immediately placed in the position of the “other” and associated with potentially dangerous foreign interests. My relocation to Canada was viewed as a betrayal of Ukraine.

Interestingly, the fact that I was from Canada made many other Pagans, especially the representatives of RUNVira and Native Faith, welcome me. Volodymyr Shaian and Lev Sylenko, the founders of present-day Ukrainian Paganism, both escaped from Ukraine during the Second World War. Sylenko lived in Canada for a short time, eventually relocating to the United States. A community of Shaian’s most active followers was formed in Hamilton, Ontario. Many present-day Pagans in Ukraine view North America in a very positive light because it provided a fertile ground for the first Pagan leaders and their followers, enabling them to develop their religion at a time when foreign political regimes had forced them out of their native land. Halyna Lozko, the Ukraine-based successor of Volodymyr Shaian, made the following request of me: “Please pass on my warmest wishes to all our people in Canada.” To her, I was definitely not a foreigner; on the contrary, I was associated with the sacred community of the remaining followers of her teacher (Shaian). In addition, the Hamilton community continually provides financial support for various Pagan activities and publications initiated by Halyna Lozko. For her, this ensures their status as “our people” even more firmly.

My experiences within Ukrainian Pagan communities exemplify the complexity of emic versus etic perspectives, which are, respectively, linked to the categories of “insider” and “outsider.” As Sabina Magliocco (2004, 15) aptly points out, the discussions about these issues are problematic “because they essentialize the very categories they attempt to elucidate,” implying that identity is a fixed rather than a shifting, negotiated, and contextualized entity. My connection to Canada positioned me as either insider or outsider, depending on one’s interpretation. Although, throughout this work, I distinguish between emic (Pagan insider views) and etic (my interpretations of Pagan insider views), it is important to keep in mind the fundamentally shifting nature of both of these categories.

#### INTERPRETATIONS

Although I do not share the ethno-nationalist sentiments of Ukrainian Pagans, I try to avoid value judgments regarding their views. This politically neutral approach is at least partly shaped by my training as a folklorist. Contemporary folklorists strive to discuss a group’s activities and beliefs and to understand the motivations behind them rather than to evaluate the group’s views and practices.

Not all scholars remain neutral with regard to Ukrainian Pagans. Historians, especially those in Eastern Europe, often accuse these believers of mythologizing the past. Although I refer to historical evidence while illustrating the creative impulses within contemporary Ukrainian Paganism, I do not engage with Pagans in any debates regarding the accuracy or inaccuracy of their interpretations of history. I treat these interpretations as their own narratives about the past, present, and future. This is, of course, not to suggest that one should not make a distinction between academic and popular arguments. However, in my opinion, whether or not they are based on historical data, Pagan narratives deserve to be studied in their own right, especially considering that they are attracting a growing number of people. Pagans’ voices deserve to be heard and, as understanding leads to tolerance, their viewpoints deserve to be understood.

#### STRUCTURE

Many nuances of Ukrainian Paganism can be better understood if discussed in comparison to their Western counterparts. Chapter 1

introduces and contextualizes Western Paganism, serving as a source of further comparative references. Chapter 2 is devoted to the sources that nourish contemporary Ukrainian and larger Slavic forms of Paganism. Chapter 3 presents a general overview of the origins and development of Ukrainian Paganism and focuses on the organizational histories, ideologies, and spiritualities of three major groups: RUNVira, Native Faith, and Ancestral Fire.

Chapter 4 places Ukrainian Paganism within its larger Ukrainian, Eastern European, and diaspora contexts as well as within the global context of new religious (revitalization) movements. It focuses on the interactions of Ukrainian Pagans with other Slavic as well as Western Pagans. This chapter also discusses Ukrainian Paganism and its relationship to vernacular beliefs and values.

The notion of how the past relates to the concepts of creativity and authenticity is the main topic of chapter 5. This chapter also shows how creative interpretations of the past result in a diversity of present-day Pagan spiritualities. Chapter 6 is devoted to a major source of tension between different Ukrainian Pagan groups, namely, the discourse regarding monotheism versus polytheism as the basis for a contemporary Ukrainian identity and spirituality. This conflict is based on Pagans' different understandings of authenticity and creativity.

Chapter 7 discusses Ukrainian Paganism as a nationalist movement, focusing on such concepts as national heroes/messiahs, sacred territories, and the role of rituals and symbols in the creation of a sense of belonging to a national community. Chapter 8 focuses on the environmentalist concerns of Pagans, the issue of ethnicity and its relationship to nature, and the interactions between humans and nature.

While many Ukrainian Pagans search for "ancient" roots and strive for "purity" and "authenticity" in their beliefs and practices, their efforts result in new, multi-layered syncretic forms. In chapter 9, I look at the religious synthesis of many traditions and belief systems within Ukrainian Paganism. It is aesthetics, rather than political sentiments, that attract many people, especially young Ukrainians, to Paganism. Chapter 10 focuses on the role of aesthetics and beauty in this religion, and it offers some hypothetical speculations about the future of Paganism. In my concluding remarks, I place Ukrainian Paganism in the context of modernity and globalization.

Specific Pagan terms such as the names of communities, institutions, and activities have a unique flavour in their original languages,

Ukrainian and Russian. Since these appear in English translation throughout the text, I have created a list of terms in their original languages with corresponding English translations (located at the end of the text).

## “Living with Honour” Modern Western Paganism<sup>1</sup>

Modern Western Paganism is an umbrella term for such religions as Wicca, Druidry, Heathenism, Asatru, and the Goddess movement.<sup>2</sup> It is also closely linked to New Age beliefs.<sup>3</sup> Paganism offers alternative worldviews and forms of spirituality. Some outsiders view it with fascination while others treat it with scepticism. Despite the perception of outsiders, this new phenomenon is actively growing in Western Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and North America.

The exact number of Pagans is unknown and is usually described in rough figures.<sup>4</sup> Paganism is reported to be one of the most rapidly growing religions in the present-day United States and Canada. It is estimated that the number of Pagans doubles every 1.5 years and that these numbers now approach between 750,000 and 1 million in the United States.<sup>5</sup> According to the 2001 Canadian census, 21,080 people, or .1 per cent of the total Canadian population, claimed different forms of Paganism as their religion.<sup>6</sup> While one may debate whether or not Paganism is the fastest-growing form of spirituality in North America, researchers constantly report large gatherings of people who are attracted by Pagan ideas, while Pagan publications reach readerships of tens of thousands.

### ORIGINS

While each form of Paganism has its unique origin and history, they all share some common roots. Pagans are enchanted with the distant past. Many forms of this religion are rooted in nineteenth-century ideas of European Romanticism and ethnic nationalism that, in turn, were nourished by a great interest in pre-Christian times and by

ethnographic research focusing on folk beliefs and customs. Viewed as survivals from the ancient past, these folk expressions continue to inspire many present-day Pagans (Strmiska 2005, 42–3).

Pagans' fascination with the past is often accompanied by their disenchantment with the modern world and its power structures. Wars, colonialist oppression, the development of nuclear weapons, pollution of the natural environment, and the massive spread of AIDS, among other factors, undermine the popular perception that government and science have the resources and the intent to protect the world and to ensure its overall safety and well-being. Modern technology is now perceived as a detriment to human progress as it takes away the ability of human beings to care for themselves (Strmiska 2005, 43). As a result, Paganism turns to alternative forms of power and spirituality, often becoming “a retreat into magic in the age of science” (Faber 1996, 2).

Modern Paganism is also viewed as “one of the happy stepchildren of modern multiculturalism and social pluralism” (Strmiska 2005, 43). Until relatively recently, in most European and North American states, to be born in a particular place meant to be born into a particular denomination of Christianity, and any resistance to the mainstream would be met with persecution. The ideas of religious liberty and tolerance that were recently adopted by these societies introduced a wide range of alternative choices (*ibid.*).

The rise of Paganism is also largely associated with both the European and North American countercultures and the environmental movement of the 1960s. Feminism, which began to develop at around the same time, provided the foundation for feminist Pagans to ask “why God was a man and [why] women's religious experiences went unnoticed” (Eller 2000 [1993], 26).

#### INDIVIDUALISM

In discussing Paganism, Michael York (2008), himself both a Pagan and an academic researcher, says: “There is always something for everybody there.” York focuses on the advantages of a Pagan worldview. Indeed, in this religion, individual intuitions, interpretations, and perceptions take precedence over any institutionalized “fixed” ideas. This explains why a large percentage of modern Pagans prefer to be solitary practitioners. In the United States in the early 1990s, solitary practitioners constituted approximately 70 per cent of all

people who identified themselves as Pagans. Approximately 80 per cent of present-day Wiccans are also solitary practitioners (Clifton 2006, 12).

Due to the idiosyncratic nature of Western Paganism it is really difficult to trace the unifying characteristics of its various groups. Even those adherents who belong to the same community often disagree on matters regarding their spiritual and ideological paths. For example, while some feminist Pagans fully embrace the idea of “the Goddess” as a symbol of female spirituality, others prefer the more abstract concept of “Goddess.” Still others criticize both terms for sounding too monotheistic – “too like a feminized God” – and instead use the more polytheistic concept of “Goddesses” (Raphael 2000, 13). Even among the first group of spiritual feminists, “the Goddess” means different things to different people: “For some the Goddess is a real self-originating divinity in her own right; for others, who might consider themselves atheists, she is a liberating archetype whose power is psychological and political rather than external to and transcendent of the individual or movement. Others again will move freely between a number of positions” (ibid.).

#### COLLECTIVISM

Those features that various forms of Paganism have in common are often influenced by their larger social contexts. For example, as individualism is a long-standing value of Western cultures, it is not surprising that Western Pagans and New Agers tend to individualize their spiritualities (Kyle 1995, 45).

Pagan religion can also adapt to shifting social values. For example, Wicca was first established in England shortly after the Second World War. Its founder, Gerald Gardner, claimed that he was initiated by an old woman in the 1930s (Adler 1979, 62). Gardner’s form of Wicca was viewed as a “fertility religion” (Clifton 2006, 32). His followers “celebrated the old agricultural festivals, worshiped pagan gods, sought altered states of consciousness by dancing and other techniques, and raised and released vital energy from their bodies for beneficial magical ends” (Orion 1995, 15). In England, Wicca was also closely tied to British history, being perceived as “the true indigenous religion” (Clifton 2006, 32).

Wicca eventually made the journey across the Atlantic and was brought to the United States in the 1960s. Gardner’s understanding

of this religion was not possible in the American context, in which the term “indigenous” referred exclusively to those peoples who had lived in this territory before the arrival of Europeans (Clifton 2006, 32). In the United States, Wicca, while maintaining many elements introduced by Gardner, absorbed local ideas about the “sacrality of nature” and the environmental awareness of the 1960s and 1970s. As a result, from being a “fertility religion” in England Wicca transformed into a “nature religion” in the United States (32–3).

#### NATURE

The majority of Western Pagans share a deep concern for nature, accusing the modern world of using nature as a resource for industrial growth and thus causing its destruction. Feminist Pagans accuse men of ruining the natural world through the development of science and technology as it is predominantly men who are in charge of these spheres. They consider women to be closer to nature and, thus, still able to save the world.<sup>7</sup>

#### RESISTANCE TO CHRISTIANITY

The majority of Pagans are former Christians.<sup>8</sup> They now strongly resist the world’s dominant monotheistic religions, especially Christianity. In addition to historical accounts of events such as the Christian Crusades and witch hunts, there are many other factors that undermine the reputation of Christianity in the eyes of modern Pagans. For example, Pagans often criticize Christianity for being hierarchical and institutionalized, leaving little, if any, space for the formation of a spirituality based on one’s personal needs and values.

Many Pagans also tend to rethink those concepts associated with ancient paganism – concepts whose meanings have been altered by Christianity and mainstream society. For example, they strive to “cleanse” terms such as “witch” and “witchcraft” of the negative connotations imposed on them by churches as well as of their humorous presentation within Western popular culture. For example, well-known American Pagan Starhawk is concerned about the perception of witches as either “agents of the Devil” or “funny creatures in pointed hats with broomsticks.” She offers a resolution to this problem: “I think that for us, it’s worth taking on the effort of educating people, because if you counter people’s assumptions about what it

means to have a source of power that doesn't come from the authorities, that isn't 'blessed' by the powers that be, that connects us back to our intuition and a world that is *alive* and where all the plants and animals and elements are speaking in conversation" (Starhawk 2001, 8, emphasis in original).

#### ALTERNATIVE KNOWLEDGE

Modern Pagan witchcraft is largely associated with alternative medicine and healing. The power of witches lies in their psychological skills and their ability to alter their state of consciousness (Orion 1995, 157). In contrast to traditional physicians, who "conquer" illness, witches act more like midwives, striving to empower their patients to heal on their own. Unlike traditional doctors, who depend on institutionalized research and sterile medical environments, witches work independently, in their own settings and with the help of simple tools.<sup>9</sup> From an insiders' perspective, witches "represent nature as the Earth (dirt from the vantage point of their critics), while physicians represent culture and the benefits of purity and technology" (157–8).

Adherents of the New Age movement also oppose traditional Western medicine, embracing holistic health practices (Kyle 1995, 1). However, in comparison with Pagan groups, their healing practices incorporate a wider range of components, including those borrowed from Eastern traditions: tarot, psychic readings, acupuncture, hypnotherapy, channelling, and so on.<sup>10</sup> Overall, the New Age movement is largely associated with esoteric knowledge and the paranormal.<sup>11</sup>

Unlike many Pagans, New Agers closely engage with psychology. Carl Gustav Jung occupies perhaps the most prominent place among the psychologists who have influenced the New Age movement.<sup>12</sup> This is not surprising considering that many Jungian ideas come out of his analysis of esoteric traditions, including astrology, Gnosticism, alchemy, and the *I Ching*. To Jung, these traditions revealed patterns of human behaviour rooted in people's collective unconscious. He refers to these patterns as "archetypes." Unlike Freud, who studied neurotics, Jung took great interest in "self-actualized people" – successful and fulfilled individuals – and their "peak experiences" (Kemp 2004, 106). Self-fulfilment is exactly what attracts New Agers as they believe in great human potential and the ability to reach a high metaphysical state – a state in which they are united with nature and God.

Intriguingly, despite their overall critical view of Christianity, one of the New Agers' favorite examples of "self-actualization" is the figure of Christ. New Agers do not consider Christ to be the Son of God but, rather, someone who achieved "unique divine status" and who can serve as an example for others (Hanegraaff 1998, 189–90).

#### RESISTANCE TO SOCIAL NORMS

Opposing the idea of hierarchy, many Western Pagans do not recognize formal leaders but acknowledge "Big Name Pagans" on the basis of their talents and special services to their communities (Orion 1995, 130). For example, Starhawk and Margot Adler are celebrated for their written works, which have reached large audiences. Reportedly, approximately eighty thousand copies of Starhawk's first two books, *Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess* (1979) and *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex, and Politics* (1982), were sold by the end of 1985. The first edition of Adler's *Drawing Down the Moon* (1979) sold thirty thousand copies (Orion 1995, 130).<sup>13</sup>

Feminist Pagans link hierarchy with the patriarchal social system, which, in turn, is associated with the oppression, sexism, and racism that they strongly oppose. Feminist Pagans resist predominantly male forms of spirituality, searching instead for female imagery in their communication with the divine (Griffin 2000, 14).<sup>14</sup>

Pagans often rethink the concepts of the sacred and the profane as understood by mainstream society. For instance, American Pagans often appear nude at their outdoor gatherings because, to them, "nudity, among other things, represents freedom from cultural conventions." Nudity is linked to the sacred space (nature), where it is safe to take off one's clothes. Clothes, in turn, are associated with secular space and mundane existence (Orion 1995, 133).

#### THE PAST

The ancient ancestors of modern Pagans practised more localized religious traditions as they had neither a print industry nor the means to travel far or often. In contrast to their ancestors, contemporary Pagans can gain access to a variety of religious practices from across the globe and can interpret and select information about the past, adapting it to their present-day needs.

Pagans highly regard those scholarly sources about the past that support and nourish their spirituality. For example, the establishment and universalization of the Goddess religion is largely indebted to Marija Gimbutas (1921–94), a Lithuanian-born American feminist archaeologist (see Gimbutas 1996, 1989, and 1991). Gimbutas studied various aspects of the Neolithic and Paleolithic cultures that existed in what she calls “Old Europe” (the territory of southeastern Europe). To Gimbutas (1991, 222), Old Europe’s cosmology and social organization was woman-centred: “The very earliest symbols engraved on rocks and articles of bone or horn reflect a profound belief in a life-generating Goddess who represents One Source while pictured in many forms. From as early as 25,000 BC, she is depicted with exaggerated breasts, vulva, and buttocks, indicating the centers of emanation of her procreative powers.”

Gimbutas was also convinced that what she called “matristic ‘Goddess societies’” (the earliest civilizations of Europe as well as China, Tibet, Egypt, and the Near East), while being female-oriented, maintained gender equality and peace; no weapons, except for hunting tools, were found on their territories. They ceased to exist after the invasion of the early Indo-Europeans, or “Kurgan people,” who arrived from present-day Russia and transformed the civilization of Old Europe, introducing patriarchal, hierarchal, and warrior culture (Gimbutas 1991, 324, 352).

Although many scholars criticize Gimbutas for her biases,<sup>15</sup> one can hardly find a single Pagan publication devoted to present-day Goddess spirituality that does not refer to her studies with admiration.<sup>16</sup> Pagans respond to outside criticism by emphasizing their right to their own view of the past and by stressing that history in general “is not so much a matter of fact as it is a matter of interpretation” (Christ 1997, 73).

In addition to archaeological artefacts and other historical evidence from the past, modern Pagans are fascinated by geographic sites associated with ancient times. They engage with places such as the Avebury landscape, Stonehenge, Stanton Moor, and Glastonbury in Great Britain and Sedona in Arizona, constructing a sense of sacredness, ownership, and heritage. Sometimes their visions of these sites come into conflict with views of official cultural and archaeological institutions (Blain and Wallis 2007; Ivakhiv 2001).

In contemporary Paganism, the past acquires the image of the “other,” which opens horizons for personal imagination and creative

interpretations. Although these interpretations may not always correspond to academic findings, they fulfill Pagan needs. Pagans often romanticize and idealize the past, projecting onto it their present-day concerns and desires. Feminist Pagans search for female power in the past, finding in it a way of resisting today's patriarchal authority. By identifying with perceived female authority in ancient times they strive to establish their power in the present. Other Pagans do not stress the idea of past female spirituality; rather, they envision the past as a time when their ancestors lived in harmony with nature and the surrounding environment, relying on their human sensations and intuitions rather than on social conventions.

#### THE PRESENT

Interestingly, while being fascinated by the "pre-historic" past and being opposed to many aspects of the modern world, present-day Western Pagans often communicate their ideas with the help of modern means. For example: "The story of the Pagan movement is [partly] the story of written texts: books, articles, letters, and correspondence lessons in Witchcraft" (Clifton 2006, 3). That Pagans express themselves via publishing is not surprising, given that the majority of them are from the well-educated middle class.

The internet is another important venue for contemporary Pagans. Paradoxically, they communicate "nature-based ideologies" with the help of "non-natural" technological means, demonstrating their attempt to expand their definition of the sacred "to include the possibility of the sacredness of technology as well" (Arthur 2002, 303).

#### ETHNICITY, AUTHENTICITY, AND CREATIVITY

Many earlier Pagans were concerned about the hereditary nature of their craft. For example, the founder of Wicca, Gerald Gardner (1999 [1954]), thought it important to show the unbroken connection between his mid-twentieth-century witchcraft and the traditions of the Middle Ages in order to legitimize the "authenticity" of his practices. Later, many Pagans opposed narratives about hereditary knowledge, admitting that they had nothing to do with reality (Clifton 2006, x-xii). Today, they no longer see the need to have a lineage.

Nor do many Pagans, especially those residing in the United States, feel the need to be linked to one particular ethnic heritage; instead,

in their rituals, they combine elements from various cultural traditions “to construct an esthetically pleasing whole” (Magliocco 2004, 209). Although many Americans associate with a particular European heritage, others respond to questions about ethnicity by saying “I’m nothing,” thus reflecting the general view that white Americans are not typically perceived in ethnic terms, that they are considered mainstream and not particularly interesting. For many people, Paganism, with its roots in diverse ethnic traditions, offers a way for them to feel that they belong to a distinct culture – a feeling that they would not otherwise have had (212).

Various “cultural borrowings” in Pagan practices also symbolically communicate Pagans’ strong commitment to inclusiveness.<sup>17</sup> For example, Goddess worshipers often focus on those ethnic contexts within which the Goddess is believed to have been worshiped in the past and/or is still acknowledged today. Oya of Africa, Inanna of Sumer, Cerridwen of Wales, Frigga of Scandinavia, Nu Kwa of China, and Coatlicue of Mexico are some examples.<sup>18</sup> By acknowledging female forms of worship from various cultures, Pagans not only legitimize their own spirituality but also strive to diminish ethnic differences, emphasizing their anti-racist position.<sup>19</sup>

Scholars label this “all-inclusive” approach, which overcomes national, ethnic, and racial boundaries, as “Universalist” (Magliocco 2004, 224) or “Eclectic” (Strmiska 2005, 19). Not surprisingly, forms of Universalist, or Eclectic, Paganism can be most often found in the British Isles and North America, where ethnicity is somewhat de-emphasized (20). Representatives of this form of Paganism, while drawing their inspiration from the spiritualities of the past, are very creative when it comes to interpreting old beliefs and practices. Furthermore, they are self-conscious about their creativity and often sanctify it. With regard to this, Shirley Nicholson (1989, 19) comments: “Acts of creativity are understood to contain a sense of sanctity, to be closely aligned with the creativity or creation of Goddess. New songs, new prayers, new chants, new rituals are welcomed and appreciated. Individual differences are encouraged, and creative contributions are regarded as enriching. If there is any ‘tradition,’ it is that of embracing and accepting continual growth and development.”

Although eclectic tendencies dominate in Western, especially North American, Paganism, one can still find Pagans who see a close association between spirituality and ethnicity/race. For example, some (but not all) forms of the North American Asatru movement,

whose followers are mostly of Nordic background, represent “racist Paganism” (Gardell 2003, 146). Asatruers biologize their spirituality. While searching for their origins in Old Icelandic sagas, they strive to trace the possible presence of their ancestors in pre-Columbian North America in order to claim their hereditary right to this land (146–7). An interesting historical account may serve as an example. In 1996, an extraordinary skeleton was found near Kennewick, Washington. Radiocarbon exams showed that it was ninety-two hundred years old, one of the oldest skeletons ever found in the United States. Some studies suggested that it had Caucasoid features. Intriguingly, scientists, Native Americans, and Asatruers all laid claim to this finding. Native Americans strongly opposed scientific studies of the skeleton, wishing instead to rebury “their ancestor.” For their part, Asatruers were convinced that this skeleton was *their* ancestor (149–51).

Asatruers and other believers who strive to accurately reconstruct the religious beliefs and practices of a particular ethnic group or geographical territory belong to what Michael Strmiska (2005, 19) defines as Reconstructionist Paganism. Although Reconstructionist Pagans can also be creative, provide their own interpretations of the past, and selectively adapt old practices to their present-day needs, they find older traditions to be more meaningful and authentic than newer ones. Reconstructionist Paganism dominates in Eastern Europe (19–20).

In the West, Eclectic Pagans markedly outnumber their Reconstructionist counterparts. Over the course of its history, Western Paganism gradually changed its attitude towards the issue of “authenticity,” implying a close link with ancient traditions (Reconstructionist Paganism) and “creativity,” the latter being connected to the selective adaptation of old traditions (Eclectic Paganism). While earlier Pagans emphasized their connection with the past in order to legitimize their activities and power, many present-day Pagans no longer find this necessary. This change in view is partly influenced by academic studies of Paganism that frequently stress its creative nature (Ivakhiv 2005b, 29).

#### COMMUNICATION

Relationships between Pagan communities are dynamic and changing. Earlier, numerous streams of Paganism and the New Age engaged in heated debates with each other regarding various beliefs

and conceptual issues.<sup>20</sup> For instance, at the early stages of their movement, feminist Pagans refused to recognize any spirits and divinities other than the Goddess. They were also not willing to allow men into their circles (Eller 2000, 37). This hostile situation has changed over time, and today, one can observe a much more peaceful and welcoming relationship between the communities. Pagans owe this peace to particular individuals, especially Starhawk. Starhawk, who discovered both Paganism and feminism at approximately the same time (in the early 1970s) managed to make feminist spirituality more inclusive. She found a place for men in her rituals without changing their feminist character (38–9).

Among other factors that led to an improvement in inter-group relationships is the fact that feminist Pagans had already “won their right to the Goddess” (Eller 2000, 39), demonstrating that time is indeed the best healer. For other Pagans, “feminists are no longer angry alien infiltrators in a settled world of happy, naked, dancing nature-worshippers; they have become a part of the scenery” (ibid.).

As one might expect, Pagans receive a great amount of criticism from their major opponents – Christians. Some earlier Christian critics viewed modern Paganism and the New Age in evolutionist terms, considering them “barbarian.”<sup>21</sup> Traditional Christians still often regard Pagan spiritualities as heresies and aberrations (York 2003, 159).<sup>22</sup>

#### SAVING THE WORLD

Anthony Wallace (1956) suggests that many religious phenomena begin as revitalization movements. Even contemporary organized religions are the relics of old revitalization movements.<sup>23</sup> Although different in their forms and visions, these movements have much in common. The societies in which they occur are usually experiencing socio-political turmoil and stress – a situation common to colonialist settings. In turbulent contexts the world is frequently perceived as being in trouble and, therefore, in need of being saved. Revitalization movements and their charismatic leaders offer visions of how to restore social order and how to cope with stress (265).

Many Western Pagans and New Agers perceive society as being in trouble or, rather, as being “sick” (Hanegraaff 1998, 302, 330). (For this reason, many Pagan rituals are connected with the notion of mental or physical “healing.”) This sickness is caused by the pollution of nature, which is seen as a result of industrial progress, dominant

social doctrines, racism, and so forth. For example, June Mewhort (1992, iii) begins her explanation of the “birth of a New Age” with the following statement:

There is turbulence in the world. The political picture is changing so rapidly that Rand MacNally, the famous map makers, cannot keep up. Economic uncertainty has the whole world holding its breath, as a global restructuring unsettles the trading practices of the past and creates new, powerful alignments between blocks and nations. Socially, the people of the world are insisting on being involved in the issues of the day, from environmental protection to human civil rights. An exciting renaissance of the human spirit is under way, as self-empowered individuals join together to take control of their lives, their countries and their planet.

Whether or not modern Western Pagans will save the world is as yet unknown. What is clear is that Paganism is developing rapidly, striving to occupy its niche among the world’s respected religions.

## “Where Do They Get This From?” Sources of Ukrainian Paganism

On 28 April 2007, the followers of Ancestral Fire gathered on Khoryvytsia Mountain, an undeveloped, natural area in the centre of Kyiv. They met for their weekly Sunday ceremony of *Slavlennia* (Glorifying Gods). The rite was conducted by Arseniia, the group’s leader, according to the *Minor Service Book of the Native Orthodox Faith* (Mezhymyr 2005), in which *Slavlennia* is described in detail.<sup>1</sup>

The ritual is performed in a circle and includes several stages: (1) glorifying the gods and sanctifying the place where the ceremony is to be held; (2) opening of the Sacred Gate through which the gods are believed to enter the ritual; (3) presenting offerings to the gods in the form of sacrificial crops, symbolizing the work of people’s hands; (4) practising the mode of holy silence and unification with the gods; (5) honouring the world of Prav – the godly world; (6) honouring the world of Iav – the earthly world; (7) honouring the world of Nav – the underground world; (8) filling with the light of Rod the Almighty; (9) listening to the sermon; (10) blessing the water; (11) unifying with Rod, creator of the universe; (12) approaching the altar, addressing the native gods, and drinking holy water. The ritual ends with all participants holding hands, walking around the fire, and singing ritual songs. This ceremony lasts from approximately forty minutes to an hour, depending on the number of participants involved and the extent of the leader’s improvisation.

Although Arseniia followed the general structure of *Svalennia* as presented in the *Minor Service Book*, she nonetheless engaged in a great deal of improvisation. The following is her improvised address to the presentation of offerings to the native gods:

And now, when all our nearest gods are here among us, let us bring them offerings from our spotless hearts, from our souls. This is the work of our hands from Mother-Earth. [Arseniia lifts up a cow's horn, filled with milk, that had been earlier placed on the shrine]. It is Rod Almighty who created our universe, placed in it the Milky Way. And we see in the star-filled sky, through which our planet travels, our cow, our Zamun, who feeds us and nourishes us on this earth! ... Let our lives flow into this world like pure milk that nourishes us, as was given to us by the gods ... Accept this, our gods! [Arseniia walks around the shrine and gradually pours milk onto the fire].

I discuss this narrative, and, in particular, the specific image of the cow referred to as Zamun, later. As the above example illustrates, both the cosmological beliefs and spiritual practices of Ukrainian Pagans are rich and structurally complex. They include colourful imagery in the form of old Slavic gods and other spiritual beings. Ukrainian Pagans communicate their beliefs through songs, poetry, and a variety of lifecycle and calendar cycle rites. "Where do they get this from?" is a question frequently posed by those who are impressed by the richness of Ukrainian Pagan practices and the complexity of their spiritual images. Although individual communities are diverse and their relationships with each other are often less than friendly, the majority of Ukrainian Pagans rely on the same sources, although in different ways and to varying degrees.<sup>2</sup>

#### FOLKLORE

Ukrainian Paganism draws heavily upon folklore. While in both Western Europe and North America the meaning of the term "folklore" has expanded to fit new social and economic situations,<sup>3</sup> Ukrainian Pagans apply the term as it was used when it was introduced in the Romantic era, referring exclusively to peasant (village) life. While modernization clearly influences life in urban centres, peasant societies are usually more conservative and much less eager to change (see Shanin 1971, 11–19). Pagans value peasant folklore in both past and present settings. They are convinced that villagers maintain many elements of their ancestral culture – a culture rapidly dying out due to pressure from the Christian church, hostile political regimes, and modernization. Pagans consider peasants to be the bearers of a "true" and "pure" Ukrainian identity.

Ukrainian folklore is closely tied to particular rural places. Each ethnographic region in Ukraine is known for its unique cultural expressions: beliefs, calendar and lifecycle rituals, customs, medicine, magic, material culture, as well as music, dance, and oral genres such as stories, legends, myths, proverbs, and so on. In the past, peasant societies were relatively isolated from urban centres and from each other, and peasants were predominantly familiar with the traditions of their own villages or vicinities. The great regional diversity of village traditions was obvious only to those scholars who conducted ethnographic research among peasants throughout Ukraine. Today this information is available to a much wider audience because of the ease of travel and access to published ethnographic research. Like Western Pagans, Ukrainian Pagans selectively borrow appealing aspects from a variety of old folk traditions; however, their geographical scope is limited to the Slavic world and, especially, to the territory of Ukraine.

Many Ukrainian Pagans conduct their own folkloric research in various villages. They also make use of academic materials devoted to rural culture.<sup>4</sup> The authors of these works, while providing rich ethnographic accounts, offer interpretations that are clearly the product of their personal views, political and religious convictions, and particular schools of thought. Interestingly, it is not only ethnographic findings that shape the development of Ukrainian Paganism but also the biased interpretation of these findings. Selected examples are discussed below.

#### CULTURES OF THE PAST

In line with their fascination with time immemorial, Ukrainian Pagans draw upon those cultures that had, or are believed to have had, some kind of relationship to the territory of present-day Ukraine. Sources that shed light on these previous eras can be distinguished as either primary or secondary. Primary materials are archaeological findings (i.e., particular physical objects and their remains) and/or written texts from a given period; secondary sources are scholarly and/or popular interpretations of primary sources.

##### *Aryan Culture*

Ukrainian Pagans often refer to the “Aryan” Vedic civilization. The term “Aryan race” was first used by the German philologist Max

Müller, who proposed that there was a people known as the Aryans who invaded and settled India and developed the Vedic religion and the oldest Indo-European language, Sanskrit (Waradpande 2000, 1). Upon comparing certain roots of the Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, Gothic, Celtic, Slavonic, Romanic, and Anglo-Saxon languages, Müller (1877, 273) came to the conclusion that “the words which have as nearly as possible the same form and meaning in all the languages must have existed before the people who afterwards formed the prominent nationalities on the Aryan family, separated.” On the basis of his linguistic analysis, Müller portrayed the Aryan people as great achievers:

It can be proved by the evidence of language, that before their separation the Aryans led the life of agricultural nomads ... They knew the arts of ploughing, of making roads, of building ships, of weaving and sewing, of erecting houses; they had counted at least as far as one hundred. They had domesticated the most important animals, the cow, the horse, the sheep, the dog; they were acquainted with the most useful metals, and armed with hatchets, whether for peaceful or war-like purposes. They had recognized the bonds of blood and the laws of marriage; they followed their leaders and kings, and the distinction between right and wrong was fixed by customs and laws. They were impressed with the idea of a Divine Being, and they invoked it by various names. (274)

Müller’s interpretations became instrumental in the further development of a multidimensional Aryan discourse.<sup>5</sup> Present-day Western scholars recognize the notion of the “Aryan race” as a myth;<sup>6</sup> however, contemporary Ukrainian Pagans do not question the past existence of Aryans. They view themselves as direct descendants of Aryans and refer to Indian Vedas, in which they believe the wisdom of the Aryans is presented. Pagans strive to revive that wisdom to the highest possible degree.<sup>7</sup>

### *Mizyn (Mezyn) Culture*

Mizyn (Mezyn) hunting culture dates back to the late Paleolithic era (60,000 to 15,000 BCE). It is associated with a settlement that was discovered near the village of Mizyn in the Chernihiv region of Ukraine. Notable examples of Mizyn material culture include houses

built on a foundation of mammoth bones as well as bone and stone objects decorated with meander-like designs (Zabolotnyi 1966, 9).<sup>8</sup> Ukrainian Pagans, especially RUVIRA followers, draw heavily upon Mizyn culture. The meander (an ornamental design winding in and out) is one of the most important symbols of this group.

### *Trypillian Culture*

Trypillian civilization is a Neolithic culture. It was discovered in the late nineteenth century during excavations led by archaeologist Vikentii Khvoika. Khvoika named this finding after the village of Trypillia in the Kyiv region, where the excavations took place (Passek 1941, 3). Trypillian culture has never ceased to attract the attention of both scholars and the wider community.<sup>9</sup>

Trypillians comprised agricultural tribes that settled on the territory of present-day Ukraine, in particular the Dnister-Dnipro region, between 30,000 and 20,000 BCE (Passek 1941, 3). Some archaeologists argue that the oldest remains of Trypillian culture can be dated as far back as the second half of the fifth millennium BCE (Burdo and Videiko 2008, 13). Trypillian culture is known from the remains of various material objects, including settlements, two-story dwellings, and, especially, clay objects such as pottery and ceramic figurines (see Balabina 1998). All are richly decorated with abstract geometric, anthropomorphic, and zoomorphic designs. Ukrainian Pagans believe that Trypillians are their ancestors. Pagan leaders study the remains of Trypillian artefacts, striving to understand Trypillian cosmology and spirituality.<sup>10</sup>

### *Scythian Culture*

Ukrainian Pagans are also inspired by Scythian tribal culture, which dates from 700 to 300 BCE.<sup>11</sup> Scythian tribes resided on the terrain of present-day Ukraine and Russia as well as in other lands. In Ukraine, they occupied the territory adjacent to the Black Sea, settling from the Danube in the west to the Don in the east and as far north as present-day Kyiv. At certain periods in Scythian history, their territory extended far beyond these boundaries (Rolle 1980, 11).

Scythian culture is richly represented through its burial mounds, known as *mohyly* or *kurhany*, which can reach the height of a three-storey building and are one hundred metres in diameter at the base

(19). Numerous excavations of these mounds resulted in valuable findings, including human and animal skeletons as well as the remains of material objects that shed some light on the Scythian lifestyle and worldview. In addition, there are written documents describing this culture. One of the best-known sources is the written impression of the Greek historian Herodotus, who travelled across this area in the fifth century BCE. Herodotus described the climate, customs, and traditions of these people and even speculated about their origins. Although Western scholars often regard Herodotus not only as the “father of history” but also as the “father of lies,” questioning the accuracy of his historical accounts (Evans 1968), Herodotus’s works serve as a significant source of reference for many Ukrainian Pagans.<sup>12</sup>

Scythians are known for great military and cultural achievements. Their material culture is especially renowned in Ukraine for the spectacular golden jewellery pieces found in archaeological excavations. One of the most famous examples of jewellery is known as the Scythian Pectoral, dated 400 BCE.<sup>13</sup>

### *Old Slavic Culture*

Pre-Christian Slavic culture is also an important source for Ukrainian Paganism. There are many written records devoted to old Slavs, but these are mostly historical chronicles and church documents. Although they contain some data about the pre-Christian Slavic mythological pantheon, there is not much information regarding pre-Christian beliefs or the rituals and services connected with them. This is not surprising, considering that only Christian monks had the ability to write at that time, and it would have been considered unacceptable for them to focus on such “ungodly” matters (Hnatiuk 1912, vi).

One of the major records of the life and history of the old Slavs is the Primary Chronicle *Tale of Bygone Years* (see Blyznets 1982). This document was compiled in the early twelfth century and covers the period of time between 850 and 1110. The Primary Chronicle provides some information (albeit indirectly) about old Slavic cosmology. For example, the section devoted to the period of Prince Volodymyr the Great briefly touches upon the Slavic pantheon. Having conquered his brother Iaropolk, Volodymyr centralized his power in Kyiv. In 980, eight years before he Christianized Kyivan

Rus,<sup>14</sup> Volodymyr undertook a pagan religious reform, establishing a shrine near his palace. The Primary Chronicle gives the names of those deities that Volodymyr chose for his shrine as well as some information about their functions. In addition, it also includes some mention of how the old Slavs visualized these spiritual beings: “He [Volodymyr] placed wooden gods on the mountain behind his palace. *Perun*, god of lightning and thunder, had a silver head and golden mustache. Then [came] *Khors* ... After him – *Volos* – protector of cattle and trades, and also *Dazhbog* and *Stryboh*, who kept the sky and wind in their hands. Next to them, he placed *Symarhl* and *Mokosha*. It was *Mokosha*, whom sorceresses and *zhrytsi* (priestesses) came to worship” (Blyznets 1982, 64–6).

Another written source devoted to the early Slavs is the epic poem entitled *The Lay of Ihor's Campaign* (see Rylskiy 1976). The story behind this poem is shrouded in mystery. Some believe that the *Lay* was written in the fourteenth century, although it describes the events of a much earlier time – the campaign of Prince Ihor against the Polovtsi in 1085. Count Alexei Musin-Pushkin, a collector of Russian antiquities, acquired the manuscript of this work in the late eighteenth century (Likhachev 1981, 9). The original manuscript was destroyed along with Musin-Pushkin's entire collection in a fire in 1812, and only copies of this text, and its original translation into modern Russian, have survived (10).

The *Lay* also contains brief references to the old Slavic pantheon. For example, a bard called Boian is addressed as the grandson of *Veles* (Rylskiy 1976, 13). In academic circles, the *Lay* is widely perceived as a forgery. One hypothesis is that it is a late eighteenth-century literary text (see Keenan 2003). Pagans, however, do not question its authenticity.

