



INTIMACY BEFORE SEXUALITY: THE UKRAINIAN TRADITION OF UNWED YOUTH SPENDING THE NIGHT TOGETHER

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Abstract: In the preindustrial Ukrainian village, there was a tradition of young people of marriageable age spending the night together. Even though nineteenth-century scholars studied the live tradition almost simultaneously and mainly in the same regions, they provided very different accounts of it. While some saw it as decent entertainment for youth, others pointed to the more intimate or even sexual nature of young people's relations. Drawing on the Foucauldian idea of discourse as power and queer theoretical framework on sexuality, the paper explores knowledge production on the tradition of young people spending the night together (also known as *prytula*). In particular, the article seeks to understand how the modern concept of sexuality informed scholars' perspectives on the tradition and how their discursive positionality defined their understanding of what they witnessed. Three main discursive perspectives are identified and scrutinized: national romantic, radical, and feminist approaches. In the paper's final part, a queer theoretical perspective on the tradition, which destabilises the very idea of sex, is introduced.

Keywords: intimacy before marriage, history of sex, traditional culture, Ukraine.

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Intimacy Before Sexuality: The Ukrainian Tradition of Unwed Youth Spending the Night Together

In the preindustrial Ukrainian village, there was a tradition of young people of marriageable age spending the night together. Even though nineteenth-century scholars studied the live tradition almost simultaneously and mainly in the same regions, they provided very different accounts of it. While some saw it as decent entertainment for youth, others pointed to the more intimate or even sexual nature of young people's relations. Drawing on the Foucauldian idea of discourse as power and queer theoretical framework on sexuality, the paper explores knowledge production on the tradition of young people spending the night together (also known as *prytula*). In particular, the article seeks to understand how the modern concept of sexuality informed scholars' perspectives on the tradition and how their discursive positionality defined their understanding of what they witnessed. Three main discursive perspectives are identified and scrutinized: national romantic, radical, and feminist approaches. In the paper's final part, a queer theoretical perspective on the tradition, which destabilises the very idea of sex, is introduced.

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L'histoire de la sexualité — c'est-à-dire de ce qui a fonctionné au XIXe siècle comme domaine de vérité spécifique — doit se faire d'abord du point de vue d'une histoire des discours.¹

Michel Foucault

Research question

There is a great deal of ethnographic data to show that in the preindustrial Ukrainian village there was a tradition of young people of marriageable age spending the night together. Well studied and described in detail, this tradition has raised many questions and debates. After all, the assertion that girls received nocturnal visits from young men and according to custom gave them the opportunity of spending the night together contradicted the extremely convincing facts of traditional culture's respect for maidenly modesty, restraint and inaccessibility. Reports that couples would go off together for the whole night were at variance with data concerning the value attached in the preindustrial village to premarital purity and inexperience. And the young persons' ability to choose for themselves with whom they would sleep at these evening

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¹ 'The history of sexuality — that is, of something that functioned in the nineteenth century as a specific sphere of truth — should be written first and foremost as a history of discourse' [trans. by Robert Hurley. — Eds.].

gatherings contradicted the well-known facts that their parents traditionally chose whom they would marry.

When studying the tradition of young people spending the night together, nineteenth-, twentieth- and early twenty-first-century scholars inevitably attempted to find an explanation that would either do away with these contradictions or explain them. They most often set about solving these problems with questions of an ontological character — ‘What did the young people actually do when they spent the night together?’, ‘What was the essence of this custom?’ — or their ethical congeners: ‘What was the moral basis of the custom?’, ‘Why was it morally acceptable?’ Although there were very many works on this topic, by and large they remained within the framework of the stated questions.

This article will attempt a poststructuralist analysis of the discourses that provided the vantage points for the study of the tradition. I shall approach the material with the epistemological questions ‘What discourse is the researcher’s interest a product of?’, ‘From the vantage point of what discourse does the researcher speak?’ and ‘What discourses does the study of the custom produce?’

If such an approach does not allow the removal of the contradictions outlined above, it should at least allow them to be significantly diminished. We shall see them not as properties of a culture, but as the products of research procedures. As far as the bearers of the culture were concerned, their everyday life was natural, and not contradictory.

The category of ‘discourse’ is used here in the Foucauldian sense as a form of ideological power-knowledge: it means those ideas, rules and concepts, ‘regimes of knowledge’, that determine the research work (choice of subject, formulation of the question, choice of material and, in the end, the conclusions, or at least their trajectory and range) and give it veracity and significance. In this approach, truth is not a reflection of reality, but a reflection of the structures of the discourse, the ‘regime of knowledge’ that they predetermine. Truth here is multifarious, and this idea will be illustrated at the end of the article in the concluding remarks.

Three fields of discourse will be examined in the article: *the discourse of national romanticism*, *the discourse of modern sexuality* and *the discourse of feminist analysis*.¹ It should be said that the research ideas developed within each discourse have often continued to be reproduced in later work, even to the present day. In this article I do not undertake to trace the entire chain of the functioning and

¹ Only a limited amount of work can be analysed within the format of a journal article. Many very important publications that have been left out of the article are examined in the monograph version of the text. I see my task here as the definition of the basic discourses with which research can be correlated, including that which is not mentioned here.

transformation of previously formulated discursive knowledge about the custom (important though that certainly is), but to focus chiefly on the analysis of their original production.

The last part of the article is a look at the tradition of young people's premarital nights together from the position of *queer discourse*, which is characterised by a socio-constructivist approach to questions of sexuality. From this position, the questions addressed to the tradition will be: if we begin with Foucault's assertion that sexuality as a lexeme and as a form of biopolitics is a product of modernity [Foucault 1984: 9–10], what was happening at the end of the nineteenth century, when ethnographers were studying the preindustrial folk tradition of premarital nights together using the terminology and ideas of modern sexuality? What was happening when sexuality was being studied in a culture that did not possess the concept of sexuality? In an attempt to answer these questions, the last part of the article offers an analysis of the significance that intimate premarital practices had within the systems of meaning of the milieu in which they existed, and what happened to those meanings when the tradition was studied and interpreted by modern ethnographers.

