

LAMENTS AND RITUAL SONGS OF RUSSIAN PEASANT WOMEN

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Lamentation and ritual wailing were a large part of the lives of Russian peasant women. For centuries, laments and songs pervaded every significant life event they witnessed or participated in. Songs were sung at work, at rest, alone and with friends. Other songs were restricted to rituals such as wedding ceremonies, funerals or *khorovody* (games and dances). Recurring themes in the songs included fate, unhappy love, farewells, matchmaking and marriage. The richest of the songs pertain to love and family life (Reeder, *Volga* 11). Traditionally the songs were performed by women and during the last few centuries chanted laments have been exclusively a genre of women's poetry (Sokolov 226). The oral tradition of ritual laments followed women from the time they were young girls through rites of matchmaking, marriage, motherhood, and death. These ritual laments educated them in society's traditions and expectations of them.

Matchmaking

Tragically, financial difficulty prevented many hopeful couples from marrying for love. When parents married off a son it was primarily an economic consideration, because their

household acquired a new worker who could in turn produce additional new workers. An ideal bride from the parents' point of view was healthy, wealthy and strong. Because of these financial pressures, the selection of a partner was not always based on love. Therefore, especially from the girl's perspective, marriage was not necessarily a happy event. A girl had little or no say in the matter. Generally, all she had to look forward to was a life of labor with a man she likely did not love. This predicament helps to explain why most verses in wedding songs express the bride's sorrow about her fate (Reeder, *Volga* 17).

Girls hoped to marry someone equal in age who would be a friend. Unfortunately the parents often made a decision contrary to their daughter's desires. Young girls were sometimes betrothed to old men or to very young boys. Because of great age discrepancies and prohibitive traditions of patriarchal life, many of the girls' songs were melancholy and described unhappy love. For example:

Now, my own, my dear father,
Accept my affectionate words,
Affectionate and grateful.
Do not betroth me to an old man,
An old husband will be my ruin,
Misfortune upon my poor little head,
My maidenly beauty I shall lose,
All my freedom and joy

(Alexander 71).

And again:

Daddy, daddy,

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Oh, daddy of mine!
Receive, receive,
Receive my caressing words,
Look favorably on these friendly words:
Don't give, don't give,
Don't give me in marriage to a young boy!
A young boy, a young boy,
To the death will I not love a young boy,
With a young boy will I not take a stroll!....

(Reeder, *Volga*, 150)

The songs also show her heartbreak at the betrayal of a lover who has married another. Sometimes a girl threatened and even vowed to get rid of her rival as well as an unfaithful lover (13).

Yet many songs were about the happy fulfillment of genuine affection and mutual trust. Often love did lead to marriage. If a girl loved her betrothed, so much the better. However, even in circumstances when the groom selected his own bride out of love and his parents approved, the girl still faced the miserable fate of entering her future husband's unkind family (18). In such cases the bride-to-be lamented leaving her parents. This honored her parents and expressed her love for them (Worobec 159).

Laments began as early as the matchmaking ceremony, cued by the rituals of the parents and matchmaker. When the groom's matchmaker came to the bride's home to obtain consent from her parents, both the guest and the hosts spoke in coded language. For example, the guests would call themselves hunters in search of a marten. After their coded exchange and much negotiation, the parents led out the bride and presented her to

the matchmaker. When the presentation ended the bride sat in a corner or at the table and wailed (Reeder, *Volga* 19). The basic message of her wailing was a request that her father wait to give her away. She called herself a green reed or an unripe berry, indicating that she was unprepared to enter matrimony. Song lyrics reveal her apprehension:

So young, I am so very young,
So green, I am so very green,
A very young girl I am,
Who has no mind of her own....
My white face is not yet mature,
My fair braids are not yet full.
I lack mind, I lack reason,
I lack sense, I lack mind,
I just cannot imagine at all,
How shall I live among strangers,
With my silly, simple mind...

(Alexander 53, 56)

After the matchmaker left, the bride continued to grieve. She appealed to her father, asking if she was a poor worker or had somehow disgraced him. She asked her mother why she did not dissuade her husband from marrying away their daughter. She cried to her brothers, telling them to take back the gifts of the matchmaking ceremony from her future in-laws. She also informed her her sisters that they were lucky to be maidens for a while longer. She even cried to her girlfriends, begging for one last chance to talk with them (53–62).

