The Slave Soul of Russia

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A favorite theater of pain in Russia is the communal bathhouse ("bania"). This idea may seem strange to the Westerner who is accustomed to the lonely pleasure of a tepid bathtub, or the bracing spray of a shower. A proper Russian bath, however, is not just relaxing, or bracing. It truly hurts. The Russian does not merely soap up and rinse off, but endures additional quotas of suffering. The water (or beer, or kvass) thrown on to the stones or bricks atop a special bathhouse stove (termed "kamenka" in the countryside) produces steam which is so hot as to bring out a profuse sweat in the bathers. The eyes and nostrils sting from the heat. Moreover, the naked bathers flail one another (or themselves) with a bundle of leafy birch twigs (termed a "venik"). This mild flagellation supposedly assists the steam in flushing out the pores of the skin, and leaves behind the pleasant fragrance of the birch. Sometimes the hot portion of the bath is followed up with a roll in the snow, or a dip in a nearby river or lake, or a cold shower. The hot bath may then be repeated.¹

Russians of all social strata perform the bathhouse ritual willingly, and often follow it up with a hearty meal and drinks. Russians who do not know how to perform the ritual are rare. A criminal character in Vasilii Shukshin's novella Snowball Berry Red has spent so much of his time either in prison or on the run that he does not know how to make proper use of a bania: instead of pouring more water on the kamenka, he pours it on a fellow-bather, scalding him. He is called a "halfwit" ("poludurok") for such incredible ignorance.²
BORN IN A BANIA

Cleansing Body and Soul

Pain is essential to the bania. In the Primary Chronicle it was said of ancient Novgorodian bathers that “they make of the act not a mere washing but a veritable torment.” Adam Olearius, who partook of a bania in Astrakhan in the middle of the seventeenth century, declared that the combined heating and beating was “unbearable for me.” Soviet writer V. Kabanov conjures up the cries of pain/delight uttered by peasant bathers as they would lash one another in the traditional bania: “Gradually, with growing excitement, the bathers would pass the venik from hand to hand, not letting a moment go by without using it. The sweaters would cry out rapturously, “okh!,” “akh!,” “ukh!,” and would ask those down below to put on more steam.”

It doesn’t take a clinician to recognize the masochistic element in this practice. Journalist Hedrick Smith, who visited the famous Sandunov Baths in Moscow, refers to the “special twist of Russian masochism” in Russian public bathing. He adds: “The banja is supposed to produce a sense of well-being but in my experience Russians do not really enjoy that without a preliminary dash of masochism.”

Russians themselves, though they may enjoy it, think of the bania as a kind of punishment as well. The colloquialism “zadat’ baniu” (literally, “to give a bath”) means “to give it (to someone) hot,” “to let ’em have it,” as in a reprimand. Earlier, according to Dahl’s dictionary, this expression meant “to flog” (“vysech’”), as in: “Dam baniu, chto do novykh venikov ne zabudes’” (lit., “I’ll give you such a bath that you won’t forget it before the next veniki”). Elsewhere, in his collection of proverbs, Dahl provides some related expressions:

They gave him such a bath that he was scared out of his wits (or: that the very devils were sickened) (Takui u baniu zadali, chto nebo s ovchinku pokazalos’ [ili: chto chertiam toshno stalo]).

You’ll remember (or: you won’t forget) this bath till the next veniki (Budesh’ baniu etu pomnit’ [ili: ne zabudes’] do novykh venikov).

Don’t mention banias, for there are veniki for you as well (Nepominai bani: est’ veniki i pro tebia).

The last item is paradoxical. It refers to someone who lives well and has so much leisure time as to be able to take a bania often. But this person
should not brag, that is, should not mention the bania, for he or she will encounter misfortune in the future as well, will be punished by veniki just as everyone else is.

The bania cleans not only the body, but the soul. That is, it removes guilt: “Bania vse grekh smoer”9 (“The bania will wash away all sins”). Were there no pain involved in going to the bania, this would not be the case. An American hot shower does not wash away sins, but a Russian bania does. Guilt is removed by means of punishment. A bania is a handy device for periodically dealing with the chronic, low-level guilt feelings of most Russians.

