



Dzianis Ramaniuk

Rites, rituals, and cemeteries

Dzianis Ramaniuk, son of well-known Belarusian ethnographer Michas Ramaniuk, has been returning to the region contaminated by radioactivity from Chernobyl since 1987. Here, he describes the Christian and pagan rituals that are still practiced in the region, as well as his attempts to retrieve artefacts from the evacuated homes within the strict control zone.

During the expedition to Karmianski County in 1987, night overtook me on the road. I turned aside into a village and began to look for light in the windows in order, as usual, to seek a night's lodging. However, as I walked through the unusual quiet of the street, I saw no light anywhere. Then I decided to knock at every house. Only in one of them did a face look out cautiously through the window and fearfully say that the village had been evacuated. For fear of looters, of whom there were a great number around, they would not grant me a night's lodging. I spent that night in my car. Such was my first acquaintance with the Zone. [This includes here not only the Strict Control Zone, but also the entire area affected by the Chernobyl explosion — ed.]

From that time on, I have been coming here every year in search of treasures of material culture, which had been listed in my father's card index, but I did not find many of them. Only abandoned houses with photographs scattered on the floor, dirty towels, broken earthenware pitchers, fragments of fences, brick chimneys, concrete skeletons of byres. Sometimes, it was possible to find a village shown on an old map only from the line of electricity poles. They stand along the former roads without their wires and seem more like crosses on a *via dolorosa*.

When I was still a small boy, my father, the ethnographer Michas Ramaniuk, brought me on an expedition to these localities. This is where he came most frequently. Both because here the age-old rites and rituals of life were best preserved, and because he himself was a native of Kavali village in Brahin County. And because, perhaps, he had a presentiment that very soon all this would be gone.

The only things that survive here today are the cemeteries. Nothing else bears witness to the presence of man. In the cemeteries, time has stood still. Just as 20 years ago, they are tended and adorned with fresh ceremonial towels and flowers. Every year the paint is touched up, the plots refurbished, and the grass cut. Radunica, the springtime memorial day honouring one's ancestors, when the former inhabitants gather here, has now become a memorial day for their native villages and homes, wells and gardens. They gather here from all ends of Belarus, and thus this place where the dead are united brings together the living.

Last time, I watched Radunica in the evacuated village of Aravicy in Chojniki County within the 30-kilometre Exclusion Zone. A long line of cars was coming out from the cemetery, not towards the village but in the other direction. As if hypnotized by this sight, I followed them and found myself on the bank of the Prypiac River. Here, in an open place, tables had been laid and the benches by them were full of people. They were recalling departed relatives, past times and were happy to see one another. The bees that were buzzing around their hives in the cemetery trees reminded me of an archaic Palessian craft.

I had witnessed this craft in Azdami village in the Stolin region. The hives, which imitated tree trunks and formed a bees' paradise, had been produced here thousands of years ago. In the sixteenth century, there were more than 1 million hives in the whole of Belarus, which every year yielded more than half-a-million pods of honey. Today, this classic style of apiculture is preserved only here, in the regions that suffered gravely from Chernobyl. In Azdami, they visit the bees twice a year — in May and in the autumn, on Holy Cross Day (27 September). When the spring floods on the river Scviha inundate the villages here, the honey-gatherers make the tour of their hives in boats. Once, one farmer had up to forty hives hanging in trees far away in the forest. Now many of these hives remain as the only memorials to a vanished craft.

The rites and rituals that survive here down to our times are a special story. The best attended of those that take place in the Zone are the pilgrimages to holy springs. Twice a year, on the feast of the Holy Maccabees (14 August) and Epiphany (19 January), people pray around the springs, asking for health and protection from all kinds of troubles. Today, the greatest such trouble is the aftermath of Chernobyl. Maybe this is why this archaic rite of homage to the springs has not disappeared here but, on the contrary, has spread. In 1991, on Maccabees Day in the village of Rudnia-Bartalameyeuskaya, this ritual was observed by my father, who wrote:

Around 10.00, women started to assemble to pray and bless the gifts of nature, which they had brought with them. The word "bless" is only informal since each woman offered to the cross (which was draped with towels) and put on the bench her delicacies of nature, adding them to the heap, and then going back to the crowd for the likewise informal liturgy. Candles were lighted. One woman, who had a holy book, read a prayer, and they all sang a hymn together. After this liturgy, one of the women drew some water from the spring and sprinkled it on the vegetables and fruit. After this, they formed a line by the spring, not only those who had taken a direct part in the prayers but first and foremost children and girls from the town, who had come to visit their parents and had stood rather apart. Men were entirely absent from the prayers. However, they said, and it was certainly true, some of them at that moment were praying at home in front of the "holy corner".

