

**Traditional Magic or European Occultism?  
Commercial Fortune-Telling and Magic in Post-Soviet Russia and  
their Relationship to Russian Tradition**

Faith Wigzell  
University College London-SSEES  
London, UK

Abstract

The article examines the vibrant commercial magic and fortune-telling industry in Russia today. Based on fieldwork in Petersburg conducted in 2006, supplemented by printed and, in particular, web material, it seeks to show that, despite the many similarities with its counterparts in Europe and North America, Russian fortune-telling and magic are clearly shaped by local traditions. In the context of the article, tradition is taken to include not just rural folk magic and divination, but also urban traditions of the late imperial period as well as those resulting from Soviet policies and practices. It emerges that as far as magic services are concerned, the range of services offered are those demanded by the client, largely stemming from folk tradition. By contrast discourse, approach and ritual often owe much to Western esoteric literature, and perhaps also to pre-Revolutionary occultism and the Soviet interest in psychics. In the case of fortune-telling, today's professionals (gypsies apart) have adopted more complex and sophisticated ways of telling the future (tarot and astrology). Old ways of fortune-telling are so widely known that they must offer something different to clients. Tradition survives in many ways, sometimes transmuted, sometimes partial, but it makes the Russian magic and fortune-telling scene distinctive.

Folklorists were never sympathetic to assumptions, usually from outside Russia, that the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991 represented a radical break with the Soviet past. They need no convincing that traditions die hard, or that they evolve in response to social and political change, and, as they do, interact in the modern world with spoken, written and visual media. Consequently, folklorists are able to contribute to the current exploration of continuities and change [e.g. Rouhier-Willoughby 2008; Panchenko 2010]. Following this trend, in this article I too focus on continuities in one area of contemporary Russian life, the

vibrant commercial magic and fortune-telling scene. In this case tradition encompasses both rural folklore and other traditions, Soviet or earlier, since to separate them seems artificial and impoverishing.

It would seem an appropriate moment to make this assessment, now that the uncritical Russian passion of the early 1990s for all things foreign has abated. In 2006, with the invaluable help of a research assistant, Dr Marina Hakkarainen, I conducted a series of interviews in Petersburg with professional esoteric specialists, amateurs, students and devotees.(1) The focus was on those who predicted the future, but it soon became clear that fortune-telling could not be separated from the broader esoteric commercial scene, since specialists often offer future prediction as part of a range of services. Given both the size of the market and the existence of two full length studies of magic healers and occult cosmologies [Lindquist 2006; Honey 2006], I have excluded alternative health treatment, although consultations and actions intended to improve clients' emotional and psychological health are included, since they are an essential component of the services offered by astrologers, magic specialists and even fortune-tellers. The decision to focus only on fortune-tellers and magic specialists provided the impetus to add to the recorded and collected data with extensive internet material, not just from the many esoteric web sites, but also hostile and friendly articles, chat rooms, opinion polls and readership surveys.

How vigorous is the market for magic and fortune-telling in Russia today? It is, I contend, more visible and vibrant than in many West European countries. Apart from the horoscopes in women's magazines there are three mass market publications catering for those with a particular interest in astrology and divination: the glossy monthly *Liza Goroskop*, one of the stable of Liza magazines for women, and the cheap monthly newspapers *Orakul* and *Predskazanie orakula* [The Oracle's Prediction]. Free local papers contain adverts for predictive and magic services, and bookshops regularly sell a range of fortune-telling and other esoteric material. Choice there is aplenty; to take one example, the publishing house Rapol Klassik lists 69 books on astrology, 29 dreambooks and 45 fortune-telling guides, though some of these are repackaged versions of others in the catalog. A wider range can be purchased at esoteric shops along with tarot packs galore, occult literature and magazines for the specialist such as *Ezotericheskii vestnik* [The Esoteric Herald] and *Tainaia vlast'* [Secret Power]. They also sell New Age items like crystals, runes, incense, amulets and gemstones and advertise forthcoming events, courses and occult services. All these

items and more can also be obtained from the many esoteric web shops and sites.

Although many individuals post one-line advertisements offering to elucidate the future and help with personal problems, the most visible form of commercial activity takes the form of esoteric centers, some of which operate from prestigious premises; in 2005 it was estimated that there were twenty in Petersburg, though the majority would have been dedicated primarily to alternative medicine. Centers place advertisements in the press and online offering consultations and courses in astrology, chiromancy, tarot, clairvoyance and magic, and their specialists frequently appear on television to make *prognozy* [predictions], especially around New Year when their forecasts for the coming year are widely reported in the newspapers. The RuNet contains a staggering number of sites (150 and still counting) offering to help you solve your personal problems through magic and ensure or determine your future, as well as numerous online journals devoted fully or partially to prediction. One of Russia's most popular TV programs, now in its sixth season, is a reality show *Bitva ekstrasensov* [Battle of the Psychics], the most popular program of the TV company TNT in the week of 20<sup>th</sup> October 2008 and 38<sup>th</sup> most popular program overall in the week of 13<sup>th</sup> October [TNS Gallup Media].(2) After an initial episode, the eight most successful *ekstrasensy* [here = psychics] compete in following weeks for the crown denoting the best in Russia. The program was then in its sixth series.

The vitality of the esoteric services market in Russia today is self evident, but the boom years were the early 1990s. Then a torrent of esoteric material of all kinds was reprinted or, more often, translated from Western sources, and fortune-telling guides sold in their hundreds of thousands. Astrology caught on in a big way, and contacts were made with Western esoteric practitioners of all kinds. Forms of prediction previously virtually unknown in Russia, tarot and runes in particular, but also the I Ching and other Eastern mantic and esoteric beliefs acquired a mass following. Meantime, psychic distance healing gripped the nation; Kashpirovskii, the best known *ekstrasens*, not only attracted millions to his television show, but, according to a poll of 60,000 readers of *Komsomol'skaia pravda* in 1990, was far more widely trusted (by 67%) than their local council (only 16.4%) [KP 1990].

In today's less fevered commercial esoteric market, it might appear initially that there is little that cannot be found in the UK at Glastonbury or at a Psychic Fayre – astrology, runes, amulets, clairvoyance, psychic

healing, tarot, channelling, work on karma or aura – specialists in all of these advertise widely in the media: “Светлана, специалист по карме. Нетрадиционное решение кармических проблем”(3) [Svetlana, specialist in karma, offers a non-traditional resolution of your karmic problems], “Парапсихолог. Чистка ауры и коррекция биополя” [Parapsychologist. Cleansing of your aura and correction of your biofield], or “магистр Анатолий Шварц. Возврат любимых навсегда” [Magister Anatolii Shvarts. Permanent return of your loved ones]. If, however, it looks as though Russians have jettisoned the folk and pre-revolutionary urban tradition and co-opted Western esoteric and predictive practices without placing a distinctive stamp upon them, closer scrutiny dispels this idea. Cultural and historical context is crucial.

In fact the commercial esoteric market has many facets in which tradition is reflected directly or indirectly. I propose to look first at fortune-telling, more specifically the types of commercial fortune-telling and fortune-teller found in pre-revolutionary urban Russia, tracing, where possible, their fate in the winter of the Soviet period and re-emergence (or not as the case may be) in the late 1980s. If a given mantic skill is rarely offered by professionals, has it survived in some other commercial form (books, internet and other media), or only at domestic level? The second part of the article considers the role of tradition in magic services.

