Religion, Customs and Local Identity

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Religion, customs and local identity: bi-spirituality in rural Ukraine

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Abstract

Identity is a complicated matter in the religiously diverse Ukraine. Based on long term anthropological fieldwork carried out in a village in Odessa province, I explore the association between spirituality and identity. The focus is on the relationship between institutionalised religion (namely the Orthodox Church and the priest as its representative) and local customs (attributed to the Bulgarian heritage of the population). The distinction between 'customs' and 'religion' – an emic one to which both villagers and their priest subscribe – divides their spiritual loyalties and often creates tensions in the community. Such tensions, I suggest, are not a threat to community integrity as much as a means by which collective identity is managed. Bi-spirituality provides a means of belonging; contributing to the community's ethnic minority status in an emerging Ukrainian nation-state.

Introduction

The importance of religion in the construction and maintenance of identity has drawn considerable attention from anthropologists, amongst other social scientists, working on post-Socialist Europe.[1] The revival of religion has made possible the rebuilding of national identities, usually based on mono-religious/ethnic arrangements, in many post-Socialist countries. The case of Ukraine, however, is far more complex: various types of Orthodoxy compete for prominence, alongside other Christian denominations (including Greek Catholicism, Protestantism) as well as Judaism, Islam and other faiths. However, no one single confession has a monopoly in this predominantly Orthodox country (Mitrokhin 2001, 173). National generalisations are thus especially problematic in a country where regional diversity, based on religious, ethnic and cultural differences, intersect in complex ways to shape identity. My concern here is with a rural community in Odessa province, where the

branch of Orthodoxy that dominates is the Russian Orthodox Church – in line with the rest of the region - while at the same time villagers engage with other beliefs and practices that provide alternate forms of spirituality. It is the articulation between institutionalised religion, on the one hand, and particular forms of alternate spiritual practices on the other, which provides a foundation for local identity.

The material presented below is based on long-term anthropological fieldwork, carried out in a village I call 'Nagorna' which lies at the very southern-most part of Odessa province in Ukraine, only 40 km from the Danube River - which also constitutes the border with Romania - and seven km from the Moldovan border to the west.[2] Apart from this village, with a population of approximately 3,000, of whom the vast majority claim to be ethnic Bulgarians (approximately 94 per cent), there are six other villages in the same administrative district, also made up of largely mono-ethnic populations – five Moldovian and one Gagauz.[3] Reni, the district capital, which lies on the Danube river, is more mixed and in addition to large populations of Bulgarians, Moldovans and Gagauz, is also home to ethnic Russians and Ukrainians, amongst others. The villages in the district, while largely mono-ethnic, are – in terms of language – bilingual: Russian is the language spoken across ethnic boundaries; while within each village the local ethnic language, be it Bulgarian, Romanian or Turkish, is used.[4] The diversity of the region – in terms of ethnicity, language use and customs – is such that even villages in the area which belong to the same ethnic group, often display variations in terms of language and ritual practices that provide a source of local differentiation and identity (Kaneff and Heinz 2006, 11).

In the same way that Russian is the language of inter-ethnic communication, so the Russian Orthodox Church (henceforth ROC) forms the basis for shared religious activities and moral communities between the local populations.[5] The 118 Bulgarian families who reportedly first settled in Nagorna some two centuries ago[6] remain true to the Orthodox Church, despite decades of decline and lack of public sponsorship during Soviet times. The Orthodox Church regained its rural prominence in the region in the post-Soviet period and while nationally it has splintered into three branches - thus creating an important part of the plural religious tapestry of contemporary Ukraine [7] - in Nagorna, as in the rest of the district, the community remains loyal to the ROC, renamed as the Ukraine Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate), henceforth UOC(MP), which continues to dominate.

Thus, the Russian language and Russian Orthodox Church (now as the UOC-MP) provide a binding force between the villages and ethnicities in the district; while local languages and various other customary practices provide distinguishing features between them. This is more than just an interesting feature of the region, it is at the heart of tensions within the village and provides, I suggest, the key for understanding local identity.

In the first section, I begin with a discussion of bi-spirituality and emphasise that despite the acknowledged problems with the concept (e.g. Levin 1993; Rock 2007), the term still has some value as a tool that allows us to explore emic articulations of spirituality. The following two sections provide an empirical example: firstly, describing a local village

custom of praying for rain, and then secondly focusing on the opposition to this practice by the village priest and the villagers' response. This allows me, in the penultimate section, to look at how the tensions between the community and the priest, when considered within a broader historical and geopolitical context, are fundamental to understanding local identity. I suggest that bi-spirituality is a feature of the (historical) disjuncture between ethnicity and territory, as a result of Bulgarian migrants retaining their customs and settling in Russian lands where they adopted Russian Orthodoxy. The tensions resulting from this bi-spiritual arrangement plays a core role in the construction and management of a local identity. The wider significance of this case is addressed in the conclusion: in the context of heightened identity concerns – such as in contemporary Ukraine – bi-spirituality is an important means of identity management for groups that have no claims of membership based on straightforward alignments between ethnicity, territory and religion.

