

# Breaking the Waves: Voodoo Magic in the Russian Cultural Ecumene

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## Introduction

Globalization has become one of those contested terms that, having originated in the social sciences, seeped out into popular discourse, contributing to the already considerable tool-kit of late modern reflexivity. Like other such terms that have escaped tight disciplinary boundaries—most notably “culture”—“globalization” has been widely and diversely used (some would say misused), questioned, and contested. According to some, the global world carries with it unprecedented possibilities of a better life for all (Gates 1995). Others say that this point of view is itself a stance of cultural imperialism or that it reflects an utter lack of touch with the reality of inequality, dominance, and exploitation (Bauman 1998). But this reality is itself a global condition. Scholars who look for a theoretical compromise offer a minimalistic understanding of globalization as a recognition of empirical conditions of “complex connectivity:...a dense network of unexpected interconnections and interdependencies” (Tomlinson 1999:2) that have become a feature of life in the world's most distant nooks and crannies.

In this paper, I consider an empirical case of such unexpected, and indeed bizarre, interconnectedness. However, I start not from the idea of the “global,” but, instead, from the notion of *ecumene* as proposed by Hannerz (1996). In his usage, adapted from Kroeber (1945), *ecumene*, “the entire inhabited world as Greeks then understood it,” is an area of “connectedness and reachability,...of interactions, exchanges and related developments” (Hannerz 1996:7). In other words, *ecumene* is the world conceived as a single place, but, significantly, seen from a certain point of view by a situated cultural subject. *Ecumenes*, thus understood, are different for different onlookers, depending on their geographical location as well as on their social and cultural positioning. An *ecumene*, moreover, can also be seen as a pool from where signs, images, ideas, expressive forms, and practices are drawn, a cultural “habitat of meanings” (Hannerz 1996; Bauman 1992). It is imaginable and usable by, and so existing only in relation to, concrete individuals, cultural agents who, subjectively, are always at its center. These *ecumenes* are shared and overlap between bigger and smaller collectivities, but, as “culture”<sup>1</sup> can be individual and idiosyncratic, so too, possibly, can its “*ecumene*”—a metaphorical area from where its resources can be drawn. Social and ideological conditions, as well as cultural histories, draw the borders of these *ecumenes* in specific ways. As Hannerz remarks, some countries have managed to lock themselves up against the majority of existing ties and currents

of globalization. He cites Albania and Burma as examples; North Korea can surely be added.

These cultural ecumenes, or habitats of meaning from which personal and group cultural universes are constructed, have their own centers and peripheries depending on where the agent is. In Sweden, the USA is often seen as a center, but this is not necessarily the case for Russia or China. Also, these centers may differ with respect to the spheres of human activities that, in themselves, can be considered as cultural universes, separate if sometimes overlapping. The centers of global currents in science and technology, undoubtedly seen by many to lie in the "West," and more specifically in North America, do not coincide with centers of spiritual influences, which, even for many modern Westerners, lie east of Europe.

For many Muscovites during Soviet times, their ecumene may be imagined as a world consisting of concentric circles, much as a map taught to school children in geography lessons of that time. Moscow was the center, surrounded by the rest of Russia and, further away from the center, by the then-Soviet republics. The domestic "West," the local "abroad" (*zagranița*), the source of material comfort and high(er)-quality goods, was in the Baltic republics; the domestic Orient, the source of colorful exotics, was in Central Asia. The furthest reaches of this concentric ecumene were in Siberia and in the Far East; these areas were seen as the abode of untamed nature on the verge of civilization, and thus as untainted by the destructive effects of human industrial activities: nature outside of culture. All those places, the entire ecumene, were, for the inhabitants of the Soviet Union, the world within conceivable reach. It was not that every Muscovite in his or her lifetime would have visited the geysers of Kamtchatka or the mosques of Bukhara; but most people were aware of their existence and knew they were free to visit them any time if they chose to. Moreover, the inhabitants of these "peripheries" could be met in the centers, in Moscow and Leningrad, as visitors, as traders selling local goods, and living there semi-permanently in ethnic communities.

Further away, outside the borders of actual reachability, but still within the borders of the imaginable, lay the "brotherly" countries of the Socialist world. The other of this cultural universe was the "West," a cosmos that, for the majority, belonged to the realm of fiction. This imagined world was presented as the cosmological Hell by the official ideology, as a world of poverty, exploitation, and drug-abuse, and as the cosmological Heaven by the counterculture, where it was vaguely seen as the world of freedom, flamboyant consumption, and material possibilities beyond all limits. But in both the official ideology and counterculture, this Hell/Heaven was an abstract imaginary, existing only theoretically or hypothetically in discourse, not in reality. The majority of the people in the Soviet Union knew that the likelihood of their setting foot on, say, the streets of New York was as small as their walking on the moon. The "West" as a real geographical and

cultural area was practically irrelevant, and outside the Soviet people's cultural ecumene.

The same could be said about the rest of the world, even though the Soviet polity, as well as the economy, had ties far outside the Soviet ecumene. The fact that some Soviet citizens traveled and even lived for longer periods of time in New York, as well as in Libya, Cuba, or Egypt, did not bring those places inside the habitats of meaning of their fellow citizens. The political, economic, and financial infrastructures of the global world constructed with Moscow as its center did not coincide with the cultural ecumene shared by the majority of the people living in this world.