The most popular professional fortune-telling services today are tarot and astrology (which is concerned as much with character as future possibilities) followed by chiromancy, the I Ching, runes and, at the bottom end of the market, coffee-cup reading and fortune-telling with ordinary cards. Dream divination is generally only offered as part of a range of other services. With the exception of the I Ching and runes and partial exception of astrology, all the mantic skills popular today reach back to tsarist times in some respect or another. Then, the skills practiced by professional fortune-tellers reflected less the types of divination in the Russian village than those popularized through fortune-telling manuals. These functioned as the prime conduit of western popular mantic skills from the late eighteenth century to the Revolution. Their contents were assimilated to the point of the books being regarded by readers as truly Russian items, and hence they came to constitute a secondary folk tradition [Wigzell 1998: 44-45]. Professionals took their cue from the books. Oneiromancers (dream interpreters), cartomancers and chiromancers seem to have been the most popular in the nineteenth century, though there were also bibliomancers, clairvoyants, geomancers,

numerologists and others. The only available figures are of those registered with the St Petersburg police in 1913: 286 chiromancers and 103 cartomancers as well as sixteen astrologers and “predictors of fate” [Shakhnovich 1996: 5]. The absence of dream interpreters does not mean that they did not exist. Dream interpretation has not traditionally been regarded as a form of divination in Russia, and oneiromancers may have been differently classified.(4)

After 1917 the professionals gradually found life more difficult, especially towards the end of the 1920s. In Petersburg in the early NEP years they had gathered in the Black Cat café on Nevskii Prospekt opposite the Hotel Europe. They eked out a living by appearing in so-called “psychological experiments” in the foyers of cinemas (actually fortune-telling or clairvoyance), or else acting as hypnotists’ assistants at public performances [Shakhnovich 1996: 6, 10]. In early 1930s Leningrad, Mikhail Shakhnovich, a young scholar who was interested in the history of religion and the occult sciences, tracked down a dozen or more former and current professionals. These included at least one cartomancer, chiromancer, astrologer, dream interpreter and clairvoyant.(5) Life by then was much tougher. Those still operating were all women, probably because it was easier for them to avoid regular work, whereas the cabbalist and astrologer, Rafael’, was now working in a housing office. Even then, one elderly woman was working openly on Sennaia Ploshchad’ [Hay Market], where she had been since 1915. She had a regular clientele from different parts of the city – sales assistants, cashiers and artistes –, whom, she said, liked her because her charges were modest and her predictions often correct. Shortly afterwards, fortune-tellers and their skills went underground, operating, if at all, at amateur level. Professionals only re-emerged in the 1990s.

Judging by my informants, the most pervasive mantic skill in the late Soviet period was cartomancy, but using conventional playing cards rather than tarot. Tarot first appeared in Russia at the very end of the nineteenth century as part of the interest in the occult. It acquired Russian devotees in the early twentieth century [Decker and Dummett 2002: 199-203], but its appeal seems not to have spread outside elite circles into the wider commercial sphere before the Revolution. Although cards with distinctive symbols had been known from the 1840s, they too seem not to have been widely used in the early twentieth century [Wigzell 1998: 32-3]. Cartomancy was not restricted to professionals. By the Revolution, reading the cards was a skill common among women all over Russia. Introduced to an urban readership in the

late eighteenth century, it was then taken to the provinces and countryside by servants and other seasonal or temporary town dwellers [Wigzell 1998: 62-3]. The widespread availability of conventional packs of cards, together with the relative simplicity of the interpretive method, not only facilitated its passage into oral tradition but later assisted its survival in the Soviet Union, when most households owned the basic equipment of a pack of cards.

When one informant Alisa remarked that doubtless her first acquaintance with fortune-telling was when someone told her fortune in the cards, though she didn't remember, she was implying that, in her social environment, card reading was commonplace.(6) Her testimony was supported by other informants whose introduction to fortune-telling came via cartomancy. The tradition usually ran in families, often reaching back to tsarist times; for example, Oksana's friend learnt it from her grandmother, and Liza from her great aunt who in her turn had been taught by her mother (Liza's great grandmother). Both were talking about a village context, but unofficial fortune-telling took place all over the Soviet Union, according to informant Vasilii Vasil'evich; in his case it was his mother, a resident of Volgograd, who had been taught to read cards by her grandmother.

Survival strategies were the same as for other mantic skills, discretion or trivialization. Discretion was crucial in the Soviet period. As with other unofficial activities, word of mouth, known in Russian as *sarafannoe radio*, worked very effectively. Vasilii Vasil'evich explained that in Soviet times his mother's clients found out about her via the grapevine. That oral transmission was the normal *modus operandi* is confirmed by Larisa Gribova from Talan: *Rosakademtsentr narodnogo tselitel'stva i psikhologicheskikh praktik* [Talan – Russian Academic Centre for Traditional Healing and Psychological Practices] in Moscow, who said in an interview that both her mother and grandmother practiced cartomancy:

В нашем доме всегда гадали, к бабушке и маме приходило столько желающих узнать свою судьбу, что принять всех было просто невозможно! Да еще и времена были такие, что приходилось гадать тайно, вот люди и ждали своей очереди много месяцев.

[In our house fortunes were always being told, and so many people came to see my mother and my granny to discover their fate, that they could not manage to see all of them! In those days it all had to be done in secret and people would wait several months for their turn.] [Orlova 2009]

Whether from choice or out of necessity, cartomancy can be viewed as entertainment; Liza's great-grandmother, being president of the Sel'sovet did not, indeed could not, take it seriously, though she continued with readings for fun. Whether those who had their fortunes told by her took it quite so lightly is another matter, since, as Gribova's testimony reveals, for many it remained a serious enterprise.

Other divinatory skills similarly survived in the domestic and amateur sphere thanks to trivialization strategies and discretion. In Volgograd, Vasilii Vasil'evich's mother not only read the cards but coffee cups too, on the rare occasions that ground coffee was available. She had to be careful at all times. Like cartomancy, coffee-cup reading was a skill practiced by women in families or among friends, often for fun. Dream divination was somewhat different; it had always been a family affair, but at the end of the Soviet period, societal change had led, at least away from rural areas, to more dream divination being conducted among friends, as well as to a greater emphasis on entertainment [Wigzell 1998: 172]. Nonetheless there were those prepared to interpret dreams for a wider audience. One informant, Nina Vladimirovna, noted that in Soviet times one of her work colleagues would not only lay out the cards but also interpret dreams, though not for money. The oneiromantic tradition that best survived the years when printed dreambooks were generally unavailable was the folk one, albeit with the admixture of some well-known "literary" dream symbols [Wigzell 1998: 172-3; Razumova 2001: 94-104].(7) Although translated dreambooks were hugely popular, not just with Pushkin's Tat'iana, and their contents fairly stable, they have proved less durable than the old oral tradition.

The survival of mantic skills thus depended on families and groups of like-minded people being discreet and at times accepting trivialization. Chiromancy, however, presents a partial exception. Between 1880 and the Revolution, the revival of interest among more affluent groups attracted by the pseudoscientific claims of chiromancy led both to the publication of more chiromantic texts [Wigzell 1998: 35] and a rise in the number of professionals, as the figures for registered chiromancers in Petersburg in 1913 reveal. Despite this period of relative prestige just before the Revolution, over time chiromancy descended the social scale, coming to be seen mainly as the property of gypsies, just as in Western Europe. The strong ethnic prejudice against gypsies in Russia may have contributed to its decline in the domestic sphere, but it should be remembered that women, who were the active bearers of tradition through the Soviet period, had never adopted palm reading with the same

enthusiasm as they had some other skills. Nonetheless, interviews threw up the odd reference; Nina Vladimirovna mentioned that in the 1980s one of her female colleagues, now a respected academic, used to read the palms of friends and colleagues. Since informant Nora Pavlovna also knew of people who, *inter alia*, practiced chiromancy in the Soviet period, and of others who had either been imprisoned or sent to psychiatric units for fortune-telling, it is clear that chiromancy retained some adherents throughout the Soviet period among groups other than the gypsies.