Church texts also shed some light on old Slavic spirituality, but they do it through the prism of Christian beliefs. The texts often include edicts against “evil” pagan practices. The following example from the teachings of the eleventh to twelfth centuries illustrates this attitude: “Those [peasants of Kyivan Rus] call rivers goddesses, and make sacrifices to the animals that live in them ... Others bow to the mud and wells ... and the fires, and the rocks, and the rivers, and the springs, and make sacrifices to *berehyni* [likely water nymphs]” (quoted in Humenna 1978, 206).

Among the textual sources that nourish contemporary Ukrainian Paganism, the most prominent place belongs to *The Book of Veles*.<sup>15</sup>

Unlike the texts that provide brief, indirect references to old Slavic mythology and spirituality, *The Book of Veles* deals with these topics quite explicitly. Many people believe this book was originally written in the form of runes on wooden planks. However, the location of these planks is unknown: only their transcriptions are available. While the book is devoted to a very early time, possibly as early as the seventh century BCE, it was first discovered in the early twentieth century on the territory of contemporary Ukraine, near the City of Kharkiv. A majority of Eastern European and Western academics treat *The Book of Veles* as a forgery;<sup>16</sup> however, many contemporary Slavic Pagans regard it as a major sacred text. It must be pointed out that, although the text resembles the old East Slavic language, there are many disagreements between its various translators, including those who are Pagan.

Old Slavic culture also speaks through physical objects. One of the best known artefacts connected with this era is the so-called Zbruch idol, found in 1848 in the Zbruch River in the Ternopil region of Ukraine. It is a four-faced stone statue that is over two and a half metres long. What attracts the viewer's attention to this idol are the various visual images engraved on it. The whole composition is divided into several layers. On the first (bottom) layer, three male heads are featured; the second layer depicts four stylized human figures with outstretched hands; the third layer displays the images of a horse and a sword and is topped by the depiction of four heads looking in four different directions and covered with one hat. In addition, the hands of this creature are depicted in different positions. This statue has provoked interesting interpretations at both the scholarly and popular levels, and we return to it later.<sup>17</sup>

#### DECODING THE PAST

Bygone eras attract curious minds. However, the sources discussed above can only partly satisfy our curiosity. The texts provide rather obscure fragments of the past. Artefacts are not any easier to understand as they do not carry any inscriptions that would help to identify their exact functions and meanings. Nevertheless, a great variety of secondary sources devoted to the past have appeared in print, offering attempts to translate or interpret primary sources, both texts and physical objects. On the basis of the authors' approaches, methodologies, styles, and views, these works can be divided into



2.1 Replica of the Zbruch idol in the backyard of a private Pagan home in Koncha-Zaspa. May 2008. The original stone Zbruch idol is two and a half metres tall and can be found in the collection of the Museum of Archaeology, Krakow, Poland.

three major categories: academic publications, popular works, and “alternative scholarship” (Ivakhiv 2005a, 7).

#### *Academic Interpretations*

Scholarly sources that interpret old cultures on the territory of present-day Ukraine offer various levels of objectivity. Some researchers, such as Volodymyr Hnatiuk (1912, vii) and Metropolitan Ilarion (1965, 95), are very critical of any interpretations of myth that are not based on empirical evidence.<sup>18</sup> To Ilarion, even the general form of old Slavic religion, specifically the existence of beliefs in

a supreme god, is questionable since the primary information available can be interpreted in different ways. For example, in the Primary Chronicle, prince Ihor's treaty with the Greeks (944–945) includes the statement that, if anyone breaks its terms, “they will be cursed by God, and by *Perun*.” As another example, Prince Sviatoslav's oath regarding his peace treaty with the Greeks (971) contains the following: “May we be cursed by god, in him we trust, in *Perun*, and in *Veles*, the god of cattle.” The phrase “by god” is not clear because it can be understood to mean not only a pagan god but also the Christian god (Ilarion 1965, 95).

Translation can make matters even more complex. Ilarion quotes the original text written in Old Church Slavonic. Victor Blyznets, in his Ukrainian translation of the Primary Chronicle, suggests, through the use of specific linguistic turns and certain punctuation, that Prince Sviatoslav's oath implies exclusively pagan gods: “May we be cursed by god *Perun*, in whom we trust, and by *Veles*, the god of cattle” (Blyznets 1982, 56). This translation is less ambivalent than Ilarion's, but its accuracy is questionable.

While some researchers limit their interpretations of those aspects of the past that cannot be verified, others do not, hypothesizing according to different biases, either personal or connected with a particular school of thought. The nineteenth-century European mythological school of folklore is an example of the latter. Although the school's ideas and methods have been challenged and are no longer followed in Western academic circles, it continues to contribute to Slavic scholarship.<sup>19</sup> For example, its influences are evident in the works of the Soviet historian Boris Rybakov (1908–2001), who is known for his hypothetical interpretations of various archaeological artefacts found in Slavic territories.<sup>20</sup> This is how Rybakov (1981, 463) decodes the Zbruch idol: “All the ... composition can be encoded in the following way: the middle world (world of people) is inhabited by people (men, women and children). It is possible that they are depicted here performing a ritual dance. A mustached god holds up the earth while kneeling. This is probably *Veles*, the God of Cattle and Prosperity, connected with the earth and harvest. The upper layer represents the heavens.”

In examining Trypillian clay figurines covered with particular designs, Rybakov sees a parallel between the symbols of earth and human fertility. Among the designs he studies is a rhombus divided into four sections with the help of intersecting lines, with each section

containing a small dot. Rybakov views this composition as the symbol of a sown field, with the square representing the field and the dots representing seeds. These statuettes often have two stylized snakes, symbolizing water and rain, depicted on their female breasts. Since snakes usually come out when it rains, in Trypillian pottery Rybakov (1981, 170) traces a close symbolic connection between the humidity of the heavens and snakes. According to him, the designs on these figurines express various fertility-related ideas: prosperity (symbolized by sown fields); water as being basic to a field's fertility; and the well-being of a child in its mother's womb (179). Although these and many of Rybakov's other interpretations of the pre-Christian worldview are thought-provoking, they cannot be verified.

Political convictions can also shape scholarly interpretations of old cultures. For example, in the nineteenth-century context of European Romanticism and ethnic nationalism, academic circles accepted the view that rural folklore items were ancient relics that manifested the "primordial" origins of particular nations. While today such approaches are largely considered outdated and biased, especially in the West, nineteenth-century ideas continue to inspire many folklorists and ethnographers in Eastern Europe, including Ukraine. Such sentiments are reflected in Oleksa Voropai's *The Customs of Our People* (1958), in which she provides an extensive ethnographic description of folk rituals and beliefs, often trying to trace their pre-Christian origins. Voropai believes that these customs constitute the foundation that unites people into one nation: "The customs of our people [settled on different territories] have a lot in common. Who knows, maybe it is this similarity of our customs that is the cementing medium that, with the help of its strength, overcomes all the forces that work towards destroying the unity of our people" (Voropai 1958, 1:11).<sup>21</sup>

Although some secondary academic sources may be less reliable than others in terms of their objectivity, they all have a significant influence on the development of popular discourse about old mythology. For example, it is rare to find a popular work devoted to pre-Christian beliefs and practices in present-day Ukraine in which Boris Rybakov is not cited.

### *Popular Sources*

Popular interest in old Slavic mythology has been especially active not only among those people who self-identify as Pagans but also

among the wider social circles. There are many reasons for the attempt to reconstruct the old Slavic past. Frequently, these reasons, especially those involving nationalist sentiments, coincide with the views of certain scholars. Not surprisingly, popular works often romanticize and idealize the old Slavic past.

One of the common themes in popular literature is resistance to global technological progress. This sentiment is similar to that which appears in European and North American Paganism, whose adherents believe that their ancient ancestors lived in harmony with nature and that this harmony is being destroyed by the forces of modernity. For some Ukrainians, the rediscovery of their roots offers them a way to resist globalization and urbanization. For example, the popular ethnographer Vasyl Skurativskyi romantically portrays the village as a place full of colourful customs and rituals that are profound, nature-friendly, and aesthetically pleasing manifestations of ancestral wisdom. In contrast, he views the city as the carrier of technological progress – a form of progress that leads to the spiritual regression of the Ukrainian people. This is why he believes that urbanized Ukrainians need to go back to their rural roots (Skurativskyi 1987).

### *Alternative Scholarship*

As the term suggests, “alternative scholarship” embraces works that do not fit into mainstream (i.e., Western) scholarly discourse. Nevertheless, the authors of these works are either scholars or consider themselves as such. They are either affiliated with academic institutions and possess academic degrees or follow the format of academic writing. This tends not only to give their voices more authority than they would otherwise have but also to develop trust among their readers. For example, if an author teaches at a university, then what he or she says about the past is usually perceived by the non-academic public as accurate.

Many pieces of “alternative scholarship” are connected with the discipline of *narodoznavstvo* (the study of the people), which has become very popular in Ukraine since the 1990s. At that time it was widely introduced into institutions at all educational levels, from primary schools to universities, as a compulsory part of the curriculum. Its methodology was adapted from the fields of folklore and anthropology, but its main goal was to glorify folk culture rather than to analyze it. Narodoznavstvo treated folklore “as national pride and national property” (Shostak 1999, 90). It was a state

project connected with the development of national consciousness when, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Soviet myth had shattered, and it was fully accepted by some politically engaged scholars. Although *narodoznavstvo* is no longer a part of the academic curriculum, it shaped popular national consciousness and profoundly contributed to the Pagan discourse.

In addition to the field of *narodoznavstvo*, there are many individual works of alternative scholarship that are easily recognizable by their titles. Among them is Stepan Nalyvaiko's (2007, 4) *Ukrainian Indo-Aryan World*, which ambitiously attempts to show that "the Ukrainian language and spiritual culture reach back many millennia" and that "Ukrainian history was created simultaneously with the histories of the most ancient civilizations of the world." And O.O. Chaichenko's (2003, 4) *Ukr-Aryans: A Study of the Evolution of the Ukrainian People* "addresses the cosmic images and symbols of various cultural traditions in their relationship to esoteric and Vedic knowledge, comparing them with similar Ukrainian elements and showing their common origin." As we can see, these authors strive to discover time immemorial. Indeed, their mantra could be "the older, the better."<sup>22</sup>

It can sometimes be difficult to draw a line between various types of secondary sources – academic, popular, or alternative scholarship – since they may overlap. For example, many Ukrainian scholars view themselves as nation builders and believe that their idealized interpretations of Ukraine's past are needed in the context of a post-Soviet identity crisis. To them, the romantic ideas of the nineteenth century or the mythological school of folklore studies are inspiring and continue to present a relevant framework.

#### THE BOOK OF VELES

Considering its greatly influential role in modern Ukrainian Paganism, *The Book of Veles* deserves separate attention. While this text is largely perceived as a forgery in Western and Eastern European academic circles, it is the most popular "primary" source for contemporary Ukrainian Pagans. They view *The Book of Veles* as offering the fullest available account of the spirituality of their ancestors.

However, the text that Pagans consider their most complete source of historical information is difficult to understand. The language of its "original" version resembles old East Slavic mixed with some

elements from contemporary Russian, Ukrainian, and Polish. While *The Book of Veles* has been translated many times into contemporary Ukrainian, Russian, and English, there is much dissimilarity between the various translations. For example, Board 7–G of *The Book of Veles* includes the phrase *kravu zamun* (accusative case). When translating into contemporary Ukrainian (and English), some individuals read the term *kravu* as *krov*, meaning “blood.” In his English translation, Victor Kachur (1973, Board 7–G) gives the following version: “Dazhbo [Dazhboh] had given us [old Slavs] birth through the unity of blood.” Mykola Skrypnyk (1968, 3:11) translates this term into literary Ukrainian: “We [old Slavs] are the descendants of Dazhba [Dazhboh] who gave birth to us through blood *zamun* [this word is not translated, just transliterated].” In contrast, both Serhii Piddubnyi (2007a) and Halyna Lozko (2007a) provide another translation, which, in turn, changes the entire meaning of the line. They interpret the word *kravu* as *korova*, meaning “cow.” Both agree that it is the sacred cow Zamun that is mentioned in this passage. Halyna Lozko’s translation of the excerpt is: “Dazhboh gave us [old Slavs] birth through the cow [called] Zamun.” In her commentary regarding this line, Lozko refers to it as a remnant of totemic symbolism based on the myth about the cow “Zamun” who gave birth to old Slavic tribes (159).

It is important to understand that, in this case, we are dealing not simply with agreements or disagreements between particular translators. Individual readings of *The Book of Veles* result in new ideologies and cultural expressions. Lozko and Piddubnyi’s hypotheses about Zamun have found their way into a contemporary Pagan spiritual worldview. In the ritual of *Slavlennia* (described at the beginning of this chapter), Arseniia presents Zamun as the being “who feeds us and nourishes us on this earth.”

#### “CULTIC MILIEU” AND PSYCHOLOGY

Some (but not all) Ukrainian Pagans employ the esoteric practices of “cultic milieu” (Ivakhiv 2005a, 9). The concept of “cultic milieu” was first introduced by Colin Campbell (1972, 122) to describe “the worlds of the occult and the magical, of spiritualism and psychic phenomena, of mysticism and new thought, of alien intelligences and lost civilizations, of faith healing and nature cure.” Those Ukrainian Pagans who are driven by cultic milieu take a special

interest in Eastern mysticism and Western esotericism, especially in their relationship to human health and wellness.

Some Ukrainian Pagans are also inspired by achievements in the field of psychology. Like Western New Agers, they draw upon the concepts of Carl Jung, especially his psychological typology. This typology is an attempt to categorize people according to the different functions of human consciousness.<sup>23</sup> Jungian types eventually formed the basis of the field of socionics introduced by Aushra Augustinavichiute (who eventually shortened her last name to “Augusta”) in Lithuania. The theory of socionics holds that human interaction is shaped by “socionic types,” which describe the fundamental ways in which the human psyche operates. There are sixteen such types in total. One’s socionic type largely defines one’s perception of life and relationships with other people.<sup>24</sup>

Socionics is little known in the West, but, in parts of the former Soviet Union, including Ukraine, it has grown into a field that attracts a great amount of attention. Some Ukrainian Pagans use socionics while theorizing about human relationships and the compatibility of different types, especially with regard to creating a family. Individuals who are well acquainted with mysticism, esotericism, and socionics are usually viewed as possessing special knowledge (*znannia*). Most often, the bearers of this knowledge are leaders of Ukrainian Paganism.

As this chapter illustrates, it is important to “filter” the sources that Pagans draw upon in order to better understand their beliefs and practices. What is filtered reveals many layers of influence and meaning – layers that are often as interesting as are the beliefs and practices themselves.

## Ukrainian Pagan Groups History, Ideology, and Spirituality

### ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT

Two names – Volodymyr Shaian and Lev Sylenko – are associated with the roots of modern Ukrainian Paganism. Volodymyr Shaian, being fascinated with the idea of Aryan origin, took the first step in reviving old Slavic religion in Ukraine in the mid-1930s (Ivakhiv 2005a, 11). During the Second World War, he established two orders of the Knights of the Solar God as semi-religious and semi-political organizations. According to the followers of Shaian, one of the knights initiated was Lev Sylenko. Sylenko then allegedly split with his teacher, reformed Shaian's religious doctrine, and established RUNVira. RUNVira sources, however, stress that Sylenko was never a student of Shaian and boldly state that he never had need of teachers of this kind (Kolodnyi 2002).

Both Shaian and Sylenko shared a vision of an autonomous Ukraine. They also shared racist and anti-Semitic sentiments and thoroughly rejected Christianity. Despite this, the two leaders approached the pre-Christian past and present-day spirituality in different ways. The main difference pitted polytheism against monotheism. For Shaian, God was a manifold essence that appeared through the images of various Slavic mythological deities; for Sylenko, there was one god, Dazhboh, the Sun-God in old Slavic mythology. Dazhboh was the basis for what Sylenko considered to be the true Ukrainian religion, and he announced himself the teacher and the prophet of this faith.

Although Shaian is credited with taking the first step towards the revival of the old Slavic religion before and during the Second World War, Ukrainian Paganism thrived in the postwar diaspora because of

Sylenko's efforts. Having immigrated to Canada, Sylenko organized the dynamic RUNVira movement that, throughout the second half of the twentieth century, grew among the Ukrainian urban intelligentsia. Shaian's ideas also continued to develop in the diaspora, though on a markedly smaller scale. His followers established small communities in Toronto and Hamilton.

The Western diaspora played an important role in the development of Paganism in Ukraine. Pagan ideas began to reach Ukraine from the diaspora in the early 1980s (Shnirelman 2002, 201);<sup>1</sup> however, Paganism did not begin to grow intensely in Ukraine until after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Ukrainian Paganism in the diaspora continues to be represented predominantly by RUNVira, but its membership is gradually declining. In contrast, Ukrainian Paganism is rapidly growing in Ukraine, where one can find a great variety of groups. In the early to mid-2000s, the predominant streams of Paganism included two branches of RUNVira, the Council of the Native Ukrainian Faith, Ancestral Fire, and Native Faith. Smaller groups included the Kyiv-based Trinity, Perun's Host, Knights of the Order of the Sun, devotees of the goddess Berehynia, as well as the more pan-Slavic Khara-Khors Slavic Vedic movement and the Zhytomyr-based Great Fire (Ivakhiv 2005a, 23).

Today, this list can be expanded to include many new groups and umbrella organizations, such as the Vinnytsia-based Native Orthodox Faith "Wreath of God," the Zaporizhzhia-based Rus Orthodox Circle, and the Brotherhood of Ukrainian Pagans "Svarha," among others. The Council of Ukrainian Customary Communities is a recently formed umbrella organization that unites several Pagan groups and defends their common political interests. These groups are not required to share the same ideology or spirituality.<sup>2</sup>

Some contemporary Ukrainian Pagans rely on the teachings of either Volodymyr Shaian or Lev Sylenko, while others incorporate the ideas of both these men. Many influential ideologists who have come after the founding fathers of Ukrainian Paganism also enrich this religion.

#### STATISTICS

Religious Information Service of Ukraine (RISU) statistics show that Paganism is growing each year in Ukraine. The figures from 2009 are markedly higher than are those for previous years; from 1997 to

2012 the number of Pagan congregations in Ukraine grew by eighty-nine (RISU 1997, 2012). According to RISU, as of 1 January 2012, RUNVira consisted of fifty-nine officially registered communities while “Other Pagan Religious Organizations” consisted of fifty-nine communities (RISU 2012).

Despite these figures, it is very difficult to obtain any exact numbers with regard to Ukrainian Pagans. The number of congregations does not tell us much about the number of actual adherents (in order to register a religious organization in Ukraine, that organization must consist of at least ten people at the time of registration). For their part, Pagan leaders usually claim greater numbers of adherents than they actually have.

Furthermore, given that any attempt at official registration in Ukraine often involves an exhausting bureaucratic procedure, some communities prefer to practise their spirituality in private settings, without making themselves “official.” In the case of one RUNVira group I encountered in Lviv, western Ukraine, several individuals gathered for Sunday services at one member’s apartment and did not plan to register their community officially.

Moreover, although Ukrainian Paganism is more structured and institutionalized than is its Western counterpart, not all the people who participate in Pagan activities officially belong to a Pagan congregation. Some may be interested in Pagan culture but not willing to undergo a registration process. There are also individuals who attend Pagan gatherings simply out of curiosity. I observed Pagan gatherings all across Ukraine, ranging from a few individuals to approximately two hundred people, especially on particular celebratory occasions.

In this study, I choose to focus primarily on three groups – RUNVira, Native Faith, and Ancestral Fire – for the following reasons. First, as these are the largest branches of Ukrainian Paganism, these are the groups that I most frequently encountered while conducting research. Second, these three groups each hold a unique place in the general Pagan discourse. RUNVira and Native Faith are closely tied to the origins of this religion, while Ancestral Fire represents a more recent movement whose rapid growth, both inside and outside Ukraine, is rather impressive. Third, although overlapping in many ways, these three groups differ markedly from each other, thus demonstrating the great diversity within Ukrainian Paganism.

## RUNVIRA

*History*

Founded by Lev Sylenko, RUNVira initially developed in the Ukrainian diaspora in North America. The first community was officially registered in Chicago, Illinois, on 3 December 1966 and consisted of fifty-three families (Kolodnyi 2002). Subsequent congregations appeared throughout the 1970s in six other cities in the United States and Canada.<sup>3</sup> By the mid-1990s, RUNVira had further expanded in North America and also reached Australia, England, Germany, and New Zealand.<sup>4</sup> The main spiritual centre of RUNVira in the diaspora is the Oriiana Holy Temple of Mother Ukraine in Spring Glen, New York. Sylenko resided there in the 1980s and early 1990s.

In the 1980s, RUNVira in the diaspora split into two major branches: the Association of Sons and Daughters of Ukraine RUNVira (aka OSIDU) and the Association of Sons and Daughters RUNVira (aka OSID). The OSIDU community consisted of those individuals who remained unquestionably loyal to Lev Sylenko, while the OSID community represented former followers of Sylenko who, although still recognizing him as the founder of their religion, rejected his ultimate political power. The representatives of OSID RUNVira took over the temple in Spring Glen through legal means, accusing Sylenko of misusing community funds.

The Spring Glen community appears to be the only remaining active RUNVira group in North America. This community now consists of only a handful of families, whereas in the 1970s and 1980s it numbered around one hundred people (at least so it would appear from community photographs taken during that period). Many Spring Glen resources are now being redirected to Ukraine.

In Ukraine, the first RUNVira community was officially established in Kyiv on 17 September 1991, less than a month after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Sylenko 1996a, 6). Bohdan Ostrovskyi, a professional bard, was its leader. Because its followers maintained close contact internationally, RUNVira's split in the diaspora was followed by its split in Ukraine (Ivakhiv 2005a, 17). OSID RUNVira in Ukraine continues to maintain ties with the Spring Glen RUNVira community.

*Ideology and Publications*

*Maha Vira*, written by Lev Sylenko, is RUNVira's main sacred text. Its title combines the Sanskrit term *Maha*, which means "great," and the Ukrainian term *vira*, which means "faith." Its first edition was published in the United States in 1980 and numbered 1,427 pages. This book offers Sylenko's interpretation of a perceived eleven-thousand-year history of Ukraine; his philosophy regarding life, religion, and the cosmos; as well as his didactic directions for the "Ukrainians of a new age." *Maha Vira* also describes RUNVira rituals and holiday celebrations. Many of these derive from Ukrainian village folklore, interpreted and modified by Sylenko, while others are newly created.

Sylenko's ideology is based on the idea of ethnic primordialism, which implies that humans have been naturally divided into ethno-cultural groups in the process of their evolution and in the context of their interactions with particular natural environments. Varying geographic locations and experiences have resulted in a diversity of religious views, languages, and other cultural features specific to particular ethnic groups (Ivakhiv 2005a, 17). Sylenko (2005, 6), who strongly resists any foreign oppression (whether political or religious), argues that such diversity enriches the spiritual life of humanity. He holds that Ukrainians are superior Europeans, descendants of the ancient Oriians (Aryans), and he considers Kyiv to be the most ancient city of the "white race."

*Chronology*

The RUNVira calendar represents Sylenko's own chronology. It begins eleven thousand years ago, when the Mezyn culture reached the apogee of its development. In RUNVira, the Gregorian year 2012 is the Dazhboh year 11,119.

*Hierarchy*

In order to have the right to conduct RUNVira rituals and to lead a community, a person must have obtained the status of *runtato* [RUNfather] or *runmama* [RUNmother]. (In RUNVira communities, RUNtatos markedly outnumber their female counterparts). While Sylenko was alive,<sup>5</sup> this status could be obtained by making an

application directly to him, accompanied by letters of recommendation from fellow RUNVira followers.

The RUNtato is expected to teach his congregation how to apply RUNVira in real life. He is to give advice to his community members on various matters regarding their personal and social lives. He is also expected to possess specific personality traits. The RUNtato is self-controlled, speaks softly, and behaves in a noble way; he never judges, accuses, or intimidates anybody, and never shows his anger. In general, he is the one who is most completely trusted in his community (Sylenko 1991, 22). Sylenko also insists that the RUNtato should display his loyalty and respect to the teachings of his prophet, who, of course, happens to be Lev Sylenko (69).

### *Spirituality*

Sylenko (1991) provides a detailed description of RUNVira practices in his *Sacred Book of Rituals*, which was published in the United States. RUNVira lifecycle rituals include the blessing of a newborn child, marriages, funerals, and the commemoration of the deceased.<sup>6</sup> Calendar holidays are associated with folk beliefs (re)created by Sylenko. For example, the Great Day of Dazhboh Light (14 April) resonates with the celebration of Easter in Ukrainian villages.

Some other holidays are devoted to famous historical figures whom Sylenko refers to as the Spiritual Giants of the Ukrainian nation. Among these is the Kyivan Rus prince Sviatoslav (approx. 935–72), who is known for the military campaigns that helped him to expand the borders of his country. Sviatoslav is glorified both for his achievements as a warrior and for being the last pagan leader of Kyivan Rus who did not betray the faith of his ancestors. Another important figure is poet Taras Shevchenko (1814–61), whom Sylenko views as a critic of Christianity and a promoter of ancestral faith.

A separate set of important days in the RUNVira calendar is devoted to contemporary social and environmental issues. These include Animal Protection Day (28 April) and the Day of People's Anger (5 November), which is meant to recognize the people's indignation towards foreign intruders and oppressors of the Ukrainian nation. RUNVira followers also celebrate, on 27 September, Holy *Maha Vira* Day and the birthday of the Native Prophet (Sylenko).

The Holy Hour of Self-Reflection, a basic weekly (Sunday) ritual, constitutes the core of most rites. Although Sylenko allows some

flexibility in preparing rituals, he insists that *Maha Vira* must be the main source in this process. The RUNtato is supposed to choose those parts of *Maha Vira* that correspond to a particular Holy Hour theme (Sylenko 1991, 69). For example, on Taras Shevchenko Day, he reads excerpts from *Maha Vira* devoted to Shevchenko's life and legacy. On "folk" holidays, the RUNtato reads those passages from *Maha Vira* that describe how a particular holiday was celebrated in the past and how it should be observed by the "Ukrainians of a new age."

Despite Sylenko's efforts to establish uniform RUNvira services, some community leaders approach his teachings selectively. For example, the Ukraine-based head of OSID RUNvira, Bohdan Ostrovskiy, attempts to "advance" Sylenko's ideas.<sup>7</sup> Ostrovskiy's weekly *Nabozhenstvo* (the Service of Honouring God) only vaguely resembles Sylenko's Holy Hour of Self-Reflection. Ostrovskiy does not read much from *Maha Vira* but, instead, fills his rituals with colourful ritualistic action and singing. Ostrovskiy refers to himself as "priest," not RUNtato. In his opinion, historically, the Ukrainian people have been hostile to innovations and foreign influences, always preferring familiar things. Sylenko's terms – RUNtato and RUNmama – sound "somewhat funny" to him because they are foreign to Ukrainians.

The majority of RUNvira's ritual objects feature political symbols, both historical and contemporary. The most prominent of these are the present-day blue and yellow Ukrainian state flag and the trident, the state emblem of Ukraine. A widely used historical object is the flag of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, which is black and red.

The RUNvira trident is called a *trysuttia* and is usually encircled by a stylized sun, a symbol of Dazhboh (see figs. 3.1 and 3.2). The *trysuttia* symbolizes the worlds of Iav, Nav, and Prav, originally mentioned in *The Book of Veles*. The world of Iav is the visible world, the world of Nav is the spiritual world, and the world of Prav is the world of customs and laws of nature.

Another widely used RUNvira symbol is the meander. It is associated with the Mezyn culture and is perceived as the most archaic form of ancestral spiritual expression. The images of Mother Lel and Father Or, viewed as the forebears of present-day Ukrainians, along with portraits of Sylenko and of the Spiritual Giants can also often be found in RUNvira interiors.

A person who decides to join RUNvira is required to choose a native name. RUNvira adherents view the majority of contemporary Ukrainian names as "foreign." To them, what makes this situation



3.1 The Kyiv residence of Lev Sylenko, where he spent the last several months of his life before he returned to North America. Please note the RUNvira symbols displayed in this room: an OSIDU RUNvira flag and a *trysuttia* (trident) on the walls and a portable Dazhboh sign on the table. The table is covered with embroidered cloths known as *rushnyky*. August 2008.



3.2 Sanctuary wall of the Holy Temple Oriiana in Spring Glen, New York. The images of Mother Lel (right) and Father Or (left) are incorporated into the sanctuary. A *trysuttia* is encircled by a stylized sun in the centre of the wall above the altar table. April 2008.

even worse is the fact that many names, such as Maria, Petro (Peter), Pavlo (Paul), and others, are closely associated with Christianity. While talking about their names, RUNVira followers (as well as other Pagans) often explain that native Ukrainian names have to be “transparent” and “easily readable,” as were the names of their ancestors. Some of these old names, such as Bohdan (Given by God), Sviatoslav (Glorifying the Sacred), and Liubomyr (Loving Peace), are still widely used by Ukrainians today. If a person who wishes to officially join RUNVira already has a “truly Ukrainian” name, he or she need not be renamed.

In addition to old “transparent” names, RUNVira followers create new names on the basis of the model described above: Boholiub (The One Who Loves God), Svitoslava (Glorifying the World), Zoreslava (Glorifying the Stars), and others. When a name is chosen, a potential RUNVira follower goes through the ritual of name-giving.

#### *RUNVira: Politically Driven*

Although RUNVira makes use of and adapts many elements from folklore, it is heavily charged with nationalist politics. Most, if not all, of RUNVira’s spiritual practices are politically oriented. For example, reading of the heavily nationalist *Maha Vira* is the main component of RUNVira sacred rituals, and the RUNVira calendar is largely devoted to those figures who, for their perceived contributions to the development of the Ukrainian nation, occupy prominent positions in the overall nationalist discourse. RUNVira’s major symbols and ritual objects also feature predominantly political elements.

### NATIVE FAITH

#### *History*

The origins of Native Faith are associated with the year 1934, when Volodymyr Shaian spent time in the Carpathian Mountains. He participated in local village traditions, which gave him a feeling of connection with the ancient past and the wisdom of his ancestors. This is when the idea of the revival of pre-Christian religion first occurred to him (Murovych 1987, 7).

Because of his nationalist sentiments, Shaian was forced to flee Ukraine during the Second World War. Prior to his departure for

Western Europe in 1943, he established his first group of the Order of the Knights of the Solar God in Lviv. Shaian insisted that those Knights who did not plan to leave Ukraine should join the Ukrainian Insurgent Army in order to assist in the struggle against the Soviet Red Army. Laryssa Murovych, while studying the chronicles of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, found a record regarding an insurgent group by the name of Perun (God of Thunder and Lightening) that rescued seven prisoners from the village of Poverhiv in the Komarnians'ky region in September 1944. Hypothetically, considering the name of the group, this organization could have consisted of Shaian's followers (Murovych 1987, 8). There is no indication that this group continued to exist in the context of postwar Soviet Ukraine.

In 1944, in Augsburg, Germany, Shaian established a periodical called *Svitannia* and began to organize the Ukrainian Free University. This is also when he created the second group of the Order of the Knights of the Solar God (Zoreslava 2003, 26). After the liquidation of the displaced persons camps, the Knights began to leave Western Europe for different parts of the world, especially Canada and the United States (Lozko 2004, 15). In 1948, Shaian moved to London, England, where he continued to work as a scholar and cultural activist (Murovych 1987, 7–8). He developed a strategic plan for his Knights, requiring, in particular, that they go to North America and establish a financial base for the order. The Knights were expected to donate one-tenth of their incomes to the order's central office. These finances were to become the common property of the Knights. Shaian's plan did not materialize, and the majority of his followers who had moved to North America became inactive (7–9).

In 1972, due to the efforts of Shaian's followers in Ontario, the quarterly *Svitannia* evolved into the Institute of Volodymyr Shaian, which was incorporated in Canada (Murovych 1987, 9). In 1981, the group of Pagans in Hamilton was re-registered as the Ukrainian Native Faith Church by Myroslav Sytnyk, the Honourable Elder of Native Faith.<sup>8</sup> Thanks to Sytnyk's efforts, many of Shaian's works have appeared in print. The Hamilton community donated Shaian's library to the Research Institute "Ukrainica" at the Ukrainian Cultural Centre in Toronto. Shaian's correspondence and original manuscripts as well as the translations of the Order's publications are now preserved at the National Archives of Canada in Ottawa (Murovych 1987, 11).

Because the few remaining followers of Shaian in Canada are elderly people, they have granted leadership authority to Ukraine-based Halyna Lozko. Myroslav Sytnyk officially initiated Lozko in Kyiv in 1994 (Pagans in the Ukrainian Diaspora 2004, 18–19). Since the time of her initiation, Lozko has been a very enthusiastic Native Faith leader and has promoted her teacher's ideas in Ukraine. Her Pagan name is Zoreslava and she is addressed as the Supreme Volkhvynia (Pagan Priestess) of Ukraine-Rus. Lozko is a philologist, folklorist, ethnologist, and philosopher. She has defended two dissertations, having received the candidate of sciences (somewhat comparable to a Western doctor of philosophy) and a doctor of sciences (roughly similar to Habilitation in some European and Asian countries) in the field of philosophy. Lozko is currently employed as a university professor.

Lozko's Pagan activities began in 1993, with the creation of the first Native Faith community, which was called Pravoslavia. In 1995, she established the periodical *Svaroh*, which has grown into a publishing and information centre. She also founded the Svitovyd Centre for the Revival of Ukrainian Culture, the School of the Native Faith (1995), and the Museum of *The Book of Veles* in Kyiv (1996). The local government closed the museum in 1996 (Ivakhiv 2005a, 22). The School of the Native Faith eventually evolved into the Ukrainian Spiritual Academy of Native Faith. Recently, through Lozko's initiative, the first Ukrainian Pagan Bookstore was opened in Kyiv.

By the mid-2000s, under Lozko's leadership, Native Faith grew to include five registered communities and over ten unregistered congregations across Ukraine (Ivakhiv 2005a, 22). According to the "Contacts" page of the Native Faith website, this stream of Ukrainian Paganism now embraces twenty-seven communities across Ukraine.<sup>9</sup>

### *Ideology and Publications*

*Faith of Our Ancestors* (see Shaian 1987), a compilation of Volodymyr Shaian's works, is the first, and one of the most influential, Native Faith publications. It was first published in 1987 by Shaian's followers in Canada. It includes Shaian's interpretations of old Slavic mythology and the Vedic worldview as well as his patriotic readings of prominent Ukrainian writers and cultural figures. In addition, it offers Shaian's analysis of *The Book of Veles* and his translation of *The Lay of Igor's Campaign*.

Halyna Lozko's numerous publications have also played a significant role in the development of Native Faith. Like Sylenko and Shaian, Lozko writes through the prism of ethno-nationalist and racist ideologies. With the help of ethnicity-oriented religions, she is engaged in the promotion of the "white race." For example, in the book *Awakened Eneia* (Lozko 2006), based on her doctoral dissertation, she strives to justify the revival of native religions across Europe on the basis that it is the only way to ensure the self-preservation of nations. She views Christianity and other major monotheistic religions as totalitarian forces and as a means of facilitating globalization, which she sees as dangerous for indigenous cultures.

### *Chronology*

Native Faith chronology begins from the time of the Trypillian civilization. According to this system, the year 2012 is recognized as the year 7520.

### *Hierarchy*

Zoreslava is the ultimate authority with regard to Native Faith. She is the only person who bears the title Volkhvynia and who can conduct all Native Faith rituals. The Volkhvynia can grant the status of *Zhrets* (masculine) or *Zhrytsia* (feminine), a lower rank of Pagan priest/priestess. A bearer of this title is usually the leader of a particular regional community and is able to conduct the majority of rituals. He or she is also expected to complete studies in Native Faith and to write a research paper. The third title is *Obriadodii*, meaning the person who conducts rituals. Individuals of this rank can be initiated either by the Volkhvynia or by a *Zhrets/Zhrytsia* and are only authorized to conduct minor rites (e.g., *Obriadodii* can conduct some weekly services but cannot bless a new-born child or perform a name-giving ritual).

### *Spirituality*

The followers of Native Faith strive to reconstruct the old Slavic pantheon as accurately as possible, drawing heavily on *The Book of Veles*. They believe in a great variety of gods and goddesses who are in charge of various spheres of life and nature: Dazhboh, the Sun-God; Stryboh, the God of Winds; Perun, the God of Thunder and Lightning;

Mokosha, the Goddess of Female Crafts; and many others. The main deity of Native Faith is Svaroh, the God of Light and Heavenly Fire, referred to as “the father of the Ukrainian pantheon.”<sup>10</sup>

The Native Faith calendar, known as Svaroh’s Cycle, features holidays that are based on pre-Christian agricultural beliefs. Lozko provides instructions on how to celebrate these holidays. Many of her rituals closely resemble folkloric rites, yet many are not familiar to general insiders of Ukrainian culture because they are the products of her own interpretations of historical and folkloric sources.

The calendar honours particular gods and goddesses. For example, the holiday of Stryboh, the God of the Winds, Air, Space, and Weather, is celebrated on 14 July. Lozko (2005, 447) suggests that this god should be honoured with bread and *varenyky* (Ukrainian dumplings) presented to the four winds near a body of water. Another major part of the Native Faith calendar is devoted to various agrarian and nature-related themes. For instance, on 9 March, the adherents of Native Faith celebrate the Awakening of the Mother-Earth (444).

Many ritual objects of Native Faith feature political elements such as the Ukrainian state flag and the trident (see figure 3.3). One of the main symbols of this Pagan group is a swastika shape known as a *Svarha*, an element that can be found in traditional Ukrainian embroidery, ceramics, and Easter eggs (*pysanky*) (see figure 3.4). Native Faith followers interpret the svarha as a solar symbol signifying eternal movement and as a sign of their main god Svaroh.

A person seeking to join Native Faith must choose a native name and go through the ritual of name-giving. A potential new adherent is supposed to bring a new (unworn) embroidered shirt for this occasion. During the ritual, the adherent removes one item of his or her old clothing and puts on the new shirt. In this way, he or she symbolically parts with his/her old self and acquires a new spiritual identity.

#### *Native Faith: Folklore-Inspired*

Many adherents of Native Faith are politically engaged. Nationalist and racist ideas concerning ethnic purity are not uncommon themes in their ideology. Since most of these Pagans live in Ukraine, unlike RUNVira followers in the diaspora, they more readily respond to present-day socio-political issues than to those of Ukraine’s past.

However, political themes are all but absent from Native Faith’s spiritual practices. Here, folklore is what is most important. Indeed,



3.3 A Native Faith adherent wearing paper headgear: the trident encircled by the stylized image of the sun (similar to RUNVira's *trysuttia*). The inscription says "For Native Veda-Faith." Photo taken on 24 August 2006, during the annual Pagan *khoda* (procession) in Kyiv.

collecting and studying folklore is one of the major tasks of Native Faith activists. They are often enthusiastic about sharing research findings such as songs, beliefs, and/or rituals that they have recorded from village elders or have found in ethnographic literature. These are incorporated into Pagan activities.

#### ANCESTRAL FIRE

##### *History*

Ancestral Fire was formed in June 2003. On 22 May 2004, at the first Council of Ancestral Fire, which took place in Kyiv, it was announced that Ancestral Fire included approximately twenty communities. It was comprised of three Regional Fires: Kyiv Regional Fire, Podillia



3.4 Native Faith banner with the inscription “Ukrainian Pagans.” Note the trident beneath the inscription on left side. The sign on the right side is a variant of a *Svarha* (a swastika-shaped symbol of the universe).