After *perestroika*, borders opened and the flows of people, ideas, and capital began to move in and out with greater intensity than before. The frameworks for organizing diversity, outlined by Hannerz,<sup>2</sup> started to take shape. Face-to-face contact across the former borders between the real and the imaginary world multiplied after thousands of people emigrated to the "West," primarily to the USA and Israel. Scientific and professional contacts became possible. Some people traveled abroad and came back as exchange students, visiting professionals, and tourists. Many had friends and relatives in the West who came to visit and who invited their friends in post-Soviet Russia to visit them in their new homes.

The capitalist market arrived in Russia and the former Soviet states, bringing with it previously foreign cultural currents (ideas and artifacts) and organizing the new diversity that was this created. Finances poured into the Soviet states in the form of loans and, especially in the beginning, as foreign investments; money flowed out, especially to Western bank accounts belonging to the New Russians. The infrastructures of modernity, for better or worse, were being built.

This expansion of global infrastructures, embracing and penetrating Russia, affected the cultural ecumene of (some of) its inhabitants. With this expansion new reservoirs and sources of cultural impulses appeared from which individual agents could draw. In doing so, they modeled themselves as new cultural subjects, and introduced changes in existing orientations and values that went deeper than the usual movements of "emptied" signs and images referred to in globalization discussions (Lash and Urry 1994).

### **Weak and Strong Globalization**

In examining the intricate connections between the expanding infrastructures of globality, the changes in meaning and meaning management they underlie, and the construction of new identities that they make possible, it is useful to understand the distinction made by Friedman (1994) between strong and weak forms of globalization. Weak globalization, according to Friedman, is a sheer availability of global structures, the fact that they stretch onto new geographical terrains. In the case of foreign magic

in postcommunist Russia, the infrastructures that frame cultural flows are represented primarily by two elements: (1) the new routes of migration and travel that people take, and (2) the arrival of the market. The market is a cultural institution that is new for Russia, one that opens up new niches and arenas where people can take on new roles as producers and consumers of new services, and so of new meanings and expressive forms.

The stronger version of globalization occurs where not only the forms meanings take and the channels through which they flow are globalized, but also the patterns of meaning attribution. There appear global models of identification; people identify themselves with communities and practices that are disembedded (Giddens 1990), deterritorialized (Tomlinson 1999), and have seemingly little to do with their home turfs. The transition from weak to strong globalization will be examined by looking at seemingly disembedded practices in the world of Moscow magic. Do the new conditions result only in the transmission of disconnected goods, free-floating signs, expressive forms, and institutions emptied of meaning and significance? Or do they change deep cultural meanings and values, thereby making the local cultures more open, more substantially globalized?

### **The Market of Magic**

Practices of magic and healing in contemporary Russia are widespread, resorted to by all social strata and population groups. They are a firm part of everyday strategies of survival for many people, irrespective of their income bracket or education level. Logistically, it would be an easier task to study those who do *not* use magic in their everyday lives. Generally speaking, two groups may be singled out that would be likely to have a distrustful or contemptuous attitude to magic and healing. The first are pious Russian-Orthodox believers, predominantly those from the highly educated urban intelligentsia. They shun magic because the Russian-Orthodox church bans it as an expression of demonic action in the world (Lindquist 2000a). Religious people belonging to other social groups, those who have their roots and ties in rural areas and have been exposed to folk traditions, where the boundary between religion and magic is quite blurred, are more likely to have a more positive and pragmatic attitude to magic and healing practices. The second category that distrusts magic is made up of the old technical intelligentsia and their younger heirs, the new high-tech, information-technology-skilled urbanites, schooled in materialistic and rationalistic “disenchanted” thinking that discounts magic as charlatanism.

I would suggest, however, that this resistance to magic is contingent on the gravity of the problem that is affecting the individual. I met several staunch detractors who, sufficiently cornered by circumstances, were prepared to give it a try after all. This was easier for them if the healer had reliable personal references and was flexible enough to de-emphasize the “magical,” ritualistic, and supernatural elements of his/her activities. Many of the Moscow magi can and often do shift roles, performing

as psychiatrists, hypnologists, acupuncturists, and osteopaths. Magi are always ready to bring forth any other additional facet of his/her trade. As a rule, magi and healers, in addition to rituals of folk magic proper, are well versed in healing techniques involving healing with the hands or biofield healing, which constitutes the essence of healing, and master herbalism, bone setting, varieties of massage, acupuncture, hypnosis, psychotherapy, and a number of other specific and rare types of treatment.

Magic and healing can be analytically distinguished from one another. 'Healing' more often pertains to the treatment of biomedically defined diseases. To advertise as a healer, a person has to have a medical degree obtained from a college, nursing school, or, as a minimal requirement, a degree from schools that offer courses in the training of folk healers.<sup>3</sup> These latter criteria were devised in the first years of *perestroika*, in order to give a semblance of legal-bureaucratic legitimacy (see Lindquist 2001) to the practitioners that had already established their reputation and gathered a substantial clientele, and also to screen out, as many practitioners with a license would put it, outright madmen and charlatans. To advertise as a healer, open a clinic, or be employed by one requires a license issued by several institutes for training "folk healers." To advertise as a magi one does not need such a license; in their advertisements magi are not allowed to promise the treatment of biomedically defined diseases, even though they often disregard this regulation. It is common knowledge, however, that good or powerful magi do indeed help their clients get rid of acute and even chronic illnesses as one of the results of their treatment. As a rule, clients come to magi with existential predicaments that have to do with problems connected with love or marital relationships, problems with children, addiction to drugs or alcohol, and business or job problems (on the business magic, see Lindquist 2000b). In the course of a (successful) treatment, these problems are solved, and, as a side benefit, health problems are alleviated as well.