General information about the tradition of young people spending the night together before marriage

The custom of young people spending the night together before marriage existed in many parts of Ukraine, Russia and Belarus, and also in the cultures of Scandinavia, Germany, France, Switzerland, Austria, the US ('bundling') and elsewhere [Fischer 1901; Vovk 1928: 227; Segalen 1983: 21].

The records allow the existence of this tradition to be traced from practically the whole territory of Ukraine: we have ethnographic material about people spending the night together before marriage during *vechornytsi* 'evening parties', *dosvitky* 'parties "till dawn"' and *vulytsi* 'summer outdoor parties' from central areas (Kyiv and Poltava Oblasts), southern areas (Kherson Oblast), northern areas (Polissia, Chernihiv Oblast), eastern areas (all of Sloboda Ukraine, including its eastern parts now within the present-day borders of the Voronezh and Belgorod Oblasts of Russia), and from the Podillia (Vinnycia and Khmelnytskyi Oblasts). By and large the custom is identical throughout the region, allowing it to be regarded as a common cultural complex and enabling the comparison of its existence in different parts of the region.¹

¹ Sumtsov's interesting communication that 'in the Mezensky Uyezd [in northern Ukraine] no value is attached to a girl's innocence: on the contrary, it is easier for a girl who has had a child to find a husband there than for this one who has preserved her virginity' [Sumtsov 1886: 432] stands apart. Such facts are occasionally encountered in the ethnographical literature and require a separate study.

In the Western Ukrainian regions — Galicia, Bukovina and Transcarpathia — *vechornytsi* proceeded differently. Here it was not only young people who gathered in the evenings to spend time or work together, but adults too, married people, and their parents. As Volodymyr Hnatiuk has written, this ‘had a strong effect on the way the party went, because they had to refrain from a lot of things that could not be done in the presence of adults (“grey heads must be respected”). The parties finished before midnight, and nobody stayed the night in the house where they had taken place, everyone went home’ [Hnatiuk 1919: 288]. We shall not in this article consider how young people’s leisure was organised in those areas where it was not usual for them to spend the night together, but concentrate on the area from the Podillia to Sloboda Ukraine, where the tradition is well attested from the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth (and in individual cases even from the second half of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first, in accounts of the middle of the twentieth century).

Ethnographical research testifies that young men and women of marriageable age in the village had the opportunity to spend the night together, either in the house where the young people gathered for parties, or in a secluded corner of the hayloft, storeroom or garden. In some places the girl would even ‘receive’ the young man at her parents’ house: when the family was going to sleep, the girl let the lad in, and they accommodated themselves in the same room as the rest of the family members.

Nights spent together were a traditional, permitted, and generally accepted village custom. Researchers emphasised that adult members of the community took a benevolent view of it. As evidence they cited the observations of the well-known German cultural historian F. C. J. Fischer, who wrote at the end of the eighteenth century in his work on ‘trial nights’: ‘Die Landleute finden ihre Gewohnheit so unschuldig, das es nicht selten geschieht, wenn der Geistliche im Orte einen Bauren nach dem Wohlsein seiner Töchter fragt, dieser ihm zum Beweise, dass sie gut heranwachsen, mit aller Offenherzigkeit und mit einem väterlichen Wolgefallen erzehlt, wie sie schon anfiengen, ihre Kommnächte zu halten’ [The country people find their custom so innocent that not infrequently, when the local priest asks a farmer how his daughter is, the father will give proof that she is growing up nicely by saying, quite candidly and with paternal pride, that she has already started holding her ‘trial nights’] [Fischer 1901: 7].

Still, in some circumstances a night spent together was followed by a symbolic punishment. The quotation that follows tells of such occasions. I quote an extensive fragment of the text both as an example of the classical ethnographical description of the tradition of spending the night together before marriage, and as rare, previously unpublished material (the story concerns early twentieth-century customs in the village of Loska, Chernihiv Oblast).

The young people of the village have parties and various entertainments all the year round, but spring and summer are considered the best time for young people to enjoy themselves. The girls can be heard singing in the evening in every settlement, and the lads join in. They sing, they play games, they have fun, and, as they say, enjoy themselves till late at night in the street or in a field not far from the settlement, and then they leave in couples, going to where the girls' parents live. These couples leave, as sharp tongues in the village put it, and go straight 'to bed'. This means that when a girl has taken a lad's fancy, he goes into the room where she has made her bed, and spends the rest of the night there with his future bride. This is how the young men and girls come together, get to know each other more closely and, as they say, 'get used' to each other, that is, fall in love. Usually when the girls get together they ask each other whether such-and-such of them has 'got used to her lad yet', that is, whether she is in love. In the majority of cases they get a satisfactory answer. <...> It happens that when one girl has attracted two young men, they both do their utmost to get close to her, to which end each tries to get 'to bed' with her before the other. The lad who is left behind, for his part, devises all kinds of tricks, sometimes even dirty tricks, to annoy his rival or, worst of all, make him look ridiculous to the girl. When the couple are by themselves in her room, the jealous lad will tie the door shut with rope or wedge it shut with a stake, so that his rival cannot get out, and then start banging with a stick on the door and walls of the room. Sometimes the prisoners ask him to let them out, or swear at him. The lad replies with the choicest expressions and flat innuendoes about the prisoners. Far from deterring him, their entreaties make him all the more persistent. This goes on until the master of the house gets tired of it, and finally appears on the porch with a poker in his hand and drives the unruly lad away. Then he removes the rope or stake from the door and lets the prisoners out, not forgetting to reward the lad as he leaves with a swingeing blow with the poker. Sometimes the girl gets it as well [ARI ASFE NASU, collection 1–5, item 397, pp. 1–4].

National romanticism and the construction of folk 'morality'

Gradually, in the second half of the nineteenth century, there appear in Ukrainian ethnographical literature the first mentions, and then whole articles, about the tradition of young people spending the night together before marriage [Afanasev-Chuzhbinskiy 1858: 30–32; Svidnitskiy 1861: 54–56; Chubinskiy 1877: 450–451; Sumtsov 1886].¹

¹ The ethnographical study of nights spent together before marriage was anticipated by the treatment of this topic in literature: 'Ukrainian writers of the old times used to like to write about vechornytsi' [Sumtsov 1886: 421]. According to Sumtsov's observations, the subject of premarital relations first appears in literature in the second half of the 1830s.