“The essence of the steam bath,” says ethnographer Dmitrii Zelenin, “is to be beaten over the body with a hot venik.”10 The veniki are understood to be the chief instruments of punishment in the bania. The organ they stimulate is the skin, which becomes red with irritation. The process might be termed skin masochism of a non-eroto-genic type. Apparently there is no real damage to the skin, although there are fantasies of severe damage, such as the narrations about bathhouse demons who peel away a person’s skin.11 In a hellish scene in Dostoevsky’s House of the Dead the prisoners’ scars from previous floggings turn a bright, glistening red in the bathhouse steam.12

When wet the veniki are soft and do not hurt very much. Were someone to be beaten (“steamed”) with a dry venik the pain would be much greater (“Poparit’ sukhim venikom”).13 The venik can also be personified: “Venik v bane vsekh (i tsaria) starshe” (“The venik in the bania is older than everybody, including the tsar,” i.e., is the highest authority). There is also: “Venik v bane vsem gospodin/nachal’nik,”14 literally, “The venik in the bania is everybody’s master/boss.” This expression might be used in a context where, in English, someone would say “I’m the boss here!” But the venik has its limits: “Bez pereviaslali venik rassypalsia”15 (“Without its binding the venik would fall apart”).

In Mikhail Zoshchenko’s famous 1924 short story Bania the customary veniki are never once mentioned. However, the narrator manages to “beat himself” throughout the course of the story by means of laughter. It takes an hour for him just to find a tub to use for washing himself. He then has to wash standing up, and he is so irritated by noisy, soap-splattering fellow bathers that he decides to go home to finish bathing. Upon leaving he discovers that one of his claim checks has been lost, and someone else’s trousers are returned to him. The joke is on
him—or on urban Soviet bathhouses generally, which do not measure up to (fantasized) American bathhouses.\textsuperscript{16}

There is a series of delightful paintings by the contemporary artist Sima Vasil'eva depicting the bania. One pair from this series is reproduced in a volume of the \textit{Biblioteka russkogo fol'klora}.\textsuperscript{17} These two pictures illustrate, among many other things, contrasting attitudes toward the venik. In the first picture, titled “Ban’ka,” the interior of a normal Russian village bania is represented. The men and women inside are naked, and are flailing themselves with veniki. A woman on the roof of the bania is sitting astride a venik, about to fly off. In the other picture, titled “Alternative Bania,” sits a group of staid, fully dressed Soviet officials. Some veniki are hung up on the wall, others are being held as if they were rifles by two policemen, one on each side of the bania. The veniki connote punishment in both pictures, but whereas in the first they are instruments of an erotically charged masochism, in the second they will be wielded sadistically by the policemen against anyone who might dare approach the bania.

\textit{Digression on Russian Birches}

Normally the veniki used in a bania are prepared from small branches cut from a birch tree (“bereza”). This is done in the spring when the leaves are just coming out on the twigs, and birch fragrance is at a maximum. Appropriately enough, the birch itself has connotations of punishment and pain.

The birch makes one smarter, \textit{about the rod} (Bereza uma daet, o rozgakh).

Sent away to count birches, \textit{sent off to Siberia, along the great road} (Uslan berezki schitat’, soslan v Sibir’, po bol’shoi doroge).

To feed somebody birch kasha, \textit{to whip} (Nakormit’ kogo berezovoi kashei, postegat’).\textsuperscript{18}

These expressions are as comprehensible to Russians today as they were over a century ago, when the birch switch was commonly used as a means of administering corporal punishment.\textsuperscript{19} They might be compared with the somewhat pale English verb “to birch,” that is, to whip with a birch rod. As for the “birch kasha,” it refers to the greenish mess that a
venik turns into when it has been used to hit someone over and over again. The image is curiously oral, suggesting that eating is a punishment (cf. English “eat crow”). A threat to punish someone might be stated as: “You’ll find out what birch kasha tastes like” (“Uznaesh’ vkus berezovoi kashi”).