It might be expected that over more than six decades of Soviet education and propaganda, belief in magic and fortune-telling would have withered away. In fact, for all their zeal, Soviet efforts to combat “superstition” met with only partial success. In the late Soviet period (1982-3) a survey was conducted in the Krasnoiarsk region among 3000 students and 900 “young specialists” (young graduates and grad students), just those who would be expected, after sixty plus years of socialism, to have plumped for rationality and science [Nemirovskii and Manuil’skii 1987: 70-75]. In their analysis Nemirovskii and Manuil’skii decided to place those who rejected superstition outright into one category, and all the others - believers, waverers and “don’t knows” - into another. They argued convincingly that those who replied “*malo veriu*” [I believe a little] and “*zatrudniaius’ otvetit*” [I find difficulty in answering] probably felt too embarrassed to admit to superstitious beliefs [Nemirovskii and Manuil’skii 1987: 71]. The results were surprising. Asked whether they believed in the immortality of the soul or revelation from on high, the great majority replied in the negative (82% and 90%, with a fair number of “don’t knows”), suggesting that anti-religious propaganda had been effective. On the other hand, asked whether they believed in divination, omens, prophetic dreams or witchcraft, replies were much more equivocal. A majority, over 60%, did not believe in fortune-telling (though nearly 40%, therefore, did think there was or might be something to it). The situation was more acute as far as belief in prophetic dreams was concerned; here only half the students and a mere 38% of the young specialists were skeptics - the latter group, being older, were perhaps more prepared to say what they really thought. Girls were more than twice as likely to believe in divination as men [Nemirovskii and Manuil’skii 1987: 73].

The two authors noted that “scientific-materialist” views dominated among their subjects, even if they coexisted with belief in the fantastic, but in fact it is the strength of belief in traditional divination and



witchcraft that is most striking. And lest it be thought that school leavers and college students in Krasnoiarsk were untypical, the authors provide comparative figures for the Altai region, where belief in traditional divination and witchcraft even was slightly higher. The persistent traditional interest in magic and divination, largely surviving through oral transmission, thus underlay the esoteric boom that occurred once the political atmosphere changed.

In the frenzy of the late 1980s and early 1990s the fate of various skills differed. Professional dream diviners did not regain a footing in the contemporary market place, though esoteric specialists like Natal'ia, the tarot reader I visited, will interpret dreams as part of a consultation, but this is not a service that she or anyone else promotes heavily. Informant Masha thought that people would not trust professional dream interpreters and would not pay for their services. A more credible reason, given the propensity of the public to pay for other services, may be that, although dream-telling is common among female friends, its key position has always been in the heart of the household, where it contributes to the activation of moral and behavioral norms and creation of "a microclimate of communication" and trust [Razumova 2001: 85; also Wigzell 1998; 50, 122]. Families do not always have to be in physical proximity, as Marina, my research assistant, indicated, when she said that her cousin in Moscow always phones her in Petersburg to chew over a disturbing dream. It appears that the role of dream-telling in family communication and cohesion has stifled the activities of professionals.

If, at the end of the Soviet period, families had largely to rely on oral transmission of dream meanings, now they can, and evidently do, reinforce this oral knowledge by recourse to a published dreambook. In the view of informant Dasha, the existence of such books further limits the appeal of professionals, although it must be remarked that this is not the case with tarot or astrology. The translated dreambooks and reprints of pre-revolutionary editions typical in the 1990s have given way to books authored by Russian citizens, though the most frequently reissued text is a translation of the large dreambook compiled in the early twentieth century by an American, Gustavus Hindman Miller. Even if the boom is over, dreambooks remain extremely popular. For example, one of the Russian equivalents of Amazon lists well over 200 different editions [ozon.ru]. Some of these seek innovation within the dreambook tradition, notably by devoting whole books to interpreting erotic dreams as in Violetta Khamidova's *Сексуальные сны. Расшифровка и толкование эротических снов* [Sexual Dreams. Deciphering and

Interpreting Erotic Dreams], but novelty can be combined with tradition as in O. Smurova's series which recognizes the role of the family, such as *Полный семейный сонник. 150,000 толкований* [Complete Family Dreambook. 150,000 Interpretations].

Interestingly, the conventional marketing ploys of tsarist times are being re-used: declarations about the expertise and experience of the author, emphasis on the huge range of dream symbols or the connection with famous sages and dream interpreters. The sages of tsarist days have faded from prominence, with only Miss Hussey surviving on title pages, joined now by Nostradamus, the Bulgarian prophetess Vanga and Freud.(8) As before 1917, the sages are foreign and not necessarily dream interpreters, or, in the case of Freud, not an interpreter of dreams in the traditional manner. It is possible that the Russian dreambooks reprinted from the late 1980s, together with newly translated foreign texts with a long publication history such as Miller, may have inspired authors and publishers to copy the traditional presentation of pre-Revolutionary popular dreambooks, but it must surely be the case that some of these marketing strategies would have been adopted anyway. One omission remains: given the respect in which many hold traditional village wisdom, it seems surprising that so little overt use has been made of the native folk tradition. Nowadays there are many personal dreambooks by named Russian authors, far more than before 1917, but if they draw on local area tradition, they do not advertise the fact.

Increasingly print is being rivaled by the internet. Many fortune-telling sites contain a section where you can discover the meaning of your dream, but, over and above that, numerous specialist sites focus on sleep and/or dream interpretation: try [sleepexpert.ru](http://sleepexpert.ru); [sonnik.funplanet.ru](http://sonnik.funplanet.ru); [sonnik.net.ru](http://sonnik.net.ru); [sonnika.net.ua](http://sonnika.net.ua); [snov.net.ru](http://snov.net.ru); [sonniki.com.ru](http://sonniki.com.ru); [sonniki.info](http://sonniki.info); [sononline.ru](http://sononline.ru); [russkiy-sonnik.ru](http://russkiy-sonnik.ru); [prisnilos.su](http://prisnilos.su) or [sonnyk.ru](http://sonnyk.ru). As Aleksandr Panchenko has noted, marketing strategies on the internet echo those of the tsarist period, in fact, it may be added, much more closely than do books. Piracy is the order of the day, though a good proportion of the texts posted on the web are not those republished without permission in tsarist times, but recent arrivals in Russia or recent compilations [Panchenko 2010: 8-9]. Many sites, such as [russkiy-sonnik.ru](http://russkiy-sonnik.ru), offer several different dreambooks. Others follow another method employed by book publishers before 1917 in combining material from different sources. For example, the dreambook section of [astromeridan.ru](http://astromeridan.ru) allegedly combines material from 20 different printed texts. The interpretation offered by each is grouped under the dream symbol, with

the result that there may be several conflicting interpretations, allowing the user to choose the most congenial or appropriate. Though piracy and marketing ploys (lurid covers, exaggerating the contents, attribution to sages, emphasis on novelty and usefulness) all replicate the publishing practices of the tsarist era, it is unlikely that this is a conscious return to tradition, and more a natural competitive response in a poorly regulated market.

The large number of websites either fully or partially dedicated to offering traditional dream interpretation indicates the vitality of the tradition among a younger generation, given that internet access is strongest among the under-forties. For the same reason it also suggests a level of participation among the relatively well-educated. At first sight this conclusion conflicts with poll findings which show that:

В вещие сны больше всего верят домохозяйки, неквалифицированные рабочие, пенсионеры и в целом женщины (в 2,2 раза чаще мужчин), с образованием ниже среднего, низкими доходами, проживающие в сельских поселениях.