She lamented for entire days on end, standing with a shawl or veil over her head (Worobec 158). Initially her

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laments addressed the home she must leave, but eventually shifted to the cruel new home she must enter. For example:

They are making me marry a lout
With no small family.
Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh dear me!
With a father, and a mother,
And four brothers
And sisters three.
Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh dear me!
Says my father-in-law,
“Here comes a bear!”
Says my mother-in-law,
“Here comes a slut!”
My sisters-in-law cry,
“Here comes a do-nothing!”
My brothers-in-law exclaim,
“Here comes a mischief-maker!”
Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh dear me! (159)

These lyrics emphasize that life with the in-laws could be miserable. In the song, the future bride anticipated that her in-laws would criticize her, question her chastity, imply that she was burdensome to the family, and label her as a mischief-maker. All these insults indicated that she would be forever beholden to her husband's family. They would think that she was beneath them and more trouble than she was worth.

A girl's trepidation at moving in with her in-laws was more than ritual, it was real. Her in-laws could be overbearing and could demand strenuous work. If her hus-

band's family lived far from her own family, the new bride was essentially isolated from her former home and friends. Songs show that the bride often asked an older married woman, perhaps an aunt, for counsel on how to live with her in-laws. This dialogue was sung in a question-and-answer style. The bride asked her aunt how she should behave in the new home. The aunt taught her to humble herself and to keep silent (Reeder, *Volga* 20–21). An example of their conversation is:

I will tell you even more, little dove,
About the strange far-off land,
About that cursed evil place.
It is difficult, my little dove,
Difficult to live in a strange land,
Difficult to live among strange people.
You must learn how to live,
You must understand how to speak.
You must call the old man uncle,
And call the old woman auntie,
You must extol the young ones by name,
By their patronymic¹

(160–161).

In general, ritual lamenting was part of a cultural norm that taught women to be subordinate to their husbands and in-laws (Worobec 159).

The future bride and her friends celebrated *devishnik*, a party celebrating maidenhood, prior to the wedding. The bride-to-be was the only heavyhearted person at this party, unless a professional wailer was invited to attend and lament with the bride. The bride sang

1 Patronymic: in Russian, a name derived from the father's name. It is a sign of respect, used to address adults who are not relatives, close friends or children.

songs for her friends, inviting them to eat and to remember how lucky they were that it was not yet their turn to marry. The most important part of this ceremonial party was removing the maidenly *krasota*, a headdress made of wide ribbon and decorated with beads or pearls. The bride walked around her parents' hut, singing to her family and friends to admire her *krasota*. Then she asked her parents to remove the *krasota* for her. The parents both refused in turn, and eventually a younger brother or sister removed the ribbon. Once removed, she begged him or her to return it to her. Sometimes he or she did return it, but eventually she had to admit that it was no longer her lot to wear the *krasota*. At this point the bride sang a song and gave her *krasota* to her younger sister, to her fiancé's sister or chose to take it to an icon in the church. After the marriage ceremony the new bride received a woman's headdress to replace the one she gave up (Alexander 71–78).

The fiancé's brother or friend would arrive in the evening of the *devishnik*, bringing gifts for the future bride which he exchanged with a gift for the groom. The guests at the party gave the bride-to-be gifts of money while they drank. At the conclusion of the *devishnik* celebration, the bride and her girlfriends went around the village singing farewell laments under the windows of the future bride's relatives. Then she and her friends went out together and continued to sing.

Preparation for the Wedding Ceremony

The morning of the wedding the bride would awaken her girlfriends with laments. She told them of terrible dreams she had, wherein strange people led her away

from her home into a forest and how she saw her father's house crumble (Reeder, *Volga* 22).

I spent the night, a young girl,
I spent the night sleeping little,
Many things did I see in my dreams.
There appeared to me, a young girl,
Many steep mountains,
Many quick rivers,
Many dark forests,
Many wild beasts.
What are the steep mountains--
My grief-sorrow,
What are the quick rivers--
My burning tears;
What are the dark forests--
A strange, far-off land,
What are the wild beasts--
Strange, unknown people (Alexander 159).

If the grieving maiden slept in, her girlfriends woke her up. They would tell her how much work there was to do and how much they had already done (Reeder, *Volga* 22). This was a reminder that she would no longer have time to sleep in, but must rise early to work.