### **Advertisement of Magic**

The main way professional magi attract new clients is to advertise in newspapers.<sup>4</sup> There are specialized newspapers that deal exclusively with the "paranormal." There, advertisements of individual practitioners are interspersed with articles on diverse subjects, the choice of which would seem familiar to many Westerners interested in New Age alternative medicine and spirituality. These newspapers also serve as a source of elementary education in the world of Russian Orthodox religiosity. Here one can read about various Old and New Testament figures as well as Russian saints, the feasts of the Russian Church and the folk beliefs and customs connected to them, and also about Satanists, vampires, and aliens. One can get how-to recipes for attracting lovers and money and for retaining youth and beauty; instructions for interpreting dreams; and information about astrology, numerology, fortune telling, and more. Besides specialized newspapers covering all aspects of magic and the paranormal, general advertisement newspapers are also

available, where the ads of healers and magi mix with all others—from tractors to language courses, escort girls, and trips to exotic resorts.<sup>5</sup>

Although widespread, magic and healing in Russia are not unproblematic practices. As mentioned before, they are condemned and vilified by the Church as Satanic practices, and also are looked down upon as fraudulent by conventional scientists. Both Church and science are sources of authority and legitimacy in postcommunist Russian society, thus magi tend to use, in their public presentation (in advertisement and, for the most successful of them, in media interviews), easily discernible strategies of legitimation to render their craft less ideologically and culturally suspect. There are four strategies of legitimation that can be distinguished (for a more detailed discussion, see Lindquist 2001). One is to represent the craft as stemming from “tradition.” This can be framed as “folk tradition,” a corpus of spells and rituals coming from rural Russia that indeed have deep historical roots. In addition, the Russian Orthodox Church is widely considered to be a bearer of “Tradition,” therefore reference to Russian Orthodox religiosity figures prominently in many public presentations of the magi. These two strategies of legitimation by reference to “tradition” are most often merged: “folk” is presented as synonymous with “Russian Orthodox.” Another legitimation strategy is to reference conventional science and its bureaucratic institutions—what I have elsewhere called “rational-bureaucratic legitimacy” (Ibid.; MacCormack 1981). The third legitimation strategy is “charismatic legitimacy,” the reference being to the healer’s personal charisma. Finally, the fourth, which is increasingly visible on the market of Russian magic, is to reference the distant Other—the foreign origins of the craft. In individual presentations, these strategies can overlap and mix, but these tendencies are clearly seen in the texts of the advertisements.

Legitimation of magic (and healing) is indeed crucial because the moral grounds of magic are as problematic as its ideological and epistemological premises. Morality in postcommunist Russia is far from sorted out. To a large degree, this difficulty was inherited from Soviet times, where moral values were never unambiguous or shared by all. The “moral code of the builder of communism,” the official normative corpus, was already sufficiently contested in Soviet times. The moral rules and implicit values of the countercultural intelligentsia were often simple inversions of official directives. To complicate the matter, both of these moral codes were mixed or merged and somewhat transformed in the diffuse “folk” conceptions of morality, making the whole domain quite muddled.

To illustrate some of this confusion regarding moral values, two instances should suffice, both having to do with the category of what constitutes the desirable: 1) “property”/ownership versus social capital and 2) mercy/forgiveness versus punishment. The first instance has to do with the ambivalent attitude to money and “business” as a way to “make money” through one’s own activity with the help of market mechanisms (as opposed to receiving money from the state in the form of a

salary). In Soviet times, money was generally considered dirty and all practices of money-making were regarded as immoral (and were criminalized by the state) (Humphrey 1995; Pesmen 2000). Money as “capital” was secondary to social capital in the forms of kinship, friendship, sexual partnership, work relationships, and simple acquaintances. All these, rather than money, were crucial in providing a person with access to material and social goods. In postsocialist Russia, with the arrival of the market, money has become the primary, if not the only, means of survival, devaluing and attenuating old networks of trust. However, moral valuation of the new ties have not yet been worked out, and there is no defined legal system of punishment for the breach of obligations (and less so, mechanisms by which the system can be enforced). In the absence of these structures, violations of trust are sanctioned by physical violence. It is in this context that magical practices have become a new salient part of the cultural repertoire, sometimes used as alternatives to this type of violence. Many of them, as we shall see below, are resorted to in order to effect punishment for breach of trust and to inflict revenge for violation of obligations or other wrongdoings in the world of business affairs.