[The people most likely to believe in prophetic dreams are housewives, unskilled workers, pensioners and women as a whole (2.2 times more than men), with lower than average educational attainment and low incomes, living in rural areas.] [Samokatov? 2001].(9)

Firstly, there is no need to contest the idea that more people in the above categories believe in dreams - these would in any case be those most likely to be active bearers of oral tradition – but these groups do not exclude others. For example, although informants were not asked specifically about oneiromancy, Dasha, a student, volunteered that she believed in prophetic dreams. Secondly, internet users may well not be firm believers in prophetic dreams, instead accessing these sites wholly or partially for fun. Finally, polls show that the under-24 age group is the most likely to be interested in the esoteric field as a whole [VTsIOM 2008, 2009].

If dream interpretation features commercially but not professionally, the same is not true for cartomancy, chiromancy and coffee cup reading. Cartomantic tradition has survived but in transmuted form. With a highly educated population in today's Russia, professional fortune-tellers need to emphasize that their mantic skills are superior to those of the average non-professional; the commonest tactic is to emphasize the complexity or deeper meaning of tarot. Liza, for example, said it took her 2-4 years before she felt she had fully grasped the complexities of tarot, while Nora Pavlovna saw tarot as akin to meditation and self-understanding

and therefore a path to spiritual development. As she said in her entry in the 2007 Petersburg directory of alternative practitioners; “Это не только предсказательная система, это глубокое философское учение о строении мира, общества и человека” [This is not just a system of prediction, but deep philosophical teaching about the structure of the world, society and humanity] [Gorskaia 2007: 21]. As a consequence, the old tradition of reading conventional cards, which has no such discourse attached to it, is made to appear crude and unattractive, except to traditionalists who are mainly clustered at the bottom end of the market. This does not stop amateurs acquiring some skill at tarot, whether from the many popular books (258 listed on ozon.ru) or online, or else by studying at an esoteric center. The situation with coffee cup reading is similar; it is only available from the most basic professionals, but the existence of manuals devoted to the subject (four in the Ripol klassik catalog, for example) and numerous guides online reinforce my personal impressions of widespread popularity among amateurs. My coffee cup has been read two or three times, not at my instigation, by educated and often sophisticated women, most recently by Dasha in the café where I interviewed her and two friends. In their case, they had all acquired their knowledge orally, but others doubtless do not. It is reasonable, however, to assume that the information gained via print and internet will soon be reinforcing the oral tradition in the course of transmission among friends.

Chiromancy, as mentioned above, has to a great extent become the property of gypsies; in this sphere transmission is oral and enclosed, gypsies being extremely careful not to pass on any of their mantic knowledge to outsiders, according to Vasilii Vasil'evich. They are, however, the most despised type of fortune-teller. Informant Irina talked of a time around 1990 when she wasted her money on a “гадалка примитивная как цыганка” [a fortune-teller primitive like a gypsy]. Informants Aleksei, Liza and Alisa saw them as skilled confidence tricksters, but at the same time Dasha, Linda, Tania, and Masha, as well as Alisa, feared them because, they said, if you upset them, they may put a curse on you or predict catastrophe, even death. In traditional village life, the sorcerer's links with the “unclean force” evoked terror, something actively encouraged by the sorcerer himself [Shchepanskaia: 2001: 78-80]. If therefore you were brave enough to go to the sorcerer for a prediction or to solve a problem, it was because you believed his magic was particularly strong. The same dynamic operates here; fear of the gypsies' alleged power over people (ability to hypnotize people out of their money) is matched by a sense that they may have genuine

psychic powers. This difficult relationship may well assist in the preservation of both their chiromantic practice and their closed oral tradition.

Such is the contempt and fear in which gypsy palm-reading is held that it has probably hindered the re-emergence of chiromancy into the mainstream commercial sphere. Those who practice professionally choose a respectability strategy known from the late eighteenth century in Russia: stressing the scientific nature of what they do. Such was the case with Boris Nikolaevich in Petersburg. When I asked him whether I was destined to become a grandmother, he replied that he was not a *koldun* [sorcerer], and could not tell without looking at my children's hands. His approach was, he said, essentially an empirical one, involving scrutiny of many thousand palms, testing the various interpretive hypotheses in books for himself, and so developing his own skills. The same impulse lies behind the use of the term "chirologist," preferred by some in Russia, as in Western Europe and the US. At the non-professional level, chiromancy features on many websites as well as in books; the internet bookshop *ozon.ru* lists over a hundred, though many are re-packagings of the same text. In 2005 a popular TV series called *Khiromant* featured a man whose father had been interested in chiromancy, and who himself develops a real predictive skill. Nonetheless, palm-reading is less popular than other forms of divination and character reading, and there are certainly fewer chiromancers/chirologists than astrologers or tarologists.

It may be concluded that, despite the huge popularity of astrology, which owes little to oral tradition, and recent imports like runes and oriental predictive practices, the forms of divination popular among the urban population before 1917 have managed to survive, albeit sometimes transmuted, and sometimes only domestically rather than professionally. In the case of professionals, traditional practice forms the basis on which innovation can take place. The tendency towards increasing complexity reduces the possibility of the more complex mantic skills entering oral currency, but is essential for professionals in protecting markets and bolstering prestige.

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In Russia today many professionals who offer prediction are primarily or additionally involved in purveying magic services. These are not only popular but highly lucrative, judging by the price lists observed at esoteric centers. Given the access magic specialists have to oriental and New Age esoteric beliefs and practices, it is a surprise to discover

the extent to which many draw on Russian tradition. This tradition is rich and varied, but since the nature and range of traditional magic practitioners and their activities in pre-revolutionary Russia have been extensively documented and discussed in English [Ryan 1999; Ivanits 1989: 83-124], they will only be sketched out here. Briefly, the three main categories of magic practitioners in pre-revolutionary Russia were the *ved'ma* [witch], the *koldun* [sorcerer] and the *znakharka* [folk healer], who by the turn of the century was the commonest of the three [Ivanits 1989: 111].(10) The *znakharka*, whose activities mingled folk medicine and magic, was generally regarded as benign [Ivanits 1989: 116], while both witches and sorcerers were feared for their supposed ability to command otherworldly powers, and hence control the natural and human worlds. They were believed to cause harm in various ways, notably by “spoiling” (putting a spell on) crops, animals or people, causing failure, illness and other woes. They could, however, be enlisted for good, perhaps to punish the source of a spoiling, or rid someone or something of a spell cast by another witch or sorcerer. Like folk healers they were consulted for love magic (spells and potions), as well as to find lost property and identify thieves and murderers. In addition, sorcerers had a defined protective role in marriage ceremonies. Since it was thought easy to spoil a marriage, a sorcerer would be invited as an honored guest to ward off potential evil forces [Tolstoi 1999: 531-2].

Rising literacy, social change and the increased mobility of the last decades of the tsarist regime resulted in some members of the peasantry moving towards a rationalist world view, and it might be assumed that this process would have accelerated dramatically after 1917. However, as A. Trachevskii noted in 1930: “if the official religion of the priests is in decline, then the religiosity of daily life (*bytovaia religiia*) in all its manifestations – belief in omens, spells, house sprites – still has a firm hold on peasant life” [Smith 2007: 91]. In the period before World War II the Soviet government was keener on uprooting religion (an ideological rival) than dealing with everyday “backwardness.”(11) What efforts they did make had less impact than the spread of schooling and modern medical facilities and, above all, the brutal dislocation of rural life following collectivization. Though these factors weakened belief in magic, they failed to dispel it. During the war less attention was paid to either religious or magic belief, but towards the end of the 1940s official hostility intensified [Zubkova 1998: 69]. Nonetheless, the context of belief required to maintain the presence of magic practitioners still hung on in the late Soviet period, when, as mentioned above, belief in the

supernatural remained strong among the young in provincial Russia; of the school leavers questioned in the Krasnoiarsk region 47% of girls believed in witchcraft, while around 50% of the 900 young specialists at scientific research institutes had some level of belief.