There is also a denial that the birch is dangerous: “The birch is no threat—it rustles but can’t move” (“Bereza ne ugroza: gde stoit, tam i shumit”). The English equivalent might be: “All bark and no bite” (macaronic pun unintended).

The birch is of course the favorite tree of Russian peasant culture. This no doubt has something to do with the fact that various species of the birch genus (Betula) are common throughout vast stretches of European and Asian Russia. Dahl reports that, in the Saint Petersburg area, “bereza” was simply the generic term for any deciduous tree. In the spring the birch tree provides a tasty and healthful sap (from which a birch kvas might also be made). The birch’s freshly green branches, in addition to being cut for making bathhouse veniki, were formerly used to decorate the interior of the peasant hut. During Semik week (seventh after Easter) and on Whitsun (Troitsa) young girls would dance around a special birch tree, some of whose branches they had “curled” (“zavivali”), that is, twisted into the form of wreaths. The top branches of the tree would be bent over and tied to the ground, or two birches standing side by side might be tied together at the top. Girls who kissed through the wreaths (“kumitsia”) were said to be friends for life. Sometimes the girls decorated the birch wreaths with flowers or ribbons and wore them on their heads. The birch might be cut down, dressed in human (usually a woman’s) clothing, and later abandoned in a rye field (to promote crop growth) or thrown into a river. Birch wreaths, too, were thrown into water in fortunetelling rituals. Birch buds were supposed to have special curative and protective powers. Mermaids (“rusalki”) might choose to live in the branches of the birch tree. Patriotic Soviet films almost invariably featured birch imagery. During the late Soviet period an early summer holiday, termed “Russkaia berezka,” was celebrated in some areas. As Russian national self-awareness intensified during the late Soviet period, birch references became common in such conservative journals as Sovetskaia Rossia, where one could find such slogans as: “the birch is the symbol of the Russian land.”

Clearly the birch was and still is an important cultural object for Russians, especially for women. Its importance in women’s agricultural
rituals of growth was established by Soviet folklorist Vladimir Propp. To this day the birch is regarded as something like the Russian national tree. When in 1992 Bulat Okudzhava opened an article with the words "There is no peace under the birches" ("Net mira pod berezami"), his readers automatically understood that he was referring to unrest going on specifically in Russia.24

The fact that the birch was traditionally personified in some way is what is of psychoanalytic interest. It was dressed in a woman’s clothing, for example. During the Semik-Troitsa rituals girls would sing loud songs to it. They would address their wishes and requests to it. It would be dragged into peasant huts and offered food. In some wedding songs it was forced to submit to the wind by “bowing down” in the direction the wind blows.25 In the lyric songs generally it was associated with the sadness, suffering, and overall miserable lot of women.26 But precisely which person, which woman might she (“bereza” is a feminine noun) have represented?

Here Propp unknowingly lends the analyst a hand when he interprets the belief that a birch tree thrown into a pond insures adequate rainfall for the summer: “The harvest [urozhai] depended on earth and water, and on their union. The same little birch that was supposed to provide the fields with the earth’s birthing strength [rozhdaushchei siloi zemli] was obliged to provide them with the moisture, without which the earth will not give birth [rodit’ ne budet].”27

Who, if not a mother, could this imagery possibly refer to? If the birch was not a mother herself, then at least she was a midwife who, by some contagious fertility, assisted “mother earth” in producing a crop (“urozhai”) of rye (“rozh’”), itself often imaged as a mother (“mashushka rozh’,” “rzhitsa-mashushka”).

