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The “Crooked Spindle” Motif in Small Genres of Russian Folklore

Abstract

The Russian expression *кривое веретено* {crooked spindle} is an important structural and semantic component of Russian dialectal phraseology, proverbs and small ritual texts. There are about 14 phraseological units, proverbs and almost as many small ritual texts, including their variations, of spring invocations (*веснянки*) and harvest-time sentences (*жнивные приговоры*). Up to now, the origin of the expression *crooked spindle* and its connection with traditional culture has not been investigated. Preliminary analysis of these short folklore texts shows the possibility of their division into the following 5 groups:

1. Phraseological units of elementary structure (phraseologisms, comparisons) in which the expression *кривое веретено* is transparently metaphorical. The meanings revealed are the following: ‘mobile woman/girl’, ‘fiction, lies’, ‘careless piece of work’: *кривое/косое веретено, как верчѐное веретено*.

2. Paroemias (proverbs, sayings) which could be understood directly: *На кривом веретене не много добудешь, Кривое веретено не надёжа* (can’t provide smb with clothes). They reflect dysfunctionality of a crooked spindle.

3. Paroemias in which the attribute *кривое* is deprived of its primary denotational meaning, and carries the connotation of ‘something not valuable, unimportant’): *На шильце, на мыльце, на кривое веретѐнце* (money is needed for); *Знай [баба] своё кривое веретено*.

4. Texts of spring invocations and harvest-time sentences in which *веретено* is a symbol of a calendar and domestic year.

– *Жаворонки, перепелушки,
Прилетите к нам!
Весну ясную, весну красную
Принесите нам:
На жердочке, на бороздочке,
И с сохой, и с бороной,
И с кобылой вороной,
С пряльцем, с донцем,
С кривым веретенцем!*

*Зима нам надоела,
Хлеб и соль поела.
Ручки-ножки познобила,
Скотинушку поморила!*

Mainly in spring invocations, a row of substantives stand for the names of agricultural and domestic tools, used during the whole year from early spring till late winter: *жердочка, бороздочка, соха, борона, пряльце, донце, веретенце* (ploughing, harrowing, spinning). Spinning is the last component of the economic year, and it is marked negatively (*с кривым веретёнцем*). The spin (also a wheel) is a well-known Slavic symbol of the flow of time and its eternal recurrence. In the period preceding the new agricultural circle, the previous calendar year was rejected as well as its symbol. The time that passed and all its attributes was considered to be ‘wrong’ (hence the definition *crooked*) and supposed to be destroyed and replaced with the new one (hence — spindle-spoiling metaphors: *Намзима-тонадоела... Всю кудельку перепряла, **Веретены переломала***).

4. The paroemias in which *кривое веретено* is considered to be an instrument of sorcery. These proverbs directly describe the procedure of making thread (they contain such verbs as *мотать* ‘to wind’, *навертеть* ‘to screw’, *напрясть* ‘to spin’, *плести/наплести* ‘to spin, to weave’): *Мотать на **косо веретено**, Навертеть на **кривое веретено**, Напрясть на **кривое веретено*** etc. The figurative meaning, though, reflects the situation of negative mental, emotional and physical impact of a sorcerer on an addressee, f.ex. *Я те наряду на кривое веретено!* {*I’ll avenge myself/I’ll do you wrong!*}). The practice of spindle using in magical rituals is widely known among all the Slavs.