Regional Fire, and Zaporizhzhia Regional Fire. Volodymyr Kurovskyi was announced as the Supreme Volkhv (Pagan Priest) of Ancestral Fire and was elected to serve as its head for five years (*Ancestral Fire* 2005 [7513], 3).

Kurovskyi still heads Ancestral Fire today (2013). Under his leadership, this stream of Ukrainian Paganism has greatly expanded. According to the “Contacts” page on its official website, Ancestral Fire’s present-day organizational structure is quite impressive. In Ukraine, it now consists of four Regional Fires, which, together, embrace seventeen established communities, twenty-nine initiative groups (communities in the process of formation), and one International Spiritual Centre.<sup>11</sup>



3.5 Cossack-sorcerers' camp in the village of Rashtivtsi, Ukraine. Volodymyr Kurovskyi (farthest on the right side) conducts a martial arts workshop. July 2008.

Ancestral Fire has also developed external relationships with communities and individual Pagans in Russia, Slovakia, Serbia, Belarus, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, and Poland (*Ancestral Fire* 2005 [7513], 3). Over the last few years, Ancestral Fire has become more pan-Slavic, rather than exclusively pro-Ukrainian, in its orientation. Pan-Slavic ideology helps this group to spread its influence throughout Russia and other post-Soviet countries in which Slavic people reside and where Russian is widely spoken. As of today, Ancestral Fire has under its umbrella ten communities across Russia and one group in Moldova.<sup>12</sup>

Ancestral Fire has also expanded beyond the Slavic world, now having followers in Munich, Germany, where Volodymyr Kurovskyi frequently visits. Furthermore, Ancestral Fire's website announced a large festival – “Native Faith: Source of Happiness” – that was to be held in Toronto, Canada, from 20 April to 10 May 2010, and in which several leaders were to participate. The festival was to organize (Slavic) Pagans on the North American continent and to discuss the future of their native spirituality. There is no documented evidence that this festival actually took place.

Many representatives of Ancestral Fire, predominantly its male adherents, belong to an association of Cossack-Sorcerers that Kurovskyi created in the fall of 1999 (see figure 3.5). Cossack-Sorcerers, in addition to their physical strength, are believed to have had supernatural/magical powers that made them glorious warriors. Scholars view Cossack-Sorcerers as legendary figures who appear in folkloric texts; there is no evidence of their real-life existence (Shiyan 2006, 109–24). However, present-day Ancestral Fire Cossacks perceive

them as heroes and strive to attain their glorious strength by studying both martial arts and magic.

Ancestral Fire conducts many educational activities. In addition to numerous lectures, seminars, and workshops, this stream has formed the spiritual educational establishment known as PRAV, an acronym for the Orthodox Native Academy of Faith. The academy offers courses on various aspects of ancestral Slavic spirituality. The winter session, which took place from 3 to 13 January 2010, reportedly had forty-eight full-time students. Another seventy-two individuals took distance-learning courses.<sup>13</sup>

Volodymyr Kurovskyi and his wife, All-Knowing Mother Lada, have also founded the Rodosvit Academy of Human Development, which teaches “Vedic spiritual practices of self-perfection and healing.”<sup>14</sup> As part of the activity of this academy, Volodymyr and Lada have produced a great number of books and audio-visual materials. Since a large percentage of their students and customers are from Russia, the majority of Rodosvit publications are in Russian.

Despite its otherwise successful development, Ancestral Fire has experienced some structural changes and losses due to internal conflicts between its leaders. A major split took place in the fall of 2007. This split was brought about by Kurovskyi’s conflict with Volkhv Svitovyt Pashnyk, who, at the time, was the head of the Zaporizhzhia Regional Fire.<sup>15</sup> Kurovskyi stripped Pashnyk and two other leaders of their spiritual orders because, according to Kurovskyi, they had not observed the main principles of their faith, had rudely ignored the Ancestral Fire hierarchy, and had not completed their studies at the PRAV Academy.

Svitovyt Pashnyk, in turn, was concerned that Kurovskyi and his followers promoted a type of spirituality that had never been characteristic of the ancestors of contemporary Ukrainians. Pashnyk called Kurovskyi’s group “religious merchants,” arguing that their main intention was to accumulate funds by selling false ideas and images in the name of ancestral memory. In Pashnyk’s opinion, it was the desire to make money that led Kurovskyi and his followers to their close cooperation with Russia and, consequently, to their re-orientation towards pan-Slavic, rather than exclusively pro-Ukrainian, ideas. Pashnyk strongly criticized Ancestral Fire leaders for their extensive use of Russian over Ukrainian. In addition, he viewed the ecumenical endeavours of Ancestral Fire, such as inviting the followers of the Krishna movement to their festivals, as completely unacceptable.

As a result of this conflict, Pashnyk, several other individuals, and six entire communities separated from Kurovskyi. Shortly after, Pashnyk and his followers created a new organization called the Rus Orthodox Circle.

### *Ideology and Publications*

Ancestral Fire publications contain many references to the distant past. Although Ancestral Fire authors express racist sentiments, such as, in particular, opposing inter-racial marriage, these sentiments are not as extreme as they are in RUNVira and Native Faith. Nationalist politics is also markedly less pronounced in Ancestral Fire than in these other groups. Ancestral Fire's main concern is to build a pan-Slavic spiritual state.

Ancestral Fire publications focus almost exclusively on spirituality and its immediate application to one's life. Some of these publications focus on concepts such as time, eternity, good, evil, and holiness; others resemble popular psychology publications, providing advice on how to behave in difficult life situations or on how to gain spiritual and physical strength by drawing upon ancestral knowledge about the universe.

Ancestral Fire publications often deal with mystery and magic. For example, in *Diagnosing Fate: Improving Karma* (Kurovskie 2008), Volodymyr and Lada Kurovskie, Ancestral Fire's most active writers, attempt to explain the essence of human spiritual power.<sup>16</sup> They introduce what they consider to be the ancient methods of karmic healing, which enable a person to enter his or her previous life in order to find the causes of their present-day misfortunes. Volodymyr and Lada promise to teach their readers how to cure the majority of their illnesses, how to overcome their fears, how to improve their relationships with other people, and, in general, how to apply the great knowledge of their ancestors to their own lives.

Ancestral Fire devotes a significant amount of attention to the concept of the family. Volodymyr and Lada, who consciously strive to present an example of a harmonious union, express their major concerns regarding present-day family relationships in the book *How to Teach Your Daughter to Be Happy in Love: Formation of the Goddess* (Kurovskie 2007). The authors emphasize that, traditionally, a woman fulfils herself through the creation of love in her family and through raising happy and healthy children. For a man,

his family is the foundation that helps him climb the social ladder and develop his inner potential. Volodymyr and Lada are disturbed by the present-day situation, in which supposed gender roles are mixed. In their opinion, this leads to unhappy marriages.

The writing style of Ancestral Fire authors is especially striking and quite different from those of RUNVira and Native Faith leaders. The majority of Halyna Lozko's publications are written in an academic format (even though, because of her perceived lack of objectivity, they are not regarded as properly academic in many respected scholarly circles). Lozko strives to place her ideas in the context of the larger academic discourse, providing proper citations and references. Lev Sylenko, whose voice is didactic and authoritative, also attempts to follow an academic style. In contrast, rarely do Ancestral Fire authors provide citations or references. This may be explained by their overall view of knowledge. Ancestral Fire leaders emphasize that their knowledge is not formally acquired but, rather, transmitted from generation to generation by word of mouth. They do not treat their works on Slavic mythology and spirituality as products of research (as do Shaian, Lozko, Sylenko, and other Pagan ideologists); rather, they perceive them as a modern form of sharing knowledge. In order to add a special ancient flavour to this knowledge, Ancestral Fire authors try to imitate the old (Slavic) language of Kyivan Rus as it appears in primary chronicles.

### *Chronology*

Like that of Native Faith, Ancestral Fire's chronology begins at the time of the Trypillian civilization. In the Ancestral Fire calendar the year 2012 is considered to be the year 7520.

### *Hierarchy*

Ancestral Fire's leadership includes three spiritual orders. Volkhv is the highest title. The Volkhv is a spiritual authority who has completed spiritual studies and a period of probation. This person is allowed to conduct all rituals. A Volkhv can only be ordained by the Supreme Volkhv, Volodymyr Kurovskyi. The second highest title is *Vidun* (all-knowing individual). This person is also expected to complete spiritual studies and probation and, when the Volkhv is absent, can be authorized to conduct rituals. A Vidun, like a Volkhv, is

ordained exclusively by the Supreme Volkhv. The third and lowest title is *Zhrets*. The *Zhrets* may conduct a limited number of rituals and is expected to complete spiritual studies. He or she can be ordained by a Volkhv but only with the permission of the Supreme Volkhv. The Volkhv, the Vidun, and the *Zhrets* may have particular specializations, such as healer, bard, and so on.

### *Spirituality*

Ancestral Fire adherents view the cosmos as a trinity of worlds: Prava, Iava, and Nava. To them, Prava is the world of gods, Iava is the world of people, and Nava is the underworld, the kingdom of dark forces. Nava accommodates the souls of those ancestors who did not live a righteous life.

Ancestral Fire followers are polytheistic but consider Rod to be the main god, the creator of the universe – eternal, omnipresent, all-knowing, almighty, most-righteous, and all-good (Mykolaiv 2008, 222). This view is apparently influenced by Boris Rybakov's (1981, 20–5) hypothesis about the superiority of Rod in the old Slavic pantheon. In Ukrainian and some other Slavic languages, Rod (Rid) also means “clan,” understood both as family and as an ethnic community or nation.

Ancestral Fire leaders produce instructive literature outlining the way to conduct rituals. Their *Minor Service Book of the Native Orthodox Faith* presents three major categories of Ancestral Fire rites: life-affirming rituals, life-giving rituals, and the rituals of Svaroh's Cycle – four major seasonal rites based on traditional folk holidays, with pronounced agricultural themes (Mezhymyr 2005 [7513]). The rite of *Blahosviata* is an example of a life-affirming ritual. It is conducted in order to cleanse a certain place (a living space, a workspace, a place of worship, a shrine, etc.) of its previous energy and fill it with the power of native gods. The Birth of Bozhych is one of the rituals of Svaroh's Cycle. It closely resembles the traditional Ukrainian Holy Supper on Christmas Eve. The entire family is supposed to share twelve meatless dishes. The most important of these is *kutia*, made of boiled wheat. The *didukh*, made from the last sheaf of wheat collected during the harvest, symbolizes the presence of the family's ancestors.

In line with their pan-Slavic orientation and relative political indifference, Ancestral Fire communities do not make extensive use of Ukrainian state symbols. Instead, specifically Pagan elements dominate



3.6 Ancestral Fire ritual candlesticks displayed in Ancestral Fire's office in Kyiv. Varieties of the *alatyr* are applied to these objects. May 2007.

this stream of Ukrainian Paganism. The most important symbol is the *alatyr* (eight-pointed star), which forms part of all major ritual objects (see figure 3.6).

The purpose of the name-giving ritual in Ancestral Fire is to enable a potential follower to join the Great Slavic Kin and bring his or her soul and spirit into the order. The Volkhv, with the approval of the parents, plays an important role in choosing the child's name. The Volkhv proposes names based on the time of conception and the child's Heavenly *Svarozhych*, or constellation/Zodiac, sign.

There are many facets to the name-giving ritual, some of which, such as spreading a sheepskin coat inside out, are associated with traditional village folklore. Others, such as wrapping the baby in the *kryzhma* – a cloth used specially for this purpose – may have pre-Christian origins but are now part of the Byzantine Christian baptism ceremony. If one wishes to join Ancestral Fire as an adult (Ancestral Fire's leaders would refer to this as “returning to Ancestral Faith”), one must go through a similar ritual; however, instead of being wrapped in a *kryzhma*, the person puts on a new embroidered shirt as a symbol of his or her new spiritual identity.

#### *Ancestral Fire: Magic-Oriented*

Like Native Faith adherents, Ancestral Fire followers are fascinated with traditional village folklore. However, Ancestral Fire's relative

indifference to nationalist politics and its pan-Slavic orientation differentiate it from both RUNVira and Native Faith. Moreover, unlike RUNVira and Native Faith, Ancestral Fire makes use of concepts from the field of psychology. Many leaders of this group possess esoteric knowledge and can often achieve a desired effect that cannot be logically, rationally, or scientifically explained.<sup>17</sup> This phenomenon is widely understood by folklorists as magic. While RUNVira emphasizes politics and Native Faith emphasizes traditional folklore, Ancestral Fire emphasizes magic.

The history of Ukrainian Paganism is dynamic: it is constantly developing and changing in terms of its form, structure, and affiliations. There is no common understanding of the nature of Ukrainian, or Slavic Pagan, spirituality; rather, it is constantly debated and negotiated.

## Boundaries and Borders Cultural Context

### UKRAINE AND CHRISTIANITY

Ukraine is considered to be a Christian state. Christianity has been the predominant faith since 988 ACE, when it was adopted as the official religion of Kyivan Rus by Prince Volodymyr. At the time of Christianization, the Kyivan Rus state was a loose federation of various pagan Slavic tribes. While they shared a similar polytheistic worldview, beliefs varied among different groups. For example, while southern Slavic tribes had the cult of Perun, God of Thunder and Lightning, northern Slavs worshiped Veles, the God of Cattle and Prosperity, as their main deity (Froianov, Dvornichenko, and Krivosheev 1992, 4). Prince Volodymyr was dissatisfied with this situation as he felt that spiritual diversity was the cause of political hostility between the various tribes. He desired to obtain absolute control over the Slavic tribes and to centralize his authority in Kyiv. Volodymyr envisioned bringing this about through religious reform.

Volodymyr's first attempt involved a reformation of the pagan pantheon. For the purpose of symbolic unity, Volodymyr placed several wooden idols representing pagan gods on the hill outside his palace courtyard. He asserted the superiority of Perun over the other deities by placing this idol in the centre of the others and adorning it with a silver head and golden beard. Some researchers view this as a fundamental mistake as the tribes who differed in their preferences to particular gods did not appreciate the imposition of this hierarchy (Froianov, Dvornichenko, and Krivosheev 1992, 4–5).

Volodymyr's next step was to introduce a new monotheistic religion. He chose the variant of Christianity practised in Constantinople

over other branches of Christianity and other non-Christian religions as he believed that it best fit with the Slavic identity. For example, Slavs were drinkers of alcohol and eaters of meat, which made Islam unacceptable. They preferred colourful ritual celebrations involving visual art, music, and rejoicing, and they found these elements in the Christian Church of the Byzantine Rite (Froianov, Dvornichenko, Krivosheev 1992, 4–5).

In contemporary Ukraine, although Evangelism and other Protestant Christian denominations are growing rapidly,<sup>1</sup> the Christian Churches of the Byzantine Rite still occupy the dominant position.<sup>2</sup> The situation is similar in Ukrainian North American diaspora communities, where traditional Christian churches dominate among religious Ukrainians.<sup>3</sup> Paganism is a small minority religion in the predominantly Christian contexts of both Ukraine and the diaspora.

#### PAGANISM AS ALTERNATIVE

Ukrainian Paganism is largely nationalist in character, shaped by the colonial and postcolonial atmosphere in which it evolved. It developed most intensely in the post-Second World War Ukrainian diaspora and in post-Soviet Ukraine. In these contexts, Paganism became a movement of resistance to both the political oppression of Ukraine and to Ukraine's dominant "foreign" religious force – namely, Christianity.

Both post-Second World War diaspora and post-Soviet Ukraine experienced socio-political turmoil, a time when it is not uncommon for people to feel the deep need for a distinct national identity, or, as Galina Lindquist (2005, 9) would say, when they seek "alternative forms of hope": "When the societal channels of agency are blocked, people turn to alternative ones ... when societal hope disappears, together with trust in electoral promises and utopian ideological projects, the culture generates alternative ways in which people can maintain their engagement with tomorrow, it offers alternative forms of hope."<sup>4</sup>

Ukrainian Paganism is an alternative construct that, in the context of socio-political turbulence, provides hope for the future betterment of the nation by emphasizing its great cultural potential and its past roots. In the diaspora, the politically conscious Ukrainian intelligentsia felt compelled to construct and emphasize Ukraine's national identity as, during and following the Second World War, Ukraine's fate was in the hands of Nazi Germany and/or Soviet Russia. In

Ukraine, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the myth of the “Soviet people” was shattered, thus increasing the need for many individuals to seek a new sense of self. Ukrainian Pagans continue to search for a “true” and “pure” Ukrainian identity in pre-Christian times. They strongly oppose the increasing interest in Christianity that, for many non-Pagan Ukrainians, forms the foundation of a national identity in post-Soviet times.<sup>5</sup>

#### ACROSS BORDERS

In post-communist settings, Paganism is not a uniquely Ukrainian phenomenon. It has also developed in Russia, Belarus, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Serbia, Poland, the Czech Republic, and other countries.<sup>6</sup> Although it has unique local characteristics in each of these contexts, Paganism in general has become a response to a post-communist identity crisis.<sup>7</sup> An ethno-nationalist component distinguishes Eastern European (and specifically Slavic) Pagans from many of their Western counterparts. Slavic Pagans view ethnicity as an “inherently territorial phenomenon” (Ivakhiv 2005b, 202–3) and consider this kind of ethnicity to be the basis of nationhood.

Ukrainian Pagans interact closely with Pagans from other Eastern European and Western countries. The majority of Pagans occupy marginal positions in their larger societies, both in Eastern Europe and in the West. Their attempts to unify on an international level are fuelled, at least partly, by their need for political power. However, while they share this political concern, Pagans often disagree about other issues. For example, the Tenth World Congress of Ethnic Religions took place in 2007 in Jurmala, Latvia, attracting Pagans from Lithuania, Poland, Russia, Italy, Germany, England, and the United States. Native Faith, led by Halyna Lozko, represented Ukraine. *Svaroh*, a Native Faith periodical published by Lozko, offered the following reaction, on the part of Ukrainian Pagans, to certain issues addressed at the Congress: “In some cases, we were struck by pagan internationalism and rejection of nationalism. Americans blatantly propagated tolerance, pacifism, and other ‘general human’ values. Understandably, Ukrainian Pagans are critical of such doctrines” (Tenth World Congress 2007, 7). In contrast, more narrowly focused Slavic gatherings, such as the Slavic Clan Council and the All-Slavic Congress, most often result in consensus among participants regarding their faiths and ethnicities.

The relationship between Ukrainian Pagans and their Russian counterparts is especially close and interesting. At the outset, both Ukrainian Paganism and Russian Paganism were nourished by the same sources: rediscovered nineteenth-century pro-Slavic literature; works of Russian and Ukrainian émigré writers Volodymyr Shaian, Iurii Miroljubov, Sergei Lesnoi, Iurii Lisovyi, and Lev Sylenko; and *The Book of Veles* (Shnirelman 2002, 2011).

Like its Ukrainian counterpart, Russian Paganism has evolved into a diverse movement, with a variety of branches.<sup>8</sup> Present-day relationships between Russian and Ukrainian Pagans are as diverse as is the movement itself. Originally, the two founding fathers of Ukrainian Paganism – Shaian and Sylenko – while disagreeing on many issues, both viewed Russia as the main historical colonizer of Ukraine. Each portrayed Ukrainians as having unique characteristics, emphasizing their difference from Russians (Shnirelman n.d.). Although this kind of thinking continues to predominate among many Ukrainian Pagans (especially in RUNVira), many other followers of the movement do not share these views. While Halyna Lozko criticizes some Russian Pagans for the imperialist connotations of their ideologies, she actively cooperates with others, such as Pavel Tulaiev, editor of the Russian Pagan periodical *Atenei*.<sup>9</sup>

Volodymyr Kurovskyi, the leader of Ancestral Fire, works closely with Russian and other Slavic Pagans. For Kurovskyi and his followers, all Slavs are brothers and sisters in blood and, when united, represent a great power. They believe that enemies of the Slavs impose upon them controversial political ideas in order to separate and weaken them. For this reason Kurovskyi insists on the unity of all Slavic Pagans. However, Kurovskyi has an intriguing view regarding who occupies the central position in the “Slavic family,” illustrated by an example from the Kupalo Wreath Festival organized by Ancestral Fire in Kyiv in the summer of 2008. The main theme of the festival was the celebration of the summer solstice ritual of Kupalo, which falls on 21 June.<sup>10</sup> The festival began a week prior to the actual Kupalo celebrations. That week was filled with lectures, educational workshops, spiritual practices, and preparations for the Kupalo night. There were Pagan guests from other Eastern European countries at the festival, with the majority of visitors being from Russia.

One particular workshop was devoted to traditional Ukrainian Kupalo songs, which were to be sung during the upcoming Kupalo

ritual. The Ukrainian Volkhv Iarovyt, a close follower of Kurovskyi, conducted the workshop. Both Ukrainian and Russian Pagans were learning the songs. Some Russians experienced linguistic difficulties, especially with certain dialects used in these old songs. Iarovyt regularly switched from Ukrainian to Russian in order to explain the meaning of the lyrics. With an air of superiority in his voice, he presented (in Russian) Ancestral Fire's argument regarding the Ukrainian language.

Kurovskyi and his followers are convinced that, among contemporary Slavic languages, Ukrainian maintains the greatest number of linguistic features similar to the language spoken by the ancestors of all present-day Slavs. They support this view by suggesting that the majority of contemporary Ukrainians speak at least two Slavic languages (Ukrainian and Russian) and understand all the rest. They also suggest that many Russians speak only Russian and have difficulty understanding other Slavic languages. Ancestral Fire adherents further argue that, if Ukrainians have preserved the language of their ancestors most fully, then the sacred knowledge and traditions of old Slavs must also have been most fully maintained in Ukraine. In their opinion, Ukraine is naturally the spiritual centre of Slavic Paganism.

The Russian Pagans at the festival were not receptive to this idea. To avoid any potential conflict, one person suggested (in Russian): "Let us sing instead!" While scholars might disagree with Ancestral Fire's linguistic arguments, these creative interpretations of the past influence the dynamics of present-day relationships among Slavic Pagans. Native fluency in Russian helps the leaders of Ancestral Fire spread their message and influence beyond political borders and, in response to their colonial past, to make a major power shift – from the political centre in Moscow to the spiritual centre in Kyiv. They view the fact that many Ukrainians are fluent in Russian not as a product of Ukraine's colonial past but, rather, as a marker of spiritual superiority.

As we can see, the attitudes of Ukrainian Pagans towards their Russian counterparts are diverse, ranging from complete rejection of anything Russian to cooperation with select Russian groups and even attempts by "the colonized" to enlighten "the colonizer."<sup>11</sup>

#### FOREIGN RELIGION AS GLOBAL FORCE

Like their Western counterparts, Ukrainian Pagans strongly reject Christianity. However, the reasons for this are different from those of

Western Pagans. Western Pagans, in line with their resistance to dominant social norms and conventions, are concerned with Christianity's hierarchical, patriarchal, and institutionalized nature. Ukrainian Pagans, given their ethno-nationalist orientations and racism, reject Christianity as being a "foreign" Judaist religion.

Lev Sylenko often describes Christianity as a kind of "nomadic Judaism" that was forcefully introduced to Kyivan Rus by Prince Volodymyr. In reaction to an entry devoted to this event in the Primary Chronicle, Sylenko (1996a, 26–7) provides the following comment: "I [Prince Volodymyr] give the order to baptize [the people of Kyiv] tomorrow. Whoever does not show up at the river – rich or poor, worker or any churl, will be my enemy, ... will be deprived of his possessions and punished by death.' One had to disown one's own, that which was sacred; to disown the holy things of one's ancestors, and 'with fear and trembling' to kneel and worship alien idols – icons depicting alien gods, brought from Greece."

In Sylenko's (1999 [10999], 3) view, the foreign and oppressive nature of Christianity leads to the development of false consciousness in young Ukrainians:

Ukrainian children go to school [and] open their ABC textbooks where Nazareth, not Kyiv, is given more space and attention. The teacher presents the first concepts to them: 'When the star of Bethlehem appears in the sky, little Jesus will come to visit children ... and there will be Holy Supper and caroling in every house.'

'I am a little Ukrainian girl' and 'I am a little Ukrainian boy'<sup>12</sup> – we glorify Nazareth, Bethlehem and the Jordan River. The first impressions of children's feelings, thoughts, and worries are devoted to non-Ukrainian holy things. Ukrainian children are happy that little Jesus is born; they become sad that he becomes crucified [and] then happy again that he is resurrected.

According to Pagan interpretations, Christianity, as an external foreign force, attempts to destroy indigenous Ukrainian culture by blending it with a global cultural pattern in order "to play down ethnic differences and to indoctrinate its followers with a cosmopolitan attitude" (Shnirelman 2002, 204). Ukrainian Pagans are also concerned that Christianity contributes to the development of a "slave mentality" among the Ukrainian people. Many Pagans originally

belonged to Christian churches but parted with Christianity because they felt uncomfortable being addressed as “slaves of God,” as is common practice in Eastern Christian churches.

#### MIRRORING SOCIETY

##### *Individualism and Collectivism*

Ukrainian Paganism absorbs the values of its larger socio-political context. While the idiosyncratic nature of Western Paganism reflects Western society’s focus on the individual, Ukrainian Paganism is more collective in character. The Soviet influence on the promotion of collectivity cannot be underestimated. The majority of Ukrainian Pagans identify themselves in terms of their relationship to their communities and to their leaders. When a split occurs within a Pagan community, those who leave usually initiate the creation of a new community. Solitary practitioners seem to be a minority in Ukrainian Paganism.

##### *Institutionalization and Hierarchy*

Unlike the opposition to hierarchy found in Western Paganism, Ukrainian Paganism is, to a large extent, a religion of leaders and followers. It is institutionalized and hierarchical, and spiritual orders and social positions are clearly defined. Ukrainian Pagans relate the concept of institutionalization to their general political goals. While Western Pagans strongly resist many aspects of the state as an institution, Ukrainian Pagans see the building of a state as their main mission. RUNVira and Native Faith adherents strive to create a new Ukraine while Ancestral Fire followers attempt to build a new spiritual Slavic state. “State,” of course, implies institutionalization and hierarchy.

As state builders, Ukrainian Pagans do not resist existing state systems; rather, they often imitate them. Their organizational structures closely resemble those of the present-day Ukrainian state. The country consists of twenty-four provinces called *oblasti* plus the Autonomous Republic of Crimea. While *oblasti* have some economic and administrative autonomy, they are ultimately controlled by the central political power in Kyiv. Ukrainian Pagan groups follow a similar system, with main offices and leaders followed by regional communities whose local leaders answer to the central powers.

*Gender*

Gender dynamics in Ukrainian Paganism also mirror the values of the larger society. While feminist voices have occupied a prominent niche in Western Paganism, issues connected with women's liberation are not explicitly addressed by Ukrainian Pagans. With the exception of a few narrow circles of academics and cultural activists, present-day Ukrainian society is generally hostile towards feminism (Pavlychko 1996, 305; Zhurzhenko 2001, 110).<sup>13</sup>

Gender politics in contemporary Ukraine is dominated by neo-traditionalist views (Zhurzhenko 2001, 109–31). Following these views, the family carries “the status of the moral absolute” (111). Women are empowered only within the domestic sphere rather than in the public sphere. The revival of old folkloric traditions often serves as a tool to reinforce these standards.

The revived spiritual figure *Berehynia* provides one of the most intriguing examples of this. The origins of Berehynia have not been established. However, there is, perhaps, no term associated with old mythology that has gained more popularity than Berehynia. In Ukraine, Berehynia has been attached to a popular ethnographic journal, a radio program, bookstores, kindergartens, cultural and educational projects, a medical clinic in Kyiv, a shoe factory in Chernihiv, a furniture factory in Zaporizhzhia, and even a newly developed variety of potato. In Russia, *Bereginya* is also the name of a mineral water bottling factory, a herbal product that is claimed to prevent the development of certain types of tumours, and a black-terrier breeding kennel in the western part of Moscow. This list is exhaustive neither for Ukraine nor for Russia.<sup>14</sup>

With the exception of a handful of scholars (see Kis 2003), few people in Ukraine question the past existence of Berehynia, who is widely perceived as a Slavic goddess. Great interest in this mythological figure developed shortly before and (especially) after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Popular ethnographer Vasyl Skurativskyi contributed to the popularization of this myth. He presents Berehynia as a female archetype of the “protectress of the family.” According to Skurativskyi (1996, 61): “The ancient symbol has forever remained in the historical memory [of the people] ... At all times and for all peoples, woman embodied the comfort of the family hearth, giving birth to and raising children, the preservation of family traditions and customs, as well as maintaining order in the house. Her immeasurable

love, tenderness and warmth inspired many generations of people to great heroic deeds, inspired the elevated thoughts of poets and philosophers, inspired industriousness among hunters and heroism among kings and warriors.”

Skurativskyi (1987, 7) is convinced that the etymology of the word *berehynia* is connected with the Ukrainian verb *berehty*, meaning to protect or to preserve. In line with this etymology, Skurativskyi limits female authority to an exclusively domestic sphere, thus contributing to the further development of patriarchal gender discourse in Ukraine. Contemporary Ukrainian politicians have successfully adapted this understanding of the role of the female, often addressing women as “bewitching, beloved, our own *Berehyni*,” as “mothers,” “wives,” and as the “*Berehyni* of our people.” Consequently, the modern *Berehynia* myth “seduces contemporary Ukrainian women into a false sense of their own centrality even as it consigns them to inferior status” (Rubchak 2001, 149).

A similar understanding of the central position of women is reflected in Ancestral Fire’s interpretations of *Berehynia*. In one of their books, leaders Volodymyr and Lada Kurovski say: “Dear reader, since ancient times your Ancestors sacredly respected woman since she is naturally the *Berehynia* of the family who preserves everything that her husband accumulated and brought into the family, clan and state. It is precisely the woman who passes on from generation to generation what our Ancestors-Gods gave to us long ago” (Kurovski 2008, 6).

The leaders of Ancestral Fire also attempt to control the moral behaviour of their female followers. This is reflected in Lada’s Dew, a sacred Ancestral Fire ritual for women who want to have children, especially for those who are having difficulty conceiving. If a woman suffers from problems related to infertility, she can seek help from a Volkhvynia (or Volkhv). The Volkhvynia analyzes the woman’s fate by looking at both her past and her future, especially those moments that may be connected with her current infertility. One of the most severe sins is the loss of virginity outside of wedlock. Volodymyr and Lada point out: “[In the past] every girl had to know that the first man with whom she has an intimate relationship, leaves the image of his spirit and body in her. All the children that she has will be from this man’s clan. This is why it is very important for a girl to share sacred wedlock only with her beloved husband. Those who were unaware of this while creating their families placed themselves

into great trouble. It happened that Mother Lelia, the Goddess of Love, through her pure and strong love, cleansed those girls who were unwillingly dishonoured. However, this would not always happen, as the couple needed to possess a very light Spirit and Soul for it to occur” (Kurovski 2008, 12).

As part of the Lada’s Dew ritual, women bathe nude in the morning dew, hoping to be cleansed of their past misdeeds (interestingly, there is no cleansing ritual for men). The form of the ritual – bathing in dew – appears to be influenced by Ukrainian folk traditions associated with the holiday of St Iurii (George) celebrated on 23 April (Julian calendar). According to folk beliefs, “Iurii’s dew” has magical power. Villagers roll in “Iurii’s dew” in order to be healthy and beautiful (Chubynskyi 1995, 31). While defining the purpose of the ritual, Volodymyr and Lada, without acknowledging their sources, apparently draw upon the popular psychological argument that one’s first sexual partner is crucial in shaping and developing one’s future sexuality. To this they add spiritual flavour.<sup>15</sup>

The Lada’s Dew ritual leaves Ukrainian Pagan women with only one way to obtain power, namely, to display good behaviour by willingly following patriarchal norms. This includes preserving their virginity until marriage, giving birth to children, and taking care of their households. Ancestral Fire’s Berehynia myth and the Lada’s Dew ritual involve a neo-traditionalist adaptation of folklore that feminist scholars would interpret as creating a trap for women. To put it in Zhurzhenko’s (2001, 122) terms: “Neo-traditionalist sacralization of motherhood and the reconstruction of the matriarchal myth becomes a trap that limits women’s potential to pre-given gender roles, creating an obstacle to the recognition of real discrimination problems.”

Although patriarchal views dominate in some Ukrainian Pagan communities, other Pagans respond to patriarchal ideology by producing matriarchal narratives about the past. They do not explicitly address feminist concerns (considering that these are a taboo in the larger society) but often implicitly communicate liberating ideas. Volkhvynia Zoreslava (Halyna Lozko), the ultimate authority of Native Faith, and her social position are an example. The feminine word *volkhvynia* appears to be a relatively recent construct in the Ukrainian language. There is no information indicating that female priests existed in old Slavic culture. However, Zoreslava has a different view of this situation.

According to Zoreslava, in the past, women possessed great spiritual power. As an example, she focuses on one particular artefact

discovered during the archaeological study of ancient cultures. This is a spindle, which was found among valuable gold and silver items at an archaeological excavation and dated at between 700 and 800 ACE. For Zoreslava, the spindle's medium shows that "it was of a great value to its female owner" (Lozko 1995, 190). She further argues that the sacred nature of old spindles is manifested in their form since they were often adorned with various sacred signs (sun, moon, and constellations) and used as tools not only for spinning but also for "observing heavenly bodies." Thus, they could "be viewed as the attributes of the *volkhvyni* [pagan priestesses] ... of traditional cults" (Lozko 1995, 191).

In her narrative of the spindle, Zoreslava does not question the past existence of Pagan priestesses. Since today spindles are associated with female crafts, she surmises that, in the past, this particular object belonged to a woman, and she concludes that such spindles were important attributes for traditional *volkhvyni* (Lozko 1995, 190).

Although Zoreslava does not explicitly address gender issues, she introduces a female perspective into her narrative by emphasizing the supernatural powers of female leaders in the pre-Christian past. By doing so, she strives to legitimize her own gender authority as the Supreme *Volkhvynia* of present-day Ukraine. Zoreslava's feminist views are present not only in her narratives about the past but also in the organizational dynamics of her communities. While the majority of regional community leaders in Ancestral Fire are males in their mid- and late thirties (like the group's main leader Kurovskiy), the situation is very different for Native Faith. The majority of its regional leaders are middle-aged women (like their main leader, *Volkhvynia* Zoreslava).

Although contemporary Pagan matriarchal and patriarchal myths of the past are united by ethno-nationalist sentiments, they represent different perspectives. While men often justify their desires by referring to the past and women often attempt to empower themselves by submitting to patriarchal rules, liberated women attempt to subvert dominant patriarchal interpretations of the past (albeit neither directly nor openly).

#### SAVING UKRAINE

Like their Western counterparts, Ukrainian Pagans believe that their society is in turmoil. However, they link this misfortune with the idea of lost ethnic roots and identity. Let us consider an example. Vira, a middle-aged female Pagan, works as a street vendor at the

informal street market on Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square) in Kyiv. This market is one of the rare places in Kyiv that creates an atmosphere conducive to alternative thinking. In addition to selling Pagan literature, Vira actively engages in educational and propagandistic conversations with her customers. Although she belongs to RUNVira, Vira is also attracted to various forms of esoteric knowledge that are not generally characteristic of this group. In her opinion, the Ukrainian nation is being destroyed by a variety of modern means:

Psychotropic weapons, immunization, Chornobyl (Chernobyl), [and] Coca-Cola destroy us ... Our women walk around partially naked because they are the most beautiful in the world ... but they are silly because they think that this is fashion. Our girls are ... beaten with negative energy in their bare midribs. This is done in order to destroy the white population. And a twelve- to thirteen-year-old child ends up in the hospital for treatment of her reproductive organs ... In the past, women were protected from these vampires by wearing necklaces, embroidered shirts, skirts, aprons, and belts in such a way that not a single vampire would reach their bodies. Now, a girl is given a bottle of beer and a cigarette and she no longer smells pleasant, but stinks ... And she will have the same kind of a child ... We are being destroyed, destroyed, and destroyed ... In Greek, *customs* (*zvychai*) means morals. One who does not know one's customs is an immoral person.

However, Vira ends on an optimistic note: "They have a stranglehold on us but they will not asphyxiate us. Genetic memory will still manifest itself because it is still the heavens that rule us."

While responding to both historical colonialism and the present-day socio-political crisis in Ukraine, many Pagans propose concrete projects that, in their opinion, will help to overcome the current turmoil. One example is a projected Ukrainian constitution, which was published in the proceedings of the 7515 (2007) Annual Pagan conference entitled "The Being of Ukrainians." The Constitution is devoted to "the future of Ukraine" and a copy was delivered to the secretariat of the president of Ukraine, Viktor Yushchenko, in 2008. The Constitution's greatest emphasis is placed on the formation of the "idea of a nation," which is connected with deep knowledge and



4.1 B. Klymchak. A model of Oaza-Hora displayed at the creator's home. May 2008.

the following of old traditions: “While taking into consideration our customs and academic research regarding the preservation of Ukrainian ethnic and family genes through maintaining virginity before marriage, through the genetic influence of the first sexual partner – the State provides active explanatory and propagandistic work regarding the maintenance of woman’s and man’s honour, dignity and purity” (Matviienko, Kozhushko, and Karpenko 2007, 31).

Lviv-based Bohdan Klymchak, a political prisoner during the Soviet era and a very active adherent of *RUNVira*, proposes a different project. Klymchak is convinced that, in order for Ukraine to

overcome its present-day socio-political crisis, the country must honour its historical heroes, including the prisoners of the Soviet regime. He has designed a massive, multilayered monument that would honour such individuals and contribute to historical awareness. He calls this pyramid-like structure *Oaza-Hora* (see figure 4.1).

Whether or not contemporary Pagan visions and projects will help to save the Ukrainian nation remains a matter of speculation. I hypothesize about this and the future of Ukrainian Paganism in the last chapter.

## “We Haven’t Given Up What Is Ours” Past and Present

### UNBROKEN TRADITION

Fascination with the past closely unites Eastern European Pagans, including those in Ukraine, with their Western counterparts. However, over the course of their development the focus for a majority of Western Pagans has shifted from “authenticity” to “creativity.” Although they continue to draw inspiration from the past, many Western Pagans have made peace with the idea that their religion is new. Many even encourage and promote creativity.

In the case of Slavic Pagans, it is important to distinguish between emic and etic perspectives with regard to the notion of creativity. While now both insiders and outsiders consider Western Paganism to be a new religious movement, only outsiders view Slavic Paganism as a modern construct. For their part, many Slavic Pagans would argue strongly against being seen as modernist. In order to better understand this issue, I propose to distinguish between self-conscious creativity in the case of Western Pagans and unself-conscious creativity in the case of their Ukrainian counterparts.<sup>1</sup>

The belief in “unbroken tradition” is extremely important for many Ukrainian Pagans.<sup>2</sup> It helps them justify their present-day visions while at the same time reinforcing the authority of their leaders. For instance, Native Faith followers emphasize the significance of unbroken tradition in their narratives about the initiation of Pagan leaders. Volkhvynia Zoreslava, the Kyiv-based leader of Native Faith, was initiated by Canada-based Myroslav Sytnyk, himself a successor of Volodymyr Shaian, the founder of this religion. Commenting on this event, Zoreslava’s follower, Svitoiar,

emphasizes the important role of Zoreslava in maintaining the tradition of the “golden chain.” To him, this tradition “symbolizes the eternal inheritance of the spirit of [the] ancestors,” which has existed from ancient times, “until Prince Volodymyr broke the golden links of this chain in 988, when he executed the leading Volkhvynia [Pagan priests] of [Kyivan] Rus.” According to Svitoiar, the contemporary revival of the broken “golden chain” takes place through laying hands on a future Volkhv or Volkhvynia who, in turn, teaches and ordains his or her successors, “ensuring the continuity of the tradition and [the] inheritance of spiritual links.” Volkhvynia Zoreslava is a bearer of this tradition, and she ensures its continuity. Svitoiar (2001, 14) is convinced that Native Faith has been revived according to “ancestral right” because it follows the “golden chain tradition,” while all the other Pagan groups “that chaotically appear in Ukraine are amateur.”

