

# THE WANDERING BLIND MENDICANT SINGER AND THE SLAVIC RITUAL YEAR

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*The Slavic wandering mendicant singers, who were usually blind from birth, were trained in special associations of the craft-guild type, where they were taught song repertoires and begging prayers by an older singer in exchange for pay. These informal guilds were of a religious nature, and they were formed in the vicinity of a monastery. Such associations survived until the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. They had special rules of operation, common customs and norms of behavior, their own patron saint, a hierarchy, common duties of members, a common pool of money, a secret language, secret signs, and so on. A comparison is made with similar associations of blind street singers in other European countries.*

Keywords: *wandering blind mendicant singer, Slavic folklore, ritual year, rites of passage, religious and legendary songs*

*Slovanski beraški potujoči pevci, ki so bili navadno slepi od rojstva, so se urili v posebnih združenjih cebovske vrste, kjer jih je starejši pevec v zameno za plačilo učil repertoarja pesmi in beraških molitev. Ti neformalni cebi so bili verske narave, nastajali pa so v bližini samostanov. Takšna združenja so preživela do konca devetnajstega ali začetka dvajsetega stoletja. Imela so posebna pravila delovanja, skupne navade in pravila obnašanja, lastnega svetniškega zavetnika, hierarhijo, skupne dolžnosti članov, skupen denar, tajen jezik, tajne znake itd. Avtorica jih je primerjala s podobnimi združenjih slepih pocestnih pevcev v drugih evropskih državah.*

Ključne besede: *slep beraški potujoči pevec, slovanska folklor, obredno leto, obredi prehoda, verske pesmi in legende*

The wandering blind mendicant singer is a peculiar type of professional epic singer. In this article I limit myself to wandering blind mendicant singers among the Slavic peoples. This phenomenon is also characteristic of other countries in Europe, Asia, and elsewhere, and a number of the semantic and functional characteristics of itinerant blind mendicant singers are valid for other national traditions as well.<sup>1</sup> Those characteristics do not have specific elements that distinguish the wandering blind mendicant singer as a typical Slavic phenomenon, the difference being that in other European countries the tradition of mendicant singing declined at the end of the eighteenth century, whereas the institution of professional mendicant singing survived in most Slavic countries until as late as the 1930s or 1940s due to the specific social and historical conditions and the longer survival of the patriarchal village community among the Slavs (especially among the South Slavs).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed examination of this phenomenon in Europe, see Mihaylova (1993: 29–36).

<sup>2</sup> This article is based on field research conducted by the author in several Slavic countries, archival sources, and materials published in rare books and periodicals from the early nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century.

## SLAVIC NAMES FOR MENDICANT SINGERS

Itinerant mendicant singers were known by various names among the different Slavic peoples: *kaliki perekhozhie* and their successors, *nishchie startsy*, among the Russians, *kobzari*, *lirnyky*, and *bandurysty* among the Ukrainians, *startsi* among the Belarusians, *dziady* among the Poles, *džadi-žobráci* among the Slovaks, *niněristé* among the Czechs, *slepi guslari* among the Serbs and Croats, *slepi gadulari* among the Bulgarians, *bozhetsi* and *pitachi* in Macedonia, and so on. Those names are usually derived from the musical instruments played by the singers (*lira*, *kobza*, and *bandura* among the Ukrainians, *lira korbowa* among the Poles, *niněra* among the Czechs, *gusla* among the Serbs and Croats, *gadulka* among the Bulgarians, etc.).

## GUILD-TYPE ASSOCIATIONS OF SLAVIC MENDICANT SINGERS

The wandering mendicant singer was a professional epic singer not only because he earned a living by singing. These types of singers, who were usually blind from birth or had become blind later in life, were trained in informal associations in exchange for pay. In most Slavic countries, such associations were closed or secret, similar to the craft guilds of medieval times. Some of them survived until the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. Almost all were of a religious nature and they were founded in the vicinity of a monastery: for example, the *slepáčka akademija* (academy of the blind) of the Serbian *guslari* in the town of Irig in the Srem District near the monasteries of Fruška Gora (which survived until the mid-eighteenth century), the *dobarska shkola* (Dobarsko school) of the Bulgarian *slepi gadulari* in the village of Dobarsko in the Razlog District near the Rila Monastery or the *baldevska shkola* (Baldevo school) in the village of Baldevo in the Pazardzhik District, the *uchilishte za pevtsi* (school for singers) or *slepachki manastir* (monastery of the blind) of the *pitachi* and *bozhetsi* near Bitola in Vardar Macedonia, the *nishchensky tsekh* (guild of beggars) of the Belarusian *startsi* in the town of Semezhov in the Slutsk District of the Minsk Province, the *bratstvo* or *gurt* of the Ukrainian *lirnyky* and *kobzari* in the town of Mena and other such secret organizations in the Chernigov, Podole, Poltava, and Kharkiv provinces, the *cech žobrácov* (guild of beggars) of Slovak beggars in the village of Farkašín (today Vlčkovce) in the Trnava District of western Slovakia, and so on. These associations had special rules of operation, common customs, and norms of behavior. They also had their own hierarchy, their own holiday, common duties of members, and a common pool of money. They were headed by an older mendicant singer that was usually elected from among the blind beggars—the *tsekhmeyster* (guildmaster), *panotets* (master-father), *starosta* (elder), *žobrácý rychtár* (beggars' mayor), *król dziadów* (king of the beggars), and so on—who taught the guild's songs to those willing to practice the "beggars' craft," learning how to play the musical stringed instrument, how to behave, and so on. At the end of the training period, which lasted two or three years, trainees were required to take