Folk healers survived by being both valued and discreet. For example, Baba Valia, a *znakharka* living in Karelia, began practicing folk healing in the 1940s within her extended family, only beginning to operate more openly in the early 1990s [Il'ina 2007]. Belief in witchcraft still answers a need in rural areas where life is hard, functioning in the traditional way by finding external reasons for problems, very possibly by scapegoating a neighbor [Vlasova 1998:72]. The village *koldun* lost his role as protector of weddings when the traditional folk wedding ritual disappeared [Golovanova 2007], but survived in many regions through the Soviet era as a powerful and frightening figure, though he is today a less common figure than either the folk healer or the witch [Vlasova 1998: 242, 249; Loginov 2000].

Nor were towns an esoteric-free space. Though the Soviet authorities attempted to root out belief in magic, at the same time they themselves stimulated interest in the esoteric through scientific research and officially sanctioned entertainment.<sup>(12)</sup> Hypnosis and mind-reading, which had been popular from the 1880s, flourished in the circus in the 1920s and again in theaters in the 1940s [Mannherz 2005: 145]. Everyone in the 1920s had heard of Ornal'do and in the post-war period of Wolf Messing, and there were other lesser names. Scientific research into psychic phenomena mainly focused on telekinesis and telepathy, but was banned between the mid-1930s and 1960. Then in the early 1960s the psychologist Leonid Vasil'ev, who had been involved in research of this nature when it was permitted, published a hugely popular book *Внушение на расстоянии* [Mental Suggestion at a Distance] [Vasil'ev 1962]. Another, *Таинственные явления человеческой психики* [The Mysterious Phenomena of the Human Psyche], while seeking to demolish belief in the paranormal by offering scientific explanations of diverse psychological phenomena such as dreams and extrasensory perception, inevitably served to intrigue and excite [Vasil'ev 1962, 1963]. For many, science and magic were intertwined. Thus in the 1982-3 Krasnoiarsk surveys of superstition, the highest percentages of believers were for those who gave credence to telepathy and clairvoyance; indeed this was the only category, apart from belief in UFOs, where boys were as likely to believe as girls [Nemirovskii and Manuil'skii 1987: 71-73]. It is likely that, generally speaking, boys, who

are consistently shown to be less interested in traditional esoteric beliefs, found officially sanctioned scientific research into telepathy fascinating and socially acceptable, while among the girls a fair proportion were in tune with the traditional world of the individual with clairvoyant abilities, and were doubtless the same people who also believed in omens and prophetic dreams.

Apart from magic healers, contemporary magic practitioners include specialists claiming psychic abilities of various kinds and dealing with a range of non-medical problems. The terms they use to describe themselves reflect a concern to either align themselves with, or distance themselves from, traditional magic. The first category consists of those who call themselves *mag* [magus], a term that existed in tsarist Russia but was not widely used, *spetsialist*, which has connotations of technical expertise, *magistr* (which can be said to link the ideas of magic and expertise, even if through false etymology) or *master*. All indicate a desire to imply esoteric sophistication and learning by avoiding close association with “primitive” village magic, and in particular the harmful black magic of the rural sorcerer or witch. The alternative is the *koldun* (or its feminine form *koldun'ia*) [sorcerer], which derives directly from the native esoteric tradition, and is a stigmatized term, but one that can evoke fear. It is little used by those who work in esoteric centers, but features on the internet, where black magic is more evident. Occasionally it appears in the classified ads in free newspapers. Variants are *vedun/vedun'ia* (lit. the knowing one, m. or f.), *baba* or *babushka*, village woman or granny, and, more rarely, *ved'ma* [witch], all of which have folk connections. There is one other term that comes from literate culture in the nineteenth century but indicates a rejection of occult learning for a reliance on intuitive and psychic powers without suggesting folk occultism: *iasnovidiashchii/aia*, literally meaning clairvoyant but essentially equivalent to the “psychic” of the English-speaking world. It seems to be used more by women than men.

The way magic specialists describe themselves is designed to appeal to their targeted clientèle, rather than, in the majority of cases, express any genuine connection with traditional rural magic. One aspect concerns claims about the manner in which they have acquired their skills. In Russian folk belief the means of acquiring occult knowledge for a sorcerer was via inheritance or a pact with the devil and occasionally was acquired unwittingly or unwillingly. For the *znakharka* it was inheritance or, more specifically, transference, usually from an elderly relative [Ivanits 1989: 95-97; Dobrovol'skaia 2001: 97-98]. At times the idea of



powers inherent at birth is made more explicit, if only symbolically, for example in the notion that witches and sometimes sorcerers are born with tails. There is understandably far less emphasis on learning, though a type of sorcerer known as a *chernoknizhnik* [lit. “black bookman”] was believed to own books of magic [Tolstoi 1999: 528]. Today, “inherited” is a valued epithet, especially among those who emphasize links with tradition through their selection of title, *koldun*, *vedun* and so on. They frequently describe themselves as *potomstvennyi* [hereditary], as, for example, do Gennadii Stepanovich Ponomarenko (3<sup>rd</sup> generation) or hereditary sorcerers A’lbert Astaf’evich Lider (13<sup>th</sup> generation) and Koldun Fad on their respective websites [Lider; Fad].(13) However, *potomstvennyi* is such a powerful asset that it may also be employed by a *mag*, *magistr* or *spetsialist*.

As this example reveals, the dividing line between the (allegedly) traditional *koldun* and the magic specialist who avoids links with tradition is fuzzy. The wide area in which professionals define themselves is best demonstrated by looking more closely at what informants said about themselves and their work. Magic specialists, especially *kolduny* are leery of giving interviews, and I had in any case targeted those who predicted the future. Nonetheless, we did manage to talk to two, a female *mag* and a male *spetsialist*, both of whom were well educated and aware of how to present their activities to us. We also learnt about a *iasnovidiashchaia* called Marina.

Information about *iasnovidiashchaia* Marina came not direct, but from her enthusiastic client, Larisa. It was less detailed but nonetheless revealing. In 2006 Marina charged 700 rubles per visit, a modest sum, perhaps partly a function of her location far from the center of Petersburg. According to Larisa, she possesses a psychic gift which allows her to acquire information from the cosmos - not a traditional form of discourse. However, Marina does not provide the common service of regaining the affections of a spouse by pronouncing a magic charm [*privorot*], but rather views her gift as a specific form of psychotherapy [*инструмент определенного типа психотерапии*]. At first sight Marina’s practice seems to have no real connection to tradition, except in general terms with the psychics of the Soviet period. Neither her discourse nor her services seem traditional, and we had no information about the rituals she employs. However, Larisa then recounted an interesting story. The mother of one of her friends, Lena, had seen Marina, who immediately diagnosed cancer (a characteristic psychic achievement). Numerous hospital tests revealed nothing, but

eventually the clairvoyant was proved right. After a longish period of treatment, Lena's mother died. Marina had predicted that during her illness she would "vampirize" her daughter, i.e. suck out all her strength. And so it turned out. "мать был таким человеком, который был энергетическим вампиром" [the mother was the sort of person who is an energy vampire]. Lena's mother had become very difficult and Lena was doubtless under a great deal of strain. Hardly surprising then that she should feel enervated, but all three women interpret this in traditional folk terms expressed in contemporary terminology. In Russian oral tradition the commonest form of such a tale refers to a revenant, usually a dead husband but sometimes a devil or a dragon in the form of the husband who returns at night to visit the widow, causing her to fade away [Baiburin 2001: 98-99]. It was a conventional way of explaining grief and distress that had impacted physically. Here the terminology is not traditional; the word "*vampir*" is not a Russian term, stemming instead from Bram Stoker and the vampire industry. It became well-known in the 1990s when Western texts about magic and the supernatural flooded into Russia. The situation is also slightly different, in that it is a sick mother, not a revenant spouse who is the "vampire", but it fits with the folk belief that internal problems are caused from outside, and that physical decline may be caused by one family member sucking the life out of another. "*Energeticheskii vampirism*" came to be seen in the 1990s as a real problem affecting many people [Astrogor; Kandyba]. As the memorate reveals, there are those who still believe in the phenomenon.