Village bi-spirituality: religion and customs

Tensions between the church and local populations are not a new phenomenon – as Chulos (2003,55) has shown in the case of Russia. *Dvoeverie*/double belief is a theme that runs through discussions from medieval Russian times to the present (e.g. see Conte [1992]; Levin [1993]; Rock [2007]; Vakhtin [2005]). These debates, in their widest scope, focus on the role and influence of Orthodox Christianity with respect to other spiritual practices. The perceived opposition between an 'imperfectly' adopted Orthodoxy and other forms of spirituality – pagan, popular religion etc. – is viewed as a source of hostility and conflict within communities (Levin 1993).

Double belief is understood in various ways. In her meticulous historiography, Rock (2007) convincingly shows how scholars have attributed the existence of alternate spiritual practices - frequently and sometimes inaccurately identified as 'pagan' - to a number of possible factors, including the 'backwardness and ignorance' of rural inhabitants or forms of resistance by villagers to institutionalised religion. Such explanations – a consequence of the imposition of contemporary concepts to other periods in history – are problematic because they are based on ideologically-loaded representations of the 'folk' and driven by overarching nation-building agendas. As Rock (2007, 157) notes: 'Every term we use – double-belief, pagan survivals […] – is tainted with ideological baggage and prone to conceptual flaws.' Rock's (2007, 159) critical insights are valuable in revealing how representations of double belief systems are academic constructions, often ideologically driven, which serve to reinforce stereotypes about the rural 'Other', while the terminology masks a range of diverse phenomenon and situations.

Despite such convincing critiques, the issue of religious 'purity' remains an ongoing interest in academic works discussing contemporary Ukraine. For example, the lack of commitment to religion in southern (and eastern) Ukraine is explained away by attributing to this region a 'low level' of religious culture – partly seen as a result of effective 'atheist propaganda' (Mitrokhin 2001, 174) – that gives rise to different forms of 'superstitious belief' (Mitrokhin 2001, 180). Such views are, in my opinion, unsatisfactory for a number of reasons including: conceptual difficulties in assessing the 'effectivity' of propaganda given

the possibility of hidden forms of opposition; the fact that low or non-participation in church life may be attributable to a wide range of factors; and the difficulty in distinguishing between 'pure' institutionalised religion and other 'less pure' forms. The positionality and (ideological) interests of the writer are also crucial considerations.

Adopting an ethnographic-based approach, which demands exploring bi-spirituality in context and from the perspective of those engaged in the practices, provides a different platform from which to examine the 'problem' of double belief. From this perspective debates about the degree and extent of religiosity seem ultimately a futile endeavour, since spirituality means different things in different contexts and is, more often than not, a mix of (institutionalised) religious practices with other spiritually-based beliefs. By taking into account the broader historical, geopolitical and cultural factors that constitute part of the setting for spiritual activities, alongside the way in which spirituality is played out in everyday life, I suggest that bi-spirituality is a means to manage communal membership on multiple levels.

'Spirituality', as used in this paper, is applied in its widest sense to refer to any beliefs and practices where some form of 'other world' or 'force' is implicated. If 'bi-spirituality' is when 'two distinct belief systems' co-exist in the same community (Rock 2007, 160), then my use of 'bi-spirituality' differs in an important way; I view it as not so much two 'distinct' belief systems co-existing in the same community, as much as the one system that operates as a duality. The difference is subtle but important. In much the same way that the community is bi-lingual – an analogy I return to again later in the paper – so bi-spirituality denotes a particular way of engaging in the community's spiritual world. Everyday negotiations between two sets of practices – denoted as 'religion' and 'customs' – constitute the community's spiritual world in totality. Importantly, this distinction is rooted both in empirical reality and forms the basis of my analysis. 'Religion' is used to refer to institutionalised religion – in the form of the UOC-MP with its long term established roots to the ROC – while 'customs' are locally specific practices attributed by the community to their Bulgarian ancestry.[8] These designations are those of the community, that is, they are emic terms used by villagers and the priest alike. I use this same terminology to highlight, analytically, delineations in the villager's spiritual world.

In treating religion and customs as emic terms with analytical value, I take the position that the coexistence of customs and religion is not a sign of local ignorance or backwardness, nor is it a local attempt to resist institutionalised exploitation or even an academic myth (Rock 2007). Instead, if we understand bi-spirituality in context, as Levin [1993] suggests we should, then the bi-spiritual system described below, founded on antagonisms in the community, provides a basis for identity and a sense of belonging that accommodates and satisfies the community's particular historical, territorial and ethnic alliances. A spirituality that is divided between religion and customs is founded on the villagers' ability to move between two sets of practices that together constitute their spiritual world: between their customary practices drawn from their ethnic (Bulgarian) heritage and the practice of institutionalised religion adopted from their host country's traditions. Such

mobility enables villagers to locate themselves in the region and beyond, as a minority group in an evolving independent Ukrainian state.