an examination in order to become mendicant singers. In some organizations, such as the fraternities of the Ukrainian *kobzari* and *lirnyky*, the examination was conducted in a special ritual ceremony called *vyzvilka* or *odklinshchyny*, which was attended by the entire fraternity.<sup>3</sup> The members of those guild-type organizations also had a secret language, such as the *lebiys'ky yazyk* (from *lebiy* 'old man') or *lobur'ska mova* of the Ukrainian *lirnyky*, the *lyubetsky lement* of the Belarusian *startsi* in the Mogilev Province (who called each other *lyubki*), the secret language of the Russian *startsy* from the area near the town of Bryansk, the *gegavački jazik* of the Serbian *guslari*, the language of the Bulgarian beggars from the village of Dobarsko in the Razlog District, the language of the blind *bozhetsi* and *pitachi* from the area of Bitola and Prilep in Vardar Macedonia, and so on. Those secret languages had quite a rich vocabulary; for example, the *lyubetsky lement* of the Belarusian *startsi* had nouns for people and parts of the human body, animals, plants, natural phenomena, food, cutlery, clothing, dwelling, different religious concepts, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, numerals, pronouns, and so on (Romanov 1890: 118–145). The language of the Ukrainian *lirnyky* and *kobzari* was just as rich and had special words for the days of the week.<sup>4</sup> Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century linguists were especially interested in the language of the blind beggars in Vardar Macedonia, where other craft guilds in the cities also had their secret languages. The secret language of beggars was made up of distorted words from Bulgarian as well as Greek, Turkish, Serbian, Vlach, and Romany words. What was most characteristic of this secret language, though, was that it had special words for the numbers; these words were not found in any other secret guild language in the region (Chilev 1900: 876–878; Gabyuv 1900: 868–870; Shishmanov 1895: 25–27, 47–50). In some Slavic countries, sighted beggars also had secret signs that they drew on the walls of houses to help guide the other members of their organization, such as the secret signs of the Polish *dziady* or of the Slovak *džadi-žobráci* (Mihailova 2006: 299–328; Michajłowa 2010: 254–286). In countries like Ukraine and Belarus, blind mendicant singers were especially keen on keeping their craft and organization secret. The *gurt*, *bratstvo*, or *tsekh* of the Ukrainian *lirnyky* and *kobzari* had secret oral charters called *Ustyns'ki*, *Nezryachi*, or *Slipets'ki Knygy* ('Oral books' or 'Books of the blind'). These charters contained the customs of the guild, which was organized like a commune governed by an elected council. They also contained the rights and norms of behavior of every member, the activities of the guild's council and tribunal, information about the places that were best for collecting alms, words and phrases from the guild's secret language, instructions about how to play the musical instruments (the *lira* and *kobza*), the words of prayers begging for alms and the words of psalms expressing gratitude to almsgivers, the entire repertoire of the guild's songs, stories about famous members of the guild, and so on. The content of the books remained unknown to the rank-

<sup>3</sup> See RF IFME, f. 11-4/589, recorded by Martinovich in 1885–1886; RF IFME, f. 11-4/591, recorded by Martinovich in 1885; RF IFME, f. 11-4/592, recorded by Martinovich in 1885; RF IFME, f. 8-4/338, recorded by Dniprovski.

<sup>4</sup> RF IFME, f. 11-4/592, p. 4, recorded by Martinovich in 1885. See also RF IFME, f. 6-4/161a, pp. 1–5, recorded by Kharkiv in 1929–1930.



