

# Prayer and Power A New Women's Tradition in a Ukrainian Village

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Article abstract

A young girl from the western Ukrainian village of Horodnytsia was seriously ill. In 2007, a family in Germany sent her a statuette of the Mother of God that was said to have miraculous power. The gift was intended to help the girl to recover from her illness. The statuette took on a new purpose, developing into a new tradition. It was incorporated into a homemade altar that traveled from house to house, accompanied by many local women performing religious songs and prayers. This paper draws attention to the Horodnytsia ritual's collective significance. From an emic perspective, as shared by the ritual's practitioners, the new tradition communicated women's response to the ongoing post-Soviet socio-economic crisis. From my own, etic, perspective, informed by performance and gender studies, the altar's role appeared to expand beyond this, revealing women's creative, though unselfconscious, attempt to subvert the patriarchal order of vernacular Christianity. The ritual empowered the village women, especially because it was shaped by the familiar model of religious authority. The women consecrated their domestic space following a well-known pattern of church spatial organization. They established their own authority through the development of a kind of close contact with the sacred that they could not achieve in the context of the traditional church.

# PRAYER AND POWER

## *A New Women's Tradition in a Ukrainian Village*

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### **Background and Methodology**

In July of 2008, I observed a new ritual organized by women in the village of Horodnytsia, western Ukraine<sup>1</sup>. The ritual involved a statuette of the Mother of God sent by a family in Germany as a gift to a seriously ill village girl. The statuette was incorporated into a homemade altar that traveled from house to house, accompanied by many local women performing religious songs and prayers. This paper is an ethnographic snapshot of the socio-cultural dynamics of the life of the Horodnytsia women as communicated through the new ritual.

My study is inspired by a number of works on domestic altar making practices that reveal the multiple meanings home altars convey to those involved in their creation and maintenance. Kay Turner, in her book-length study devoted to private altars in diverse locations and religious contexts across the USA, addresses a wide range of people's experiences (including dreams and memories), emotions (such as fear) and beliefs as expressed in their altars through both physical objects and personal stories. Special attention is paid to the aesthetic dimensions of the altars (Turner 1999). Aesthetics constitute the main focus of Sabina Magliocco's study of contemporary pagan altars (Magliocco 2001). Maria J. Bermúdez and Stanley Bermúdez emphasize the important therapeutic and community strengthening effects of home altars in American Latino families (Bermúdez

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1. I would like to thank my mother, Hanna Lesiv, for recognizing in the summer of 2008 that there was something in the village of Horodnytsia that would be of interest to me as a folklorist. I am grateful to Marta and Svitlana for their friendly nature and hospitality and to other women of Horodnytsia who, despite their busy schedules, welcomed me and my questions. I am also indebted to the two anonymous reviewers of this article for their valuable comments and suggestions.

and Bermúdez 2002). Gabriella Riccardi addresses home altars as a symbolic way of documenting and maintaining family history among Mexican American women in Oregon (Riccardi 2006).

The altars discussed in these studies are predominantly part of established altar-making traditions in given cultures. These scholars pay special attention to the personal engagement of individuals with those traditions. Instead of focusing on the personal dimensions of meaning the new Horodnytsia altar had for its creators and worshippers, this paper will draw attention to the Horodnytsia ritual's collective significance. Such an approach is dictated by the phenomenon itself. The Horodnytsia women enthusiastically engaged in a practice that was new for their region, which predominantly drew my attention. The statuette of the Mother of God evolved from a personal gift to the focal point of a major community activity. I wanted to understand the roots of the community's enthusiasm for this object.

From an emic perspective, as shared by the ritual's practitioners, the new tradition communicates women's response to the ongoing post-Soviet socio-economic crisis. From my own, etic, perspective, informed by performance and gender studies, the altar's role appears to expand beyond this, revealing women's creative, though unselfconscious, attempt to subvert the patriarchal order of vernacular Christianity. By inviting readers into a non-Western context, this paper contributes to a growing volume of folklore scholarship on women's cultures that illustrates how women the world over engage with their traditions in creative and selective ways, crossing the boundaries established by patriarchal systems. As this paper will illustrate, the Horodnytsia women developed a new spiritual tradition that appeared to empower them, especially because the tradition was shaped by the familiar model of religious authority communicated by vernacular Christianity.

I spent a few days in Horodnytsia, documenting the ritual and conducting informal interviews with the women involved. I filmed the ritual as it was performed in two neighboring households. Although I recorded two formal interviews, while being interested in the collective significance of the new tradition, I preferred to interact with the participants through casual group conversations, and relied heavily on participant observation. While the women of Horodnytsia knew that I was a researcher from Canada, my mother and I were introduced simply as family friends interested in participating in the ritual. I also wanted to take care that I was not

observing a performance of the ritual that was overly staged for my benefit<sup>2</sup>. It was possible to achieve, considering that my hosts were close family friends and I had an insider's knowledge of western Ukrainian village culture.