Before turning to a particular event that serves to highlight the everyday tensions resulting from the practice of customs and religion, I would also like to say something about customs as a particular form of spiritual practices. I use the word 'customs' – rather than folk or popular religion or any other myriad number of possible terms – because this is the term used by villagers themselves[9]. They carve up their spiritual world into 'customs' and 'religion' (sometimes 'the church'). Further, customs are not a coherent set of beliefs or practices. They are, rather, a collection of apparently 'fragmented' activities that are seen as part of an ancestral heritage that are said to have a 'long tradition' and which villagers trace back to their Bulgarian roots. The custom discussed in this study – one of a number of practices to which the priest expressed opposition as 'pagan devilry' – and which is attributed by villagers to their ethnic heritage[10], makes use of at least some symbols and activities that the church considers its own[11]. Indeed, it is this that makes such customs the source of conflict between the priest and the rest of the village.

Under the umbrella of customs, we could also include magic, healing practices and a range of other non-institutionalised forms of religion that are performed in the village (all of which are referred to locally as 'customs' and 'our tradition'). However, only a proportion of these customs are 'spiritual' in the sense of appealing to a supernatural or external force from another world, and it is only these that the priest has openly criticised. For the same reason, many of the magic and healing practices carried out in the village are also viewed negatively by the priest, as are the elderly women who conduct these activities. These practices are not a focus here because they are, as Lindquist (2000) notes in her study of such activities in Russia, an individual solution to an individual crisis (see also Borowik 2002). Unlike magic and healing practices, the custom discussed in this paper is conducted collectively and provides a shared solution to a common problem that faces every household and every agricultural cooperative in the village – the need for rain to enable the successful growth of crops. It is the collective nature of the custom that also makes it particularly pertinent for any exploration of group identity.

Praying for rain – *paparuda*

The concern for rain in this low-lying land characterised by temperature extremes – very high in the summer and very low in the winter – is especially urgent in the late spring and early summer months when crops require adequate water. The dismantling of the Soviet collectives and the loss of their irrigation equipment (mostly stolen during the early 2000s) has only exacerbated the problem. Little wonder that prayers for rain are an important focus of both religious and customary practices in the village.

I begin with a description of the local custom of praying for rain that takes place every year on 15 May.

Paparuda is the name of a practice that is centred on groups of women entering households to sing/pray (villagers used both words interchangeably) for rain. They carry

with them a large cross decorated with branches, leaves and flowers – also called a *paparuda*.[12]

In the neighbourhood where I lived, which covered the central part of the village, a few groups came out to sing, occasionally overlapping in the route that they took. I followed two groups on the day. One was made up of five school-aged girls (8th grade); they were led and organised by Anya, in her official capacity as head of cultural activities for the village, a position for which she received a salary from the village Council. The other group – much more typical for the event – was comprised of seven pensioner women and friends, all living in the same street. They had, for many years come together on this day to participate in the custom and clearly enjoyed the event; apart from their genuine desire to pray for rain, it was also an empowering experience and one in which they engaged with much enthusiasm.

While there were some differences in the way in which the two groups practiced the custom, these were relatively unimportant (for the purposes of this paper) and both were received equally warmly into the households they visited. On entering the household yard, the eldest member of the group who carries the *paparuda* is encircled by the other women. They sing a short song (in Bulgarian) that at regular intervals repeats the words 'let there be rain', a sentiment echoed at various moments by the householders: '*dai boze duzd*'/God grant us rain. At the end of the song, the householder attaches money to the cross, usually a one, two or five UAH note, depending on how much he/she could afford. Householders also give flour and whatever other staple products they wish to donate – a few eggs, some feta or fresh unsalted cheese, oil or pig fat, and red wine which is poured into empty containers that the women carried with them. In keeping with the central theme of rain and praying for a good harvest, the singers were sprayed with water and more was thrown at their feet. The householder then produces a sieve which is rolled along the ground and the final position it assumes is said to indicate the sort of year the household could expect: an upturned sieve indicates a year of plenty, a sieve on its side would indicate a 'so-so' year and a sieve downturned indicates a bad year. Before leaving, the elderly women (unlike the group of school girls) were offered a small glass of wine: the same glass was passed around to each in turn, who emptied the contents in one swig, before it was refilled and passed to the next woman. Each time before drinking, the woman would raise the glass and toast 'God grant us rain'.

By early afternoon, having visited approximately 15 households, the women completed the ritual by carrying the *paparuda* to the lake, where they sang, one last time, the 'let there be rain' song, before wading into the water and releasing the *paparuda*, watching it float away. They then retired to the house of one of the women from the group, where they reviewed their spoils[13] and cooked an improvised feast with the gifted food. They met the following Sunday in order to hold a proper feast using the remaining spoils from the day.