Nadezhda Pavlovna, director of Oracle, The Academy of Irrational Psychology, who gave us a lengthy interview, strongly emphasized heredity even though she calls herself *mag*. She came from a Buriat family with a tradition of shamanism reaching back five generations. Her daughter now worked with her, and she noted that her own granddaughter had very obviously inherited the family gift; at the age of five she was able to say what was inside a Kinder Surprise and get it right every time. Nadezhda Pavlovna's primary qualifications were in chemistry, but she had subsequently studied psychology in order to reinforce her natural psychic skills. Nonetheless, the vocabulary she used to describe what she did came from occult teaching. Magic for her was a kind of religion, she said, because all religions rely on influencing the personality. There were different psycho-techniques which could reach information from the unconscious, and could be used to influence the personality of clients. She herself possessed a "гибкая психика

способна к адаптации... дело в том, что когда идет считывание информации, то нужно себя погрузить в ноль сознание” [flexible psyche capable of adaptation... the thing is that when information is being acquired, you have to plunge yourself down to nil consciousness], that is, into an altered state of consciousness. She saw no conflict between her gift and her training in psychology; both used dialogue, questioning and possibly a computer, though she personally was able to acquire information from clients solely through her own psychic abilities. Then, having perceived the nature of the client and the problem, her aim was *korreksiia sud'by* [correction of someone's fate] by helping the client change his or her attitudes, thereby solving a problem or difficult situation - in other words a form of psychotherapy. When problems were very deep-seated, change could not be effected in one session, so normally the client who wanted his/her spouse to come home made a return visit after six weeks, and then further visits for up to six months, depending on progress on the home front. Although she was keen to deemphasize magic, she admitted that she used ritual and tarot as a means of working with clients, though tarot for her was a diagnostic not a predictive tool. Thus far there is nothing traditional in her discourse, and indeed, since oral tradition did not possess a language for describing occult powers, none would be expected. Her practice can be said to approximate the folk healer's only in the most general terms: both use questions, intuition and rituals. If Nadezhda Pavlovna has a link with esoteric tradition, it is more with the psychics of Soviet entertainment and research than with the shamanism of her Buriat family background.

However, when she began talking about the services she offered, a folk element emerged. According to her regular ads in early 2006 in the free Petersburg newspaper *Tsentrplius*, Nadezhda Pavlovna offers a number of services including the return of loved ones without any harm to the client; a ritual designed to attract a fiancé(e); defense against sorcery and removal of any kind of negative, as well as the resolution of family, marital, financial, business, and accommodation problems. She said she mainly did what she called *privorotnye deistviia* [actions to turn someone's affections], which in this case usually meant persuading a spouse to return to the marital home. Love magic, especially *privorot*, was an important aspect of village magic [Ivanits 1989: 113]. However, in both advertisements and interview Nadezhda Pavlovna emphasized that she was not offering the conventional magic charm and ritual of *privorot*, but help for individuals in understanding their own emotional problems, so that they can then change their own fate by altering their

perceptions and behavior – an approach very similar to clairvoyant Marina’s. This person-centered approach is far removed from the traditional worldview that, by externalizing problems, allows for the removal by magical means of alien elements. In fact, Nadezhda Pavlovna’s advertisement exhorts readers not to use magic *privorot*, which may impact on health and wellbeing and is condemned by the Church, but to choose her *bezgreshnyi* [without sin] method. Nadezhda Pavlovna’s connections with folk tradition were therefore limited to her stress on hereditary powers and the services she offered which were tailored to fit clients’ expectations, and owed little to her family involvement in shamanism.

Almost the first thing Vasilii Vasil’evich said in the interview was: “*zanimaius’ okkul’tizmom*” [I am engaged in occultism]. However, he played down links with heredity or traditional magic even more insistently than Nadezhda Pavlovna, and this explained his choice of the title *spetsialist* rather than *mag* or *koldun*. Though his mother had told fortunes, he had only become interested in the occult in the early 1990s, when he was intrigued by the distance healing and psychic abilities of Kashpirovskii and Chumak. Despite his mother’s view of her skill as a gift, he suggested that it came partly from her natural sociability and empathy, which made her perceptive. He saw no real dividing line between magic and psychology, arguing that anyone seriously interested in occultism must be thoroughly versed in psychology in order to be able to distinguish psychological from occult effects. Like Nadezhda Pavlovna he had studied for a higher degree in psychology in order to “*объективно оценить... узнать что официальная наука об этом пишет*” [evaluate it objectively ...see what official science had to say about all this], and he is continuing to deepen his knowledge.

Vasilii Vasil’evich, who has lectured in psychology, thus operates on the borderline between psychotherapy and parapsychology, illustrated best when he said that if clients need medical psychiatric help he sent them to a medically trained psychiatrist, and if they clearly needed psychological help, he did not tell their fortunes or perform any rituals, but treated them in his capacity of psychologist. As he said, sometimes this involved a small deception involving psychosomatic techniques:

Если кто-то решил что у него сглаз или порча.., и он убежден на сто процентов что это так, и ему ничто не поможет кроме так снять у него этого колдовства, тут бесполезно говорить <<тебе необходимо ... другая помощь.>> Бесполезно. Послушает и пойдет к другому специалисту, который все равно снимает эту порчу... А для отхода сглаза можно снять порчу. Провести ритуал, просто формально, без

реальных каких-то действий. Тогда человек успокаивается ... и дальше выполняется нужная работа ... Главная задача, чтобы человеку стало хорошо...

[If someone has decided the evil eye or spoiling has been put upon him, and he's 100% convinced of it, and that nothing will help other than having the curse removed, it's useless telling him: "you need a different kind of help." He listens, and then goes off to another specialist, who will remove the spoiling... For the evil eye to go away you can remove the spoiling, perform a ritual, just formally, without any real effects. Then the person calms down... and the necessary treatment can begin. The main aim is that he should get better]

The occult tradition to which Vasilii Vasil'evich belongs is not a rural one, but rather stems from urban occultism of the late tsarist era - his magic knowledge is drawn from the writings of the famous French occultist and physician Papus (1865-1916).

Though both these magic specialists played down the role of folk tradition in their work, the majority, not least those calling themselves *koldun*, are happy to advertise a range of traditional services, even when they claim to take their knowledge from non-Russian esoteric beliefs such as voodoo or New Age [e.g. Shango, Zinaida]. Not all village magic and fortune-telling has made a direct transition; obviously, beliefs and procedures relating to the economic sphere of life - potential or actual agricultural disasters such as drought, crop failure, animal disease or cows going dry - have little place in an urban setting. The impulse towards magical help or useful prediction in that sphere does, however, survive in the competitive and often cruel economic circumstances of Russia today, now taking the form of business astrology, prediction and magic. These are widely advertised services which usually involve drawing up an astrological chart, laying out the cards or conducting a ritual to predict or ensure business or work success. More specifically, as Galina explained, they might help to select personnel, find out if it is a good time to open your premises or go on a business trip. By contrast, since matters of the heart and concerns over family welfare are eternal, it is services dealing with problems of this nature that have transferred most easily and with the least adaptation into the modern world. For example, Koldun Mstislav's website typically advertises return to the bosom of the family, *privorot* and the opposite, *otvorot* (making someone fall out of love), rituals to bring two hearts together and join two fates (usually known as removing the "crown of spinster/bachelor-hood") [Mstislav]. Another highly traditional group of services are those that Koldun Mstislav describes in non-traditional terms as *izbavlenie ot*

*negativnykh programm* [escape from negative programming], modern-speak for the removal of any kind of sorcery [*sniatie liubogo koldovstva*]: *porcha* [spoiling], *sglaz* [evil eye], *rodovoe prokliatie* [family curse]. The follow-up to negation of the curse is protection against sorcery, which is also frequently offered.

