

## The Domovoy: Benevolent House Spirit or Overbearing Grandpa?

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### ABSTRACT

Contemporary belief in the Slavic house spirit, the Domovoy (or Domovoi), among Russians stems from a long history of Slavic pagan belief. Ethnographic data reveals that the Domovoy is regarded as a benevolent ancestor and spirit to a given family. He is responsible for all domestic aspects of his dwelling. He punishes amoral behaviour like a messy home and aids his family through favours when they please him. The Domovoy's characteristics and behaviours reflect larger social and cultural values of Russian peasants before their Christianization in the 10th century. Values of communal and cooperative behaviour, sharing, modesty, and domestic harmony are evident in the 'rules' the Domovoy sets for his family. This paper investigates how the belief in the Domovoy strengthens these values of community and tradition. The persistence of the Domovoy in the religious beliefs of contemporary rural Russians exemplifies how studying folk and pagan aspects of larger religious institutions can aid in understanding the cultural intricacies of rural populations.

### 1. Introduction

Contemporary belief in the Domovoy (or Domovoi) among Russians stems from a long history of Slavic pagan belief (Ivanits 1989). The survival of this belief and the practices surrounding it reflect the cultural values of contemporary Russian villagers. Using ethnographic data compiled in the late 1900s and early 2000s (Ansimova and Golubkova 2016; Adonyeva and Olson 2011), I explore how this belief solidifies community, cements tradition, and reflects the ideals of the rural Russian village.

The Domovoy is a benevolent Slavic house spirit that is believed to live in the homes of Slavic people ranging from modern day Serbia, Kazakhstan, and northern Russia (Ivanits 1989). Other very similar house spirits exist in cultures around the world, such as the Scottish brownie (Henderson and Cowan 2001). The Domovoy's genesis can be traced to Slavic paganism, which was practiced in Eastern Europe since before the Christianisation of the Slavic regions in Europe (Tikhomirov 1959). Although there is minimal native documentation of the region during the pre-Christian era due to illiteracy, scholars believe settlements were arranged in small villages with fortified centres surrounded by fences or a similar barrier for protection (Andreyev 1962). The inhabitants of the villages lived in farmsteads and were primarily farmers and agricultural workers who relied on difficult manual labor to sustain their livelihoods (Andreyev 1962). Russia during this time was predominantly pagan; there was no overarching structure to their beliefs and practices. Villagers believed in multiple deities, including the supreme god, Rod, and performed rituals to appease them. They also believed in "lower" entities that were tied to nature, rivers, and the home (Hazard Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor ~1113 AD).

The introduction of Christianity to the rural villagers of Russia influenced their pagan belief system. These influences occurred in several waves from the 8th century to the 13th century, but Christianity was officially adopted in 989 C.E. (Tikhomirov 1959, 200). The initial "baptism" of Russia was primarily concentrated to the nobles who resided in urban areas. Thus, years of Christian influence only superficially altered the beliefs of the Russian villagers likely due to their geographical and cultural isolation (Tikhomirov 1959). Although villagers accepted Christianity with little resistance, it is clear through ethnographic research in the mid and late 1900s that rural Russians still held onto some of their pagan ways

(Adonyeva and Olson 2011; Ansimova and Golubkova 2016). The veneer of Christianity was placed upon pagan practices and beliefs, allowing villagers to continue their traditional ways of living with slight modifications.

Due to limited agricultural technology in the villages, farming was small-scale and only done for sustenance. As a result, many families were poor and the social structure of the villages were heavily communal and collective (Andreyev 1962). Collaboration and compromise were essential to the survival of the village and its inhabitants; neighbours and kin helped each other with cooking, caring for children, and farmwork (Clements 1982). Although the Russian Revolution in 1917 liberated the villagers from their landlords, their new “freedom” was not much different from their labour-intensive lives before. Years of Christian influence seeped into the pagan tradition and the syncretism of these two belief systems formed double-faith or *dvoeverie*. Despite the mixture of these two belief systems, rural Russians do not consider themselves to be practicing a mixture of religions, rather, most consider themselves to be Orthodox Christians (Chulos 1995).