Since 2008 I have maintained a close, though long-distance, contact with the village through Marta (introduced below), making additional inquiries about the altar. In the summers of 2012 and 2013, I conducted extensive fieldwork on various manifestations of supernatural beliefs and practices in both rural and urban centers of western Ukraine as well as in the capital, Kyiv. Although not directly related to the Horodnytsia phenomenon, some findings from that research also inform the present work. In addition, I rely on my own experiences with village life in western Ukraine not only as an outside researcher but also as a cultural insider. I was born and raised in Ukraine. Although my parents are city dwellers, they have maintained close ties with the village. I spent most of my early childhood with my village-based grandparents and frequently returned for prolonged visits, even while attending secondary and post-secondary schools. Since my relocation to Canada in 2003, I have paid visits to my village relatives during annual trips to Ukraine.

### **Village of Horodnytsia**

My mother's friend, Marta, lives in Horodnytsia. The village is situated alongside a river and receives a greater amount of sunlight than other areas of western Ukraine. This setting allows the villagers to grow certain agricultural products, especially tomatoes that cannot take root anywhere else in the region. These tomatoes are the centerpiece of their local economy. There are almost no other jobs in the village for younger people, and it is difficult for the elderly to survive solely on their state pensions. As a result, the residents of Horodnytsia grow tomatoes to sell at markets in neighboring cities. The proceeds are used to cover major family expenses such as children's education, medicine and home renovation projects, among others. In the summer of 2008, Marta's tomatoes supported not only her own family but also that of her jobless son and his sick child. Moreover, she was saving funds in preparation for the wedding of her other son, an event that promised to be a significant expense.

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2. On one occasion during a previous research expedition, when the participants in an event I was observing became aware of the fact that I was an ethnographer from Canada, they quickly changed from their regular clothing into traditional embroidered shirts and asked me where I preferred they should stand.

In addition to growing tomatoes for profit, each family in Horodnytsia operates a semi-subsistence farm that usually consists of some chickens, a few head of cattle and a large garden that supplies most of the agricultural products for the entire year. Spring, summer and early fall are the busiest seasons for the residents of Horodnytsia both for growing tomatoes and doing other farm-related chores. In addition, earlier that summer the village of Horodnytsia was hit with a major flood that caused significant damage. Considering that no help could be expected from the government, the flood imposed additional financial and labor burdens on the villagers. Against this contextual background, the events that took place in the village in July of 2008 were indeed significant.

### Ritual

When Marta comes to the city to sell tomatoes she usually stays with my parents. One day she announced that she needed to leave the market and return to Horodnytsia for several days because her daughter, Svitlana, needed her help. Svitlana, who lived with her own family in the same



Figure 1. Marta and Svitlana doing last minute preparations.

village, was hosting a miraculous statuette of the Mother of God. Marta told us that the statuette had arrived in Horodnytsia in 2007 with a special purpose. A young girl from the village had been seriously ill. The girl's aunt corresponded with a family in Germany regarding the girl's sickness and they sent a gift in the form of the statuette of the Mother of God. This particular image is known as the Mystical Rose. The statuette was said to have miraculous power and the gift was intended to aid in the girl's recovery. Having served its original purpose, the statuette began to travel from house to house within Horodnytsia. When it was Svitlana's turn to host it, I visited the village to observe this new practice.

When I arrived, people were preparing to welcome the statuette at Svitlana's home. A table, covered with a white tablecloth, with two vases of flowers placed on either side was set up in the living room. In the adjoining room, another table was covered with plates, each containing two sandwiches, buns and chocolate candies (figure 1). Except for the candies, all the food was homemade. This food was to be shared by all those who would come to join Svitlana in her prayers to the Mother of God. Plastic bags filled with treats (mostly candies and cookies bought at the local store) were placed on a couch in the same room, to be distributed to visiting guests and family members.

Each member of the household was dressed in their Sunday best. As Svitlana and Marta ran last minute errands, more people arrived. These were Svitlana's relatives, neighbors and friends as well as active churchgoers who knew many religious songs and prayers and were to lead the upcoming ritual. It appeared that the hostess had attempted to invite as many people as possible.

When everything was ready, a procession from Svitlana's household walked to the home of her neighbor, where the statuette had been previously hosted. The statuette was placed in the middle of a rectangular wooden structure topped with a small dome, an altar developed by the villagers. The entire construction was richly decorated with artificial flowers, necklaces, and paper reproductions of various image versions of the Mystical Rose. Svitlana's guests joined the members of her neighbor's household in a prayer before the altar. Then Svitlana's group, walking in a ritual procession, carried the structure to her home. As they walked, the participants sang various sacred songs devoted to the Mother of God. Before entering the house, they stopped and sang another of these songs.