In preparation for the wedding ceremony the bride's girlfriends accompanied her to a bath in the *banya* (bathhouse). This bath was a significant ritual with many songs. The songs tell of the bride washing away her maidenly beauty (23).

We, white swans, set out
For the hot steam bath
For your maiden *krasota*.²

² *Krasota* in this lament refers to the Russian word for beauty.

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We opened the narrow doors,
Walked in quietly;
We took your maiden *krasota*
Wrapped it in a towel...(167)

The friends saved some of the bath water to make a *pirog* (dumpling). Later they gave the *pirog* to the groom to eat. This helped to ensure that he would love his bride (Worobec 161). After the bath they prepared the bride-to-be for the wedding by braiding her hair and dressing her. A peasant maiden wore a single braid, symbolizing her father's home. The girls undid the future bride's single braid, singing in place of the bride as they parted her hair into two braids and adorned and dressed her (Alexander 63–65). A married woman's two braids symbolized the home of her father and the home of her husband.

In wedding attire, the bride wailed in her room and awaited the groom. She begged everyone to help her avoid her tragic fate, In the songs the groom was always portrayed as an enemy and tyrant (Reeder, Volga 23). At this point the bride made one final attempt to persuade her father to change his mind and save her (Worobec 164).

During the wedding feast the soon-to-be bride sang still more songs, one of which she performed while pouring wine for the guests. This was called lamenting for a glass of wine." The groom did not accept the drink she offered him until she bowed at his feet.

There were joyous songs at the wedding to contrast the bride's laments. These songs praised the bride, the groom, the parents, and guests. After the wedding, the bride and girlfriends sang farewell songs, then everyone

went to the groom's home where young people threw grain and hops on the new couple and sang more songs (Reeder, *Volga* 24-25).

Although it seems like an incredible amount of singing, Russian peasants did not sing themselves hoarse at each wedding. There were numerous songs, but they were interspersed throughout many other rituals, and the whole ceremony was spread over several days. The match-making and marriage ritual included witty remarks from the best man, riddles, prayers, eating and drinking. Alex Alexander calls the musical commentary at weddings "reminiscent of a classical Greek chorus, particularly the songs of the girlfriends" (Alexander 50). The comparison to Greek tragedy is appropriate because the mournful songs far outnumber the lighthearted ones. Alexander Pushkin himself wrote that Russian "wedding songs are doleful, like a funeral wail" (Reeder, *Volga* 25).

In accord with the laments of the wedding, the family songs were also full of complaints about a bitter life. Wives often found their new homes oppressive or difficult and sang about wanting to go home again. They sang of their fear that when they returned home no one would recognize them because they had aged.

Trouble between the husband and wife themselves, though, was worse than difficult in-laws. Difference in age often contributed to this trouble. Ethnographers have recorded songs about wives drowning, burning, or hanging their aged husbands to get rid of them.

Last evening they deceived Dunja,
To an old man, to an old man they married her.
She lived not long with the old man,

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In all only three days.
On the fourth day, on the fourth day she calls him to
the field:
“Let’s go, old man, let’s go, old man, to the bare field!
In the bare field, in the bare field is a blue sea,
And on an island, and on an island a flower has
bloomed,
Go, old man, go, old man, and pick the flower.”
“I’m afraid, wife, I’m afraid, wife, that I’ll drown!”
“It’s most likely, old man, it’s most likely, old man,
the devil won’t grab you.”
The first step, the first step is up to his knees,
The second step, the second step came up to his
waist,
The third step, the third step came up to his neck,
He cries: “Wife,” he cried, “wife, I’m drowning!”
“Thank God, thank God, you’re drowning,
Thank God you’re drowning!”

(Reeder, *Lyrics* 136)

Motherhood

Although most of these songs are sad, a few are
happy. The happy songs describe a content husband and
wife, a wife who always sings and dances, or rejoicing at
the birth of a son.

...In Mixail’s home there was joy,
There was joy.
In Ivanovich’s home there was joy,
There was joy.
Why in his home
Was there joy, was there joy?
His young wife a son
Has borne, has borne,

Writings

And the sweet Theodosia-darling a son
Has borne, has borne,
Sweet Petrovna-- darling a son
Has borne, has borne (131).

