

SOME ASPECTS OF UKRAINIAN FOLK RELIGION IN BRAZIL

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Annotation. *One of the interesting manifestations of folk religion in Brazil is a house altar. He is an obligatory element of village interior design and can sometimes be encountered in the old houses of small towns. During the last seventy years the rural house altar has experienced some evolution. In the past, when churches were few, many religious events such as Custom of the Chapel, readings, celebrations, or the recitation of the rosary took place at the villagers' homes, with families taking their turns as hosts. That is why house altars were «micro models», or imitations of the church interior. The number of churches has grown substantially over the last decade. Therefore, the need to have an «imitation» of a church altar in each house has disappeared, hence the living room now has only a small holy corner.*

Key words: *Ukrainians in Brazil, folk religion, house altars.*

Scholarly discussions around folk religion flare up and die back down with a certain regularity [See: 1]. The contestable nature of this notion was – to a certain extent – documented in the Canadian-published book *Letters from Heaven* [5], a collection of scholarly articles representing the entire spectrum of views on the nature of folk religion. In the introduction, editors Andriy Zayarniuk and John Paul Himka review various methodological approaches to, and explanations of, this phenomenon in North American scholarship [3, 3–12]. According to Natalie Kononenko «Folk Orthodoxy [in Ukraine] was in many ways a reaction against the Soviet system, a way to keep religious belief in a state that considered religion the opiate of the unenlightened» [4, 68].

The Ukrainian-Brazilian situation in regard to folk religion is both unique and ambiguous. Within that setting, the term *folk religion* defines a totally different scope of phenomena than in, say, Ukraine.

Brazilian Ukrainians – like other Brazilians – are extremely pious people¹. Their religiosity could well be characterized by the adjectives «mystical», «fanatical» and even «theatrical». The Ukrainian Church possesses an undeniable authority among Ukrainian rural people. All those customs that would in Ukraine be called «folk» are under the protection of priests (mostly Basilian), brothers and sisters servants in Brazil. Rural people donate a huge amount of their spare time to spiritual events, and the schedule of such events is intense. For example, Great Lent in Brazilian-Ukrainian Catholic

¹ In this article I am writing about Ukrainian Greek Catholics, who constitute 90 percent of all ethnic Ukrainians in Brazil.

rural settlements is dense with such events as Holy Hour, the Way of the Cross, Bible readings, meditations on the Passion of Christ, etc. Such events are held almost daily in May, which is called a «Marian month» (because of a special veneration of Mary, Mother of God); also in August it is called a «Month of Vocation»; in September it is called a «Month of the Bible»; in October it is called a «Month of Rosary»; and in December, during the Fast of St. Philip.

In the beginning, an outsider gets the impression that all the spiritual activities in the rural Ukrainian settlements of Brazil revolve around church, and that there is no room left for anything «folk» (in the sense in which the term is used by ethnographers from Ukraine). In reality, however, this impression is very misleading, and most of the above-mentioned activities are communal in nature. Meetings take place in village houses or schools, while the organizers and participants are the villagers themselves, and sometimes sister servants. As Metodio Tehei said: «During a fast we were reading a book about the Passion of Christ. People would come weekly, usually on Wednesdays. Women had their own time for such readings. [People] would come to a school or some house; whoever was a better reader than person read, and the rest would piously listen and meditate on the Passion of Christ».

Another example refers to the traveling shrine. In content, this practice is in line with the official position of the Ukrainian Catholic Church in Brazil, yet its form is communal, folk. The shrine is a wooden model, a house inside which there is an icon of the Mother of God. The practice consists of transporting the shrine daily from one house to another within the same community, the members of which are for that reason called the «children of the shrine». The number of houses serving one shrine coincides with the number of days in a month, for example there were 30 of them in May. Therefore, the shrine would spend one night per month in each house². In the evening, according to Tehei, other children of the shrine would come to the house where the shrine was staying for the night – though not all thirty families at once, but rather the closest neighbors. There would be a reading, recitation of the rosary, praying, singing, and the serving of mass.

