

Northern Russian and Norwegian Mythological Household Spirits of Inhabited Space Typology

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Abstract. *This article highlights representations of household spirit (domovoj (домово́й) and nissen) in folk culture of the Arkhangelsk region, Russia, and Northern Norway. The work proposes typological and regional approaches to the study of collected material. Typological vector is used to describe diachronic evidence and to evaluate genre characteristics, as well as to highlight historic and typologic features of folklore images. Typological direction studies those trends that lead to formation of plot and character groups. Regional approach allows a detailed study of the traditions of the area, regional, local and microlocal traits of northern folklore.*

Keywords – folk culture, household spirit, folklore texts, myth, nissen, domovoj*.

I. INTRODUCTION

The cultural heritage of many European nations retains house spirits into the modern period, for example, brownie (Scotland and England) or hob (England), kobold/ goblin/ hobgoblin (Germany), tomte (Sweden), tonttu (Finland). Mythological representations constitute an important part of archaic and contemporary culture of peoples. Research on mythological folklore is of vital importance, as it deepens our perceptions of traditional culture and its transformations in the modern world. The narratives of mythologic representations are evident through publications of collections of field materials, gathered by folklore specialists in various geographic areas.

The article studies traditional folk fiction texts found in the northern parts of Russia and Norway. In this work we focus on the prominent features of *household spirit (domovoj and nissen)* in Northern Russian and Norwegian traditions, aiming at the comparative and genetic analysis of these two traditional representations.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The existence of household spirits representations in the contemporary folk culture and speech practice is supported by publications of field evidence, collected in recent years [10, 11, 12, 18, 21, 27, 37, 39], as well as by the factual material gathered in the expeditions to various parts of Arkhangelsk region during the period of 1990 – 2012 and to

Northern Norway (Finnmark and Tromsø) in 2006 – 2007. Studies of semantics and functioning of house spirits' images have been fulfilled by the following researchers: in Norway – J.K. Qvigstad [30], T. Storjord [34, p. 2], S. Solheim [32], L. Stærk [33] and others; in Russia — D. Zelenin [38], E. Pomeratseva [29], V. Zinoviev [40], N. Krinichnaya [20], E. Ratchinskaya [31], L. Vinogradova [36], V. Chervaneva [4, 5, 6], I. Razumovskaja, N. Drannikova [12, 9].

III. METHOD

The sources for our research can be placed in several groups:

I. field notes, kept in the archives of Centre for Studies of Traditional Culture of European North, Northern (Arctic) Federal University, named after M.V. Lomonosov,

II. collections of folk texts by A.N. Afanasjev [1], N. Drannikova and I. Razumovskaja [12],

III. Norwegian collections by P. Ch. Asbjørnsen and J. Moe [2, 3], A. Faye [14], J.K. Qvigstad [30], T. Storjord [34], R. Kvideland and H.K. Sehmsdorf [21], L. Stærk [33], E. Ratchinskaya [31], M.H. O'Leary [26].

IV. dictionaries [8, 35],

V. folklore and ethnographic works of the authors, who publish the texts under consideration and quote from them (works by S. Maksimov, P. Jefimenko, D. Zelenin, E. Pomerantseva and others [24, 16, 17, 38, 28, 29]).

The research follows synchronous-diachronic approach to the analysis of the studied material, which is spread over the period of more than a century and a half in this case. The first notes on mythologic tales in Russia go back to 1856 and were made by S. Maksimov during his expedition to Arkhangelsk province, which was organised by The Naval Ministry for the purpose of collecting ethnographic and historic evidence of Pomors [23]. The last notes on them refer to the beginning of XXI c [9, 10, 11, 12]. First Norwegian tales about nisse were published in 1833 by the writer A. Faye [14]. They last came in print in 2006 – 2007 [the archives of Centre for Studies of Traditional Culture of European North, NARFU, Folder 450][†]. This research is primarily based on the sources dating to the period of the end of the second half of XX c. — the beginning of XI c.

[†] All the materials are kept in the archives of Centre for Studies of Traditional Culture of European North, NARFU (Northern (Arctic) Federal University, named after M.V. Lomonosov).

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IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

While comparing household spirits, we took into consideration the following features: name (nomination), origin, habitat, the time of appearance, status, functions and their relations with human beings.