Volodymyr Kurovskyi and his Ancestral Fire are among those groups and leaders whose positions Native Faith followers strive to undermine. According to Native Faith sources, Kurovskyi swore an oath and was formally initiated by Zoreslava as a Zhrets of Native Faith on 8 September 2002. This event was preceded by an official letter requesting the acceptance of the Podillia-based branch of Cossack-Sorcerers, at the time headed by Kurovskyi, into Native Faith. The letter included the following:

Dear Volkvynia, [we] made a decision ... to ask you to accept our association of Cossack-sorcerers to Native Faith. On our part, *we ensure you that:*

– *We consider ourselves to be native believers, followers of Native Faith, revived by the Great Volkhv Volodymyr Shaian; ... [W]e recognize Volkvynia Zoreslava and all her canonic successors as the higher moral and spiritual authorities in questions of religion and faith; we consider ourselves to be part of the world movement of Ukrainian Pagans [iazychnyky] and wish to belong to the Native Faith Association of Ukraine ([Lozko?] 2003, 68 [emphasis in original])*

Zoreslava and her followers treated Kurovskyi’s eventual separation from Native Faith as a “breaking of the oath” and, by extension, as his being disconnected from the “golden chain” of ancestral

tradition. This invalidated Kurovskyi as a leader and as a Native Faith adherent in the eyes of other Native Faith followers.

Kurovskyi, in turn, promotes the idea of the “unbreakable tradition of the past” in his own narratives about his status. While Zoreslava emphasizes the initiation ceremony through which she obtained her present position, Kurovskyi draws upon the folkloric idea of the oral transmission of traditional knowledge. Kurovskyi often emphasizes that he is a hereditary *Volkhv* because, in his family, the tradition of Pagan priesthood has never been interrupted. This narrative is deeply embedded in the consciousness of Ancestral Fire followers. While discussing their allegiance to Kurovskyi, many of my consultants emphasized Kurovskyi’s hereditary knowledge as one of his major virtues.

As we can see, from the emic perspective it is important for many Ukrainian Pagans to think of their beliefs and activities as having been inherited from ancestors rather than as having been invented or created. Pagans legitimize the “authenticity” of their practices with the help of either initiation narratives (in the case of Native Faith) or the acquisition of knowledge narratives (in the case of Ancestral Fire).

#### RECONSTRUCTIONIST VERSUS APPROPRIATIONIST PARADIGMS

Let us now look at Ukrainian Paganism and its relationship to tradition from an etic perspective. In contrast to Western Paganism, in which, with its adaptation of various ethnic traditions, one can see that the Eclectic paradigm dominates, Slavic (including Ukrainian) Paganism is largely connected with what Strmiska identifies as the Reconstructionist paradigm. Many Slavic Pagans associate “cultural borrowings” with undesirable foreign influences – influences that contaminate their pure ethnic identities.

In Ukrainian Paganism, the situation with “cultural borrowings” is even more complex than what is found in the Reconstructionist pattern. For example, some Ukrainian Pagans, especially representatives of Ancestral Fire, appropriate elements from other cultures; however, they are convinced that these elements were originally part of the culture of their ancestors, and they do not treat them as foreign. Therefore, I propose to expand Strmiska’s theoretical framework for modern Paganism to include an Appropriationist paradigm.

While there is some overlap between the Appropriationist and the Eclectic paradigms since both are associated with “cultural borrowings,” there is a significant difference in insiders’ attitudes towards them. Many Eclectic Pagans who consciously adapt elements from various traditions openly admit doing so; however, many Ukrainian Pagans, especially Ancestral Fire followers, claim that their borrowings are authentically Ukrainian. For example, they are attracted to Eastern mysticism and meditation techniques but insist that these practices are connected with the traditions of their ancestors. Perhaps the most intriguing example emerged during an informal conversation with a young male adherent of Ancestral Fire who suggested that the ancestors of present-day Ukrainians invented yoga, though it may have been known by a different name.

Martial arts, as employed by some Pagans, especially Cossack-Sorcerers, can serve as another example of the Appropriationist paradigm in Ukrainian Paganism. The most widely known figure in the world of contemporary Ukrainian martial arts is Volodymyr Pylat. He is considered the founder and supreme teacher of Boiovyi (Combat) Hopak, a historical dance that has become a label for Pylat’s present-day physical and philosophical system, which includes the following major principles: “Fighting for truth and against the forces of Darkness and Evil in the name of victory for Light, Goodness and Love – positive creative powers that facilitate the development of the Universe, the creation of the most perfect forms of life and the transformation of the physical into the spiritual” (Pylat 2008, 18).

Pylat has his own school of Boiovyi Hopak in Lviv, where he offers martial arts classes at various levels of complexity. Although he emphasizes that the Boiovyi Hopak school is a non-religious institution, Pylat himself belongs to RUNVira. He is highly respected not only by his fellow RUNVira followers but also by other Ukrainian Pagans for his talent and for his contribution to the revival of Ukrainian traditions.

Boiovyi Hopak does not receive much attention in Ukrainian ethnographic literature. Andrii Humeniuk describes the dance, based on his own fieldwork and on Ukrainian folk songs and literary works that mention folk dances. Humeniuk does not use the term *boiyyi* with regard to hopak, but he does hypothesize that this dance originated during Cossack times. This hypothesis is based on the visual form of the dance, which includes many elements resembling

martial arts movements (Humeniuk 1963, 97). Humeniuk's research reveals several steps and movements that constitute both the Cossack style and the more recent hopak.

Intriguingly, the number of steps and movements described by Humeniuk is very small in comparison to those described by Pylat in his book *Combat Hopak: Requirements for the Zhovtiak Level of Proficiency* (2008 [1999]). Another impressive aspect of Pylat's book is the specific names of the constituent elements of Boiovyi Hopak. Pylat's linguistic choices largely resonate with those of Ancestral Fire leaders. They are influenced by the old Slavic language of primary sources, older-sounding Ukrainian (as spoken in western Ukraine before the Soviet era), as well as Pylat's attempts to Ukrainianize martial arts to the greatest possible degree. His language, although understandable to contemporary Ukrainian speakers, differs markedly from present-day literary Ukrainian.

Even though the forms and exact origins of particular elements in Pylat's Boiovyi Hopak require more in-depth research, the "foreign" roots of many are obvious. As previously mentioned, the spiritual, physical, and linguistic richness of Pylat's present-day practices markedly exceed what can be corroborated by available historical evidence. In addition, Pylat is very familiar with non-Ukrainian traditions, especially Eastern martial arts, as reflected in his conscious attempts to make Boiovyi Hopak fit the standards of contemporary international martial arts systems (Pylat 2008, 17). Moreover, Pylat received his initial training in Eastern martial arts, as mentioned in the anonymous introduction to his book: "Before he began to revive *Boiovyi Hopak*, Volodymyr Pylat studied Kyokushin Karate for seventeen years, and was a sensei for eight years. Simultaneously, Volodymyr studied such styles as Goju Ryu, Shudokan, Karate, Kickboxing, Jujutsu, Aikido" (5).

It is important to note that Pylat's initial training is acknowledged in this article in order to stress his expert knowledge. There is no mention about how Pylat applies his knowledge of Eastern traditions to the development of Boiovyi Hopak and how this reflects on the form of his dance and philosophical system. Instead, Boiovyi Hopak is presented as an authentically Ukrainian phenomenon, and the hereditary aspect of Pylat's knowledge is strongly emphasized. In particular, the author stresses the roles of Pylat's father and grandfather, who introduced the first elements of Ukrainian martial arts to him (Pylat 2008, 5–6). Pylat came to appreciate their contribution

only later in life, after having received formal training in Eastern martial arts: “Fighting elements that were shown to Pylat by his grandfather or father appeared irrational and sometimes even unreal to Volodymyr at first sight. Only much later, after having acquired rich experience in the field of martial arts, the Teacher [Pylat] came to understand the content of these elements. He became firmly convinced that this is a very powerful technique that, if applied properly, is able to cause miracles and can enable one to defeat any adversary” (6). With the help of Volodymyr Pylat and Eastern martial arts elements, a historical dance – hopak – has become not only visually but also ideologically attractive, having acquired the status of a dance that maintains and reinforces ancestral wisdom.

In addition to borrowing select elements from various cultural traditions, some Ukrainian Pagans also “appropriate” academic research, especially theories from the field of psychology. In July 2008, I visited Ancestral Fire’s summer camp held in the village of Rashtivtsi in the Ternopil region, Ukraine. The campers’ daily activities consisted of workshops and classes on a variety of topics, including folk arts and crafts, alternative medicine, and martial arts.

The leaders of Ancestral Fire regularly delivered lectures addressing various theoretical issues regarding Slavic spirituality. In line with this group’s focus on traditional family values, many presentations were devoted to family relationships. Volodymyr Kurovskyi gave a lecture on various socionic (psychological) types and their compatibility.<sup>3</sup> He emphasized that awareness of these psychological types can help one to successfully find a soul mate, to understand his or her spouse on a deeper level, and to avoid psychologically traumatic family experiences.

While explaining socionic types and intertype relations within a family, Kurovskyi drew a parallel between the theory of socionics and the wisdom of the ancestors of contemporary Slavs. According to Kurovskyi, this psychological theory was originally a folk tradition called *Rodolad*. The first half of the word, *Rod*, means Clan. The second part, *lad*, signifies “order.” Thus, to Kurovskyi, the term *Rodolad* implies maintaining order in the family. He is convinced that the distant ancestors of contemporary Slavs possessed knowledge of the secrets of human relationships. As he stated during the lecture, “socionics equal *Rodolad*.”

Kurovskyi emphasized that, according to his experience and knowledge, the happiest couples represent the most compatible psychological

types. He stressed, however, that today such couples are a rarity. People often make thoughtless, rash decisions regarding their relationships. Kurovskyi was convinced that the ancestors of contemporary Slavs avoided such problems because they relied on the tradition of Rodolad and were much more judicious than are present-day Slavs in making their choices. He supported his argument by referring to rural folklore. He focused on the Ukrainian wedding tradition as it was still practised in late nineteenth–early twentieth-century Ukrainian villages and that was well documented by ethnographers.<sup>4</sup> The tradition consisted of three major phases: pre-wedding, wedding, and post-wedding. Although specific traditions varied from region to region, throughout Ukraine, each of these phases was complex and multi-layered. For example, the pre-wedding phase alone included several parts: inquiries, matchmaking, inspection, betrothal, marriage banns, dowry, invitations, decoration of wedding tree, baking of wedding breads, maiden's evening, and wreath-weaving. Each of these stages, in turn, included a complex of relevant sub-rituals. According to Kurovskyi's interpretation, each wedding stage gave the couple an opportunity to get to know each other better and, thus, to be more considerate in making important decisions.

#### THE PAST AS THE “OTHER”

Slavic Pagans borrow from other traditions because their own past is largely obscure. While some ethnic cultures have richly documented information about their ancestors, contemporary descendants of the old Slavs do not. The existing data about the old Slavs, especially about their spiritual beliefs and practices, are fragmentary. The obscure past becomes the unknown “other,” and this attracts curious minds and opens horizons for creative interpretations. Because of the obscurity of the past, various leaders provide differing depictions of it, in the process projecting upon it their own personal views and desires. To put it in Victor Shnirelman's (n.d.) terms, they “invent” their past. Because the past is for the most part unknown, it is often difficult to prove a given interpretation of it definitively wrong.

Because of its obscurity, the past becomes contested. Because their visions of the past often conflict, Slavic Pagans do not always reach consensus regarding their present-day spirituality. One disagreement is related to food. Native Faith adherents eat meat and consume alcohol as, in their opinion, did their ancestors. In contrast, Ancestral

Fire followers find the consumption of these products unnatural, arguing that their ancestors were always of sober mind and did not kill animals.

In another example, Native Faith leader Volkhvynia Zoreslava strongly criticizes the leaders of Ancestral Fire for borrowing ideas from other traditions. She is convinced that the esoteric, mysticism, and magic were foreign to the ancestors of contemporary Ukrainians (Lozko, interview, 23 May 2007). Russian Pagan Volkhv Veleslav, the leader of the Rodoliubiie Russian-Slavic Native Faith Community and one of the most widely published Pagans in Russia,<sup>5</sup> is also concerned about “cultural borrowings.” He criticizes Slavic Pagans who incorporate esoteric practices and claim that they are part of their ancestral religion. He regards this situation as constituting “the dissemination of an informational parasite into Native Faith” (Veleslav 2009b, 258).

Differing views of the past lead to conflicting visions of the future and produce spiritual diversity in the present. This results in new and dynamic cultural forms even within the same ethno-religious movement.

Although they disagree with each other regarding specific interpretations, all Ukrainian Pagans consecrate their ancestral past, viewing the pre-Christian period of the territory of contemporary Ukraine as a “golden age.” Anthony Smith defines a “golden age” as a particular era in the history of a nation recognized for its significant contributions to the development of that nation. The “memories of a ‘golden age’” are characterized by “exaggeration, idealization and heroization” (Smith 1996, 583).

Smith hypothesizes that the better a “golden age” is documented, the more influence it can have on later periods and generations. This does not seem applicable to Ukrainian Paganism, where the opposite is usually true. It is the historical period with the least documentation that attracts the attention of Pagans. For them, the more distant the past, the more valuable it is. The obscurity of bygone years gives Pagans more freedom in their interpretations.

References to prehistoric eras help Pagans to view themselves as a legitimate ethnic community. Let us recall the Pagan calendar. RUN-vira, Native Faith, and Ancestral Fire all begin their chronologies with ancient cultures, although each uses a different starting point. Stressing the “primordial” origins of the present-day Ukrainian nation helps Ukrainian Pagans to legitimize their present-day religious worldview

and to claim its superiority over Christianity. By emphasizing how much older their chronologies are than those found in Christianity, they strive to diminish the status of the latter, positioning it as a new religion that is only two thousand years old.

#### DEFENDING THE PAST

Not only do Pagans develop their own idealized visions of the past but they also defend the past from interpretations that would undermine the positive image of their ancestors.<sup>6</sup> I witnessed an interesting example of this at a Pagan gathering devoted to the one hundredth anniversary of Volodymyr Shaian on 31 July 2008 in Lviv. Pagans from various streams attended this event. Many delivered speeches underlining Shaian's contribution to the development of modern Paganism and discussed various present-day concerns. In her talk, Antonina Lytvyn, an adherent of Native Faith and a known cultural activist, referred to the famous Ukrainian folk song "The Cossacks Rode Along" (*Ikhaly kozaky*), often referred to simply as "Song about Halia [a female name]" (*Pisnia pro Haliu*):

The Cossacks were returning home from the Don River, they  
tricked Halia and took her with them.

Oh, Halia, young Halia, they tricked Halia and took her with them.<sup>7</sup>

Go with us, with us Cossacks, it will be better for you than at  
home with your mother.

Halia agreed and joined them, and they took Halia into the dark  
woods.

They took Halia into the dark woods and tied her braids to a  
pine-tree.

The Cossacks went about the forest, collected kindling, and  
burned the pine-tree from top to bottom.

The pine-tree burns and rages, Halia cries out, cries out and says:

"Oh, whoever is in the woods and can hear me, let him save me,  
and those who have daughters, teach them.

And those who have daughters, teach them, and do not let them  
out in the dark of night.<sup>8</sup>

Lytvyn argues that the lyrics of this song, as known and widely sung today (both in folkloric settings and by professional musicians), are twisted or, as she puts it, “forged.” Lytvyn strives to popularize a different version of the lyrics:

The Khazars were returning from trading and battles, tricked  
Halia and took her with them.

Beautiful girl, come with us. It will be better for you than at  
home with your mother.

Halia agreed and climbed aboard their wagon, and they took  
Halia into the dark woods.

They stopped to rest in a dark valley, and there they disgraced  
the Ukrainian daughter.

They tied Halia’s braids to a pine-tree, set the pine-tree on fire  
and rode off.

Halia screams and shouts: “Oh, whoever is in the woods and can  
hear me, let him save me.”

Halia screams and says: “And those who have daughters, teach  
them.

Fathers and mothers, teach your daughters with whom they can  
deal and who they should stay far away from.”<sup>9</sup>

Lytvyn comments on her version:

When I was little, I came to my grandfather because I had heard  
the song “Oh, Halia, Young Halia.” ... I was so struck to hear  
that the Cossacks would take a girl away and tie her braids to  
a pine-tree, considering that we perceived the Cossack as some-  
thing sacred. The Cossack is a protector who would always  
defend a girl. I do not know who the author of this song is but I

heard this version from my grandfather Trokhym Mykytovych Harmash who was born in 1879. [Men in] his family were Cossacks for many generations. Although the Cossacks did not exist at that time any more ... [his] grandfathers nourished that memory and tradition. (Lytvyn, public speech, 31 July 2008)

It is obvious that the Khazars “got under the skin” of our people. Each intruder began to be called Khazars, not necessarily only the Khazarian Khaganat [a successor state of Western Turks] ... My grandfather told me [this] ...

This was a moralistic song in character. It was sung at all the parties for the girls to consider. Just listen, “The Khazars were returning from trading and battles...” These are the ones who trade and, to this day, are still tormenting us, those who have money and deceive our girls. These are “shufrychi,” “tabachnyky” [derogatory terms based on the names of contemporary politicians]. (Lytvyn, *Lvivska poshta* [Lviv Post], 7 February 2009)<sup>10</sup>

Pagans view the Cossack period of Ukraine’s history as a “golden age.” Lytvyn finds certain interpretations of the Cossack past to be forgeries because they do not fit with the Pagan image of the Cossacks. Pagans view Cossacks as great warriors and noble defenders of their fatherland, not as violators and rapists. Negative characteristics are only attached to the enemies of the old Slavs, such as the Khazars, a Turkic tribe.

Lytvyn also makes a link between the historical enemies of Ukraine and its present-day counterparts. As she mentions, “Khazar” has evolved into a generic term used to describe any intruder or oppressor. She uses “shufrychi” and “tabachnyky” to refer to a certain category of present-day political leader. These are clearly derogatory terms, and they are based on the names of well-known contemporary figures Nestor Shufrych and Dmytro Tabachnyk, who, among others, are often accused of questionable financial dealings that keep the country on the verge of poverty. Lytvyn treats such people as the “other” – as enemies and not as “true” Ukrainians – who are responsible for Ukraine’s present-day economic crisis. “True” Ukrainians would not treat their fatherland and its people in such a way.

In her article on this topic, Antonina Lytvyn accuses the Soviet regime of eliminating the “Khazar” version of the “Song about Halia” from people’s memories: “This was some time in the 1930–1940s,

before the war. There was a showcase of amateur artists in the Kyiv region, and a choir participated, either from Tarashcha or from the Bila Tserkva county, I am not sure. The choir sang this song, using exactly these lyrics [about the Khazars]. After the showcase ended, the members of the choir disappeared and their fellow villagers did not have any information about these people.”<sup>11</sup> While telling the same story at the gathering devoted to the one hundredth anniversary of Volodymyr Shaian, Lytvyn mentioned that all the members of the choir were exiled to Siberia. She does not provide a source for this information, thus it is impossible to verify, especially since she is not exactly sure from whence this choir came.

In Ukrainian post-Soviet society, narratives about how the Soviets persecuted individuals for engaging in cultural practices that did not fit the official Soviet discourse circulate widely. Lytvyn situates her story within this model of post-Soviet narrative. Her fellow Pagans do not see a need to question the historical accuracy of her story since it fits a familiar pattern of discourse.

In Antonina Lytvyn’s version of the “Song about Halia,” the phrase “and there they disgraced the Ukrainian daughter” has a clear political (i.e., national) connotation. The term “Ukrainian” had not been used in its present-day political sense until the middle of the nineteenth century. In contrast, the widely known version of the song does not provide a political message but, rather, a social warning. It appeals to young females, warning them not to trust strangers: Halia represents a standard image of a naïve girl. Lytvyn’s version emphasizes a different idea: Halia is the “Ukrainian daughter,” a metaphor for both historical and present-day Ukraine, oppressed and “raped” by its enemies, the “Khazars.”

It is difficult to determine the origins of any folk text. Hypothetically, since Antonina Lytvyn’s version carries a political connotation, the mid-nineteenth century would be the earliest possible date of its origin. The exact age of the widely known version of the “Song about Halia” is also unknown. There is no evidence to prove that it did not appear later than Lytvyn’s version. However, what is striking about Lytvyn’s narrative is her claim that it was her version, and not the one about the Cossacks, that had been widely known before its text was eventually “forged” by the Soviets. If this is true, it means that the version that features the Khazars was eventually completely eliminated from peoples’ memories. (It cannot be found in existing collections of folk songs, and I have not heard it sung in Ukrainian villages).

It is known that the lyrics of many Ukrainian folk songs, especially Christmas carols, were altered by the Soviets to fit the secularist Communist regime. In these altered forms, they were propagated in line with the official doctrines of the Communist Party. However, the original lyrics of these songs could still be heard in Ukrainian villages, albeit in secret, and they were actively revived after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The fact that Lytvyn's version is unknown in Ukraine suggests that it could be a contemporary Pagan creation rather than an old folk song. However, the age or authenticity of this song variant is not as important as is the Pagan desire to cleanse the past of any unfavourable interpretations. Cossacks, as the ancestors of contemporary Ukrainians, must be portrayed as heroes because, to paraphrase Maria Carlson, by imagining who you were you determine who you are.<sup>12</sup>

Glory to Dazhboh (Sun-God)  
or to All Native Gods?  
Monotheism and Polytheism<sup>†</sup>

RETHINKING THE PAST

One of the major debates among Ukrainian Pagans involves the question as to whether polytheism or monotheism should be the model for a contemporary national identity and spirituality. RUN-vira and Native Faith communicate this question most clearly. Their conflict dates back to the roots of present-day Ukrainian Paganism and is connected with the visions of its two founding fathers – Volodymyr Shaian and Lev Sylenko. Shaian’s Native Faith followers believe in many different spiritual beings, each of whom is in charge of particular natural forces and spheres of life. Sylenko reworked the polytheistic faith of old Slavs, proclaiming Dazhboh as the only god of the true Ukrainian religion.

While trying to justify his spiritual choices and convictions, Sylenko (2005, 10) mentions the following: “Like other peoples, Ukrainians were originally polytheistic ... Dazhboh was one of numerous gods within these beliefs. *Volkhvy* did not care about the unity of lands and tribes of Ukraine-Rus. They treated the intentions of the Great Prince of Kyiv [Volodymyr] to unite all the tribes around Kyiv with malevolence. Belief in many gods was going through a moral crisis in Ukraine-Rus, which could not be stopped by pagan priests.”

Sylenko’s followers summarize their prophet’s ideas regarding monotheism as follows:

Polytheism is a lower form of religion, which existed 5–7 thousand years ago, and which still exists among tribes ... in [some]

backward parts of our planet. Already 2500 years ago such leaders as Zarathustra, Confucius, Buddha, Mohammed [and others] moved away from polytheism, establishing the concept of One God among their peoples (Sylenko 1996a, 18–19).

Ukrainians have two understandings of God. Firstly, a thousand years ago Dazhboh was one of the numerous gods in the polytheistic faith of Ukraine-Rus. This was a religion of a lower form, like any polytheistic religion. Secondly, however, Prophet Lev Sylenko is the first Person to introduce the Ukrainian understanding of One God named Dazhboh. Dazhboh is Almighty and Eternal. He has no need of any ambassadors in the forms of higher or lower gods. RUNVira is the faith of higher spiritual perfection. It represents absolute monotheism. (Sylenko 1996a, 20)

According to Sylenko (2005, 10): “A Ukrainian, who is able to think, does not identify the understanding of God as introduced by Prophet Sylenko in RUNVira with the understanding that existed 1000 years ago in polytheism. There is a higher form of monotheism in RUNVira.” Sylenko thinks in evolutionary terms, stressing that monotheism represents a higher level of human spiritual development than does polytheism. He considers his reform of old Slavic polytheism to be a step towards spiritual progress.

Thus, the followers of RUNVira appear to be more future-oriented, believing their mission is to advance the faith of their forefathers. An encounter at the 2008 tri-annual congress of RUNVira in the village of Bohoiavlenske illustrates this attitude. During the breaks between administrative meetings and holy services, delegates of the congress socialized outside the temple. During one such social gathering, I was given an album of reproductions of paintings by the Ukrainian artist Viktor Kryzhanivskiyi commissioned by Ancestral Fire (Kryzhanivskiyi 2004 (7511)). The album featured various polytheistic themes and images, predominantly the gods and goddesses of the old Slavic pantheon worshiped by Ancestral Fire. Each reproduction was accompanied by a detailed explanation of old beliefs connected with particular spiritual beings as interpreted by this Pagan group. For example, the album stated that Lada was the goddess of universal harmony and the protectress of birth, women, marriage, harvest, and fertility. Dana was the goddess of heavenly water and rivers, and the female origin of the world, who descended from the heavens,

accompanied by fire and light, during the birth of the universe. Kupailo was the god of love, married couples, and the summer solstice and was connected with water and fire. In total, there were seventeen images presented in the album.

As I was admiring these contemporary artistic interpretations of the past, Bohdan, a male RUNVIRA adherent, approached me. He commented on the paintings with an air of superiority: “This is all *iazychnytstvo* [paganism]. Think about it. We cannot believe in various forest, field and water spirits today. Yes, our ancestors believed in these things but we should not any longer.” His comment indicated that he viewed the doctrines and practices of polytheistic Pagans as backward and past-oriented.

The word *iazychnytstvo* as used by Bohdan and other RUNVIRA followers deserves special attention. While the term “paganism” is widely accepted in the West with regard to both old and new polytheistic beliefs and practices, RUNVIRA and some other Ukrainian Pagans strongly reject its closest Ukrainian equivalent, *iazychnytstvo*. On the one hand, they explain this attitude by pointing to the negative connotation imposed on the term by the Christian church, which equates paganism with barbarianism; on the other hand, they introduce new terminology since they wish to emphasize the difference between their contemporary faith and that of their forefathers, considering RUNVIRA to be an advanced version of the old Slavic faith. In particular, they prefer to be called *runvisty* (believers of RUNVIRA) or *ridnoviry* (native believers).

In contrast, while completely accepting the term *ridnoviry*, the followers of Native Faith also embrace the term *iazychnytstvo*, interpreting it their own way and cleansing it of its Christian connotation. For example, Halyna Lozko provides her own definition of this term, applying a comparative linguistic method in order to do so. She stresses that the root of the term *iazychnytstvo* is *iazyk*, which means “tongue” in contemporary Ukrainian but that, in old Slavic languages, also meant “language” as well as “a tribe, a people who share one language.” The term has a Greek equivalent signifying *ethnos*, and this leads Lozko (1998, 48) to link the concept of *iazychnytstvo* to that of ethnic/native religion: “Ethnos – is a community of people who have common territory (native land), common language (native language), common kin, legends about its origins, common historic memory, customs and rituals, namely – a native

religion. Thus this term [*iazychnytstvo*] is connected with ethnic (national) religion as the basis for spiritual culture for every people.”

Native Faith and RUNVira’s differing views of spirituality are also connected with their dissimilar attitudes towards the past. While RUNVira members tend to consciously modify their ancestors’ worldview, Native Faith followers fully idealize and consecrate the past. They strive to legitimize their contemporary beliefs and practices by emphasizing direct continuity with ancient polytheistic traditions and, thus, “authenticity.” Halyna Lozko views contemporary Paganism in Ukraine as a “direct inheritor of the old paganism, differing from the latter only by some modernized way of communication of the same primordial laws.” She rejects the term *neo-iazychnytstvo* (neo-paganism). In her opinion, the prefix “neo,” if added to the term *iazychnytstvo*, symbolically deprives Native Faith adherents of their “hereditary rights for the continuation of [their] tradition” (Lozko 2007b, 3).

While emphasizing the significant role of the past in the continuation of this tradition, Halyna Lozko strongly disapproves of Sylenko’s reforms. In *Ethnology of Ukraine* (2001), she provides two charts, one of which is entitled “Monotheism and polytheism as binary opposition,” in which she contrasts these two religious worldviews. She states that monotheistic religions “are established artificially by [their] founders (‘prophets’)” while polytheistic religions “appear in a natural way as ethnic, national religions, developed by a people itself” (Lozko 2001a, 282).

In the second chart, entitled “Comparative chart of neo-religion [as Lozko defines Sylenko’s faith] and Ukrainian ethno-religion [as she defines her faith],” Lozko criticizes Sylenko for “cancelling all the Ancestral Gods, proclaiming absolute monotheism, and using the native name of Dazhboh, attaching his own characteristics to this God.” Thus, Lozko views Sylenko’s RUNVira as “new, modern and reformatted,” while Native Faith, in her opinion, is “traditional (authentic, customary, ancient, ancestral)” and “natural (created by the Ukrainian ethnos over a span of many millennia)” (Lozko 2001a, 282). The polytheistic Pagans attempt to undermine the beliefs and practices of their monotheistic counterparts by characterizing them as creative and, thus, “regressive.” From the etic perspective, however, it is clear that the adherents of the polytheistic Native Faith are at least as creative as are their monotheistic RUNVira counterparts.

## INDIGENIZING TERMINOLOGY

In the past, monotheism and polytheism were recognized in the field of religion as two major contrasting models for human spiritual development. These models owe their popularity to the adherents of socio-cultural evolutionism, who introduced the idea that monotheism represented a higher stage of the evolution of human thought than did polytheism.<sup>2</sup> However, present-day Pagans, who purposely search for their distant polytheistic roots, challenge this idea.<sup>3</sup>

As for contemporary academics, the spiritual development of humanity, especially within an evolutionist framework, is no longer a prominent theme; instead, they tend to concentrate on individual societies and changes within specific contexts, rejecting the universal evolutionist model of social progress. However, while academics consider evolutionist ideas a legacy of the past, these ideas continue to shape present-day spiritualities, providing the foundation for new ethnic religions such as RUNVira.

The terms “polytheism” and “monotheism,” as used today with regard to religious beliefs and practices, are also being challenged by academics. Some researchers question their relevance to complex spiritual worldviews and practices (such as the idea of the Trinity in Christianity, a religion that is, theoretically, monotheistic). In particular, theologian Laurel Schneider goes back to the origins of these terms to argue against their validity. She points out that both categories are modern constructs, not ancient ones. Both were introduced in the seventeenth century and carried strong political, rather than spiritual, connotations. The concept of monotheism was presented as a means of establishing the religious and cultural superiority of Europe and Euro-America in the early modern context by “charting monotheism as an advance over polytheism” (Schneider 2008, 22). These two terms are interdependent, the term “polytheism” acquiring meaning only when juxtaposed to the term “monotheism” (Schneider 2008, 21; Smith 2001, 11). Schneider finds these terms anachronistic when applied to ancient contexts. She locates the “problem of monotheism-polytheism binary ... in the reductive quality of all binary distinctions and the limitations they place upon otherwise much more complex and shifting realities” (Schneider 2008, 20). In her opinion, one must be very careful in applying modern concepts to non-modern contexts since a significant amount of indigenous meaning can be lost when doing so (21).

The case of Ukrainian Paganism contributes profoundly to the discourse on polytheism versus monotheism since it demonstrates the complexities of people's spiritual experiences in the modern world. It turns out that, at least on the ideological level, both models can coexist and influence each other in the process of identity negotiation, even within the same religious movement.

Schneider's emphasis on the political nature of the terms "polytheism" and "monotheism" and the limitations that they can place on people's spiritual worldviews and practices is very important. Indeed, these terms often do not come from the people themselves. However, this is not the case for Ukrainian Paganism, a modern religious movement with strong political connotations. The terms "polytheism" and "monotheism" may be anachronistic when applied to old Slavic paganism since it is doubtful that the old Slavs consciously thought about themselves in these terms. However, they are appropriate for those contemporary Ukrainian Pagans who consciously embrace them. In fact, for Ukrainian Pagans, the concepts of monotheism and polytheism are an important part of what enables them to form a modern national identity. It is precisely through the use and manipulation of the categories of monotheism and polytheism that they negotiate this identity among themselves, debating who can offer the best version of "Ukrainianness."

Contemporary Pagans provide the terms "monotheism" and "polytheism" with their own meaning and, thus, indigenize them. As noted above, Lev Sylenko was greatly influenced by the discourse of European superiority as communicated through the concept of monotheism. However, he imparts to the term his own connotations. Sylenko presents Ukrainians not only as part of a superior European community but as part of a superior nation – a nation that now shows the path of spiritual progress to the rest of Europe:

Humanity languishes in the darkness: it is absolutely necessary  
To feed its brain with new food.  
Ukraine is called by the Heavens  
To show Europe the new way [of spiritual development].  
(Sylenko 1996b, 7)<sup>4</sup>

To Sylenko and his followers, spiritual progress lies in the "European understanding of God," implying the need to reformulate particular ethnic religions into monotheism. Thus, RUNVira followers associate

Sylenko's reform of old Slavic beliefs with the advanced thinking of a progressive people. In contrast, Native Faith adherents view monotheistic religions as foreign forces attempting to destroy indigenous Ukrainian culture by forcing it to conform to a global cultural pattern. For these people, it is polytheism that represents a progressive model for building their contemporary indigenous spirituality. In the context of present-day Ukrainian Pagan discourse, the terms "monotheism" and "polytheism" offer a linguistic means for communicating contemporary ideologies. These terms come from the people.

## “Where Else Is There Such a People?” Vision for a Nation

### RITUALS AND SYMBOLS

#### *Creating a Sense of Belonging*

Although interpretations of the past and visions of the future nourish Ukrainian Paganism, it is not only “theory” that contributes to its growth. People need real experiences to help them develop a sense of connection with both their past and their present-day communities. Pagans often create these experiences with the help of rituals and symbols.

Over the past several years, the Pagan *khoda* (procession) has become a traditional activity for many Pagans in Ukraine. It takes place annually on Ukraine’s Independence Day in the context of state celebratory activities. Pagan groups begin their celebrations with sacred ceremonies performed near their respective shrines and then walk through the central streets of Kyiv. Their final destination is the monument to Taras Shevchenko. Near the monument, Pagans pay homage to Shevchenko and deliver speeches expressing their current political, social, and religious concerns.

Anthropologist David Kertzer discusses the role of symbols and rituals in the building of a large-scale community such as the state. Kertzer argues that the idea of the state and the idea of the citizen can only be represented symbolically. He defines ritual as “standardized, repetitive, symbolic behavior” and sees it as one of the symbolic weapons used by new political forces in the power struggles with existing regimes (Kertzer 1991, 85–6). Symbols can be of various kinds, including particular clothing, songs, icons, and flags. However,

it is through rituals that the meaning of symbols is created and reinforced. By wearing certain clothes, singing certain songs, and/or carrying particular icons or flags, people develop a special attachment to them while simultaneously communicating their allegiance to a certain community (87).<sup>1</sup>

The Ukrainian Pagans' *khoda* has indeed become a form of what Kertzer would call "standardized, repetitive, symbolic behavior" that serves as a weapon with which contemporary Pagans attempt to undermine the existing pro-Christian regime and to promote their own vision of the Ukrainian nation. Through political symbols such as the Ukrainian national emblem (the trident) and the Ukrainian national flags carried by participants, the adherents of Native Faith communicate a sense of belonging to the Ukrainian nation. However, by combining state elements with visual interpretations of old Slavic mythology (such as a stylized sun – the symbol of Dazhbog, the Sun-God), Ukrainian Pagans also offer their own particular vision of this nation, which is connected with the revival of the distant past. While recreating the past through standardized symbolic behaviour, Pagans create their present reality and sense of community.

Rituals and symbols also help Pagans identify with their distant ancestors. For example, Ancestral Fire followers, while paying tribute to their gods and goddesses, often sing the songs of Zhyvosyl Liutyi, a contemporary musician and cultural activist. Both the lyrics of these songs and the collective ritualized sing-along (usually done while holding hands and walking around a bonfire) bridge the past and the present. Here is an example of one such song (music by Zhyvosyl Liutyi, lyrics by Ukrainian poet Natalia Virhush):

We haven't given away what is ours, we haven't destroyed our  
Old Gods,  
We established a house for them, treating them as our great  
grandparents in our prophetic home.

There is an iconostasis in our house, and we bow sincerely  
Before all those, who protect us, who give us hope and faith.

Whatever may have happened in the world, whatever centuries  
may have passed,  
We have carefully listened and waited for the time when those  
whom we saved would say to us: "For the cause of good"<sup>2</sup>

And our astute mentality prayed aloud and silently  
 To *Iarylo* for the blossoming steppe and to *Veles* for the ears of rye.

To *Svaroh* for the fire in our souls, to *Berehyni* for protective  
 talismans  
 We allowed nature, not idols, to live in our holy family.

Water spirits and forest spirits – we haven't even burned the  
 unclean force<sup>3</sup>  
 And house spirits live in the houses that we have sanctified.

Well, where else is there such a people, who are connected with  
 the living and the eternal,  
 Who, like the immortal and wise soothsayer, have tied themselves  
 to the earthly and to the cosmic?

No, we haven't given up what is ours, we have just dug in our  
 roots  
 At all times, they gave us strength against misfortune.  
 We haven't broken our Kin, and for this our God has saved us.<sup>4</sup>

For Pagans, these lyrics express a sense of pride in belonging to both the present-day Ukrainian nation and to the unique community of the old Slavs.<sup>5</sup> Together, both are imagined as an organic whole. Benedict Anderson (1991, 6) aptly points out that a national community “is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.” In the case of Ukrainian Pagans, this imagination expands not only to the fellow members of the contemporary Ukrainian national community and to those who are within people's historical memory but also to those who lived on the territory of present-day Ukraine in “prehistoric” times and of whom very little is known.

For Ukrainian Pagans the imagined achievements of their imagined ancestors form the core of the unique Ukrainian nation (“Well, where else is there such a people?”). Their vision of Ukraine is connected with its native religion, the roots of which were “buried” but are now being rediscovered. Collective ritual singing allows Pagans to glorify their ancestors and themselves as their descendants – as what Anthony Smith (1996, 586) would call “chosen people,” an

ethnic community “entrusted with a sacred mission to proselytize or crusade or act as standard-bearer of the true faith.”

### *Consolidating Beliefs*

Belonging to the same group does not necessarily imply consistency in the beliefs of the groups’ members, “not only because the different participants have different beliefs, but also because each of the participants has a formless morass of conflicting beliefs” (Kertzer 1991, 90). Participants often reach consistency through common actions.

