

THE HUT ON CHICKEN LEGS: TOWARDS THE IMAGE GENESIS

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ABSTRACT

The hut on chicken legs belongs to the images of the Russian folktale which are best known and attract greatest attention, both among the scholars and the readers. However, this image still lacks an exhaustive conception that could help us to understand what its original significance was and in what way the latter was reflected in its distinctive qualities. The present study made it possible to deepen and clarify V.Ya. Propp's idea according to which the hut on chicken legs has been interpreted as a house for the initiation ceremony, and to establish the origin and meaning of this mytheme in connection with the mythopoetic ideas about the winter solstice that were common among the Slavs. Accordingly, various types of fairy-tale plots in which the hut on chicken legs is mentioned obtain an interpretation as representations of the myth of the descent of the solar God (hero) into the underworld through the input opening during the days of the winter and/or summer solstice, that is common to many peoples of the world, or of the ideas of the return of the dead from the other world during the holy holidays, that are known among the Slavs. Consequently, the connection of these plots with the initiation rite can only be secondary. The complexity of the image of the hut on chicken legs which contaminates two archetypal features (the ornithomorphic appearance and the ability to turn around) on the basis of the mentioned mythopoetic concept is noteworthy, while each of the mythemes related to it (Kuuiriṅta 'Crane palace' of Aži Dahāka in the *Avesta*; the rotating houses in Dolgan, Vedic, and Irish epics; J. Chaucer's literary interpretation) is based on one of them only.

Keywords: Slavic folklore, Slavic mythology, fairy tale, hut on chicken legs, Baba Iaga, archetype, genesis, comparison.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most striking and famous images of the Russian folk tale is the hut on chicken¹ legs, usually turning around its axis, the habitat of Baba Iaga, which the hero/heroine visits and where the hero spends the night before performing his main feats.

¹ Sometimes with additional characteristics: "on a cock's shank", "on a ram's horns", "on a dog's shank", "on a dog's heels", etc. (see Novikov 1974: 137).

Much has been done for understanding this peculiar image of East Slavic folklore; however, in our opinion, no comprehensive conception that would explain its origin and functions with reference to all its characteristic features has been put forward so far. In this article, we will try to fill this gap by means of a comparative semiotic analysis based on the methods which V.Ya. Propp used in his work *The Historical roots of the fairy tale*.

Often, for the hut, they try to find a specific historical basis in ancient Russian customs. In this regard, they recall the funeral ritual of the East Slavic tribes described in the *Tale of Bygone Years*: “sobravše kosti vložakhu v sudinu malu i postavękhu na stolpě na putekh” ‘[after cremation] having collected the bones, [they] put them in a small vessel and put them on a pillar on the tracks’, the *Laurentian Chronicle* (PSRL 1926: 14). Data are also drawn on a Ruthenian construction method according to which a log house was placed on stumps with chopped roots in order to protect it from decay on marshy soil and which the name of the Moscow Church of St. Nicholas on Chicken Legs (now defunct) is motivated by (Nekrasov [1924]: 40-41). There is probably a rational grain in these comparisons; however, they concern only the external, formal embodiment of this mytheme in the minds of the people and do not explain either the nature of the connection between the hut and the world of death, or why its legs are chicken, nor its turning.

A.N. Afanas’ev (1982: 258f) finds the prototype of this image in a cloud wandering along the sky. But how does it correspond to the rotating character of the hut’s movement?

Propp interprets this image as an outpost on the way to the afterlife, which can only be entered through it, the entrance to the kingdom of death, modeled during the rite of initiation. As comparative data show, such huts often have the shape of an animal or pronounced zoomorphic features since initiation was conceived as the absorption of a boy by a monstrous animal, after which he was resurrected as another person (Propp 1986: 56ff). If one follows this interpretation, the hut on chicken legs is functionally close to the giantess’ stone courtyard through which, in one of the songs of the Elder Edda, the path of the deceased Brunhild to Hel lay and which she was able to overcome only after a skirmish with the hostess, who did not want to let her through (*Beowulf* 1975: 190).

It should be noted, however, that it is difficult to bring a chicken/rooster under the concept of a monstrous man-eating animal. Besides, Propp does not explain the rotation of the hut.

Some scholars look for reflections of burial rites in this image. V.N. Toporov (1963: 35ff) tries to find a counterpart to the hut on chicken legs in the Hittite *hista-*, *hesta-* ‘mortuary shrine, ossuary, charnel, mausoleum’ (Puhvel 1991: 319ff). V.P. Anikin (1984: 112ff) connects the image of the hut with the custom of the so-called “air burial”, respectively interpreting Baba Iaga as a dead woman; for a convincing critique of this point of view, see (Nazirov 1990: 5ff), who, in his turn, emphasizes the bird features in the image of Baba Iaga, also leaving the rotation of the hut aside. On Toporov’s hypothesis, it is necessary to note that

the priestess ^{SALŠU.GI}, whom he presents as a probable parallel to Baba Iaga, is never mentioned in connection with the *hista-*, *hesta-*.

The insufficiency of the interpretations suggested clearly demonstrates that the study of the nature and functions of the hut on chicken legs is still an actual problem. In order to solve it, we consider it necessary to view the image of the hut in its unity, i.e., understanding its characteristic features in their mutual connections, as different sides of one mythological notion, since “if there is a meaning to be found in mythology, this cannot reside in the isolated elements which enter into the composition of a myth, but only in the way those elements are combined” (Lévi-Strauss 1955: 431). A detailed discussion of each of them will help us to discover these ties.

THE IMAGE OF BABA IAGA

Before proceeding to consider the image of the hut on chicken legs, one should say a few words about the image of its mistress, in isolation from which it is impossible to analyze it. The main features of the image of Baba Iaga have been convincingly established by researchers. It is apparently of Proto-Slavic origin since she is known in Polish tales as well; her residence, however, usually lacks the features that are characteristic for it in East Slavic folklore (see Wróblewska). There is no doubt that Iaga is connected with the realm of the dead (Propp 1986: 53ff); she is often compared with the deities of death and winter in various religions. Her belonging to the underworld is clearly shown in the fairy tale where she rides out from under a stone in her mortar and then, being defeated, hides under it pursued by the hero, who thus penetrates into the dungeon (see Novikov 1974: 159). The image of the good Baba Iaga, the mistress of the forest, the mistress of animals and birds, genetically goes back to the deity – the patron of the female gender; this mytheme is characteristic for the era of matriarchy (*Ibidem*: 180) and is based on an archaic understanding of the idea of fertility: “Iaga represents the stage when fertility was thought through a woman without the participation of men” (Propp 1986: 75). The researchers emphasize the genetic unity of the “good” and “evil” incarnations of Baba Iaga as reflections of her different perceptions that arose in various historical conditions. Speaking about the deeper origins of this image, it should be borne in mind that the fairy-tale witch is a transformation of the Great Mother (Meletinsky 1994: 9), whose closest representation on East Slavic ground is the image of Mother the Moist Earth (*Mat'-syra zemlia*) embodying the positive beginning of the world and ritual purity.²

