

Orthodox Christianity, Soviet Atheism and 'Animist' Practices in the Russianized World

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Russia was the first state in the world where atheism became an official ideology. And, although atheism was above all an idea and a doctrine whose content was variable, soviet Russia tried to put it into practice.

Before we ask ourselves what a practice of atheism might consist of, we should also remember that at the level of the Russian state two systems of rites and representations succeeded each other historically. First a monotheism: until 1917 Orthodox Christianity was the state religion. Then after the bolshevik revolution Orthodox Christianity was replaced by militant atheism.

Nevertheless, in Russia atheism and Christianity were never the only two competing systems of rites and representations. Indeed Russia is profoundly multi-ethnic: the 1926–7 census, well-known for its reliability, counted no fewer than 194 ethnic groups in the USSR, while the 1989 census found 120 in the Russian Federation alone. Along with this multi-ethnic patchwork goes a very wide religious diversity. Apart from the many Christian groups, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism are also widely represented in Russia. In addition a large number of non-Slav groups – even today and in European Russia as well – have an 'animist' religious system. In these local systems of rites and representations, which may be utterly different one from another, 'spirits' and 'divinities' occur in great number.

Rather than simply contrasting monotheism and atheism in Russia, this paper proposes to introduce a third term – these various animist religious systems, to be precise – and explore the interactions and interrelationships between the three terms: Christianity, atheism and local religious systems. For in fact the Russian state first tried to evangelize the animist groups living on its margins; then the soviet authorities attempted to establish atheism there. So I shall briefly retrace here the activities of Orthodox missionaries, then atheist propagandists in this animist country, together with the local consequences of these varied activities. In order to apprehend these interrelationships without blurring their richness or their complexity I will

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SAGE: London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi, www.sagepublications.com

DOI: 10.1177/0392192105050591

analyse them here on two levels: the general level, in order to identify the central authorities' strategies and intentions in these enterprises of evangelization and propagation of atheism, and at the local level, in order to gain a detailed understanding of the concrete interactions taking place on the ground. Of course I would ideally have needed to present a wide range of these particular local examples. Within the restricted context of this paper I have allowed myself one only. Though this case on its own cannot claim to be representative of the diversity of local situations, it nevertheless gives an idea of the mechanisms and levers that have been set in motion by the various actors involved.

Evangelization of animist groups

The early 18th century was the period of the start of mass Christianization campaigns. Before that time, in many regions, the state was not yet able to launch huge evangelization campaigns, since Russian conquest was recent. The Russian presence was still weak in many areas, and local leaders, overcome by force, had become representatives of the state. They were in charge of collecting tribute in furs and sorting out simple legal problems. The government encouraged them to convert. Some agreed to be baptized and brought with them the groups under their authority. The few churches were built on the site of old cult locations. Christianization was generally limited to this Christian veneer of baptism.

It was Peter the Great who triggered the launch of mass evangelization campaigns at the beginning of the 18th century: the reforming tsar thought all the empire's inhabitants ought to know that there was only one God in heaven and that there was, and could be, only one tsar on earth.¹

Immediately the political strength of monotheism was emphasized very clearly by Peter the Great: one emperor, one God. For in fact Peter had a political objective. Among his numerous reforms we should highlight the abolition of the patriarchate, which had been created in 1589 when Moscow saw itself in official ideology as the 'third Rome': it was the public sign indicating that Moscow was taking on the legacy of Byzantium.² In 1716 new military regulations stated that 'His Majesty is an absolute monarch who does not need to answer for his actions to anyone whatever in the world, but has the power and strength to govern his states and lands as he wishes as a Christian sovereign'.³

In 1721 Peter the Great thus abandoned the old Byzantine model where religious power, represented by the patriarch, was separated from imperial power. The patriarchate was abolished and the church was henceforth governed by the Holy Synod, whose members had the rank of civil servants. A lay senior civil servant, the 'Holy Synod Procurator General', headed the institution. So Peter the Great became head of the church and from that time both powers were concentrated in the emperor's hands. With this change in political model Russia turned into an empire. The patriarchate was not restored until 1917, once the tsarist empire had disappeared, and less than three months before the separation of church and state.

Mass campaigns of evangelization

And so in the early 18th century Orthodox missionaries were dispatched in large numbers among Russia's non-Slav peoples, and complex strategies were developed. What were the methods employed to convert these people to monotheism?