Numerous creative interpretations of the past result in a certain amount of inconsistency in Ukrainian Pagan beliefs. Rituals help each group consolidate its views. For example, unlike other Pagans, Ancestral Fire followers emphasize the importance of their life-long allegiance to the spiritual leader Volodymyr Kurovskyi, who strives to maintain centralized power and stresses that whoever performs the ritual of name-giving (usually either Kurovskyi himself or one of his closest followers) becomes a “spiritual father” to new Pagans for the rest of their lives. Furthermore, as a result of Kurovskyi’s workshops and interactive lectures on the topic of Rodolad (order in family), many Ancestral Fire followers speculate about family and social relationships in terms of compatible or incompatible psychological types. Rodolad differentiates Ancestral Fire from both Native Faith and RUNVIRA as the doctrines of the latter two do not embrace psychological theories.

### *Constructing Memories*

While paying homage to Shevchenko on Ukraine’s Independence Day in 2006, the leader of Ancestral Fire, Volodymyr Kurovskyi, said: “Let us perform the holy ritual of unification with our Ancestors! We have a powerful spiritual leader of our family, Taras Shevchenko, who glorifies our family with his spirit, his holiness and his wisdom, and who teaches our family! We know that wisdom is rooted in Veles, and thus the power of Veles talks to us through Taras’s words! Thus, let the spirit of Veles be united with the spirit of Taras today!”

While listening to Kurovskyi’s speech I wondered about the connection between the nineteenth-century poet Taras Shevchenko and the old Slavic god Veles. In a later interview, Kurovskyi explained

that Veles is the patron of arts and creativity while Shevchenko is one of the greatest Ukrainian creators. In primary sources, Veles is known predominantly as a god of beasts and cattle as well as the protector of trade. The hypothesis that Veles was also the god of poetry, music, and other creative arts belongs to Metropolitan Ilarion, who bases his interpretation of the god on *The Lay of Ihor's Campaign*, in which the bard Boian is referred to as Veles's grandson (Ilarion 1965, 105). Contemporary Pagans have further developed this idea (see Lozko 2005a, 136), and many of them now consider Veles to be the patron of arts and creativity.

Sociologist and anthropologist Paul Connerton (1989) would call the ritual of honouring Shevchenko a “commemorative ceremony.” Commemorative ceremonies help modern Pagans not only to build their present-day experiences and spiritualities but also to create collective memories about the past. Rituals tend to be repetitive, and “repetition automatically implies continuity with the past” (Connerton 1989, 45). However, what distinguishes commemorative ceremonies from other kinds of rites “is that they do not simply imply continuity with the past but explicitly claim such continuity.” By doing this, commemorative ceremonies shape communal memory, often “re-presenting” rather than just “representing” the past (43–5). Kurovskiy's speech devoted to Shevchenko “re-presented” the poet's contributions to the development of the Ukrainian nation. Kurovskiy emphasizes that Shevchenko's creative works are not the product of the poet's inspiration but, rather, of Veles's. This interpretation of Shevchenko's legacy shapes the participants' collective memory about the poet. Shevchenko is now perceived not only as a famous figure in the history of the Ukrainian nation but also as Veles's ward.

#### HEROES AND MESSIAHS

Among the spiritual giants (to use Sylenko's terminology) of Ukrainian Pagans, Taras Shevchenko occupies perhaps the most prominent place. He belongs to what Kertzer defines as a reservoir of potent symbols – a reservoir that every culture possesses. New political forces tend “to claim those symbols as their own,” legitimizing such appropriation via rituals (Kertzer 1991, 89). This is exactly what has happened in Ukraine with the figure of Taras Shevchenko. At different times in history, he has served as a symbol for ideologically

opposed political forces. To describe this phenomenon, researchers have even introduced the term “struggle for Shevchenko” (Zabuzhko 2007, 6).

Born into a peasant family, Shevchenko lived at a time when Ukrainian peasants suffered under the meagre conditions of serfdom. In the nineteenth century, the territory of contemporary Ukraine was divided between two political powers. Western Ukraine belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire while eastern Ukraine, where Shevchenko was born, was part of the Russian Empire.<sup>6</sup> Although the abolition of serfdom in the western part of Ukraine took place in 1848, in eastern Ukraine the emancipation of serfs did not occur until 1861.

Because of his extraordinary writing and drawing talents, Shevchenko obtained a higher education at the Saint Petersburg Academy of Arts, and his freedom was purchased with the help of his influential friends. Unfortunately, he died prematurely, after suffering many years of persecution at the hands of the political authorities of the Russian Empire, shortly before abolition was decreed. The Russian imperial regime viewed Shevchenko’s writings, and hence Shevchenko himself, as politically dangerous.

Humanist ideas recur throughout Shevchenko’s poetry and prose. In particular, he devotes a great amount of attention to the suffering of Ukrainian peasants under serfdom, strongly criticizing both the ruling regime and the clergy, who had great political and economic power at the time. Shevchenko’s most famous publication is the compilation of poems entitled *Kobzar*, which first appeared in print in 1840 in Saint Petersburg. Numerous editions of *Kobzar*, in many translations, have since been published.

What Shevchenko actually wrote matters less than does the way in which his works are read. Various groups interpret Shevchenko in various ways, each adapting his texts to its own ideological needs. Reading his works in terms of Marxist theory, the Soviets considered Shevchenko a great revolutionary who spoke for oppressed peasants in class-based Imperial Russia. Many Ukrainian nationalists, in turn, view Shevchenko as a hero who struggled against Russia’s political oppression of Ukraine. Nationalists draw parallels between Imperial and Soviet Russia. While Soviet ideologists with secularist views try to de-Christianize Shevchenko, Ukrainian nationalists try to Christianize his legacy. Among countless examples of the latter are such popular slogans as “*Kobzar* is the Bible of our people” and

poetry like Dmytro Pavlychko's "Our Father, Taras the Almighty" (Zabuzhko 2007, 6).<sup>7</sup>

Although Ukrainian Pagans share some aspects of the nationalist interpretation of Shevchenko, especially regarding his anti-colonial ideas, unlike Christian nationalists they consider him anti-Christian and even pro-Pagan. They reach this conclusion via a selective approach to his poetry. They choose particular excerpts from his poems and interpret them separately from his complete texts. For example, a banner carried by Native Faith adherents in the procession discussed above included the following lines from Shevchenko's poem "Dream":

For alas, O Christ,  
 What trouble have you caused! And how transformed  
 The very spirit of God's human creatures!  
 Our Cossack heads have fallen in the dust,  
 Our foolish heads for "Justice" and "The Faith";  
 And we have drunk our own and strangers' blood ...  
 And are we any better for it? No!  
 We have become still worse!  
 (1964, 323)

Upon reading the entire poem, I have the impression that Shevchenko is criticizing the political and clerical regimes of his time. To me, he seems to be more concerned with people being bad Christians rather than Christianity being a bad religion. However, it is only the latter message that Ukrainian Pagans focus on, separating it from its broader context. Presenting these particular lines of Shevchenko's poetry in the context of the khoda ritual, Pagans emphasize his alleged pro-Pagan views and, thus, symbolically appropriate him as their hero and prophet. (Interestingly, Pagans' attempts to de-Christianize Shevchenko mirror those of their great ideological enemies, the Soviets.)

Anthony Smith (2003, 32) points out that, within nationalist movements, famous figures are often consecrated and acquire the status of "heroes/messiahs," playing an important role in the formation of their nation: "These heroes and messiahs are ... seen as 'authentic' – pure, true, pristine, originary – and as such rooted in the soil of the homeland. Their message is still relevant, they provide models of conduct, and their exploits are true *exempla virtutis*, worthy of emulation in each generation" (41). In Shevchenko's writings, Ukrainian Pagans find both resistance to Ukraine's political

oppression and pro-Pagan sentiments. They believe that Sevchenko's prophetic gift is his ability to recognize that the problems of his fellow Ukrainians are rooted in their tendency to practise a "foreign" spirituality.

#### SACRED LAND

Ukrainian Pagans consecrate not only particular historic figures but also particular pieces of land. These may be placed into the following categories: historic sites, natural landscapes, places of sacred revelation, areas mentioned in folk narratives, and the entire territory of Ukraine. Although it is difficult to calculate the exact number of consecrated places, there are several dozen throughout Ukraine.

##### *Historic Sites*

Historic sites that attract Ukrainian Pagans are those geographic areas that are mentioned in historic documents dealing with Ukraine's past. For example, as part of the speech she delivered near the monument to Shevchenko on Ukrainian Independence Day in 2006, Volkhvynia Zoreslava read her letter to the president of Ukraine, written on behalf of all the followers of Native Faith. This letter expressed several Native Faith concerns. It appealed to the Ukrainian government "to provide financial support for the building of a Native Gods Temple in one of the holy places in the Kyiv area that historically belonged to pagans." Zoreslava suggested those areas that the primary sources mention in connection with the establishment of the City of Kyiv: "For example, it can be the Zamkova (Castle) hill, Starokyivska (Old Kyiv) hill, the sources of the Lybid River or any other piece of land within the territory of Kyiv, which has been the capital of Rus since primordial times."

The Starokyivska Hill, the territory surrounding the present-day National Museum of the History of Ukraine on Volodymyrska Street in Kyiv, is especially highly regarded. According to historians, a pagan shrine was located in this area before the time of Volodymyr. During Volodymyr's era, a statue of Perun was situated in the exact area now occupied by the museum.<sup>8</sup> While the majority of Ukrainians view this area as a historic part of the city, Ukrainian Pagans view it as much more than that. Although it is impossible for them to reclaim ownership of this exact spot, Pagans consecrate the area around the

museum as a place sacred to their ancestors. On 26 August 2009, Ukrainian Television News Service TSN (All-Ukrainian Chanel 1+1) reported the following: “A three-metre-long idol of God Perun was placed today in the centre of Kyiv on the Starokyivs’ka hill, on the spot from where it was pulled down and thrown into the Dnipro River in 988. The representatives of Native Faith, Ancestral Fire, and RUNVira carried Perun in their arms as they marched along the hills of Kyiv.”

This event united the three Pagan groups, whose relationships with one another are otherwise hostile. Even RUNVira adherents participated in this initiative, despite the fact that they do not follow the polytheistic beliefs of their ancestors and do not worship Perun. Regardless of their spiritual and ideological differences, Pagans sometimes unite forces in order to gain recognition in the wider society, where they are generally marginalized.

Intriguingly, the Starokyivska Hill is the place where the Church of the Tithes, the first Christian stone church of Kyivan Rus, was built in 988–96 by Prince Volodymyr. Since that time, the Church of the Tithes has been destroyed and rebuilt several times. The last replica was demolished by the Soviets in 1928. In 2005, then president of Ukraine Viktor Yushchenko assigned responsibility for the reconstruction of the church to the government of the City of Kyiv, while promising to allot funds from the federal budget for the project.

There are many different opinions in Ukraine regarding whether or not the Church of the Tithes should be rebuilt. Some intellectuals argue against any replicas and believe that original ruins should be recognized as the true remains of their ancestral heritage. Others, especially those who associate the post-Soviet revival of national consciousness with a religious (Christian) revival, fully support this initiative. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church is especially enthusiastic about this project. These believers have built a small chapel near the place allotted for the actual church, where they conduct their Sunday liturgies and other services.

The chapel is situated only a few metres away from the Pagan shrine at which Native Faith followers conduct their own Sunday rituals. There is great tension between these two ideologically opposed forces as each group presses its right to this sacred territory. For Christians, this place is holy because the original Church of the Tithes marked their ancestors’ first steps towards Christianization. For Ukrainian Pagans, this territory is sacred because it is associated



7.1 *Kam'iana Mohyla* (in the background). The Scythian statues in the foreground are not part of the original landscape but were brought to this place from the Ukrainian steppe area. August 2008.

with pre-Christian times and practices. Contested narratives about the area's past result in present-day ideological conflicts.

### *Natural Landscapes*

Ukrainian Pagans also consecrate certain natural landscapes. Among many examples is *Kam'iana Mohyla* (Stone Tomb) situated near the City of Melitopol in the Zaporizhzhia region of eastern Ukraine. At the state level, *Kam'iana Mohyla* is a state historical and archeological preserve (see figure 7.1). The official state discourse about the significance of this place is shaped by official historical sources. Borys Mykhailov, one of the most well-known researchers of *Kam'iana Mohyla*, views it as a phenomenon of nature. He reaches this conclusion by tracing multiple changes in the land surface in this area (see Mykhailov 2005, 6). Mykhailov also points out that, in the distant past, the caves and grottoes of *Kam'iana Mohyla* attracted people and served as a place for the performance of spiritual practices.

To many Ukrainian Pagans, *Kam'iana Mohyla* is much more than a historic site that reflects the spirituality of the past, and their narratives about it differ from those of Mykhailov. I accompanied a group of RUNVIRA followers from Lviv on their trip to the site in August 2008. Lelia,<sup>9</sup> a RUNVIRA adherent from Melitopol, conducted a tour for her fellow believers from western Ukraine. She is familiar

with the historical sources devoted to Kam'iana Mohyla, especially Mykhailov's works. According to Lelia, Mykhailov's problem is that he is not willing to accept that Kam'iana Mohyla is a living spiritual organism that "produces" sacred energy and reveals esoteric "information." In contrast to historians, many Pagans believe that it was a higher spiritual force, not gradual changes in the earth's lithosphere, that created Kam'iana Mohyla.

As soon as we approached the site, Lelia instructed her guests regarding how to address the spirit of Kam'iana Mohyla, asking it to accept them. Then she began to share stories from her personal experiences. Her discovery of Kam'iana Mohyla occurred several years ago, when, with a group of like-minded friends, she walked through the site trying to experience its energy. Among their special findings was a triangle-shaped rock. When they first approached the rock they felt an especially strong flow of energy coming from it. Then they found that this rock could "talk," that it would "answer" people's questions. Among many miraculous encounters, Lelia mentioned that, several years ago, after having prayed on Kam'iana Mohyla, her friend was cured of an advanced form of cancer without any medical intervention.

There is usually no room for the supernatural in official RUNVira discourse. Most RUNVira followers treat Kam'iana Mohyla as their sacred site because of its role in the spiritual lives of ancient civilizations. They do not emphasize the present-day magical potential of the place. This view is more closely connected to that of Ukrainian historians than to that of magic-oriented Ukrainian Pagans. In fact, Mykhailov is widely quoted in RUNVira publications devoted to the site.<sup>10</sup> Lelia, a RUNVira adherent, is an exception. During her tour, she mentioned that she felt a close spiritual connection with Ancestral Fire followers because they understand and highly value spiritual energy.

Despite their pro-scientific orientation, the majority of Lelia's RUNVira guests were impressed with her. In their eyes, through her narratives about the supernatural, Lelia acquired special power. While conducting their Holy Hour of Self-Reflection on Kam'iana Mohyla, the members of the group had difficulty reaching the culmination because Lelia kept saying: "something is not letting me go." Led by Lelia, the RUNVira followers had to relocate several times until she could feel the energy that would release her. Interestingly, Lelia did not perform any miracles to prove her supernatural power and/or special connection with the site: to paraphrase Barbara Rieti (2008,

151), narrative was the only magical act involved.<sup>11</sup> Lelia's guests continually contrasted themselves with their hostess, emphasizing their diminished spiritual position and the need to learn from her.

Mainstream society and official scholarship does not accept Pagan magical thinking. The administration of the Kam'iana Mohyla State Historical and Archeological Preserve views Lelia as an enemy. There is a poster on the ticket booth at the entrance to the preserve that states, in Russian: "Attention! *Only* academic staff is authorized to conduct tours on the site of *Kam'iana Mohyla*" (emphasis in original). The tours Lelia conducts for Pagans are illegal.

#### *Places of Sacred Revelation*

Ukrainian Pagans also consecrate places associated with particular spiritual revelations. One of these places is Mount Gregit in western Ukraine, where Volodymyr Shaian's spiritual revelation took place and where he wished to be buried. Halyna Lozko comments on Shaian's special attachment to Gregit:

It was precisely on Gregit that Shaian visited a common Hutsul family's household and observed the ritual of the blessing of seeds before sowing. He saw that this ritual was not Christian but had just a few Christian elements added on. Although the ritual appeared to be conducted to the glory of Jesus Christ, it was indeed devoted to mother earth and the sun, which were sanctified by our ancestors. Within the ritual, the seeds were imparted with the strength of strong, muscular men in order to fertilize mother-earth. This symbolism was very clear. A woman would put these seeds into her apron. She symbolized mother earth while men represented the forefather in Heaven, namely, our [God] Svaroh. Undoubtedly, all this symbolism deeply touched young Shaian and became the primary reason for him to take the first step towards the revival of Native Faith, not just as some kind of an academic work in the form of a book. He began to revive Native Faith as a living and active religion.<sup>12</sup>

#### *Places from Folk Narratives*

Among the places that Ukrainian Pagans highly value are those whose significance is communicated in oral narratives. For example,

in spring 2007, on our way to the Lviv Znesinnia Park, where Ancestral Fire was conducting its Sunday rituals at that time, Ohnedar,<sup>13</sup> a young male adherent, pointed to an area surrounded by a fence. He said that this place was called *Svitovydove pole* (Svitovyd's field) and that their ancestors had had a shrine there in the past. Although there are no supporting historical records, this information was passed on among present-day Pagans by word of mouth. Ohnedar shared his concern regarding the government's recent decision to build a tunnel under this piece of land. This decision was part of the plan developed for the preparation for the final games of the 2012 European Soccer Championship. Ukrainian Pagans strongly resisted this initiative, considering such a desecration of their sacred land to be unacceptable. Although Pagans did not have political power, they were determined to struggle on the spiritual level, through prayers to the native gods.

I later discovered more information about the Svitovydove pole. It was Zhrytsia Iaryna, the leader of the Lviv-based Native Faith group, who first discovered the place. Her source of information was a small book entitled *Tilky u Lvovi (Only in Lviv)* published in 2007 (see Vvedenskyi et al. 2007). *Tilky u Lvovi* is a collection of essays. The contributors emphasize the popular (as opposed to academic) nature of this publication. In a humorous way, they identify it as "coffee talk," or "conversations in the coffee houses of Lviv." The collection consists of legends about Lviv, whether or not they are based on historic evidence. Tales of the underground river that flows through the city, how Dracula's autograph came to be in Lviv, and old pagan shrines are among these stories.

The article entitled "Walking to Pagan Lviv" includes the following information about the Svitovydove pole: "The toponym *Sviatovydove pole* was first noted by the historian Antonii Shnaider due to its appearance in local folk stories. Now, it is unknown whether it is its more than one-thousand-year-old history that preserved this authentic term, and we are indeed dealing with a shrine of Svitovyd in Lviv, or whether it is a later romantic invention. Nevertheless, the main idea remains the same. The so-called *Sviatovydove pole* is a pre-Christian Slavic shrine from the seventh to ninth centuries that is beautifully preserved, practically unresearched, and has miraculously survived at the heart of modern civilization" (Kosmolinska 2007).

As we can see, this passage is somewhat unclear. At first, the author points out that the information about the Svitovydove pole is

very obscure, and then he firmly states that we are dealing with an old shrine. This ambiguity does not seem to be important to Zhrytsia Iaryna. She recalls that her daughter accidentally found this book and brought it home. The information it provided about pagan shrines became especially valuable to their family because it presented the spiritual core for which they had been searching. Guests from the much older city of Kyiv could no longer diminish the spiritual role of Lviv by saying that, in the thirteenth century, when Lviv was established, pagans had ceased to exist. To Iaryna (n.d), her finding signifies that Lviv was not built “on an empty place.” This example demonstrates that the spiritual need for this kind of information can overcome the need to verify it through historical data.

Zhrytsia Iaryna told me that, after she found this particular place for their sacred services, she posted a note about it on the internet. Shortly after, the Lviv-based followers of Ancestral Fire began to worship at the same place. Although this group of people has since separated from Ancestral Fire and Volodymyr Kurovskyi, until quite recently Ancestral Fire’s official website included photographs of the Svitovydove pole under the heading “photos of the ancient shrine in Lviv.”<sup>14</sup> All these encounters show how the Svitovydove pole has made the transition from the “conversations in the coffee houses of Lviv” to a present-day Pagan sacred site.

#### *Ukraine as a Sacred Territory*

In addition to separate pieces of land, Pagans view the entire territory of Ukraine as holy. Zoreslava expresses these sentiments in a letter to the Ukrainian government, in which she strongly criticizes its recent decision regarding the sale of land in Ukraine. In the early years of the Soviet Union the lands of the Ukrainian peasantry were confiscated and converted into collective farms. After the collapse of the Soviet regime, the issue of de-collectivization became one of the major focuses of the Ukrainian government. One option was to sell it to private individuals and businesses, including foreign interests. This decision immediately resulted in protests from the Pagans, for whom the sale of the sacred land of their ancestors was unacceptable. Zoreslava formulated her concerns regarding this issue as follows: “Many times the adherents of the Native Faith in Ukraine have appealed to state officials regarding the unacceptability of selling land in Ukraine, warning them about possible negative outcomes of

such a poorly considered decision. It was impossible to take this land away from the people with the aid of weapons for so many thousand years, yet now they attempt to take it away with the help of small pieces of paper – money! We are certain that the Ukrainian people will protect their land till their last breath! Our history manifests this [attitude] ... Let us not allow our land to turn into a commodity!”

### *Contested Sacred Sites*

The above examples show how Ukrainian Pagans claim particular pieces of land – or, indeed, the entire territory of Ukraine – as sacred. Pagans legitimize their views by referring to the “primordial” past of these territories. In other words, to them, “old” means “sacred.” Scholars define “sacred territories” as those areas that, at one time in the history of a community, “provided the scene for historic events” (Smith 1996, 589). A similar concept – “holy lands” – is used with regard to territories that, at some point in their history, are associated with contact with the sacred (Hastings 2003). In Ukrainian Paganism, the geographic areas that are believed to have witnessed pre-Christian sacred practices are consecrated.

The Pagan discourse about sacred territories often conflicts with other views of the same places. For example, three contrasting narratives – academic (historical), Christian, and Pagan – intersect in each group’s claim to the Starokyivska Hill. In the case of Kam’iana Mohyla, academic narratives about this landscape come into conflict with Pagan views, while in the case of Svitovydove pole, Pagan narratives come into conflict with the views of the Ukrainian government.

Although historically and contextually unique, the struggles of Ukrainian Pagans for their sacred places resonate with those documented in others parts of the world. For example, Western Pagans of British heritage compete for ownership of sacred sites with various archaeological and socio-political institutions (Blain and Wallis 2007). In Glastonbury, England, and Sedona, Arizona, Pagans struggle to claim these landscapes through the construction of particular narratives and symbols (Ivakhiv 2001). These places are labelled “contested landscapes” (Ivakhiv 2001) or “contested sites” (Blain and Wallis 2007).

It is not narratives alone that nourish the discourse of “sacred territories” in Ukrainian Paganism. Visiting these sites, establishing shrines on their territories, and conducting sacred services also

contribute to the creation of profound experiences associated with place. Through these experiences, Pagans engage in a symbolic conversation with their ancestors, simultaneously validating their present-day spirituality.

#### NATIONAL VERSUS TRANSNATIONAL CULTURE

While adapting rural (peasant) folklore to their needs, Ukrainian Pagans create a new “national” culture. It is important to note that most peasants of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were not politically conscious and did not identify themselves in national terms. In contrast to the peasants whose culture they attempt to revive, modern Pagans have access to information about all ethnographic regions of Ukraine through published sources and the ability to travel and to conduct their own research. As a result, Pagans incorporate elements from various regions of Ukraine. What, in the past, was ethnographically specific to a particular region acquires, in the present, a new political connotation and becomes part of the “generic” contemporary national culture. Pagans perceive ethnographic diversity with pride, understanding it as a sign of cultural richness. However, ethnographic diversity may weaken the representational characteristics of a Pagan community by causing “chaos.” To create national distinctiveness, Ukrainian Pagans use only select elements from these diverse traditions to serve as “logos.”<sup>15</sup>

The followers of Ancestral Fire take one further step. Pan-Slavic in their orientation and striving to build a Slavic spiritual state, they de-emphasize national differences, promoting instead those cultural features that unite all Slavic Pagans. Ancestral Fire’s spiritual practices are based on elements selected from various Slavic traditions. In this way, Ancestral Fire followers create a new transnational entity that they call Slavic *Rid* (Ukr) or Slavic *Rod* (Rus), meaning Slavic Clan or Slavic Family. (Contrary to popular beliefs, there is no historical evidence suggesting that the old Slavs perceived themselves as a unified ethno-cultural entity [Ivakhiv 2005c, 209–1].)

The Kupalo Wreath Festival in Kyiv in 2008 provided many examples of the Slavic cultural mosaic. In the evening preceding the Kupalo night, while the *Volkhvy* (Pagan priests) were preparing for their sacred ceremony, other participants were engaged in *khorovody* (group dances accompanied by singing) and various ritual games. Pagan leaders from Ukraine and other countries came to the festival

well prepared and took turns introducing their ethnically specific activities to all participants. While playing games and dancing, the participants did not place much emphasis on ethnic particulars but, rather, stressed the Slavic nature of their activities. For example, after they finished performing a Russian khorovod that involved some intense physical actions (such as running towards the centre of the circle and back to its edge), many participants were out of breath. The Russian leader of the khorovod commented: “Now we can all feel what the *clan khorovod* is” (emphasis added).

As we can see, Ukrainian Paganism is not exclusively informed by theories of the past. Pagans create experiences in order to reinforce their alternative vision of nation, either Ukrainian or pan-Slavic.

“We Allowed Nature to  
Live in Our Holy Place”  
Nature and Power

NATURE IN WESTERN PAGANISM

I am a Pagan. I am a part of the whole of nature. The rocks, the animals, the plants, the elements are my relatives. Other humans are my sisters and brothers, *whatever their races, colours, ages, nationalities, creeds or sexual preferences*. The earth is my mother and the sky is my father. The sun and moon are my grandparents, and the stars my ancestors. I am *part of this large family of nature, not the master of it*. I have my own special part to play and I seek to play that part to the best of my ability. I seek to live *in harmony with others in the family of nature*, treating others with respect, not abuse. (2006, 25, emphasis added)

Selena Fox

Because of their focus on nature, various Western Pagan groups are often defined as adherents of “Nature Religions.”<sup>1</sup> Although nature “means different things to different people” (Ivakhiv 2005b, 196),<sup>2</sup> many Western Pagans agree on its relationship to such notions as territory, ethnicity, race, environmentalism, and power.

Selena Fox, quoted above, is a well-known American Pagan. Although her speech evinces certain individual characteristics, it represents the way many contemporary Western Pagans understand relationships between humans and nature. They perceive both nature and humans in global terms, de-emphasizing any geographical, ethnic, political, sexual, or racial boundaries.

Many Western Pagans emphasize equality in their relationship with nature. Fox’s phrase “I am a part of this family of nature, not the master of it” suggests that humans are viewed as equal partners

with nature rather than as its overlords. While recognizing that nature sometimes physically overpowers humans, and that it can be unmerciful and manifest its brutality through such disasters as tsunamis, hurricanes, and earthquakes, Pagans, as Emma Restall Orr summarizes, try to “craft a sustainable relationship” with all of nature’s behavioural patterns. While Restall Orr does not encourage her fellow humans to fully submit to nature’s power, considering submission to be self-negation, she does stress the necessity of peaceful “negotiation” between humans and nature. “Crafting a relationship” with nature should be differentiated from human attempts to obtain control over nature by abusing its resources (Orr 2007, 37–8).

Western, especially North American, Paganism is closely tied to the general environmental movement. For example, it was in North America that Wicca, originally associated with English heritage and often viewed as a “metaphoric fertility religion,” became identified as a “nature” or “earth religion” (Clifton 2006, 52–3). What was originally perceived as a connection with pre-Christian European spiritual beings and practised as spell craft is now a religious response to environmental consciousness in the larger North American context (66).<sup>3</sup>

In fact, many people have come to Paganism through their prior engagement in ecological matters. Research often shows that it is not Paganism that generates pro-environmental motivations in its followers but vice-versa (Oboler 2004, 98).

Western Pagans often view themselves as separate from nature. They can bring about social and cultural change and, unlike nature, their rights are recognized and valued (Ivakhiv 2005b, 218). However, the change brought about by humans does not always have a positive effect on nature. In line with general environmentalist ideas, the majority of Western Pagans critique the modern world’s use of nature as a resource for industrial growth, which they feel is leading to its destruction.

#### NATURE IN UKRAINIAN PAGANISM

In contrast to Western Pagans, who often become Pagans because of their environmental concerns, some Ukrainian Pagans find that it is their involvement in Paganism that leads them to think more deeply about ecological issues and, thus, to respond to larger environmentalist concerns. However, environmental concerns are not as prominent

in Ukrainian Paganism as they are in its Western counterpart. This mirrors Ukrainian society's relative indifference to ecological issues. While environmentalist ideas are firmly established in Western countries, they are less developed in Eastern Europe, including Ukraine. Attempts to educate the general population about basic environmental issues such as recycling and establishing separate waste collection systems have begun only recently. Their implementation is progressing very slowly, and ecological organizations are still largely marginalized.

A popular emerging environmentalist trend that has influenced some Pagans in present-day Ukraine is the Anastasia Movement. This movement originates in Russia and is associated with a series of books entitled *The Ringing Cedars of Russia* by Vladimir Megre (see Megre 2002). According to the plot, a Russian entrepreneur named Megre travels to a Siberian forest for business purposes in the 1990s. On this trip he meets Anastasia, a descendant of an ancient Siberian tribe. While Anastasia is a fictional female character, some people believe in her actual existence. In addition to possessing the healthiest and the most physically perfect human characteristics, this woman also has supernatural powers. She knows every detail about the civilized world, yet promotes a natural way of life. After their meeting, Anastasia authorizes Megre to write a series of books in order to pass her message along to the larger society. Megre's books present Anastasia's teachings about health, nutrition, spirituality, childrearing, and sexuality. In general, they focus on the building of a harmonious relationship with nature.

One of the major ideas promoted by Anastasia is that family homesteads should be incorporated into rural settlements. She encourages every family to acquire one hectare (2.471 acres) of land. On this land, the family is supposed to build a house from natural materials, dig a well, plant an orchard and garden, and engage in subsistence farming. In her opinion, only this lifestyle can save the environment and achieve the healthiest state of life.

Megre's books have touched many. Russian editions sell in the millions and these books have also been translated into approximately twenty other languages. There are many followers and registered organizations in Russia and Ukraine working towards the fulfilment of what they often refer to as "Anastasia's dream." For example, the website of the Lviv Anastasia Information Centre promotes the idea of family-owned homesteads and settlements in the

Lviv region. Reportedly, Anastasia followers have four homesteads already operating in the area (Homesteads 2011).

Recently, some Ancestral Fire adherents have begun to adapt Megre's ideas to their own needs and ideology. On the internet forum "Creation of a Pagan Settlement," they discuss Anastasia's settlement model. Sviatoslav, an Ancestral Fire activist who is familiar with the Anastasia movement, offers the following suggestions to his fellow Pagans. According to him, sociologists argue that an optimum settlement would include 150 to 200 families (this constitutes about 800 to 1,000 people). In such a settlement, Pagans would need their own temple, with three to five spiritual leaders, and a school with Pagan teachers should be a first priority. In addition, such a settlement would be expected to have its own governing structure (such as a village council) as well as a post office and a medical clinic. It would also need fifteen to twenty entrepreneurs who would be able to establish community businesses.<sup>4</sup> Some Pagans have already taken the first steps towards the formation of this type of settlement. Bozhena, the sister of Volodymyr Kurovskyi, and her husband Volkhv Tverdoslav, along with their three young children, recently abandoned their city lifestyle and settled in the village of Rashtivtsi in the Ternopil region. They expect six more Ancestral Fire families to soon join them. Together, they plan to create a health and educational centre in this village.<sup>5</sup>

While many Western Pagans criticize urban centres for initiating the technological progress that has had a detrimental effect on the natural environment, Ukrainian Pagans are concerned that "cities ruin ethnic culture."<sup>6</sup> These differing views of the effects of urban settings reflect a major difference between Western Paganism as a "Nature Religion" and Ukrainian Paganism as an "Identity Building Religion." In both cases, however, the negative sentiments regarding cities remain purely theoretical. The majority of both Western and Ukrainian Pagans are city dwellers. Usually, it is only while participating in rituals held outdoors in parks, forests, and at perceived sacred sites that Pagans commune with "pristine" nature.

As national identity builders, Ukrainian Pagans feel comfortable in cities. In the search for their roots, they are often drawn not only to the rural folklore associated with pristine nature but also to the glorious (or, more accurately, glorified) pages of Ukrainian history. This history is more explicitly represented in old cities, where it speaks through historical architecture, monuments, and a variety of

commemorative events, than it is in rural settings. Moreover, since Ukrainian Paganism is an intellectual movement, it is nourished by formal higher education, including the study of history, which is offered by educational establishments located in cities.

Sometimes Ukrainian Pagans compete over the spiritual importance of their cities. For example, Zhrytsia Iaryna of Native Faith paganizes the history of her hometown of Lviv in order to reinforce its significance in contemporary Ukraine. Iaryna was deeply concerned that Lviv, founded in the thirteenth century, was a relatively new city, especially in comparison to the much older city of Kyiv. It was painful for her to hear comments suggesting that there could be no ancestral pagan places in Lviv since there had been no pagans in the thirteenth century. The popular publication *Tilky u Lvovi* (*Only in Lviv*) was a great discovery for Iaryna since it showed that Lviv had been established on a spiritually powerful location, namely, an ancient pagan shrine, with the Svitovydove pole in the centre (see Vvedenskyi et al. 2007). With great pride, Iaryna (n.d.) states: “Come to Lviv, a city that is a phenomenon, a city that is a national hero. Do not be surprised that the inhabitants of Lviv have such highly patriotic feelings towards their city. This is because of the mystical features of the space where our town is situated, where a person can feel the true touch of the Gods, the breath of the Universe.”

While contemporary Western Pagans view ethnicity as a social construct, Ukrainian Pagans perceive it is a natural entity that is closely connected with nature and territory. Adrian Ivakhiv (2005b, 203–8) calls this “territorial ethnicity,” something understood as naturally evolving within a particular environment over a long span of time, sometimes millennia.<sup>7</sup> As a result, unlike Western Pagans, to whom nature appears in its own right, Ukrainian Pagans perceive themselves and nature as one organic whole (195). This view of nature is also closely tied to the notions of ethnos, nation, blood, and sacred tradition. Ethnos are understood to have homelands, where they act as “hosts,” while minority groups are perceived as “guests” (206).<sup>8</sup>

Ukrainian Pagans believe in the sacredness of Ukraine and in the spiritual and energetic power of its natural landscapes. This enables them to respond to perceived threats that come from both the East (fear of the returning dominance of Russia) and the West (cosmopolitanism and the competitive capitalist economy under which Ukraine may lose its identity and become economically oppressed) (Ivakhiv 2005b, 208–10).

Vedan,<sup>9</sup> a young male adherent of Ancestral Fire, commenting on the fact that Ukrainian Pagans are often criticized for their nationalist, racist, and even somewhat fascist views, attempts to justify these views by connecting them to the concept of nature and its relationship to territory and ethnicity:

Look at this territory. If it were Zimbabwe and if I said that Ukrainians were the coolest people here, then probably all these –isms [nationalism, racism, and fascism] with which you [journalists/critics] have labelled me would be understandable. However, this is Ukraine, and the nation is Ukrainian, Ukrainian people. And I, as a representative of the Ukrainian people, I have to be the first and best to serve as an example for others. I do not mind others living on my territory, but only with my permission. Why? Because this is my position ... I want to *revive those traditions and customs that have existed here from the very beginning*. This doesn't mean that I will push away those who live according to our laws and do not defile them ... However, I don't want anybody to simply spit on this attitude, thinking that everything is allowed ... I am not for this kind of democracy, I am against this kind of democracy. I want there to be *order in Ukraine as naturally should have been formed here*. In the end, God gave everybody a land, and this is the land that he gave to Ukrainians. It means that we have a full right to it. (Vedan, interview, 28 April 2008 [emphasis added])

This quote illustrates that, for Ukrainian Pagans, nature has geographic boundaries and political borders. While Selena Fox (quoted earlier) speaks about nature in global terms, Vedan's understanding of this concept is linked to the geographic and political territory of Ukraine. He sees a direct physical connection between Ukrainian ethnicity (associated with particular traditions and customs) and Ukraine's geographic territory. His wish to revive those traditions and customs, which "should have been formed here naturally," reflects his view of ethnicity as a "natural" entity that evolves in the process of interaction with other humans in the context of a given natural environment. He also implies that those traditions and customs that "should have been formed" on the territory of Ukraine may not have been formed due to "unnatural foreign" interference. This is why Vedan believes it is important to revive those traditions

that existed in the primordial past, before they were “polluted” by “foreign” ideologies.

Vedan divides people into two categories: “insiders” and “outsiders,” or “hosts” and “guests.” The insiders belong to the Ukrainian ethnic clan and the outsiders are strangers, the “other.” “Guests” wishing to enter Ukrainian land must seek permission from the ethnic “hosts” of this land.

#### NATURE AND POWER

“Let us meet near the yoke,” Zhyvosyl Liutyi suggested when I contacted him to arrange an interview in the spring of 2007. I recall feeling confused and uncomfortable because the tone of his voice indicated that he was identifying a famous landmark and I did not recognize it. I did not want to disclose my ignorance and present myself in an unfavorable light. After an awkward pause in our conversation, he clarified what he meant by “the yoke.” “It is the so-called Arc of Friendship of the Peoples,” he said. I began to laugh because it seemed like a good joke; however, Zhyvosyl was absolutely serious.

This landmark is a monument in the shape of a large rainbow. It was erected in 1982 by the Soviets in the centre of Kyiv near the bank of the Dnipro River. Two smaller monuments beneath the rainbow are especially evocative. One depicts two workers – Ukrainian and Russian – holding the Soviet state emblem. The second monument represents the participants of the Pereiaslav Council of 1654, at which Cossack Hetman Bohdan Khmelnytskyi signed a treaty with the Russian tsar, placing the Cossack State under the military protection of the Russian Empire.

What the Soviets intended as a symbol of great unity between the two peoples, many nationally conscious Ukrainians, including contemporary Pagans, interpret as a historical symbol of the political oppression of Ukraine and its subordination to Russia, the “older sister.” To Zhyvosyl and his fellow Pagans, “the yoke” contributes to the development of a “slave mentality” among Ukrainian people.<sup>10</sup> Paganism has become a form of spirituality that helps its followers free themselves from this slave mentality and become masters of their lives and their nation.

This sentiment is reflected in the way some Pagans, especially the adherents of Ancestral Fire, understand nature in relationship to

power. Although, theoretically, Ukrainian Pagans view themselves and nature as an organic whole, in practice they often distinguish themselves from nature, striving to obtain control over their environment. Let me return to Natalia Virhush and Zhyvosyl Liutyi's song "Old Gods." In chapter 4, I discuss the role of this song in the symbolic construction of community. In what follows, I show how its lyrics symbolically communicate a connection between nature and power.

As suggested by the phrase "We allowed nature, not idols, to live in our holy place," nature appears to the authors in folkloric terms. In standard Ukrainian, "idols" is a derogatory term referring to pre-Christian gods and goddesses and their sculptural depictions. The authors reject this negative interpretation of ancestral beliefs. To them, these idols are profound because they are rooted in the natural environment.

In the song, the narrator positions her people as "us." She does not place "us" inside the system of old ancestral beliefs but, rather, outside it: we are observers and evaluators of those beliefs. Contemporary Ukrainian Pagans (and those Ukrainians who do not self-identify as Pagans but who adhere to Pagan ideas) may not necessarily believe in the magical power of spirits, but the narrator is proud that her ancestors had such a rich belief system ("Well, where else is there such a people?").