Nomination

In Arkhangelsk tradition domovoj is most often named according to its habitat (the master of the house – rus. *dom*). There are 23 nominations for domovoj in the book by N. Drannikova and I. Razumovskaya. Among them one can see *zhikhar'* (*жухарь*), *dedushka* (*дедушка*), *domoveyko* (*домовейко*), *botamushko* (*ботамушко*), *botomanushko* (*ботоманушко*) and others [12, p. 133–149]. Taboo nominations for domovoj are also fixed: *sam* (himself), *on* (he) and others [12, p. 185–187]. The semantics of domovoj nomination is connected to the word *dom* (house), but in some texts it is narrowed, e.g. *golbeshnik*, *zapechnik* – related to *pech'* = stove). Besides a male image of domovoj, there are female corresponding images. Sometimes these are wife and daughter of domovoj, in other cases — mythologic hostesses of the household, *domovikha* and *susedka* [12, p. 179]. In Norwegian folklore we do not meet the tradition of having household spirits from both sexes.

In Norway the household spirits are called *nisse*. This name can vary and join some other words, which manifest the features of the mythological character. The other name for *nisse* is *tunkall* (a household guardian). The group of names, that genetically unite Norwegian *tomte* with the spirit of the deceased ancestor, also includes the names *haugbonde*, *tomtegubbe*, *godbonde* [31, p. 95]. *Bonde* is translated from Norwegian as ‘a farmer’, ‘a landlord’ [22, p. 82]. Respectful attitude to the household spirit is transmitted in Russian tradition through prefixes (*-ko*, *-ushko*, *-yeyko*), in Norwegian — through epithets (*good*, *kind* and so on).

Origin

As a rule, Russian domovoj is considered to be one of the deceased members of the family, the ancestor of the generation, who was appointed by the God to serve living household members for his sins; the male, who died without repentance and others [35, p. 120]. One can follow the connection between man and deceased members of families in the relationship between domovoj and man [12, p. 187–193].

It is hard to trace the exact origin of *nissen* image. Nevertheless, the texts at our disposal allow us to conclude, that in the Northern Russian tradition this image is connected with the cult of fire/hearth (the household spirit's place of living is sometimes stove, which is evident through the names *pechnik* (stove-setter), *zapechnik* (the one who stays at home, near the stove, all the time) [12, p. 142], as well as with the cult of ancestors (this is evident through the similarity with the deceased relative; the clothes of domovoj resembles funeral wear, and so on): “He stands, all in white, shirt, sash, just as my deceased grandpa” [31, p. 185].

Reconstructing the image of *nissen* we can judge, that it is connected with the world of ancestors, like *domovoj*. *Nissen* is a founder, or the first master of the farm. However, the image of *nissen* has changed in the course of time. In X c. *ancient nissen*, *gardvar* / *keeper of the farm* were known. In the same historical period such nominations as *ship*, *forest* and *church nissen* / *kirkenissen* appeared. According to folk beliefs, *ship nissen* lives on wooden ships and stays aboard during the whole cruise, forecasting weather. If *ship nissen* comes ashore, this foretells the wreck of the ship [31, p. 109]. *Church nissen* is considered to live in every church, either in the attic or in the hole on the floor, which is to the left of the entrance. It can also have a nest on the tower. *Church nissen* dislikes church bells ringing and on the days of service it leaves the church [25, p. 216]. The image of *Christmas nissen* or *julenissen* got close to the image of Santa Claus over time[‡]. According to Norwegians, *julinissen* appears on Christmas Eve; at this time ritual food is prepared for him. It is a sweet porridge with cinnamon called *remmegret*. In the tale «When the Nisse Got No Butter on His Christmas Porridge» *nissen*, a great lover of butter, got very angry, when he could not find it [21, p. 241][§].

In XVII — XVIII Norwegian church made attempts to connect the image of *nissen* with the devil [15, p. 204–217] but in modern Norway its status has changed: many people consider *nissen* as a fairy character and do not refer to him as a demoniacal force.

Appearance

Some Northern Russian *bylichka* stories depict domovoj as invisible harbinger of some tragic event (death, fire and so on) [12, p. 176, 167, 168]. Most often domovoj has anthropomorphic appearance. It is a squat, shaggy and furry peasant man with a big grey beard, hairy palms and feet and long nails [12, p. 135, 136, 138, 175]. The appearance of domovoj as a black man was also traced [12, p. 195]. In the household where there are men, domovoj looks like a male; if there are only women in the household, and the master of the house is a female, domovoj comes as a woman [12, p. 159, 191]. In oral stories domovoj is sometimes represented in zoomorphic images, as a pig or a bird, a dog, a calf or a cat [12, p. 139–158]. Arkhangelsk tradition describes domovoj in two ways. In the first case, he lives in the household, in the second — in the yard, and is called *laska* (weasel).

Respondents are more detailed in their descriptions of domovoj-*laska*. As a rule, this character is evaluated in negative terms, unlike domovoj. It is said to look like an ermine and have fur that resembles egg yolk. It comes to the shed and to the stable, tortures household cattle, plaits horses' fur, and can chase a horse till it foams, curls the

[‡] NArFU Folklore archive. Fond 37. The Materials of the Expedition to Norway in 2005–2006 by N. Drannikova.