² “Among the agricultural tribes, the Great Mother was conceived, on the one hand, cosmogonically, as the Ancestor of the World, the mother of the gods and everything that exists, and on the other hand, as Mother Earth, Mother the Moist Earth and, because of this, the patroness of the harvest” (Rybakov 1981: 401). In the Christian era, the cult of the Great Mother strongly influenced the cult of the Virgin Mary among the Slavs (see *Ibidem*: 14; Tolstoi 1995-2012: 2 316, etc.); the mythological identification of these two images in the Russian religious consciousness survived until very late times, cf.: “the mother of God is the great mother – the damp earth”, Dostoevsky, *The Possessed/The Devils*, 1.4 (translation by Constance Garnett).

The seeming inconsistency of the image of Baba Iaga who acts, on the one hand, as a helper and giver, and on the other hand, as a creature from the underworld, an opponent of the hero, a cannibal and kidnapper of children is rooted in the ambivalence of the image of Mother the Moist Earth as the goddess of both the living and the dead, which is explicitly expressed in the ideas of the Belarusians: “she feeds the living, but accepts the dead” (Tolstoi 1995-2012: 2 316).³ This concept is archetypal: similarly, the Roman *Tellus Mater* ‘Mother Earth’ acted as a deity of the afterlife in certain rituals (Fox 1916: 292). All these data will be needed for further consideration.

THE DESCRIPTION OF THE HUT IN FAIRY TALES AND ITS CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES. CONJURING THE HUT

Strictly speaking, the role of the hut in the narrative is exhausted by one short episode, in which its characteristic features are manifested, – the meeting of the wandering hero with it, which usually takes place in the forest thicket, occasionally – on the seashore, in a swamp, etc. To enter the hut, the hero must turn it with the entrance to himself saying a spell: “Stand back to the forest, to me in front” (with options: “to the forest with your eyes, to me with a gate”, “here with your face, and there with your crow”). Analogical formulas also occur in the Polish fairy tales (see Wróblewska). A very informative is the case in which the turn of the hut is oriented according to the cardinal points: “in front of me, backwards to the west” (Novikov 1974: 138). Thus, the path of the tale hero coincides with the daytime path of the sun to the west, to the kingdom of the dead, on the border of which he meets the hut. One archaic Belarusian text clearly says that the hero reaches the hut during or after the sunset: “Zakhodzits’ sontsa. Pryiazdžaiuts’ k lesu, ažno stait’s’ khatka na kurnaj nožtsy i krutsitsta” ‘The sun is setting (or: set). [They] come to a forest where a hut on a chicken leg stands and turns around’ (*Kazki pra žiweł...* 1971: 346).

However, much more about the nature of the hut on chicken legs is said by another common version of the incantation formula used by the hero – “Stand in the old way, as the mother put it” (*Stan’ po-staromu, kak mat’ postavila*). It is obvious from the context that this “mother” is not Baba Iaga since the latter appears in this episode in person; it is most natural to assume that here one has in mind the positive hypostasis of the image of the Great Mother, mentioned above, – Mother the Moist Earth, fertilized by heavenly moisture, a fruitful universal mother and nurse, and it was to her world, the world of life, and not of death, that the hut was previously turned. The turning of the hut by the hero, therefore, is not a violation of its nature, but only a reproduction of its natural state in the past. Thus,

³ A transitional stage between the two appearances of Baba Iaga is represented by the figure of the evil one who, however, has a friendly and hospitable daughter (daughters) or a niece aiding the hero. This image splitting is also known beyond Slavic folklore, cf. the analogous character in *Les merveilles de Rigomer* by Jean de Cambrai (the 13th c.): “Une pucele est aparue, | Qui est fors de cambres issue, | Jounete de petit eage, | Mais mout estoit cortoise et saige” (verses 3585-3589). Baba Iaga who acts as a helper is always solitary.

the functioning of the hut is based on the principle of cyclicity: it does not belong entirely to the world of death (as follows from the concept of Propp who completely ignores this formula), but at certain periods of time, in turn, due to some laws, it opens up to one or another world. The positive meaning of the turning of the hut is also indicated by the fact that “in the texts where Iaga plays a negative role in relation to the hero, such formulas [of addressing the hut] are not recorded” (Nikitina & Reili 2008: 57). However, it is impossible to fully understand the nature and function of this mytheme without clarifying the origin of its two most striking features – the presence of chicken⁴ legs and the ability to turn around.

CHICKEN LEGS

There is a reason to believe that initially chicken legs were a feature of the appearance of Baba Iaga herself: the Baltic goddess of vegetation and earth *Lauma, whose image is correlated with that of Baba Iaga in many respects, was sometimes depicted with chicken legs (Běťáková & Blažek 2012: 105-106). Cf. the following statement: “the hut... is, in fact, Baba Iaga herself” (Gimbutas 2004 (1987): 727). The German character Berchta/Perchta, who is close to Baba Iaga as well, appears in some folklore texts as “the big-footed Bertha” – an old woman with a goose’s or swan’s paw instead of a leg (Grimm 1882: 280-281); in the French tradition, it corresponds to La reine Pédauque (< Occitan *pè d’auca* or late Latin *pes aucae* ‘goose foot’) (q.v. the article *Reine Pédauque* in the *Encyclopedia* of Diderot and D’Alembert).⁵ The idea of the non-anthropomorphic nature of this part of the body of Baba Iaga is consistently preserved in the fairy tales in the designation of her leg as of bone (less often, of gold, iron, or clay) (see Nazirov 1990: 7ff where Baba Iaga is elevated to the image of the Tsar-Bird (preserved in the fairy tales), that marries the hero and helps him, and, further, to the image of the Goddess-Bird of the Indo-European agricultural tribes, reconstructed by M. Gimbutas). The same idea is postulated by M. Shapiro (1983: 121ff) as well, although his arguments are often unconvincing: the secondary, taboo Slavic *baba* ‘pelican (and some other animals and plants)’ says nothing about the origin of the ancient mytheme of Baba Iaga; Proto-Slavic **jega* cannot be phonetically and historically deduced from Proto-Samoyed **ɲga* ‘god’, especially since the latter is absent among the Proto-Samoyed lexemes reconstructed by J. Janhunen (1977). We also do not accept the author’s attempt

⁴ Strictly speaking, the definition *kurū* does not indicate the bird’s sex since this adjective meant both ‘chicken’ and ‘rooster’ in Old Russian (ÉSSIA 1974-: 12 133-134), so gender interpretations of this image have no linguistic basis.