Figure 1. Russian blind mendicant singers with a guide (Reproduced from Maslov 1905).

and-file members of the guild or fraternity. It was known only to the guildmasters and teachers, who memorized it by heart. Anyone that dared to reveal the secret content of the books was cursed, and the books contained special curses and imprecations expressly for that purpose.<sup>5</sup> The religious nature of the organizations of mendicant singers was also considered especially important. This was manifested in the mandatory training of those that wanted to perform religious songs and prayers, and in the mandatory assembly of all members on the feast-day of the local church, where the newly trained beggars were “blessed.” Furthermore, candles and other items for the church were purchased in part with money collected by the beggars. In some Slavic countries, the beggars’ fraternities and other such associations had patron saints. For example, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the well-known community of blind beggars in the town of

Bitola (at that time largely Bulgarian) regarded St. Peter, St. Nicholas, and the Prophet Elijah as their patron saints and invented a long rhapsody in their honor, in which they prompted listeners to give them alms (Chilev 1900: 876). Mendicant singers also often had certain religious duties. This was especially true in Belarus and Ukraine, where beggars worshipped their own icon in the local church, kept the lamp in front of it burning, cleaned the church, and so on (Gruzinsky 1891: 149–150). Furthermore, the loss of the religious nature of the *kobzar* and *lirnyk* guilds in Ukraine led to the disappearance of these icons. If, for example, a guild’s banner or other religious symbols kept in the local church were destroyed, the guild in question was most likely to fall apart and cease to exist (Cherems’ky 1999: 43).

## THE REPERTOIRE OF MENDICANT SINGERS

Wandering mendicant singers had different types of songs in their repertoire to suit different audiences, depending on the place and time of performance. Among the Slavs, these repertoires consisted mostly of epic songs and could be provisionally divided into three

<sup>5</sup> RF IFME, f. 8-4/338, recorded by Dniprovski.

groups of songs: historical-heroic epic songs, family songs and ballads, and religious and legendary epic songs. Religious and legendary epic songs were an essential part of the repertoire of wandering mendicant singers. They indicated the professional character of the singers, who could not practice their craft unless they knew those songs.

#### A COMPARISON WITH WANDERING MENDICANT SINGERS IN OTHER EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

In other European countries, the role of the wandering mendicant singer is similar. Itinerant street singers such as the *Platschierer* in Germany, Switzerland, and other German-speaking countries, the *ciego jacarero* in Spain, the blind *vielle* players in France, the blind street singers in Sicily, or singers playing the hurdy-gurdy in Britain also performed mostly religious songs. Those songs, however, were not in the style of “high” religious poetry, which consisted of versified vitae of saints disseminated by the church among the aristocracy. They were instead in the style of poetry close to that of the common people. Itinerant mendicant singers had organizations that were established in the vicinity of a monastery, as in the Slavic countries. For example, a brotherhood of poor blind men was founded in Madrid in 1614 under the patronage of the Calced Carmelite Monastery of Our Lady of the Visitation (*Nuestra Señora de la Visitación*)<sup>6</sup> and had statutes that were approved by the ecclesiastical judge. By virtue of their statutes and other court judgments, the members of the fraternity sold not only their own ballads, but also newspapers, calendars, almanacs, books of devotion, and printed edicts without permitting non-affiliated blind men to do so. As a distinguishing sign, the members of the brotherhood were to wear a medal, suspended from the neck, bearing an image of Our Lady. Some of them also had other duties, such as saying weekly or daily prayers (Kany 1932: 64–65). In the fourteenth century, the phenomenon of itinerant mendicant singers was also common in the German lands and was regarded as an occupation. There is evidence from the mid-thirteenth century of blind itinerant singers in Saxony that sang songs about Siegfried’s battle with the dragon (Lachmann 1833: 113). In his 1343–1349 vita of St. Nicholas, the writer Herman von Fritschelar notes: “I do not intend to tell you about the miracles [of St Nicholas]—they are painted on the walls and sung by the blind men in the streets” (Grimm 1829: 173). Another vita of Bishop Ljudger (*Vita Liudgeri*) mentions a blind singer from Friesland in Northern Germany called Bernlof, who was loved and respected by everyone for his singing. The vita notes that the bishop had cured his blindness and had thus won him over for the Christian faith. Instead of epic and heroic songs, the singer began to sing songs about Jesus Christ (Hammerich 1874: 223). The available evidence about these itinerant mendicant professional singers in the Late Middle Ages and the Renaissance shows that they were most often described as being

<sup>6</sup> For the Virgin Mary’s visitation to her cousin Elisabeth, who conceived late in life by God’s grace, see Luke 1: 39–56.

blind, although some of them were not such in reality. Because the majority of professional mendicant singers were blind, the term “blind street singers” gradually became a general term for all itinerant beggars that earned a living by singing. The contemporary British scholar Peter Burke also notes that in the early Modern Ages the term “blind street singers” was used more as a cliché than as a statement of fact (1981: 111). What those itinerant singers in western Europe had in common was their repertoire of religious and legendary songs with distinctly moral-didactic elements. According to a German legend, a true folk bard was someone that created and disseminated songs about Jesus Christ (Hammerich 1874: 223). This shows not only how the wandering mendicant singer was perceived, but also what role was assigned to him in the dissemination and preservation of the religious and legendary epic songs and ideas of Christianity among the common people.