Another moral problem appears in connection with affairs of the heart and with love partners. Romantic love and the desire (and ultimate impossibility) to possess the beloved is probably a universal human predilection, thus love magic has likely existed as long as human cultures have. In Russia today, moreover, marital unions and sexual (extramarital) partnerships are often the only recourse for physical survival for non-working women (and their children), as the situation for women on the labor market has drastically deteriorated. Therefore, *privorot*, or magic ways of attracting someone’s love, is one of the main elements in contemporary Russian magic. Arguably, *privorot*, whose intention is to bend another person's will according to one's own designs, is morally questionable. In Russia, however, it may be considered a moral act if commissioned by a lawful wife whose husband is about to abandon her after many years of marriage for someone else (which in practice most often means younger and healthier). The same *privorot* is an immoral act, even an outright “sin,” however, if done on behalf of a mistress who wants to snatch the man from his wedded wife. The difference between white and black magic, gravely simplified, is that a white magus always wishes to remain within the borders of the morally acceptable. Thus, someone who professes to practice “white magic” would never even accept the latter assignment.

In real life, however, questions of morality in business as well as in love are hopelessly entangled. In popular understanding a connection exists between money, potency, and otherness (foreign), on the one hand, and evil, the Devil and black magic, on the other (Taussig 1987). White magic may be considered moral by the practitioners (they do not see “sin” as part of their activities), but in its effectiveness it is understood to be limited by God's will: if it is not God's will the magic will fail and the stray husband will not come back.

These connections can be traced in the following advertisements:

White magus. The magic of good and light. Liquidation of all kinds of sorcery effects and negative influences. Attraction of the beloved without committing a sin (*bezgreshyi privorot*). Solutions to private and family problems. Work with photographs. Consultation and diagnostics free of charge.

Genuine black magic. I help people selectively. Neutralization of rivals and enemies in love and business. Retribution to those who harmed you. Protection from all kinds of sorcery. Free for children. Very strong rituals to attract money and love. Rituals for female attractiveness. Individual approach. Expensive! 200 per cent guarantee. What is allowed to Jupiter is not allowed to the bull!

In the second ad, the author flaunts that he is being selective, supposedly judging and accepting applicants by his own criteria. One of these criteria is pointed out in advance, by qualifying his services as expensive. This effectively rules out those who cannot afford to pay, meaning, by implication, those “weak” people who have not managed to secure for themselves a decent existence in the new capitalistic jungle of Moscow. In return, the magus adopts the burden of moral judgment as to who should be punished, by extension permitting his clients the power to mete out punishments and retributions. It is such people with power/money (in practice, in Russia as elsewhere, these two go together), who are “Jupiters,” allowed more than simple people—they stand outside the moral law.

Neither of these ads mentions the name of the magus (only telephone numbers are given). Many magi try to keep a low profile, thus they keep their surname secret and under no circumstances do they allow themselves to be photographed. The photographic image is powerful, and is believed to be the most convenient material for magi to work with. Many magi and healers, for example, use photographic pictures of persons for *privorot*, that is, for arousing the love of the object of the client’s desire (depicted on the photograph) against this subject’s will. Photographs are also used for treating alcohol and drug addictions, most often without their knowledge or consent (as, for example, when a mother or wife brings to a magus a photograph of her addicted husband or son). Photographs are believed to be an effective means of harming the people they represent, by means of sorcery or black magic. Powerful magi often have (or believe they have) many enemies and would be reluctant to take the risk of having their image end up in the wrong hands.

Some magi, however, audaciously challenge this assumption of their own group culture, thus placing themselves implicitly above the rules of their own cosmology. Big, lavish, colored photographs of a few selected magi and healers, presented close-up, in full ritual attire and shown with main paraphernalia dominate



advertisement pages of specialized newspapers. These ads are very expensive, and only those magi who have lots of clients and money can afford them. Here, again, the same connection between money, power, and exclusivity is made: what is allowed to Jupiter is not allowed to the bull.

## A Voodoo Magus

Helena Santera is one of those few in the world of Moscow magic who utilize fancy advertisements.<sup>6</sup> A large photograph shows her wearing a mantle and tiara, with a crystal ball hanging from chains in her right hand, and holding an incense burner in the shape of a golden pagoda temple in the left (all signs of an undefined and vaguely exotic, “foreign” spiritual power). The efficacy of her work, according to the ad in one of the newspapers for magic advertisement, is “confirmed by knowledge and titles obtained under many years of work and constant replenishing of her stock of knowledge received in person from the teachings of Voodoo priests from Haiti, Africa and America. All the methods are exclusive, certified and have no analogues in Russia. The reliability of rites and ceremonies is founded on many centuries of experience. Only the secret knowledge of the ancient VooDoo magic can work genuine miracles!” .

The services Helena offers are of the usual range, but presented in an unusually specific and flamboyant way:

- Realistic help in solving family and everyday problems.
- Ancient magical rites of protection against the negative effects of evil sorcery, curses, and bad spells.
- Help in business. Analysis of business-situations, to reveal dishonest partners. Protection against those whom it is not possible to neutralize or eliminate. Wherever the situation is impossible to change, the straw can be laid down (*podstelit' solomu*) in order to painlessly survive the fall.
- Special amulets manufactured according to Voodoo methods (strictly individual approach).

Examples of amulets are:

- “Get lost, my enemy!” (*sgin'*). Due to this amulet, punishment comes quickly and inexorably; your enemy is plagued by fear and cannot make any attempt to harm you. If this is not enough, more powerful and merciless forces come into action. The effect is irrespective of whether or not your enemy is known to you.
- “The slave of love.” Your beloved loses forever any desire or ability to be unfaithful to you.