Before the Soviet period women prayed to birch trees in the area of Svetloiar (near Nizhnii-Novgorod), addressing the trees as “birch mother” (“bereza mashushka”).28 A topos in some of the Russian spells placed the Mother of God beside a birch tree: “U beloi berezy sidit mat’ presviataia bogoroditsa.”29 The maternal suggestiveness of the birch is also more recent. Tat’iana Tolstaia quotes a Soviet popular song from the 1970s: “And the motherland generously fed me birch juice, birch juice” (“I rodina shchedro poila menia berezovym sokom, berezovym sokom”).30

On the other hand, the birch in the girls’ songs could also refer to
the girls themselves who participated in the spring rituals, for it bore such names as “devushka” (girl), “krasota” (beauty), “nevesta” (bride), and “kuma” (girlfriend). According to folklorist Tat’iana Bernshtam the decorated birch is a “maidenly symbol” (“devichi simvol”).\(^{31}\) Philologist Paul Friedrich speculates that the birch is an ancient symbol of “young, virginal femininity” that goes back to the Proto-Indo-Europeans of five thousand years ago.\(^ {32}\)

The psychoanalytic consequence of this double semantic potential of the birch is most interesting. During the Semik-Troitsa rituals the girls treated the birch totem in a rather violent fashion. They twisted and tied the birch branches in various ways, they ripped branches off the tree (“zalomati”), they cut the tree down, sometimes they stripped off the bark (“obdirai a kak belochku”), and they chopped it up into little pieces, or set it afire, or they hurled it into a body of water to the accompaniment of funeral-like songs (“otpevani e berezki”).\(^ {33}\)

If the birch is, indeed, a maternal icon, then is this any way to treat a mother? If, on the other hand, the birch is a maidenly symbol, as Bernshtam says it is, then is this any way for a girl to treat herself? Is it sadism or is it masochism that is being signified?

True, the girls would sing sad songs to the little birch as they conducted it to its place of destruction. But such behavior does seem to be a ritualized form of anger and rejection. Each girl who actively participated in the Semik-Troitsa destruction ritual was either acting out a sadistic fantasy against her mother, or she was playing a masochistic fantasy against herself. Possibly she was doing both, given the task of breaking with the mother that adolescent girls normally have to work through.

The participants in the rituals apparently did feel some guilt over what they did to the birch tree. Shein reports that, in the village of Kornilovka in Muromsk uyezd, the “curling” (“zavivanie”) of the birch was considered to be a sin (“grekh”), and that the girls tried to hide this ceremony from the older members of the collective.\(^ {34}\) It is worth noting that, in many areas of Russia, during most times of the year there was a taboo on felling trees or cutting off tree branches.\(^ {35}\)

In the village of Mstera, according to Shein, girls shouted “Toni, semik, topi serditykh muzhei” (“Sink, Semik, drown angry husbands!”) as they threw the little birch into a river. This would seem to indicate anxiety about the way that their future husbands were going to treat
them, or the way their fathers were treating their mothers. A song they sang earlier around the birch reveals rather strong emotions about wife beating:

Гей ты березка, белая, кудрявая,  
В поле на долине стояла;  
Мы тебя срубили,  
Мы тебя срубили,  
Сруби и ты мужа,  
Сломи ему голову,  
На правую сторону,  
С правой да на левую.

Hi, you little white curly birch,  
In a field in the valley you stood.  
We cut you down,  
We ruined you,  
So you, too, ruin your husband,  
Cut his head off,  
On the right side,  
From the right to the left!36

The rather sudden transition in line five suggests that the birch tree was an object on which the girls would vent their frustration concerning the violent relationship of spouses. If the spouses in question were their parents, then the girls seemed to be blaming mothers who allowed themselves to be mistreated by their husbands. In effect: if you allow your husband to ruin you, we will ruin you too, so you ruin him instead.

If, on the other hand, the husband to be ruined was their own, that is, if they were thinking about the future, then the girls seemed to be directing their anger both at themselves and their abusive husbands: we will ruin any husbands who ruin us.

Whatever the meaning of the ritualized birch-abuse, the song does indicate a high degree of sadomasochistic ideation. If the birch is a mother, then the fantasy basis of the abuse is sadistic. If the birch is the singer herself (e.g., as future, married woman), then the fantasy basis is masochistic.

More folkloric examples of the association of the birch tree with sadomasochistic ideas could be adduced. At this point it is enough to observe that such an association exists, and that the “birching” which goes on in a Russian bathhouse is therefore consistent with the overall
picture. That is, the use of birch veniki in the bathhouse flagellation ritual seems to fit into an overall sadomasochistic complex of attitudes concerning the birch tree.  