⁵ The question arises: how significant is the difference in bird breeds in the Balto-Slavic and Western European traditions for understanding the specifics of these images the mythological symbolism of which is also different? It seems that the image of the geese-swans carrying kidnapped children to Baba Iaga, to the hut on chicken legs (in some fairy tales, Baba Iaga does this herself), clearly illustrates their mythopoetic equivalence. The magical power of Baba Iaga integrates the nature of all these breeds, which is expressed in the fact that she turns her stepdaughter into a goose and the king’s bride into a swan (see Nikitina & Reili 2008: 39).

to attach kammenye baby, i.e., ‘stone women’, rough full-face female figures which have been found in southern Russia and the Eurasian steppe past the Caucasus to Mongolia, to the image of Baba Iaga: the characteristic feature of the kammenye baby is that they hold horns in their hands (Pettazzoni 1954: 162), which is completely alien to Baba Iaga. The fact that an ornithomorphic image⁶ was the prototype of Baba Iaga known from the fairy tales is also confirmed by comparison with the image of the sorceress Circe whose myth presented in the *Odyssey* (canto 10) reveals a striking (still, as far as we know, not noted) coincidence with the considered episode of the Russian fairy tale in almost all its main plot elements. Circe lives in a forest (as Odysseus and his companions see the smoke rising from her dwelling above the forest) and at the same time in an open place; in other words, her house stands in a forest clearing where the fairy tales usually place Baba Iaga’s hut as well. Circe is surrounded by wild beasts tamed by her charms; this clearly shows her function as a mistress of wild animals.⁷ Like Baba Iaga, Circe, after the conflict from which her acquaintance with Odysseus begins, renders him hospitality, feeds him, arranges for the night, enters into sexual intercourse with him⁸ (as Nazirov convincingly supposes about Iaga), and then shows him the way to the afterlife, providing him with necessary instructions. Circe’s characteristic motif of turning people into animals is connected with Baba Iaga in many other fairy tales. The etymology of Circe’s name shows that originally she had the appearance of a bird: *κίρκος, κίρκη*, the name of a (predatory) bird (Chantraine 1970: 534).

On the other hand, this attribute is inseparable from the cult of the dead: in some East Slavic rites, traces that were similar to those of chicken legs, found on the ashes, were considered to be traces of the ancestors (*nav’ia*) (see Gaľkovskii 1916: 202).

By the presence of the ornithological features in its appearance, the hut of Baba Iaga can be compared with the Avestan *Kuuirinta*: according to *Yasht* 5.29-31, 15.19-21, *Aži Dahāka* referred to *Arədvī Sūra Anāhitā* in the land of *Baβri* and to the god of winds *Vayu* in the “cursed” (*dužita*) palace of *Kuuirinta* with a vain plea to exterminate mankind: as established by J. Darmsteter, *kuuirinta* is the Avestan predecessor of the later word *kulenk* ‘crane’, which is confirmed by the legend cited by Hamza al-Isfahani that *Zohhak* built a crane-shaped palace in Babylon and

⁶ The rare mention of Baba Iaga’s wings (see *Ibidem*: 69) as well as the Serbian image of the winged woman (*krilata baba*) (Karadić 2017: 356-363) are also revealing in this regard.

⁷ In the fairy tales, this ancient function of Baba Iaga is largely leveled, but cf. a characteristic remark of the storyteller: “Baba Iaga has children: wolves, bears, foxes, gray foxes, arctic foxes, what kind of animal is in the world – all are her children” (Khudiakov 1964: 270). Thus, a more complete consideration of the available material (both directly related to the subject of our discussion and comparative) makes it possible to refute the superficial skepticism of K.V. Chistov who tries to deny that Baba Iaga has the functions of the owner of the forest and the mediator between the worlds (see Chistov 1997: 56).

⁸ This gives a certain basis for judgments about the gender contrast between the hero and Baba Iaga as one of the binary oppositions in the spirit of structuralism; however, it is still not worth giving it a fundamental importance for this plot because, as will be shown below, a female character can also act in it, instead of the hero-boy.

called it *kulenk dīs* ‘crane palace’ (Darmesteter 1883: 210-212).⁹ According to the *Yajur Veda* (24.22), the crane is a bird sacred to Vayu. Characteristically, Vayu is united with Iaga both by his intermediate position between the two worlds and by his connection with the world of death (in the *Avesta*, he is also characterized as the god of death) (see Duchesne-Guillemin 1962: 179; Malandra). For her part, Iaga sometimes appears as the mistress of winds: “The old woman came out onto the porch, shouted in a loud voice, whistled with a valiant whistle; suddenly rose from all sides, violent winds blew, only the hut is shaking”. In another text, she is called the mother of the winds (Propp 1986: 76).¹⁰ Given the ubiquitous mythological role of the image of a bird, on the one hand, as the embodiment of death carrying the souls of the dead to the afterworld, as well as an intermediary between the two worlds, the messenger of the gods, and on the other hand, as a metaphor for the wind (“a bird is a mythical image of wind” (Afanas’ev 1995: 168), the connection of structures in the form of birds with the cult of deities related to death and wind looks quite natural.¹¹

The fully or partially zoomorphic appearance of the dwelling of a fully or partially anthropomorphic mythological character is the result of the metonymic transfer of the traits of the latter lost by him in the process of anthropomorphization (in accordance with the well-known pattern according to which the properties that made up the essence of the deity himself become his attributes during this process, similarly like the ivy (Evius) and the bunch of grapes, which represented the archaic Dionysus, in the mythology of the classical era only wrap around his thyrus). A historically earlier development stage of the image of such a house is represented by the natural habitat of the corresponding animal or bird, cf. a hut hidden in the hollow of an old tree, in which Muma Pădurii ‘Mother of the Forest’, an Eastern Romance character close to Baba Iaga, lives (Vulcănescu 1987: 490-491). On the other hand, the chicken legs are in the same row with the parts of human bodies that make up the fence enclosing the home of Baba Iaga in the fairy tale

⁹ We find a real reflection of this tradition in Hindu temple architecture: as is clear from a document dated by the 6th century, the shape of a bird (eagle, Garuda, goose) was one of the three main forms of small one-story temples (Gerasimov 1975: 311). This tradition is rooted in the distant past: M. Oleszkiewicz-Peralba (2015: 36) compares Baba-Iaga’s hut to the Neolithic house-model with a bird’s head and incised plumage, found in Transylvania and described by Gimbutas (1996: 67).