I cite these examples in order to demonstrate how one has to understand the notion of folk religion in regard to Brazilian villagers of Ukrainian descent. It is folk in the sense of its communal nature and context. Such a situation is characteristic not only of the Ukrainian population but rather of the whole Catholic world, especially in South America. According to a leading expert in the field of folk Orthodoxy, Aleksandr Panchenko, «to draw a line between the Church and Folk Orthodoxy is impossible, just as between Catholicism, Islam, and so on» [2; 3].

One of the interesting manifestations of folk religion in Brazil are house altars. They are an obligatory element of village interior design and can sometimes be encountered in the old houses of small towns.

Traditional rural Brazilian-Ukrainian houses were being built till the 1960s, and they are still well preserved in rural settlements. The layout of each such house included one special room. Unlike rural houses in Ukraine, where such a room was dedicated to guests and feasts, the Brazilian one was used – and still is used today – purely for spiritual

purposes, such as the above-mentioned shrine. As Metodio Tehei said, «[they] do not work, do not consume food, [only] greet guests, [and] pray». Note that this, despite the present tense being used, is more characteristic of the past.

During my fieldwork in Brazil in 2009, I researched houses built between 1930 and 2005. Traditional house altars can still be encountered in old houses, though they now look somewhat «old fashioned». For this reason, new houses mostly have holy corners. I will now analyze three altars and one holy corner from rural and small-town settings. I will start from the classical «symbolical sacred» compositions and move to the «modern» ones.

Case 1: The house of Vera and Eugenio Lozovei. They are brother and sister; both were born in the 1950s and live in the settlement of Costa Carvalho (in Santa Catarina State). The house was built in the 1950s by their uncle. The appearance of the household indicates that the parents of Vera and Eugenio were good and caring masters of the old world style. They left behind them many household items and gadgets. The mastership of the parents is evident in everything, including the style of the house interior. Unfortunately, today the house and yard are neglected.

The domestic altar of Vera and Eugenio is located in a room that is not used for any other purpose, particularly for eating. The altar occupies the whole wall and two adjacent corners and belongs to a complex of sacred images, which are «scattered» around the house. By the wall, there is a ritual table with symbolic sacred items. In the middle of the wall, there is a window. The upper row of the *obrazy*, the one closest to the ceiling, is probably the oldest part of the altar. The images in that row are located synchronically, positioned next to each other, and they have identical frames. Other images, from the second and third rows, are split around the window, yet their location still bears a certain aesthetic harmony.

I can now summarize eight main features of the complex of sacred images in the house of Vera and Eugenio Lozovei.

1. The complex represents a family tradition of two generations, since the upper rows of images of the altar in the «main room» and kitchen were certainly left from the parents' time.
2. The sacred images tend to concentrate in the «female sections of the house» such as the kitchen and the space above Vera's bed.
3. This suggests that caring about such images is a female prerogative.
4. Apart from its sacred function, the house altar has practical functions – judging from calendars and clocks – as well as aesthetic functions.
5. Only one sacred image is painted in Byzantine style, the rest are in Roman Catholic style.
6. The altar has a core that consists of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary.
7. The old part of the «iconostasis» bears the gendered hierarchical logics: on the left is the «female» side, with various images of the Virgin Mary, while the right side is «male» one with images of Jesus Christ and St. Nicholas. In the newer part of the «iconostasis», however, this principle is not preserved on either side of the window.
8. The room where the main altar complex is located is not being used nowadays for greeting guests or for collective prayers.

¹ In recent times the tempo has slowed, and the shrine stays in each house for several days and nights.

9. It serves instead as a storeroom. The praying function seems to have been transferred to the private altar situated in a bedroom.

10. Finally, the symbolical sacred complex of the Lozoveis house demonstrates the principle of accumulation of various sacred images of different origins and quality.