First of all there were material incentives. Converts were exempted from paying tax for a certain period – three to seven years – which varied over time. When this was no longer deemed a sufficient encouragement, the authorities also gave some new clothes or even a small amount of money to those who accepted baptism. And to make up any losses, they increased the taxes others had to pay – in the 18th century the amount tripled in a few decades.

Many people converted in order to take advantage of these tax benefits or to get a few roubles. Naturally it did not take the missionaries long to realize these conversions were totally skin-deep, and a system of fines was introduced. If new converts did not go to church or were found making sacrifices to the spirits, they were severely punished.

More radical measures were adopted against those who, despite the supposedly great advantages they might gain or despite threats, refused to embrace the Christian religion. Then attempts were made to convert them forcibly and with the army's assistance. Various accounts have preserved the memory of local people imprisoned for refusing baptism or thrown into the font with their hands and feet bound. Accompanied by the imperial troops, priests also marched into villages, where bloody conflicts sometimes ensued. Then cult sites – or places thought to be such – as well as cemeteries or ritual objects, were destroyed and burnt, and the local people were hurriedly baptized.

These methods in their turn gave rise to violent reactions: revolts broke out in many areas. On the middle Volga alone more than 100 uprisings have been recorded for the period 1740–72 (Ališev, 1990: 253). They were all cruelly put down.

New methods

During the 19th century methods of evangelization underwent a radical transformation throughout the empire – for instance, force was no longer used.

In fact Christianization had not produced the results hoped for in the previous century. In the view of the new generation of missionaries the reasons for this failure were explained particularly by ignorance of local languages and religions. At that time priests often spoke only Russian, which the non-Slav peoples scarcely understood, if at all. The missionaries of the 19th century began to learn their languages and translate the Scriptures.⁴

And so missionaries attempted to explain the Orthodox faith in the villages. They made use of objects, for example icons, which they handed out liberally. Those who accepted one had to agree to learn to tell the sacred story associated with the representation. They also tried to use the threat of hell, but that strategy could turn out to be counter-productive, because the local people often expressed the wish to go after death to the place where their relatives already were, even if that was hell. In

addition new churches were built, but Christian dogma did not always seem easy for those animistic peoples to assimilate.

During the second half of the century a strong personality changed radically the direction of evangelization techniques among the non-Slav populations of the Volga. N. I. Il'minskij (1822–91) studied a number of languages as a young man, travelled in the East and tried to analyse the different methods of Christianization being applied both in Russia and abroad. In his view only Christianization could in the long term bring about Russification: the political stake associated with the propagation of monotheism is thus quite clear.⁵

In order to achieve this result it was necessary to use the medium of local languages. With his encouragement many more translations of biblical texts were completed. Il'minskij's ambition was eventually to train local priests who would then go out into the villages. With this in view Il'minskij set up seminaries for ethnic minorities. In the early years teaching was in local languages, but as soon as students had assimilated Russian, classes had to be conducted in that language. These schools operated for 50 years (1863–1913); the opinion of even early 20th-century missionaries was that this method of evangelization had only a mediocre success rate.

Results

Did the peoples living on the margins accept the monotheistic vision that Peter wished so dearly to promote?

For the local mythologies recorded from the mid-19th century onwards, the idea of monotheism is meaningless. From this perspective the image of the Christian god appears to have given rise, in local pantheons, merely to a rather vague representation of a celestial divinity, a personification of the heavens. Thus we find utterly passive 'Divinities from above' or 'Spirits from the sky'. Though they are sometimes assumed to have once created the world, they are not – or no longer – thought to intervene in human affairs. Furthermore it should be noted that they are not the object of any cult, unlike other spirits. These heavenly gods are frequently considered to have one or several sons who were sent down to earth, but they then often become tutelary divinities who are thought, among other things, to defend their people against the Russians and their religion! Indeed it is these sons from the heavens who are likely to be contrasted with the Christian god, who is perceived essentially as, and frequently called, a 'Russian god'. So the political message was certainly heard by the minorities, who attempted to set against it symbols and emblems of their identity at least partially borrowed from the conquerors and turned against them.