¹⁰ The combination of the functions of the mistress of forests and of that of winds is archetypal, cf. Artemis who deprived the Greeks of the fair wind in Aulis. In Slovene folklore, Rarašek (‘falcon’), the servant of Pehtra Baba, keeps the winds imprisoned in a barrel (Kropej 2012: 247). That this Rarašek can be identified with our chicken is evident from the image of a fiery chicken (*ohnivě kuře*) the name of which is, however, Raráš in a Czech fairy tale (Erben 1905: 23ff).

¹¹ Another archetypal form of Baba Iaga is that of a snake (q.v. Gimbutas 2004 (1987), which allows to establish her identity with the warrior maiden Nastasya Mikulichna in the bylina *Dobrynya and Nastasya* (and, consequently, to consider the verbal duel between the fairy tale character and Baba Iaga as a softened variant of the personages’ combat and further marriage in the bylina (a detailed analysis of the latter is presented in Yuyukin 2020), as well as with Nightingale the Robber (the bylina *Ilya Muromets and Nightingale the Robber*) who is treated as a monstrous guard on the border between the two worlds (just like Baba Iaga) and appears now as a snake and now as a bird (q.v. Yuyukin 2024). Exceptionally, Baba Iaga still preserves her snake image in the folktales (q.v. Novikov 1974: 163).

Vasilisa the Beautiful and with the description of Baba Iaga herself, whose body parts are dispersed throughout the room and give the impression of existing separately each from other (on the latter, see Nikitina & Reili 2008: 58). Behind all these details, one can guess a more general mytheme of some kind of physical decomposition, bodily dismemberment associated with the image of Baba Iaga. But can such an interpretation be considered exhaustive for Baba Iaga's hut? An analysis of its another characteristic feature, the ability to rotate around its axis, will help us to answer this question.

THE ROTATION

In world mythology, the image of the turning house is rare but not unique. It is attested in the epic of peoples quite different both in origin and in the level of their socio-economic development, which makes it possible to attribute it to mythological archetypes. In a Dolgan epic poem, the Son of the Horse Atalamia the Bogatyr features a house revolving on loops, located "at the top of the three heavens, at the tip of a finger"; an old woman simeksin and a girl to whom "people of the whole world yield in magic" live there; the desire to compete with her draws the hero, who consistently follows the path of the sunny side, to this house, and there he defeats the evil shaman abaasy who is wooing the girl (*Folklor Dolgan* 2000: 57ff). In other olongkhos and fairy tales, the image of the revolving house acquires new features: it can be silver, and then it is located both in the upper and in the middle world (*Ibidem*: 155, 161), or iron, located on an iron stump on the top of a boulder that has grown from a pit, in a country where "a man of human blood... cannot reach" (*Ibidem*: 293ff). This house is on the side of the country of death, the hero reaches him, following a rolling ball, which stops at the house, and when he puts the ball in his pocket, doors that were not visible before are opened (*Ibidem*: 219). The latter version is almost identical (with the exception of the absence of the chicken legs) to the Russian hut, to which in those tales where the hero successively visits the three Iaga sisters he is also led by the rolling ball received from the previous Iaga.

In the *R̥gveda*, one meets the figure of *R̥jraśva*, who was blinded by his cruel father and cured by the *Aśvins*, whose name means 'the upright horse', or the turning pole of the heavenly house – the metaphor of the revolving weeks and days (Hewitt 1896: 123; Hewitt 1972: 214, 590).

In the Irish mythological text *Fled Bricrend* (*Fled Bricrenn*) 'The Feast of Bricrenn', we meet the revolving castle of the hero *Curoi* (*Cú Roí*) endowed with magical powers (*Fled Bricrend* 1899: 102-103); its doors are only opened to the chosen ones and only at certain moments of the calendar cycle (probably on the days of the solstice, as evidenced by the folklore continuation of this motif in the form of a stone spinning at the solstice at the location of the treasure). After sunset, *Curoi* casts a spell, as a result of which the castle begins to spin at the speed of a millstone and the entrance to it becomes invisible. This mythological image (later passed into the legends of the Arthurian cycle) approaches the solar circle and is considered a metaphorical embodiment of the notion of the rhythm of the cosmos (Walter 2015: 88).

Extremely interesting is J. Chaucer's image of Domus Dedaly rotating around its axis (verse 1920ff), which is interpreted as an image of the earth, mundus, and which is described by the author as the focus of various kinds of opposites, including life and death ("of deeth, of lyf", verse 1963) (see Gabrovsky 2015: 51). This version of the revolving house is the most abstract, rational, which, of course, is a consequence of its literary processing, but its mythological basis and typological connection with those considered above are beyond doubt.

The mutual comparison of these parallels makes it possible to single out a number of common features that, with a high degree of probability, are inherent in the image of the revolving house.

1. First of all, the matriarchal origins of this mytheme are undoubted. The mistress of the revolving dwelling is always a woman; the echo of this idea is also clear in the Irish text: in the absence of Curoi, the three characters who arrived at his castle are met by his wife, who gives them a warm welcome and makes them take turns guarding the castle at night, as a result of which each of them has to engage in battles with monsters (*Fled Bricrend* 1899: 100ff).

2. The revolving house is a cosmic image that symbolizes the cyclicity and unity of the universe and, in this regard, can be associated with various parts of the cosmos, various levels of the world – the sky, the sun, the earth / the upper and middle worlds, as well as with the lower, afterlife kingdom (in addition to being located on the side of the land of death in the Dolgan text, cf. Curoi's epithet *rí in domain* 'king of the (Lower) world' (Kalygin 2006: 65).

It should be noted that the mythological meaning of the revolving hut precisely corresponds to the original semantics of PIE **uer-* (Sl. *vra-/vre-/vřr-*) 'to turn, rotate', which, on the one hand, is inseparable from the concept of time, cf. Sl. **vert-men* 'time', Lat. *annus vertens, mensis vertens, anniversarius* (Vasmer 1996: 1 361), and on the other hand, from the concept of the feminine on the border between the being and the non-being, cf. *Vrotah*, the name of the Venetic goddess of childbirth (Pokorny 1959: 1157). Thus, the rotation of the hut (duplicated by the spinning, which is characteristic for Baba Iaga in some tales), suggests time as well as a locus of death or a portal between death and life. The episode from *Vasilisa the Beautiful* in which the heroine successively sees three horsemen – white, red, and black – riding to Baba Iaga, whom the latter calls "her faithful servants" the day, the sun, and the night respectively, would confirm Baba Iaga's role as the mistress of time.