Inside the house, the altar was placed carefully on the prepared table



Figure 2. Svitlana's neighbor kneels before the altar prior to Svitlana's taking this position to lead the prayer ritual.

and the prayers began. The lady of the house was called to kneel before the altar while other women occupied chairs placed against the two side walls (figure 2). Svitlana had a list of the names of those relatives, both deceased and living, that she wanted to remember in her prayers. The list was prepared in advance in consultation with family members. The entire ritual lasted over three hours, with one break during which the participants shared food. At the end, Svitlana thanked everyone and presented a bag of chocolates and cookies to each guest. Since the altar was to stay at her house for two more days, Svitlana made arrangements for the following day and invited people to return. From Svitlana's house, the statuette was to move to the home of her next door neighbor. In the summer of 2008, the statuette's future locations were not limited only to local village homes, but inhabitants of neighboring villages also began to add their names to the list of potential hosts of the altar. (According to Marta, the altar is still travelling, although she is not sure about its exact present-day location).

At its outset, the ritual was relatively simple. People would bring the statuette into their homes and pray before it within their narrow family circles. It took over a year for the altar to reach Svitlana's street and by

that time the ritual had acquired a more elaborate form involving visitors, food, songs and a processional walk. The altar now remained in each home for three days, accompanied by prolonged collective prayers.

### **Mystical Rose**

The name, Mystical Rose, was the only piece of information known to the villagers regarding this image of the Mother of God. The women involved in the ritual at Svitlana's house were not aware of the background history or symbolism of this particular image. The Mystical Rose occupies a prominent niche in vernacular Christianity, particularly in Catholic and Orthodox communities, the world over.

According to folk narrative, the Mother of God appeared to Pierina Belli, an Italian nurse, and others several times between the 1940s and the 1970s. At the first appearance of the apparition, the Mystical Rose had three swords piercing her heart. She looked sad and spoke only three words: "Prayer, Sacrifice, Penance." With the second apparition, the Mother of God had three roses (red, white and yellow-gold) over her heart. She was more talkative and explained the meaning of the symbols. The swords signified people's various misdeeds, but through prayer and sacrifice, people bringing roses to the Mother of God would help to heal her injuries. In total, Pierina Belli experienced 13 apparitions, during which the Mystical Rose expressed her wishes and concerns for humanity.

This is a brief generalized summary of the Mystical Rose story that appears, with variations and in several languages, on numerous Catholic and Orthodox Christian websites<sup>3</sup>.

The apparition narratives include many details such as descriptions of the Mother of God's physical appearance and emotions as well as Pierina Belli's reactions. The narratives are often accompanied by many texts of formulaic prayers to the Mystical Rose, poetry devoted to this image of the Mother of God and various manifestations of her power in a variety of contexts.

3. For more information on the apparitions of the Mystical Rose, prayers and poetry devoted to this image of the Mother of God as well as information on how it is adapted to local Catholic and Orthodox Christian traditions in various localities, see "Mystical Rose/Rosa Mystica" (n.d.) in English, "*Sviata tradytsiia Ukraïns'koi Greko-katolyts'koiï Tserkvy* [A Holy Tradition of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church]" (n.d.) in Ukrainian, and "*Blagoukhannye mirotochashchie slezy Sviatoi Devy v Tveri* [Aromatic Oil-weeping Icon of the Mother of God in Tver]" (n.d.) in Russian, among other online sources.

## Village Women and Vernacular Religion

Although the specific Mystical Rose phenomenon is new to Horodnytsia, the ritual is a manifestation of women's traditionally active roles in things religious. Ukrainian village women have long been the orchestrators of important sacred rites within their own homes and larger village settings. For example, prior to the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the Soviet system took full control over medical matters, the role of midwives was significant. Not only did these women deliver babies but they also performed important magical and religious rituals to ensure the well-being of both the child and the mother (Boriak 2002). The established tradition, that continues today, of female folk healers (who outnumber their male counterparts) in Ukrainian villages provides another example. In a historically patriarchal society, female healers enjoy privileged status for their ability to restore comfort and hope (Phillips 2004: 27). During Soviet times, the roles of village women were especially important. Elder women were, due to the absence of churches and priests, in charge of major religious rituals officially discouraged by the state, such as baptisms and funerals (Kononenko 2010: 126). Because of their age and gender, these women did not represent any potential danger to state authorities and were not usually persecuted for their religious practices.<sup>4</sup> Although marginalized at the state level, village women acquired special recognition and religious power within their communities as ritual experts (Kononenko 2010: 126-27).<sup>5</sup> While not directly related to the institutional Church, sacred rituals performed by women are often filled with Christian prayers and paraphernalia. Some are either approved or simply disregarded by clergy while others are strongly condemned. (The priest in Horodnytsia gave his approval to the Mystical Rose ritual).