Ukrainian Pagans strive to build a traditional society by reviving its rich traditional religion. Their understanding of religion fits the classical definitions of religion offered by Edward Tylor and James G. Frazer. Tylor (1873) views religion in traditional societies as a belief in spiritual beings, while Frazer (1948, 50) sees it as "a propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man which are believed to direct and control the course of nature and human life."<sup>11</sup> However, are the old Slavic spiritual beings as presented in Virhush and Liutyi's song treated as superior powers? Lines like "*We allowed* nature ... to live in our holy place," "*We established* a house for them [Slavic spiritual beings]," "those [spiritual beings] whom *we saved*," "house spirits live in the houses that *we have sanctified*" suggest rather the opposite (emphasis added).

On the one hand, these lyrics imply that Ukrainian Pagans have a deep respect for nature as they endeavour to preserve those folkloric elements in which nature-related beliefs are reflected; on the other hand, they also suggest that contemporary Ukrainian Pagans strive to consciously maintain control over their world. While the majority

of Western Pagans stress the idea of living in harmony with nature, many Ukrainian Pagans attempt to control natural forces, as Virhush and Liutyi's song exemplifies: they "craft their relationship with nature" in a different way than do their Western counterparts, granting it permission "to live in [their] holy place."

Some Ukrainian Pagans also manifest their power over nature through the use of magic, believing this to be a continuation of the tradition of their ancestors. A *Slavlennia* ritual conducted by Ancestral Fire's leader Volodymyr Kurovskyi on *Zamkova hora* (Castle Mountain) in Kyiv may serve as an example. During the course of the ritual, while all participants were standing in a circle glorifying their gods and goddesses, it suddenly began to rain. Kurovskyi put away his service book and addressed the participants. He encouraged them to gather up their inner energy, invoking the power of native gods to turn away the rain. Kurovskyi's charismatic actions were accompanied by his artfully improvised poetic oration, in which he ordered the rain to stop:

I ask you, brothers and sisters, to raise your hands up and feel how a spiritual fire appears inside of you. Now put your hands down below your stomach and feel how a great powerful fire of our Clan begins to warm up and burn. Feel now how it begins to warm up inside of you [Kurovskyi is breathing deeply]. And, whether you are a man or a woman, you fill up with the fire, emotions, and flame. And you connect with the fire. [Meanwhile, one of the male followers of this group blows and fans the fire.] Only a fire of light, a fire desiring light. And now we slowly raise this fire over our spiritual tree, we raise it upwards [slowly raising his hands up and apart] and see how our fires connect into a Svarha [a symbol of the universe]. And there is a flaming Svarha [and an] alatyrl there. It begins to rotate above us, creating a golden flaming shield, and wipes off the clouds, and creates a fire above our hill, and does not give water any access to it, and protects us. [Kurovskyi raises his voice.] And father Symarhl is coming to us, and father Stryboh is coming to us to protect us and create a starry shield, a flaming shield, protecting our ritual of Slavlennia. Let it be so. Glory to our Gods! [following the leader, all the participants put their hands down.] Let us close our eyes and maintain this aspiration, close our eyes and see this spiritual stream of light that comes from us, from our fire, and moves up

to the Svarha and opens like a shield, like an umbrella above us, protecting us from rain. [Raising his voice again.] We call father Stryboh to come to us with his powerful forces and to move the clouds away so that the light of Dazhboh would shine upon us and enlighten our hearts with virgin holiness. Let our incantations and our souls confirm themselves in Iava, and let the light and good weather appear. [Crosses his arms around his chest area and bows before the fire. The participants do the same.]

The rain stopped immediately. Although sceptics may argue that the rain could have stopped on its own, this is not how Kurovskyi and his followers viewed the situation. Kurovskyi's behaviour and the tone of his voice during this religious event deserve special attention. He did not attempt to "craft a relationship with nature"; rather, he gave it direct orders.

In a later interview, Kurovskyi recalled another occasion when, on a very sunny day, he asked Father Dazhboh, the Sun-God, to partially cover his face because the intense light prevented his congregation from concentrating on their spiritual activity. According to Kurovskyi, clouds immediately covered the sun, amazing the journalists who were filming this ritual. Kurovskyi is convinced that any Slavic person can control (and "control" is the term he often uses) natural forces according to his or her will: he is convinced that the old Slavs had such powers. He argues that it is precisely their power over nature that enabled them to achieve agricultural prosperity (Kurovskyi, interview, 16 May 2007).

One question continued to trouble me: "What if magic does not work?" Although Kurovskyi insists that this was never a problem for him, I observed just such an eventuality in the summer of 2008, during Ancestral Fire's Kupalo Wreath Festival. (Kurovskyi did not attend the festival, but it was led by his closest followers.) On one of the days of the festival, it was raining heavily. As I approached the Ancestral Fire camp, I noticed a number of shirtless men walking within a circle around the fire and performing various martial arts movements. It was explained that these men were trying to stop the rain, which had been interfering with the camp's various spiritual and educational activities.<sup>12</sup>

The ritual lasted for approximately one hour, and the rain gradually stopped. Realizing that both insiders and outsiders might wonder whether the cessation of the rain had indeed been the result of

their magical activity, and, even if it had been, might wonder why it had not stopped sooner, the leaders provided the following explanation. They emphasized that, as a festival (as opposed to a purely spiritual ceremony meant exclusively for insiders), Kupalo Wreath attracted many new people. These individuals may have had a variety of reasons for attending the event, and spiritual fulfilment may not have been a driving force for all of them. Many may have attended purely out of curiosity. According to the leaders, when people who do not fully belong in the sacred circle participate in Pagan rituals, it renders the latter less effective. What is even more interesting is not the way they justified the outcome of their magical ceremony but, rather, their unwillingness to question their own power over nature. They refused to accept that, in at least some instances, nature might not obey their will.<sup>13</sup>

Carol Christ's discussion of will in the ritual of goddess worship can help us understand the role of will in the case of Ancestral Fire. Christ (2006, 52–4) considers the concept of a woman's will to be a female response to Christianity, a patriarchal religion within which this will is suppressed. While gender does not play a major role in our case, the notion of individual will can be viewed as a response to the Soviet situation, in which the will of the individual (as opposed to the will of the collective) was not tolerated.

The attempts of Ukrainian Pagans to control nature are also a response to their collective memory of the political and spiritual oppression that led to the development of a "slave mentality." Their desire to gain control over nature supports Oboler's (2004, 105) argument that it is not only religion that shapes social norms. My case study demonstrates that it is the reality of socio-political life, along with resistance to colonial oppression, that influences Ukrainian Pagans to seek alternative religious models.

The power of individual will over natural forces plays an important role in the construction of an alternative national identity in the post-Soviet context. Ukrainian Pagans strive to be empowered individuals. They refuse to be treated as slaves and insist upon being masters of their own house.

## “This Is Indeed Ours!” Religious Syncretism<sup>1</sup>

In the spring of 2007, while conducting fieldwork in Lviv, western Ukraine, I met Ohnedar<sup>2</sup>, a young male adherent of Ancestral Fire who was especially enthusiastic about his group’s calendar- and lifecycle rituals. He found them spiritually and socially meaningful as well as aesthetically pleasing. Discussing Pagan marriages, I asked Ohnedar to describe wedding rituals that he had either observed or in which he had participated. I was surprised to find that Ancestral Fire weddings were very similar to weddings currently celebrated in many Ukrainian villages by people who identify themselves as Christians. He explained: “When you accept Native Faith you don’t really feel like you’ve changed religions. You just begin to look at certain things from a different angle and perceive them on a different level.”

I had another similar, somewhat humorous encounter. I attended several RUNVira services in the summer of 2008, and one Sunday I videotaped the weekly Holy Hour of Self-Reflection held by a Lviv-based RUNVira community. My brother accompanied me to take photographs. He confessed that a number of times during the Holy Hour he had almost made the sign of the cross because he felt the service greatly resembled those in Eastern Christian churches. My impression of the service was similar. This seemed paradoxical, considering that Ukrainian Pagans, especially followers of RUNVira, perceive Christianity to be one of their major ideological opponents.

The above encounters reflect the religious syncretism of Ukrainian Paganism. The first case involves cultural contact between present-day Paganism and the rural folklore that many Pagans strive to appropriate; the second case suggests an overlap between RUNVira and Eastern Christian traditions of worship. In general, syncretism

in modern Ukrainian Paganism is complex and embraces many traditions and belief systems. These include old Slavic paganism (as presented in primary sources and whose traces are believed to be visible in contemporary rural folklore), Christianity (both official and vernacular beliefs), and non-Ukrainian elements (both spiritual and secular). Pagan practices can embrace two or even all three systems simultaneously, resulting in intriguing new religious forms.

#### SYNCRETISM

Scholars commonly define religious syncretism as a “synthesis of different religious forms” (Shaw and Stewart 2004, i) and see it as the unavoidable outcome of cultural contact. Although it is now accepted that all cultures are essentially syncretic, the concept of syncretism can still shed light on some complex cultural dynamics. While in some contexts syncretism may be perceived as negative, as embracing impurity and inauthenticity, in others it may be viewed as positive, as resisting oppression, connecting with a forgotten history, and/or constructing a national identity.

In the past, syncretism was closely associated with cultural hierarchy. Scholars viewed cultural influence as a one-way process, implying that a subordinate culture slowly and progressively accepts the dominant culture. Contemporary research shows that cultural influence is, rather, a two-way route; despite their hierarchical positions in any given context, cultures most often exert a mutual influence upon each other (Shaw and Stewart 2004, 6).<sup>3</sup>

The standard definition of syncretism usually implies the blending of two or more existing traditions when they come into contact with one another. I propose to expand this understanding of religious syncretism since, in our case, an entirely *new* religion is created on the basis of various traditions.

#### SYNCRETIC CHRISTIANITY

Contemporary Ukrainian Pagans, either consciously or unconsciously, embrace elements of Christianity that are themselves syncretic. Ukrainian Byzantine Rite Christian practices often have very little, if anything, to do with the Bible or with official Christian doctrine. Some elements suggest pagan origins while others may be more recent creations. While some have found their way into formal

church rituals, others, although rejected or ignored by the official Church, still function at the vernacular level.

Many Eastern European ethnographers argue that a great number of pagan motifs were adapted by the church as Christianity established itself in Slavic territories. Both ethnographers and Pagans have attempted to identify and to isolate these motifs, with varying levels of success. Volodymyr Hnatiuk (1871–1926), in his comparison of the Slavic pagan worldview represented in historical sources and village beliefs of his time, found that attributes connected with many pagan gods and goddesses were eventually attached to Christian saints.<sup>4</sup> Hnatiuk, agreeing with his contemporaries Léger and Niederle, concludes that the characteristics of Perun, God of Thunder and Lightning, had been applied to Saint Illia (Elijah). Likewise, in some areas of Ukraine the functions of Veles, God of Cattle and Prosperity, had become associated with Saint Iurii (George), while in other regions they were connected with Saint Nykolai (Nicholas) (Hnatiuk 1912, vii).

According to early ethnographers, besides blending the attributes of individual gods and goddesses with those of Christian saints, many pagan holidays were adapted to the Christian calendar.<sup>5</sup> For example, *Velykden'* (Easter) was originally the celebration of spring (Hnatiuk 1912, vii). Hnatiuk suggests that the blessing of pysanky and various foods (e.g., Easter bread *paska*, cheese, eggs, meat, butter, etc.), believed to be a pagan practice, was adopted as a component of the official celebration of Easter. Often syncretic elements were associated with vernacular beliefs and practices that were not necessarily recognized by the official Church. For example, Pavel Chubinskii (1872a, 23) observes that, in some rural areas of late nineteenth-century western Ukraine, bones from the meat blessed on Easter were buried in fields in order to protect crops from hail.

While some willingly converted to the new religion, Christianity was forcefully imposed upon many people of Kyivan Rus. Old church records show that the Christian clergy criticized the peasants of Kyivan Rus for their “ungodly” beliefs in natural forces.<sup>6</sup> This indicates that peasants maintained their pre-Christian practices for some period of time. It is possible that the church tolerated pagan motifs in the hope that they would eventually wither away.

Over time the church's views regarding local beliefs may have changed, allowing certain pagan elements to be included in Christian rituals. For example, many researchers discuss the reason the blessing

of the Easter eggs (pysanky) became an important component of the church's celebration of Easter. Relating the Resurrection of Christ to the resurrection of nature (symbolized by the pysanky) would have helped facilitate the spread of the Christian message in Kyivan Rus. Steven Kaplan (1995, 16) would refer to this process as *Christianization* – the creation of Christian versions of traditional rituals and beliefs in which local religious practices are viewed as potentially valuable “for the development of a Christian life in a Christian community.” This is a form of syncretism that provides a useful function for one of the two religions that came into contact.

Ukrainian Byzantine Rite Christian churches played a crucial role in the formation of a distinct national identity in both the post-Second World War Ukrainian diaspora and in post-Soviet Ukraine.<sup>7</sup> Folk (peasant) elements, especially those that are widely believed to have pre-Christian origins, also play a significant role in identity construction through the church. For example, the church blessing of pysanky on Easter Sunday is as much a marker of Ukrainian identity as it is a form of spirituality. Many nationally conscious Ukrainians prefer folk elements to any other cultural forms because these (unlike elements from elite culture) are easily recognizable as Ukrainian and are closely linked to a particular geographic territory (Kononenko and Lesiv 2011). Folk elements are spiritually and socially beneficial for the church, which in turn, plays an important role in building national identity.

#### DUAL BELIEF SYSTEM

The concept of *dvoievir'ia* (*dvoyeverie*, in Russian), or dual belief system, has been popular in Eastern Europe since the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> It refers to the synthesis of Christian and pagan practices. The idea was especially popular among early nineteenth-century ethnographers, who attempted to trace what they called the survivals of ancient paganism in order to claim antiquity for their nations, thus contributing to the discourse of nation-state.

Despite some recent criticism from Western scholars,<sup>9</sup> the concept of *dvoievir'ia* is still widely circulated in academia and, more important, at the popular level. Modern Pagans not only recognize this concept but also use it as a tool for the building of their spirituality. They are firmly convinced that contemporary folklore contains many remnants of ancient Slavic paganism. To them, the concept of

dvoievir'ia provides an academic confirmation of their view that the beliefs of their ancestors have, over time, been polluted by a different belief system, namely, Christianity. Furthermore, Pagans are convinced that, in Ukraine, Christianity has introduced little that is new; rather, it has based itself upon old pagan models. While bringing pagan motifs into their contemporary practices, Ukrainian Pagans strive to “cleanse” the latter of any “foreign” Christian layers.

#### CONSTRUCTING CHARISMA

Christian motifs, both official and vernacular, used by Ukrainian Pagans include not only material objects and visual images but also certain Christian ideas and patterns of behaviour. Let us consider the way the founder of RUNVira, Lev Sylenko, speaks about himself. He proclaims himself a prophet, sent to his fellow Ukrainians by God. However, in this case, the concept of God is presented as understood by the ancestors of contemporary Ukrainians, or, more specifically, as how Sylenko believes it was understood. Sylenko (1996a, 246) describes his experience as follows: “God’s grace came upon me, and following the will of God I have proclaimed a new understanding of God.” According to his followers, Sylenko could feel the “breath of his Ancestors” in his soul and was united with them “through divine holiness” (16–17).

Sylenko (1996a, 38) identifies his relationship with his ancestors as follows: “I was born out of their love. And this is why I love everything that is my own so devotedly and tenderly as they loved it. Their blood flows in my blood. Their souls live in my soul. They are my love. They are my Saints.” He tries to legitimize his role as a RUNVira prophet through the notions of vision and spirit possession. Specifically, he claims that he is possessed by the spirits of his ancestors and their God. These ideologically syncretic ideas help Sylenko to consolidate his position of authority. Or, as Robert Weller (1994, 91) would say, they serve “as a means to recruit and retain the enthusiasm of followers.”

The following is an excerpt from one of Sylenko’s poems, in which he introduces his mission as a prophet:

I have come, my dear native tribes,  
From your truths, sources and sufferings ...  
Slaves with evil tongues will go against me.

They will destroy the free orchard of my thoughts.  
 “A false prophet is coming!” – the faceless children of slavery  
 Will be saying, laughing at me ...  
 I say, “The lost, come back,  
 I am bringing you the Native Faith from Heaven,  
 Open your hearts, do not hold aloof,  
 I have risen for the joy of [my] people” (Sylenko 1996b, 7)<sup>10</sup>

In terms of its style, metaphors, and linguistic turns, this poem resonates with many lines from the Bible, especially those devoted to Jesus’s arrival in Jerusalem, where the Jews reject him as a false Messiah. Jesus reacts to this situation as follows:

Most assuredly, I say to you: He who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life (John 5:24).<sup>11</sup>

But I know that you have not the love of God within you. I have come in My Father’s name, and you do not receive me; if another comes in his own name, him you will receive. (John 5:43)

I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst. But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. All that the Father gives me will come to me; and him who comes to me I will not cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. (John 6:35–8)

The resemblance between the figure of Lev Sylenko as presented in his poem and that of Jesus Christ as portrayed in the Bible is striking. While Jesus was born of the Holy Spirit, Sylenko was born of the love of his ancestors. While Jesus descends from heaven in the name of his Father to save the world, Sylenko comes in the name of his ancestors to save his fellow Ukrainians. Moreover, Sylenko metaphorically uses the biblical concept of “resurrection” (*voskresinnia*) associated with Jesus to describe his mission. Like Jesus, who speaks for his Father, Sylenko speaks for his ancestors and is aware of the fact that he will not be immediately well received by all his people. However, like Jesus, he promises salvation to those who fully accept him. In general, Sylenko views his mission as similar to that of Jesus

Christ and communicates it with the help of particular linguistic means. This symbolic association with the dominant religion and its main spiritual figure significantly contributes to the construction of Sylenko's own charisma.

Sociologist Max Weber was the first to introduce the concept of charisma into academic discourse. He viewed charisma predominantly in Christian terms, as a divine gift: "[Charisma is] a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual is concerned and treated as a leader" (Weber 1947, 358–9).

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973), known for interpreting cultures as symbolic systems, expands on Weber's definition of the concept of charisma. He suggests that charisma cannot be seen exclusively as a divine gift because it may also be socially or culturally constructed. Certain symbolic elements – such as material attributes, language, particular actions or patterns of human behaviour – often help to reinforce the leader's charisma, and this, in turn, plays a significant role in consolidating particular communities around a central authority figure. Geertz (1983, 129–37) demonstrates that the symbolic elements involved in this process are often rooted in the religious ideologies and traditions of particular societies and, thus, must be studied within these particular contexts.

Sylenko's authority and charisma are reinforced through the help of symbolic associations with Christian concepts that are familiar to the majority of Ukrainians. In other words, Sylenko's authority is constructed on the basis of a well-known pre-existing model of spiritual power. However, his charisma, as understood in Weber's terms, cannot be underestimated. In fact, he is remembered by many as a dynamic and talented individual with great oratorical skills. According to one Ukrainian Canadian, who remembered when Sylenko came to Edmonton, Alberta, in the 1970s to proclaim his RUNVIRA ideas: "Everything became quiet, and the ground shook when he spoke." Sylenko's charisma is both "natural," in that it is associated with his personality, and socially constructed: the two exist in dialogue with each other.<sup>12</sup>

## RECLAIMING IT

Ukrainian churches of the Byzantine Rite indigenize Christianity by imparting it through folk elements that are easily recognizable as Ukrainian. However, Ukrainian Pagans have a different view. Pagans, especially the adherents of *RUNVira*, criticize Christianity for taking a Ukrainian form and contaminating it with foreign content. Thus, Lev Sylenko (2005, 798) addresses Christian Ukrainians: “The pysanka is yours, but it glorifies an event in Bethlehem rather than in Kyiv. Children are yours but their souls have to be excited about and inspired by non-Ukrainian holy things and celebrations of Greek Orthodoxy.”

Pagans incorporate what they perceive to be ancient practices into their own activities, arguing that the former originally belonged to them. Like Ukrainian Christians, Pagans use these practices as auxiliary instruments to promote their own Ukrainianness. Interestingly, many of the motifs Pagans are reclaiming have been gradually modified and transformed within Christianity and are now widely associated with Ukrainian Christian traditions. As Volodymyr Hnatiuk (1912, vi) pointed out in the late nineteenth century, those traditions that are now recognized as remnants of the old pagan worldview do not exist in their original form or even in the shape that they acquired at the early stages of Christianity in Ukraine; rather, they have been changed as a result of various influences over time.

The limited amount of primary information about old Slavic paganism leaves contemporary Ukrainian Pagans with only a small number of “real” pagan elements to revive. For example, it is not known what pysanky looked like a thousand years ago or whether they even existed at that time. The first ethnographic accounts of the pysanka, or Easter egg, tradition date from the late nineteenth century. Since these findings clearly indicate the tradition was firmly established by that time, we may hypothesize that it originated earlier, although we cannot know exactly how much earlier. As a result, Ukrainian Pagans appropriate pysanky and other elements of folk tradition in the forms that are presently known and available, adapting whatever elements fit their needs. This results in what Hobsbawm and Ranger (2000, 5) call “invented tradition,” whereby “adaptation t[akes] place for old uses in new conditions and by using old models for new purposes.” Much like Kaplan’s idea of “Christianization,” what occurs here may be termed “paganization,” whereby Pagan versions

of traditional practices are valued for their ability to help with developing a Pagan life in a Pagan community.

One especially evocative example of adaptation deals with an illustration in a RUNVira article entitled “Great Day of Dazhboh Light” published in the periodical *Unique Ukraine-Rus* (see Great Day 1992 [10999]). The article discusses old pagan rituals performed on the territory of Ukraine in the context of the celebration of solstice and the resurrection of spring and suggests that pysanky were a significant component of this ancient holiday. The illustration features three pysanky. While the designs found on two of the eggs are based on abstract geometric and floral motifs, the design on the third includes a stylized image of a Christian church. This element can be found on the Easter eggs of the Hutsul ethnographic region in western Ukraine and reflects the type of wooden church architecture characteristic of that area. Pysanky depicting church architecture would not have appeared earlier than the actual churches themselves.

#### INDIGENIZING THE FOREIGN

Natalia, a Ukrainian American currently living in New York state, was very nervous prior to her 1991 wedding. She wanted her father, a RUNtato, to perform the marriage in the RUNVira style, yet she also wanted the ceremony to be understood by their American guests, many of whom were neither Ukrainian nor members of RUNVira. Natalia consciously combined RUNVira elements with those of American urban folklore and popular culture. For example, a large unity candle, a feature of the contemporary American non-denominational wedding tradition, was placed on the RUNVira altar alongside sacred RUNVira items. The candle is to be lit each year on the date of the wedding until the fiftieth anniversary of marriage.

This example shows that larger socio-political contexts affect Ukrainian Paganism. Although Ukrainian Pagans, especially the followers of RUNVira, are strongly oriented towards Ukraine and things Ukrainian, the combination of Ukrainian and non-Ukrainian elements in their rituals helps Ukrainian-American representatives of the faith to reach out to the larger community, thus making Paganism look more natural within the American setting. This example is culturally specific to the Ukrainian diaspora and does not apply to the majority of Pagan communities in Ukraine. North American Ukrainian Pagans are influenced by the mainstream ideology of Western society,

which promotes inclusiveness and tolerance of the other – ideas that are not popular in present-day Ukraine, where many Pagans clearly distinguish between “us” and “them.”

#### BORROWING FROM PAGANS

So far we have considered situations in which contemporary Pagans borrow motifs and ideas from other traditions. However, despite being a relatively new phenomenon, Paganism has already begun to spread its influence in the wider Ukrainian society. This results in even more complex forms of syncretism, confirming that cultural contact is indeed multi-directional.

I have heard some non-Pagans describe contemporary Pagan practices as “truly Ukrainian” and “authentic.” Although many nationally conscious Ukrainians do not necessarily support the revival of old paganism as a religion, Pagan rituals appear to them to have a close connection with the traditions of the old Slavs and, as such, are valuable sources of identity formation. I witnessed an example of this at the *Kraina Mrii* (Dreamland) Festival in Kyiv in 2008. *Kraina Mrii* is an annual musical and cultural event in Kyiv organized by Ukrainian pop star Oleh Skrypka, and it coincides with the time of the “Christianized” Kupalo celebrations, which occur around 6–7 July. The festival is all-Ukrainian in nature and is patriotic in spirit: there is no explicit reference to any religion. By supporting and popularizing traditional genres of Ukrainian music, *Kraina Mrii* plays an important role in the raising of contemporary national consciousness.

Kupalo is an old ritual.<sup>13</sup> Ethnographers interpret it as an agrarian rite connected with “a pre-Christian celebration of the solstice and vegetation fertility magic” (Kononenko 2004, 179). At some point following the introduction of Christianity, Kupalo became associated with Ivan (John) the Baptist because the feast-day honouring this saint (7 July/24 June) falls very close to the solstice. The academic hypothesis popular among Ukrainian Pagans is that this syncretic holiday became known as Ivan Kupalo, with “Ivan” referring to the Christian saint and “Kupalo” referring to his pre-Christian counterpart.

As ethnographer Pavel Chubinskii documents, one of the most colourful parts of the old Ivan Kupalo celebration was an evening event organized by youth. It involved constructing a figure called either “Kupalo” or “Marena” (sometimes it featured both). The

body was made of small boughs, a broom, or straw and was decorated with wreaths, necklaces, ribbons, and flowers. Girls would dance and sing around Marena, while boys would attempt to steal her. At the end of the night, Marena and/or Kupalo would either be drowned or dismembered, with pieces spread across the fields, supposedly to ensure the fertility of crops (Kononenko 2004, 179; Chubinskii 1872b, 193–5).

Socially, this ritual was designed to enable young people to meet and to form potential couples. In line with the themes of marriage and fertility, many fortune-telling and magic elements were incorporated. For example, Chubinskii observes that, in some rural localities of nineteenth-century Ukraine, girls of a marriageable age would make wreaths and attach candles to them. The candles would be lit and the wreaths set afloat on a nearby body of water. The direction in which one's wreath would flow would indicate the direction from which she could expect her future husband. The culmination of this holiday was the lighting of a bonfire. When the flames were of a lesser intensity, couples would hold hands and jump over the fire. It was believed that the couple whose hands remained connected as they leapt across the flames would stay together and would soon be married (Chubinskii 1872b, 196; Kononenko 2004, 181).

During the Soviet era, the celebration of Kupalo was sovietized. In line with Marxist ideology, both the magical and religious elements of this holiday were dismissed as remnants of backward thinking; instead, the Soviets emphasized the aesthetic and playful components of Kupalo (Kuveniova et al. 1971, 182–9; Klymets 1990, 106–16). In 1959, the Day of Soviet Youth was introduced to the Soviet calendar, and its celebrations were based largely on old Kupalo rituals. However, in the Soviet context, the Kupalo bonfire came to represent goodness and the eternal glory of Soviet heroes. Instead of Kupalo and Marena, effigies of the enemies of Soviet ideology, such as warmongers, bureaucrats, drunkards, and hooligans, were burned in a bonfire (Kuveniova et al. 1971, 185–6).

It would not be an exaggeration to say that Kupalo has become one of the most popular rituals among post-Soviet revivalists throughout Ukraine, both in rural settings and in staged performances in urban centres. Associated with the distant past, it has now become a powerful marker of Ukrainianness. As is to be expected, Kupalo has also become one of the major holidays of the Pagan

calendar cycle. On the first day of the 2008 Kraina Mrii Festival representatives of Native Faith gathered at their shrine in Kyiv to conduct the weekly ritual known as Glorifying Gods and Goddesses. During this ritual they made references to Kupalo and their plans for a special celebration later that night, when they would observe this holiday as one of the major spiritual experiences of the yearly cycle. Meanwhile, immediately following the ritual they joined the Kraina Mrii Festival procession that was taking place near their shrine.

Many Ukrainian Pagans were pleased not only with the manner in which the festival was organized that year but also, and especially, with the time that it was held. Several Pagans claimed that it was their idea to convince Oleh Skrypka to stage Kraina Mrii (which, itself, would incorporate many Kupalo themes) on the actual day of the summer solstice – 21 June. They believed that this was precisely when the ancestors of contemporary Ukrainians originally celebrated. Pagans strongly opposed the idea of staging the festival around 7 July, on the Orthodox Christian feast day of Ivan Kupalo, as was originally planned. Apparently, Skrypka was convinced that the change of date was a good idea, and Native Faith Pagans happily joined his festival procession before beginning their own Kupalo celebrations. After the procession arrived at its destination, the effigies of Kupalo and Marena were placed near the main stage. Throughout the festival, guests and participants took pictures in front of the figures.

Prior to joining the festival procession a representative of Native Faith made an interesting comment that explains the Pagan view of Kupalo. He told his fellow believers that he was very pleased with what Oleh Skrypka was doing. He was concerned, however, that, for the organizers and guests of Kraina Mrii, Kupalo was mainly a colourful theatrical performance and not the real spiritual experience that it was for contemporary Pagans. Despite this fact, in his opinion, it was a good start. He hoped that, through “theatrical performance,” many Ukrainians would come to a “real spiritual experience.” At least one step in this direction had already been taken when it was agreed, at the instigation of Pagans, that the Kraina Mrii Festival would be celebrated on the day the holiday had been observed in the distant past.

The syncretism related to Kupalo is especially complex and multi-layered. While this holiday is believed to have pagan origins, it was later combined with Christian ideas, imbued with romantic nationalist sentiments, and cloaked in Soviet ideology. More recently, it was again

given Pagan content, especially with regard to the time it is celebrated. In this form it reached the larger circle of non-Pagan Ukrainian patriots, whose political visions often coincide with those of Pagans. Unlike the Soviets, who tried to de-secularize this ritual, Ukrainian Pagans strive to revive its alleged sacred nature. However, Soviets and Pagans both have negative feelings about the Christian elements of Kupalo. This is intriguing, especially considering that Paganism and Soviet Communism are ideologically opposed.

The Kupalo ritual as recreated by Bohdan Ostrovskyi, a Kyiv-based leader of RUNVira, is even more complex than is the one discussed above.<sup>14</sup> Kupalo was not celebrated in the area where Ostrovskyi was born (the Ternopil region, western Ukraine). Still, since it was widely recognized after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ostrovskyi decided to include it as part of the RUNVira calendar. However, he was not fully satisfied with certain parts of Kupalo. In his opinion, the ritual included many obscene elements, such as young men and women swimming together “half-naked,” which he found immoral. While considering how to organize the Kupalo celebration so that it would be suitable for his community, he reviewed some literature and encountered the theme “marriage of the ancestors.” Since the wreath is an essential component of both Kupalo and of marriage rituals and, further, is also a symbol of female virginity in Ukrainian folklore, Ostrovskyi linked it to the idea of “marriage of the ancestors.”

On the day of Kupalo, young females in Ostrovskyi’s community make wreaths and have them blessed. While blessing the wreaths, Ostrovskyi says: “To be blessed with purity and fidelity.” The implication is that the girls are obliged to take their wreaths home and keep them as a reminder to preserve their purity until marriage and then to remain faithful to their husbands for the rest of their lives. Ostrovskyi frames this ritual as a “commandment of their ancestors.”

Ostrovskyi recalls how, one year, he was invited to conduct his Kupalo ritual for the general public in a particular area of Kyiv. Approximately three hundred people gathered to attend the ceremony. According to Ostrovskyi, they were especially enthusiastic when it came to the moment to bless the wreaths. Those who did not have wreaths began to make them from plants growing in the area. An elderly woman approached Ostrovskyi in this context. She had tears in her eyes and a wreath in her hands, and she said: “Please forgive me, I am an old and stupid woman. I never realized that we [Ukrainians] bless wreaths. I want to die knowing that I had my

wreath blessed.” She put the wreath on her head for Ostrovskiy to bless. He understood that the woman meant that, at the time of her marriage, she was pure but had not had a blessed wreath.

This example illustrates how a Pagan leader creatively reworked the form and meaning of traditional Kupalo practices in order to project onto them his own philosophy and moral convictions. His version of Kupalo is apparently well received by his followers. Moreover, it has been introduced to the larger public, which in the post-Soviet context of the rise of national consciousness, are interested in it as a purely traditional Ukrainian cultural form.

Ukrainian Pagans not only borrow folkloric forms from their original village contexts but also recreate them. These recreated practices, in turn, find their way back to the people. To expand on Kaplan’s theory of religious syncretism, this mode of adaptation, which involves the constant and mutually beneficial exchange of religious elements, may be referred to as “reciprocity.”

From an etic (i.e., academic) perspective, I view Ukrainian Pagan activities as syncretic; Ukrainian Pagans, however, do not consider themselves as such. What I call “paganization” Pagans see as a form of “anti-syncretism,” as an attempt to cleanse their old traditions of “foreign” influences. Indeed, the adherents of anti-syncretism clearly associate “syncretism” with “inauthenticity” or “contamination” (Shaw and Stewart 2004, 2).

My understanding of authenticity is not so negative. It coincides with that of Shaw and Stewart (2004, 6–7): “‘Authenticity’ and ‘originality’ do not necessarily depend on purity. They are claimable as ‘uniqueness’, and both pure and mixed traditions can be unique. What makes them ‘authentic’ and valuable is a separate issue, a discursive matter involving power, rhetoric and persuasion. Thus both putatively pure *and* putatively syncretic traditions can be ‘authentic’ if people claim that these traditions are unique, and uniquely their (historical) possession. It could be argued, in fact, that syncretic blends are more unique because historically unrepeatable.”

Many researchers identify popular, or vernacular, Christianity in Ukraine as a dual belief system (*dvoievir’ia*) that incorporates both Christian and pre-Christian elements. Although Ukrainian Pagans strive to reverse this and to return to what they believe is the original single belief system (*odnovir’ia*), the results are complex. Modern

Ukrainian Paganism is a multiple-belief system (*bahatovir'ia*) – a syncretic conglomeration of old paganism, popular and official Christianity, non-Ukrainian elements, and exclusively Pagan elements. This contact between various cultural elements not only influences existing religion(s) but also forms the basis for a new form of spirituality.

## In Spite of Politics Aesthetics and Beauty

The existing literature on Slavic Paganism focuses almost exclusively on the nationalist and pro-racist politics of its various movements.<sup>1</sup> This is largely the result of methodology. Scholars concentrate predominantly on authoritative discourse, namely, the voices of Pagan leaders as presented through official media such as books, periodicals, websites, and public presentations.<sup>2</sup> Folklorist Leonard Primiano (1995, 44) emphasizes the importance of understanding religion not only as it is preached but also “as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it.”<sup>3</sup> Ethnographic research enables us to look at modern Ukrainian Paganism as it is lived by particular individuals, revealing its many important aspects (other than politics), one of which is aesthetics.

When I asked Volkhvynia Zoreslava what inspired her to accept Paganism as a form of spirituality, she emphasized the role of Ukrainian patriotism. However, while she was enthusiastic about stressing how Ukrainian Paganism contributes to the strengthening of national consciousness, she was no less enthusiastic about the beauty of the practices that contemporary Pagans revive: “All this beauty of our Ukrainian rituals, all these embroidered cloths, wreaths, all these objects reflecting nature and human life and culture, together they create such a *beautiful world*” (Zoreslava, interview, 23 May 2007 [emphasis added]).

Zlatana, a twenty-one-year-old adherent of Ancestral Fire from Odesa (Ukrainian spelling), shared her experience. She first heard about Ukrainian Paganism from her friends.<sup>4</sup> For Zlatana, people gathering in a natural setting to pray to their gods sounded like a fairy

tale. She became interested in the movement but did not have a clear understanding of Pagan spirituality until she met Pagan singer and composer Zhyvosyl Liutyi in Kyiv in 2006. It was her aesthetic response to Zhyvosyl's sound that led Zlatana to convert fully to Paganism:

He was the first who told me everything about it. He sang his songs for me. Something touched me. He began to sing and play his *bandura*, and something special was awakened in my soul. I felt something native. At that time, I did not know my native language and native culture very well. I was very distant from them. It was because I was from Odesa, and in Odesa this is not widespread. There are many more Russian-speakers and Russian patriots. Then I met Zhyvosyl, and had such an admiration – a person looking for his nature, for his roots.” (Zlatana, interview, 27 April 2007)

This statement is especially powerful as it shows how the aesthetics of sound markedly changed Zlatana's worldview. She now identifies as native the culture that she discovered with the help of Zhyvosyl Liutyi rather than the culture in which she was raised.

Anton Lubii, a Native Faith adherent in his mid-twenties, is a sculptor and a recent graduate of the Lviv National Academy of Arts. According to him, it was art that brought him to Paganism. He became fascinated with ancient cultures and the symbolism of various objects and motifs associated with old traditions: “It is not because I am a Pagan and feel like I should create only Pagan images. No, I am genuinely interested in creating them. The images of Perun and Veles are inexhaustible for me. I make them however I choose. One can create many images of these gods” (Anton, interview, 12 May 2007).

What unites these narratives is each individual's fascination with Pagan aesthetics. Although communicated less extensively and openly than politics, aesthetics is a very important component of contemporary Ukrainian Paganism. Art and politics cannot be completely separated, however, since Pagan ideas of beauty are driven largely by political sentiments. Pagans associate their national identity with aesthetically pleasing images. In other words, for them, there is a close connection between Ukrainianness and the physical beauty of their clothing, ritual objects, visual images, and music.

## FOLK ART

*Dress and Nudity*

While the majority of North American Pagans “wear some sort of clothing,” for some, especially Wiccans, “nudity itself becomes a form of costuming”:

For practitioners, it is a powerful expression of the body and its essential sacredness, in direct opposition to Western culture, in which nudity (frequently equated with sexuality) and sacredness are thought of as being opposite poles. For Gardnerian Witches, nakedness is a symbol of openness and vulnerability before the deities and each other; the naked body is sexual, but not *only* sexual, and sexuality is an expression of the sacred polarity that underlies all life in the universe. Nakedness also removes class differences among participants, itself a form of social critique, and creates a strong sense of intimacy. Covenanters who worship naked see each other at their most vulnerable, yet no one leers, stares, or comments; participants are in a safe, sacred space. This contributes to the sense of “perfect love and perfect trust” which Wiccans say ideally should prevail in a coven. (Magliocco 2001, 55 [emphasis in original])

Unlike some of their Western counterparts, Ukrainian Pagans do not remove their clothes during/before their sacred rituals. This contrast with regard to dress and nudity is connected to the major values around which these two forms of Paganism have developed. Western Paganism represents a mode of resistance to many social conventions. Pagan nudity, in particular, is a rejection of what is perceived as socially and visually normal in Western societies. For Ukrainian Pagans, social conventions are a minor concern. This movement focuses specifically on the formation of a unique national identity rather than on a struggle against established societal norms. In other words, while the goal of many Western Pagans is to find social freedom and harmony with nature, the goal of most of their Ukrainian counterparts is to become truly Ukrainian or Slavic. Nudity, in addition to stripping people of class differences, also often removes markers of ethnic belonging (Magliocco 2001, 55). This is not an effect that Ukrainian Pagans strive to achieve; if they gave up their

costumes, they would lose one of the most distinct markers of their Ukrainianness. Moreover, while Western Pagans reject formal leadership and find that nudity helps to promote equality, Ukrainian Pagans promote hierarchy. Among other things, dress is a marker of the special position of leaders within their communities.