Thus the dogma was not assimilated, and the missionaries did not succeed in introducing a little Christianity via the idea of monotheism. In fact they did achieve it with the cult of the saints: by this method practices considered as Christian were established, in particular because of the regular rituals and seasonal feast-days which were often at the heart of the local religious systems. In order to apprehend the part played by these Christian intercessors on animist territory, we shall look at a specific case.

We shall simply take the example of a feast celebrated in honour of the prophet Elijah in the Russian Far North.⁶ A rite organized for St Elijah's day (20 July) was described in the early 20th century among the European Nenets, a Samoyed people who lived nomadically herding reindeer on the Arctic tundra. In those far-off regions of northern Europe that were hard to reach Orthodox missionaries were not particularly active till the 19th century. There follows, in a few words, a description of their activities among this animist group.

In 1822 a programme to convert the European Nenets was ready, and the tsar approved it two years later. Then a mission was created around the archimandrite Veniamin,⁷ and its members began to travel about across the tundra with the aim of converting the Nenets. These evangelization campaigns were vigorously pursued: the missionaries would do battle with the local religious leaders and destroy sacrificial sites, burning the sometimes very numerous ritual instruments of the spirits that were there. Then they raised a cross on the spot where the cult site in question was. And they were accompanied by soldiers who, if necessary, might also threaten Nenets who refused to convert. In 1830 the majority of the region's Nenets were baptized. Between 1830 and 1835 wooden churches were erected on the tundra. Nenets children could now attend school there.

Like a number of his contemporaries Veniamin had observed that the Nenets understood virtually no Russian, so preaching had to be carried out in their language. In 1825, therefore, he started to learn Nenets, which meant that he could translate, for instance, Matthew's gospel.⁸ Similarly the archimandrite tried to understand the Nenets religion so that subsequently he could go about converting more efficiently, and as a result he produced an excellent ethnographic study in 1855.

Thus it was among the Nenets evangelized by Veniamin and his colleagues that a rite associated with the prophet Elijah was described early in the 20th century. Two authors have discussed it as follows.

(1) In the reindeer herders' lives 20 July has a special place as the day dedicated to St Elijah, considered to be the patron saint of reindeer herders. On that day the Nenets gather together in the tent belonging to a big herder who is highly respected. They come from afar, 30 versts⁹ or even further.

Several competitions are organized. The most interesting one is the sled race, where the distance to be covered is very short, 300–400 sagens¹⁰ or even less. The value of the race lies not only in speed but the beauty of the leading reindeer during the race. Beside the race, in which even the older men take part, the young ones compete at lasso-throwing, wrestling and axe-throwing. There are no prizes, but the winner of the race ties a many-coloured ribbon round his leading reindeer's neck.¹¹

(2) The reindeer festival is celebrated on St Elijah's Day, when the young reindeer are three months old. For this festival the Nenets normally gather in the tent belonging to their richest, most influential member. They all bring their best reindeer. After a meal they organize a reindeer race. Some teams of animals line up and at a signal dash forward. When they reach the agreed point they wheel round towards the tent where they are greeted with shouting. The atmosphere is then at its height. A ribbon is tied to the winner's leading reindeer, who keeps the title till the next race. Then those who wish put on demonstrations of movements, passing back and forth with their teams between the empty sleds, which are laid out in different ways. After the sled competitions there are games. The

Nenets wrestle, lift weights, throw lassoes, etc. Then they have supper and swap information about the tundra, their reindeer . . . Around nightfall they begin to perform epic songs.¹²

The representation of Elijah as the reindeer herders' patron saint is definitely a consequence of the missionaries' work and not an effect of a 'popular Russian Christianity' that might have reached the Nenets. Indeed in the Russian tradition the prophet of Israel, who is widely celebrated, has other characteristics.¹³ As Elijah's prayers are supposed, in the Book of Kings, to have brought drought, then rain, upon Israel, which had turned to the worship of Ba'al, Russians believe he possesses power over the rain and so fertilizes the fields and promotes good harvests. Probably by an analogy between fertility and fecundity, he has sometimes been considered a protector of domesticated animals (calves, sheep, goats). However, this function appears to be marginal and other Orthodox saints seem more able to protect livestock.