[§] It should be noted that nowadays grown-up people do not usually believe in *nisse*'s existence. However, even in 2009, 350,000 Norwegians admitted, that they usually left porridge for *nisse* at Christmas Eve. 75,000 people did this annually, as it was mentioned by Margaret Hayford O'Leary [28, p. 47].

straw bedding. It is considered, that laska can only be got rid of with the help of a goat or its skin [12, p. 202].

In Norwegian sagn we can point out two kinds of nissen images. The first is anthropomorphic, p. 95]. Not so often there are descriptions of an invisible kind of nissen [31, p. 97]. Many texts feature nissen as a very fairy grey creature, pointing out the profusion of hair all over nissen's body. Its appearance is not so well described. Perhaps, nissen's clothes were similar to those traditional Norwegian clothes of a housemaster. The important feature of a nissen is the presence of only four fingers on each of his hands [31, p. 97]. Zoomorphic kind of nissen was not traced by us. «In old times there lived great many nisses, not like today. According to folklore texts, practically in every house there was a nissen. He is short, not taller than a child, and wears grey knickers, a jacket and red knitted hats with a tassel. Nissen has only got four fingers, no thumbs. He usually lives in the hayloft, shed or in the horse stable (...) Nissen is very mischievous, he is always ready to have fun, like open up all the stalls and let the cows out, or frighten the hostess (...) [16]. *Gardvar* as opposed to nissen is very big: it is described leaning on his elbows to the roof of the house [7, p. 11].

Antropomorphic, zoomorphic or zermorphic nature is the key feature in the classification of domovoj and nissen's appearance. As we could see, there are common representations of household spirit in Norwegian and Russian folklore. The stories depict him as a grey, short old man or shaggy creature, whose gender corresponded to the one of the household masters. Arkhangelsk tradition presents antropomorphic nature of this image wider: *starik* (old man), *starukha* (old woman), *chernyi chelovek* (black man), *prostoy muzhik* (peasant man), *lokmatoye sushchestvo* (shaggy creature) [12, p. 135, 136, 138, 175].

Arkhangelsk tales only give household spirit's image of zoomorphic nature and depict domovoj as a cat, dog or a weasel; he is invisible.

Loci

Arkhangelsk domovoj is often considered to dwell near the stove: nissen can live behind the stove, on the stove or under the stove [12, p. 140, 151, 181]. At the same time nissen can reside in the barn, cellar [12, p. 138, 155]. Some texts show that domovoj's powers spread upon all the household buildings [12, p. 131].

In a house Norwegian *nissen* could be located in places like stove, house corner, attick. It was believed that nissen possessed his own special room, which could be occupied by no one. *Nissen* could also live near a house, under the oldest tree, in the farm [31, p. 98]. *Nisse* usually live in the haylofts, in the barn or in the horse stable [16]. Norwegian folklore equates a household spirit and a yard master: nissen can live in the corners of the house, as well as in the dryers for fish and under the trees [31, p. 101]. Thus, in the neighbouring cultures localisation of household spirit is most often connected to a stove / fire (house hearth) cult, but there can be some variations for household spirit's habitat. In the Russian North that is the space around stove, cellar,

attick, in Norway – the area around house (place under the old tree).

Main Motifs of Tales

Let us study the main motifs for the tales of household spirits. Arkhangelsk mythologic stories present domovoj as a master of the household, guardian of the family and cattle. Domovoj is said to live in each house, being its watchman [12, p. 132, 141]. He is not interpreted as a stranger, nor is he referred to 'impure force' [12, p. 184]. Domovoj is often present only at acoustic level [12, p. 176]. He takes care of all the household chores: starts and maintains the fire in the stove, cleans the house, dries grain, supplies water and looks after the cattle [12, p. 134, 139].

Domovoj is also considered to be the master and guardian of cattle and poultry in the household. If he likes the cattle, it gets smooth, fed and healthy. Domovoj adds forage to the crib, cleans cattle, combs the horse's mane [12, p. 194, 204, 205, 207]. Cattle's breed is the main factor, that influences domovoj's attitude to the cattle. If the breed is "wrong", domovoj starts "torturing" the cattle [12, p. 194, 201, 202].

One of the most wide-spread motifs is domovoj's future foretelling. Domovoj "presses up" a sleeping person, predicting man's fortune at this moment [12, p. 158, 163, 165, 168, 173]. If domovoj prophesies good for the household members, he laughs and caresses them with his warm hairy hand. In case he predicts some sad events, especially one of the household members' death, he howls, knocks, slams the door [12, p. 169, 171, 172]. The nature of foretelling is defined by the key events of man's life cycle [12, p. 165].