The Bania-Mother

As observed earlier, clinicians link masochistic behaviors and attitudes to early interaction with the mother. We have just seen that the birch has unmistakable maternal attributes. But what about the bania itself? There could hardly be a more maternal image in Russia than the bania. One enjoys the bania in the nude, that is, in the equivalent of what we would call a birthday suit (“v chem mat' rodila”). In his dictionary Dahl quotes these peasant sayings: “The bania is a second mother” or “The bania is one’s own mother” (“Bania mat’ vtorai a ili mat’ rodnaia”).  

(recall that the same assertion is made about the stove in a peasant hut; the bania, like the hut, contains the essential stove). There are some very good reasons why the peasant would make this blatant equation.

First of all, the bania is perceived as a place one goes to cure all ills: “The bania fixes up everything” (“Bania vse pravit”); “If it weren’t for the bania we would all be done for” (“Koli b ne bania, vse b my propali”). These sayings are listed right after the “second mother” reference in Dahl’s dictionary, and they reflect a typical childish attitude, to the effect that “mother will take care of everything.” In Illiustrov’s dictionary of proverbs the connection is direct: “The bania is our mother, it will straighten the bones and fix up the whole body” (“Bania—mat’ nasha, kosti raspravit, i vse telo popravit”).  

Second, the inside of a bania is very wet. Water is thrown upon hot bricks or stones to produce steam, which condenses everywhere within the bania. The whole interior becomes dripping wet, warm, womblike. Francine du Plessix Gray describes her experience in the “mother-hot darkness” of the Siberian variant of a bania:

Coddled in that dark maternal warmth, inhaling the dry, hot smell of pine and eucalyptus and birch leaves and of the smoldering stove, the perfume of the tea and jam in the room next door, I was transported to the arms of the Russian women who had cared for me so well when I was a small child, my great-grandmother, my great-aunt; to the fragrant intimacy of the tiny icon-filled rooms of their Paris exile, to memories of their own nurturing warmth, cheer,
gentleness, selflessness, stoic patience—qualities which have given me whatever strength I've had in life.\(^\text{40}\)

The association of water with the mother is of course well established in Russian lore. "Mother earth" is specifically "moist" ("mat' syra zemlia"). Rivers are often called "mother." One must not spit into a body of water, because that would be the same thing as spitting into one's own mother's eyes ("Plevat' na vodu, vse odno, chto materi v glaza").\(^\text{41}\) The plural form "vody" in Russian, like the English plural "waters," refers specifically to the amniotic fluid in the mother's womb.\(^\text{42}\) As Joanna Hubbs points out, peasants in many parts of Russia simply addressed water as "mother."\(^\text{43}\)

The maternal connotations of water are not only Russian. In the dreams, folklore, mythology, etc. of many peoples water imagery is associated with childbirth. Psychoanalyst Otto Rank devotes much attention to this connection in his classic 1909 study *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero*. For example, while the Persian King Cyrus was being born his mother dreamt that "so much water passed away from her that it became as a large stream, inundating all Asia, and flowing as far as the sea."\(^\text{44}\) Other psychoanalytic scholars have also studied the maternal significance of water imagery.\(^\text{45}\)

The bania itself was traditionally built near a body of water, such as a lake or a river. An illustration to Kabanov's article shows two bani actually *in* the water of a large lake.\(^\text{46}\)

Even more maternally significant than the aquatic associations is the fact that, well into the Soviet period, childbirth itself typically took place right in the bania.\(^\text{47}\) A dialectal meaning of the verb "banit'" ("to wash," related to "bania") is "to perform midwifery."\(^\text{48}\) The "bath prayer" ("bannaia molitva") referred specifically to a prayer a priest would recite on behalf of the woman about to give birth.\(^\text{49}\) Of a stillborn child, or of a newborn child that quickly died, it was said: "Right from the bania and into the pit" ("Iz ban'ki da v iamku").\(^\text{50}\)

If the wetness of the bania makes it a metaphor for the mother, its physical contiguity to her during the parturition process made it a metonymy for her. The connection of the bania with the mother was thus a semantic double whammy in the peasant imagination.