The phenomenon of the Mystical Rose ritual, in the context of firmly established women's religious traditions, reminds us about the importance of looking at religion as it is practiced in real life. Leonard Primiano drew the attention of folklorists to the complexity of religious folklife by introducing the concept of "vernacular religion," as both theory and method (Primiano

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4. See Ignatenko (2013) for an extensive discussion of the statutes of women in traditional Ukrainian village culture that are related to the physiological processes in women's bodies. In particular, Ignatenko notes that in the village belief system, post-menopausal women were viewed as "clean," allowing them access to many sacred practices (Ignatenko 2013: 170-75).
  5. See Hrymch (2012) for a number of ethnographic and theoretical contributions devoted to other roles of women in various aspects of traditional Ukrainian culture.

1995)<sup>6</sup>. Previous understanding of folk spirituality was largely based on Don Yoder's definition of "folk religion" as "[...] the totality of all those views and practices of religion that exist among the people apart from and alongside the strictly theological and liturgical forms of the official religion" (Yoder 1974: 14). According to Yoder, folk religion may include what some view as survivals from the distant past, syncretic elements incorporated in official practices or new local creations. Although his definition of folk religion is inclusive and implies a complexity of people's spiritual expression, without any negative or marginal connotation, the problem Primiano finds with Yoder's view is the oppositional dichotomy of "official" versus "folk" that it emphasizes. Primiano insists on the importance of understanding religion "as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it" (Primiano 1995: 44). As lived, the Mystical Rose ritual is a clear example of vernacular religion whose practitioners do not distinguish between the official and the folk.

### Searching for Hope

Considering the context in which the new ritual was taking place, I had some rather pragmatic thoughts. What I found striking was the amount of effort put into this rite during the middle of the busiest agricultural season. The time commitment each woman devoted to the ritual was indeed significant, especially considering that they were also expected to visit several other households. Each host had to pay reciprocal visits to at least those individuals who had earlier been her guests. However, despite the intensity of their regular summer work and the additional expense and clean-up as the result of that year's flood, the women of Horodnytsia still found this new ritual important enough to set aside time and money toward it.

Although prayers commemorating deceased family members seemed important to the women praying at Svitlana's house,<sup>7</sup>

6 Sociologist Meredith McGuire raises similar issues proposing to look at people's spiritual practices as "lived religion" or "religion-as-lived" (McGuire 2008). She calls upon her fellow sociologists to expand their research focus beyond statistical questionnaires and broad surveys and to pay attention to "how religion and spirituality are practiced, experienced, and expressed by ordinary people (rather than official spokespersons) in the context of their everyday life" (McGuire 2008: 12).

7. Although it is beyond the scope of the present paper to explore this aspect of the Mystical Rose ritual, it is noteworthy that the importance of commemorating the deceased has deep roots in traditional village beliefs (Kononenko 2010: 125-26).

the theme of health appeared to be more prominent. As Marta often repeats “a person has nothing without good health.” When asked why they participated in the ritual, other women also gave particular emphasis to the significance of health. When I expressed surprise that they gave priority to the ritual over farm work during the busiest season, several participants noted that “one needs all of that only when one is healthy,” implying that material things will not bring happiness if one is unwell and, as such, it should not be surprising that praying for health was most important.

From an etic (the women’s) perspective, the travelling altar phenomenon communicates what Galina Lindquist defines as a need for an “alternative form of hope” that arises in contexts experiencing socio-economic turmoil. Although Lindquist focuses on post-Soviet urban Russia, that setting shares much in common with the situation in Ukraine:

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 [...]. (Lindquist 2005: 9)

Post-Soviet society is going through a transitional crisis. There is corruption throughout all levels of government. The state medical system is drastically underfunded and often fails to provide basic care. Quality private medical facilities are concentrated in large urban centers and are not easily accessible to villagers. Many people simply do not trust the official system. Stories are very common of doctors not providing proper medical treatment simply because a patient was unable to pay for services. Narratives about doctor incompetence because their medical degrees were purchased through bribes rather than earned are also widespread. (In the summer of 2011, a village woman told me one of the most disturbing stories. A man from her village had been scheduled to have a leg amputated. When he awoke from the anesthetic, he realized that the doctors had amputated the wrong leg).

Common people often feel powerless when it comes to their own health and well-being. This insecurity is felt more intensely in villages, where inhabitants represent the most marginalized category of people in Ukrainian society. When the state system fails to provide help, they feel

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The inclusion of the names of the deceased family members in Svitlana’s list reflects this importance. For an extensive English-language discussion of both historical and present-day Ukrainian folk beliefs related to death, funerals and afterlife, see Kukhareno (2010: 57-172).

the need to search for it elsewhere. For the residents of Horodnytsia, the altar of the Mystical Rose offered an “alternative form of hope” for the health and well-being of their loved ones. Considering the context, it is not surprising that the ritual of praying to the Mystical Rose developed into a large community event worth significant effort and prolonged interruption of work during the most important agricultural period.