Afanasev-Chuzhbinskiy writes about the custom in the Poltava Oblast: 'Every lad courts the object of his affections openly, and when they have had enough fun, sung lots of songs and danced, couples leave imperceptibly, under the mysterious cover of night, and almost always stay together until morning.' Here the author hastens to add an important remark: 'But let not the reader think that the young people indulge in dissipation at that time' [Afanasev-Chuzhbinskiy 1858: 30].

All the researchers of this period considered it important to accompany every mention of nights spent together with assurances of their 'purest, strictest morality': 'For the most part the lads stay the night with their lasses after the *vechornytsi*, in the same place; but they never allow themselves to have intimate relations with the girls, but, on the contrary, every lad is concerned for his bride and takes care of her' [Chubinskiy 1877: 451]; 'None of the young men or girls permit themselves the least immodesty that would offend good morals' [Afanasev-Chuzhbinskiy 1858: 32]. Thus, towards the end of the 1880s Sumtsov summed up, that '*almost all the ethnographers who have touched upon vechornytsi have acknowledged them to be moral diversions for young people*' [Sumtsov 1886: 440; italics mine. — M.M.].

The thesis of the morality of the relationships between the young people was the most important and most emphasised in these works, and not by chance. The study of the nights spend together by young people before marriage was impelled at this period by the *discourse of national romanticism* of the second half of the nineteenth century with its characteristic inspired reverence for 'the people', 'the tradition', 'the village', perceived as 'the fount of national culture'. The assertion of the idea of the people's high moral qualities was important to it. The authors of many ethnographical works of this period studied popular morality and wrote about the nobility of the young men and the sober morals of the girls [Afanasev-Chuzhbinskiy 1858: 30–32; Sumtsov 1886: 438–439].

Researchers in this group operated with a relatively stable set of arguments, which was not significantly augmented or altered afterwards, and has continued to be reproduced to the present day. Much attention is given in these works to the value of chastity in traditional culture, to the ritual of verifying that a girl was intact at her marriage, to the shameful punishments for losing one's 'cherry' before marriage, and the 'woeful position' of a woman who had given birth out of wedlock (as indeed of children born out of wedlock). In research of this sort, strict village morality and the severity of the punishments serve as an argument in support of the thesis of the unfailing observance of 'the rules of morality'. Anatoliy Svidnitskiy writes: 'Moreover, the girls are so bound by the ritual of the first

night that only one who is drunk or utterly shameless would give in to seduction; but if there is the least shame in her heart, if any consciousness of what is due to herself or her honour remains in her head, she can only be overcome by force and would on no account agree *to trample her father and mother underfoot* [Svidnitskiy 1861: 55] (see also: [Sumtsov 1886: 438–439]).

Authors did acknowledge in their work instances of ‘wantonness at *vechornytsi*’, when young people ‘had not been able to restrain themselves’, but such ‘excesses’ were declared to be ‘extremely rare’. What is more, even these ‘rare’ infringements were put down to the influence of external factors. Among these factors Sumtsov names ‘the remains of a primordial, almost animal simplicity in sexual relations’ and the consequences of ‘the harmful, corrupting influence of the factories and manufactories’ [Sumtsov 1886: 442]. Despite such an obvious contradiction (the infringements are blamed simultaneously on a backward past and a new modernity), and even the tendentiousness of the arguments intended to remove the reasons for moral delinquencies beyond the bounds of the life of the people, the necessary effect was achieved. Traditional popular sexuality was presented in idealised colours, as emancipated from primordial ‘promiscuous savagery’ and still unspoiled by the corrupting influence of the city. This image of popular life is frequently engaged by right-wing discourse even today.

While *the discourse of national romanticism* based itself on an opposition between the *pure, strict and sober morals of the village* and the intoxicated dissipation of the city, the *discourse of sexuality* that replaced it used this opposition in a completely different way: village life was frequently used here as an example to prove that urban sexual ‘psychopathies’, ‘illnesses’ and ‘delinquencies’ were typical, and not unique.

The discourse of sexuality and the ethnography of sexual life

At the very end of the nineteenth century researchers began to articulate a task that scholarship had never hitherto set itself: the study of ‘the sexual life of Ukrainian peasants’. The advertising material for a collection of obscene folklore published in 1909 says as much: ‘This volume begins the publication of works intended to cast a fundamental light on the sexual life of Ukrainian (Malorussian) peasants from the point of view of scholarly research of various kinds’ [Kupchyns’kyi 1998: 199].

With this aim ethnographers began actively and deliberately to collect examples of obscene folklore, understood as a source of data on the sexual lives of the peasants. Scholars became interested in texts which had previously been below the level of what was to be

recorded, and not perceived as respectable folk literature. But the discourse of sexuality offers a completely new interpretation and evaluation of these previously rejected texts. In the light of the discourse of sexuality, obscene folklore acquires the value of a cultural fact, a unique source of information about the life of the people, where 'the peasants appear before us in all their reality, without make-up, as they are and as they live, full of life and aspirations' [Kupchyns'kyi 1998: 199]. Scholars assert the idea of the scholarly importance of obscene folklore, and ignoring it is considered an unscholarly approach, a manifestation of priggishness and hypocrisy.

Material containing invective or bad language or mentioning the genitals, coitus, excrement or the passing of faeces or wind became particularly interesting to researchers into folk literature. Whereas there were few such records from the preceding decades, and they had come about infrequently, incidentally, and not by design [Vlasova 1995: 55, 56; Nikiforov 1996: 509], now this sort of folklore was collected deliberately and with special enthusiasm. Volodymyr Hnatiuk, for example, mentions a collection of over a thousand items that had been collected over a single collecting season [Naulko et al. 2001: 40].