- “The Gift of Aphrodite.” The amulet for female attractiveness. Those who own it are unassailable for rivals and draw men as if by a strong magnet.
- “Macho-macho man.” Amplifies male potency, protects from *privorot* and *egiliet* (magically caused impotence). The owner becomes irresistible for the one he desires. Unlike Viagra, there are no side effects.
- “Living money.” Money sticks to the owner of this amulet, and the desire to spend it disappears.
- “The fiery shield of gods.” This will forever protect you from any kind of sorcery.
- “The power of Kaligonian spirits.” This is the strongest amulet that gives a magus, or an adept, the wisdom and power of supreme priests.

Helena is not the only advertising *Voodoo* practitioner in Moscow. The term “Voodoo” turns up in small anonymous ads now and then, mostly in connection with love magic, always promising to effect strong attraction spells. But Helena is the only advertising *Voodoo* practitioner who dares to reveal her name and show her face publicly, and who offers such a broad and detailed range of services. This alone requires considerable courage: *Voodoo* is widely considered to be a variant of black magic, tainted by the demonic and therefore evil.

My acquaintance with Helena Santera began when I dialed the telephone number indicated in the ad and paid a visit to her studio. The locale where she receives clients is recognizable from Hollywood films featuring Afro-Brazilian cults, but it must be definitely striking for an unprepared newcomer. As are many other magi’s studios, it is housed in quaint underground premises (*podval*), hidden from common view. The façade of the house does not reveal the use of the space inside; it is the concealed liminal space of a Moscow apartment house. The black armored steel door has no number or other identifying signs; there is only a door bell. The visitor presses the button, the bell is answered by someone inside, the visitor identifies herself or himself by name, the name is checked against the schedule, and the door is unlocked. The visitor descends a flight of dimly lit stairs, to find herself or himself in a waiting room. The walls are lined with dark cloth and decorated with lithographs and oil paintings of strange beings—*Voodoo* spirits. Three chairs for waiting clients face an arrangement reminiscent of an altar. It is a low platform covered with variegated cloths set against the background of a huge painting of a spirit. On the cloths a motley assortment of artifacts are displayed—masks, figurines carved of wood and bone, sea shells of all forms and shapes, some of them necklaces and bracelets; vases, flasks and bowls of all sizes and materials, filled with dried herbs and colored liquids—and all this basks in a profusion of ruble bills. Doors from the waiting room lead to reception rooms; one is a black velvet curtain, now drawn together, covering the entrance to the Temple.

A young man in his early twenties, in black shirt and wearing a pendant with a metal-engraved box on a massive chain, is there to meet me. His name is Herman, a colleague and apprentice of Helena, unsmiling and stern in manner but attentive and even sociable in his own grave way. He informs me that Helena and her secretary, Oxana, are on their way, stuck in a traffic jam. In the meantime, I introduce myself as an anthropologist, and we talk for a while about my study of magic and healing in Moscow, to which Herman seems quite sympathetic.

Eventually, the priestess herself makes an appearance. She is a stout woman garbed in long flowing multilayered gowns, with long black curly hair and intense dark eyes. She is devoid of all attire displayed in the ad, but this in no way detracts from the power of her commanding presence. She storms in, accompanied by a slim and elegant secretary, fashionably dressed in tight denim and a jersey, complete with long nails and golden chains, exquisite but utterly conventional, without any reference to magical exotica. Helena whispers to Herman some quick instructions, conspicuously ignoring me, the waiting client. Herman introduces me as an anthropologist; she seems unimpressed though generally friendly and polite, in a non-apprehensive, Western way, so unlike many other Moscow magi. After attending to some household business, she invites me to her reception room and asks me what my problems are. I tell her that I don't have any, but study magic in Moscow and would like to know more about her brand of trade. "Ok," she says, "what do you want to know? Please, ask questions, I'll answer all I can. But don't ask me about our rituals—they are secret and only for the initiated members of our community. The spirits get angry when a stranger is present. By the way, don't ask me about their names. They reveal their names when they deem timely. And don't ask me about the composition of our amulets—there are herbs and brews from all over the world—we get stuff from Africa and Latin America—their names won't tell you anything. Even if you knew the names, you would not be able to make one yourself, because the secret of each and any one is a special blessing of the Spirits." I humbly explain to Helena that I am not after recipes or other secrets. What I want, I say, is to learn more about her as a human being, about what she is doing, not by interviewing her but, preferably, by being around and watching what she does. Helena is now remarkably relaxed and cooperative in a casual and easy-going way, her stately priestess air completely gone. "You understand that you cannot be present at my encounters with clients—no client will accept it. But you can sit here with Oxana and Herman, and I shall run in and out in between the seances, so we can chat," she concedes.

Helena shows me to the secretary room, where Oxana is reading a book of fiction. Without interrupting her reading, she manages to answer the telephone, which rings non-stop. She is polite but incommunicative. Least of all does she want to discuss Voodoo magic. At several occasions during my stay she indicates to me that her job is purely business and friendship to Helena—they are childhood friends—but that she has no interest in, and nothing to do with, the trade itself. On the table, a

kettle is brewing and tea is drunk continuously, and Herman cooks pelmeni (Russian ravioli) on a little electric plate.