### Empowering the Other

It is not surprising that the women of Horodnytsia were drawn to a representation of the Mother of God because this figure is prominent in many aspects of religious life, especially in the Byzantine rite Orthodox and Catholic churches that dominate in Ukraine. Throughout the Mystical Rose ritual the participants consulted a church book that included a number of prayers to the Mother of God. A songbook they used also had a majority of songs devoted to this sacred figure. While conducting research at various sites of perceived sacred apparitions in western Ukrainian villages, I found that most of the apparitions were of the Mother of God. Furthermore, the Horodnytsia women’s reverence for the Mother of God reflects a widespread traditional belief in the Mother of God as a helper for women in child and health-related matters.

What was striking, however, was the foreign nature of the Mystical Rose image within the western Ukrainian village context, especially considering that village culture could offer many other rich vernacular religious resources that were readily available. For example, in villages throughout Ukraine, there is a firmly established tradition of the *pokut’* (also known as *sviatyi kut* or *krasnyi kut*) or icon corner, a small place of family worship within the home (Darenska 2009). Although the icon corner is a stable, non-transferable structure that features icons on the walls of a home, it shares some features with other types of homemade altars and could potentially serve the same purpose.

In the churches of western Ukraine, there is also a well-established tradition of travelling icons. Since the beginning of the post-Soviet revival of religion, traditional icons (predominantly of the Mother of God) that are recognized by the church to have miraculous powers have often been transported from their permanent locations to other churches throughout the region. These icons are not displayed in individual homes but are temporarily installed in local parishes for pilgrims to venerate. The movement of icons from one church to the next is accompanied by large

celebratory processions. The Horodnytsia women may have been inspired by this familiar religious imagery since the transportation of the Mystical Rose resembled these church rituals.<sup>8</sup>

Despite these rich resources, the women chose to fulfill their spiritual quests with the help of the foreign image of the Mystical Rose, even though they were not aware of its background history and symbolism. Intriguingly, from conversations with participants in the ritual, it was clear that the statuette's foreign origin, namely, its "otherness," was at least equally as important to them as the Mystical Rose's perceived miraculous power. There was not a single woman I conversed with who did not stress the fact that the statuette had arrived from Germany.

The notion of the "other" plays an important role in belief-related practices. While studying supernatural beliefs and practices in both vernacular and popular culture settings in contemporary Ukraine, I found that many were especially attracted to cultural borrowings. Elements with no association to Ukrainian culture often become charisma-constructing tools for individuals with perceived supernatural abilities such as healers and fortune-tellers.<sup>9</sup> For example, Yaroslava, a healer from the western Ukrainian city of Ivano-Frankivsk, self-identifies as a devout Orthodox Christian and includes many church prayers in her rituals. However, she wears a Japanese kimono when she meets with clients. In addition, Yaroslava often emphasizes that she received training in spiritual healing from Tibetan monks. The rituals conducted by Olena, a Kyiv-based healer, are also heavily filled with Christian themes and prayers. However, in addition to images of Christian saints, Olena's office walls are decorated with posters featuring Hindu deities and several portraits of Sathya Sai

8. See "Manyavs'ka chudotvorna ikona [Manyava miraculous icon]" (2012), an independent amateur video showing an episode of the transportation of the Manyava Miraculous Icon of the Mother God from its temporary place in the Kalush-based All Saints of Ukraine Church back to the Manyava Monastery. See Huraliuk (2012) for a photograph showing a procession carrying the Pohonia Miraculous Icon of the Mother of God. See also "Zarvanyts'ka sviatynia prybula v Ternopil' [Zarvanytsia icon arrived to Ternopil]" (2014), for a news report on the arrival of the Zarvanytsia Miraculous Icon of the Mother of God at Ternopil. All these examples are from western Ukraine.

9. The approach of studying people with perceived supernatural abilities through the prism of their constructed charisma is inspired by Lindquist (2005). This approach is also informed by Clifford Geertz who expands Max Weber's view of charisma as a divine gift (Weber 1947: 358-359), arguing that it can also be constructed and reinforced with the help of various symbolic elements and patterns of behavior (Geertz 1983: 129-137).

Baba (1926-2011), an Indian guru and spiritual leader. While the two have never met, Olena considers him to be her spiritual teacher. This syncretism appears to help both practitioners and their clients. On the one hand, things familiar, such as elements of vernacular Christianity, help to establish comfort between healers and their clients. On the other hand, the “other,” namely, foreign cultural images, serve as powerful tools that symbolically provide the healer with access to a world that is not widely familiar and, thus, less accessible to the client. This strengthens the healer’s charisma and potentially reinforces the client’s belief in the healer’s abilities. For example, two of Yaroslava’s clients that I interviewed in the summer of 2012 each mentioned that they were impressed by the fact that the healer had studied under the supervision of Tibetan monks. To them, it reinforced their belief in Yaroslava’s knowledge of the field of alternative healing.