My father told me that in some villages, this ritual was exclusively local: outsiders, in particular men, were not allowed there. Thus the first time that he attempted to be present and to photograph the rite in Rudnia-Bartalameyeuskaya, the women angrily chased him away. Once, I myself visited this village on Maccabees Day. Everything was as described above. However, there were very few children. The young families had left this

Chernobyl village several years before.

In summer 1999, I went looking for holy springs in Slauharad, Krasnapole, Chachersk, and Vietka counties. The spring, which there they call "Kluchy", was hidden on the edge of the forest, several kilometres from the still-populated village of Navilauka (Vietka County). An almost invisible path led me first to a stream about four metres wide, and its rapid flow guided me to a pilgrimage clearing where the stream began. This was an area free from trees with many small springs where the water bubbled as though boiling. At the source itself, two wellheads had been erected. There was a cross next to each of them and, on the ground, an icon was leaning against one of them. On the façade of the left-hand wellhead, I read the chalked inscription "Make us happy and prosperous, O God. Help Belarus!" This form of appeal to God was chosen precisely as a result of Chernobyl. The people of Navilauka and neighbouring villages already knew about their impending depopulation.

From the practical point of view, the building of wellheads over the springs so far from any dwelling is pointless; thus this form of popular self-expression has a spiritual content which gives the complex by the springs the role of an intermediary between human beings and God. The inhabitants of villages far distant from any church, when building a wellhead to a spring, make use of Christian attributes: they set up crosses similar to those in cemeteries, they hang icons, they light candles. As a result, they create the semblance of a shrine.

Two years later, Navilauka was empty. With difficulty, I found two old women who agreed to make use of my transport — they had problems walking — so that they would be able to pay their respects to the "Kluchy" for the last time. They collected all the necessary offerings, a ritual towel, money, and apples, and we drove to the springs. As soon as we reached the spot, the women recited the greeting: "Dear Kluchy, dear Kluchy, may God be your help!" They prayed, then they moved over the fallen trees to the "outlets" themselves — the spots at which the water comes to the surface — and with the words: "Dear Kluchy, dear Kluchy, thank you for your labour! We have brought you some goodies!" they threw in coins and sweets. Then they went to the crosses, draped the towel on them and put apples on the cross bars. Returning to the wellhead, they scooped up water in their mugs, first drank some, then washed their faces and then, only after all these ritual acts, did they fill some bottles to take home.

For centuries, at the end of the spring agricultural work, they performed the rite of "Bearing and burying the arrow", which was usually performed before Ascension. In many places in Homiel Palesie this has been preserved to the present day. On 9 June 2005, I was able to visit four villages in Vietka County, in each of which this rite had its own particular features.

In Janova village, I met with a crowd of people in traditional dress. Old women, youths, and girls danced round dances and, holding hands, went around the fields singing. Then, with particular enjoyment, they began to roll on the shoots of the young crops. Each participant buried in the soil coins saved especially for that day. The ritual of burying money and ribbons imitates a far more ancient one — of burying stone arrowheads. At the same time, a concertina-player who was accompanying the procession, without stopping the music, also took several steps onto the green ears. When I said it was a pity that the ears should be crushed, the old women assured me that the next day the field would be like new, the ears would be standing up straight as if they

had never been trampled.

In the village of Peralouka, the arrow rite began with the "Candle" ritual. A special large wax candle is dressed up like a person and is lighted. Then, coming closer to the "holy corner" and the "Candle", the women pray and sing hymns. At the end of the solemn litany, the hostess lays the table and all the guests put on it what they have brought with them. When the meal is over, the women go out into the yard.

As I was driving to the village of Staubun, while I was still far off, I heard the unmistakable sound of singing that bore witness to the start of the ritual of going out into the fields. And indeed, several dozen women came to meet me and took me by the hands. They approached the field and began to dance a round dance. After this, they went into the field to bury coins among the new ears.

In Niehlubka, large groups of people come together from both ends of the village. Many men also take part in the ritual here and, unlike neighbouring villages, the Niehlubka arrow ritual is distinguished by the presence of new heroes — the elders. Irrespective of their age, these are characters with staffs in their hands who drive away the children who tease them, stop passers-by and vehicles asking for money for a snack and take part in dances. On this occasion, there were two couples — men and women — dressed as elders. In the past, they used to end the rite casting their masquerade costumes away in the field. The musicians play the whole time without tiring and thanks to them, the celebration does not end with a typical round dance: everyone dances to the rollicking music.