### THE REPERTOIRE OF RELIGIOUS AND LEGENDARY SONGS

The religious and legendary songs that peasants in the different Slavic countries associated most closely with blind itinerant mendicant singers were rarely performed by other folk-singers. Most Slavic peoples had special names for these songs: the Bulgarians called them *prosechki*, *bozhii*, or *molebni pesni* (beggars', divine, or praying songs), the Serbs *slepačke* or *pretkućnice* ('songs that blind men sang in front of people's houses, pleading for alms') or *klanjalice* ('songs by which blind men prayed at religious festivals and fairs'), the Slovaks *pitačky* (from the verb *pýtať* 'to beg'), the Ukrainians, *zhebranki* (from the verb *zhebraty* 'to beg'), *zaplachki*, *zaproshnyts'ky zhali* (begging laments), and so on.

The religious songs of itinerant mendicant singers are based on motifs from the New or Old Testament, exempla of preachers, and vitae of Christian saints, hermits, or martyrs. A common theme that runs through a number of storylines and motifs is that of sin and punishment. Most of the songs in the repertoire of blind mendicant singers deal with problems concerning charity to the poor (the Gospel parable of the rich and the poor Lazarus), the Last Judgment, the fate of righteous and sinful souls in the world beyond, punishment of the rich (e.g., songs about Saint Peter's sinful mother), penitence and absolution of sins, the protective function of the Mother of God and her miracle-working icons, and heaven and hell. Some songs are based on apocryphal versions of the relevant Old Testament or New Testament story. Others, although they contain Christian concepts, they are treated with the devices of folklore, and are therefore “brought down to earth” and represented as stories about everyday life. One could say that the religious songs of the wandering mendicant singer, who usually came from the people of a lower social rank, are a “low” version of “high” Christian culture. In a number of cases, the mendicant singer songs were influenced by sermons of local or itinerant Catholic preachers, and especially by religious legends. In terms of function, some unquestionable similarities can be found between the itinerant preacher and the itinerant mendicant singer.

The main places for wandering blind mendicant singers' performances were the festivals and feasts honoring patron saints and other religious holidays. They also were led from house to house, singing religious and legendary songs and blessing the threshold of the house without going inside. They did this at strictly fixed times of the year—during Advent (the Christmas Fast) and Lent. During other times and at other places, mendicant singers could also perform other repertoires, mostly heroic epic songs.

## SEMANTIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MENDICANT SINGER

By examining some folk songs, narratives, beliefs, customs, and ritual practices, one can learn how the itinerant mendicant singer was perceived by the common people. The main features



Figure 2. Bulgarian blind singer and *gadulka* player (Painting by Iliya Petrov, 1927).

include sacredness (mendicant singers were perceived as a human incarnation of a deity and associated with the cult of the dead), poverty (they were likened to Jesus Christ, who wandered around the earth to test people), mobility (they wandered mostly from secular to sacred places), liminality (they sang at the threshold of houses, on roads, and bridges, and at liminal times, such as fasts and rites of passage), and blindness (associated simultaneously with the world beyond and with death, on the one hand, and with the supreme, the divine, with wisdom and insight, on the other). It is because of their specific semantic characteristics that they were perceived in a specific way and performed specific functions in society. **F2**

## PERFORMANCE OF MENDICANT SINGERS AND THEIR FUNCTIONS AT RITES IN THE HUMAN LIFECYCLE

In the closed village patriarchal communities, which survived until later times among most of the Slavs, itinerant mendicant singers were perceived as people whose prayers reached God more directly. That is why peasants invited them to perform at important moments of the human lifecycle. Until the 1940s in Poland, for example, the blind mendicant singer was a desired guest at feasts celebrating the baptism of newborn children of rich families, especially those that had long been childless (Łuczowski 1986: 98). This was associated

with the belief that blind mendicant singers brought good fortune to children. The same belief inspired the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century custom of inviting mendicant singers to become godfathers of children of noble families (Dobrogost 1897: 866) or the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century practice of asking beggars to become godfathers of ailing children (Kuchowicz 1975: 183). Among the South and East Slavs, blind epic mendicant singers were preferred at weddings instead of other folksingers not only because of their higher professional skills and inspiration given to them by God, but also because it was believed that they were “people of God” and would bring good fortune to the newlyweds (Sheyn 1893: 570). Conversely, the punishment for refusing to accept a mendicant singer at the wedding was severe because it was believed that the curse of the beggar immediately took effect: the child born to the newlyweds would be blind.<sup>7</sup> In Polish villages until the first decades of the twentieth century, all weddings were invariably attended by the universally respected itinerant mendicant singer, the *dziad*; in some villages, he would even be invited to be best man at the wedding because he was believed to be closest to God, and would therefore bring good fortune to the godchildren (Biegeleisen 1927: 204–205).