This was the way I spent days in Helena's magic parlor. I was never able to speak to clients, whom I occasionally observed in passing. They were mostly women, plainly dressed, and looked extremely shy and nervous. They peered into the floor and took good care to avoid everyone's gaze and to remain as invisible and anonymous as possible. None of the staff objected to my presence after the efficient Oxana saw to it that I paid the 600 rubles due for a consultation. For clients, this consultation fee was only an introduction; rituals and amulets that constituted treatment cost much more. To me this suggested that Helena's clientele belonged to a more affluent middle class, considering that an average salary is about 1600 rubles. However, Helena rejected my suggestion that she treats only the wealthy. According to her, her treatment is so efficient that people save especially for it, borrow from friends and collect money wherever they can. Her clients, she said, were those who had gone to all sorts of other magi and failed to get what they wanted; and they stayed with her because they saw that her craft "really worked". In this way, she avoided the claims of exclusivity that marked the black magic ad quoted above. She made it clear that her stance was not to "help people selectively": she served all who turned to her for help (of course, if they were able to pay).

As a special courtesy, Helena took me to the Temple, warning me that I should not touch any object there; everything was imbued with intense energies which could hurt an unprepared visitor, much as bare electric wires would cause a shock, she explained. The Temple was even more impressive than the altar, with skeletons, skulls, and bones of what seemed both humans and diverse animals, with dolls, carved figurines, and masks representing spirits. As Helena explained to me, each of the spirits had a name and a special realm of dwelling; one belonged to the crossroads, another to a cemetery (it is to him that the skull and the skeleton were dedicated). The principal Spirit, Helena's own patron, whom she called simply Mama, was that of the sea.<sup>7</sup> Offerings of money, tobacco, wine, and flowers were displayed in front each of them. Mama, the mistress of the place, had a large bottle of expensive Champagne—this was a brand she especially liked, Helena explained.

Unlike many other healers I met, Helena did not like to talk about herself, even though her manner towards me was invariably open and friendly. She conveyed the impression that her life outside her trade was largely irrelevant, a nuisance of an earthly shell. Still, by direct questioning at various points of our patchy conversations I managed to reconstruct the story of her becoming a Voodoo priestess. Helena, who is now in her mid-40s, was in her past Lena and had another surname. During the Soviet times she was a wife and mother, and a medical doctor, working in an ambulance, probably the toughest branch of Soviet health care. As many doctors of that time, she experimented with hand healing and was able to take away headaches and sooth toothaches with hand passes. After *perestroika* her husband separated from

her and emigrated to America. She was contemplating emigration as well, and in the meantime visited Florida, in order to show Disney World to her daughter.

Wandering in Disney World, she found herself in a small shop selling Afro-Brazilian exotica. This was where she was summoned by Spirits. Masks spoke to her. She heard their voices, she said. She was standing there, trying to understand what was happening to her; she was a person with strong nerves, a skeptical mind, and a dry sense of humor, not a type prone to hysterical delusions. A shop clerk, an African-American woman in her late fifties, talked to her and invited her behind the curtain, into the shop's back room. "I see that the Spirits have called you," she said, "Do you want to be initiated?" In her own words, Lena was not surprised and did not hesitate, although these sorts of activities were nothing she had ever had any idea about before. In the next couple of days she spent in Orlando, she came back to the shop a few more times, met its owner and other people, and "became initiated" (she did not go into details). When she came back to Moscow, where at that time all sorts of magic were starting to blossom, she soon found Serafim Cassandr e, "the initiated disciple of the great Priest of Voodoo Babalua Vonbana Canbobo." She became his student and eventually his colleague. The "center" (the Russian name for magical parlors) that I visited had been started by Serafim and belonged to him. Helena, who in due time adopted the name "Santera" (obviously resonating with Latin American and Caribbean practices of Santeria), traveled several times to Rio and Sao Paulo, as well as to Cuba, met her fellow servants of Spirits, made friends, and learned from them. She also traveled to the East and West coasts of the United States, to visit friends and relatives, and bought anthropological and popular how-to books on the rituals of Condombl e, Santeria, and Macumba.

By that time a few translated books on Voodoo magic had appeared in the alternative bookstores in Moscow. These were sources of recipes for amulets and instructions for rituals, but most "information," she said, she received directly from the Spirits. "They talk to me and I listen," she said, "they tell me exactly what to do, and I do it, and then it works." She collected herbs, flowers, and barks for her amulets from the woods in summer and bought materials on her travels. She also acquired birds, frogs, and lizards, whose parts, prepared in various ways, served as ingredients. She started a hen coop in the "center," because many rituals required sacrifice of life and infusion of blood. She received some material from Serafim, who also traveled a lot. Clients who "discovered that her magic worked" became friends and disciples and, with time, formed a little community of Voodoo worshippers. The group gathered in the Temple to celebrate seasonal rituals, moon cycles, and Yoruba holidays, or for sacrificial rites for special purposes, when individual members wanted to ask for a personal favor. A sign of good disposition of Spirits, a member of this community was an Aeroflot pilot, regularly traveling to other continents (to African countries among others). He became a constant source of supply in herbs, oils, and scores of magical objects Spirits needed for proper rituals of propitiation and worship.