Rural inhabitants still make up a large part of the Russian population. In the mid 1900’s the rural population was at a staggering 46% (“Rural Population (% of Total Population) - Russian Federation | Data” n.d.). In the early 2000s, rural inhabitants made up 26% of the total Russian populace (“Rural Population (% of Total Population) - Russian Federation | Data” n.d.). Research done with villagers in rural areas of Russia from the late 1900s and early 2000s has documented the enduring existence of pagan beliefs. From this research, it is clear that the Domovoy is one of the most prevalent supernatural spirits. In the following pages I will describe the Domovoy, his appearance, and his role in rural Russian society. I will then provide an analysis of his characteristics and behaviours and link them to cultural values. Exploring the function of the Domovoy and his role in the home and in the community can provide insight into why he has persisted in the beliefs of villagers for centuries.

## **2.The Domovoy**

### **2.1 The Domovoy’s Abode**

The Domovoy is believed to reside in the homes of Slavic villagers. His typical place of rest is behind or under the stove, in the hearth, in the chimney, or in the basement or attic (Ansimova and Golubkova 2016). A villager from the Omsk Region of Russia says that, “He lives with [them] behind the stove; he would jump out of there. Small, shaggy, [they] could not really see him well” (Ansimova and Golubkova 2016).

### **2.2 The Domovoy’s Appearance**

The Domovoy is invisible most of the time; villagers believe he prefers not to be seen and even punishes those who are particularly intent on spotting him (Ivanits 1989). When he does appear, he is often anthropomorphized and represented as a small, masculine, humanoid creature with a long beard or covered in hair from head to toe (Adonyeva and Olson 2011). Sometimes he is described as bearing a resemblance—not just in appearance, but also in attitude and voice—to a deceased male ancestor of his lineage or the master of the house (Adonyeva and Olson 2011). This description is very common among villagers in numerous regions and many even consider him to be the reborn soul of an ancestor. Additionally, he is said to be able to manifest into the form of an animal, often the family dog or cat (Adonyeva and Olson 2011).

### **2.3 The Domovoy’s Role**

*The Domovoy serves as the guardian of his designated family, often ensuring their health and a bountiful harvest. He is deeply invested in their well-being,*

*actively contributing to domestic duties, and bringing good luck.* During harvest season when the family is working the land, he looks after the livestock, and when parents are busy with chores or other tasks, he looks after the children (MacCulloch and Jan 1918). The Domovoy also supervises the people of the household and enforces “proper” domestic behaviour. He expects the home to be clean and orderly and keeps a watchful eye over the behaviour of his family, ensuring that they are all adhering to social rules (Ansimova and Golubkova 2016). For example, one account from the *Khar'kov Province* illustrates the Domovoy's punishment for broken social rules:

The woman went out onto the porch and, forgetting that she did not have her head covered, she stood and admired the starry sky. Suddenly she recollected herself and quickly headed back to the passageway, but there the domovoi was waiting for her. He seized her by the braid and pulled her up to the attic” (Ivanits 1989, 170).

In return for his service, the Domovoy asks to be honoured and fed. If a family neglects their Domovoy, fails to tend to him adequately, or mismanages the household, he may become vengeful. The Domovoy may “cause the walls of the house to creak, bang pots, tangle needlework, spread manure on the door, and turn everything upside down in the yard” (Ivanits 1989, 53). However, owing to his inherently kind nature, he may simply vacate the dwelling, which perhaps is the worst fate of all for the family, as domestic harmony was believed to be impossible without the presence of the Domovoy. (Ivanits 1989).