The bania was a good place to give birth because it was usually located some distance away from the rest of the population, and hot
water was readily available there. This is not to say, however, that either privacy or cleanliness were of any concern. Indeed, the notion of privacy has never had much currency in Russia, and today’s notions of hygienic medical practice were not known to the peasants. A mother giving birth was considered both unclean (“nechistaia”) in the ritualistic sense and vulnerable to possible evil wishes of others. It was therefore best that she be isolated from most of the people she knew during childbirth (although at least a midwife was likely to be present). As for hygiene, David Ransel points out that, “until very late in the imperial era it was rare to find a village midwife who bothered to wash her hands before testing cervical dilation.”

Apparently it was a widespread practice for the midwife (“povitukha,” “povival’naia babka”) to actually administer a steam bath to a woman during labor and/or after delivery. In some areas this included a beating about the mother’s abdomen with the standard veniki. A treatise on midwifery published in 1784 by the physician Nestor Ambodik states that peasant midwives, “disregarding the fact that they [women in labor] are sweating enormously, mercilessly rub their bellies with coarse veniki and treat them to irritating drinks, with the intent of speeding up the process of childbirth.” In difficult or prolonged labor rather extreme measures were taken. Various ways of shaking the woman, hanging her upside down, rubbing her abdomen, and giving her drinks to induce vomiting are described by Professor Rein in his 1889 paper.

Even more horrifying was the treatment accorded the newborn child. Antonio Sanches, in a treatise published in 1779, reports that it was common for the mother to steam the child along with herself within hours after birth. Ambodik says that, when the infant was taken to the bania to be washed, it was placed on a shelf high up, near the ceiling, so as to receive the maximum amount of steam and heat. In addition, it was scourged with veniki, then doused with cold water. Another medical doctor, E. A. Pokrovskii writing in 1884, reports that steaming of the newborn child was standard practice in northern and central regions of Russia, and among Russians living in Siberia. The term “steaming” (“parenie”) refers both to heating by means of steam and flogging with birch veniki (e.g., “parenie venikami”). Pokrovskii refers to infants developing a special type of rash from this treatment.

The mother and newborn child, while recovering from the trauma of parturition, were treated to more than one round of steaming and
flagellation with veniki in the bania. Various lullabies sung to the newborn infant (by the midwife or the mother), and various spells pronounced by the midwife, refer to “steaming” (“parit’”) the infant. According to T. A. Listova, one of the main reasons for the midwife to stay on a few days after the birth took place (second half of the nineteenth century) was to administer steam baths to mother and child. She quotes the “widespread” rule that “the midwife may leave only after three baths” (“povitukha dolzhna uiti toľ'ko posle trekh ban’”). Again, the use of the word “bania” here suggests the usual application of both steam and veniki. Listova also quotes Zelenin to the effect that the village midwife would “steam” (“poparit”) mother and child.

An illustration in Pokrovskii’s book shows an exhausted young mother lying on a bed of straw in a bathhouse. Several women are shown entering the doorway of the bathhouse, bringing food with them. Barely visible in the steamy upper left corner is the midwife. She is beating a naked newborn child with veniki.

From day one, then, the Russian peasant child was subjected to the intense thermal and tactual stimulation of the bania. This postpartum treatment was repeated on an almost daily basis for several weeks. When the midwife left, the (by definition pre-Oedipal) mother was the one who would “steam” her child. As the child grew, it became quite accustomed to the bania experience. Images of the bania must have been among the early memories of every adult peasant.