Because of the notion of the sacredness of mendicant singers, on the one hand, and of their liminality and connection with the world of the dead on the other, they were also invited to perform at funeral rites. This practice was especially popular among the West and East Slavs. In eastern Slovakia, mostly women beggars were invited to perform the lamentation for the deceased in their home, on the way to the cemetery, and at the grave.<sup>8</sup> In some places mendicant singers performed during the transportation of the deceased to the cemetery. In the area around Krakow in Poland, for instance, the peasants would invite a mendicant singer to lead the funeral procession if the cemetery was far away, and not the village priest, who would have to be paid well. During the funeral procession the beggar performed songs that he had composed about the good and the bad deeds of the deceased.<sup>9</sup> A similar custom was also common until the end of the nineteenth century among the Roman Catholic population in the area around the town of Grodno (Sheyn 1893: 572). Among the Russians, since the time of Kievan Rus all funerals of noblemen were invariably attended by the *nishchenstvuyushchie brat'ya* (mendicant brothers), who accompanied the deceased, their benefactors, with special lamentations (Maslov 1905: 7).

In most Slavic countries, beggars regarded All Souls' Day as their holiday. In what was a universal custom, specially prepared bread or other ritual food was distributed at the graveside to the beggars that gathered there. The Serbs, for example, believed that giving

<sup>7</sup> Informant Iliya Georgiev Toshev, born 1923 in the village of Petrovo, Sandanski district; fourth-grade education; miner, mason, beekeeper, singer in the village church; former guide of blind mendicant singers. Recorded by Katya Mihaylova, 11 September 1987.

<sup>8</sup> ALU HR, No. A XCII/5-291, p. 3, recorded by Míča in 1978 in the village of Drienov, Šariš region.

<sup>9</sup> Thanks to Antoni Zola from the Department of Ethnomusicology and Hymnology at the Institute of Musicology of John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Poland for this information found during field research.



food and drink to beggars and other poor people at the graves of the dead on All Souls' Day represented giving food and drink to the dead that had risen from their graves to eat and drink (Stanković 1959: 136). Giving food and drink to beggars also acknowledged the special power of the prayer of beggars, which was believed to be more effective. The beggars knew prayers for various occasions, such as absolution of sins, healing physical disabilities, or protection from the evil eye. However, the main role assigned by peasants to beggars was to pray to God for the commemoration of the dead and the salvation of their souls. The attitude of Polish peasants towards beggars is best described by the sociologist Stefan Czarnowski:

*If they had a major request of God, peasants would give money to the priest to conduct a service, whereas if they had smaller wishes they would give a couple of coins to the beggar so that he or she would take their petition to God. Thus assigning their deeds to those that knew the way to God better than they did, peasants felt secure about themselves.* (Czarnowski 1956: 105)

In this sense, the function of the beggar was that of a mediator between heaven and earth, between God and man.

Wandering mendicant singers mostly performed this function at commemorative rites among the East and West Slavs. In a number of villages in Belarus, the mendicant singer replaced the priest. In villages in the Minsk Province, a mendicant singer invited at All Souls' Day would stand in front of the icon in the home and pray for each of the deceased whose names were told to him by the man or woman of the house. At the end, he would pronounce a commemorative prayer for all the deceased. On that day beggars went to all the houses in the village, but if they happened to miss someone's house they would be called back and begged to go inside because their prayers were believed to be beneficial (Sheyn 1893: 563). Peasants in the Mogilev Province also invited mendicant singers instead of priests to conduct (for a significantly smaller fee) commemorative services or Akathist hymns<sup>10</sup> for various occasions, such as blessing the cattle on 23 April. Peasants also said they preferred to invite a mendicant singer instead of the priest because they wanted their deceased relative to hear more comprehensible songs, which were more popular and better liked by the common people—songs called *zhalobnye stikhi* (lamenting poems) instead of the reading of the Psalter (Romanov 1890: 123). On All Souls' Day, blind singers performed religious songs at gravesites, for which they were rewarded much more generously than ordinary beggars, who prayed only for the souls of the dead. Peasants believed that “those that sing religious songs pray twice” (Łuczowski 1986: 99).