Furthermore the saint found Russia to be particularly favourable soil, since he seems to have taken on the characteristics of Perun, the old Russian god of thunder, lightning and rain. According to the Scriptures Elijah ascended to heaven in a fiery chariot drawn by flaming horses, and Russian peasants used to think thunder was caused by the chariot rumbling. On St Elijah's Day they did not go to work in the fields in the belief that there would definitely be a thunderstorm; lightning would probably strike too on that day. Among various non-Slav minorities¹⁴ in Russia thunder is similarly associated with the prophet Elijah and his celestial chariot.

Among the Orthodox population Elijah might additionally be the patron of domestic animals. The missionaries probably chose him because they knew Nenets: in Russian Elijah is *Il'ija* and in Nenets *il'*¹⁵ means 'life'. This is a case of a particularly productive root which, in Samoyed languages, clearly refers to the semantic fields associated with ideas of life, animation and soul.¹⁶ Furthermore the Nenets formed a word on this root that they use to indicate the wild reindeer (*iljebc'*), which literally means 'livelihood'; and *iljebja* means 'wealth, goods', referring to the importance of the domesticated reindeer herd. The name of a Nenets god that Veniamin¹⁷ himself saw as a 'god the creator, giver of life' contains one of these two words; he is called *iljebam' pertja*, which may be rendered by 'god who is concerned with wealth, livestock'.

With the work of the missions this god probably gave way to Elijah, whose name is phonetically close. Logically the prophet of Israel took on his predecessor's role and so became the protector of the herdsmen, a function he could legitimately occupy from the perspective of Orthodox tradition. In addition St Elijah's feast-day is the only one attested among the Nenets, whereas all the other Samoyed peoples organize great animist rites of renewal during which ritual games take place, like the reindeer race for St Elijah. It is therefore likely that the feast-day held on 20 July replaced an animist festival.

This example is very far from the monotheistic idea and doctrine Peter the Great wished to promote in order, among other things, to secure his imperial legitimacy. In direct contact with realities in the field, the missionaries had to use extremely concrete mechanisms if they hoped to sow Christianity. Here they made use of Elijah,

especially for linguistic reasons; elsewhere, and always according to local specificities, they opted to use other saints.

Atheism

Let us now look at how atheism in its turn tried to get a foothold among the same minorities in Russia.

The content of the notion of atheism has varied according to historical period. For instance, in Bossuet's view it involves denying not God's existence but his effectiveness on human behaviour. The *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* itself¹⁸ dates the idea of atheism to ancient Greece and briefly traces its history. In passing it highlights the fact that the Russian word *ateizm* was borrowed from the French and quotes a number of French authors among the representatives of the strand of thought: Helvetius, Diderot, d'Holbach among others. Though atheism came from the West, it was nevertheless in soviet Russia that it became a state ideology based on the denial of the existence of God and any supernatural force or creature.

Shortly after the October revolution, the bolshevik authorities introduced a number of measures on religion. The 18 December 1917 decree laid down that only civil marriage was recognized by the state; a month later, on 20 January 1918, the church was separated from the state and education. The July 1918 constitution guaranteed freedom for religious and anti-religious 'propaganda'.

However, it was not down the road of religious freedom that the new government was setting off, but towards inculcating a state ideology that categorically denied the existence of supernatural entities, and towards battling against Orthodoxy and all other forms of religion. In the end atheism, which was directly dependent on the political powers, took over the place that Orthodox religion held under the tsarist empire. In 1918 the church was attacked and ecclesiastical chattels were liable to be confiscated. On 31 January 1918 (13 February) Lenin replaced the Julian with the Gregorian calendar. The thirteen-day gap between them would create a major handicap for anyone wishing to celebrate Orthodox rites.

Abolishing religion did not mean abandoning ritual. In fact atheists very quickly realized they needed to structure day-to-day life using ritual, and they undertook a theoretical study of the question. So on the one hand dogma was uncoupled from ritual, and on the other it was assumed that ritual's content and form were separable elements.

Atheistic ritualizations

During the first half of the 1920s a civil ritual system was introduced. A 'red baptism' was created and new first names appeared. They were no longer linked to the saints from the calendar but to the Marxist revolution and its heroes: Oktjabrina (from the month of October), Engelina, Vladlen – a contraction of Vladimir Lenin – etc. There was also a civil wedding and a 'red funeral', which then consisted of a procession

with red flags, a eulogy at the cemetery and revolutionary hymns for the burial proper.