3. At the same time, the features of a certain universe in which opposite states of the world merge into one clearly appear in it. This characteristic finds the most distinct expression in the description of Domus Dedaly, but in other examples as well the revolving houses are as if placed in a kind of absolute space, in which the differences in size and distance are neutralized: the location of the Dolgan house is characterized as both the most remote ("at the top of the three heavens") and the closest ("at the finger-tip"); as the saga emphasizes, every night Kuroi protects his dwelling with the spell, regardless of where in the world he is at the moment. The ambivalence of spatial characteristics can also be traced in the hut on chicken

legs: on the one hand, it is clearly small for Baba Iaga alone (“A man is walking in a hut, and Baba Iaga is in it: in front is her head, in one corner is her leg, and in the other – another one” (Afanas’ev 1984-1985: 1 124), but the hero, without apparent difficulty, settles in it, first for dinner and then for the night.

4. This is also the place where the hero is tested, in which he must fight with the forces of evil and win them, which we see in both Dolgan and Irish legends. In the Russian fairy tales, this motif, in connection with the hut on chicken legs, is largely reduced; its echo can be seen in the dialogue of the hero with Baba Iaga, as a result of which he manages to subdue her to his will and force her to fulfill his instructions.

MYTHOPOETICAL INTERPRETATION OF THE IMAGE

The archetypal features highlighted show that the revolving house should be considered in the context of a certain ritual from the era of matriarchy, which was associated with the celebration of a natural phenomenon belonging to the calendar (very likely solar) cycle, considered by traditional consciousness as the triumph of good over evil, of life over death. An attempt to suggest the cosmic explanation of the turning of the hut of Baba Iaga has already been made, cf.: “La semovenza di questa abitazione si prestava ad essere interpretata come una dimora astrale” (Gasparini 2010: 638); however, the author’s argumentation seems not to be approved by the texts: the fairy tales contain no hint that the hut rhythmically turns now from the one side and now from the other; but even if it did, this fact would be insufficient to identify its turning with the change of the lunar phases which are opened now to the east and now to the west. An idea that allows us to link this circumstance with both characteristic features of the hut on chicken legs can be found in the common Slavic beliefs regarding the winter solstice according to which, after the sun turns into summer, the day increases “by a chicken step”: “the barbarians of the night snatched a chicken step” (Russian), “on Koliada the day arrived on a chicken foot” (East Slavic), “na św. Łucie przybywa dnia na kurzą stopę, na Boże Narodzenie przybyło dnia na kurze stąpienie” ‘on St. Lucy has a day for a chicken’s foot, Christmas has a day for a chicken’s foot’ (Polish), “na nový rok o kuří krok” ‘a chicken step for the new year’ (Czech); according to the Bulgarian belief, from the day of St. Andrew before Christmas, the day increases as much as a slaughtered chicken (rooster) jumps (Tolstoi 1995-2012: 3 61). In Bulgarian signs related to the winter solstice, the gradual increase in the length of the day is likened to the movements of a rooster, which first stands still, then begins to tremble, then jumps over the threshold, later jumps over the wattle fence, etc. (Ibidem: 4 29). The spinning bird (*ptitsa-vertenitsa*) in the Russian folk riddle about the sun (Afanas’ev 1995: 106) is directly related to the hut on chicken legs; in turn, the echo of the ornithomorphic solar nature of Baba Iaga is heard in her ability to turn into a golden bird, and in order to carry out the reverse transformation, she needs to go into the hut (Onuchkov 1908: 15) – a circumstance that clearly indicates the former syncretic unity of the images of the hut and of its inhabitant.

A unique evidence of this earlier, entirely ornithomorphic stage of the rotating hut on chicken legs can be found in a tale from Transcarpathian Ukraine where one meets a golden cockerel on a palace roof; it turns around and crows when it sees a stranger approaching. This cockerel lightens the world, and when the hero kills it, everything plunges into the darkness (*Skazki Verkhoviny* 1970: 294); thus, its solar nature manifests itself very clearly. This image surely existed in the Russian folktales too, as *The Tale of the Golden Cockerel* by Alexander Pushkin proves: although several attempts have been made to find a non-Slavic literary source of this poem (*The Legend of the Arabian Astrologer* by Washington Irving and others), it is well known that Pushkin's tales were inspired by folk stories told him by his nurse Arina Rodionovna, about which he wrote in one of his letters.

Thus, the combination of demonic properties with solar symbolism, which is inherent in the image of a chicken/rooster in Slavic traditional culture on the whole, was reflected in the presence of the chicken legs at the hut and in its ability to rotate.¹² In its turn, the connection of Baba Iaga herself with the winter solstice is apparent from the fact that she played an important role in Russian Yule disguises, from which one can conclude that she appears on Christmas (Potebnya 1865: 95; see a detailed description of the presentation of Baba Iaga in the Yule celebrations in Tereshchenko 1848: 162-166).¹³

¹² The interpretation of the image of a chicken as an expression of Baba Iaga's connection with the element of earth (a flightless bird) may be implicitly traced in her characteristics (Baba Iaga cannot overcome the sea or a fiery river, therefore, does not have the ability to fly; her famous mortar does not fly on air at all, as is often thought, but moves without leaving the ground: "As soon as Iaga-Bura grabbed him, she put him in a mortar and galloped through the bushes, through the forests, through the ravines" (Afanas'ev 1984-1985: 1 136); even the aforementioned golden bird does not fly into the hut, but enters, stepping on the ground). However, this semantics cannot be considered the main one for this image. Firstly, the hen/rooster is by no means associated in the fairy tales with the impossibility of flying: for example, Ivan Tsarevich flies to the realm of Helena the Beautiful on a rooster, the owner of which is a big old man-eater, the brother of Baba Iaga (see Nikitina & Reili 2008: 68). And most importantly, the idea of Iaga as a chthonic character seems to be too one-sided: to an even greater extent than with the earth, she is associated with water (she often cracks down on her victims at water sources, her father is called the tsar of the sea, and her elder brother is the tsar of water (see *Ibidem*: 50, 68); cf. also her commonly recognized connection with the goddess *Mokoši* whose name is derived from Slavic **mok-* 'wet, moist'). Regular correlations between the images of Baba Iaga and related characters, on the one hand, and of Slavic female water spirits (East Slavic rusalkas, West Slavic bohinkas, Bulgarian samovidas, Serbian vilas), on the other hand, are noteworthy in this regard: goose paws of the rusalkas and bohinkas or chicken claws of the bohinkas, such their attributes as a comb, a pestle, and a mortar. The correlation of Baba Iaga with the celestial elements – the wind (as indicated above), the sun, the moon (see below) – is also clear. More contradictory relationships connect Iaga with the element of fire: on the one hand, she is its guardian and giver (this function most clearly appears in the tale of *Vasilisa the Beautiful*); on the other hand, she often dies in fire (in her own furnace, a fiery river, etc.). Thus, everything indicates that Baba Iaga should be rather considered in connection with the general picture of the universe, the natural principle on the whole (which leads us again to the image of the Great Mother) than with any individual natural element. Actually, the biography of Baba Iaga reflected in the fairy tales is a personification of cosmological and eschatological ideas, the history of the world that arises from water and is doomed to perish by fire. The mythopoetic meaning of the connection between Baba Iaga and the chicken/rooster will be discussed in detail below.