Women sang these songs as lullabies to their children to put them to sleep or to calm them. Since the purpose of these songs was to calm children down, soothing rhythms and rhymes were more important than a coherent message. The lyrics told of animals such as a cat or a pigeon. Sometimes they told of a frightening wolf that would eat the baby if he/she would not go to sleep. Lullabies were often sung by sisters or old women who cared for the baby while the mother worked. These caretakers likely added a comic element to the frightening parts of songs. As a whole, the cradle songs expressed tender love for the baby (Reeder, *Volga* 31).

Death

Surprisingly, there are numerous songs fortelling a baby's death. This may be because village life was hard, and death often came as a relief. Women protected themselves from pain by putting an emotional distance between themselves and the deaths of their children (Ransel 120). Causes of a child's death included the evil eye, the will of God, bad luck, unsanitary conditions and poor feeding practices (122–23). All these factors created a high mortality rate: half of all peasant children died before age five.

Funeral laments were not exclusively performed by women. In early centuries men and women both lamented at funerals. These songs narrated the circum-

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stances around the death, while thanking the coffin maker, asking the deceased where he or she will go and extolling the deceased's virtues. Then the mourners asked the deceased why he/she abandoned his or her loved ones.

The poor mother had no time to enjoy her child,
To admire her dear daughter,
For left her the little, white swan!
Do not hide it, tell us, my little swallow with the
pretty braid,
Upon whose advice are you leaving us?

(Alexander 104)

There were special chants for the trip to the cemetery, lowering the coffin, assuring that the grave would be watched over and cared for and for the pretended search for the deceased in his house (95–97).

Some of the expressions in the songs were contradictory. For example, the mourners pled with the deceased to not forget his family, but to keep it safe and to visit it, yet they protected themselves from the deceased's return by laying his or her feet pointing toward the door to facilitate his or her departure (Sokolov 224–25). This can be explained as a means of honoring the dead, similar to the bride who was willing to be married, but lamented all the same in order to honor her parents. By asking the deceased to visit they imply that he or she will be missed, even though they do not want his or her spirit to remain attached to the house.

Laments were a necessary part of a funeral. Professional wailers were often invited to attend and assist in mourning a death. A good wailer followed the proper

order for the funeral laments, although there was room for improvisation within the limits of the established style. Every woman needed to know how to chant, for the kinswomen of the deceased always lamented at funerals. On the other hand a wailer could be hired at any time to lament in the place of a widow, children, a brother or a son.

Funeral lament styles varied by region. South and Central Russian provinces' laments were stylized by sorrowful cries, appeals, and ejaculations. In the northern parts they related more of how death came, how the relatives reacted, the social setting, and the misfortunes of the family resulting from the death. Within the customs, wailers could show their talent at expressing emotion as well as describing life (228). Improvisation allowed an expression of deep feeling and left room for artistic creativity.

Professional wailers were also common at farewells for conscripted soldiers (235). From 1794 until 1874, soldiers were typically recruited for twenty-five years. Their long-term absence was similar enough to death that their departure was, in a sense, a funeral. The wife left behind, through no fault of her own, acquired a lower social status and less rights than a widow. She sang laments of her own about her fate of poverty without a provider.

I now have no part
 In the village allotments,
 No share in the building,
 The clothes, and the cattle,
 And these are my riches:
 Three lakes of salt tear-drops,
 Three fields sown with grief!

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(Farnsworth 63)

The wailer at the conscript's departure helped emphasize the tragic situation of the family.

One famous wailer, Irina Andreyevna Fedosova, created extensive poetry. Folklore collector E. V. Barsov recorded over 30,000 lines of her wedding, funeral and other laments, and published them in 1872 (Sokolov 229). These are a wonderful record of peasant life in the middle of the nineteenth century. Popular lamentations continued on into the Soviet era, noticeably lacking the religious coloration which was replaced with civil and revolutionary motifs (669).

Folklorists, linguists, ethnographers and composers did not scientifically collect the epic poems and laments of the Russian peasantry until the nineteenth century. However, transcriptions of Russian folk songs date back to the seventeenth century. Originally, the songs and laments were not intended to be read, but were strictly an oral tradition among the peasants. Later outsiders came and wrote them down (Reeder, *Volga*, 1).

Through these records we can see the importance of ritualistic laments in peasant life, from the cradle to the grave, and the influence this poetry had on the attitudes and beliefs of peasants. The songs influenced peasant women to subordinate themselves to their husbands and in-laws and to expect a hard life.

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