At first sight it may seem a little odd that research on the ethnography of *sexual life* is represented primarily by the collections of obscene *folklore* actively published in the 1890–1910s ['Folklore de l'Ukraine...' 1898; 1902; *Das Geschlechtleben...* 1909; 1912].¹ This fact, I suppose, should be understood as the process of searching, the definition by ethnographers of what precisely was to be regarded as 'sexual', where the focus of 'sexuality' should be sought in traditional culture, and what precisely was to be interpreted as 'eroticism'. The bearers of the culture themselves did not have the concepts of *the sexual* and *the erotic* at their disposal, and so could not answer direct questions. 'Folk sexuality' was created by ethnographers out of different strands of folkloric material that were regarded in an emic interpretation as 'shameful', 'disgraceful', merry, entertaining or funny.

However, the folk concept of 'the shameful' did not prove compatible with the modern concepts of 'the sexual' and 'the erotic'. For example, 'shameful' folklore was most often a humorous genre [Filobibl 1997: 549, 550; Propp 1999: 166–168]. There was even a special term later developed for it — *humorous erotic folklore*. How far could such texts be relied upon for the study of norms, practices and prohibitions in the field of 'sexuality'?

¹ On the history of the creation of these collections of folklore, see: [Boriak, Mayerchuk 2013].

In turn, it was hard to find points of reference for ‘the sexual’ and ‘the erotic’ in examples of folk culture and oral literature. The author of the preface to a collection of Ukrainian obscene folklore, considering how the erotic was perceived by ‘the common people’, noted that his informants ‘do not find any attraction either in bodily nudity or in the depiction of copulating couples’ [Hnatiuk 2013: 38].¹ Aleksandr Nikiforov devoted a work based on North Russian material to attempts at differentiating between various shades of ‘shameful’ folklore and systematising them, defining them by the categories of *sexual*, *erotic* and *perverted*. His deliberations show that the scholar encounters difficulties when he tries to use modern categories for the analysis of folkloric texts. According to his observations, ‘the sexual’ is omnipresent in the popular way of life, but at the same time is impossible to pin down. He writes: ‘I admit that I was struck by how full the village was of sexuality, which pursued me at every turn. It was evident in speech, in tales of everyday life, in the facts of family relationships, in oral folklore, and so on. However, I soon noticed that this village sexuality lacks that element that makes it specific in the town, that which would have raised it to the degree of eroticism. Observation of everyday life shows that you are dealing with a natural, rather coarse background to a life which is in reality extremely chaste and strict’ [Nikiforov 1996: 510].

At the same time, the discourse of sexuality stimulated the first attempts at an ethnographical study of actual ‘sexual practices’. It was hard to put such material together, and very little was collected. Only a few fragments of information about the everyday life and customs connected with the sphere of the intimate are presented in individual publications.

Research on the nights spent together before marriage by young people occupies a special place among the few works on the customs in this sphere. Several publications were devoted to them, by Marko Hrushevs’kyi, Vladimir Yastrebov and Mytrofan Dykariv [‘Folklore de l’Ukraine...’ 1898: 2–6; 1902: 303–328; Mr. H. 1906: 96–107; Dykariv 1918]. These works typically displayed a weakening of interest in questions of ‘morality’ (but not a rejection of them), and a quickening of attention towards the intimate details of the

¹ It is important to note that the text cited was written by Friedrich Krauss, and not by Volodymyr Hnatiuk, with whose name it is signed. This can be seen from the correspondence between the two scholars. In a letter of 2 January 1912 Krauss asks permission to sign the preface that he had prepared for the volume of Ukrainian obscene folklore with Hnatiuk’s name. Hnatiuk was the compiler and editor of the volume, so that this, in Krauss’s opinion, was appropriate, and moreover, he writes, ‘Such an excursus can only come from a Ukrainian researcher,’ and, further on, ‘You can rely entirely on my knowledge of the matter, and also on my command of style, I have been able to set down your scholarly intentions seriously and insistently as well as can be’ [Kupchyns’kyi 1998: 221–222]. Hnatiuk’s answer is unknown, but the preface is signed with his name.

interaction between the young people during the nights they spent together. Several works contain extremely scrupulous descriptions of the intimate and sensual interactions between the nocturnal couples [Mr. H.¹ 1906: 96; Rudenko 2000: 48–49], while others, without going into detail, inform us that ‘as a result of these nights spent together, they say that there are no honest girls in the villages’ [Hnatiuk 1919: 195].

The appearance of works on the ethnography of sexuality coincided with a change in the style of ethnographic fieldwork. While Sumtsov or Vovk in his early days (while he was writing his study of the wedding) were entirely armchair scholars, Hrushevs’kyi, Hnatiuk or Dykariv would go out directly ‘into the field’ and carry out the work of collecting (though they continued to make use of the assistance of intermediaries). Direct contact with their informants helped to establish confidential relationships and favoured opportunities for finding out, observing and recording information about extremely delicate nuances of the life of the people.

As an example of an ethnographical description of young people’s nights in which features of the discourse of sexuality are clearly present, I shall give a description made at the end of the nineteenth century in the south of the Kyiv Oblast.

When their blood is up, they go to see each other and then they can rub up against each other, go out together, touch each other, sleep <...> And then, when they get used to each other, they play real prytyula. This is a game played by young men and girls. He gets on top of her, and they join their bellies together, and they would do more, but they are afraid both for their reputation and of going through it, that is, of destroying that membrane (the hymen); her maidenly honour would be destroyed as a result. That is the whole power of maidenly honour. They don’t do anything else, they only play, they always restrain themselves, so as not to go through it, so he just pushes his way into her a little bit, and when the seed comes out of him, he doesn’t let it go into her, because they know [they mustn’t]. <...>

So they play as much as they like, and that’s all. And everyone plays this game, and they know from long ago that young people can play it until they’re married. Once they’re married, they’re not afraid of it [pregnancy]. That’s how it’s been since long ago, and that’s how it is now.

