

ETHNO-METEOROLOGY : A MODERN VIEW ABOUT FOLK SIGNS

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ABSTRACT

Ethno-meteorology is a scientific trend in studying the ethnic specificity of traditional ideas of different peoples of the world linked with the weather, in the context of modern ideas of natural science. Specific comparative research of the ethnographical materials testifies to the link between folk ideas in the field of meteorology and the traditional mode of life. Investigations in the field of ethno-meteorology show that a complex interdisciplinary approach to the research of folk signs opens considerable potential for a perspective of the study of traditional folk culture and also for exposing the original material to the empirical observer of nature over a long period.

RÉSUMÉ

Ethno-météorologie : une vision moderne des savoirs populaires

L'ethno-météorologie est un courant scientifique qui étudie la spécificité ethnique des idées traditionnelles de différents peuples du monde en relation avec le climat, dans le contexte des idées modernes des sciences naturelles. Une recherche comparative spécifique sur des matériaux ethnographiques atteste le lien entre les idées populaires concernant la météorologie et le mode de vie traditionnel. Des investigations dans le domaine de l'ethno-météorologie démontrent qu'une approche interdisciplinaire complexe sur les savoirs populaires ouvre un potentiel considérable dans la perspective d'une étude de la culture populaire traditionnelle. Elles mettent également des matériaux originaux à la disposition des observateurs empiriques de la nature.

ETHNO-METEOROLOGY AND FOLK KNOWLEDGE

Time presents every new generation of scientists with ever new problems and, at the same time, allows them to assess what is already known, from a different and unexplored point of view. First and foremost this applies to the study of

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humankind and nature and the interaction between them. At present, when social and natural sciences have proved the existence of complex chains of interdependence in nature, and the fact that mankind has yet to identify the laws of its inherent organisation, then a search for qualitatively new and non-traditional ideas and approaches is especially urgent. This is shown in practice in the special attention given to interdisciplinary studies, in the use of ideas which were once put forward by scientists, but which have since been rejected and forgotten, and in traditional folk observations and signs.

Contemporary works by both anthropologists and natural scientists, devoted to the study of man and nature, are distinctive in the attention they give to traditional folk culture. These have resulted in the use of folk medicine and diagnosis, including the use of rotation for traditional crops.

Represented in the traditional cultures all over the world are various signs, recipes, recommendations for economic activity, treatment and diagnosis of diseases, etc. The division of these signs into the rational and irrational, which was made by ethnology, more often than not, according to the criterion of simple evidence, promoted the appearance of an area of knowledge known as "folk knowledge". At the same time the consensus of this criterion predetermined the relative nature of the division itself. As time went by ideas about the world underwent changes, many signs previously regarded as superstitions were included in "folk knowledge". That was the case, for instance, with the signs used for diagnosing human diseases by changes in the iris of the eye. They initiated the appearance of a new field in modern science - iridodiagnostics.

In this connection it is interesting to consider the possibilities and potential perspectives for studying ethnographic material for the sciences concerning humankind and nature, and the exploration of the cognitive activity of humans. Given the complex and multifaceted nature of the problem, let us confine ourselves to considering only one aspect of traditional folk culture : ethno-meteorology - a field of ethnology which concentrates on the specific ethnic character of the ideas of the peoples of the world connected with meteorological factors.

ETHNO-METEOROLOGY AMONG RUSSIAN PEASANTS

For this purpose let us turn to the traditional ideas of the Russian peasants who lived in the Central European part of Russia - farmers engaged in growing grain crops, flax, vegetables and fruits, as well as breeding cattle. In this region they were for centuries totally dependent on the weather. Folk signs such as "*May with water-June with grass*", "*much snow-much bread*", which closely related the abundance of bread and hay (so important for the Russian peasant) with the specific

character of local weather conditions, reflect the peculiarities of folk observations of weather. Often it is not the weather itself that is of prime importance but its influence on economic activity. The dependence of farming on weather conditions predetermined a diversity and thoroughness with which the weather was observed.

Short-term weather forecasts were based on observing hygroscopic substances (salt, tobacco, wool), characteristics of atmospheric phenomena (rainbows, halos), behaviour of animals, birds and insects (swallows flying low to the ground herald rain), the condition of plants (dandelions not opening their blossoms in the morning means rain), and sensations of the observer himself (a pain in the bones and joints indicates rain).

Long-term forecasts (from several days to several seasons) were based on observing the cyclic natural phenomena (for example, frosts on *Kreshcheniye* - 19 January, hot weather and thunderstorms on Ilyin Day - 2nd of August), “entailing” periodical phenomena “*if Samson Day, 10th of July, is rainy, the following seven weeks will be the same*”, and phenological indicators (a heavy yield of acorns and nuts, and few mushrooms in autumn are indicative of a snowy, cold winter). According to meteorological signs, long-term forecasts were often simultaneously based on calendar and phenological observations : for instance, the appearance of ducks before *Blagoveshcheniye* (7th of April) was associated with the coming of warm weather.