Case 2: The house altar of Anna Presliak, who is 96 and lives in a small house in the municipal city of Prudentopolis³. Anna had lived most of her life in a village, and therefore she is a good representative of the rural tradition. Her house consists of a big room that serves as both a living room and her bedroom, a kitchen, storage room, and a washroom. The house altar is located in a big room occupying only a part of a wall that begins at the doorway. The iconostasis is not well organized: images are positioned randomly and without proportions. Of the eleven images, only one can be qualified as an icon. It is a quite thick wooden board to which a printed image of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus and Immaculate Heart of Mary are attached. The edges of the wooden board are decorated with foil picks that imitate *wycinanki*. It would look almost like an icon found in contemporary Halychyna villages and small towns if not for one significant detail: a small, carved figure of Aparecida is inserted in the lower middle segment of the icon. The technical modernization of the icon is also very interesting: its upper middle segment is equipped with an electric bulb.

Since images of the Mother of God and Jesus Christ occupy virtually the entire space of the icon, an onlooker would presume that they comprise its conceptual center. However, the signatures on the icon – «N. S. Aparecida»⁴ (at the top) and «guarda este casa»⁵ (at the bottom) – testify that it is dedicated to Aparecida, while images of both the Mother of God and Christ serve only as the background. This icon is totally kitsch in its appearance, though the owner definitely values it as a beautiful and serious item due to the aforementioned design and technical «innovations».

The other images include St. Catherine, the Mother of God with Jesus (or «Crowned,» the so-called «Heavenly Queen»), a picture of the Bible with flowers on it and a note «Eu sou o caminho a verdade e a vida»⁶, a colored wooden relief of the Mother of God with open chest and Immaculate Heart, a piece of printed pastoral image showing the Virgin Mary with little Jesus in her arms and a girl sitting next to her (it seems that originally that was a corporate calendar of the firm «Officina Electro Mecanica» which is still owned by Antonio Presliak, a relative of Hanna), and a stereotypical pastoral picture of the Virgin Mary framed by 15 small oval *obrazy* with scenes from her life. There are two rosaries with crosses on a nail that holds this picture; two images of Jesus Christ (one is the front page of a calendar for 2006, another one is a regular print); a picture of the Holy Family and Father-God in the sky. Small pictures in the form of pocket calendars or wallet pictures are added to larger pictures (they are inserted under the glass, in a corner), and one of them is done in a Byzantine style.

On the table is the following composition: two figures of Aparecida, a Mother of God with little Jesus, St. Joseph with Jesus, two figures of Jesus Christ, a picture of a sister servant (Anatolia

or Josaphata) on a ceramic vase, and the Bible. There are also non-sacred items like artificial flowers, three clocks, and two pairs of glasses. There is also a TV sitting on a small table nearby. In a distant corner of the house I found a dried-out bouquet that served as a talisman.

We therefore see that this altar complex has a traditional composition, as it consists of two parts – an iconostasis and a sanctuary. The fullness and variety of the subject matter of the images are intense. There is a clear tendency towards accumulation of different items which have direct or indirect relations to sacred symbols. A female affiliation with the altar in this case is also clear. The altar is a «working» one, and the owner prays there daily. The main accent is on the icon compiled of images of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, and the figure of Aparecida. The latter, the black patron saint of Brazil, is the most important holy personage among them. Traits of «modernization» are manifested through the altar's close proximity to a TV next to the altar as well as clocks on the ritual table.

Case 3: Like the altar in case 1, the house altar of the Teheis family is located in an unused room. As in case 1, it consists of two parts: images on a wall and a ritual table holding symbolically ritual and non-ritual items. This altar was probably generated within the lifetime of a single generation. The family used to consist of a mother, father, and six children. Nowadays only two unmarried adult children are still living with the parents. The mother, Anna Tehei, always performed the main spiritual functions in the family. Not only was she a guide and mentor for her children, but she also taught catechism to the neighborhood children who were preparing for their first communion. As in the two previously mentioned cases, in this family, the house altar is in a female domain. Its composition is considered to be an important designer's task: images are placed systematically and synchronically, and the space between pictures is filled with artificial flowers. As I have noted, the altars in cases 1 and 2 had both primary, sacred functions (a place for praying and reciting the rosary) and additional, or applied functions. The practical functionality of the Teheis' altar is manifested differently from that of the Lozoveis' altar. If the latter incorporated calendars, then the Teheis' altar displays certificates of their children's first communions.