Burying the arrow is one of the most ancient rites to combine Christian belief with elements of paganism and it is preserved only in this area. It is no wonder that researchers come here to observe it from all over the world. Alongside me in the village lanes and near the round dances, scholars from Moscow, St Petersburg, and Minsk were hard at work with their dictaphones, cameras, and video cameras.

For the past three years, I have tried to go round the most significant architectural monuments that fell within the range of the radiation, in particular, village buildings in the evacuation zone. The village of Dziam'ianki in Dobrus County both enchants with its landscapes that can be observed from a huge cliff on the edge, and disenchants with the huge palace in front of which stands a headless statue of Lenin. In Soviet times, this was an orphanage; now only memories remain of its former greatness. In the neighbouring village of Vyleva, only a plaque and the foundations are left from the former church. They transported it to Homiel and so, maybe, saved it from destruction. In the Zone, treasures of architecture have no defence against fires. My special trip to the Church of the Holy Saviour and St Nicholas in the village of Dudzichy in Chachersk County proved fruitless: it had burned down several months previously.

Since my childhood, when I went travelling with Father on his expeditions, the thing I liked best was to visit deserted houses and discover objects from the former life there. Pots and spindles, baskets and bast shoes [traditional shoes of the region woven from linden or birch bark that date from prehistoric times and are now obsolete — ed.], even icons draped with towels. I would take the best of them to Father and he would decide which were worth taking with us to put into the ethnographic collections. At that time, there were few deserted

houses. But now, without Father, who departed this life in 1997, I look at the villages in the Zone, and fall to thinking: how little we have been able to collect, study, and preserve from the ravages of time. During the past few years I have visited dozens of these villages and have seen endless numbers of abandoned houses. And, just as in the past, I go there in hopes of coming upon some interesting object. On one such expedition to the village of Viazhyshcha in Naraula County, I chanced on an exceptional specimen of a "coffer". This was a special form of Belarusian rural furniture that always occupied an important place in the interior of the house. A coffer was not just a chest for storing things, but an important aesthetic, even ritual object. As I could not transport so large an object in my own car, I went to the director of the Chojniki school museum, who also goes round the villages rescuing memorials of folk life and art, and asked him to take care of the coffer.

Unfortunately, my latest trips to the Chernobyl territories have borne witness to the total disappearance of this craft of coffer making. When the Chernobyl people were evacuated, they left their coffers behind: they were outmoded and cumbersome. This is why so few coffers have come into museum collections. But somewhere in the abandoned villages, they are still standing there, alone in the empty houses.

I remember how during the 1988 expedition, during a frightful heatwave with great clouds of dust, Father and I were driving round Cherykau and Krasnapol Counties. Far off in the fields we noticed an incomprehensible object and moved towards it. When we reached it, we were amazed at the unexpected sight. Before us stood a "stack" made up of hundreds of towels, aprons, and other cloths. In the course of time, they had formed a dense layer all round the cross, for what was before us was a cross to which offerings were made. Usually people gather at such places at the great Christian feasts or in times of misfortune. They come to make offerings and to seek help against disasters, whether of human or natural origin, and to ask for favours. They treat such places as shrines. Hence one so often hears about such crosses being inviolable.

On that far-off day, seeing the huge number of fresh propitiatory cloths, we decided to make special visits to the "oracle", which some unknown force kept standing there under their weight. During those first and most dangerous years after the accident, women came to it from the neighbouring villages. That is why there were so many new towels, as on the other ritual crosses we saw in the course of this journey. But nothing was able to fight off the radioactivity. Today these villages have vanished from the map and the cross is gone from the field. It seems that left alone, without the support of human thoughts and emotions, it too became a victim of Chernobyl.

When I look at the route of that expedition, I see that we went through areas that are now totally depopulated. Then no one spoke about the danger: there were no maps of contamination and, for those villages in the Mahileu area, evacuation was still some time away. I remember how we became bogged down on the sandy road through the fields on which, choking on radioactive dust, land-improvement workers were toiling unawares. And so there remains in my memory the ritual cross outside the lost village of Malinauka under the weight of a multitude of cloths, behind each of which lay someone's fate and hope.

This article is published in Dzianis Ramaniuk (ed.), Chernobyl, 2006.

Published 2006-04-21

Original in Belarusian

Translation by Vera Rich

Contribution by Index on Censorship

First published in *Index on Censorship* 2/2006: "The Hidden Histories of Chernobyl"
(forthcoming)

© Dzianis Ramaniuk/Index on Censorship

© Eurozine