In Northern Norway nissen, as well as Russian domovoj, looks after the cows and provides them with fatty milk, cleans the yard from dung, covers the shed floor with sawdust filing, milks cows and feeds cattle [31, p. 99]. Norwegian stories, like Russian ones, tell, that cattle grow healthy and fertile, in case nissen likes it. Norwegian nisse do not care about cattle's breed. Nisse help in field works: mow grass, grind grain, guard at the moments of danger [31, p. 100]. Beer and porridge, cooked with cream or milk, is the main award for nisse's labour (there are texts, which depict rituals of feeding nisse — only once a year) [31, p. 101]. Sometimes nissen was paid with nice clothes and footwear for his labour, as it is described in the tale "The Nisse's New Clothes" [21, p. 245].

Nisse can offer their help around the house by themselves (at this moment nissen comes as a tiny man wearing a red cap) [31, p. 100]. According to folk belief, nissen has a wife and kids [31, p. 87]. The texts often include reference of necessity to follow definite rules in relationship with nissen, e.g. not to swear aloud, touch nissen's food and so on [31, p. 106]. Norwegian tradition has the ritual practice of not only inviting nissen to a new place, but also the practice of inviting nissen from one host to the other one, offering "more profitable terms" [31, p. 106]. One can pass nissen from one brother to another, or to go to the crossroads and call nissen to come to his place [31, p. 103].

Various reasons (unkind attitude to the household spirit, lack of oblation) can lead nissen to surviving the host from home or driving “a stranger” away, if he has taken nissen's space [31, p. 98]. According to folklore, Norwegian household spirit had a right to punish those quarrelling, because this influenced family's well-being. If one did not observe the rules in relationship with nisse, one was punished. There are texts, which describe cases of host offending nissen by his words, which resulted in nissen leaving the household [31, p. 106–107].

For *gardvar* one had to leave a room or at least a bed in the house. He dislikes uninvited guests and treats them rudely, at the same time guarding from any misfortunes [7, p. 11].

From Arkhangelsk oral stories one can hear that family's well-being and relationships between its members depend upon domovoj's disposition. This is most often shown through the ritual practices of “inviting” domovoj, when moving to a new house, and following household etiquette. When it is broken, negative consequences occur [12, p. 144–150]. Domovoj keeps his eye on order and family members' location, guards his own space from “strangers” invasion, as well as from family members' intrusion. It is said that one has to ask domovoj for permission to enter the house [12, p. 151, 152, 155]. We can also come across some motifs of domovoj not letting a woman marry [12, p. 188], and of him helping a person to survive the death of a relative [12, p. 192].

V. CONCLUSIONS

To summarise, we would like to say, that the research deepens the existing perceptions of culture of the two neighbouring countries – Russia and Norway. The resulting analysis of mythologic tales helps us to draw the following conclusions. Domovoj's image in the Northern Russian ethno-cultural tradition is very similar to the image of Norwegian nissen on the number of features and functions:

- 1) the principle of nomination (names of Norwegian and Russian household spirit derive from house topos and its inner space, as well as from the status, ascribed to the master of the house);
- 2) household spirit's localisation;
- 3) types of connection to the household master's life;
- 4) domovoj and nissen have the function of a family guardian.

We can also assert the similarity in the genesis of the two images. The ideas of the household spirits, that emerged in the course of educational and economic activity of man (in both Northern Russian and Norwegian cultures) became fundamental for his worldviews: ancestors cult and household topos were respected and even considered to be sacred. Domovoj in Russian culture and nissen in Norwegian culture came as personification of these ideological elements. The comparative analysis of the structures of mythologic tales makes us conclude, that texts specifics are discovered on the theme level: they are isomorphic to the practices, common in the culture. These

are agricultural and economic practices, as well as social practice, connected to property relations. The distinction between norms and practices lies at the core of thematic difference and functions of household spirits in Northern Russian and Norwegian folklore traditions. Besides, landscape, geographic and ethno-social peculiarities have a big importance for the perception of household spirits. Mythologic ideas and representation of corresponding knowledge are inseparable from the degree and character of influence of professional culture (cultural core) on folk culture, from the development level and types of family culture, from mass media impact and other factors, where we can also include the tradition of retelling in this or that area, which can hardly be explained, or the type of speech culture.

Domovoj and nissen images in the studied folklore traditions have their own differential features, such as the ways of nomination (prefixes /epithets), influence of various weather conditions and living conditions of the population in the area of domovoj localisation, difference in character functions, as well as various attitude of domovoj towards family members, which is connected to household etiquette. The analysis we have performed only identifies the direction to an accurate and detailed study of ethnic peculiarities and local varieties of the mythologic characters under examination.

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