Meteorological signs reflect both the natural and climatic conditions of Central Russia and the outlook of the observer - the Russian peasant farmer. Although locally limited by the number of phenomena which can be observed, traditional meteorological observations are extremely varied, for they include observations of the Sun, Moon, constellations, flora, fauna and man’s sensations. The thoroughness with which the Russian peasant observed nature allowed him to detect a number of interdependent links, for example : the time between the cherry tree blossoms and the latest frost ; the colour of bird’s plumage and forthcoming precipitations ; good weather on *Pokrov* (the first day of October according to old style of Russian calendar) and the weather of the coming winter ; and even between the time of coming rain and “place” at the end of the rainbow ; and in which ear man has a ringing. It was the use of data obtained by natural scientists (physicists, phenologists, meteorologists) in analysing this syncretic material that made it possible to determine the elements of the rational and irrational, and, in particular, promote a re-assessment of the significance of some signs and superstitions. For instance, after analysing long-term meteorological observations, it was actually proved that a cold first day of October (*Pokrov*) did indicate lower average temperatures in November and December, and that a blossoming cherry tree could practically serve as an indicator of the seasonal warming of weather in Central Russia.

The presence of meteorological signs in the traditional culture of all peoples of the world gives us an exceptional opportunity to conduct wide-scale comparative research.

The similarity of natural and climatic conditions predetermined the common character of meteorological signs used by peoples who at that time had little in common, either in their cultures or the place where they lived. This pertains to both short-term forecasting signs (the majority of peoples of Europe and North Asia use signs linking the state of hygroscopic objects with forthcoming rain), and long-term ones (for example, warm days in early autumn, dubbed "*Babiye leto*", or Indian summer, are registered by peoples of Europe and North America alike). A comparative analysis of ethnographic material shows that the specific features of economic activity, life style and the religious factor add diversity to the traditional meteorological ideas of every nation. It is possible to follow this process more consistently by using the ethnographic material collected in the Middle Volga area - a multiethnic region populated by Russians, Chuvash, Tartars, Marii and Udmurts. The Chuvash who lived there traditionally observed the periods of the lunar calendar to make long-term forecasts of weather and harvest, the Tartars linked that with the 12-year cycle calendar, and the Russians made use of the solar agricultural calendar. However in the 19th century, the Chuvash, who were recognized in the region as "Weather oracles", used all these methods to forecast weather.

CONCLUSION

The connection of traditional meteorological ideas with natural and climatic conditions and ethnographical factors strengthens the link of ethno-meteorology with a definite ethno-ecological system. This determines the significance of material provided by ethno-meteorology for natural scientists (which is connected with a possibility of finding unknown indicators of weather fluctuations and chains of interdependence in nature), ethnographers and historians of culture (who have the opportunity to study the cognitive activity of Man, taking into account the traditional life style of the ethnic community), as well as the expediency of their complex inter-disciplinary study. Ethno-meteorology is a particular case, an aspect of the far-ranging theme of man's perception of the laws of nature and the study of man's cognitive activity of traditional pre-industrial society. Ethno-meteorology shows the potential of ethnographic material primarily based on the observation of nature. These observations reflect the phenomena under observation, the state of nature and ideas and the viewpoint of the observer himself - the hunter, fisher, farmer, cattle breeder - who, due to his close contact with nature, perceives himself as an inherent part. The example of ethno-meteorology proves that a complex inter-

disciplinary approach radically promotes the enrichment of the data bank of empirical observations of nature (which is important for natural sciences), and the specification of ideas held by ethnographers about the rational and irrational in traditional folk culture. Numerous examples of this kind can also be found among traditional folk ideas connected with predicting earthquakes and the state of Man. For instance, the new trend in science-biolocation stemmed from the folk tradition of searching for objects hidden in the earth with the help of “rods” (*lozokhodstvo*).

Being of great practical value, all the examples mentioned above simultaneously urge one to pay more attention to the cognitive activity of Man towards traditional society as a whole, as well as to the peculiarities of man’s perception of the surrounding world.

In studying the cognitive activity of Man, modern science stresses the fact that his perception can be fully valued only when it employs two different methods of cognition (the principle of complementarity). Different cerebral hemispheres of the human brain are responsible for different functions - one for logical structures, the other for images. Image thinking ensures the cognitive activity of Man through synthesizing logical structures.

It would appear that a special study of traditional ideas and ethnographic material connected with the cognitive activity of ethnic communities can promote, not only a better understanding of the traditional perception of the world by Man in pre-industrial society, but also the study of important problems of human nature as a whole.

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