Typically the peasant would go to the bania once a week, on Saturday. This was often a family affair. Not only was there often a mixing of the sexes in both the peasant and commercial baths of tsarist times, there was also a mixing of the generations. Several of the illustrations provided by Professor Cross in his excellent article bear this out. A drawing by Jean-Baptiste Le Prince, who had spent some years in Russia in the second half of the eighteenth century, depicts a bania full of children and adults, including a woman pouring water over a child. A drawing done by one P. Iw (Ivanov?) in the mid-nineteenth century shows a woman with a child on her lap. An etching by Mikhail Kozlovskii (late eighteenth century) shows an assortment of children and adults, including an infant at its mother’s breast. All of the mothers and children in these works are of course naked. An eighteenth-century popular print (“lubok”) shows several naked women in a bathhouse, including
one holding a naked child. A more recent work by A. A. Plastov shows a naked mother adjusting her young daughter’s scarf just outside a bathhouse.

Charles Masson, in his somewhat hostile memoir of Russia under Catherine, says:

In the country, the baths are still on the old footing; that is to say, persons of all ages and both sexes use them together, and a family consisting of a father of forty, a mother of thirty-five, a son of twenty, and a daughter of fifteen, appear together in a state of innocence, and mutually rub down each other.

According to Masson, the Russian peasant is not excited at the sight of others unclad, for “from his infancy he has seen and examined everything.”

The two occasions where mixing of the sexes did not occur were postpartum bathing (discussed above) and the prenuptial bath. The latter is nearly as important as the former for understanding the Russian bathhouse culture.

**The Prenuptial Bath**

The bania played an essential role in the traditional peasant marriage ceremonials (“svad’ba”) in rural areas. The bride underwent an emotionally charged prenuptial bath with her girlfriends. Sometimes the groom would bathe with his male friends too. Typically the bride and groom bathed together after consummation of the marriage.

Of these various wedding baths the bride’s prenuptial bath was of particular significance. An anthropologist would classify it as a rite of passage, or more specifically, a rite of separation. Not the wedding itself, but the prenuptial bath severed the bride from her family. At some point, usually the day before the actual wedding took place, the bride was accompanied by her girlfriends to the bania. Males were usually not allowed.

Ethnographic descriptions of the prenuptial bath vary enormously, in part because there was considerable regional variation, and in part because some scholars are more willing than others to go into detail. Most authorities on this subject agree that the girlfriends in fact washed the bride and rearranged her hair in some way. They also agree that this bath symbolized a washing away of maidenly “beauty”
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("krasota") and/or "freedom" ("volia"). The "krasota" was not just an abstract idea, but was normally represented by some concrete physical object worn on the head, such as a ribbon set in beads and plaited in with the braid, or a headband. This headgear might reluctantly be cast off and entrusted to a girlfriend or sister during the prenuptial bath, or before or after it at a gathering termed the "devichnik." At some point the bride's braid would be unplaited and then replaited into a single braid for the last time (later it would be split into the double braid traditionally worn by married women).^71

The loss of the "krasota" or the "volia" could conceivably be interpreted as loss of virginity. A bride was "officially" expected to be a virgin, as is clear from the ritualized examination of her shift for traces of blood after consummation of the marriage. The groom was regarded as "the one who drove away maidenly beauty" ("otgonitel' dev'ei krasoty").^72

However, there is evidence for premarital sexual activity among Russian peasant girls, particularly at those traditional mixed-sex gatherings termed "posidelki,"^73 so the virginity test must often have been faked. Also, female virginity became less of an issue as rural Russia became industrialized and young women gained some degree of freedom from their families by going off to work in factories.^74 Certainly the value of premarital virginity declined among rural women in the Soviet period.

In addition, there are other, more iconic signifiers of the loss of virginity, such as the various fruits and berries which pervade the love songs and wedding songs,^75 or the traditional splitting of the tightly woven, hairy braid ("kosa") into two parts. The literal meaning of the loss of "krasota" and "volia" is actually more suggestive of bondage than of sexuality. True, the bride was now supposed to have sex with her husband, and he supposedly "drove away" her virginity. But after that she no longer had sexual choice. For her to lose her "krasota" and "volia" suggests that she literally gained their opposites, that is, "nekrasota" and "nevolia" (ugliness and slavery).^76

A girl of course did not literally lose her beauty just because she took a ritual bath and got married, and she did not literally don a set of chains. But the cultural expectations were such that it was as if the bride were now ugly and enslaved. Her beauty was no longer relevant, it no
longer empowered her, for she was not supposed to be attracting males
the way she had been during her premarital romps with the local village
boys. She no longer was in charge of her beauty for the purpose of
exercising sexual choice. There was no choice if she was sexually bonded
with, and thereby bound by her husband.