<...>

Prytuly are an ordinary matter and very simple. However it may be, a girl has to allow prytyuly without making a fuss about it if as she

¹ Hrushevs’kyi’s preferred pseudonym, ‘Mr. H.’, represents an abbreviation of his first name, Marko, followed by the initial of his last name [Eds.].

knows that the lad won't gossip about her and [if] he has already spent the night with her. But doing it on a first date doesn't often happen. Well, the way girls are nowadays, there isn't much to be had by it. And anyway, in cases like the one above, any girl will let him do it. <...>

There are different sorts of *prytula*. One is sideways: press her legs together, or she might lift one leg up a bit to make it easier for him. The other is from on top, only with her legs together. Or else she puts one of his legs between her own, and that satisfies him. And it does happen that she lets him put both his legs between hers, only she doesn't let him really do it, just half the 'member' or less, only that's the scariest [*prytula*] [Mr. H. 1906: 96–97; 100–101].

The field ethnographers themselves do not use the vocabulary of sexuality, and do not plainly call the phenomena they describe 'sexual life'. But soon, on the foundation of their notes and citing their texts, scholars specialising in sexuality would do just that. Researchers from the Ukrainian Psychoneurological Institute in Kharkiv wrote in 1931: 'Young men and girls spending the night together leads to incomplete sex acts, and very often to complete sex acts <...> Our research allows us to shed a somewhat broader light on certain aspects of the sexual life of the peasant girl, connected with the customs of *dosvitky*, *nochuvannia*, etc.' [Hurevych, Vorozhbyt 1931: 44]. Later in this article we shall consider the question of the medicalisation and biologisation of sexual practices as an essential part of the creation of a science of sexuality.

To sum up, I would note that it is not a change in the customs, but a change from the discourse of national romanticism to the discourse of sexuality that explains that one and the same practice was perceived and described so differently in research carried out so closely in time, if not at the same time: Sumtsov was printing his articles on moral *vechornytsi* in 1886 and 1889, at which time Hrushevs'kyi had already begun his ethnographical research on *prytula*.

The discourse of feminist analysis

The feminist or gender approach is important in that it overcame the limits of the positivist questions within which almost all research into the custom without exception had remained until the end of the twentieth century, and offered a new critical perspective directed towards the study of gender regimes of power. The two most representative studies of nights spent together by young people before marriage from the position of feminist analysis are by Christine Worobec and Oksana Kis [Worobec 1990; Kis 2008].

Oksana Kis draws attention to the fact that the custom favoured the establishment of gender power regimes in traditional culture through

practices of direct violence and control. She shows that the young men regulated other young men's access to the girls of their part of the village as they chose [Kis 2008: 111], and expected 'their' girls to be amenable and submissive [Ibid.: 113], and in cases of disobedience could make use of various 'repressive measures': public humiliation, material losses or physical violence [Ibid.: 114]. The girls had no altogether reliable strategy, and the lads could punish their girlfriends both for 'loose' behaviour and for excessive modesty: "The ethnographic material shows that sometimes the lads used physical force to make the girls sleep with them at *vechornytsi / dosvitky*' [Ibid.: 111].

The discourse of feminist analysis has opened up the paradigm of power in the modus of sexuality. At the same time, despite this qualitative turn, the interpretation of sexuality here, as in the previous two approaches, has remained within the framework of essentialism. *Vechornytsi* have been interpreted as a cultural support for a biological need ('pubescent steam') arising in the sexually maturing body [Worobec 1990: 233]. Allowing biological arguments has made any further constructivist analysis impossible.

Queer discourse or the constructivist analysis of traditional norms of sexuality

In Michel Foucault's opinion, the beginnings of modern sexuality go back to the early modern period, but it did not reach its final form until the nineteenth century. In this context Judith Butler wrote that 'Some might say that the scandal of the first volume of Foucault's *History of Sexuality* consists in the claim that we did not always have sex' [Butler 1993: 81].

This assertion of Foucault's should be understood in a particular manner: firstly, as a change in the structures of meaning and the beginning of the procedures of biopolitics. The philosopher himself explained it as a transformation of what had previously been a practice (permitted or sinful, artistic or humdrum) into a characteristic of the body — a biological, psychosomatic feature, an identity that determined an individual's other spheres of life and had an influence on them. Judith Butler has written of this new quality of sexuality that sexuality had never before had such an all-pervasive power to create a person's essence, to construct a 'subspecies' of person. Whereas sex had previously been a contingent practice, an arbitrary characteristic, now it was a stable, fixed part of the identity and the body. As Butler put it, since the nineteenth century 'one is one's sex', and 'it is precisely through being sexed that we become intelligible as humans' [Butler 1993: 81].

Secondly, Foucault's assertion should be understood as an indication of the emergence of a sexuality 'pénétrable à des processus patho-

logiques' [penetrable to pathological processes]. Unregulated, prohibited sexuality is now understood not simply as transgression or 'nastiness', it becomes an illness, the object of medical and psycho-neurological treatment, punishment and control [Foucault 1984: 9–10].

These two complex senses of modern sexuality (its biological nature and its susceptibility to pathologies) which, indeed, laid the foundations for various biopolitics of surveillance and punishment, were imposed upon the body of traditional culture to a large extent through its ethnographical study at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

On the question of the vocabulary of sexuality

When, at the end of the nineteenth century, ethnographical research into traditional norms of sexuality and 'erotic' folklore was begun, there were still no names for this group of works. Neither ecclesiastical, nor even popular language possessed a lexicon that was relevant to research into this topic in folk culture. Recourse was had to the classical languages to make up for this deficit: *kryptadia* ('I had already begun printing the second volume of my *kryptadia*' [Kupchyns'kyi 1998: 220]) and *anthropophyteia* ('research into anthropophyteia' [Ibid.: 199]).¹ Soon scholars began to adapt the modern vocabulary of sexuality that was developing in parallel. For example, in a letter of 1899 Hnatiuk denotes the genre of the folklore that he was collecting as 'collections of pornography'² [Ibid.: 63]. Later, using the same formulation — the collection was 'coarsely pornographic and devoid of any scholarly value' — a Berlin court ordered the confiscation of a volume of obscene folklore compiled by Hnatiuk [Naulko et al. 2001: 133, 147] (for a more detailed history of the prosecutions of Krauss, see: [Burt 2009: 97–111]).