¹³ The very name Iaga, which is cognate with the words of the Indo-European languages with the meanings 'waste', 'annoy', 'sorrow', etc. (q.v. Vasmer 1996: 1 542), is undoubtedly a taboo name (as P. Skok (1971: 780) has supposed) used instead of the name of the Slavic deity of winter and

Analogically, in a Slovak fairy tale, the meeting of the prince with Ježibaba takes place on the summer solstice (*o svätom Jáne* ‘on St. John[’s Day]’); nevertheless, she appears as the embodiment of winter: she wears seventy-seven fur-coats and complains of cold (Kollár 1953: 43ff).¹⁴

death Mara, Mora, Marena (and other forms). This is directly evidenced by naming winter Baba Iaga (Ježi-baba) in the Slovene song performed during the rite of meeting spring: “Zelenega Jurja vodimo, | Maslo in jajca prosimo, | Ježi-babo zganjamo, Mladoletje trosimo!” ‘We are leading the green Yuri, | Asking for butter and eggs, | Chasing Baba Iaga away, | Scattering the Spring!’ (Štrekelj 1904: № 5000) as well as in the analogous Russian chant: “Videlo li, solnyško, | Staruiu iagu, | Babu li iagu – | Ved’mu-zimu? | Kak ona, liutaia, | Ot vesny ušla, | Ot krasnoi begla, | V meške stužu nesla, | Kholod na zemli triasla, | Sama ostupilas’, | Pod goru pokatilas’” ‘Did you see, the Sun, | The old iaga, | Baba Iaga – | The witch-winter? | Well, she, the fierce one, | Went away from the spring, | Ran away from the beautiful one, | Carried chill in her bag, | Shook cold out on the ground, | Stumbled by herself, | Was back running down the hill’ (*Russkaia narodnaia...* 1984: 173). Mara (Marena) usually appears in similar Slavic rites. On East Slavic ground, one can further point out the variant of the tale *Morozko* ‘Frost’, which has been repeatedly noted in the literature, where Baba Iaga takes the place of the title character (Afanas’ev 1984-1985: 1 102-103 = ATU 2004: № 480 *Frau Holle*), and the name of the warrior maiden Marya Morevna if one takes into account the fact that the various variants of this image (the Tsar Maiden, Marya the Tsarevna, the most powerful heroine) are often called the nieces of Baba Iaga (see Nikitina & Reili 2008: 69).

¹⁴ Kollár adduces two variants of this plot (ATU 2004: № 303), which is also represented in the Russian tale *The Magic Hunt* (*Skazki* 1988: 269-270) and in the Romanian tale of Vereia Viteazul (*Din vieața...* 1928: 192-193; Botezatu 1981: 239-240; Botezatu 1995: 210-211; *Wikipedia*). In Kollár’s № 35b, a hunter who intends to go to the underworld rests under a huge tree and fries meat on a fire. He then hears from the tree the voice of an old woman who complains that she is cold. The hunter invites her to go down to the fire to warm up. After she goes down, she strives to touch the hunter’s meat with frogs on a spit saying: “those who fry meat should eat frogs, and those who fry frogs should eat meat”. Then she explains the hunter how to reach the underworld and gives him a number of useful advices. In later variants, this plot is combined with the dragon-fighting one (Slovak, Russian), and a conflict arises between the hero and the old woman, who appears as a malicious witch there. The result is tragic for the hero. In the Slovak and the Russian tales, she turns the hero into a stone until a youngest of three brothers saves the two elder ones and kills the witch. In the story of Vereia Viteazul, the old hag (see on Muma Pădurii above) rips open his belly, takes out the intestines, heart and kidneys, and instead stuffs his belly with horse dung or wood rot. The old hag takes Vereia Viteazul’s viscera to her house on the top of a tree, heals his ripped open belly with magic water, and before releasing him, she says that if he tells someone about what happened, he will die immediately. Vereia Viteazul returns to his palace. This plot represents the oldest stage of the myth of Baba Iaga, in which she, if not completely preserves her original appearance – a bird-like mistress of the forest which is the border between the two worlds, living at the top of a tree and carrying the souls across this border, then clearly hints at it. This is especially visible in the story of Vereia Viteazul. The method of her avenging herself on the hero reflects not so much her perverted sexual fetishism, as Á. Castiñeira Ionescu (1983: 469-471) believes, as her original bird-like nature: she does not kill him in any human way but tears him to pieces, similar to how a bird of prey does with a corpse. The exchange of food she suggests to the hero expresses an inversion one must undergo while crossing the border of life and death, an inversion which stands in line with the turn of the hut. The next development stage is represented in the Russian tale of Medvedko (Afanas’ev 1984-1985: № 141-142) where the hero and his assistants occupy an empty rotating hut on chicken legs in the forest and hunt all days long, while one of them stays at home and cooks meal. Suddenly, Baba Iaga appears from the underground, requires their food, eats all, and cruelly beats two the bogatyr successively, after which Medvedko wins her. The bird-like features already disappeared from her figure. The secondary, corrupted character of this variant is seen from the fact that the aggression of Baba Iaga is unmotivated here as the bogatyr meet her hospitably. It seems to be plausible that a hunter’s or funeral rite of offering a sacrifice in the form of food to the mistress of forest animals or to

The Slovenian Pehtra Baba (Jaga Baba, Ježi Baba) is imagined as the leader of the wild hunt during twelve nights around Christmas and New Year (Kropej 2012: 51).

Another argument in favour of our thesis that the rotating hut on chicken legs symbolizes the winter or summer solstice is provided by the fact that this hut repeatedly figures in the tales of a girl who ran away to the forest in order to avoid an incestuous marriage with her own brother (*Skazki* 1989: 328, 331): this plot is exclusively timed to the summer solstice feast (*Ivan Kupalo*) and is told in numerous songs which are sung on it.

Some comparative data also indirectly point to the connection of Baba Iaga and of the hut on chicken legs with the idea of the solstice. The probable relation of Curoi Castle to the solstice has already been mentioned. Berhta/Perhta is a character embodying the winter solstice by origin (see Tolstoi 1995-2012: 4 18). The Vedic metaphor of the turning house-pole = the revolving time “was transferred to the year of five seasons, it became that which told how Sirius, the dog, who begins to hunt the sun at the summer solstice to the south, leaves his quarry free to return at the winter solstice” (Hewitt 1972: 590).