#### **2.4 Pleasing the Domovoy**

Due to the Domovoy's mercurial personality, measures are taken to please him. In many households he is given a portion of supper, milk, bread, sugar, tobacco, or bread and salt as an offering (Ivanits 1989). In many stories, it is often emphasized that the Domovoy is invited to the new home when a family moves dwellings. One villager from the Novgorod Region warns, “You should surely invite him to a new house, otherwise he will not go, but will remain [where he was].” (Ansimova and Golubkova 2016, 132). One such ritual to invite the Domovoy is to “take a new broom and sweep all the corners, saying, ‘Our keeper, father, come with us to live in the new house.’ In the new house, you need to put the broom behind the stove with its head up, and this broom should be no longer used for sweeping” (Ansimova and Golubkova 2016, 132). The broom was a common implement to transport the Domovoy to a new home, along with a boot, a slipper, or a bag (Ansimova and Golubkova 2016).

Along with these implements, there are other various traditions and rituals, which vary between villages, to invite the Domovoy into a new home (Ansimova and Golubkova 2016). If the Domovoy was *not* properly invited into the new home, he would howl and wail and eventually become a nuisance for the new homeowners (Ivanits 1989). Further measures taken to please the Domovoy included keeping horses, cats, and other animals of his favourite colour (Ivanits 1989). If the Domovoy did not like an animal, “he scattered its feed, tied its tail to the manger, caused it to stomp all night, and sometimes rode it to exhaustion” (Ivanits 1989, 55). The master of the house would spend the night in the shed with the new animal to watch the activities of the Domovoy to determine if the colour of the new animal was the Domovoy's preference (Ivanits 1989).

#### **2.5 The Domovoy as Kin**

The Domovoy, much like a member of the family, shares in the happiness and sadness of the household to which he is connected. He mourns when a family member dies and may be heard crying in the night. He may even foresee the death of a family member and begin his mourning prematurely by “knock[ing] on the

windowing or clink[ing] dishes on the eve of the death of relatives" (Ansimova and Golubkova 2016, 132). The Domovoy has the special ability to predict the fate of his family. To see the Domovoy in physical form is interpreted as an omen (Ansimova and Golubkova 2016). Furthermore, villagers describe the Domovoy as most active at night. He visits people, gently dragging his hairy hands over the faces of sleepers. A soft and warm hand is seen as a sign of good luck, while a cold and dry hand is a sign of the opposite (Ivanits 1989). One woman tells the story of her family Domovoy on the eve of her wedding, "At night, a shaggy bear fell on me and started to suffocate me. This was a Domovoy who was driving me out of the house. I soon got married" (Ansimova and Golubkova 2016, 132). Stories of the Domovoy 'suffocating' or 'choking' members of his household are particularly common in many regions.

### **3. Discussion**

#### **3.1 *The Domovoy's Brethren***

Many of the Domovoy's characteristics allow him to fall into different categories of supernatural beings. His small stature, connection to ancestors, and devotion to his community are shared by house deities and spirits from cultures around the world (Briggs 1976). He can be classified as a fairy due to his small size, humanoid form, supernatural abilities, ability to vanish and reappear at will, and the inherent risk associated with encountering him (Briggs 1976). Alternatively, his deep connection to a specific family and his ability to control objects telekinetically are reminiscent of a poltergeist (Briggs 1976). Folklorist Eugeny Karagov also posits that the Domovoy's omnipresence, enabling him to "watch" over his family at all times, and his often benevolent nature, may derive from his association with a certain manifestation of the supreme Slavic god, Rod (Ivanits 1989).

A characteristic of the Domovoy akin to many creatures in other cultures and religions is his connection to the ancestors of his given family, for example, the Veli in Fiji, as documented by Tomlinson (2016). Clark and Coe (2021) theorize that ancestor worship functions to preserve social norms and traditional behaviour. "A failure to treat kin altruistically, in many societies, is said to ignite the scorn of dead ancestors and/or other supernatural beings" as well as living elders who heavily discourage breaking of tradition (Clark and Coe 2021, 288). "The threat of supernatural punishment should then be largely interpreted as synonymous with the threat of social, public punishment, meaning that the vague threat of supernatural punishment (e.g., illness; crop failure) can be paired with immediate, direct punishment (e.g., isolation from larger social groups)" (Clark and Coe 2021, 288).