Western and Ukrainian Paganisms have developed in different social contexts, with dissimilar attitudes towards nudity and beauty. In Western societies, especially in multicultural settings, individuals learn to tolerate one another. Accordingly, many Western Pagans promote acceptance regardless of physical appearance. The situation is different in the Ukrainian context, in which tolerance of the other is not a part of mainstream ideology. There, the idea that a pleasant physical appearance expresses a unique collective identity dominates. But the naked body is not always conventionally pleasant. By avoiding nakedness in their rituals, Ukrainian Pagans avoid having to tolerate what might be perceived as unpleasant-looking bodies.

#### *From Peasant Dress to Urban Fashion*

Although the Ukrainian urban intelligentsia began to express interest in folk costume in the nineteenth century, this interest has become especially pronounced during the post-Soviet era. As a distinct marker of national identity, folk costume has become incorporated into nationalist politics. What was originally referred to as “folk clothing” is now charged with a political connotation and is widely regarded as “national costume.”

The style called “folk” has occupied a prominent niche in contemporary Ukrainian urban fashion. Dress of this style involves various degrees of improvisation, from very close replication of particular folk costumes to the incorporation of select motifs from these costumes into modern attire. Often highly stylized, these elements may only slightly resemble traditional folk dress.

The folk style is popular among prominent present-day political figures. For example, Yulia Tymoshenko, former prime minister of Ukraine, and Kateryna Yushchenko, the spouse of Victor Yushchenko (former president of Ukraine), often appeared at official functions in attire based on folk motifs.<sup>5</sup> Both women used their clothing as a way of expressing their sense of belonging to the Ukrainian nation. Men’s attire based on folk costume is usually more modest than women’s and is limited to embroidered shirts worn with the classic

business suit. A more casual style features the combination of embroidered shirt and jeans.

In its original context, folk clothing had typical functions: it provided protection from the elements while communicating, among other things, normalcy, age, gender, status, and beauty. In addition, folk clothing served as a marker of particular ethnographic territories (Kononenko and Lesiv 2011), at least for those familiar with the material culture of various regions. Because folk clothing is identified with a certain place, it has become a prominent national symbol. Moreover, by utilizing folk clothing members of the Ukrainian elite imbue it with new status. It is now prestigious to wear that which previously may have been associated with lowly peasant status.

#### *Sacredness of Pagan Dress*

Costume is a significant component of Ukrainian Pagan events. It is usually the physical appearance of Pagans that attracts the attention of outsiders. Pagans are greatly inspired by traditional folk costume and, visually, their dress style overlaps with that of other nationally conscious Ukrainians. For example, Pagans can often be seen wearing embroidered shirts in combination with jeans or business suits.

With regard to its meaning, Pagan clothing differs from that of other Ukrainians. Like many nationally conscious Ukrainians inspired by the nineteenth-century European mythological school of folklore studies, Pagans interpret the symbolism of folk costumes and particular embroidery motifs. However, unlike those who are merely fascinated with an imagined past, Pagans incorporate these interpretations into their present-day spirituality. They recognize various elements of embroidery as protective symbols. Unlike other Ukrainians, who agree that such symbols represent the rich ancestral traditions of the past, many Ukrainian Pagans believe that these symbols continue to function in the present.

In May 2008, at a weekly sacred service of the Lviv-based community of Native Faith, Lada, a female Pagan in her sixties, was wearing a richly embroidered shirt (see figure 10.1). When I enquired about the shirt, Lada told me that she had reproduced this pattern from one she had found in a 1970s issue of *Radianska zhinka* (*Soviet Woman*), a widely known Soviet periodical. She mentioned that, while participating in the annual Pagan khoda in Kyiv, she



10.1 Lada in her embroidered shirt. May 2008.

noticed one individual who could not take his eyes off her shirt. Later, this person approached Lada and said that he could not even imagine the kind of protection she had embroidered onto her shirt. He suggested that these motifs (flowers and crosses) were indeed very powerful talismans that had been created by the ancestors of contemporary Ukrainians. Lada is very proud of the profound symbolism embroidered onto her shirt.

The design on this shirt is not traditional. Apparently, it is the creation of a professional fashion designer and is based on folk embroidery. During the Soviet era, folk-inspired embroidery was adapted by

urban fashion industries but was perceived exclusively in aesthetic terms. In line with Soviet secularist and materialist ideology, any magical or religious interpretations of particular motifs would not have been tolerated.<sup>6</sup> Although Lada reproduced this Ukrainian Soviet design in the 1970s, now, several decades later, she imbues it with new meaning. The Soviet pattern has found its way into contemporary Pagan aesthetics. Today Lada's shirt is perceived as aesthetically pleasing not only because of its beautiful form (admired by the Soviets) but also because of its attractive ideology (i.e., its connection to ancient ancestral traditions) and spirituality (i.e., its connection with a belief in magical protection).

Volodymyr Kurovskyi provides another example of how old peasant embroidery is transformed in the context of contemporary Paganism. While describing the symbolism of the embroidery on one of his shirts, Kurovskyi said that each element was a manifestation of a certain god. To reinforce one's particular qualities at a certain period of the day, one puts on a certain shirt. Kurovskyi stresses that particular symbols can only work if they are embroidered by hand. Like many of his fellow Pagans, he strongly disapproves of the machine embroidery that has recently become popular in Ukraine (Kurovskyi, personal communication, 20 July 2008). To Pagans, such embroidery spoils the ancestral tradition and dilutes its spiritual power.

### *Dress and Status*

The male dress of Ancestral Fire followers is unique. Its general style is inspired by the male folk costume from a number of ethnographic regions of Ukraine: a long white embroidered shirt is worn on top of narrow white pants, with a belt tied around the waist (see figure 10.2). The most striking aspect of Ancestral Fire costumes is the size and quantity of the embroidery. Anyone familiar with traditional Ukrainian folk costume would immediately notice the great amount of embroidery, especially around the chest area, which is not characteristic of traditional men's shirts. The visual effect of the richness of embroidery is achieved with the help of complex compositions created from traditional motifs. To reinforce this effect, the motifs are often greatly enlarged (compare the male shirts in figure 10.2 with those in figure 10.3). By enlarging traditional embroidery designs, these Ukrainian Pagans re-emphasize their devotion to ancestral traditions and, thus, their super Ukrainianness.



10.2 R to L: Volkhvy Iarovyts, Bohumyr, and Volodymyr at the celebration of the Perun holiday in the village of Rashtivtsi, Ternopil oblast. July 2008.

It is usually Ancestral Fire leaders who wear richly embroidered and aesthetically striking costumes during ritual occasions. Regular followers of this branch of Ukrainian Paganism dress in a more modest way. Thus, to put it in folklorist Don Yoder's (1972, 295) terms, the costume "identifies the wearer to the outside world as well as to his own community." Anthropologist Edmund Leach (2002, 119) presents a similar argument with regard to the role of dress in ritual communication: "It is characteristic of all kinds of ritual occasions that all participants adopt special forms of dress, which emphasize in an exaggerated way the formal social distinctions that separate one individual from another. Thus, ritual serves to remind the congregation just where each member stands in relation to every other and in relation to a larger system."

RUNVira communities in both Ukraine and the Ukrainian diaspora display similar tendencies related to dress and leadership. For example, during rituals, only a RUNtato or RUNmama wear *sviadan*s,



10.3 Traditional holiday costumes of the Ternopil region, western Ukraine, displayed at the Ukrainian Museum of Canada, Saskatoon Branch. The amount of embroidery on the man's shirt is relatively modest despite the fact that this is festive attire.

long narrow ribbons made of blue and yellow fabric (the colours of the Ukrainian state flag) that are draped around the neck, resembling the stole worn by Orthodox and Catholic priests (see figure 10.4).

#### *Dress and Worldview*

Ritual clothing communicates differences in worldview between various Pagan groups. For example, RUNVIRA followers focus on



10.4 RUNtato Boholiub blessing baskets with food on the Day of Dazhboh Light at the Oriiana Holy Temple in Spring Glen, New York, 13 April 2008. He wears a *sviadana* (long, narrow, blue and yellow ribbon) with the Ukrainian Insurgent Army symbol attached.

modern Ukrainian history, such as the role of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army. The red and black colours on RUNvira sviadanas indicate the strong nationalist orientation of this branch of Ukrainian Paganism. In contrast, Ancestral Fire leaders, by designing their costumes on the basis of peasant motifs that they view as remnants of ancient culture, emphasize their connection with their ancient ancestors. Thus, while political aesthetics dominates in the case of RUNvira clothing, spiritual aesthetics dominates in the case of Ancestral Fire attire.

Furthermore, RUNvira RUNtatos wear embroidered shirts, predominantly in combination with regular business suits (see figure 10.4). Because this general style of suit originated in Western Europe (specifically, England), in Ukraine this type of dress is often

called a “European suit.” This particular difference between RUNVira and Ancestral Fire clothing reflects the difference between the broader ideologies of the two groups. Ancestral Fire is oriented towards the “authenticity” of ancestral traditions. Thus, its leaders want their clothing to look as distant as possible from contemporary everyday dress and to resemble that of their ancestors. In contrast, RUNVira followers adapt ancestral beliefs and practices to their new realities. To them, contemporary Ukrainians are progressive descendants of their ancestors. By adding some old flavour – embroidered shirts – to their contemporary dress, RUNVira followers show that they value the traditions of their forefathers. However, by wearing their embroidered shirts predominantly in combination with European business suits, they communicate their orientation towards the future.

*“Ancient” Meaning, Modern Means*

Although they are oriented towards the past, Ancestral Fire adherents often express their orientation with the help of modern means. Volodymyr Kurovskyi’s sister Bozhena provides a striking example. During an interview, my attention was drawn to her fingernails (see figure 10.5). I was impressed by the way they were painted. On top of a background of transparent nail polish, various Ukrainian embroidery motifs were applied with the help of black, red, and white nail polishes. Bozhena described two motifs in detail and then shared the story behind this particular art project.

On the forefinger of her right hand is the symbol of Berehynia.<sup>7</sup> Bozhena interprets this symbol as indicating a woman who is raising her hands up to heaven and asking the gods to bless and expand her family. The symbol of the alatur is depicted on the nail of the third finger of her left hand. Because Bozhena has a medical problem that affects her nails, they are not natural but artificial. By painting them, she is treating them through the application of folk motifs that are perceived to have healing power.

For Bozhena, the idea of magical healing is rooted in ancient agricultural traditions whose remnants can be traced to Ukrainian peasant contexts. However, these symbols of the past are communicated in terms of modern urban fashion and aesthetics. Bozhena chooses not to heal her nails with the help of herbs or diet but, rather, with the application of plastic paint. It is difficult to imagine a peasant



10.5 Bozhena's nails. Rashtivtsi, Ternopil oblast, July 2008.

woman, either in the past or today, with nails like these. Adopting such a fashion statement would clearly interfere with any agricultural labour.

### *Costume and Situational Identity*

Pagan identity, as expressed through costumes, is situational in character. In everyday life, many Ukrainian Pagans are indistinguishable from their fellow Ukrainians. Pagans typically dress in their distinct costumes only for special occasions and during sacred ceremonies. They often arrive at a place of worship in regular clothing and then change. Several factors help explain this. First, because Paganism is marginalized, some people are fearful of disclosing their spirituality. While an embroidered shirt alone would look quite normal on the streets of Ukrainian cities, outsiders would perceive richly decorated costumes and jewellery as unusual. According to Zhrytsia Iaryna, the leader of a Lviv-based Native Faith community, this fear is the reason she chose a site in Znesinnia Park, in a remote part of Lviv, for her group's gatherings (Iaryna, interview, 4 May 2008). Second, Ukrainian Pagans clearly distinguish between the sacred and the secular. Pagan clothing adds a special celebratory flavour to sacred rituals and helps to distinguish between these practices and everyday

life. Third, since Pagan sacred clothing is often hand-embroidered, it needs to be handled with special care. Ritual clothing undoubtedly lasts longer when worn for a limited time at a sacred site than it does if it is worn for the entire day, especially if one is using crowded public transit (cars are still a luxury for many Ukrainians).

### *Altars*

Altars have been important components of various religions for millennia. This is because they represent a “place where humans and deities establish[,] ... negotiate[,] ... and maintain ... their relationships” (Beezley 1997, 93, quoted in Magliocco 2001, 8). Ukrainian Pagan altars are structures in which particular ritual tools are placed, and they can be divided into two broad categories: portable and stationary. Portable altars can be transported and set up at each Pagan event. They represent what Magliocco calls “ephemeral art” since a particular altar is displayed during a particular sacred occasion and then removed. While the same ritual objects can form part of a different altar in the future, their arrangement and combination are never the same as they were in the past (Magliocco 2001, 10). Stationary altars are usually located in temples (in the case of RUNVira), in offices, and in people’s homes.

RUNTato Boholiub and RUNmama Svitanna, leaders of the Spring Glen RUNVira community, have an altar at their home in Shelton, Connecticut. The altar includes all the attributes that are necessary for conducting a RUNVira ritual. Since the drive from their home to the Oriiana Holy Temple is over two hours, RUNTato Boholiub conducts minor rituals (e.g., short prayers before meals and birthday parties) at home.

The altar is set up on a small table covered with four different embroidered cloths. The top and bottom pieces are decorated with meandering designs associated with Mezyn culture. In the middle of the altar there is a portable metal Dazhboh sign, a mandatory attribute of RUNVira services. Copies of *Maha Vira* and *Sacred Book of Rituals* are placed on the left side of the altar, while on the right lies a folded sviadana. There is also a small container with soil from Ukraine. One lump of soil is from RUNmama Svitanna’s mother’s village and the other is from the town of Kaniv, the burial place of Taras Shevchenko. Finally, there are two candlesticks on the altar. Boholiub and Svitanna like the smaller of these candlesticks because

it features stylized ears of wheat. To them, this design symbolizes the centuries-old agricultural lifestyle of the Ukrainian people (Boholiub and Svitanna, interview, 14 April 2008).

The story behind the framed images of Father Or and Mother Lel (foreparents of the Ukrainian nation), each decorated with artificial flowers, is especially interesting. These are miniature reproductions of the original paintings displayed at the Oriiana Holy Temple in Spring Glenn. RUNmama Svitanna and RUNtato Boholiub became acquainted with RUNvira in the United States during the late 1960s. Prior to this, they belonged to a Christian church and were married by a Christian priest while in a refugee camp in Germany shortly after the Second World War. On this occasion, the couple received framed icons of Jesus Christ and the Mother of God. However, when they accepted Sylenko's teachings and RUNvira, Svitanna and Boholiub replaced their Christian icons with the images of Mother Lel and Father Or, leaving all the other original decorations (artificial flowers) unchanged (Boholiub and Svitanna, interview, 14 April 2008).

Since the Spring Glen RUNvira community separated from its teacher, Swyrydenky's altar does not include any attributes referring specifically to Lev Sylenko. In this respect, it differs from the altars created by those communities that continue to closely identify themselves with Sylenko. The following items are displayed on the altar table of the Sylenko RUNvira Temple in Bohoiavlenske, Ukraine: a vase with flowers (including poppies and cornflowers), a vase with ears of wheat, a Dazhboh sign, two candles in candlesticks, a sviadana, RUNvira publications (including *Sacred Book of Rituals* and a short version of *Maha Vira*), a small jar with water, and a container of soil. A portrait of the prophet Lev Sylenko is also found on the altar table.

One can find some differences between the two RUNvira altars described above, especially with regard to the figure of Sylenko. The Bohoiavlenske community sanctifies its prophet by placing his portrait on the altar table. In contrast, by including his publications on its altar, the Spring Glen community recognizes Sylenko as the main ideologist of RUNvira; however, by omitting his portrait, it indicates that it does not worship him. As a private structure, Swyrydenky's altar presents some individual features, such as the images of Father Or and Mother Lel, which reflect this couple's personal narrative.

In general, however, both altars follow the rules established by the founder of RUNvira, Lev Sylenko. He provides a very detailed description of the items that should constitute a RUNvira altar



10.6 Volkvy Iarovytt and Bohumyr set up an Ancestral Fire altar. Several followers stand aside watching them. June 2008.

and he explains their symbolism. According to Sylenko, ears of wheat should be placed on the table to symbolize a holy place associated with Trypillian times, and soil must be brought from the field of Trypillia. Water is supposed to come from Ukraine's major river, the Dnipro.

The altars of polytheistic Pagan groups have many similarities to those of *RUNVira* in that they display a great amount of embroidery and various ritual objects. However, since polytheistic Pagans conduct their rituals predominantly outdoors, their communities are dominated by portable altars. Figure 10.6 depicts how two Volkhvy set up an Ancestral Fire altar during the Kupalo Wreath Festival in Kyiv in June 2008. Three small stools placed next to each other are covered with a richly embroidered cloth known as a *rushnyk*. The following items are displayed on this structure: two ritual breads (one covered with an additional *rushnyk*), a wooden *alaty*, and a candle. An Ancestral Fire follower holds a cow's horn that will be added to the altar at a later time.

This same community set up an altar for another occasion – the celebration of the holiday of Perun. Three embroidered cloths were spread out on the ground, displaying the following items: two bowls, a cow's horn, a pitcher, a copy of the *Minor Service Book*, and two

ritual breads. Although the two Ancestral Fire altars described here differ from each other in terms of their form, the items included on each are similar.

Although Magliocco does not emphasize this issue, her research reveals that, in line with the individualistic nature of Western Paganism, individualistic characteristics dominate collective characteristics in Western Pagan altars. These altars usually display the particular beliefs or values of their individual owners. Even community altars have many individualistic attributes and are usually composed of disparate objects belonging to various community members.

In contrast to the *individualistic aesthetics* typical of Western Pagan altars, the *collective aesthetics* of Ukrainian Pagan altars tends towards the standardization of sacred objects. Indeed, standardization seems to be a distinct feature of many Ukrainian Pagan practices. For example, at the Triennial RUNVira Council in Bohoiavlenske in 2008, one of the major issues addressed by delegates concerned the inconsistency in RUNVira rituals performed in different communities across Ukraine. Many RUNVira followers expressed concern that different group leaders were introducing too many innovations into their rituals. To them, standardization was important, and they believed that it could be achieved if all leaders closely followed Sylenko's service book (see Sylenko 1991). A majority of delegates agreed.

Collective aesthetics and standardization reflect the collective nature of Ukrainian Paganism in general. They also lead to distinctiveness because they help to create easily recognizable logos. Diversity may seem chaotic and confusing to outsiders. It is important to Ukrainian Pagans that they be recognized by the larger society as proponents of a legitimate religion. Standardization brings order and thus helps Pagans to construct distinct group identities that result in wider outside recognition.<sup>8</sup>

The social dynamics related to the assembling of altars are at least as important as are the altars themselves. In American Pagan communities, since any member can contribute to building an altar, one altar can accommodate the beliefs of various individuals (see Magliocco 2001, 18–19). In line with the hierarchical nature of Ukrainian Paganism, only community leaders assemble altars, with their followers remaining in the position of observers (see figure 10.6). These social dynamics set the boundary between the leaders and the rest of the believers. The leaders have active access to the most sacred

places, while the congregation passively observes and follows their instructions. This model of ritual form and behaviour reinforces the leader's charisma and his or her authoritative position in the community.<sup>9</sup>

### *Collective Meaning of Folk Art*

Traditional folk art dominates Pagan aesthetics. Richard Anderson emphasizes the importance of art's capacity to create and "convey culturally significant meaning":

For all the diverse aspects of meaning in art, the central conclusion remains. In very many cases, if not all cases, *art has meaning* – and usually meaning of considerable significance in the culture it comes from. Cultures vary in their definition of what is and what is not significant; and there are differences in the overtness with which the meaning is manifest in the artwork. Nevertheless, art does typically convey culturally significant meaning. (Anderson 2004, 303 [emphasis in original])

Folk art, whether rooted in ancient cultures or contemporary village traditions, is a meaningful and powerful resource for modern Ukrainian Pagan spirituality. Through folk art, Pagans symbolically enter the imagined world of their ancestors. By introducing the ancient magical symbolism associated with folk art motifs, they present their ancestors as having belonged to a spiritually rich and powerful community. The anonymity and collective nature of folk art linked to primordial traditions strengthens their arguments. Pagans translate these aspects of folk art into a kind of national wisdom that, they argue, has been formed over many millennia.

It is folk art that makes Pagans and their practices distinctly Ukrainian or Slavic. Closely linked to a particular geographic territory, folk art is a more effective tool for the construction of a national Ukrainian or pan-Slavic identity than are many forms of fine art.<sup>10</sup> While numerous elite Ukrainian artists have made significant contributions to the European and world art scene, which has resulted in increased national pride, their works represent global aesthetics. In most cases, the only way audiences can link these artists with Ukrainian culture is through the artists' surnames and their own claims that they belong to a particular nation.<sup>11</sup> Since Ukrainian Pagans associate

Ukrainianess with physical beauty, they do not simply borrow folk motifs in their original forms; rather, they polish them and incorporate them into complex compositions that emphasize both Ukrainianess and beauty.

#### FINE ART

It is not only folk art that provides inspiration for contemporary Ukrainian Paganism; fine art also occupies a prominent niche in this movement. Zhyvosyl Liutyi and Viktor Kryzhanivskyi are two artists whose contribution to the development of modern Ukrainian Paganism cannot be overestimated.

I met Zhyvosyl Liutyi, a well-known cultural activist, composer, and bandura player, during my fieldwork in Ukraine in 2007. He writes his own songs, which he sings while accompanying himself on the bandura. Both the lyrics and the music of Zhyvosyl's songs have a powerful effect on his listeners. His lyrics frequently include complex poetic imagery from the ancestral past along with references to contemporary village folklore. Such content reflects the polytheistic beliefs of Ancestral Fire, the group within which the foundation for Zhyvosyl's religious convictions was established.

Musically, Zhyvosyl's songs are pleasant and engaging. In addition, they are compositionally simple: most of them are based on a two-part structure, including verses with repeated choruses. The melodies are predictable, follow standard harmonic patterns, and often repeat certain melodic phrases that facilitate group singing. Furthermore, the majority of Zhyvosyl's songs are based on modal tonality, which gives them an ancient feeling. This feel is reinforced by the fact that Liutyi plays the bandura, which is widely perceived as an ancient Ukrainian musical instrument.

Zhyvosyl's creative legacy has crossed geographical and political borders. In the spring of 2008, when I visited the RUNVira community in Spring Glen, New York, I was very surprised to hear his songs at the home of one RUNVira family, considering that monotheistic RUNVira followers are usually hostile towards their polytheistic counterparts.

I met Viktor (Sontseslav) Kryzhanivskyi in the summer of 2008. Kryzhanivskyi is a professor in the Department of (Academic) Drawing at the Kyiv National Academy of Fine Arts and Architecture. As a former graduate of this institution, he is trained in the academic



10.7 Viktor Kryzhanivskiy standing by his mural in a mansion in Koncha-Zaspa.

tradition of classical European art. He kindly invited me to his studio in Kyiv, where I was introduced to the world of old Slavic mythology as visualized in his paintings. Kryzhanivskiy also took me to one of the most affluent suburbs of Kyiv known as Koncha-Zaspa. This area is famous for its elite mansions. The owner of one such mansion, a solitary Pagan, commissioned Kryzhanivskiy to paint Pagan-themed murals on the walls of his house (see figure 10.7). In line with the main tendency of the Kyiv art school, Kryzhanivskiy's works are predominantly realistic. His images also have a somewhat surrealistic flavour, especially in the depiction of mythological themes.

I had been familiar with Kryzhanivskiy's works before I met the artist in person. Like Zhyvosyl Liutyi's songs, Kryzhanivskiy's visual art has crossed geographical and political borders. I saw a reproduction of his painting *Iarylo* (the God of Spring Sun and Fertility, according

to contemporary Pagan interpretations) at the home of RUNtato Boholiub and RUNmama Svitanna Swyrydenky in Connecticut. RUNmama Svitanna shared her knowledge about Iarylo. She noted that, in the distant past, those female ancestors of contemporary Ukrainians who suffered fertility problems would address their concerns and prayers to Iarylo. This reproduction is displayed on a wall of the Swyrydenky home, behind their RUNvira altar. They both expressed their admiration for Kryzhanivskyi's work, mentioning that they had acquired this particular reproduction from the artist himself when they had met him in Kyiv several years ago (Boholiub and Svitanna, interview, 14 April 2008). This is intriguing, considering that they are the diaspora leaders of RUNvira, a group that is generally hostile towards the polytheism that Kryzhanivskyi depicts.

The photograph in figure 10.8 was taken during the tri-annual RUNvira council in the village of Bohoiavlenske, Kirovohrad region, Ukraine, the birthplace of Lev Sylenko. This photograph shows the sanctuary known as the Bohoiavlenske Temple, with a feature wall painted by Victor Kryzhanivskyi. The painting represents Mother Lel and Father Or, with a portrait of Lev Sylenko in the middle.

While there is definite hostility between different Ukrainian Pagan groups and their leaders, artists such as Zhyvosyl Liutyi and Victor Kryzhanivskyi are appreciated by all. A RUNvira adherent who had strongly criticized the polytheistic images that Kryzhanivskyi had created for Ancestral Fire admired the artist's work on the sanctuary wall in the Bohoiavlenske Temple. His criticism was not of Kryzhanivskyi but, rather, of the followers of Ancestral Fire who had commissioned the polytheistic project.

Although Native Faith, particularly its leader Halyna Lozko, has many ideological disagreements with both RUNvira and Ancestral Fire, it also shares an appreciation for Kryzhanivskyi's paintings. For example, reproductions of Kryzhanivskyi's works form part of a series of cards entitled Svaroh's Cycle, which is produced by Native Faith. His works also often illustrate Native Faith's periodical, which is entitled *Svaroh*. The fact that these ideologically disparate groups all admire the similar works of a single artist might seem somewhat paradoxical.

One may argue that the reason artists enjoy special treatment among the adherents of different Pagan ideologies lies in the fact that there are not many artists who promote Pagan themes, thus limiting choices. However, this is no longer the case. Pagan themes



10.8 RUNVira Temple Sanctuary wall painted by V. Kryzhanivskyi.

are currently trendy and attract a great number of creative individuals, whether or not they define themselves as Pagans. As a result, there are many art and music products on the contemporary market from which Pagans may choose. This paradox illustrates that art can overcome political sentiments and ideological boundaries and that it can help to establish bridges between hostile ideologies and individuals. Individual artists serve as powerful mediators in this process.

#### *Art as Sacred Knowledge*

Many polytheistic Ukrainian Pagans reject the idea that their beliefs and practices involve creativity. To these Pagans, the term “creative” implies “removed from ancestral traditions.” On the other hand, the majority of Ukrainian Pagans, both monotheists and polytheists, place a high value on creativity. In simple terms, the suggestion that their rituals and beliefs were invented would be offensive to these people, but an object that represents “the past as visualized by a particular artist” would be completely acceptable to them.

Researchers of Western Paganism trace a similarity between creativity and magic. The creation of art involves transformation, as does the performance of magic. So “the artist is by definition a magician” (Magliocco 2001, 7). Ukrainian Pagan artists are magicians, and this explains their special position in Pagan communities. However, the

artists themselves, who are conscious of their role in the development of this religion, use somewhat different terminology. Kryzhanivskyi describes his process of creation in terms of his special access to sacred knowledge. According to Kryzhanivskyi, meditation leads his mind towards transformation, which, in turn, enables him to gain access to the realm of sacred knowledge. The majority of his artistic images have appeared to him in this way. The following is Kryzhanivskyi's description of his mural, depicted in figure 10.7:

This is the Tree of Life. Three worlds are depicted here: the worlds of Iava, Nava and Prava. Svaroh, the embodiment of the Universe, is in the centre. This is the way I see him. He represents the embodiment of the element of fire. Then Lada, or the Mother of the World, let us refer to her this way. Svaroh holds a sword decorated with flowers, which is typical for Ukrainians because we are a peaceful people ... He also holds a lit torch. I've organized everything in such a way that it looks like a trysuttia [trident], with three tips. In the middle of this trysuttia there are images of the male and female origins. Then, one can see Lelia, the Goddess of Love, and Lada, the Goddess of Birth. The next is a transmission from Iava to Nava, from which grows a seed, the kernel of life. This is where the gods are glorified. I split the trunk of the Tree. This is where I depict raised arms and various scenes. There, on the trees, as if in shade, sits the oracular bird. On the sides, one can see the sculpted images of Svaroh and Perun. This is my view. (Kryzhanivskyi, interview, 31 May 2008)

Many non-Pagan artists also state that, in the context of their creative search, they alter their consciousness through meditation, which, in turn, helps them to imagine their future work. In contrast to other creators, Kryzhanivskyi imbues his experiences with a sacred flavour. What other artists may refer to as "creative imagination," Kryzhanivskyi refers to as "access to sacred knowledge."

Another important factor that brings people like Kryzhanivskyi and Liutyi special recognition in Pagan communities is connected with the individualistic nature of fine art. Folk art is more collective in character than is fine art. Although individual folk artists may introduce many innovative ideas and variations into their works, and be recognized and honoured for doing so, they usually draw upon collective elements such as traditional pysanka or embroidery motifs.

Everyone has equal access to these sources. Although folk art carries sacred meaning for Ukrainian Pagans, fine art occupies a special position due to the fact that it is not as accessible to a great number of people. Only select individuals are perceived as carriers of special sacred gifts. While the majority of interested Pagans can (relatively quickly) master embroidery and pysanka writing, fine art requires a special inclination and prolonged professional education.<sup>12</sup>

Fine art is perceived as highly intellectual. The artist's conceptual skills are more appreciated than are his or her technical abilities (Anderson 2004, 320). For example, in the Western art world, which is known for its long tradition of apprenticeship, it is usually the artist who introduces a concept and produces the layout of a future work. The artist's apprentices can complete the technical realization of the project. This technical part of art is often treated as a craft. As Richard Anderson (2004, 320–1) puts it:

For most societies, it is in the mind, rather than the hand, where true artistic genius is to be found. Skill alone does not make art, but societies inevitably recognize the exceptional capacities of the artist. The extent to which the artist's heightened abilities are in-born are unknown, but it is clear that art's specialness, its ability to convey potent meaning, and its capacity to effect the emotions of the percipient, must in part result from the artist's exceptional skill of execution.

Both Zhyvosyl Liutyi and Viktor Kryzhanivskyy are highly appreciated not only for their technical skills but also for their ideas. With the help of aural and visual means, they have managed to create what my consultants refer to as the “beautiful world” and the “fairy tale.”

#### AESTHETICS VERSUS POLITICS: THE FUTURE

When it comes to a discussion of a new religious movement, the question that always arises is that of its future. Scholars attempt to predict how long such a movement will exist, focusing on the reasons for its potential development or decline. Anthony Wallace identifies five stages that form the “processual structure” of the potential development of new religious movements.

The first stage is known as *Steady State*, when a society is relatively stable and has its own techniques for tolerating stress. The second

stage is the *Period of Increased Individual Stress*, when society experiences stress and exhausts its techniques for handling it. At this stage, it needs an alternative way of dealing with turbulence. Then follows the *Period of Cultural Distortion*, which is characterized by chaos and anxiety over the loss of a meaningful way of life. The fourth stage is the *Period of Revitalization*, which is often associated with charismatic leaders whose ideas are conceived in visions, revelations, or inspirations. Leaders preach their views to others, offering them protection and benefits. In this way, a new movement becomes organized and develops a hierarchical structure. If effective, the new ideas are adapted and gradually “routinized,” leading to the formation of a new and fifth stage known as *Steady State* (Wallace 1956, 268–75). Wallace argues that, while some revitalization movements can be very successful, others can fail at any stage within the processual structure. Among other factors, their success depends on how realistic the movement’s ideas are as well as on the strength of its opponents (278).

Adrian Ivakhiv hypothesizes about the future of Ukrainian Paganism. In his opinion, this movement may follow the same pattern as its Western, specifically Anglo-American, counterpart and “become both more modern (i.e., more scientifically informed) and postmodern (self-reflexive and aware of its creative nature)” (Ivakhiv 2005a, 29). In Ivakhiv’s opinion, Ukrainian Pagans may reach this stage by better familiarizing themselves with Western scholarship and the Western Pagan literature influenced by this scholarship. In this way, Ukrainian Pagans may achieve wider recognition as a legitimate religion. As of today, they remain very isolated, being exposed predominantly to like-minded Eastern and Central European Pagans (29–30). In other words, Ivakhiv argues that reflexivity and inclusiveness may help Ukrainian Pagans to make their ideas more “realistic” and, thus, more successful with regard to future development (to put it in Wallace’s terms). While agreeing with Ivakhiv, I propose to expand on the discussion of the future of Ukrainian Paganism by drawing upon Wallace’s ideas and their relationship to the notion of aesthetics versus politics.

In my opinion, aesthetics will play a significant role in the future development of Ukrainian Paganism. However, the different emphases that individual groups put on aesthetics may lead to dissimilar future paths for these communities. As discussed throughout this work, RUNVira prioritizes politics, Native Faith prioritizes folklore, and Ancestral Fire prioritizes magic. Let me expand on this.

Boholiub Swyrydenko, the leader of the most active North American RUNVira community, which is located in Spring Glen, New York, showed me the cemetery near the Oriiana Holy Temple. He commented poignantly: “Today, there are many more of us in the cemetery than in the Temple.” Swyrydenko was especially concerned that young people do not join RUNVira.

The situation of RUNVira in Ukraine is similar. The majority of the youngest representatives of RUNVira are in their fifties and early sixties. Several young people mentioned that their Pagan paths began with RUNVira. However, after attending a few gatherings, they became disappointed and eventually joined other Pagan groups. One female in her early twenties pointed out that she felt like a complete outsider in a RUNVira community. The majority of its members were elderly people who talked predominantly about colonialist politics, and she could not relate to their discussions.

Although RUNVira’s attributes and rituals may be aesthetically pleasing, political themes still dominate the narratives and activities of its followers. The children and grandchildren of founding members cannot relate to the political sentiments of their predecessors. In contrast, Native Faith and Ancestral Fire place a greater emphasis on aesthetics as communicated through music, visual art, crafts, clothing, ritual forms, martial arts, and/or magic. Political themes, although present in their published literature and individual narratives, are either de-emphasized in, or absent from, their sacred rituals and cultural activities. Young people often join these Pagan communities not for political reasons but, rather, because they are attracted by a colourful and aesthetically pleasing Pagan culture. It is aesthetics that makes Pagan practices attractive and, thus, “realistic” (to use Wallace’s term).

Unlike colonialist politics, the aesthetic aspects of spirituality help to create the “fairy tale,” the “beautiful world” that provides an escape from the turbulent context of post-Soviet life, offering a place in which to form a new, desirable reality. In my opinion, those Pagan groups that emphasize aesthetics over politics have a greater chance for successful development.

## Concluding Remarks

### Ukrainian Paganism in the Context of Modernity

Ukrainian Paganism is a response to a fear of modernity that is associated with globalization. However, it is, in fact, modernity that provides a favourable setting for this movement's development.<sup>1</sup> Ukrainian Pagans strive to recreate the distant past with the help of modern technological resources, strategies, and ideas.

Ukrainian Paganism has become a global phenomenon. It has spread globally thanks to contemporary technology such as print publications, the internet, and high-speed transportation. Although Ukrainian Paganism is closely tied to the "sacred land" of Ukraine, its initial development occurred beyond Ukraine's geographical territory. Arjun Appadurai (1996, 32), studying influences within the context of globalization, challenges the "centre-periphery" model previously favoured by scholars. He emphasizes the mutual influences of different landscapes as they interact with one another, arguing that the influence may also spread in the reverse direction – from the "periphery" to the "centre." Although Ukraine has always been considered the ideological "centre" of Ukrainian Paganism, it arrived there from the "periphery" of the Ukrainian diaspora.

From the emic perspective, Pagans view globalization as a modern force that pressures traditional cultures to lose their uniqueness in order to blend into a single Western model. This view coincides with academic arguments that modernity and globalization are associated with the homogenization of indigenous cultures. However, ethnographic research challenges this theoretical framework, proving it to be insufficient for describing the contemporary world. Culture today is viewed as a process based on constant contact between various

traditions resulting in frequent changes and diverse formations. The phenomenon of Ukrainian Paganism is one such formation.

From the etic perspective, Pagan culture does not blend into a single global cultural pattern. Its adherents are not the victims of homogenizing modern forces. Ukrainian Pagans “indigenize modernity,” occupying their own niche among the world’s “multiple modernities.”<sup>2</sup> Using modern means, Ukrainian Pagans create a new indigenous face.

## Terms

All-Knowing Mother – *Відаюча Матінка*

Ancestral Fire of the Native Orthodox Faith – *Родове Вогнище Рідної Православної Віри (Ukr.); Родовое Огнище Родной Православной Веры (Rus.)*

Animal Protection Day – *День Охорони Животини*

Association of Sons and Daughters of Ukraine RUNVira – *Об'єднання Синів і Дочок України рунвіра] aka OSIDU RUNVira*

Association of Sons and Daughters RUNVira – *Об'єднання Синів і Дочок рунвіра aka OSID RUNVira*

Birth of Vozhych – *Різдво Божича*

Brotherhood of Ukrainian Pagans “Svarha” – *Братство Українських Язичників “Сварга”*

Cossack-Sorcerers – *Характерне Козацтво*

Council of the Native Ukrainian Faith – *Собор Рідної Української Віри*

Council of Ukrainian Customary Communities – *Собор Українських Звичаєвих Громад*

Day of People’s Anger – *День Народного Гніву*

Dazhboh Sign – *Знамення Дажбоже*

Great Day of Dazhboh Light – *Великдень Світла Дажбожого*

- Great Day of Dazhboh – *Великдень Дажбожий*
- Great Fire – *Великий Вогонь*
- Heavenly *Svarozhych* – *Небесний Сварожич*
- Holy Council – *Священна Рада*
- Holy Hour of Self-Reflection – *Священна Година Самопізнання*
- Knights of the Order of the Sun – *Лицарі Ордена Сонця*
- Kupalo Wreath – *Купальський Вінок*
- Lada's Dew – *Ладині роси*
- Life-affirming rituals – *Обряди життєстверджуючі*
- Life-giving rituals – *Обряди життєдайні*
- Native Faith Association of Ukraine – *Об'єднання Рідновірів України*
- Native Orthodox Faith “Wreath of God” – *Рідна Православна Віра “Вінець Бога”*
- Native Ukrainian National Faith RUNVira – *Рідна Українська Національна Віра РУНВіра*
- North Caucasian Scythian Regional Fire – *Північно-Кавказьке Скіфське крайове вогнище*
- Order of the Knights of the Solar God – *Орден Лицарів Бога Сонця*
- Oriiana Holy Temple of Mother Ukraine – *Святиня Матері України “Оріяна”*
- Orthodox Native Academy of Faith – *Православна Рідновірська Академія Віровідання*
- Regional Fires – *Крайові Вогнища*
- Rituals of Svaroh's Cycle – *Обряди Кола Сварожого*
- Rodoliubiiie* Russian-Slavic Native Faith Community – *Русско-Славянская Родноверческая Община “Родолюбие”*
- Rodosvit* Academy of Human Development – *Академія Розвитку Людини “Родосвіт”*

Rus Orthodox Circle – *Руське Православне Коло*  
School of the Native Faith – *Школа Рідної Віри*  
Spiritual Giants – *Духовні Богатирі*  
Spiritual Slavic state – *Духовна Слов'янська держава*  
Supreme Pagan Priest of Ancestral Fire of the Native Orthodox  
Faith – *Верховний Волхв Родового Вогнища Рідної Православної  
Віри*  
Supreme Pagan Priestess of Ukraine-Rus – *Верховна Волхвиня  
України-Руси*  
Svaroh's Cycle – *Коло Свароже*  
*Svitovyd* Center for the Revival of Ukrainian Culture – *Центр  
відродження української культури "Світовид"*  
Slavic Clan Council – *Родове Слов'янське Віче*  
Trinity of Worlds – *Триглав Світів*  
Ukrainian Pagan Bookstore – *Українська язичницька книгарня*  
Ukrainian Pagan Council – *Віче Українських Рідновірів*  
Ukrainian Spiritual Academy of Native Faith – *Українська Духовна  
Академія Рідновірів*



# Notes

## INTRODUCTION

- 1 The figure of Taras Shevchenko and his role in Ukrainian Paganism are addressed in chapter 5.
- 2 The term “Orthodox (Pravoslavna) Faith,” when applied to a Pagan group, is unusual to many speakers of Ukrainian since, in contemporary Ukrainian, the term predominantly refers to the Orthodox Christian faith. The adherents of Ancestral Fire interpret this term in their own way. As I describe in chapter 1, their belief system includes *Prava*, the world of Gods. The first part of the term *Pravoslavna* – *pravo* – refers to the world of *Prava*, or *Prav*, while the second part is based on the Ukrainian verb *slavyty*, meaning “to glorify.” Thus, to the followers of Ancestral Fire, *Pravoslavna vira* means the faith that glorifies *Prava*.
- 3 This distinction applies predominantly to the first generation of people who consciously parted with Christianity and accepted Paganism as their new form of spirituality. In contrast, their children are born into this religion and grow up with a great variety of multimedia resources developed by their parents. Paganism as a religion of choice as opposed to that of birth in both the West and Eastern Europe may constitute a fruitful topic for future research.
- 4 For example, see Blain, Ezzy, and Harvey (2004), in which thirteen contributors discuss how their gender, life experiences, religious convictions, and other aspects of personal identity potentially influence the data they collect. The authors also show how their engagement with the people they study shaped their own spiritual journeys.