Writers of ethnographic research were particularly sensitive to these gaps in the language. In 1896, when Yastrebov was writing about unions between young unmarried people, he complained in a letter to Vovk: 'I simply do not know how I shall manage with certain indelicate details, for example, in the description of how young men and girls spend the night together, the stable lads' initiation

¹ Both these words, *anthropophyteia* (from Greek άνθρωπος, human being, and φύτεια, propagation) and *kryptadia* (from Greek κρυπτάδια, secret things), were borrowed from the titles of German and French collections of folklore specialising in obscene folklore and the lexis of invective [Kryptádia 1883–1911; Anthropophyteia 1904–1913].

² The word *pornography* is known in Romance and Germanic languages from the middle of the nineteenth century. The *Dictionary of the Modern Russian Literary Language* indicates that the word is mentioned only in the third edition of Dal's *Explanatory Dictionary of the Living Great Russian Language*, published in 1904–1909 [*Slovar sovremennogo russkogo...* 1960, col. 1377]. It was not recorded in the previous two editions, although it had evidently been in existence in the language for some time.

ceremony, and so on. Perhaps I shall be able to translate them into Latin or Greek and get them into the *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie* [Rudenko 2000: 50].

Before the beginning of the twentieth century the word *seksualnost* is not found in Ukrainian, nor is the other form, *seksualizm*, which did not establish itself. The Ukrainian linguist and ethnographer Zenon Kuzelia, who was interested, among other things, in the ethnography of sexuality, published the first edition of his dictionary of foreign words in Chernivtsi in 1910 [*Slovar chuzhykh sliv...* 1910]. This was the first time that the general public was presented with the modern conceptual apparatus of sexuality: *hedonism*, *coitus*, *penis*, *pollution*, *sexualism*, *sperm*, *erection* and *ejaculation*.

The dictionary defines *seksualizm* ‘sexualism’ as a word meaning ‘sex life’. The expression *polovaya zhizn* ‘sex life’ had existed in Ukrainian and Russian scholarly language since the middle of the nineteenth century [*Slovar sovremennogo russkogo...* 1960, col. 1038].

Ethnographers had to create the relevant scholarly language to work with the topic that they were researching, and this led to active borrowing from the vocabulary of modern sexuality. In ethnographic literature the expression *polovaya zhizn* ‘sex life’ was more often used at first to mean wild, animal instinct, as opposed to cultural restraint and ‘sober morality’ [Sumtsov 1886: 442]. The Ukrainian expression *seksualne zhytie*, that is, ‘sexual life’ is first found in an ethnographic text from 1906 [Mr. H. 1906: II].

The result was that as ethnography studied *existing* phenomena in traditional culture, it required a new, external lexicon and borrowed it from the vocabulary of modern sexuality. The important thing in these innovations is that the new words brought with them the semantic structures of *biologisation* and *medicalisation* of the sphere of genital pleasures. This was the first time the words denoting copulation — *seks*, *polovoy akt* — had been so definitely ordered around biological sex.¹ Before then biology, physiology and sex had not been the determiners of meaning in words for copulation. The ecclesiastical expressions *sovokuplyatsya* ‘come together’, *prelyubodeyat* ‘commit adultery’, *greshit* ‘to sin’, *lezhat* ‘lie with’, *rastlevat* ‘corrupt’ indicate a moral evaluation, while the popular Ukrainian *chukhratysia* lit. ‘scratch’, *shmorhaty* ‘wriggle’, *hraty* ‘play’, *khytatysia* ‘stagger’, *hepaty* ‘bang’ indicate the mechanics, the motion of the actions, but neither set of terms refers to biology [Gura 2005].

To illustrate the extent to which sexuality can be interpreted extracorporeally and extrabiologically, we may cite the observations

¹ *Pol* means ‘biological sex’ [Eds.]

of the American researcher Eve Levin, who showed that in the ideas of mediaeval Christians, sexual desire was not originally a property of the human body. God originally intended an absence of sexual attraction. This feeling of attraction was a punishment, a flaw, ‘an evil inclination originating with Satan’ [Levin 1989: 13]. If it could not be altogether avoided, it must be confined within the bounds of marriage [Ibid.: 17].

Another of her observations, that sexual satisfaction, as conceived by mediaeval Christian doctrine, did not depend on who it was achieved with, is no less interesting: ‘The medieval Slavs could scarcely conceive that sexual activity might be more fulfilling physically or emotionally with one partner than with another’ [Levin 1999: 14]. To prove this, she cites the story of the Russian saints Peter and Fevronia. Guessing the evil intentions of one of her boyars, Fevronia told him to draw a bucket of water from each side of the boat, and then asked whether the water was sweeter in one bucket than in the other. Receiving the answer that both were the same, Fevronia said: ‘Women’s nature too is the same. Why should you leave your wife and think of another woman?’ [*Povest o Petre i Fevronii* 1982: 341]. Fevronia argued from the sameness of women’s nature that a man should ‘quench his thirst’ with his wife, since he would not experience anything different with another woman.

I give these examples to illustrate how sexual desire and pleasure can be imagined even without any connection with the body, or outside biology and the exchange of bodily fluids, that is, outside those meanings which have become the quintessential idea of modern sexuality. Compare and contrast the degree to which sexual attraction is biologised in an educational brochure from the beginning of the twentieth century: ‘The presence of testicles in a man and ovaries in a woman provides the conditions for their mutual sexual attraction’ [Karov 1926: 8].

Having borrowed the language of natural history and biology, and the position of a student of nature, an unbiased scientist, a medically neutral observer examining sex life ‘without false hypocrisy or shame’, ethnographical works on ‘the sexual life of the Ukrainian peasants’ also borrowed their ideas, their system of meanings, and created a monolithic, more or less indivisible amalgam of folk practices and modern understandings of sexuality.

In other words, as ethnography adapted the necessary lexicon to the sphere of folk life, it also transposed the new meanings and conceptual structures that make up the framework of modern sexuality. Modern conceptual structures were grafted into the corpus of traditional culture, and its emic meanings were levelled down and lost their relevance.

