

Kupalo: fire, water, flowers, nature, and love

(from an article by Orysia Paszczak Tracz)

Midsummer's Night, celebrated all over Europe, is the longest day, and the shortest night of the year. It is the height of summer, the turning point, the day when the sun is at its longest, highest power. Nature also has reached its peak, with plants at the pinnacle of their growth. Wild plants, especially herbs and medicinal plants are at the height of their curative powers, and are gathered that day for use throughout the year. The basic elements of each Ukrainian feast, and their symbolism, are present here also: fire, water, holy Mother Earth and nature, ancestors, and love/fertility/procreation. Fire symbolizes and reinforces the power of the sun, and is present in the enormous bonfires and in the burning big wheels of straw careening down hillsides towards the water. Water symbolizes life and purification, and the companion of fire. Fire evaporates water, water puts out fire. Water from heaven – the dew – is very powerful in the early morning of the feast, and people wash and roll in the dew in order to be healthy for the rest of the year.

All villagers are expected to attend the Kupalo festivities, and there are even songs mocking and shaming those who do not. Kupalski pisni, the Kupalo ritual songs, are about love, nature, and Marena and Kupalo, symbolic of this feast.



Two scarecrow-type figures made from tree branches or saplings are dressed as a male and a female, then carried around by the young people singing ritual songs. Often a young tree is decorated with ribbons, flowers and other ornaments by the young women, and is carried as Marena.

The power of plant life on this night is reinforced by the fragrant herbs braided into the vinky, the garlands or wreaths of wildflowers worn by the young women. These wreaths, with candles in them, foretell the maiden's romantic future as they are gently cast into the flowing water. Depending if the vinok floats, sinks, gets caught in an undertow or tangles on the bank – this symbolizes if, when, and whom she will marry, or even if she and/or he will die.

It is believed that all plant life in the forest comes alive during this night, and trees walk and talk. The



elusive "tsvit paporoti" – the fern flower that is considered the flower of good fortune – blooms at midnight. Whoever finds it, picks it and manages to bring it home, will be the richest, wisest, most loved and most blissful person on earth.

Love plays an integral part in these rituals. Couples who are in love and want to marry jump over the bonfire holding hands to seal their fate. Couples frolic in the water together. In some regions, the ideal was to jump over the bonfire directly into the water. In early times this was done after disrobing, because certain rituals were more powerful if carried out in the "natural state."

Why is this holiday sometimes called the feast of Ivana Kupala? As with most of our traditions, it is an example of dualism, of the combination of pre-Christian and Christian religions. The celebration of Kupalo fell around the time of the Feast of St. John the Baptist, Ivan Khrestytel, so the name of the feast became that of Ivan Kupalo, and the feast was moved from the June summer solstice to July.

On this night we can go back in time to the enchanted world of magic, nature and love (and if some of you do wander off into the woods, the organizers of the festivities and the vatra take no responsibility for the consequences).