The priest's objections and the villagers' views

The groups were warmly welcomed, not only by individual householders, but also by local officials in the village Council and in the agricultural cooperative headquarters, as well as at

the kindergarten where the teachers lead out all the children to partake in the custom. There was one public figure, however, who did not support the practice and was openly hostile to it: the priest, who opposed the custom for two reasons.

Firstly, the priest objected to the custom because it (mis)used symbols that were significant to the Orthodox Church. A woman who was a regular church attender and who frowned upon the actions of her peers, clarified the priest's position: 'He isn't', she told me, 'against Bulgarian customs in general, but he doesn't like the way the cross is used in this particular ritual', thus also emphasising that he is not against all local customs, only particular ones. The priest's view was that people shouldn't pray to *paparuda*, as doing so is tantamount to praying to the devil.

According to the elderly women who performed the ritual, in the previous year the priest had confiscated their *paparuda* and refused to give it back to them, when they had temporarily left it out on the street while they stepped inside the church to light a candle. The elderly women chuckled when telling me this, adding 'so we went back home, made another one, and continued!'

At church services in the days that followed *paparuda*, the priest preached against the custom to his small congregation, informing them that a cross is a sacred object and should not be thrown into the water. He continued his crusade against the custom two days later at a meeting of village officials, when he scolded the Mayor and told the attending officials that *paparuda* was 'pagan devilry'. He expressed anger, in particular, at the way the cross was used and misused. It was not only that this central symbol of Christianity was 'thrown into the water' at the end of the day, discarded in a way that seemed sacrilegious to him, but also that the women showed a lack of respect towards the cross, as witnessed by the fact that when he confiscated the *paparuda* the previous year, it held so little sacred value for them that within a short time the women produced another to replace the first! The priest's concern, therefore, was with the issue of ownership: who had authority over symbols that were linked to Christianity.

A second reason why the priest objected to the custom was because it competed with the services he offered.

In the days following *paparuda*, the priest told his congregation that if people wanted rain, they should come to the church to pray for it, rather than supporting the custom. He repeated this message at the meeting of village leaders, informing them that instead of supporting *paparuda*, the cooperative leaders should have helped him, the priest, in his own efforts to pray for rain. He admonished them for not having offered him transport so that he could carry out prayers for rain in the agricultural fields. This angered some of the Council members who vocally defended the cooperative leaders. The secretary to the Mayor (with whom I lived in the village) told me that praying for rain was 'the priest's work' and that the agricultural cooperative leaders have 'far too much to do' to have to worry about this too.

The priest was thus attempting to build up his moral authority in public life – after decades of absence – by injecting his brand of spirituality into local prayers for rain. His

desire to involve and thereby gain endorsement from officials within the village, and indeed beyond[14], was a means of not only trying to compete with local practices but also an attempt to dislodge the custom from its popularity.

As for the villagers, many were largely dismissive of the priest's views; while others seemed genuinely mystified by his negative reaction. When I told my neighbour, for example, that in the previous year the priest had confiscated the womens' *paparuda*, she appeared surprised and asked, thoughtfully 'now, why would he do that? They [the elderly women] are also praying for rain'.

It is such expressions that reveal the equal value villagers attributed to their own rituals, despite being so heavily criticised and negatively valued by the priest. *Paparuda* was seen as 'just as good', that is, just as legitimate and effective, as a prayer from the priest. This position was reinforced a couple of times during the day when we visited households during *paparuda*. On both occasions the householder, who happened to be one of the priest's ardent followers, was preparing to leave for the church service 'to pray for rain'. Anya reminded the householder: 'we are praying for rain too', to which the host nodded in agreement, confirming the truth of this and welcomed them to continue.

Notably, while most villagers would verbally acknowledge the equal value of both forms of prayer (customary and religious), in practice the vast majority participated in the custom but did not take part in religious prayers for rain. Church attendance on the day – as throughout most calendar days – consisted of the eight or so elderly women who were the priest's most dedicated followers.

The attraction of customs and the need for religion

The 'revival' of religion, and reversal of socialist policies that confined religion to private spheres of social life, has been well documented across the former socialist states (e.g. see Tomka [2011]; Hann [2006]; Mitrokhin [2001]). However, as has also been well documented, 'revival' engages a wide range of processes (e.g. Tomka [2002, 483]) and, I add, masks a wide range of local and regional variations on these processes. While keeping these qualifications in mind, we may also ask why, unlike other examples from the former Soviet Union (see Dragadze [1993] for Georgia and other parts of Eurasia), is the reversal of the 'domestification' of religion in Nagorna so clearly limited in scope? In other words, why do Nagornans continue to give value to their own customs even though it brings them into open conflict with the priest?

To answer this question, we need first to look briefly at the history of the region. While I cannot convey here the complexities and richness of this history, there are two points I wish to highlight.

