

Drawing Kolyada to oak for luck and good harvest

The Minsk Times correspondent visits village which has preserved unique Slavonic custom aimed to summon luck and rich harvest

By Victor Andreev

Folk customs have long been seen as something exotic. Only a few enthusiasts retain the knowledge of such rituals, showing the soul of a village. For urbanites, such customs are like spectacular performances, organised by amateur groups, presenting the essence of rituals which usually are found only in folk history books.

Nina Klimovich's family has a different view, as she has recorded recollections of Christmas celebrations, having interviewed elderly people in her village of Noviny in the Berezino District. She's been observing the unusual 'Drawing Kolyada to Oak' custom for 15 years now, follow-

ing rituals handed down through generations. Each year, from January 6th-21st, residents of Noviny and its neighbouring villages celebrate the season in their own way — reminiscent of Gogol's *Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka*.

According to Ms. Klimovich, Kolyady celebrations once took place across the whole Berezino District and beyond — in the Minsk and Mogilev regions. On January 21st, a wheel or sheaf (the Kolyada) was placed in an old tree — either a linden or a willow — to summon luck and a good harvest.

Ms. Klimovich doesn't know how or why this custom appeared but, as it remains only in her native

village, it inspired her to do all she could to preserve it, adjusting some aspects to be more practical. She heads the Radzina group (translated as 'family'), uniting brothers, sisters, neighbours and godparents. Everyone in the village is close, so have been happy to join her endeavour. As director of the rural house of culture, she enjoys authority in the district centre of Berezino and has brought fame to her locality.

The 'Drawing Kolyada to Oak' custom is now included on the State List of Historical and Cultural Heritage; it is unique countrywide and worldwide. Kolyada is drawn on oak in Noviny and the neighbouring villages: on Janu-

ary 21st. This finishes the cycle of Christmas celebrations (although the ritual predates the Christian celebration obviously). Pagan and Christian customs are intermixed in Noviny.

Ms. Klimovich has compiled a calendar of local Kolyady 'mysteries'; these include Lenten 'kutia' (coliphia), celebrated on January 6th-7th; 'Kutia' is a special porridge served on the Christmas table. On January 13th-14th, there is 'rich kutia' and, on January 19th, Theophany is marked. On January 21st, it's time to place the Kolyada sheaf in an oak tree.

Ms. Klimovich places a Kolyada sheaf — a pagan idol or an image of a birthing woman — in her home



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Kolyada on an oak, near Noviny village

from January 6th and then moves it to the local house of culture, so the whole village can join in the solemn event. Later, they take the sheaf to a lonely oak tree, situated far from the village. She explains, "There's a belief that the farther the tree stands from the village, the longer the flax of the new harvest will be." The villagers decorate the sheaf and the cart with embroidered rushnik cloths and the men pull the cart through the village to the ancient oak tree, followed by everyone singing festive songs. The strongest young man is entrusted to place the Kolyada sheaf in the oak tree, as the women dance around the trunk singing songs to Kolyada and reciting incantations.

Hostesses also place delicacies on their tables and take old brooms to cut away past sins with an axe — as done during Lent. The remains of the brooms are then thrown at a crossroads.

This year, Kolyada was celebrated in several villages: Noviny, Dmitrovichi, Lyubushany, Chizhakha and Mikhalevo. Kutia porridge remains were also thrown around the oak, calling in a good harvest. The villagers then sledged

and rolled in the snow. After bidding farewell to Kolyada, people begin to prepare for Maslenitsa.

Ancient customs aren't just theatrical performances in this region; they are part of life. People are generous and spiritual while guests always receive respect and honour.

The MT reference:

Kolyady customs remain in other regions of Belarus. 'Tereshka's Wedding' is performed in the Lepel District — a joyful wedding, attended by young boys and girls who search for partners. According to the custom, young girls place beetroot juice on their cheeks to look rosy and the bagpipe and harmonica are played.

Hero of Belarus Mikhail Vysotsky, an academician and the famous car designer, took part in the 'Kolyady Tsars' custom for the Old New Year (before the Great Patriotic War) in the Kopyl District's Semezhevo. He tells us that he still tries to visit his home village to recollect his youth. He is delighted that the old custom has acquired world fame.

In 2009, the custom was recognised by UNESCO's List of Intangible Cultural Heritage, showing that it needs urgent protection.



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'Drawing Kolyada to Oak' custom truly unique worldwide

Children raised and cared for as one's own

Family-style orphanages to open in Pinsk, as well as in Brest Region's Bereza and Stolin districts

By Olga Kobyakova

Three large houses have been built to house family-style orphanages, funded from regional and national budgets. Children are now being selected to move

from boarding institutions in the region.

At present, 20 family-style orphanages operate in the Brest Region, raising 136 children who lack their own parents. Kobrin Children's Village (a state so-

cial pedagogical institution) has been operating in the region for 17 years, caring for children in a family-style environment. It has 15 cottages, housing over 100 children with foster mothers.

Half of all such family-style

orphanages opening in recent years are hosted by private households, run by those who are keen to devote their life to giving unwanted children a true home. Eight family-style orphanages have been built in the

region in line with the *Children of Belarus* programme. Moreover, one has been funded by Belarusbank and another is a joint project by the Brest Regional Executive Committee and two Italian charities.