

Iryna Ihnatenko. *Zhinoche tilo u tradytsiinii kul'turi ukrainsiv* [*The Female Body in Traditional Ukrainian Culture*]. Scholarly editor, Maryna Hrymnych, 3rd ed., Intelktual'na knyha, 2014. Etnolohiia dlia doroslykh [Ethnology for Adults]. 264 pp. Illustrations. Bibliography. Appendices. Cloth.

The instances of a researcher's side interest outshining his/her primary research focus and bringing him/her renown are few and far between. Ethnologist and historian Iryna Ihnatenko resides in this minority of researchers. Initially, she chose traditional Ukrainian medicine of the Polisia region as her dissertation topic. However, she veered into the rarely explored and taboo sphere of the cultural perception of the female body in Ukrainian villages of the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. Her research is as provocative as it is informative. She also avoids any claims about the "ultimate truth" regarding the subject matter, which underscores her awareness of the limitations of the archival sources.

In the first part of the book, Ihnatenko explains that even if there are many reasons to question the reliability of the nineteenth-century archival sources—for instance, owing to their lack of common methodology; the fact that researchers were generally male; the diversity of the regions in question; and the sensational nature of the topic—these sources still reflect the genuine experiences of Ukrainian women. In order to preserve the authenticity of these women's voices, the author opts to include long quotes and abstracts rather than paraphrasing and modifying source information. Her choice makes the monograph more descriptive and less analytic.

The monograph deals with the rural beliefs, rituals, and practices relating to the female body that were prevalent in several regions of Ukraine (mostly in the Polisia, Cherkasy, and Poltava regions). The book explores how the traditional Ukrainian socio-cultural environment judged, modified, concealed, celebrated, and condemned the female body. Having sifted through extensive archival sources and personally collected interviews of elderly women in more than one hundred Ukrainian villages, Ihnatenko describes the practices and rituals of traditional Ukrainian culture, which, in the end, are telling examples of a Foucauldian disciplining of the female body. Power is achieved not through physical coercion but, rather, through pressure on individuals to police their own bodies in compliance with social norms. Ihnatenko emphasizes that "a woman's body did not belong to a woman herself" (Kuiava; my trans.) because it was strictly regulated by community rules. In illustrating her contention, the author organizes her findings about the female body into eight chapters, starting with topic of menstruation and ending with the subject of menopause. The chapters list and describe the rural framework for female hygiene, dating and wedding rituals, marriage, sex, contraception, abortion, and folk medicine—that is, the

various practices that applied to the female body throughout different stages of a woman's life.

From a contemporary perspective, the needs, demands, rituals, and prescriptions described in the book can be seen as rational, funny, or controversial—even brutal. The latter trait could be used to characterize the wedding tradition known as the *komora* (“chamber”) ritual, which Ihnatenko details in part 2, chapter 3. During a wedding, the bride was thoroughly examined; then, she and her groom were locked in a room (that is, *komora*) to consummate their marriage, after which they were supposed to produce evidence of the bride having lost her virginity at that time. Wedding guests would often stand outside the door to the room singing and inquiring about the young couple's progress. If the groom was unable to deflower his bride, the duty would be given to his best man. As Ihnatenko writes, even an older woman or the bride herself could use her hands to produce evidence of the bride's wedding-day virginity. The bride's blood-stained shirt would be cause for celebration and the glorification of the bride and her family, while the absence of a blood-stained shirt could give rise to public shaming and punishment. Although the *komora* ritual seems like something that one might see in an episode of *Game of Thrones*, it likely took place in several regions of Ukraine. This ritual is but one of many that illustrate how traditional Ukrainian village society was preoccupied with blood. But there was also a particular preoccupation with menstrual blood. Unlike the blood from defloration, which was happily accepted, menstrual blood was seen as a potential threat, one that gave reason for a menstruating woman to be temporarily excluded from performing certain functions.

The *komora* ritual, certainly, runs counter to modern-day sensibilities. At the same time, even today one can encounter traditional Ukrainian weddings that incorporate, for instance, a staged kidnapping of the bride and a subsequent demand for ransom in order to get her back. Also, I have personally attended several village weddings where second-day festivities included pulling the parents of the bride and the groom on a cart through the village to the closest pond, river, or even big puddle and bathing them in mud. Today, this latter practice is humorous and seems to be beyond rational explanation, but in the past, certain symbolic meaning was attached to it.

Despite its fascinating subject matter, Ihnatenko's book may seem too technical and dry owing to the absence of an axiological approach. In addition, its descriptive narratives call for a phenomenological, post-structuralist, feminist, or psychoanalytic framework in order to deconstruct the subjectivity of those narratives. Also, the research could have benefitted from the inclusion of some basic statistics—for instance, female population percentages; calculations of average marriage age and number of children; death rates; and life expectancy numbers. Perhaps a more personal touch on

the part of the author would have made the book less academic, but, at the same time, this might have made the book more attractive to the general reader.

In traditional Ukrainian society, what did it mean, in terms of joy and pleasure, to inhabit the female body? What kind of desires did women have? Was it possible to successfully negotiate conflicting social and personal pressures, and how could this be done? What kind of historical baggage do modern-day Ukrainian women have to carry? These and many other questions arise as Ihnatenko exposes some of the moral double standards and contradictory prescriptions regarding the female body in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Ukrainian villages. The existence of such practices and behaviours, thus, calls into question and deflates the pastoral and idealized image of traditional Ukrainian culture.

Marta Kondratyuk
Donetsk National University

Work Cited

Kuiava, Zhanna. "Zhinoche tilo: vid zaboboniv i tabu do povnoi rozkutosti." *Dzerkalo tyzhnia. Ukraina*, no. 40, 1 Nov. 2013, gazeta.dt.ua/family/zhinoche-tilo-vid-zaboboniv-i-tabu-do-povnoyi-rozkutosti-.html. Accessed 20 May 2017.