The Domovoy's role in rural Russian society fits perfectly into this theory; his tendency to punish those who do not adopt proper behaviour encourages conformity. The Domovoy makes it very difficult for a home to run in a non-traditional way and thus ensures the continuity of tradition. For example, the woman who went outside without her scarf was punished by the Domovoy because her behaviour broke the social norm. Ignoring the Domovoy's rules means ignoring the social rules that govern the village. There are unwritten guidelines that dictate how a home should be run, and if a family decides to ignore these guidelines, they face retribution from the Domovoy as well as the village. This case also illuminates the lasting gendered roles that have persisted into the modern era. Women, who participated in outdoor manual farm work alongside their husbands, brothers, and fathers, were not met with the same help in the domestic sphere (Clements 1982). It is evident in the ethnographic interviews that women are commonly the protagonists in stories concerning the Domovoy. His 'rules' of maintaining social control within the home allude that the home was a place of social control for women. Their roles were clearly defined and any transgression resulted in punishment—from both the Domovoy and the community. Thus, the Domovoy can

reveal sexist double standards that arguably serve no functional purpose in contemporary rural Russia. However, these standards persist, perhaps in part due to their association with the Domovoy and other essential social values that he promotes.

The community aspect of belief in the Domovoy is similar to the Indonesian water spirit Sikameinan. Manir, Kaptchuk, and Henrich (2021) find in their study of this spirit that belief in small gods and deities encourages cooperation and behaviour that benefits the community. Through ethnographic interviews, they find that the belief in the Sikameinan instills fear to prevent people from stealing and encourages people to share their food (Singh, Kaptchuk, and Henrich 2021). The moral wrongness of these two deviances, stealing and failing to share, are reified by the Sikameinan—which in turn—cements the cultural value of sharing. The importance placed upon sharing can be interpreted as a key ingredient to the survival of this community (Singh, Kaptchuk, and Henrich 2021).

Manir, Kaptchuk, and Henrich (2021) further theorize that the rituals performed for the Sikameinan are not merely for the sake of worship; they also serve the purpose of gaining the trust of peers. Through showing a belief and fear in the Sikameinan, the ritual performers are relaying that they can be trusted. This theory can be applied to the Domovoy; when people put their trust and respect in the Domovoy, they are simultaneously putting their trust and respect in the community. What the Domovoy deems proper behaviour is often based on the village, and therefore those who behave in ways to appease the Domovoy are behaving in ways that benefit the village. The ritual of inviting the Domovoy to a new home also contributes to this; it instills and reifies the belief in the Domovoy. It establishes the continuity of the belief because it is a demonstration of a family's devotion. It also conveys the importance of the belief to children who are essential in carrying the tradition forward. This shared belief acts as a social contract between the villagers, allowing for stability, solidarity, and harmony—not only within the home, —but throughout the community. Although the Domovoy is different from the Sikameinan, in that he is inherently benevolent, belief in the Domovoy also functions to ensure community solidarity and conservatism.

### **3.2 The Local Domovoy**

The place in the home where the Domovoy is said to reside can give insight into his origins and significance. The hearth and the stove are both places of warmth and heat. The hearth is traditionally built in the centre of the home, and the Domovoy's residence there symbolizes his importance to the Slavic family. Like the hearth, he is essential to the home, serving as its lifeforce, providing warmth and comfort. A proper home can simply not function without him. Still, the Domovoy's other places of residence—the attic and the basement—continue to symbolize his 'otherness.' These two locations, either directly above or directly below the main area of the home, represent the parallel 'otherworld' where spirits reside. The Slavic home, therefore, mirrors the world, with the spirit realm positioned either above or below the human realm.

Additionally, visits from the Domovoy in the middle of the night could be an explanation for the cross-cultural experience of sleep paralysis. Many cultures have folktales and beliefs to explain the symptoms of sleep paralysis. The Domovoy suffocating or sitting atop an individual in their sleep would produce the same sensations as sleep paralysis. The cause of these visits from the Domovoy are usually significant events, like a wedding, which often produce stress in an individual. Stress is associated with sleep paralysis and fragmented sleeping (Wróbel-Knybel et al. 2022). How a culture understands and explains sleep paralysis can significantly influence how an individual experiences it (De Jong 2005). This could be an explanation for why some individuals only feel light touches during the night rather than the typical heavy weight on their chest. Sleep paralysis is often a frightening

experience, but not all of the stories of visits from the Domovoy during sleep portray the same aura of fright. This can be due to how the culture influences the experience of sleep paralysis. Many other individuals report feeling soft touches from the Domovoy.