There is another interesting regularity in all the described altars. In case 1 (the Lozovei altar), a ritual table holds not only symbolically sacred items and decorations but also an item that is far from «spiritual» – a cassette deck. Anna Presliak has a TV next to the altar. The Tehei family has two appliances right next to their altar, a refrigerator and TV, both of which are «incorporated» in the altar complex: there are pictures and figures on both. The TV and refrigerator demonstrate a certain financial standing of a family in the rural setting of Brazil and are usually placed in prestigious places inside the house. Such a phenomenon could be observed in Ukrainian houses during the Soviet times when a TV, often with a musical centre, was the central conceptual point and interior accent of the main, or living room.

The Teheis' altar complex is characterized by the following five features:

³ The city is located in the state of Parana.

⁴ Nossa Senhora Aparecida

⁵ The female guard of the house (in Portuguese).

⁶ I am the road of truth and life (in Portuguese).

1. it has a preserved traditional structure and consists of the iconostasis and sanctuary;
2. it speaks about female affiliation;
3. the room is still functional and is used for greeting guests but no food is consumed in it;
4. there are fewer items and images on the altar, and the thematics are reduced. This is done not because the family is less religious but because it makes the altar look more contemporary. Therefore, the tendency toward accumulation is absent; instead, a desire for minimalism is observed – the owners keep only the figures and images they view as most necessary; and

5. the house altar of the Teheis bears signs of modernization, since two appliances, a TV and refrigerator, are incorporated into it. Apart from their regular functions – media translation and storing cooled food – they have acquired the new function of additional «support» for the symbolical sacred items, i.e., they have become a sort of invariant of the altar.

Case 4: The Kopiec family lives in a recently built village house. Victoria Kopiec (b. 1932) lives with her husband and their unmarried son. Although there are enough rooms in it, the house does not have an altar. What I will analyze is in fact a holy corner. It is located in the living room and is localized around a TV. This corner consists of one image of both the Immaculate Heart of Mary and the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus. Both are located in one framed picture. On top of the TV is a figure of Aparecida, a gold-plated neck cross (I am not sure if it was placed there for a purpose), and non sacred items such as wooden decorative ducks. The stand's shelves are covered with crocheted serviettes, and there are flower pots, a figure of Aparecida in a grotto, icons, an angel, and a Bible on the shelves. In one corner of the room, next to the TV, there is another small table with a red and white flower-patterned tablecloth. An icon of Jesus Christ, artificial flowers, an open Bible, and a cross stand on the table.

The owner of the house, Victoria Kopiec is very pious. She attends all the religious events organized by her church and community. And yet she has not constructed a traditional altar in her new house.

I can conclude that the traditional house altar has not disappeared completely but rather has been simplified to the bare minimum and transformed. In place of the iconostasis, there is just one image on a wall, and instead of the sanctuary section, there is a TV holding some symbolically sacred items on it. A tendency towards minimalism can be seen not only in the structure of the holy corner but also in the number of items. The design of the holy corner is certainly a female responsibility. A withered bouquet-talisman with an inserted gronnica is located in another room. The central place among the «favorite» saints belongs to Aparecida, yet when we asked «Who is Aparecida?» Victoria Kopiec provided a laconic answer: «They fished out Mother of God» [Who are they?]. «Some guy, I do not know. Somebody else should explain this [to you]».

After reviewing four altar complexes from Ukrainian rural settings in two Brazilian states, Paraná and Santa Catarina, I conclude the following: During the last seventy years the rural house altar has experienced some evolution. In a traditional Brazilian-Ukrainian house one segment of the living room is specifically designed for a house altar. This altar consists of two sections: a group of

saints or iconographic images on a wall, known as the iconostasis, and a table that serves as a ritual table holding figures and other symbolically sacred items such as crosses and religious books (mainly Bibles), as well as non-sacred items like flowers. In its essence, this is a secular micro-model of a church altar. It is therefore a symbolical model of a world, where a table serves as a substitute for God's altar, while images on a wall function as an iconostasis and reflect the hierarchy of divine powers. «Sacred» images can be arranged on a wall with or without windows. In a small house, it may be only a segment of a wall, for example the space from a doorway to an adjoining wall.