The connection of the hut on chicken legs with the winter and summer solstice completely fits Propp's interpretation of this hut as an entrance to the afterlife since various mythological traditions record the idea that this entrance opens on the days of the winter and/or summer solstices, and a solar deity or a deity associated with the idea of fertility travels there through it (Mesopotamia (Tammuz), the builders of European megaliths and America's Stonehenge, the Aztecs, the Hopi Pueblo). Widespread beliefs that it is on holy days when the dead wake up, the souls of the dead return from the other world to their homes and take part in the meal of their relatives (Tolstoi 1995-2012: 4 585-586) prove the existence of ideas about the opening of the passage between the two worlds on the solstice among the Slavs as well. The archetypical character of the motif of the open doors in connection with the mytheme of the forest witch's hut is visible in comparison with *Les merveilles de Rigomer* where the hero does not need to conjure the hut as he finds it already open (verses 3461-3465).

Thus, the fairy tale plot under consideration is based on the widespread myth of the descent of the solar¹⁵ hero into the underworld (cf. the close parallel

the female underworld guardian, at first under a tree and later in a special shrine, underlies these episodes. As far as ancient beliefs go to ruin, the veneration is gradually replaced by the conflict, in which the hero resolutely defends his right to remain in the world of life. The tale of Medvedko precisely reflected this transitional stage: for the main hero, Baba Iaga is already an enemy, while his archaic, slightly anthropomorphized companions still belong to the old religion and obey her. After the original sense of this plot was completely forgotten, it is the hero who becomes to require refreshments from Baba Iaga, and the whole this scene takes shape in accordance with realities of the peasant's life and hospitality traditions. It is important that then the old woman always returns, voluntarily or involuntarily, the hero to life: she is equally the mistress of life and death (in the Russian tales, Baba Iaga owns two sources with the water of life and of death), which flows from the ambiguous significance of Mother the Moist Earth (see above).

¹⁵ “The fairy-tale image of Ivan Tsarevich can be considered the reflection of the mythological image of the Tsar-Sun, Herodotus' Kolaksais, in those cases when he is the only or a youngest son of the tsar” (Rybakov 1981: 397).

mentioned above with the myth of Circe and Odysseus)¹⁶ through the entrance that opens during the winter and/or summer solstice, after which he is reborn to a new life. In general terms, this reconstruction corresponds to the belief, well-known among the Slavs, that the sun, after sunset, continues its journey underground illuminating the underworld, shining on the dead (Tolstoj 1995-2012: 5 103). Our reconstruction finds indirect confirmation at the linguistic level: strangely heterogeneous, at first glance, the meanings of Proto-Slavic **korčunŭ* (q.v. ĚSSla: 11 56-58) acquire a coherent and logical relationship if we assume that the semantics of this Proto-Slavic word is based on the mythological idea of the winter solstice (ORuss. *Koročun*, *Koročun* ‘fast before Christmas’, Russ. *karačun* ‘solstice, day of December 12, Spiridon’s day’, dial. *karačun* ‘Christmas rite, carols; Pre-Christmas fast’; Bulg. dial. *kračun* ‘folk holiday of the summer or winter solstice’; Slovak *kračún* ‘Christmas’) inseparable from such concepts as foot and step-by-step movement (**korčiti* ‘to walk, walk’, from which this noun is derived; Bulg. dial. *kračun* ‘big leg/legs’; Russ. dial. *karačun* ‘a child who crawls’), locking/unlocking an entrance/opening (Serbo-Croatian (old, dial.) *kràčūn* ‘bolt, bushing’, also *kracūn*), death and the other world (Russ. dial. *karačun* ‘evil spirit, devil, demon’, ‘sudden, unexpected death’). The evolutionary series ‘walking’, ‘death-departure’, ‘transition of the sun to summer or winter’, proposed by O.N. Trubachev, does not seem convincing: the verb **korčiti* denotes only walking in the elementary physical sense of this concept – as a movement performed by the legs (cf. **korkŭ* ‘leg’, Serbo-Croatian, Slovene *korak* ‘step’, *koračiti* ‘take a step/steps or stride’ (ĚSSla: 11 50); figurative meanings similar to those that Trubachev ascribes to it, as well as the sense of changing the position of the subject in space and time, are absent in its semantics; moreover, the Serbo-Croatian *kràčūn* ‘bolt, bushing’ does not fit into this scheme.

The reconstruction carried out refers primarily to the fairy tales which tell about the fight of the hero against monsters (the plot scheme “The Miraculous Adversary” (№ 300-399 according to (ATU 2004)¹⁷ classification: № 128-130, 136-137, 141, 224-225 in Afanas’ev’s collection (A) (Afanas’ev 1984-1985), etc.). However, the hut of Baba Iaga (sometimes called simply an old woman) is also found in plots of other types which are united by the motif of the return of a child boy, a brother and a sister (the plots of this type are also attributed to the group of fairy tales about a wonderful enemy, A 112, 113, 114: ATU 327A, B, C), a stepdaughter abandoned in the forest (the plot scheme “Wonderful Task”, A 95-97, 98, 102, 215: ATU 480) or of a spouse (the scheme “The Wonderful spouse or other relative”, ATU 400-459)¹⁸ from the world of death. The hero/heroine of these

¹⁶ Cf. the words said about classical myths that tell about the visit to Hades, among which the myth of Odysseus is mentioned: “These heroic legends lie in close-knit connection with episodes of solar myth” (Tylor 1920: 48).

¹⁷ The classification is given according to (SUS 1979).

¹⁸ According to A. Johns, the image of the hut on chicken legs is mainly found in fairy tales in which the hero goes in search of his missing wife (Johns 2004: 156), however, from the material presented here, it is obvious that this opinion is inaccurate and one-sided.