Though the communist rites of baptism and marriage were certainly successful, at least in places – because they were used in addition to the various local rites – the same cannot be said for the funeral. Despite very many attempts in that direction – and over decades – ‘red funerals’ never succeeded in taking root. As early as the 1920s people thought they saw people ‘come back’ who had been so buried, or they imagined they were burning in hell. At last, in the 1970s, the authorities let people bury their dead in accordance with their custom.

Death turned out to be unthinkable for Marxist materialists, who did not manage to impose a ritual to structure it. This essential point perhaps shows the intrinsic limit to a ritual system created by a dogma that does not recognize any supernatural entity and does not entertain any destiny after death. To think about death the missionaries at least offered evangelized peoples another referent, whereas atheism could only do away with the religious content of existing rituals. Having nothing to fill the vacuum created, it systematically failed where Christianity had occasionally succeeded.

Atheistic ritualization not only affected the cycle-of-life rites. A system of periodic soviet festivals was set up.¹⁹

Soon after the revolution atheism combated regular Orthodox rites with ‘counter-rituals’. Thus there appeared parodies of Christmas and Easter, for example. During these celebrations young men walked in procession shouting anti-religious slogans and waving banners in the same style. In the evening, in the course of big atheistic gatherings, topics such as ‘How gods arise and die out’ were discussed and anti-religious songs were performed. Because they were shocking, these early attempts at ritual were not considered successful and lasted only a few years. Then, rather than mocking religious feast-days, the authorities chose to concentrate on developing their own independent ritual system.

The first steps in this direction date from the revolution. In late 1919 two key dates in the new calendar were fixed: 1 May, ‘the Day of International Worker Solidarity’, and 7 November, ‘the Day of the Revolution of the Proletariat’. From the 1920s, regular rituals appeared to mark the economic cycle. Once the collectives were set up the best workers began to be honoured. The year’s economic results were announced then and a commitment was made to fulfil the objectives of the following year’s plan.

Often these new rituals were not created out of nothing: they depended on the form of pre-existing rituals. When these had been emptied of their religious substance the soviet authorities poured a Marxist content into them. Once more we can take a concrete case, again by way of example, and look at what became of the festival the Nenets used to organize for St Elijah’s Day.

Soviet policy as regards this rite was simple: it was just taken over. In 1930 Babuškin – who had observed the rite at the time of the 1926 census, which he had overseen in the region – indicated that it was ‘essential to make wide use of this traditional festival for economic and cultural purposes’.²⁰ Five years later, in 1935, the executive committee of the Nenets national district made the decision to introduce ‘the Day of the Reindeer Herder’.²¹ Reference to the prophet, which had been so meaningful, vanished, though the rite was not really moved in the calendar.

Nevertheless it was no longer celebrated on 2 August (equivalent to 20 July in the pre-revolutionary Julian calendar) but simply early in August. Furthermore it was organized by the Soviet structures in place (the collectives).

From this example we can see how far militant atheists had taken over from the missionaries. From this perspective 1917 did not bring about a radical break, and soviet ideologues took considerable advantage of the missionaries' work, which had prepared the ground for them. In the end, as Absaljamov, one of the soviet agents of the takeover, says, all that was required was to remove the 'kulako-clerical' content from the feast of St Elijah and substitute a Marxist content to make it conform to the new doctrine and act as a political tool for the new regime. He immediately saw the Nenets festival in a political light: before the revolution it was used, he writes,²² to propagate 'bourgeois nationalist ideology' and now it was a vehicle of communist education.

This was but the first stage in the takeover of ritual, corresponding to the ritualization campaigns of the 1930s. After a break during the war the campaigns started up again in the 1950s. Many rituals were created then and included in the red calendar. They were partly days associated with the war and victory, such as 19 November, which became 'Artillery Day' to commemorate the start of the soviet counter-offensive at Stalingrad (19 November 1942). The most numerous rituals, however, were work-related and celebrated on Sundays. For instance, from 1966 onwards the first Sunday in April was 'Geologists' Day', whereas from 1976 the last Sunday in October was dedicated to workers in the road transport services, etc. By the late 1970s the general soviet calendar contained close on 60 celebrations.²³