Sacred images are of several kinds: icons (sel-dom), pictures (prints), and sheets cut out of journals or calendars. The subject matter of the images is biblical and sometimes apocryphal, most from the life of the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ and Holy Family (80 percent). The remaining 20 percent of obrazy are dedicated to Our Lady Aparecida, St. Catherine, St. Nicolas, and various images from the Bible, and less often to St. Joseph. Ery often, if not always, Our Lady Aparecida is the conceptual center of the iconostasis and sanctuary parts of the altar. What is specific to the Brazilian-Ukrainian setting is that rural altars also contain images of the sisters servants, and St. Joseph, who is the patron of the Basilian Brothers order. The majority of the images are done in the Roman Catholic style, and only a few, usually the most recent, in Byzantine style.

Obrazy in rural house altars are usually set in modest frames that are hung on a wall in two or three rows, without the use of embroidered towels. The space between them can be filled, for example, with artificial flowers. The table is covered with a table cloth. It is often embroidered or has stylized printed embroidered patterns.

House altars have a female gender affiliation and testify to the designer's skills as a house mistress, and often to her character. Gender specifics were obvious in the old part of the traditional altar of the Lozoveis, where female images were located on the left, and male images on the right. The designs of old house altars demonstrate a clear tendency toward accumulation of various types of images and items (often regardless of their quality) that are viewed as sacred by the house owners.

In the past, when churches were few, many religious events such as Custom of the Chapel, readings, celebrations, or the recitation of the rosary took place at the villagers' homes, with families taking their turns as hosts. That is why house altars were «micro models», or imitations of the church interior.

Over time, modernization infiltrated this sphere of the folk culture of Ukrainians in Brazil. Altars began to be made more simply and laconically. A tendency towards accumulation in the old altars gave way to a tendency towards minimalism in the new ones. Items, that are prestigious for Brazilian-Ukrainians – such as a TV or refrigerator – are now included in the sacred complex, where they function as an altar, whether primary or secondary. Gradually, as a result of simplification, opulent house altars have been turning into modest holy corners. It does not mean that the Ukrainians of rural Brazil are less pious – they are still very active in religious events. It is happened, rather than in villagers' houses, and the number of churches has grown substantially over the last decade. Therefore, the need to have an «imitation» of a church

altar in each house has disappeared, hence the living room now has only a small holy corner.

This article represents only the first attempt to research house altars in the Ukrainian settlements of rural Brazil. Therefore, it does not cover all aspects of the phenomenon, but merely outlines possible paths for further studies.

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Переклад С.П. КУХАРЕНКО

Марина Гримич

Деякі аспекти народної релігійності українців Бразилії

Анотація. Одним із найцікавіших проявів народної релігійності українців Бразилії є домашні вівтарі. Вони слугують обов'язковим елементом селянського інтер'єру в старих будинках на колоніях та в маленьких містечках. За останні 70 років домашні вівтарі піддалися трансформації. В минулому, коли існувало обмаль церков, домашній сакральний інтер'єр являв собою міні-модель або імітацію церковного інтер'єру. Тут відбувалися регулярні читання Біблії, молебні, святкування, вшановування звичаю мандрівної каплиці. Сьогодні, коли існує достатня кількість церков, домашні вівтарі мінімалізуються, перетворюючись в один маленький сакральний куточок.

Ключові слова: українці Бразилії, народна релігійність, домашні вівтарі.

Марина Гримич

Некоторые аспекты народной религиозности украинцев Бразилии

Аннотация. Одним из интереснейших проявлений народной религиозности украинцев Бразилии являются домашние алтари. Они служат обязательным элементом крестьянского интерьера в старых домах в колониях и маленьких городах. За последние 70 лет домашние алтари подверглись трансформации. В прошлом, когда было мало церквей, домашний сакральный интерьер представлял собой мини-модель церковного интерьера. Тут совершались регулярные чтения Библии, молебны, празднования, обычай путешествующей часовни. Сегодня, когда существует достаточное количество церквей, домашние алтари минимализируются, превращаясь в один маленький сакральный уголок.

Ключевые слова: украинцы Бразилии, народная религиозность, домашние алтари.