Moral and ethical guidance is easy for Helena; she does what Spirits tell her. But if they ask her to sacrifice a human life, I inquired? They never would, was her answer. They would never even ask her to sacrifice a cat or a dog. They just do not. Chicken is quite enough to satisfy them in extraordinary cases, but usually they prefer money and good champagne. It is important to show them respect and affection, gratitude for what they do for you, and this you do through gifts and offerings. It is an energy exchange that maintains balance, said Helena. If you fail to pay them back for a service they have made you, they will demand payment, but then the conditions will be theirs, much harder. Therefore it is important to always keep them pleased, by giving them flowers, wine, and, crucially, money. "Money is the basic form of energy people have," said Helena. "If they do not pay, the balance of energy is disturbed, and the transformation they desire will not happen. This is why I charge for the seances, not because I need money myself. People understand it, and even if they do not have money, they get it somewhere. Usually people get back their first investment, with interest. This is what happens when Spirits look after you—you get all you need, including money."

According to Helena, there is practically no limit to what Spirits can accomplish if one gets them to cooperate. However, there are some moral injunctions Helena follows in her dealings with clients. They are few and simple. You never take another's man, you never take another's life, and you do not harm children. If a woman comes to Helena and asks for a *privorot*, Helena always knows when the client's object of desire belongs to another woman. "There is no way of deceiving me," she told me, "I just know the moment she talks to me if she is lying." There is no use explaining to Helena that the chosen man is unhappy with his lawful partner. Spirits, as Helena knows them, do not allow her to break families, and that is it. Another thing they do not do is harm children. Sometimes women are driven insane by jealousy and despair, and are prepared to go any length to hurt and harm their rival, even by causing injuries to their children. A mother is best hurt through her child, as everybody knows, and many professional and amateur magi do not shrink back from getting at women this way—but not Helena and her Spirits. In general, Helena personally does not undertake to punish people on behalf of the client. If a wrongdoer gets into trouble in the course of the improvement of the client's life situation, that is his or her problem, and the result of his or her own deeds, but not the cause of any directed action on the part of Helena and her Spirits. Herman, on the other hand, is unencumbered by this moral limitation; he says it's necessary to carefully unravel the situation, and if he decides that punishment is in order, so be it! The first and the second rules quoted above, however, are something that Herman abides by.

Spending time in the kitchen-cum-secretary reception room, I had little chance to make acquaintance with any clients. As mentioned earlier, all of them sat with their eyes on the floor, careful not to meet my gaze if I would happen to pass by. Luckily, however, through other fieldwork channels I met a woman who had been Helena's client a while ago. Natasha confirmed that Helena's magic was powerful

indeed. Natasha had been in a real fix at that time. As it happens to many Russian business people, she had entered a joint venture with a partner, borrowed from him a large sum of money (it was a question of five-thousand dollars), used it to pay for a batch of goods, and never got either the goods or the money back. The partner demanded his money, and Natasha did not have it, so the partner resorted to armed gangsters. Natasha was forced to leave her apartment and to go into hiding, leaving her little daughter with her elderly mother. Someone directed her to Helena, she scratched together the requisite sum of money, and left her destiny to the Voodoo priestess and her Spirits. And the impossible happened, exactly as in the rubric of the service quoted in Helena's ad above: "get lost, my enemy!" The former partner who was pursuing Natasha was arrested by the police for other misdeeds, imprisoned, and disappeared from Natasha's horizon. When the partner "got lost," so did the armed gangsters. Natasha never returned the money that she had invested, nor did she restore herself in business or become wealthy—but she was able to come back to her apartment, her little daughter, and her usual life.

As Natasha told me, however, turning to Helena was a last resort. She liked the priestess, but the experience of being among Helena's "devils" (*tcherti*) was a scary one, and Natasha would never relive it unless it was a question of life and death. She was grateful to the "devils" that they took the ruthless partner, but did not want to try her own luck any more.

### **Conclusion: Strongly Globalizing**

The parlor of a Voodoo priestess, a former medical doctor, in a dungeon in central Moscow, complete with an altar and the Temple where Spirits of distant people were offered a comfortable abode, presents a stark example of "globalization"—cultural forms deterritorialized and disembedded. This locality, designed and decorated the way it is, and imbued with the images and artifacts that affirm the beliefs of practitioners in the Spirits as real and powerful, is evidence of a remarkable juncture of infrastructures of globality that carry forms and meanings in unpredictable directions.

The ethnography also points to the multiseismic nature of these moving signs and images. In their journeys over the globe, between places and social groups, the earthly signifiers of the supernatural signifieds were twice emptied of significance, but also twice refilled. The masks, likely used for rituals in the place of their origin, were transported to the simulacra Disney World shop to be sold to tourists as semiotically sterile objects, speaking only of generalized otherness as a sign of exotica. Still, this original meaning was retained for these objects through the subjectivity of the African-American shop-clerk, likely an initiate of a cult. As well, they were full of concrete and bodily perceived meaning for the accidental tourist, the Russian doctor Lena. This itself was a whim of contingencies, as she came there by

chance, strolling around, in search of entertainment, spectacle, and souvenirs, as Disney World visitors are.