All these, whatever the language employed, are traditional, and in the pre-Revolutionary village along with healing formed a large part of the work of folk healers and sorcerers [Tolstoi 1999: 348]. Rather more surprising at first sight, given the existence of a modern police force, is the survival of criminal investigation techniques (uncovering thieves or murderers). It may reflect, perhaps, a lack of confidence in the detective powers of the police, but also that certain losses that matter a great deal to individuals are not taken very seriously by the police. In 2006, in a free Petersburg newspaper the karmic specialist Svetlana was offering to find people, cars, thieves or valuables [*Tsentrplius* 2006]. Clearly the targets of detection have changed; murderers are left to the police, and now attention is less on the perpetrator than the stolen or lost items. The reference to lost people refers mainly to the disappearance of husbands, and the client may not only want to know where he is but also order a love spell to bring him back. Methods too have changed. In the village the methods were very varied [Dobrovol'skaia 2001:103; Ryan 1999:111-2; Ivanits 1989: 116-8], while nowadays the method depends on the specific esoteric skill of the professional: Galina recounted how she had drawn up a special astrological chart in order to discover the whereabouts of lost keys.

The circumstances of life today have increased demand for some traditional services. One such is the offer to solve addiction to alcohol and gambling, usually described as “*заговоры от пьянства и азартных игр*” [charms against drunkenness and gambling] and indeed any other kind of addiction. There is a parallel here with the visits of thousands of pilgrims to the famous miracle working icon of the “Never-Draining Cup” in expectation of a cure for their own or their loved ones’ drink problem [Weichert 2003: 27-30]. For addiction and any other problem relating to family and loved ones, the tradition has emerged of presenting a photograph of the afflicted person to the esoteric specialist, so that magic rituals can be effective even though the person concerned is not present. The clairvoyant Marina, the tarot specialist Natal'ia, and the *mag* Nadezhda Pavlovna all expected this, and, unsurprisingly, web-based esoteric specialists make widespread use of this method. Other services are new responses to a changing society, such as rituals to make

you more attractive to the opposite sex, an expression of the modern belief in the right to happiness.

Contemporary magic specialists, whatever they call themselves, all stress their desire to help people with their problems. The professionals we interviewed, all of whom seemed entirely sincere, emphasized this point strongly. They acknowledged the existence of charlatans, who were, naturally enough, not them. This not to say that black magic is not on offer, even if few sorcerers openly offer black magic services like Mikhail Gor [Gor], who describes himself as the “*sil’neishii koldun Rossii*” [the most powerful sorcerer in Russia]. Those that do are mainly on the web, which being poorly regulated, allows them to post material designed to scare [e.g. Shango; Amanar]. Mag Tamerlan, for example, makes no bones about being a black magic specialist, and therefore more powerful [Tamerlan], while Koldun Mstislav at the end of his list of services mentions situations when revenge is necessary: “устранение опасных объектов, обряды магической агрессии” [the removal of dangerous objects and rituals of magical aggression] [Mstislav]. After all, those who visit a magic specialist believing the evil eye is upon them, or consider that family problems are the result of the malign intentions of an individual, known or unknown, believe in black magic. What is black magic for the mistress to whom a husband has fled is white magic for the wife who wants him back. Nadezhda Pavlovna seemed to recognise this when she said that it was ridiculous to suggest there was black and white magic. Magic was either present or it was not.

It should not be imagined that the procedures performed by magic specialists are traditional. Despite assertions about their hereditary calling, sorcerers generally do not claim that they offer traditional Russian magic rituals. This may be because there are few standard rituals for non-medical problems, and it would be unwise to risk exposure as a fraud by a client familiar with her local tradition. Indeed magic specialists face serious difficulties in creating client confidence and trust. In 2005 the reputable opinion poll organization FOM (Fond Obshchestvennoe mnenie) conducted a poll into the market for occult services in Russia. 50% of women polled and 32% of men thought magic could affect your health or fate, but Kertman pointed out that actual figures were higher because many people did not view village magic (mainly healing) as magical. 67% of those who were believers and 75% of non-believers thought that most commercial magic specialists were charlatans. Furthermore, the activities of professionals were set against what were seen as the much more trustworthy and genuine traditional

rural magic specialists. In case of need you looked “в основном в деревнях где еще сохранились старые традиции” [basically in villages where old traditions survive] [Kertman 2006: 73]. If this was not possible, you followed personal recommendation “только не по газете, не по объявлению” [only not from the newspaper, not from an ad] [Kertman 2006: 73]. Asserting a relationship with traditional magic, genuine or not, thus becomes part of a marketing strategy on the part of commercial specialists to increase trust and attract clients.

What is most important here it that it is the clients rather than the practitioners who retain a traditional magical world view. Since contemporary urban magic specialists must adapt their offerings to fit the market, the choice of offerings is primarily determined by the customer. As a consequence, the range of services is highly traditional, but not generally discourse, approach or even ritual. And naturally, the more professionals present their services in a traditional manner, the more their clients, who tend to be poor, young and/or less well educated [Kertman 2006:54], will continue to conceive of life’s difficulties in the old ways.

Traditional attitudes are a factor in the question of remuneration of fortune tellers and magic specialists alike. According to folk tradition, paying a folk healer or other occult specialist would nullify the cure, charm or prediction and even might have direr consequences, but gifts were given and expected [Wigzell 1998: 127]. Naturally, in the Soviet period it was illegal to earn money from esoteric services, and many informants emphasized that they did not charge. For example, Nadezhda Pavlovna said she was well known in her factory for her psychic skills, but, because she did not take money, the authorities left her alone. In the post-Soviet period the view that direct payment to an esoteric specialist is to be avoided remains strong. In the FOM survey of 2005, one focus group participant referred to the belief that if you paid a *znakharka*, nothing would work out and her gift would vanish. Another said:

И они никогда, я знаю, в очень редких случаях берут денежку, и вот только продуктами вот, какими-то услугами...

[And they never, well only in rare instances do they accept money, but only food or some favors] [Kertman 2006: 74].

The focus group in Voronezh were scathing about commercial magic specialists, seeing them as fraudsters:

2<sup>nd</sup> Female Participant: Это просто бизнесмены.  
[They’re just businessmen.]



1<sup>st</sup> Female Participant: Он выбрал себе свой бизнес, он зарабатывает на этом деньги.

[He's decided what business to go into, and that's how he makes his money.]

1<sup>st</sup> Male Participant: Он одурачивает людей и получает при этом деньги.

[He makes fools of people and gets paid for it.] [Kertman 2006: 75].

The sense that higher wisdom or service to others is incompatible with payment for services rendered evidently deterred some of our informants from becoming full-time professionals: Irina, who had intended becoming a professional astrologer, thought that an astrological reading was something spiritual, designed to help, and money should not be involved. When times were hard in the mid-1990s she had accepted presents, but only what people could afford. She was not the only one to be uneasy about money. Lidiia, who works semi-professionally as an astrologer and tarot card reader minimized what she charges by calling it *piat' kopeek* [5 copecks], by which she meant small sums of money like 10 or 50 rubles - a far cry from the 600r. that Natal'ia charged me, let alone the huge sums, up to \$15,000 dollars, charged by Mag Tamerlan. She does not count this money as income. Galina, who used to work part-time professionally, disapproved of the monetary approach to astrology. Those who work in centers such as Nadezhda Pavlovna or Boris Nikolaevich avoid the problem by getting the client to pay the cashier or receptionist. Vasilii Vasil'evich, who works independently, declared that he never took money in his own hand, while Natal'ia who read the tarot cards for me in her own apartment, also wanted the money placed on the table. For those who advertise on the internet and work with clients at a distance the problem may be said to be solved, as money is not handed directly to the specialist. The fact that money passes hands at all reduces the level of trust in commercial practitioners, who have to struggle to minimize the effect of longstanding attitudes.