By participating in rites of passage that were important to the patriarchal community, mendicant singers performed the function of mediators, easing the passage from one state or social status to another.

<sup>10</sup> An Akathist hymn is a hymn of praise and thanksgiving dedicated to the Mother of God, Jesus Christ, or a saint, sung by the congregation while standing (from Greek *ἀκάθιστος* ‘not-sitting’).

## PERCEPTION OF MENDICANT SINGERS AND THEIR FUNCTIONS AT THE CALENDAR FEASTS OF THE RITUAL YEAR

In addition to the rites of passage in the human lifecycle, mendicant singers were also rewarded, having been assigned a specific function, at other rites and feasts of the ritual year. Most of these annual calendar feasts were connected with the cult of the dead and of ancestors. Beggars were perceived as “a personification of the ancestor” (Čajkanović 1973: 149). They were honored especially on Christmas Eve and at Easter. The Russians believed it was very important to give alms to the *nishchie brat'ya* on Good Friday. On that day in the Oryol Province, for example, blind mendicant singers went from house to house, saying a special prayer for the salvation of the souls from sins.<sup>11</sup> In the Polesie region of Poland, there was a custom of taking consecrated eggs to the graveyard on Easter and giving them to the beggars that went there on that day to pray for the dead.<sup>12</sup> The Serbs strictly observed the mandatory ritual practice of giving food and drink to the beggars on *Božić* (Christmas)

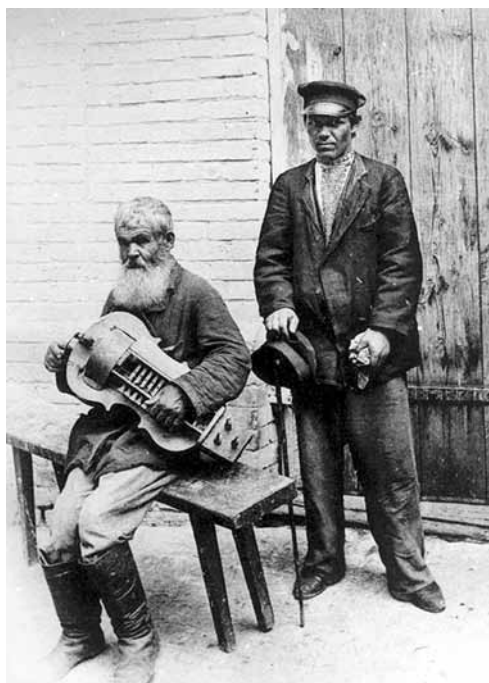


Figure 3. Ukrainian blind *lira* player with a guide in Kyiv in the early twentieth century.

and on the feast day of the patron saint of the family and the domestic hearth *Slava* (also known as *Krsno ime*), believing that on those days the soul of the dead was immediately present (Kulišić 1970: 40). In Bohemia and Slovakia, beggars received rich gifts on Maundy Thursday (*Zelený čtvrtek*, literally ‘green Thursday’), the Thursday before Good Thursday (Kratochvíl 1912: 350).

In addition to the feast days connected with the cult of the dead, beggars were also honored at other festivals of the ritual year. The main purpose of some ritual practices was to make a petition or express gratitude to God or a saint. Patriarchal peasants believed that success in their work or happiness in their personal lives largely depended on the observance of those practices on particular days of the religious calendar. For example, in Belarus itinerant mendicant singers, the *nishchie startsi*, were invited *u*

<sup>11</sup> AREM, f. 7, op. 1, d. No. 1081, pp. 3–4, Orlovsky uезд, Orlovskaya guberniya, recorded by Kostin in 1898.

<sup>12</sup> APAE, sygn. 9/28/VII, p. 87, informant Maria Zajączkowska, born 1921 in the village of Oborowo, Kossów Poleski district, recorded by Jankowska in 1970 in the village of Górczyca in the Lwówek Śląski district.

*besedu na Mikolsbchinu*, the feast held in spring and autumn in honor of Saint Nicholas to thank him for a good harvest or to appease him and ensure fertility. Beggars were given a place of honor at the festive table. Peasants set great store by their prayer on that day (Sheyn 1893: 563). In Russia on 8 May, the day of the John the Evangelist, special pies were made and given to beggars in order to ensure the fertility of the summer crops, whose sowing started on that day (Maksimov 1877: 121).