This substitution gave rise to a number of important effects. Modern meanings received a retrospective, almost extratemporal archaism, that is, were postulated as universals.

At the same time, it was this substitution, in my view, that caused the paralysing contradictions mentioned at the beginning of this article. As a result, ethnography played a paradoxical role: it created and reinforced these contradictions at the same time as it was trying to resolve them.

On the question of pathologisation: childish naughtiness or a manifestation of ‘psychopathy’

Over the years 1889–1900, Father Marko Hrushevs’kyi, a well-known Ukrainian churchman, pedagogue and amateur ethnographer, collected material on the culture of childhood and motherhood in his villages with particular conscientiousness and thoroughness. He developed a special method of recording his material, which consisted of taking down small fragments of the peasants’ talk verbatim. Thanks to this we have at our disposal not only his own generalising formulations and conclusions, but living folk expressions, the peasants’ emotional and lively reactions to the topic under discussion. At the beginning of the twentieth century Hrushevs’kyi’s notes were given to Zenon Kuzelia to be arranged, given scholarly form and prepared for publication. Kuzelia scrupulously reproduced all these remarks without omissions, structuring them and providing them with commentaries. The research was published in two volumes in 1906 and 1907 [Mr. H. 1906; 1907]. Thanks to these two researchers’ joint efforts, we have received material that allows us to trace how ethnographical data about folk practices were recast as diagnoses of modern sexuality.

Marko Hrushevs’kyi’s notes contain unique information about childish *sekeliannia* (*sekel* means clitoris), or rubbing:

— *That Mariyka and our Khivronka, it was so embarrassing to look through the garden gate: they always like to play together. They would strip themselves naked and crawl over each other. I tried to make them ashamed, but they would just go and play somewhere else* [Mr. H. 1906: 67].

— *All children are like that, they amuse themselves.*

— *So let them. What else?*

— *That’s nothing. But when they get older, even when they understand a bit, they still come together. They’re already shepherds, but what can you say to them? It’s a game, and that’s all! Children — it’s obvious.*

— *A fine game that is! Still, it’s embarrassing when you catch them at it. It’s the Devil that brings them together* [Mr. H. 1906: 67].

Analysis of the conversation shows that these childish activities are perceived by bearers of the culture as shameful and too permissive for Christians (of the Devil), but, at the same time, as harmless, natural, innocent childish naughtiness. The commentaries and conversation show that children's games of this sort did not cause adults any particular worry, fear or alarm. Feeling embarrassed, the adults tried to make the children ashamed, but the children's games did not cause any panic, and were not accompanied by punishments or fear of incurable diseases. That it was small children who were involved in the game was not an occasion for particular anxiety amongst the adults, but rather the reverse, it excused it, since the church did not regard it as a sin 'if children crawl over each other without awareness'.

At the end of the section, Zenon Kuzelia placed his own expert analysis of the game. It begins with the words: 'The unnatural satisfaction of sexual needs is now known throughout all Europe' [Mr. H. 1906: 68]. Such a formulation brings us to the topic of pathologies. The author goes on to reinterpret *sekeliannia* by means of the new concepts of *onanism*, *masturbation* and *auto-eroticism* and defines them as an *illness* [Ibid.]. He increases the tension by naming other forms of 'psychopathic phenomena', among them sadism, masochism, 'occultism as a sexual aberration' and olfactory sexuality [Ibid.: 69]. In his conclusion he sums it up thus:

We do not know from the author's [Marko Hrushevs'kyi's] notes whether other sexual perversions exist among the peasantry: we only have information about one of them, the so-called sekeliannia (rubbing), which is known to children, and, presumably, to adults. This is what is known in the scholarly literature as lesbian love, or tribadism, that is lovemaking between women, in which the one who has the larger clitoris plays the part of the man [Mr. H. 1906: 69].

Thus, in the ethnographical description we had a certain, by all accounts neutral, diversion of the village children, which the adults and the church were used to and indulgent towards. But in the light of the discourse of sexuality this childish amusement was turned into *sexual activity*.

Becoming *sexuality* meant that the relevant folk customs, games and practices of pleasure became subject to pathologisation, the object of total surveillance, regulation and prohibition. Thus, renaming games as sexual activity leads to the discovery of a weighty selection of perversions produced in abundance from a simple rural amusement. It is suddenly articulated as 'juvenile sexuality', 'homosexuality', 'masturbation' and a series of other 'psychopathies'. Sexuality in this sense is an expanding production of power. From now on children's rooms, children's games and children's bedrooms will be places of

uninterrupted surveillance (see, for example: [Engelstein 1992: 225–236]).

‘It’s a game for girls and boys...’

In the two previous sections we saw how the semantic structures of modern sexuality formatted knowledge of preindustrial folk practices of pleasure. In this section we shall attempt an analysis of the emic semantic structures that determine the significance of nights spent together by young people before marriage in the milieu in which they took place.

To this end I propose to read the ethnographic descriptions of premarital nights paying attention to the idea of sexuality as a historically conditioned project. What will we get if we trace how the bearers of the culture, and not the ethnographers, conceptualised premarital practices of genital pleasure? What meanings defined these practices and by what rules were they regulated?

The empirical basis of the analysis will be the fragments of ethnographical descriptions that contain the informants’ direct speech, like those quoted above. In such sources it is possible to discover examples of the lexis used by the informants to denote their evening pleasures and trace the structures of their meanings. It is important to note that most often material of this sort was supplied by ethnographical works following the discourse of sexuality.

First and foremost, the analysis of the available material indicates the frequent use of the words *playing*, *play*, *game*, *start to play*, *amusement*, *fool about*, and suchlike. In the quotation about *prytula* these words are used up to ten times.

Furthermore, ethnographical descriptions reveal an opposition between premarital practices and the coital pleasures of marriage. One source informs us that ‘young people can play at *prytula* until they’re married’ [Mr. H. 1906: 97]. But after marriage, such play was sinful: a husband and wife were supposed to do it *yak slid* ‘properly’, *ne khytruvat* ‘without messing about’, *nastoiashcho* ‘really’, *po pravdi* ‘truly’, *na dili* ‘for real’ [Ibid.: 97, 100, 101].