tales turns out to be turned into a representative of the animal world – a bird (*The Feather of Finist the Bright Falcon*, A 234: ATU 432), a frog (*Tsarevna Frog*, A 269: ATU 402), cf. a common belief about the transformation of the souls of the dead into animals and birds (see, e.g., Veletskaja 1978: 13ff). In many of these tales, it is not the hero who acts, but the heroine – a young girl, usually a stepdaughter, who ends up with Baba Iaga as a result of the intrigues of her stepmother, or looking for her lover or brother. As already mentioned in literature, the plots with male and female characters have a united basis, which is confirmed by the presence of a number of common main motifs in them [a search for a betrothed or other relative, a fulfillment of the parental will (whereas the royal will or the filial duty motivates the young man only), a search/test of one's destiny] (see Nikitina & Reili 2008: 61-62). At the same time, the types of relationships with Baba Iaga are different for the hero and the heroine, and for the latter they are more diverse: if the hero invariably subordinates Baba Iaga to his will forcing her to serve him, the heroine sometimes behaves actively as well, which is expressed in conjuring the hut (*Martha the Peasant's Daughter* (Skazki 1988: 332-338), *Prince Danila the Chatterbox* (Afanas'ev 1984-1985: 1 № 114), *The Tale of Dunka the Fool and of Bright Falcon* (Zelenin 2014: 143-145);¹⁹ however, she has no verbal conflict with Iaga since the latter immediately greets her kindly; occasionally, the daughter of Baba Iaga performs the function of the welcoming hostess of the hut, which echoes ibn Fadlan's description of the ancient Russian funeral rite (q.v. below), according to which the daughters of the priestess took care of the girl intended for sacrifice. This group of tales is as close as possible to the tales about the hero-youth; the difference between them probably lies only in the gender of the victim. In other cases, the heroine enters the service of Baba Iaga where, with the help of magical assistants, she copes with tasks that cannot be completed in the usual way and receives a reward (*Vasilisa the Beautiful, Baba Iaga* (Afanas'ev 1984-1985: 1 № 102-103); the plots of this group reflect the rite of initiation or the process of training a young priestess. Finally, the heroine who saves her little brother generally avoids contact with Baba Iaga and takes the boy secretly from her (*The Geese-Swans, The Brother* (Skazki 1989: 294-299). In the tales of the last two types, the spell of the heroine addressing the hut (and sometimes the main characteristics of the latter) is absent, which may indicate their later origin as a result of the transformation and rethinking of the original plot.

THE MYTH OF THE SUN'S DEATH AND THE RUTHENIAN FUNERAL RITE

The myth of the temporary death of the Sun finds a completely natural and expected concrete-figurative embodiment in numerous allusions to the ancient Slavic funeral rite based on solar symbolism, as evidenced by comparison with the description of this rite made by ibn Fadlan (the 10th c.) (*Putešestvie...* 1939: 81-83).

¹⁹ In the most famous version of this tale presented by Afanas'ev under the title *The Feather of Finist the Bright Falcon* (№ 234), the spell as well as the characteristic features of the external appearance of the hut are absent.

Already a colorful portrait sketch of the priestess who led the ceremony (probably reflecting the features typical for the persons of her profession) instantly evokes an association with Baba Iaga who is depicted as a large (hardly fitting in her hut) and strong²⁰ old woman: “came [the old woman who is called] the angel of death and spread out on the bench the beds that we mentioned. And she directs the dressing of it and the preparation of it, and she kills the girls. And I saw that she was a witch (?), big (and fat), gloomy (severe)” (*Ibidem*: 81).

The similarity with Baba Iaga can be traced even in the fact that the priestess had daughters.

In the description of ibn Fadlan, there are such motifs as the parallelism between the burial and sunset (the ceremony began in the afternoon, at a time when the sun was already setting (see *Ibidem*: 151) and the idea of the presence of a gate separating the world of the living from the world of the dead (thrice raised above some kind of their likeness, the girl intended to be sacrificed and burned along with the deceased each time declared that she saw her dead parents, relatives, and master on the other side). The treat arranged by Iaga for the hero is identical to the meal organized by the participants of the ritual for the deceased: “they put him on a mattress, and propped him up with pillows, and brought a nabid (?), and fruits, and a fragrant plant, and laid them down with him. And they brought bread, and meat, and onions, and threw it before him” (*Ibidem*: 81).

Of particular note is the important role that the chicken played in the ritual described: the sacrifice of it was performed twice – for the first time, together with the rooster by all the participants in the action after the sacrifice of three other animals, and in the second – by the girl after looking through the gate three times; thus, each time the chicken sacrifice completed a certain three-part stage of the ritual, which indicates the special significance of this sacrifice. As for the rest of the sacrificial animals (dogs, horses, cows), it is hardly occasional that their set coincides with the variants of the animal-mother of the fairy tale hero (Ivan the Bitch’s son, Ivan the Mare’s son, Ivan the Cow’s son): such a relationship unequivocally emphasizes the importance of the hero’s function as an object of the funeral ritual. To what has been said, it remains only to add a few words about a small, but persistently repeated precisely in those tales with the hut of Baba Iaga in which the female main character appears, detail. A father who leaves his daughter in the hut ties a block to the window for the girl accepts its knock for the knock of her father’s ax. This detail, so stable that, according to Propp, it finds a parallel even in the hymn to the mistress of the forest included in the *R̥gveda* (Propp 1976: 158), becomes clear from comparison with the knocking of pieces of wood against shields, with which the Ruthenians drowned out the screams of the sacrificed girl in the ritual described by ibn Fadlan.

Our assumption does not contradict Propp’s hypothesis about the reflection of the initiation rite in this plot: if this rite was timed to coincide with the winter

²⁰ Cf., for example: “Iaga-Baba came back for axes, dullards, and began to break through this mountain, and broke through it [...] and began to rake the forests, and raked them”, *Marfa the Peasant’s Daughter* (*Skazki* 1988: 337).

solstice,²¹ it is natural to assume that it could, in whole or in part, be a staging of the myth of the solar hero's descent into the afterlife.

CONCLUSION

The study made it possible to deepen and clarify V.Ya. Propp's conception according to which the hut on chicken legs is interpreted as a house for the initiation ceremony and to establish the origin and meaning of this mytheme in connection with the mythopoetic ideas about the winter solstice, which were common among the Slavs. Accordingly, the various types of the fairy tales in which the hut is mentioned are interpreted as representations of the myth, widespread among many peoples of the world, of the descent of the solar god (hero) into the afterlife through the entrance that opens on the days of the winter and/or summer solstice, or of beliefs known to the Slavs about the return of the dead from the other world during the holy holidays, which means that the connection of these plots with the rite of initiation can only be of a secondary nature.

The funeral semantics of the plots in which the hut on chicken legs appears is supported by their regular coincidences with the details of the Ruthenian funeral ceremony described by ibn Fadlan.

Attention is drawn to the complexity of the image of the hut on chicken legs, which, on the basis of the mythopoetic image of the solar bird-swirl (*ptitsa-vertenitsa*) associated with the afterlife, contaminates the two archetypal features (the ornithomorphic appearance and the ability to turn),²² which never combine with each other in the related mythemes.

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²¹ Cf. about the holy holidays among the Slavs: "The regulations regarding the organization of young men's groups, as well as other related features, suggest the preservation of vestiges of puberty rituals" (Brătulescu 2005: 9743).

²² In isolated cases, these characteristics are extended to other demonic locuses: the rotating diamond castle of the dragon, from which the whole universe is seen (Russian); the copper, the silver, and the golden underworld castles on a magpie's leg (Croatian) (Afanas'ev 1982: 258f).

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