Finally, I note that a visit to a fortune-teller or magic specialist has been presented here as a serious step for the client, while observing that in the Soviet era the survival of both divination and magic was assisted by their rebranding as entertainment, among friends in the case of the former and on the stage in the case of the latter. This development was not new for traditional divination, which was seen as fun, especially at Yuletide [Vinogradova 1981], something that is compatible with believing in the possibility of learning about the future. Today amusement probably generates a sizeable percentage of the online fortune-telling audience, and even of paying visitors to a fortune-teller. Magic is a different matter, since people normally only visit when there

is a problem. Fun seems unlikely, but curiosity is possible. In the FOM survey, 16% of those who had visited an esoteric specialist and 11% of those who might in the future were motivated by curiosity. The retreat of the magic world view means such people do not fear the consequences of not taking magic seriously. It is perhaps surprising that there are not more like them.

It is clear that traditional elements are pervasive in the commercial esoteric scene in Russia today, taking on a variety of guises, but strongest in the range of services proffered. When personal distress is conceived in traditional terms as the action of malign forces, requiring magic rituals to solve the problem, folk tradition continues little changed. Magic specialists, and to a lesser extent fortune-tellers, must deal with their clients' ways of looking at problems, even if they wish to solve them in more modern ways. Nonetheless, in using their clients' conceptual categories, like *porcha*, *sglaz* or *privorot*, they perpetuate the magical world view. Some traditional folk services like gypsy chiromancy or the finding of lost and stolen objects survive with minor adaptations. Old attitudes to payment flourish and so cannot be ignored by esoteric commercial specialists of all kinds, including astrologers, who in other respects do not follow Russian tradition. In some instances tradition is transmuted, as in the replacement of ordinary playing cards with tarot, or exists primarily at domestic and amateur level, like coffee-cup reading or dream interpretation. The impulses that lay behind folk tradition remain; hence, if in the village the chief economic concerns were the harvest or the farm animals, in modern Russian cities it is business astrology, tarot or magic that will help you in your work or business enterprise. And it is not just folk tradition that continues; modern publishing of fortune-telling texts in book or web form replicate many of the tricks of pre-Revolutionary publishers. Soviet psychics have left their trace on today's magic specialists, as indeed has the elite occult tradition of the early twentieth century. Commercial practices evolve in response to new demands, leading to the development of new traditions such as the request to bring a photograph to a consultation, or the evolution of an advertising language for esoteric services, such as the offer to remove the *venets bezbrachiia* [the spinster's crown]. As a result of this, the commercial magic scene in Russia today is distinct from its Western European counterparts and this distinctiveness is a consequence of Russian history and tradition.

## NOTES

1 I am grateful to the British Academy for funding fieldwork, and in particular to Dr Hakkarainen, without whom access to esoteric professionals would have been well-nigh impossible.

2 These figures relate to audiences in Russian towns of over 100,000 people.

3 The term “*netraditsionnoe tselitel'stvo*” [non-traditional healing] is to be contrasted to traditional healing. Healers who claim to be practicing folk medicine (many are not in fact) have the legal right to exist in Russia. The government has very slowly begun to clamp down on non-traditional practitioners, and it is less likely in 2009 than in 2006 that “non-traditional” would be employed in promoting esoteric services. Here Svetlana is clearly trying to appeal to a more sophisticated clientele.

4 For example, in Russian library subject catalogs, oneiromancy and fortune-telling appear in different sections, and today on websites, if you click on *gadanie* [fortune-telling], you will not generally be offered a reading of your dream.

5 Shakhnovich's work did not appear in print until 1996 [Shakhnovich 1996]. The book has some value for its information about professional fortune-tellers in Petersburg, but is marred by its absence of references, biased selection of material and tone of contempt.

6 In accordance with ethical research guidelines, all names have been changed.

7 Razumova's interest in dream interpretation relates to her topic of the family. In the course of her discussion she highlights a number of dream symbols and their interpretations familiar to her informants (mainly from Karelia and the Archangel region). The dream objects include those that did not usually feature in pre-Revolutionary dreambooks, such as mushrooms and berries, those with variant interpretations where both the oral and the literary tradition are represented, such as cats, and those where the two traditions coincide, such as teeth. In her material, as in my own surveys of 1989-90, folk symbols and interpretations are seen to have endured better than dreambook material.

8 In cartomancy the situation is different. Mlle Lenormand's picture symbol cards, popular in the nineteenth century, are now on sale again, though the Mademoiselle has become a Madame in the intervening years. The cards lack the connection with the Hermetic sciences attributed to tarot.

9 This text is undated, but may be by Vadim Samokatov a writer on esoteric, sexual and other topics. The poll was certainly carried out by VTsIOM, who poll 1600 people about their beliefs annually, but I have been unable to trace this particular one, and assume it is 2001, because in 2002, the VTsIOM survey in this area was focused on St Petersburg. Of the 1000 people interviewed, 53% believed that dreams can foretell the future. Since then the proportion of people believing in fate, omens and magic has certainly fallen. VTsIOM no longer asks about dreams,

10 There were many other names in different areas, as well as names for those who specialized in, say, locating lost property or telling fortunes.

11 Albeit ineffectually, as Steve Smith has shown [Smith 2007].

12 A parallel exists with the development in the 1920s of eschatological protest in the form of heavenly letters and memorates about visions of doom. Steve Smith sees them as a reaction to the Bolshevik project to promote a scientific and rational society, but which had engendered turmoil and uncertainty, and hence actually encouraged “superstition” [Smith 2005: 336].

13 There are parallels with fortune-tellers. As noted above, cartomancers often claim to have learnt the skill from an older relative, but when informants wanted to talk more broadly about the gift of occult powers rather than their divinatory method, which was normally learnt (astrology, tarot), they talked of coming from families with a clairvoyant or divinatory bent, or of being born with a gift, like Nora Pavlovna, the occult tarologist.

#### LIST OF INFORMANTS

Aleksei, born 1956, academic, amateur astrologer, draws up horoscopes for friends.

Alisa, born 1960, academic sociologist.

Boris Nikolaevich, 50s, professional chiromancer, otherwise teacher in a scientific institute.

Dasha, born 1983, student, client, devotee and amateur practitioner.

Galina, born 1970. Formerly professional astrologer, now a manager.

Irina, 40s, secondary education, office worker and astrologer. Rejected professional path.

Larisa, born around 1963, affluent New Russian, not working, client and admirer of Marina, a professional clairvoyant with qualifications in psychology.

Lidiia, born 1960, an architect by training. Semi-professional astrologer and tarologist.

Linda, born 1982, graduate, works in public relations, client and devotee.

Liza, born 1980, works in call center, active amateur tarologist, also astrology and runes.

Masha, born about 1982. Proof reader at a magazine. Astrologer, thinking of becoming a p/t professional.

Nadezhda Pavlovna, born around 1963, graduate with further qualifications in psychology. Magic specialist.

Natal'ia, 50-ish, professional tarologist. Also interprets dreams. Formerly worked in a Psychological Center.

Nina Vladimirovna, early 50s, psychoanalyst.

Nora Pavlovna, born 1961, professional occult tarologist.

Oksana, born 1960, p/t professional astrologer.

Tania, born 1983, graduate businesswoman, client and devotee.

Vasilii Vasil'evich, born 1968, degree in building construction with graduate qualifications in psychology. Professional magic specialist.

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