The first point relates to the many powers that have controlled this region at various times. The influx of different ethnic groups to this previously sparsely populated area in the early nineteenth century was encouraged by the granting of free land allotments which incorporated settlers into the expanding Russian Empire (Gitelman 1995). In the case of

Nagorna, the population today traces back its ancestry to Bulgarians who fled north to the safety of this Russian controlled territory to escape Ottoman rule in Bulgaria. While for most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the region was part of the Russian empire, Russian rule was 'interrupted' on several occasions: when the area was incorporated into Romanian territory for 19 years – 1859 to 1878 (only being returned to Russia after the Russian-Turkish war in 1878); then it became again part of greater Romania between 1918 and 1940; before being taken by the Soviet Union briefly in the early period of the Second World War (for one year); then lost again to Romania for three years (1941 to 1944); before final victory of the Soviet Union against the Germans returned the territory to the USSR, where it remained until the breakup of the Soviet Union and Ukraine independence in 1991.

The details of these changing administrations matter less than the main point: in different times in its history, the region has been under various state administrations: Russian, Romanian, Soviet and now Ukrainian. Fluctuating relations between state and local communities implied shifting alliances that also influenced local fortunes. In the Nagorna case, the ethnic Bulgarian population was viewed, at different times, as untrustworthy citizens aligned with the enemy[15], and at other times as close allies[16].

The second point worthy of highlighting concerns the Church's changing position in the region during this same period.

The ROC played an influential role in the history of the region, being the only stable institution[17] in the earliest days of settlement, when the state's presence in the new and peripheral territory was weak and transitory (Schlegel 2016, 24-30).[18] The close association between state and Church has important implications because it meant that the ROC's fortunes were closely linked to the waxing and waning fortunes of the Russian empire in the region. There are at least two times that the ROC's role was reduced: firstly, during times of Romanian domination (there is some evidence that during the 1930s, at least, Romania tried to suppress the role of the ROC[19]); and secondly, during Soviet times, when the Church was largely absent from the everyday life of many villagers, as socialist policies separated the Church from the state, resulting in the 'domestification' of religion (Dragdze 1993). In the case of Nagorna, the Church was restored in 1993 after three decades without a priest or functioning place of worship. It was in this same year that they also received their first of five priests, all of whom came and went in relatively quick succession, each not lasting more than a year or so. It was only in 2001 that Priest Kirill (who speaks only Russian) arrived in the village and, unlike his predecessors, has remained.

From the above history, it follows that the priest and Church – as indeed the state – is not viewed locally as a permanent fixture; such institutional forces have not endured through time, despite 'endurance' being an important basis for authority (Steinberg and Wanner 2008: 16). Theirs is a history of rupture. Villagers articulate this not so much through emphasising the impermanency of the Church in their historical past, but conversely through highlighting the consistency of their own traditions. They justify their customs in terms of 'we have always done them in such a way' and as Anya told the priest when he sought her out to criticise her official role in encouraging the *paparuda* custom amongst the younger

generation: 'these are old traditions which have been practiced for generations'. Customs are seen as old because they connect the community with their Bulgarian heritage.

The historical impermanency of institutionalised religion in the rural areas suggests one reason for the continued importance of customs in Nagorna. Unlike religion, customs provide a sense of continuity; they anchor the community to a distant past that refers to their Bulgarian roots.[20] Given their history of migration – meaning villagers cannot make claims of belonging on the basis of their present place of residence – customs provide a much-needed temporal anchor through ancestral connections to Bulgaria.

However, it is not only perceived permanency and rootedness in the past that makes customs attractive, it is also that they allow a strong sense of communal 'ownership'. When villagers refer to their traditions as 'ours' and justify their practices on the grounds that they have been performed over many generations, they are also underlying their control over such activities, the egalitarian nature of such practices, as well as their common and communal ownership.

It is every member of the community that, potentially at least, can partake in customs – every household has the responsibility (and a choice) for carrying out the practice and for the details of how it is performed. Thus, it is up to householders whether they lock their doors and do not allow the *paparuda* singers in, or welcome the groups to come inside. It is also for householders to decide how much and what they donate to the singers and whether their prayers for rain are carried out through the support of customs or whether they also go to pray for rain at church with the Priest. Such decisions, firmly rooted in the control of every householder, depend on his/her economic circumstances, commitment to religion/customs and so on. Customs are 'attractive' because they are egalitarian, in 'common ownership' and under the control of every single villager who decides his/her own extent of engagement.[21]

Thus, customs empower and provide the community with agency. In this respect, they differ from the more hierarchically ordered religious practices that are controlled by the priest and indirectly also by the wider institutional structure of which he and the local church are a part.

Both the above factors – continuity with the past and ownership/control – help explain why customs are important to the Nagorna community. They do not, however, explain why, given the attraction of customs to villagers, the priest or Church is tolerated or needed at all. Why do most villagers – who do not go to church to pray for rain and who uphold their own customs – nevertheless acknowledge that there is a 'place' for the priest's prayers too[22]?