#### A COMPARISON BETWEEN WANDERING MENDICANT SINGERS AND RITUAL FIGURES AT THE RITES OF PASSAGE DURING FASTS

The time of fasting before Christmas and Easter, when mendicant singers went from house to house singing religious and legendary epic songs, is believed to be a time of passage at both the social and cosmic levels. It is a time when peasants perform rites of passage necessary for the socialization of young people and their passage into a new social status. This passage involves a journey, going from house to house and singing special songs for the occasion, performed by the following ritual figures: during Advent (the Christmas Fast), by *koledari* or Christmas performers among all Slavic peoples; and during Lent by *lazarki*<sup>13</sup> among the Bulgarians, *lazaritse* among the Serbs, *v'yunoshniki* among the Russians, *valachobniki* among the Belarusians, *dyngusiarze*, *śmigustnicy*, and *dziady śmigustne* among the Poles, and so on. Some of the songs sung by those ritual figures were also performed in similar versions by wandering mendicant singers. Entering into the ritual tradition of villages, the mendicant singers, as liminal figures, also performed a specific function in the life of the patriarchal community. Similar to the ritual figures during Advent (the Christmas Fast) and Lent, the itinerant mendicant singers were perceived as “foreign.” They were associated with foreign space, with the distant and the unknown and, at the same time, with the world beyond, the world of the dead and the ancestors. Unlike the *koledari* or *lazarki* who, by entering a home, underwent a transformation and passed into another status (from “foreign” into “own”), wandering mendicant singers remained on the boundary between the two worlds. They did not pass into another social status. The *koledari* and *lazarki* walked the path from Chaos to Cosmos, whereby they themselves passed from their old into their new status; in other words, they were active. Their path was a ritual path and a sign “of the social activity of the ethnic community” (Kraev 1988: 27). The path of mendicant singers is not a path of the ritually and socially active; it is a path of passive observers, of carriers of the eternal divine truths and of ancestral memory, a path of mediators easing the ritual figures’ passage into a new status.

<sup>13</sup> *Lazarki* are performers of the old Bulgarian folk custom of *lazarwane* on Saint Lazarus’ Day (the day before Palm Sunday), when girls in bridal costume go around the village houses, dancing and singing songs for love, marriage, health, and prosperity.

The young male *koledari* were carriers of the male warrior element, of the heroic. Coming from the “underworld,” as Bulgarian *koledari* songs, they had to overcome a number of obstacles along their way.<sup>14</sup> Like the ritual figures in other initiation rites, they even had to undergo temporary death in order—through the enacted passage into the otherworld of dead ancestors—to acquire experience and knowledge necessary for initiation into the community of adults and of full-fledged members of society. In the case of mendicant singers, the situation is the opposite: they were not in the active position of young warriors seeking the knowledge of the ancestors and of God, but were in the passive position of elders, of carriers of the knowledge that had to be transmitted to the still unsocialized young men or women. Beggars were associated with God, who had descended to earth, or with ancestors that had come from the world beyond. This is why they were perceived as carriers of the wisdom, knowledge, and experience of the elders. This is also why honoring and listening to their prayers and songs during Advent (the Christmas Fast) and Lent became a guarantee

of successful preparation of young people for their passage into the world of adults. In other words, one may say that whereas the *koledari* and *lazarki* ritual figures were active and temporary mediators between the foreign and the own, mendicant singers were passive and permanent mediators for the village patriarchal community.

The different social roles of the *koledari*, *lazarki* and other ritual figures, on the one hand, and the mendicant singers that went from house to house during Advent (the Christmas Fast) and Lent, on the other, is also evident from the dominant motifs in their songs. Regardless of the Christianization of some motifs upon the inclusion of heroic epic songs into the Christmas cycle, the heroic element is dominant in the *koledari* songs of the South Slavs. What is dominant in the *lazarki* songs, in the *valachobnyya*, *v'yunosnyye* and similar ritual songs in the spring cycle among the other Slavs, is the life-affirming element, joy at the victory of the life-giving forces of reborn nature over winter and death. The



Figure 4. The Ukrainian blind *bandura* player Anatoly Us in the Kyiv Metro in the late twentieth century. The sign in front of him reads: ‘Help the blind folk *kobzar*’. (Photo: K. Mihaylova, 1999)

<sup>14</sup> AIF, no. 182, p. 75, No. 38, recorded by Katya Mihaylova in Sofia, 24 July 1980.

beggars' songs performed during fasts are entirely religious and moral in character, with strongly pronounced moralizing and social elements. Mostly among the South and East Slavs, there are some songs that were performed both by *koledari* or *lazarki* and by mendicant singers. The dominant motif in the common versions of the songs in the repertoire of these ritual figures and of mendicant singers is the motif of the fate of the righteous and of sinners in the world beyond death.

## CONCLUSION

The wandering mendicant singers performed a specific moral function during the Slavic ritual year, a function that was very important for the value-orientation of young people participating in initiation rites. They performed this function not only with regard to the young but also with regard to the other members of the village community because of the broader meaning and significance of initiation rites in the social life of the entire patriarchal community. By participating in the rites of the human lifecycle and of the annual calendar cycle that were important for the patriarchal community, these singers helped the community make sense of its present life, affirming the moral norms of the collective consciousness and building the morality and value systems of its individuals.