Eventually the masks of the Voodoo Spirits, and other artifacts signifying their presence, traveled in space to end up in a Moscow dungeon, and so did Helena, to become their priestess. For the majority of her clients, the meaning of these artifacts is different from what it was for the Disney World visitors. It is also different from that held by Helena and the woman who initiated her into the craft. For the clients, they signify the demons of the Russian Orthodox Church, powerful, but evil and destructive. It is only these people's extreme despair that caused them to appeal to this dark force in the first place.

These encounters between people and objects were made possible by the new ecumenes engendered by the recent openness of borders and minds. These are the ecumenes constructed by the new routes that people and artifacts can take in the world of branching global connectivities resulting from the novel patterns of migration and market structures. Western global infrastructures reached Russia, and the Russian ecumene, for some individuals, expanded to embrace the West. For the majority of the persons exposed to these structures, this is an instance of weak globalization; even though they were exposed to these global structures, their patterns of meaning attribution did not change. Deep cultural layers shaping their life-worlds remained intact.

But if we look closer at Helena's practices, we can see them as attempts to redefine some very deep cultural meanings and values. Recall again the popular connection between white magic, lack of efficiency, morality, and the good that embraces everyone equally, as does God's love, versus black magic that helps selectively, costs much, has foreign roots, and is connected with the demonic. The black magic of the advertisement quoted earlier explicitly states this connection, thus remaining within this cosmology, reinforcing and perpetuating it. Helena, however, refuses to participate in this discourse, by staging herself and her craft as moral, non-selective, and aesthetically gratifying. She does it by rejecting fear of enemies and rivals, by presenting herself as a friendly, outgoing, and attractive woman with a good head. She also does it by presenting her Spirits as operating within the moral domain that largely overlaps with what is popularly accepted. In so doing, she negates their connotation as evil.

Even more far-reaching, she thus negates the whole sphere of the demonic as an ontological reality affirmed by both Church doctrine and folk cosmology. She steps over fear and secrecy, rejecting popular definitions of her craft as suspect, sinful, and morally reprehensible, and by affirming the connection between money and power, thus clears it of its negative connotation. By extension, she redefines the meaning of foreign as negative, and redraws the borders of her ecumene to embrace the whole world, both the West and the Third World. She broadens the spectrum of



diversity to include other countries and other continents that previously had no place on the map of Russian ecumene.

The Moscow voodoo priestess Helena can thus be considered a strong globalist. Her new identity has required breaks with several cosmologies: the modernist secular scientific one that treats all practices of religion as a silly superstition; and the religious Russian Orthodox one that treats all images in consciousness as demonic presences and temptations. Perhaps most importantly, it requires the rejection of deep-seated Russian folk models that consider things African as primitive, savage, and inferior.

Crafting her self from material drawn from the entire globe, in defiance of her own culture's most entrenched cosmologies and stereotypes, she introduces genuinely novel patterns of meaning attribution. These are gradually internalized by a small but persistent circle of followers. Whether these changes in individual cosmologies will be of consequence for the broader culture is an open question. But one thing is clear: the community of Voodoo worshippers is ushering into the Russian scene what, paraphrasing Hannerz, can be called the "meta-culture of diversity," which is a genuinely global phenomenon.<sup>8</sup> The example of Helena, a Voodoo priestess in Moscow, suggests that a strong globalization is ultimately contingent on a weak one, but is possible only through the agency of strong individuals, capable of breaking the waves.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>This notion of ecumene is connected with the concept of culture developed by Hannerz (1996:30) in response to the recent challenge in anthropology for "writing against culture" (Abu-Lughod 1991). In Hannerz's terms, a human being constructs herself as a cultural agent "through particular sets of involvements and experiences" (1996:39). Therefore, she shares her parts of her "culture" with everyone else, with somebody else and with no one else.

<sup>2</sup>Hannerz outlines four main frameworks for the organization of global flows of meanings and meaningful forms: life form (face to face interactions in everyday life), state, market, and movements (Hannerz 1996:65).

<sup>3</sup>At these courses, students are trained, among other things, in conventional medical science: anatomy, physiology, pathology, and pharmacology. When they graduate from these courses, many of them are well socialized into the conventional bio-medical paradigm.

<sup>4</sup>There are many people who practice magic on their own, for themselves and their friends, without making a living out of it. Rituals and incantations are found in many

books on magic that are sold in specialized stores, book-stands, and kiosks all over the city.

<sup>5</sup>It is fair to say that the majority of professional magi and healers do not advertise at all. For those who are known as skillful, powerful, and capable of producing tangible effects, word of mouth works better than any advertisement. They work at home, thus avoiding tax authorities, racketeers, and the high fees that newspaper advertisement involves.

<sup>6</sup>This is her real name, as she presented me with her public image, designed for ads and media interviews. I never formed any close personal relation with Helena, and she never revealed to me anything secret, requiring special trust. The names of her staff members, however, are pseudonyms.

<sup>7</sup>This roughly corresponds to Voodoo spirits described in classical ethnographies on the subject. The sea spirit must be Agwe, god of the sea, and that of the cemetery and the grave Baron Samedi (Mather and Nichols 1993:304).

<sup>8</sup>Hannerz speaks about the “metaculture of modernity” (1996:52-57) as a commitment to similar styles of social organization, resulting from global diffusion of certain social practices and understandings. Valuing “diversity” is one such style, very much in evidence in Western metropolitan areas, but until recently not especially conspicuous in Moscow.

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