Since the foundation of the village in 1820, the community has been shaped by many cultural influences, but Bulgarian and Russian remain the most prominent. Language provides a useful analogy. Villagers are bilingual and they use language selectively and strategically. Russian is used in all public places or in more formal contexts when guests from outside the village are present; for example, at the annual village meeting attended by district officials, or at everyday occasions such as when school teachers wish to add an extra degree of formality or authority when scolding a misbehaving pupil. Russian is also the

language of the Church and of the priest who understands a little Bulgarian but always communicates in Russian. Bulgarian, on the other hand, is spoken in all everyday situations in public and public locations when there are only village natives present; for example, at home, in street conversations between neighbours, in the shops and during the practice of all customs. That is, Bulgarian is spoken with 'insiders', and in contexts which are relatively more 'informal'. Villagers navigate between the two languages to signal their read of the occasion.

I suggest that a similar principle operates in terms of spirituality: customs and religion are bound together in a complementary relationship.

'Customs' are the 'language' of and for 'insiders'; they are the basis of a spirituality that is practiced by and meaningful only to village natives. They refer to, indeed ground, identity back to its Bulgarian roots, so defining villagers against other ethnic groups in the district that do not have the same traditions. Customs also separate Nagorna from other Bulgarian villages in the wider region; no Bulgarian village practices any one custom in exactly the same way. Nagornans can and do articulate how their customs differ from the way they are practiced in other Bulgarian villages in the vicinity. Thus, customs are a means by which one village distinguishes itself from all others.[23]

I often heard the priest rationalise his views against the village's customs in terms of the fact that many of the traditions in Nagorna are not practiced in other Bulgarian villages in the province. In other words, he argued against the validity of their practices which he said could not be 'Bulgarian' because other Bulgarians do not practice these customs. However, this is precisely what gives Nagorna customs an additional power and attraction, that is, the fact that they believe their practices are distinctive to their particular community. The customs practiced in the community are more than just 'Bulgarian'; they are also 'Nagornan'. Thus, every time the priest argues against customs as 'not Bulgarian', he is inadvertently reinforcing village boundaries, highlighting the customs' uniqueness and ongoing relevancy as markers that distinguish Nagorna from other 'Bulgarian' villages in Ukraine and Bulgaria.

'Religion', on the other hand, provides the basis of a spirituality that speaks to and is associated with 'the outside' and is used in more formal or institutionalised contexts. Across the former socialist states, religion has played an important role in the construction (or recovery) of national identity.[24] Ukraine, with its multiple faiths, where no one confession dominates nationally, faces particular problems in such a nation-building enterprise. While internationally the Orthodox Church '[…] is organized on a nation-state model, with state churches serving a particular nation […]' (Wanner 2014, 432), the situation in Ukraine is more complex. Attempts to create a national Orthodox Church were accelerated with the renaming of the ROC to 'Ukraine Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate' in 1990. However, this served to fragment the Orthodox Church even further and the three main branches today (noted in footnote 7) provide a point of orientation for regions *within* Ukraine on the basis of particular historical, cultural and geopolitical traditions. Religion is regionally demarcated[25] and in turn helps position regions within the nation-state (Wanner 2015, 7). In the east and south of the country, where the UOC-MP dominates, there is a strong correlation with

Russian speaking areas, which have long historical and cultural connections to Russia, as well as pro-Russian political views (see Borowik 2002). Nagorna falls squarely in line with the majority of the rest of south and east Ukraine and this differentiates it from the particular form of anti-Russian, 'pro-nationalism' advocated in the west of the country. Given the highly politicised nature of religion in contemporary Ukraine (exacerbated by the recent and ongoing war in the east), where struggles between different branches of Orthodoxy represent competing influences in the shaping of a post-Socialist national identity (Batalden 1993), an alliance to the UOC-MP locates Nagorna in a particular way vis-à-vis the nation state – through its past and ongoing ties to Russia. The church therefore provides a pathway – a 'language' – which connects Nagorna inhabitants spiritually to the rest of the region and other regions with similar religious-political alliances; their identity as Ukrainian citizens is at least in part defined in terms of their associations and loyalty to the Russian-leaning branch of the Orthodox Church and by implication to its connections to Russia.

Thus, institutionalised religion provides another dimension to local identity; one that integrates villagers within a district, regional, national and even transnational framework. It is on this basis that the Church and priest have local relevancy in the community. Priest Kirill may be an 'outsider' in some senses, however, as a public figure who represents institutionalised religion, he is also 'necessary' because he binds the community to a wider, formalised net of spirituality that connects the village with the other villages in the district - all of which are also ROC-MP - and beyond. Even if villagers are not active supporters of the Church through, for example, regular service attendance, there is a place for the Church and priest in village life. Association with the UOC-MP provides a degree of regional and national legitimation and recognition, giving the community a particular geopolitical and cultural location in this ethnically diverse and multi-religious nation-state.[26]

Everyday villagers operate within, and negotiate between, two sets of practices that together constitute their spiritual world, and both have local value and importance. It is this duality that explains the villagers' apparent lack of concern with the priest's accusations of their 'devilry' customs which, like the elderly women practicing *paparuda*, is often shrugged off. At the same time, it also explains villagers' 'need' for the priest; why they desire to have him in the village, despite his opposition to some of their customs. The tensions between customs and religion are important – not so much as a form of competition or as posing a threat (as the priest perceives the situation) – but as a means to demarcate a boundary between 'insider' and 'outsider'. It is this boundary which plays a crucial role in the construction of a local identity. Bi-spirituality is a basis for a form of belonging to multiple groups and places that provides a point of orientation in the district, the region and beyond.