In his analysis of common Russian peasant sayings, Chulos (1995) finds that “many sayings did not indicate superstition as much as an acknowledgment of the transient nature of fortune or misfortune, the lack of control over human activity [and] other sayings commented on the fear of the natural world and uncertainties of peasant life” (208). Expanding on this quote from Chulos (1995), these sayings can indicate a causal relationship between villagers and the spiritual world. Villagers use the supernatural to cope with the uncertainty in their lives. The turbulence of village life, which includes unexpected deaths, illnesses that affect livestock, and sub-optimal crops, are softened by this relationship with the supernatural. This is primarily because the unfortunate circumstances can be attributed to them. The Domovoy himself is a connection to the untameable natural world and allows the villagers to manufacture some control over the uncontrollable.

Another interpretation of the Domovoy’s genesis and continued existence can be made using a phenomenological approach. This approach theorizes that experience leads to belief. Seeing apparitions of recently deceased relatives is a cross-cultural experience. Family members of the deceased may hear sounds or even see their relatives during the mourning process. In the case of the Domovoy, these experiences may have led to a cultural belief in spirits. More significantly, the death of an important family member—like the dominating figure that governed the home—can cause a distinct sense of loss and disorientation. These feelings could lead to the manifestation of the Domovoy as a leader and protector, in order to quell the anxiety that surrounds mortality and loss. Using the belief source hypothesis, one can theorize that individuals who grew up in this culture may be more likely to perceive apparitions and attribute them to the Domovoy. This is largely due to their prior exposure to this ideology, thus reinforcing their belief in him.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The Domovoy, a Slavic house spirit, embodies long-standing Slavic pagan traditions, persisting even after the Christianization of rural Russian regions. This house spirit takes on the role of the household’s guardian. He ensures domestic harmony and enforces social norms by imposing rules and punishing those who transgress them. The Domovoy is also deeply intertwined with Russian peasant culture. He is a physical manifestation of the values: communality, cooperation, and domestic order. This spirit is seen as an ancestral protector, participating both in his family’s joys and sorrows. The Domovoy also upholds moral conduct within the household by punishing improper behaviors and rewarding good practices. This action sheds light on gender roles and arguably outdated traditions.

Despite the official adoption of Christianity, the rural villagers maintained their pagan beliefs, integrating Christian practices with their existing traditions in a syncretic manner. This allowed them to preserve their cultural identity and continue their traditional way of life. Ongoing beliefs in the Domovoy among contemporary rural Russians offer insights into the enduring nature of these cultural practices. The spirit’s role extends beyond mere folklore, functioning as a belief mechanism that reinforces community values and social norms. The Domovoy shares characteristics with other supernatural entities across cultures, indicating a broader human tendency to use folklore to manage social behavior and maintain communal harmony.

The Domovoy serves as a cultural bridge between the past and present in rural Russian communities, encapsulating the enduring values and social norms of these societies. By examining beliefs in the Domovoy, we gain valuable insights into how

supernatural folklore can reflect, but also actively stabilize, community life. This ensures the continuity of cultural traditions amid changing social landscapes. This study not only highlights the importance of the Domovoy in maintaining domestic and communal order, but also illustrates the broader role of folklore in shaping and reflecting the cultural identities of communities. In studying the Domovoy, we gain knowledge of the cultural heritage of rural Russia, and also glean valuable perspectives on the persistence of folk beliefs and their role in shaping contemporary societies. These beliefs serve as a bridge between the past and the present, shedding light on the values that continue to influence life in these regions. Indeed, to understand the present fully, we must explore the depths of the past.

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