The soviet authorities were not content with taking over the Nenets festival in the independent Nenets district. During the 1960s they introduced it into all the other regions in Russia where there were people living who raised reindeer. Eventually the festival became 'Reindeer Herders' Day' and as such was incorporated into the soviet ritual system, where ideally every occupation was supposed to be represented. This was the opportunity to announce production objectives and results, to reward the best 'workers', etc. In contrast to what happened, for instance, with Fishery Workers' Day, which had occurred everywhere in the USSR on the second Sunday in August since its creation in 1965, it was clearly impossible to fix a date for Reindeer Herders' Day. In Nenets district the day carried on being celebrated in August, while elsewhere it might be organized at some other time: in some places it occurred in December in the 1960s, February in the 1970s and March in the 1980s. Towards the end of the soviet period it seems to have taken place in most cases in February/March. And nowadays the reindeer herders of Russia still celebrate it, and do so in style. In their turn they have reclaimed the festival, which they have stripped of its soviet references, emphasizing more the 'national' aspect. And so today it is above all an emblem and means of expression of identity capable of backing up Russian minorities' political demands.

In the soviet context ritual games such as the sled race were turned into 'national sports' and from the early 1960s they were also standardized so that results obtained here or there would be comparable. Again in the direction of greater integration inter-regional sporting competitions were soon organized: this was the fate of ritual games in regular rites.

In addition, as part of this attempt at providing a ritual structure for day-to-day life, the soviets paid great attention to local contexts, and their ritual system was liable to be adapted to each specific case. So that these rites might more easily take root they did not fail to include in them 'national' elements such as dances. It was at that period that the famous slogan held sway: 'National in form, socialist in content'. This overall strategy, planned with a view to creating a vast soviet ritual system, is reminiscent of the one the missionaries had previously operated, particularly as regards the cult of saints, which, being flexible, also meant that local specificities could be taken into account.

In the Russian context therefore monotheism as such, and atheism too, seem to be directly linked to a central political power, which used them specifically to confirm and consolidate its hold on the peoples it had conquered. More or less explicitly the objective pursued was integration and assimilation. The result was mediocre: the greater the distance from the power centre the less the monotheistic (only one God) or atheistic (denial of God's existence) aspect seemed to be understood.

If we now reverse the perspective and position ourselves at the level of local practices, the festivals and periodic rituals appear by contrast to represent a considerable factor in power relations, since the central government tried to take them over for Christianity or atheism. And so the result was, as Hocart believed,²⁴ that it seemed as if those who held symbolic control of these periodic rituals also held political power.

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Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

Notes

1. Vdovin (1979), p. 4.
2. The four patriarchates existing then (Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem) were part of the Ottoman Empire.
3. Heller (1997), p. 453.
4. Historically, however, it was not the first time that missionaries from Russia took an interest in non-Slav languages. Indeed the effort had been made much earlier, in the 14th century for example, by Stephen of Perm, who evangelized the Komis. He knew their language, into which he translated the biblical texts.
5. On Il'minskij's life and writings see, for example, Kirillov (1988), pp. 61–8.
6. For more details on this ritual see Lambert (1999–2000).
7. The archimandrite Veniamin should not be confused with I. E. Veniaminov, who evangelized peoples living in eastern Siberia.
8. On the Christianization of the Nenets see especially Homič (1979).
9. 1 verst equals 1.06 km.
10. 1 sagan equals 2.13 m.
11. Kercelli (1911), p. 98.
12. Gejdenrejh (1930), p. 30.
13. On this subject see, for example, Kalinskij (1990), pp. 147–50.
14. For instance see Fuchs (1924), pp. 249–50, for the Finno-Ugrian peoples living on the Volga or in the Urals.

15. The two apostrophes do not have the same value here. In the transliteration of Russian Cyrillic the apostrophe indicates a liquid, whereas in Nenets it is used to designate a guttural occlusive.
16. On this root see, for example, Janhunen (1977), p. 27.
17. 1855, pp. 114–15.
18. 1970 (3rd edn), pp. 369–70.
19. For a comprehensive presentation of this see especially Lane (1981).
20. Babuškin (1962), p. 10.
21. Absaljamov (1962), p. 149.
22. *Ibid*, p. 151.
23. On this topic see *Naši prazdniki* (1977).
24. Hocart (1970).

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