Conclusion

Against a historical back drop of the comings and goings of state administrations and empires – corresponding to the Orthodox church's changing level of visibility and prominence – and in a community that is part of a newly independent nation-state characterised by considerable ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity, identity is a complicated matter. In this particular area of Ukraine, ethnicity and territory do not conveniently converge through 'religion', as is

seemingly the case in other parts of Ukraine where inhabitants can make autochthonous claims to the land. Instead, a Nagorna identity and spiritual community is constituted out of a non-alignment between ethnic 'roots' (expressed through customs) and their settlement in a particular territory associated with institutionalised religion in the form of the UOC-MP. It is an identity carved from the articulation between religion and customs. Tensions resulting from engagement in these two sets of practices creates a delineation within the spiritual community that is the actualisation of two facets of their identity.

Customs provide a basis for a local and 'intimate' spiritual community; institutionalised religion offers a spirituality that integrates the community with the 'outside'. Such bi-spirituality allows villagers to navigate between the two on a daily basis. At the same time, the tensions that are played out in the village between customs and religion, between the villagers and the priest, between insiders and outsiders, between practices that are 'ours' and 'theirs' (respectively), are the means by which the boundary between the two is formed, maintained and reinforced.[27] Every such struggle only makes more concrete an identity that both incorporates institutionalised religion and at the same time limits it in a specifically local manner. In so doing the boundaries that are so fundamental to identities are made and reinforced.

In the same way that the bi-lingual villagers shift between different languages in different contexts for different purposes so, I suggest, villagers also navigate deliberately, if not strategically, between two sets of practices: with religion and customs used in different contexts for different purposes to establish their belonging in a territory to which they have no autochthonous claims. As Kollmann (1997) found for the Russian Empire in the seventeenth century, so today, language and religion provide an important part of a 'larger' (i.e. beyond the local community) sense of belonging that, together with specific place, provides a foundation for identity.

Such a bi-spiritual, bi-lingual identity is not only negotiated on a daily basis, it also provides a degree of 'flexibility'; it is a means by which villagers are able to adjust their positioning in accordance with changing external circumstances, such as changes in the nature of state and religious institutional forces, that provide the overarching conditions of their existence. Throughout the history of Nagorna, the community's spiritual world has been reconfigured in different ways, according to circumstances of the time.[28] However, in all cases, bi-spirituality is a means to 'manage', rather than 'resolve'[29] the tensions created between the practice of customs and religion.[30] It provides a way to employ both customary and religious practices in the service of a collective identity. As with other communities (e.g. see Rogers 2008), Nagorna is also constructed on the basis of multiple and often contested spiritual activities. The village is not a harmoniously united community, but defined in terms of its competing and sometimes apparently contradictory practices. This is never so true as today, when bi-spirituality continues to be a way for Nagornans to negotiate their specific place in the world, as an ethnic minority, in a newly developing and politically unstable Ukrainian state.

In concluding, I make no claims that the bi-spiritual based identity described above is a universal pattern or characteristic in any way to the Orthodox world. However, I believe the case has greater relevance. It is not ethnicity or religiosity per se, but the dynamics between these in the context of a new nation-state building enterprise (where there is renewed importance on territorial claims) that is crucial. In cases, such as the one exemplified by the Bulgarian minority in Ukraine – where groups can make no identity claims on the basis of autochthonous links to the land, and ethnicity, territory and religion do not neatly converge, – bi-spirituality becomes an important means to manage identity. Notably, Bulgarians in Ukraine are not the only group in such circumstances. There are also other ethnic minorities in Odessa province, and in other parts of Ukraine with similar migratory histories who have maintained strong cultural and linguistic links to their places of origin (e.g. Moldovans and Gagauz). In addition, these bi-lingual and bi-spiritual communities bear a striking resemblance to those of neighbouring communities in Moldova (see Boneva 2006), a region also settled by migratory populations uprooted from their original homelands during Ottoman rule in the nineteenth century and accepted into what was, at the time, part of the expanding Russian empire. Here too, ethnicity and territory do not neatly align, while the management of identity is complicated by demands of the post-Soviet nation-state building project. In such cases, bi-spirituality has considerable value.

Acknowledgements

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[1] For an anthropological overview, see Rogers (2005) and Hann (2006). For a contemporary – i.e. post Maidan – Ukraine perspective, see Wanner (2015).

[2] I have carried out a full year's fieldwork (primarily using participant observation methods) between 2000 and 2005, and a further month's fieldwork carried out in 2014.

