**RED IN SLAVIC FOLKLORE**

Slavic culture and folklore revolve around nature, magic, and spirituality. Pagans incorporate meaning into all aspects of their lives through the creation of folktales, traditional clothing, rituals, and the assigning of symbolism to objects, forces, and even colors. These ideas are still present in Slavic nations to this day. Some were incorporated into modern religions, and some stayed unchanged for centuries. The earliest Slavs filled their customs with powerful colors of nature. Within Slavic folklore, the prevalent color red is an expression of old pagan traditions and their sacred connection to nature.

Since ancient times red, the warmest of colors, was the color of life and intense emotions. Red, as a powerful hue, carries a unique meaning in different languages. In some Slavic languages, simply the word red can replace the words beautiful, colorful, and splendid. The ambiguous word *krasnaya* originally meant beautiful in Old Russian and has only as of recently become associated with red, hence the translation of the famous *Krasnaya Ploschad* as the Red Square. The plaza was established in the 15th Century and originally took its name from the Trinity Cathedral now replaced by St. Basil’s. Later the adjective *krasnaya* became popular as it referred to both the cathedral and the square (Lifeboat). Among the few, well-preserved Russian folk traditions, *Krasny Ugol*, an alter for holy icons, can be found in almost every Orthodox household. Depending on the source it is translated as Red or Beautiful Corner, portraying the importance of red in even the most common of household traditions. Another place associated with this color is the Rugen Island located in the Baltic Sea.
Before the German influence, tribes living in the area called it *Rujan*, meaning red in Old Slavic. For many centuries this site was a place of worship for Svantevit, a pagan god of heavens, war, fertility, and harvest (Kempinski 285).

Pagans recognized the sun as a manifestation of their heavenly deities. For example, the Ukrainian sun took the shape of a beautiful maiden, often described as red, the color of the evening sky (Hubbs17). The setting sun played an important role in folktales and legends. *Vasilisa the Beautiful* is a fairy tale telling a story of a young girl who needs to perform various tasks for an old witch, the Baba Yaga. On her way to the hag’s house Vasilisa encounters three horsemen, one of whom is red. The red horseman brings sunset to the forest and as she later finds out, is one of Baba Yaga’s helpers. The witch is so powerful she is able to control time and nature. A somewhat different angle, illustrating the influence of the red sun, in Slavic mythology, is taken in the Polish version of a legend *Lech, Czech, Rus*. It is a classic tale about the founding of Gniezno, the first capital of Poland, and the creation of the national coat of arms. Three brothers, Lech, Czech, and Rus journey across the Slavic lands, at some point choosing to go in different directions. Lech, after many days of travel, notices a white eagle in its nest with a red, setting sun behind it. This magnificent sight astonishes him to such a degree that he decides to settle in the area, naming the village Gniezno, derived from the word nest in polish. The white eagle, on a red background is still, to this day, the coat of arms of Poland.

Uniting the traditional clothing of all Slavic nations, red thread serves many ritual functions in the local embroidery. The standard white-red-black color
scheme of folk costumes has both social and cosmic significance among the Slavs. The use of symbols and colors skillfully sewn into dresses, shirts, and shawls was not used strictly for decorative purposes. The ornate clothing depicted, at a glance, the social status of the folk, whether they were rich or poor, married or unmarried (Barber297). Roses, swastikas, diamonds, and ducks, the most common motifs, were incorporated in embroidery for protection, fertility, and happiness (Waldman). The red thread was used for protection against diseases, evil spirits, witches, and witchcraft. Some Polish families from Gmina Biszcza believe that tying a red thread to a newly born farm animal will protect it from death. The Rushnyk is traditional to Belarus and Ukraine; it is a white towel most commonly ornamented with symbols. Since red symbolizes life, the sun, fertility, and health, white rushnyks are embroidered with this color and used during special events such as weddings and hosting of guests. To create these beautiful ornamentations, red dye had to be made first. The folk used various plants, such as blackberries and dandelion roots in the preparation of dyes, but the use of the female larvae of Polish cochineal was the most popular. Ancient Slavs harvested the insects’ larvae in late June, then boiled them with water or killed them with vinegar, before drying them in the sun, and finally dissolving them in rye beer called kvass. The extract was then used to dye cotton, silk, wool, or linen. In Polish czerwony means red which is similar to the name czerwiec. June in Polish, derived from this traditional preparation of dye (Jakubski502).

Red was not only used in clothing but also in ritual and decorative objects. As Christianity spread around Slavic regions, pagans who adapted the faith kept
some of their old traditions by incorporating them into Christian practices. The Easter egg comes from the pagan custom of reviving nature during the first days of spring. Pagans put the dyed eggs on graves; the red dye symbolized the new blood circulating out of the ground. Today, eggs represent Christ rising from his grave and the eternal life promised to his followers. The inseparable symbol of Russia, the *matryoshka* doll, tells the story of its people ever since it appeared in the 1800s. Even though the dolls are not as old as some folktales, the paintings done on them steeped in tradition and folk culture. They are sometimes referred to as the mothers of Russia, holding future generations inside them. The primary colors used in their production are yellow, red, and blue. Artists dress *matryoshki* in the *sarafan*, a type of traditional garment, and an apron. The apron served as the main focus of the artists, who decorated it with luxurious plants. The most common motif painted on the apron of the dolls is a red dog rose, symbolizing motherhood and love. On occasions family members of newborn children would gift *matryoshki* to wish them a long and prosperous life (Delaine). The exchanging of gifts is a popular custom in Slavic countries. March, a special time in Bulgaria, is the month of sending off winter and welcoming spring; it is the remnant of a pagan ritual. On March 1st, *Baba Marta* day, Bulgarians give *martenitsas* to their friends and family. These tassels of white and red thread serve as an amulet in the period of spring; they are a wish for good health, strength, and happiness. The individual has to wear the adornment until March 22nd or until they see a stork, the harbinger of spring. The white thread on the *martenitsa* symbolizes peace, while the red one stands for the cycle of life
Red as a symbol of fertility is used at traditional Bulgarian weddings. The banner and *koum*’s tree play a significant part during the ceremony. Prepared before the wedding, they are decorated with red and white cloth, an apple, red peppers, flowers, and strings of popcorn. The streamer represents the Tree of Life, an ancient pagan symbol. To protect from evil and harm, the participants wrap the pole or the branch with red thread, which is also associated with fertility (MacDermott114).

Even though the customs associated with colors exist today, their true meanings have been partially lost and diminished. Red is most commonly seen in traditional Slavic costumes through simple stitch embroidery, but it also appears as a motif in folktales, holiday rituals, and objects, such as toys. Usually it represents the sun, which is the manifestation of pagan gods. The color is not only a powerful talisman protecting from evil spirits, but also a symbol of health, fortune, and fertility. Red is the magical color of folklore.
Bibliography:


  <http://www.spellintime.fsnet.co.uk/Folklore.htm>.


Wratislaw, Albert Henry. *Sixty Folk-Tales from Exclusively Slavonic Sources*.