Most of the people who shared their experiences of using the services of folk healers or fortune tellers, revealed that they searched for help from these practitioners for mainly two reasons. Some respondents had no trust in the official system (especially when dealing with health-related or financial matters) while others had exhausted all existing sources of help. When people find themselves powerless and/or not able to resolve their problems in the familiar world with the help of available resources, they appear to become drawn to things foreign (or exotic), placing a great amount of hope in them.

In the new Mystical Rose ritual, the “other” works in a similar way. The organized church constitutes a part of the women’s everyday life, the world with which they are familiar. Church prayers, unfortunately, are not always answered or, at least, not always as quickly as one may wish. When the familiar setting appears hopeless, the world of the “other” may provide a powerful alternative source of hope.

The Mystical Rose represents the “other,” the world of the West. In the eyes of Ukrainian villagers, Germany is not only a Western country, but also a country idealistically associated with the highest quality of life and an unreachable luxurious world.<sup>10</sup> Extensive out-migration, legal and

10. I experience similar sentiments expressed towards me whenever I visit a village in Ukraine. The mere fact that a person is from Canada elevates them to the highest social status in the eyes of many people (despite whatever status that person may have in Canada). It is worthwhile to mention that Ukrainian villagers’ view of the West is less idealized than it may have been even a decade ago. European countries such as Greece, Italy, and Portugal are now perceived in more realistic terms as a result of the widespread labor out-migration of Ukrainians villagers from western Ukraine to these countries.

illegal, to Western Europe and North America, both following the end of World War II and especially since the post-Soviet economic crisis of the 1990s, has significantly contributed to the establishment of this image of the West. Although the majority of those who have travelled outside of Ukraine for work in the past two decades have ended up in menial low-paying jobs, their income is a significant (and often the only) source of financial support for their families back in Ukraine. Today it is difficult to find a household in western Ukraine that does not have a family member or acquaintance working abroad (Shostak 2006).<sup>11</sup>

Ukraine has regularly received humanitarian aid from the West since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Ukrainian mass media frequently features stories of people, especially children, whose serious illnesses could not be treated in Ukraine but who were cured by Western doctors. Announcements of fundraising campaigns for individuals who require medical help in the West often appear on TV, in newspapers and in social media. Since the idea of the West providing help for Ukraine is already part of public consciousness, the fact that the Mystical Rose statuette came from Germany reinforced its miraculous nature in the eyes of the villagers.

### **Consecrating the Domestic in a Vernacular Way**

One may wonder why the pious women of Horodnytsia did not choose to pray to the Mystical Rose in their fully functioning local church. There is no longer a fear of persecution for religious beliefs or the need to conduct religious rituals at home, as was the norm during Soviet times. The women's initiative even received the blessing of the local priest, whose home was the altar's first destination. This leads us to another striking aspect of the Mystical Rose ritual, namely, the gender dynamics that it communicates, especially in relation to sacred space and access to the sacred.

The following discussion represents my own, etic, perspective, informed by methodological approaches developed by performance studies scholars. As Debora Kapchan summarizes, “[p]erformances are aesthetic practices – patterns of behavior, ways of speaking, manners of bodily comportment – whose repetitions situate actors in time and space, structuring individual and group identities” (Kapchan 1995: 479). While observing the performance of the Mystical Rose ritual, I paid attention not only to what the Horodnytsia women were saying during and about the ritual but also to their body

11. For detailed discussions of various aspects of labor out-migration from Ukraine to the West as well as new Ukrainian diaspora communities in the West, see Markov (2012), Hodovanska (2013), and Shostak (2006), among others.

language and patterns of behavior both within the ritual frame and beyond.

While observing the ritual at Svitlana's home, I had the feeling of being in a church. This feeling was influenced by the way the home space was organized and by the way the women approached the sacred in Svitlana's living room. Both closely resembled the situation in an Eastern Christian church but with a striking reversal of gender roles. In the traditional interior of Ukrainian Orthodox and Catholic churches, sacred space is divided into various functional areas, and each member occupies a specific place corresponding to his or her mission and gender.