[3] Such claims mask a greater complexity, with intermarriage relatively common and all incomers required to learn the local language and customs in order to attain acceptance in the community. In this way, outsiders are incorporated into the community and help reinforce claims of its largely mono-ethnic make-up.

[4] Over the last two decades Ukrainian has also been taught to the younger generations at school.

[5] I do not explore this association between spirituality and morality, but see Zigon (2011).

[6] Mavrov and Bratkov (n.d.: 8)

[7] The three branches are: the Ukraine Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) which was granted independent status in 1990, although it is strictly still under the jurisdiction of the ROC (Krindatch 2003); the Ukraine Orthodox Church (Kiev Patriarchate); and the Ukraine Autocephalous Orthodox Church.

[8] In practice, the spectrum of what constitutes either 'custom' and 'religion' is far more complicated and blurred.

[9] The Bulgarian term used is *obichai*, that is, 'customs', the practice of which are given temporal anchoring through being seen as Bulgarian *traditsia* (tradition).

[10] I am not in a position to prove or disprove this association, nor is this the aim of my study.

[11] For Lindquist (2000, 268), who writes about magic and healing, such practices are a 'bricolage' which borrow at least partly from symbols over which the Church considers it has a monopoly. See also Borowik (2002, 500).

[12] *Paparuda* is reportedly practiced in various modified forms across the Balkans (Tusa 2014, 29) and scholars trace its origins back to Thracian times.

[13] On the occasion I attended, the elderly women collected: 20 kg of flour, 5 litres of red wine, 40 eggs, a whole vat of oil and another of pig fat, as well as 8 kg of cheese and 46 UAH (used to buy more alcohol and other food supplies).

[14] The priest invited officials from the district capital to come and pray for rain in the village. They declined on the grounds that it was not part of their formal state duties.

[15] For example, during the Second World War, as Bulgaria was on the side of Germany and therefore against the USSR, ethnic Bulgarians – including from Nagorna – were not trusted to fight on the front alongside the Soviet Red Army. Instead, the men were sent to labour camps.

[16] For example, after the Second World War, when The Republic of Bulgaria was one of the USSR's closest European allies, which had positive repercussions for Bulgarians in the USSR.

[17] Alongside other smaller confessions – Jews; Old Believers, Catholics and Protestants (Schlegel 2016, 24-30).

[18] Many civil administrative duties, such as the registration of births, deaths and marriages, were carried out by the Church rather than the state (Schlegel 2016, 41-42).

[19] See Schlegel (2016). Also, see Livezeanu (1995, 102; 106 [footnote 63]) who indicates that priests were involved, through their role as educators, in various nationalisation programmes during the two decades that the territory was under Romanian influence. However, the success of any such programmes – especially in villages that were not ethnically Moldovan – remains unclear.

[20] Memories of the custom relating to the pre-Soviet period indicate that the custom has changed over time. Nevertheless, this does not deter from the overarching perception of the custom as unchanging and something they have 'always' done.

[21] Dragadze (1993, 150) reminds us that while the domestification of religion may have been driven by attempts to limit religious freedoms in public spaces during Soviet times, it had the unintended consequence of empowering householders, transferring authority of cosmological practices into the hands of ordinary citizens, most of whom were women.

[22] Recall the official's retort to the priest's scolding – that it is the priest's 'work' to pray for rain; not the responsibility of agricultural cooperative heads.

[23] While I have not carried out fieldwork in other villages, other studies indicate the validity of such an interpretation (e.g. see Boneva 2006). The important point is not whether such customs are 'really' different from the way they are practiced in other Bulgarian villages in Ukraine or Bulgaria, but the fact that villagers distinguish themselves on this basis.

[24] Batalden (1993, 7); see also Hann (2006); Steinberg and Wanner (2008); Pelkmans (2009).

[25] Often such a demarcation is at the *oblasti* (regional) level, but sometimes even at smaller administrative units, i.e., *raiony* (district) (Krindatch 2003, 38; also Mitrokhin 2001, 174).

[26] Here, the analogy with language reaches its limits. For while during the Soviet period the Russian language became 'international' in the sense of being the 'lingua franca' within the Soviet Union, the Orthodox Church, during the same time, was 'domesticated' and banished to the private domain. Local customs suffered no such restrictions; to the contrary, during these same 30 years, local officials gave their full backing to customs, such as *paparuda*. It is now, from this starting position, where customs have thrived, that the priest is struggling to regain ground and authority presumably lost over previous Soviet decades.

[27] Other dimensions of this relationship – 'egalitarian vs hierarchical/authoritarian' and 'female/elderly vs male/young' - also deserve attention but remain outside the scope of this paper.

[28] For example, during Soviet times villagers travelled to the district capital for important life-cycle religious rituals because local services were not possible, while customs expanded their reach for everyday occasions through the sponsorship of local officials.

[29] To paraphrase Kollmann (1997, 44).

[30] Conte (1992), writing about the case of rural Russia, also views agency as important in the application of different belief systems; see also Vakhtin (2005) for the Russian Artic.