

# Fetish and Taboo: The Anthropology of Money in Russia

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## Abstract

The book focuses on an issue that has been widely neglected in folklore studies in general and especially with respect to Russia and Russian anthropology: Money plays a crucial role in the social and economic behaviour of people in modern capitalism. This also makes it a central hinge and focal point of the changes in the 20 years that shook the post-soviet world. The changing role of money in economy and society plays a defining role in the overall process of change — money is „what transformation is about“. Studying the anthropology of money in Russia, therefore, promises not only to bring new insights into the historical and cultural backgrounds of transition; it also allows us to understand certain aspects of the process of transition itself from a new angle.

Studying contemporary, modern money-folklore and following through to more ancient layers of monetary anthropology proved highly interesting. The material gathered in the given book includes old, classical genres, such as fairytales or *byliny*, as well as more recent material originating from 100 to 200 years ago. But it focuses mainly on modern, „fresh“ material, including practices, beliefs, texts or narratives that still are productive, today. For the description of contemporary monetary beliefs and practices, fresh material had to be collected in field work especially for this volume. Some of today's leading Russian scholars of Anthropology could be won as contributors. It is interesting to note that the initial reaction of some researchers to our proposal was somewhat sceptical — until they started to study their material. All researchers then found the issue of money not only relevant but also extremely interesting — concepts of money and of money-related actions or relationships are of very high relevance in Russian

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culture. Nevertheless, the role of money, e.g. in Russian fairy tales, has not been systematically studied, yet. There doesn't seem to be much money in Russian anthropology.

In our work with the material, we found it useful to distinguish „money magic“ — that is, magic that aims at making money — from „money rituals“, meaning money as part or medium of practices that serve other purposes. And we differentiated our material by social groups, each developing their own folkloristic concepts and rules of behaviour related to money. Also, we found it important to differentiate old and new folkloristic genres of text, that is, we looked into historical layers of more or less traditional folkloristic genres such as fairy tales or sagas, as well as songs or jokes about money in the first half of the past century. And finally, it seemed important to also look into some concepts around and about money that constantly arise in the history of monetary discourse. So the lead questions of this volume were: how does one magically make money — and how does one use it as an instrument in rituals; *who* uses money magically or ritually, and how is money a *topic of discourse*.

The answers to these questions form the five parts of this book: The first part covers modern magical practices and mythologies of money. It is headed by Alexandra Arkhipova's and Jakob Fruchtmann's article about the magic of money in contemporary urban practices. These practices are so popular that whole series of books with magical spells and incantations for making money are regularly sold quite successfully, really making money for the publishing houses. Mikhail Alekseevsky analyses this genre of popular fakelore in his paper. But money is not only the end of many magical practises — it is also regularly used as one of the most important means for „making money“. One theme that is recurrent in many contexts is the unspendable, ever-returning coin (*неразменный рубль*) — a very popular and old myth about money that always returns to its owner. This topic is covered by Olga Belova, who, by the way, also explains, how such a coin may be gained.

The second part of the book takes a closer look at ritual money and monetary practises that involve money, but don't necessarily aim at making money, themselves. It begins with an article about money in the world of the contemporary countryside, which is based on material from the Russian North. This article by Andrej Moroz and Nikita Petrov shows quite astonishing parallels between ancient practices and mythologies and the actual beliefs and practices of people, living in the deep Russian province,

today. Turning towards urban practises, we find a paper about ritual money in spontaneous urban practices, such as throwing coins into public fountains, by Dmitry Gromov. An example of highly active and developing monetary folklore practices are the rituals connected to marriage and money – a paper by Daria Levikina and Natalja Solosina on this issue closes the chapter.

Our third field of interest focuses on the differentiation of traditions and beliefs in specific social and age groups. It opens with Dmitrij Doronin's paper on the profession of shamans who are literally surrounded by money-taboos and whose contact with the spirits is often closely related to money as a magical instrument. Further, Anna Sokolova goes into a detailed analysis of the functions of money in rituals of students of military academies at the end of their education, practices that are said to go almost 200 hundred years back in Russian history. The tradition of students placing a five kopek coin in their shoes for good luck in their exams, seems to be of younger origin. It is described by Anastasija Astapova. And different aspects of the highly interesting field of money games and practices in children's folklore are covered by the articles by Valentin Golovin and Ekaterina Bychkova.

The fourth part takes a look at how money is talked about in different text types both old and new and begins with a general overview by Konstantin Bogdanov, who covers the field of money in classical folklore. Jakob Fruchtmann continues with an article on the monetary economy of fairytales, which is followed by Nikita Petrov and his paper on money in the world of Russian epic poems (*былины*). A more recent layer of Russian folklore is covered by Mikhail Lurie and his article on money in the urban song of the 20'ies (*блатная песня*). The chapter concludes with an article by Daria Radchenko about a very modern text type – the practices of chain letters forwarded through the internet that are supposed to lead to money.

Not only in Russia, (anti-) monetary morals are part of very old discursive developments: money often plays the „selfish“ counterpart to altruism, selflessness or virtue and moral behaviour. Sometimes, this even reflects on a concept of patriotism as an anti-monetary concept of selflessness. The fifth part of the book therefore discusses the history of themes like the money that Judas Iscariot, the traitor, received for denouncing Jesus. The use of this topic as a metaphor in literary and political discourse throughout the centuries is discussed by Dmitry Antonov and Mikhail

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Maisuls. Alexandra Arkhipova analyses the more specific and acute discourse on money as an antipode of patriotism — the meme of the «money of the state departement» played an important part in the public denunciation of the democratic opposition in 2011 and 2012, identifying opposition with treason and materialistic selfishness — which in turn became an ironic meme of the democratic movement itself. Marina Hakkarainen focuses on so-called «Jewish money» in the context of social and political transformations, which gives a different perspective on money and morals. And finally, Alexander Panchenko focuses on the practices of anti-monetary discourse in religious sects likes the «Vissarionovcy» of today's Russia, who, for some time, condemning money as immoral, tried to live without them in the middle of today's Russian capitalism.