Eastern Christian priests are exclusively males. Only priests and male altar servers have access to the sanctuary, the consecrated area around the altar, which, in turn, is the most sacred place in the church interior. The sanctuary is separated from the rest of the church space by an icon wall. Thus, it is only these men who have access to the most sacred.<sup>12</sup> Other men, even when not charged with performing church-related duties, may be allowed to cross the icon wall.<sup>13</sup>

However, while Ukrainian village women are empowered as religious ritual orchestrators in their homes and larger village settings, the situation differs in the actual church, where women do not obtain direct access to the sacred. In fact, traditionally, women are expressly forbidden to approach the sanctuary. They can sing in the church choir and this service can bring them recognition but it still does not give them access to the most sacred part of the church. Most often women's roles are limited to those of church cleaners and decorators, and this is the only time they can cross the boundary into the otherwise forbidden sanctuary. In contrast, under the

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12. This idea is partly inspired by Stanley Tambiah who observes a similar model of ritual in the annual religious rite of changing the clothes of the Emerald Buddha in Thailand (Tambiah 1985: 336-8). Only the Thai King may perform this ritual and is, thus, the only one who has access to the sacred.
  13. On one occasion, in 2012, I brought my three-year-old son to a church in my parents' hometown. We entered the church when there was no service, but there were several people inside praying. The church is located in one of the most populated parts of the city so it often remains open for people throughout the entire day. While I showed the young boy the spectacular iconographic paintings on the walls, he was inspired by the large open space and began to run through the church. At one point he ran into a sanctuary door and it opened. Before I had a chance to think about what step to take next, a man, who had been standing nearby, quickly ran into the sanctuary and retrieved my son. As I thanked the man, the expression on his face suggested that he was very pleased to help me since, as a woman, I was not allowed into the sanctuary.

influence of political feminism, this situation is changing slowly in some Ukrainian Catholic diaspora churches where woman can occasionally be found performing the role of altar servers.<sup>14</sup>

The contrast between Ukraine and the diaspora reminds us of the importance of understanding religion in vernacular terms not only in domestic settings but also within institutional churches that are widely viewed as representing official religion. Primiano goes as far as arguing that while “there are bodies and agencies of normative, prescriptive religion, but there is no objective existence of practice which expresses ‘official religion’” (Primiano 1995: 46). Not a single religious leader in the world maintains an “official” religious life in a pure form. Even though leaders represent and promote the most institutional norms of their religious traditions, they all practice vernacularly; “[t]here is always some passive accommodation, some intriguing survival, some active creation, some dissenting impulse, some reflection on lived experience that influences how these individuals direct their religious lives” (Primiano 1995: 46). By allowing women to cross the boundary into the most sacred, the diaspora Ukrainian Catholic church is accommodating the social and political dynamics of Western society where the issue of men and women’s equality in all spheres of life has been widely addressed.

This situation is vernacular exclusively in the diaspora context, however. A woman entering the sanctuary of a church would be perceived as very strange in Ukraine, where feminism is largely a foreign concept, especially in rural settings. In terms of spiritual hierarchy, the subordinate position of women in churches remains unchanged. Everyday relationships between women and church priests are often also hierarchical. For example, in the villages of western Ukraine, women are expected to fulfill various requests from the clergy, such as cooking for important church guests. Their work is not usually recognized as special but is often taken for granted. I witnessed one such example during my fieldwork, when, on one occasion, I joined a crew from a regional television station who were reporting on a village parish feast day celebration. While our visit was not expected by the local priest who was coordinating the festivities, he appreciated having the television crew present because it would give his community wider exposure. Wishing to act as a good host, the priest contacted a group of local women and requested they prepare some food for us. At the end of the festivities,

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14. I observed this in the Dormission of the Most Holy Mother of God Ukrainian Catholic Church in Edmonton, Alberta, a church that I often attended between 2007 to 2011.

we were served an elaborate multi-course dinner at the home of one of the women. Knowing that the women were not paid for their work and that the priest had unexpectedly taken them away from their own routines, I felt very uncomfortable, and repeatedly asked the women to stop serving and instead share the food with us. They refused, treating their work as a norm, as part of their church service.

Unlike in the church, in Svitlana's house it was women, not men, who orchestrated the entire ritual and organized the ritual space. However, they followed the church model of spatial organization. By placing the altar in their houses, women consecrated their domestic spaces, developing a close relationship with the sacred. As Kay Turner points out, "the home altar is an instrument for the perpetuation of productive relationships because it marks the site where communication (the active means of establishing and maintaining relationships) between deities and humans takes place" (Turner 1982: 310). The Mystical Rose altar also established a boundary between the sacred and the mundane areas of the house. Svitlana's living room acquired the status of a kind of sanctuary. It was the lady of the household, along with her female relatives, friends, and neighbors, who had close access to the sacred. Svitlana's position as a hostess was special as she was the only person to kneel in close proximity to the altar during the prayer period.

Svitlana's own role resembled that of a priest while men performed secondary roles, similar to those carried out by women in the church. The only men present during the ceremony were Svitlana's and Marta's family members: their husbands, brothers and sons. They did not participate in the prayer ritual. They were only passively involved, fulfilling various tasks assigned by women: carrying piles of wood, pails of water, lifting heavy objects, and performing last minute shopping. I even observed Svitlana raising her voice slightly at her husband (who is very talkative), asking him not to distract her from her important errands. The situation in Svitlana's house was somewhat similar to the tradition of making an altar to St. Joseph that Kay Turner and Suzanne Seriff observed in a Sicilian-American community in Texas (Turner and Seriff 1993). Turner and Seriff view this ritual not as women's patriarchal subordination to men embodied by the male patron but "a kind of communitywide expression of the power of women's work..." where women do not rely on men's acknowledgement and where men's roles are secondary. In a similar way, the Horodnytsia women subverted what Jessica Senebi refers to as the "supposed insignificance of domesticity" (2009: lv) by consecrating their home space.