Prytula was clearly associated with unmarried status. If a couple’s children were born at long intervals, they might be accused of ‘sleeping like a young man and a maid, playing at *prytula* and nothing more’ [Mr. H. 1906: 97]. These observations allow us to trace a strict opposition between premarital practices, regarded as a game, and copulation within marriage, understood as the real thing, a genuine act.

The distinction was made on the basis of complete vaginal penetration and the loss of the ‘cherry’. Premarital intimate practices

were limited by the principle of ‘not ruining her maidenly honour’. So long as her ‘maidenhood’ was not breached, the practice was marked as ‘a game’ and regarded as harmless, ‘not real’. This allows it to be stated that relationships between young people were regulated not by any prohibition on physical closeness (embracing, kissing, touching the genitals, even partial penetration) but by a prohibition on defloration. Behaviour that could be accommodated within such a canon was, by all accounts, regarded as perfectly moral, and penetration that did not damage the hymen as perfectly harmless and responsible.¹

The lexicon also indicates a distinction between a married couple ‘really’ doing it and premarital ‘amusements’. The word *prytula* is derived from *prytuliatysia* ‘lean against, nestle’, which is semantically opposed to penetration, going through, that is, ‘real intercourse’. This belief that intercourse without complete vaginal penetration was ‘not real’ was so firm that married couples might use it as a method of contraception [Mr. H. 1906: 97].

As a result, incomplete, partial penetration, without defloration, was the condition for regarding a sex act as not proper coitus, not real, imitative, playful, a distraction ‘for boys and girls’. Such a distraction was not only not incompatible with young people’s unmarried status, but quite the reverse: on the basis of the ethnographic material one may affirm that having a partner to spend the night with was an important marker of the status of the not yet married. One of my informants answered the question about whether young people slept together before marriage: ‘A good girl — she sleeps with the lads. There was a time when if a girl didn’t sleep with young men, she wasn’t regarded as a girl’ [AEI NASU, collection 1, box 2, item 400B, p. 10].

At the same time, a husband and wife could only sleep together if the bride’s hymen was breached. Without ‘picking the cherry’ (or, pejoratively designated, ‘the young woman’s dishonour’), a wedding was not regarded as complete. The ritual of defloration remained an important, semantically loaded part of the traditional wedding.

Thus, on the basis of the distinction and opposition between premarital *games* of *prytula* and marital reproductive practices which must involve complete penetration ‘properly’, it may be concluded that the bearers of the culture regarded the nights spent together

¹ It may be supposed that anal penetration was regarded as equally ‘harmless’. Fedir Vovk (Volkov) mentions the customs of the villages of the southern Rhodope Mountains in Bulgaria: ‘The young men and girls choose who they want to be with, and go off in couples into the woods, or if it is winter, into the hayloft, and engage in unnatural relations with each other (per anum). The old men and old women regard this as something that is not unlawful, not forbidden: they only smile when it is mentioned’ [Volkov 1895: 36; I am grateful to the anonymous peer-reviewer of this article for this reference. — M.M.].

by young people as a part of young people's life before marriage, anticipating their attainment of maturity; genital pleasures with partial penetration were regarded as possible (but only before marriage), and conceptually interpreted as 'not real', 'playful' (and, therefore, as an unacceptable indulgence within marriage). With the arrival of the discourse of sexuality these practices among young people began to be interpreted as unequivocally 'sexual'.

Some conclusions

We have examined four different discursive positions regarding the tradition of young people spending the night together before marriage.

It is striking that the first two approaches, the discourse of national romanticism and the discourse of sexuality, proceed from a common understanding of 'sexuality' and answer a common question, but come to opposite conclusions. The first asserts that the relations between young people during the nights they spent together were entirely moral, while the other, on the contrary, reveals their 'sexual' character. The possibility of such different readings of the tradition is explained by the situatedness of knowledge.

It is noteworthy that none of the approaches can be accused of being unfounded. If one takes into account that while spending the night together, the young men and women conformed to the relevant rules and limitations determined by the requirement to preserve virginity, the conclusion of the discourse of national romanticism concerning strict principles of morality in the milieu of rural youth is perfectly realistic.

At the same time, if one considers the fact that the nights the young people spent together allowed — in the formulations of modern sexuality — erotic arousal, sexual pleasure, genital contact, and partial penetration, and that all this sometimes resulted in pregnancy and venereal infections, then it is perfectly reasonable to call these relations *sexual*, as the discourse of sexuality did define them.

Both answers are justifiable within the limits of their discourses. Therefore this article does not question their truthfulness (multiple truths are assumed), but their intention: why, and for what purpose, was a particular corpus of knowledge produced and particular statements postulated.

The nights young people spent together in the preindustrial village were regarded by ethnographers sometimes as a place for satisfying sexual desire, sometimes as an area of moral restraint — but with reference to the same basal concept of sexuality, constructed according to the same categories of modernity. Where emic and

modern interpretations came into contact, many contradictions arose which could not be resolved without questioning the basic concept of sexuality.

It is precisely this issue that I addressed in the second part of the article. Having first deliberately set aside the discourse of sexuality as a governing interpretive mechanism, I traced the meanings by which the custom was defined by the bearers of the culture. The result of my analysis showed that premarital relations were conceptualised in traditional culture by being opposed to the reproductive practices of marriage, and thus constructed as their denial or absence.

Let us note in conclusion that this article does not exploit the potential provided by the discourse of feminist analysis in combination with queer discourse: the androcentrism of modern sexuality, imposed upon the conceptualisation of pleasure in the area of traditional culture, might be an attractive topic for further research.

To sum up, I should like to say that the study of the history of sexuality from the point of view not of the history of practices, but of the history of ideas, not of the history of research, but of the history of discourses, allows the emergence of new perspectives and questions, and likewise new answers to research topics that might sometimes seem to have been exhausted.

Abbreviations

AEI NASU — Archives of the Ethnology Institute, National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine

ARI ASFE NASU — Archives of the Rylsky Institute of Art Studies, Folklore and Ethnology, National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine

Archival materials

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