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AIF = Arhiv na Instituta za folklor pri Balgarskata akademija na naukite. Sofia.

ALU HR = Archív literatúry a umenia, Oddelenie hudobných rukopisov Slovenskej národnej knižnice. Martin.

APAE = Archiwum Polskiego Atlasu Etnograficznego. Wrocław.

AREM = Arkhiv Rossijskogo Etnograficheskogo Muzeja (Etnograficheskoe byuro knyaza V. N. Tenisheva). Sankt Peterburg.

RF IMFE = Naukovi arkhivni fondy rukopysiv i fonozapysiv Instytutu mystetstvoznavstva, fol'klorystyki ta etnologii im. M. T. Ril'skogo Natsional'noi akademii nauk Ukrainy. Kyiv.

### POTUJOČI SLEPI BERAŠKI PEVEC IN SLOVANSKO OBREDNO LETO

*Potujoči berač, slepi beraški pevec je bil poseben tip poklicnega epskega pevca, a ne le zato, ker se je preživljal s petjem. Med Slovani je bil ta tip pevcev, navadno slepih že ob rojstvu ali kasneje oslepelih, izučen v posebnih združenjih tipa obrtnih cehov, kjer so se od starejšega pevca v zameno za plačilo naučili pesemskih repertoarjev in priprošnjih molitev. Ti neformalni cehi so bili religiozne narave, nastajali pa so v bližini samostanov. Tourstne povezave so preživele do poznega devetnajstega oziroma zgodnjega dvajsetega stoletja. Imeli so posebne smernice delovanja, skupne navade in načine vedenja, lasten praznik, zavetnika in hierarhijo, skupne dolžnosti članov, skupen denarni fond, skrivni jezik, skrivne znake in podobno. Primerjamo jih lahko s podobnimi združenji slepih uličnih pevcev v drugih evropskih državah.*

*Bistvenega pomena za repertoar potujočih pevcev so bile religiozne in legendarne pesmi. Bile so obvezen del šolanja, saj so določale profesionalni karakter tega tipa pevcev, ki brez poznavanja tourstnih pesmi niso mogli opravljati svoje obrti. Nabožne pesmi beračev temeljijo na motivih iz nove ali stare zaveze, eksemplov pridigarjev in življenjepisov krščanskih svetnikov, puščavnikov ali mučencev. Skupna tema, ki jo najdemo v številnih zgodbah in motivih, se nanaša na greh in kazen; kot celota so te pesmi moralno didaktične.*

*Ljudske pesmi, pripovedi, prepričanja, navade in obredne prakse nam dajo slutiti, kako so preprosti ljudje sprejemali potujoče pevce. Njihove bistvene poteze vključujejo sakralnost, revščino, mobilnost, liminalnost, slepoto itn.*

*V zaprtih vaških patriarhalnih skupnostih so beraške pevce sprejemali kot nekakšne »božje ljudi«, saj naj bi njihove molitve Boga dosegle bolj neposredno. Vabili so jih ob pomembnih trenutkih življenjskega cikla – ob obredjih prehoda pri rojstvu, poroki, pogrebu in spominskih slovesnostih.*

*Avtorica razišče funkcije, ki so jih imeli beraški pevci ob nekaterih praznikih v ritualnem letu. Večina teh koledarskih praznikov je bila povezana s kultom prednikov. Beračem so vsi Slovani izkazovali čast zlasti na sveti večer in ob veliki noči. Glavni namen obrednih praks, ki so vključevale beraške pevce ob naštetih in tudi nekaterih drugih praznikih, je bil izraziti prošnjo ali hvaležnost do Boga ali svetnika. Kmetje so verjeli, da sta uspeh pri delu oziroma sreča v osebnem življenju v veliki meri odvisna od izvajanja teh šeg ob določenih dneh verskega koledarja.*

*Glavne priložnosti za petje slepih pevcev so bili prazniki in gostije v čast zavetnika lokalne cerkve. Prav tako so ob spremljavi vodnika hodili od hiše do hiše, prepevali religiozne in legendarne epske pesmi ter blagoslavljali ob vhodu v hišo, ne da bi vstopili. To so počeli ob točno določenem času: v adventu (božičnem postu) in postnem času.*

*Članek temelji na terenski raziskavi, ki jo je avtorica izvedla v različnih slovanskih deželah, s pomočjo arhivskih virov in materialov, izdanih v redkih knjigah in periodiki od začetka devetnajstega do sredine dvajsetega stoletja.*

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