Folklorists have widely addressed the theme of subversion while discussing female folklore from a woman's perspective in a variety of contexts. They have shown how women across the world challenge dominating patriarchal systems by selectively maintaining, altering and creating traditions.<sup>15</sup> They have come to the conclusion that, as Jessica Senebi puts it:

Folklore is an accessible tool of subversion because the vernacular – common knowledge – belongs to the people. Folk art forms do not require special training or certification from outside the community. They do not require special equipment and expense. Profoundly accessible, folk arts and folklore are critical tools for disrupting, challenging, and resisting powerful social systems social injustice. (2009: xvii)

The women in Horodnytsia created a new folk tradition for themselves. The vernacular Christian church provided them with a familiar model of spiritual hierarchy. By applying this model within their home settings the women appeared to symbolically empower themselves, subverting institutional church patriarchy. The organization of the ritual within the home domain instead of the church setting allowed this subversion to take place.

Folklorists interested in gender issues problematize the dynamic categories of private versus public space in relationship to women's folklore. They have demonstrated that the theoretical binary opposition of private female versus public male spaces is not clear cut and should not be essentialized. In practice, the dynamics between the two categories are rather complex, and the boundaries between them are often crossed in creative ways (Greenhill and Tye 1997: 168-170).<sup>16</sup> In the case of the Mystical Rose ritual, a relationship between the public space of the church and the private sphere of home is another example of such complexity. In Ukrainian village society, the church is not associated exclusively with things spiritual. It is a very, if not the most, important public social institution. Forbidding women to cross the boundary into the sanctuary

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15. Among numerous other scholars, Laura Olson and Svetlana Adonyeva explicitly show this in their study of Russian village women, whose contexts are very similar to the one addressed in this study. See Olson and Adonyeva (2012). Oksana Kis (2013), in her discussion of various categories of women and stages of their life cycles (such as daughters, wives, and perceived witches, among several others) also emphasizes the complex system of gender roles in the Ukrainian village society.
16. Among other studies, see, for instance, the following contributions to Greenhill and Tye (1997): Boyd (1997), Desplanques (1997), Klassen (1997), and Shantz (1997).

of the church diminishes their public position. Within the Mystical Rose ritual, the Horodnytsia women subverted the dominating spiritual power of men by not only consecrating their private homes but by also turning them into public spaces where they were in control.

Within the newly created public space, they even built their own hierarchical system that, in turn, is associated with reputation and honor. The number of people attending the home hosting the statuette of the Mother of God appeared to be a signifier of prestige and the hostesses' reputation in her community. Svitlana's special position within the ritual was not determined simply by the basic fact that she was the hostess of the altar at the time. It was also reinforced by the large turnout that mirrored her reputation in the community. Svitlana felt very pleased that her fellow villagers were willing to sacrifice their time and that prayers at her house were well attended. This was a kind of earned respect. There are similar parallels in the attendance patterns in traditional Ukrainian churches; a good priest usually draws more people to church.

The women of Horodnytsia subvert the dominating patriarchal power unselfconsciously. Their efforts are unlikely to lead to a major social shift in the village power structure. Unlike their North American diaspora counterparts, whose liberating efforts are informed and shaped by the larger political feminism in their societies, the Horodnytsia women do not have this kind of influence in their vernacular setting. Not only do these women subvert existing power dynamics unselfconsciously, they do it in a very subtle, implicit way. Prior to proceeding with honoring the Mystical Rose, they asked their priest for his approval and permission. In other words, they empowered themselves by deferring to the dominating spiritual power. This situation somewhat resonates with that of Pentecostal female preachers in southern Indiana and central Missouri studied by Elaine J. Lawless. Female preachers make their way to the pulpit by stressing traditional roles and duties preached by the church rather than emphasizing the liberating nature of the practice (Lawless 1993).

I do not know if the statuette of the Mother of God actually helped the girl who was sick. However, it appears that it provided the local women with some essentially healing experiences, enabling them to review their marginalized positions in a highly patriarchal society. By domesticating the sacred, the women consecrated their domestic space and turned it into a public venue, establishing their power through the development of close contact with the sacred (and the miraculous) that they could not achieve in the context of the traditional church. The statuette of the Mystical Rose

not only provided hope in the context of turbulent socio-economic times but also allowed the women to feel socially *important and empowered*. It gave them a voice.

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