## CHAPTER ONE

- 1 I borrow the phrase “Living with Honour” from the title of Emma Restall Orr’s book (Orr 2007). It is beyond the scope of the present work to provide an exhaustive description of Western Paganism. Instead, I give a generalized overview of this phenomenon, focusing on key themes that appear in comparative discussions in subsequent chapters.
- 2 For a detailed historical discussion of Wicca in Europe, see Hutton (1999). For a history of Wicca in the United States, see Clifton (2006). For a popular comprehensive description of Wiccan beliefs and practices, see Duff (2003). For a discussion of both historical and modern Druids, see Harvey (1997, 17–34). See also Hutton (2003, 239–58) for a historical overview of modern Druidism. For a general observation of modern Heathens, see Harvey (1997, 53–68). For a historical overview and characteristics of the (Norse) Asatru movement, see Gardell (2003) and Kaplan (1997, 69–99).
- 3 For a historical overview of the New Age and its characteristics, see, among others, Lewis and Melton (1992); and Hanegraaff (1998).
- 4 Tanya Luhrmann (1989, 4) estimates that several thousand Pagans were involved in organized groups in England in the late 1980s (1989, 4). Kathryn Roundtree (2004, ix) speaks of several thousand feminist Pagans in New Zealand between the early 1990s and early 2000s. According to the 2001 American Religious Identity Survey, approximately 307,000 Americans claimed membership in various Pagan groups (Strmiska 2005, 1).
- 5 This estimate is made by the Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance, as reported in the anonymous article “Paganism Growing Fast in US, Canada” United Press International, 26 June 2008, [http://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/2008/06/26/Paganism-growing-fast-in-US-Canada/UPI-87901214502167/](http://www.upi.com/Top_News/2008/06/26/Paganism-growing-fast-in-US-Canada/UPI-87901214502167/) (viewed 23 December 2012).
- 6 Zenit.org, “The Return of Paganism,” Newsmax.com., 9 February 2004, <http://archive.newsmax.com/archives/articles/2004/2/8/144004.shtml> (viewed 23 December 2012). Although some raw figures can be collected and some estimates can be made, gathering statistical data on modern Paganism is a very challenging task since this religion resists institutionalization. For a discussion of statistics-related problems connected with research methodology in Pagan studies, see Cowan (2005, 195).
- 7 Feminist views of nature are explicitly presented in Donna Read’s documentary *Goddess Remembered* (Read 1989). Among other sources that represent feminist perspectives in Paganism, see Budapest (1989); Canan (1989); Christ (1997); and Christ (2006).
- 8 J.G. Melton’s research in 1991 showed that 78.5 per cent of Pagans in the United States were of a Christian background (25.8 per cent Catholic and

- 42.7 per cent Protestant). In 1995, Loretta Orion found that 85 per cent of American Pagans were former Christians, with 26 per cent being Catholics and 59 per cent Protestants (Strmiska 2005, 7).
- 9 For discussions of techniques and practices of both historical and contemporary witches and shamans, see Clifton (1995).
- 10 Some scholars are concerned with the way the term “New Age” has been used over recent decades, including the way it has been adapted by popular culture. They prefer to speak about this movement as “alternative spirituality.” See Sutcliffe and Bowman (2000). Similar issues are addressed by Drury (1999).
- 11 For a discussion of esoteric and paranormal features of the New Age, see Faber (1996).
- 12 See, for example, Ferguson (1993); and Heelas (1996, 46–7). Daren Kemp (2004, 106–27) focuses on various other psychological theories that are important to New Agers in addition to Jungian ideas.
- 13 In their works, both Starhawk and Adler provide insiders’ views on contemporary Paganism and rich descriptive accounts of Pagan beliefs and practices.
- 14 One of the pioneering voices in feminist criticism of Christianity belongs to Merlin Stone, who inspired many followers of the Goddess religion. See Stone (1976); and Stone (1984 [1979]). Feminist Pagans have introduced the term “thealogy” (*thea* means goddess in Greek), instead of “theology” (*theos* means god), with reference to these spiritualities. This term was first proposed by Naomi Goldenberg (1979, 96). Today, “thealogy” appears to be firmly established in both popular and academic discourses on feminist spirituality. See, for example, Walker (2000, 26); Raphael (2000); and Griffin (2000).
- 15 For example, see Anthony (1995, 94–5); Eller (2000); Eller (1993, 93–115); and Davis (1998, xi).
- 16 For example, see Baring and Cashford (1991); Reis (1991); and Gadon (1989).
- 17 While “cultural borrowings” are welcomed by Eclectic Pagans they are not always approved by those who consider themselves “owners” of particular traditions. For more information on this issue, see Eller (1993, 67–82); Pike (2001, 123–54); and Magliocco (2004, 215–18).
- 18 For popular and academic interpretations of various female deities employed by Goddess worshipers, see Nicholson (1989); Christ (1997, 50–88); Reid (2005, 25–45); Austen (1990); Getty (1990); Billington and Green (1996); Olson (1983); Leeming and Page (1994); Cleary and Aziz (2000); Husain (2003 [1997]); Edwards (1991).
- 19 Among other sources, the ideas of the universality of the Goddess are presented in Donna Read’s film *Goddess Remembered* (Read 1989). See also Austen (1990); Getty (1990); and Ozaniec (1993).

- 20 For example, see Christ (1997, 124–25)
- 21 For example, see Henry (1988).
- 22 For a Christian perspective on modern Paganism in general and certain groups in particular, see Burnett (1992).
- 23 Wallace recognizes several kinds of revitalization movements: nativistic, revivalistic, cargo cults, vitalistic, millenarian, and messianic. Loretta Orion (1994, 25–7) compares forms of Western Paganism to Wallace’s “nativistic” movements.

## CHAPTER TWO

- 1 If not otherwise indicated, all translations from Ukrainian and Russian are by the author. Normally, only the first word of a sentence and proper nouns are capitalized in Ukrainian and Russian. However, contemporary Eastern European Pagans often capitalize those terms that have a special significance to them (e.g., Ancestral, Native, etc.). In this work, I capitalize such terms when either transliterating or translating them from the original language.
- 2 It is beyond the scope of this work to provide an exhaustive list of all these materials. Instead, I focus on major categories of Pagan sources and their influence on contemporary Paganism. My findings in this area largely match those of Adrian Ivakhiv (see Ivakhiv [2005a, 8–10]). I expand on his discussion and categorize these sources in a slightly different way.
- 3 The term “folklore” is now applied to the activities of distinct and identifiable regional, ethnic, religious, occupational, or other groups (Yoder 1972, 295).
- 4 Among the works of early Ukrainian and Russian ethnographers, Pagans utilize studies by Afanas’iev (2002 [1865–69]); Vovk (1899, 1908, 1916); Hnatiuk (1914); Potebnia (1865); Sumtsov (1886, 1890, 1891); Chubinskii (1872a, 1872b); Chubynskyi (1995); Shukhevych (1902); Shcherbakivskyi (1937); and others. A younger generation of researchers includes Bulashev (1989); Balushok (1998); Veletskaiia (1978); Humeniuk (1962); Ilarion (1965); Kylymnyk (1955–65), and Rybakov (1981, 1988), among others.
- 5 The idea of Aryan civilization became a tool that enabled European cultures to “distinguish themselves from the biblically-based history of the Semitic peoples” (Ivakhiv 2005a, 11). The Aryan/Semite dichotomy allowed many nineteenth-century intellectuals to project “their own favored and unfavored traits” (Ivakhiv 2005a, 11; Arvidsson 2006, 310). The term “Aryan” acquired a negative connotation after it was applied by the

ideologists of the Third Reich. However, prior to this, “non-Germanocentric forms of Ariosofy” circulated in Eastern and Central Europe and, in fact, became very powerful in the first attempts to revive Slavic paganism in Ukraine in the 1930s (Ivakhiv 2005a, 11).

- 6 For a critical discussion of the Aryan myth, especially Müller’s ideas, see Waradpande 2000 [1989], in which the author strongly argues that the Aryan invasion is a linguistic theory rather than a historical fact. See also Arvidsson (2006). Among other works discussing the Aryan myth and its implications in various contexts see Olender (1992); Figueira (2002); and Poliakov (1974).
- 7 See, for example, Lozko (2005b, 231–5); and Stupnikov (2001).
- 8 For detailed information about the Mizyn culture, see Shovkoplias (1965); and Bibikov (2008).
- 9 Numerous publications devoted to Trypillian civilization began appearing during the Soviet era, after the 1930s and 1940s (Zbenovich 1989). One cannot underestimate post-Soviet interest in Trypillian culture. A great variety of academic sources (ethnographic, art criticism, historical, historiographical, anthropological, archaeological, encyclopaedic, etc.) on various aspects of Trypillian culture have been published in Ukraine and in Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union. This old civilization fascinates the larger Ukrainian society as well as diaspora communities. The remnants of Trypillian culture are widely represented in museums, including the Kyiv Regional Archeological Museum (Київський обласний археологічний музей), the National Historic and Cultural Preservation Centre “Trypillian Culture” (Національний заповідник “Трипільська культура”) in the Cherkasy region, and the Archaeological Museum of the Institute of Archaeology of the Academy of Sciences of Ukraine (Археологічний Музей Інституту археології України). Largely due to the initiative of the diaspora, a large exhibit of Trypillian artefacts was displayed at the Royal Ontario Museum in Canada in 2008. Among the most recent scholarly publications devoted to Trypillian culture, see Videiko (2002); and Videiko and Cherniakhov (2003).
- 10 See, for example, Lozko (2006, 274–82).
- 11 See, for example, Lozko (2005 [1995], 42–3).
- 12 Herodotus is often criticized for his biases and for providing inaccurate accounts and/or interpretations of historical events (see Evans 1968). For critical discussions of Herodotus’s works and methodology, see, among others, Fehling (1989).
- 13 For more information about Scythians, see Terenozhkin (1977); Murzin (1990); and Braund (2007).

- 14 Kyivan Rus was a monarchy that existed between the ninth and twelfth centuries and eventually branched out into the three major socio-political units that are now Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine. A heated debate regarding Kyivan Rus and the issue of “ancestry” takes place within both popular and scholarly historical discourse, especially in Russia and Ukraine. For some general historical information on Kyivan Rus as presented by a Ukrainian scholar, see Subtelny (1988, 19–41).
- 15 See Kachur (1973); Lozko (2007a); Piddubnyi (2007a).
- 16 For a summary of the history of the discovery of *The Book of Veles* and its subsequent publications in Russia, see Shnirelman (1998). For a discussion of its popular acceptance in Ukraine, specifically by Ukrainian Pagans, see Ivakhiv (2005a, 11–14). For detailed contextual and linguistic analyses of *The Book of Veles* as a forgery, see Tvorogov (1988, 100); and Tvorogov (1990). See also Zhukovskaia and Filin (1960, 143); and Kaganskaya (1986).
- 17 For more information on early Slavs in English, see Barford (2001).
- 18 The pre-Christian beliefs of the old Slavs also changed over time, replacing some deities with others (Ilarion 1965, 97). These beliefs were also territorialized. See chapter 4.
- 19 One of the earlier representatives of this school is the well-known Russian linguist Aleksandr Afanasiev. In his three-volume work, *Poetic Views of the Slavs towards Nature* (2002 [1865–69]), he attempts not only to interpret the data available but also to trace the origins of Slavic mythology, analyzing verbally transmitted lore (riddles, sayings, and beliefs) about nature and the supernatural with the help of the so-called historic-geographic method.
- 20 Rybakov’s approaches to the interpretation of the past largely resonate with those of Marija Gimbutas.
- 21 Voropai refers to those periods of time when the territory of contemporary Ukraine was divided under the rule of different political powers, including Poland, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Russian Empire, and others. For an English-language history of Ukraine, see Subtelny (1988).
- 22 Among other examples of Ukrainian alternative scholarship, see Osypchuk-Skovoroda (2008); Petruk (2001); Piddubnyi (2005); Piddubnyi (2007); Plachynda (2006); and Shylov (1998). Among Russian-language sources of alternative scholarship, see Adamovich (2006a); Adamovich (2006b); and Adamovich (2009).
- 23 Jungian types include extraverted sensation, introverted sensation, extraverted intuition, introverted intuition, extraverted thinking, introverted thinking, extraverted feeling, and introverted feeling (Jung 1971).
- 24 See “Introduction to Socionics” (n.d.).

## CHAPTER THREE

- 1 See also Shnirelman (n.d.).
- 2 For more details on this organization, see Smirnov (2009).
- 3 These are Allentown, Pennsylvania (4 March 1970); Atlantic City, New Jersey (15 October 1971); New York, New York (29 May 1973); Montreal, Quebec (4 September 1973); Hamilton, Ontario (10 February 1975); and Toronto, Ontario (24 April 1979) (Sylenko 1996a, 6).
- 4 In particular, by the 1990s, RUNVira communities had been established in the following places: Canada (Winnipeg, Ottawa, Niagara, Edmonton, Calgary, Regina, Vancouver); the United States (Spring Glen, Rochester, Syracuse, Buffalo, Detroit, Chicago, Denver, Bridgeport, Hartford, Trenton, San-Francisco, Hot Spring, Minneapolis, Cleveland, Philadelphia, San Diego, Las Vegas, Phoenix); Australia (Canberra, Sidney, Brisbane, Carrington); England (London, Bolton, Rochdell); Germany (Essen, Stuttgart); and New Zealand (Masterton) (Sylenko 1996a, 6).
- 5 Sylenko died in Canada on 25 November 2008, at the age of eighty-seven, shortly after his first and only post-Second World War visit to Ukraine.
- 6 Unless otherwise indicated, the following summary of RUNVira rituals is based on Sylenko (1991).
- 7 The following description of Ostrovskyi's activities is based on my recorded interview with him on 29 June 2008.
- 8 Sytnyk was also initially connected with RUNVira (Ivakhiv 2005a, 22).
- 9 For details, see Contacts (n.d.).
- 10 Different Ukrainian Pagans interpret and appropriate the old Slavic pantheon in different ways. Considering that Halyna Lozko is the successor of Volodymyr Shaian, I provide this list of old spiritual beings as described by her (see Lozko 2005a [1995], 120–149).
- 11 For details, see Communities (n.d.).
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 See Mykolaiv (2009).
- 14 For a detailed description of the Academy's activities, see Rodosvit (2008).
- 15 The conflict is described as presented in a Pagan internet forum (See Ukraine is Our Fatherland 2007).
- 16 In Ukrainian and in Russian, most last names must agree in gender and number. The same surname can be spelled in different ways, depending on whether it refers to a single male, a single female, or more than one person with the same surname. I transliterate surnames according to their original Ukrainian or Russian usage. For example: in Ukrainian, it is Kurovskyi (masculine, singular), Kurovska (feminine, singular), Kurovski (plural);

in Russian, it is Kurovskii (masculine, singular), Kurovskaia (feminine, singular), Kurovskie (plural).

- 17 Some activities of Ancestral Fire that involve magic are described in chapter 6.

#### CHAPTER FOUR

- 1 In 2009, the Religious Information Service of Ukraine (RISU) recorded 1,455 congregations of the All-Ukraine Union of Christians of the Evangelical Faith Pentecostals; 601 Full Gospel Churches; 1,005 congregations of the Ukrainian Union Conference of Seventh-Day Adventists Church; and 685 communities of Jehovah's Witnesses (RISU 2009). See also Kolodny and Philipovitch (2007) for an overview of minority non-traditional and new religions in Ukraine in the early post-Soviet context.
- 2 As of 1 January 2009, the official RISU website provides the following statistics regarding registered churches in Ukraine: Ukrainian Orthodox Church (of the Moscow Patriarchate), 11,444; Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyivan Patriarchate, 4,093; Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, 1,183; Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, 3,566 (RISU 2009).
- 3 For example, the Ukrainian Catholic Church of Canada consists of 408 parishes (see UCCCA, n.d.; UCCCB, n.d.; UCCC 1996–2008; UCCC 2003–09; and UCCC 2010), while the Ukrainian Catholic Church of the USA includes 218 parishes (see UCC in the USA, n.d.; UCC in the USA, n.d.; UCC in the USA 2006; and UCC in the USA 2007). Membership in the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada has historically ranged between 20 and 25 per cent of the Ukrainian Canadian population. In 1989, this church consisted of 128,000 members in 290 congregations (UOCC 2006–10). The Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the USA embraces 103 parishes (UOC of the USA, n.d.).
- 4 Lindquist studies the great interest in magic as an “alternative form of hope” in urban post-Soviet Russia, which experienced similar turbulence.
- 5 The spiritual renaissance of traditional Christian churches was a response to the Soviet era, when religion was officially forbidden (Kononenko 2006, 46). In addition, the collapse of the Soviet Union created fertile ground for the activity of Evangelical missionaries. For a discussion of religion in Ukraine and in other post-Soviet countries, see Batalden (1993). See also Steinberg and Wanner (2008). For a discussion of the resurgence of Evangelism in Post-Soviet Ukraine, see Wanner (2007). While traditional churches play an important role in the building of a national identity,

Wanner shows how Evangelicals, in contrast, build trans-national communities, overcoming political boundaries.

- 6 For discussions of Paganism in various post-Soviet contexts, see Shnirelman (2001b). For a general overview, see Shnirelman (2002, 197–211); Shnirelman (n.d.); and Kostello (2010). For an overview of Paganism in Central-Eastern Europe, including the Baltic Republics and Poland, see Wiench (1997). For a thorough study of Polish Paganism see Simpson (2000). For a Ukrainian Pagan perspective on Pagan movements in Baltic, Slavic, and other Eurasian countries, see Lozko (2006, 120–249).
- 7 See Shnirelman (2003, 4).
- 8 For a discussion of various contemporary Russian Pagan branches, see Shnirelman (n.d.).
- 9 For Halyna Lozko’s perspective on various branches of Russian Paganism, see Lozko (2006, 146–67).
- 10 Kupalo is discussed in detail in chapter 9.
- 11 This idea is inspired by Catherine Wanner, who traces similar dynamics in contemporary Ukrainian evangelical missionary activities. Hundreds of Ukrainian evangelicals have visited Russia over the last ten years. The cultural and linguistic fluency of Ukrainian missionaries has proven to be a very successful tool in this process. For details, see Wanner (2007, 212).
- 12 These are the first lines of children’s poems.
- 13 Solomea Pavlychko (1996, 306), one of the pioneers of feminist thought in Ukraine, explains what she calls “conscious anti-feminism” and “unconscious sexism” in Ukraine due to “the lack of democratic traditions, the underdevelopment of civil society and the low political culture of contemporary Ukrainian society.” In her opinion, the Soviet regime promoted gender equality in theory but not in practice, thus leading to the devaluation of feminism (306).
- 14 This list can be expanded by a simple online search of the term.
- 15 Amy DeRogatis (2009, 279) traces a similar tendency in Evangelical sex manuals that spiritualize sex.

#### CHAPTER FIVE

- 1 An exception are RUNVira adherents, who consciously restructure the old Slavic Paganism. RUNVira’s attitude towards creativity is discussed in chapter 4.
- 2 It resonates with the first British Wiccans, who strove to prove the continuity of their practices with those of the past.

- 3 The field of socionics that developed on the basis of Jungian psychological typology is introduced in chapter 2.
- 4 The following description of traditional Ukrainian weddings is based on the summary by Foty et al. (2007). This catalogue also includes bibliographic information on the major ethnographic sources devoted to Ukrainian weddings.
- 5 See, among other of his works, Veleslav (1999, 2004, 2005a, 2005b, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2008a, 2008b, 2009a, and 2009b).
- 6 Sometimes, Slavic Pagans even engage in heated debates with academics. See, for example, Zobnina et al. (n.d.).
- 7 Each following stanza ends with the phrase “Oh, Halia, young Halia” followed by the phrase from the previous (second) line.
- 8 Їхали козаки із Дону додому, підманули Галю, забрали з собою.  
 Ой, ти, Галю, Галю молодая, підманули Галю, забрали з собою.  
 Поїдемо з нами, з нами, козаками, краще тобі буде, як в рідної мами.  
 Галя погодилась, з ними споченилась, та й повезли Галю темними лісами.  
 Везли, везли Галю темними лісами, прив’язали Галю до сосни косами.  
 Розбрелись по лісу, назбирали хмизу, підпалили сосну, із гори до низу.  
 Горить, горить сосна, горить і палає, кричить Галя криком, кричить, промовляє:  
 “Ой, хто в лісі чує, нехай той рятує, а хто дочок має, нехай навчає.  
 А хто дочок має, нехай навчає, та й темної ночі гулять не пускає.”
- 9 Їхали хозари із торгу з розбою, підманули Галю – забрали з собою  
 Дівчинонько гарна, поїхали з нами, краще тобі буде, як в рідної мами.  
 Галя погодилась, на віз почепилась, і повезли Галю темними лісами.  
 Стали спочивати в темному ярочку. Там і оганьбили українську дочку.  
 Прив’язали Галю до сосни косами. Запалили сосну. Поїхали сами.  
 Кричить Галя криком, кричить репетує: “А хто в лісі чує – нехай порятує.”  
 Кричить Галя криком, кричить промовляє, а хто дочок має, нехай навчає.  
 Навчіть, батько й мати, із ким дочкам знатись, а кого здалека треба обминати.
- 10 Lytvyn’s article is available online at <http://www.lvivpost.net/content/view/3206/348/> (viewed 27 December 2012).
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Carlson (2009, 8), while discussing contemporary Russian Pagans and their idealistic interpretations of the past based on *The Book of Veles*, argues that Pagans, while constructing their self-respecting national identity, follow the principle “you change who you *were*, you change who you *are* [emphasis in original].”

## CHAPTER SIX

- 1 An earlier version of this chapter constitutes the main part of an article published in *Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* (see Lesiv 2009).
- 2 One of the earliest proponents of this theory was the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century English anthropologist Edward Tylor (1873), who suggested that monotheism was the logical result of human thought, which had evolved from simple beliefs into more complex religious ideologies. Tylor also believed that the development of science would eventually completely overcome and replace religion. E. Tylor, J. Frazer, and other evolutionists were convinced that all societies followed the same pattern of development towards social progress, although different societies achieve this progress at different times.
- 3 For examples, see, among others, the studies by Luhrmann (1989); Magliocco (2004); and Strmiska (2005).
- 4 Людство томиться в тьмі: конче треба/ Мозок кормом новим годувать. Україна покликана Небом/ Хід Європі новий показать.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

- 1 Many outsiders viewed the Pagan procession with an expression of surprise or confusion. While they could relate to the Ukrainian national symbols displayed, they could not understand specific Pagan elements. To outsiders, these symbols served what David Cohen (1985, 50–63) refers to as “symbolic markers” of community boundaries that create a sense of otherness.
- 2 This line refers to traditional beliefs in the house spirit, *domovyk*, who guards and protects households. However, masters have to treat him with great respect in order to maintain a good relationship with him. The *domovyk* often pays nocturnal visits to his masters and can forewarn them of upcoming difficulties or troubles. When a *domovyk* begins to suffocate a person at night, the victim is supposed to ask: “Is it [the nocturnal visit] for the cause of good or bad?” The answer that he or she receives is related to future events, whether positive or negative. For a detailed ethnographic description of beliefs in the *domovyk* and particular experience-based stories collected in contemporary Ukrainian villages, see Britsyna and Golovakha (2004). The *Domovyk* in Ukrainian culture is somewhat similar to the Old Hag in Newfoundland, Canada (see Hufford 1982).
- 3 Some scholars divide the old Slavic belief system into two categories: “higher” spiritual beings and “lower” spiritual beings. Gods and goddesses

who are in charge of natural forces and particular spheres of life represent higher spiritual beings, while demons represent lower spiritual beings. Lower spirits such as domovyk are in charge of small areas and territories. Over time, the differences between the various lower spirits that existed in pre-Christian beliefs became obscured. With the establishment of Christianity, they became identified by the generic term *nechyst'*, or *nechysta syla*, meaning “unclean force” (Hnatiuk 1912, vii). Many Ukrainian Pagans, including Zhyvosyl, refuse to draw a line between higher and lower spirits. To Pagans, they all represent the rich cultural imagination of their ancestors.

- 4 А ми свого не віддали, старих Богів Своїх не знищили,  
Ми їм хатину відвели, як прадідам у домі віщім.  
В світлиці в нас іконостас, і ми вклоняємося щиро,  
Тому, хто захищає нас, хто нам дає надію й віру.  
Та як би в світі не було, які б століття не минали,  
Ми дослухалися й чекали, коли нам скажуть: “На добро!” оті, кого ми  
врятували.  
І хитрий наш менталітет молився вголос і підмольовавсь  
Ярилу за розквітлий степ і Велесу за житній колос.  
Сварогу за вогонь в душі, за береги Березиням,  
Не ідолам – природі жить дозволили в своїй родині.  
Русалки і лісовики – ми навіть нечисть не спалили  
Отак живуть домовики в хатах, які ми освятили.  
Ну де є ще такий народ, пов'язаний з живим і вічним,  
Що як безсмертний й мудрий волхв з'єднав себе з земним й космічним?  
Ні, ми свого не віддали, лише коріння прикопали,  
В усі часи воно давало нам силу супроти біди.  
Ми не порушили свій Рід. За те і нас наш Бог зберіг.
- 5 I return to this song in chapter 8 to address the concept of nature communicated in its lyrics.
- 6 For a detailed discussion of the history of Ukraine of this period, see Subtelny (1988, 201–335).
- 7 Oksana Zabuzhko (2007) provides a detailed philosophical analysis of various ideological readings of Shevchenko's works, placing these readings in their historical contexts. George Grabowicz (1982, 2000) also touches upon these problems.
- 8 Maryna Strelnyk, the National Museum of the History of Ukraine, featured on Television News ТSN [Televizina sluzhba novyn ТSN], Channel 1+1 [Kanal 1+1], 26 August 2009.
- 9 A pseudonym is used in this case.

- 10 See, for example, Dovhych 2004 (11003).
- 11 Rieti discusses many encounters of perceived witchcraft in rural Newfoundland. Her findings are similar to those of other scholars of witchcraft: many accusations have social rather than supernatural implications. As Rieti (2008, 151) concludes, “storytelling is the only ‘craft’ involved.”
- 12 From Halyna Lozko’s speech delivered on 31 July 2008 in Lviv at a Pagan gathering devoted to the one hundredth anniversary of Shaian’s birth.
- 13 This consultant wished to remain anonymous, and his name has been changed accordingly.
- 14 The photographs were removed from the website in the fall of 2012.
- 15 This situation partly relates to that in the Ukrainian North American diaspora. For example, those who are familiar with a great variety of embroidery (in terms of techniques and colours) from various regions of Ukraine would be surprised to learn that often it is only the black and red cross-stitch embroidery from the Poltava region that is recognized as “traditional” Ukrainian (see Klymasz 1987). I borrow the concept of “logos” from folklorist Andriy Nahachewsky (2003, 37), who explains the same phenomenon in Ukrainian Canadian stage dance from the perspective of “the builders of the national dance tradition” whose “object ... is not to ‘save’ the entire corpus of traditional dances that are performed by Ukrainians, but rather to promote a selected few of them to serve as symbols of the rest. In this respect, national dances can be seen as functioning something like commercial logos.” For a sociological discussion of the selectiveness of Ukrainian cultural symbols in Canada, see Isajiw (1984, 120–2).

## CHAPTER EIGHT

- 1 See Albanese (1990); and Bowman (2000). And see Ivakhiv (2005b, 194) for a detailed list of Western sources that discuss Paganism as a Nature Religion.
- 2 For a discussion of Pagans’ pluralist views of nature, especially in relationship to the consumption of food, see Bowman (2000).
- 3 For in-depth discussions of the interconnection between Paganism and various branches of environmentalism, see Taylor (1993, 1995, 1997, and 2004), among his other works.
- 4 As discussed on “Creation of Pagan Settlement,” Ancestral Fire’s internet forum, <http://alatyf.org.ua/forum/viewtopic.php?t=1492> (viewed 15 July 2012). This webpage is now inactive.
- 5 As reported by Television News TSN [Televiziina sluzhba novyn TSN], All Ukrainian Chanel 1+1 [Kanal 1+1], 29 August 2012, <http://tsn.ua/>

ukrayina/na-ternopilshchini-selyani-hochut-viseliti-yazichnikiv-video.html (viewed 28 December 2012).

- 6 See note 4.
- 7 As Ivakhiv illustrates, a Ukrainian Pagan understanding of “territorial ethnicity” is historically rooted in the intellectual discourse on nature and ethnicity that has evolved in Eastern Europe since the nineteenth century. This discourse follows a different path than does that taken in the West. For a detailed discussion of various sources that have shaped the understanding of nature and environmental ethics in Eastern Europe, see Ivakhiv (2005b, 203–8).
- 8 In the discourse on racism, this approach is defined as the “biologization of culture” (see Bonilla-Silva 2001).
- 9 Considering the politically sensitive content of the following statement, I have changed the consultant’s name.
- 10 In traditional agriculture, a yoke was a wooden beam placed upon the necks of two oxen to force them to pull together.
- 11 These classical definitions of religion are considered too narrow by contemporary scholars. The present-day academic discourse on religion is greatly influenced by sociologist Emile Durkheim, who proposed understanding religion as it related to society, distinguishing between the sacred and the profane. To Durkheim (1965), religion does not necessarily evince supernatural characteristics but it does embrace ideas and values that, within a given society, are considered sacred.
- 12 Women cannot participate in these rituals because they attract water. This interpretation is likely influenced by Boris Rybakov’s (1981, 170) ideas.
- 13 The unwillingness of Pagans to question their power over nature, at least in public, is also partly connected with their marketing strategies. Although many Pagans claim that they do not represent a missionary religion and, thus, do not need to attract more people, they do strive to present themselves to the larger society in a favourable light.

#### CHAPTER NINE

- 1 An earlier version of this chapter is published in *Modern Pagan and Native Faith Movements in Central and Eastern Europe* (Simpson and Aitamurto 2013).
- 2 This consultant wished to remain anonymous, and his name has been changed.
- 3 Steven Kaplan (1995), although he does not explicitly use the term “syncretism,” provides rich accounts of how cultures interact and mutually influence one another. His focus is on two religious systems in Africa: local

religious practices and Christianity. This chapter is greatly inspired by Kaplan's work.

- 4 Although Hnatiuk is neither the first nor the only scholar to discuss this idea, he is one of the most widely known early Ukrainian ethnographers. Ukrainian Pagans refer to his research in both their publications and private conversations.
- 5 See Sumtsov (1891); Kulzhynskii (1899); Hnatiuk (1912); and Shcherbakivskyi (1925).
- 6 As, for example, illustrated by a church script of the eleventh and twelfth centuries quoted in Humenna (1978, 206).
- 7 For a discussion of national and religious awakening in late Soviet and post-Soviet Ukraine, see Wanner (2007, 130–1). For a discussion of the historical role of Ukrainian churches in the Ukrainian diaspora in Canada, see Martynowych (1985, 170–200). For a particular case study of a Ukrainian Catholic church and its role in an early Ukrainian Canadian community in east-central Alberta, see A. Makuch (1989), especially pp. 75–93, which are devoted to this community's calendar- and lifecycle celebrations and observances.
- 8 The term has roots in the ninth century, but its original meaning was obscure and has since been enthusiastically adapted and reinterpreted by later writers.
- 9 Somewhat in line with Hnatiuk's idea (presented above), American historian Christine Worobec (2006, 16) argues that the weakness of the *droievir'ial/droieverie* model lies in its assumption that nineteenth-century folk beliefs and practices "mirrored those of the ancient past." In addition, this framework does not explain reality in indigenous terms (15). Worobec argues that one cannot limit the term "Christian" to "a tiny spiritual and educated elite that knew how to interpret evangelical texts and church dogma correctly." Even if their rituals and beliefs were not always approved by the church, Ukrainian and other Eastern European peasants "believed themselves to be practitioners of Orthodoxy, drawing upon Christian symbols and magical rites to guard against the vagaries of everyday life" (16).

Like Worobec, Eve Levin, an American specialist on medieval Russia, suggests that beliefs be carefully examined from the perspective of their practitioners. Levin focuses on medieval Christianity, insisting that it should be studied as it was experienced in the medieval context rather than from the point of view of modern Christian spirituality. She points out that many elements that are now ascribed to so-called superstitious paganism were characteristic of medieval Christianity. On the basis of her contextual analysis of medieval Christianity, Levin argues against the idea

that all Christian holidays and saints have pagan roots and/or are simply replacements for pagan beliefs and practices (although she does not reject the possibility that many of them could be). On the contrary, many have direct Christian origins (Levin 1993, 41–6).

- 10 Я прийшов, Племена мої рідні/ З Ваших правд, і джерел, і страждань.  
І південні народи, і східні/ Проти мене не підуть на брань.  
Проти підуть раби злязичні/ Щоб спотворити сад моїх дум.  
«Лжепророк йде!» - ректимуть безличні/ Діти рабства, плекаючи \_глум.  
Я речу: “Заблукалі, вертайтеся./ Рідну Віру беру із Небес,  
Відчиняйте серця, не цурайтесь./ Я на радість Народу воскрес!
- 11 The English translation is taken from *The Holy Bible: New Testament with Psalms and Proverbs* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1991).
- 12 This idea is inspired by anthropologist Jean DeBernardi. In her article on contemporary pilgrimages to the Wudang Mountain site in south-central China, DeBernardi discusses the modernization of Daoism, distinguishing between what she calls traditional and modern, or sacred and secular, forms of charisma and their relationship to space. She illustrates how these two forms of charisma coexist and communicate with each other in the present-day context (DeBernardi 2008).
- 13 This chapter does not engage into an ongoing debate about the name and the origins of Kupalo; instead, it focuses only on those aspects of the specifically Ukrainian Kupalo discourse that influence the way Ukrainian Pagans perceive this holiday.
- 14 The following description is based on a recorded interview with Bohdan Ostrovskyi, 29 June 2008.

#### CHAPTER TEN

- 1 For a discussion of Russian Paganism as a nationalist movement, see Pribylovskii (2002); and Aitamurto (2006). See also Shnirelman (2003, 3–14), among his other works. For a discussion of specifically racist and anti-Semitic sentiments in Russian and Ukrainian Paganism, see Shnirelman (2005, 2007); and Ivakhiv (2005b, 213–14).
- 2 I borrow Bakhtin’s term “authoritative discourse” as applied by Alexei Yurchak (2006). Yurchak argues that a tendency to conceptualize Soviet life in terms of the immorality of socialism, with the people as its victims, began after the collapse of the Soviet Union (6). In interviewing representatives of the last generation of Komsomol members, Yurchak found that what he calls complex “cultural shifts” were characteristic of the late

- Soviet period. These shifts were represented by people's responses to the "authoritative discourse" officially produced by the Communist Party.
- 3 Sociologist and anthropologist Meredith McGuire (2008) calls attention to a similar understanding of religion.
  - 4 At the time of our interview, Zlatana belonged to an Ancestral Fire community in Odesa. However, since she often travelled across Ukraine, she also participated in the activities of other Pagan groups, including Native Faith.
  - 5 See Gudzyk (2007) and compare to Bilan and Stelmashchuk (2001, 2011). See also (Holiday in Lviv 2006).
  - 6 The place that folk embroidery occupied in the Soviet era differed from that of other kinds of folk art. Pysanka writing, for example, was closely tied to the church and was associated with magic. Since neither religion nor magic fit Soviet ideology, both writing pysanky and studying this tradition were discouraged. During Soviet times, it was easier to emphasize the exclusively aesthetic aspect of embroidery.
  - 7 The symbol of *Berehynia* is discussed in chapter 4.
  - 8 This idea resonates with the discussion of ethnographic diversity versus distinct ethnicity in chapter 7.
  - 9 Stanley Tambiah (1985, 336–8) observes a similar model of ritual in the annual religious rite of changing the clothes of the Emerald Buddha in contemporary Thailand. Only the Thai king may perform this ritual, which occurs inside his palace. Thus, he is the only one who has access to the sacred. Members of the public, who know exactly when the ritual is taking place, can "participate" in it "behind closed doors," namely, behind the fence of the king's palace.
  - 10 Many Western folklorists reject the term "fine art" for its elitist connotations, emphasizing that the distinction between "fine" and "folk" is often fuzzy. However, Ukrainian Pagans make this distinction.
  - 11 Alexander Archipenko's creative legacy can serve as an example. Archipenko is a world-renowned Ukrainian-American avant-garde artist and sculptor associated with the cubist movement. Although he has added to Ukrainian national pride, his works alone do not awaken any associations with Ukrainian culture.
  - 12 For heuristic purposes, these ideas are largely generalized. In reality, the above-raised issues are more complex. In North America, the definition of "(fine) artist" does not necessarily imply prolonged professional training. Ukrainian art traditions are rather conservative in this respect. Length of professional training is not always connected with quality (which is connected with context, personal taste, potential judges, etc.). Moreover,

there are highly distinguished artists in Ukraine, such as Maria Pryimachenko, who have never received any professional education. Many critics, while recognizing the profound individualistic and innovative nature of her fantastic images and themes, treat her works as fine art.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

- 1 For a discussion of the role of globalization in the development of modern Paganism in the United States, see Berger (1999).
- 2 The concept of the “indigenization of modernity” belongs to Marshal Sahlins (1999, vi–vii). The idea of looking at modern cultural processes in terms of “multiple modernities” was first introduced by Shmuel N. Eisenstadt and Wolfgang Schluchter (1998).

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