As pointed out earlier, the bride had to emit signs of submission to
her husband at the wedding itself, such as bowing down to him and
pulling off his boots. Later the husband would be free to discipline her
with beatings. Naturally, she hoped her husband would not do such a
thing. In Luzhskoi uezd, for example, the girls would not bring a venik
to the prenuptial bath, for otherwise “The husband will beat you.” 77 In
many areas, however, not only was a decorated venik brought along to
the prenuptial bath, but the road taken by the girls to the bania was
itself marked with veniki. The bride had to endure what might be called
stations of the venik. In Vetluzhskii krai the girls would flagellate the
bride with veniki and would not let her down from an upper shelf of the
bania until she uttered the first name and patronymic of her husband-to-
be. The longer a bride could bear this punishment without uttering the
name, the more highly respected she was among her girlfriends. 78

Even if the bride had participated in choosing her husband, and even
if she happened to be in love with him, that did not mean he would later
refrain from exercising his tacit right to abuse her. At the bathhouse
ritual in some areas she and her girlfriends had tried not to disturb the
smoldering brands in the fire, for a quiet fire portended a home life free
of beatings by the husband. 79 Yet at this very ritual the venik she
used to beat herself had previously been obtained from the groom in a
ceremonial exchange of veniki. Smirenie toward her husband was what
she anticipated.

The songs sung about the ritual bath give a better indication of
how the bride actually felt at that moment than do the ethnographic
descriptions. They are termed laments (“prichitaniiia,” “prichety”), or
sometimes just plain howling (“voi”). They were sung by the bride, by
her friends, or sometimes even by a professional wailer (which does not
lesser their psychological value, any more than well-played organ music
at a funeral lessens the sadness of the mourners there). They express
agony, and at the same time a submission to that agony (smirenie). The
line “I will beat [my forehead], I will bow down low” occurs repeatedly
in the wedding laments. Often the bride will sing “Thank you” for the horrible things that are being done to her. The following excerpts are from Kolpakova’s marvelous chrestomathy of wedding lyrics:

Ne uboysya, jarka baenka!
Chto ne tucha podnimayetsya,
Ne soldatov idet armiya,
Ne goсударь idet со armiей:
Я idu со девицами,
Cо девицами со красными.
Я грузным idu грузёхонько,
Тяжелым да тяжелёхонько!

Don’t be afraid, hot bathhouse!
It’s not a cloud rising up,
It’s not an army of soldiers walking along,
It’s not the sovereign with his army:
It’s just me and the girls,
The beautiful girls.
I walk along weighted down,
And with oh so heavy heart.

Я недолго в бане парилась,
Да уж я много с себя спарила:
Да уж я смыла, молодешенька,
С себя девью да красоту!

I did not steam in the bath for long,
But much I steamed away from myself:
For I, young one, washed away
From myself my maidenly beauty!

Ne mogla я тоски смыть,
Ne mogla слез да сполоскать....

I was not able to wash away the anguish,
I was not able to rinse away the tears. . .

Раскатись, жарка парна баенка,
Но единому да бревешку!
Не могла я тоски смыть,
Не могла я да сполоскать,—
Вдвое, втрое да тоски прибыло!..

Roll away, hot steam bath,
One log after another!
I could not wash away the anguish,
I could not rinse it away.
Twice, three times greater the anguish grew!\textsuperscript{80}

Although the bride goes willingly with her girlfriends to the bania, her emotional pain is obviously great. It is evident that, within herself at least, she is putting up a fight. She wants time to stop, she does not want to go forward into a threatening future.\textsuperscript{81} She even wants the bania to dismantle itself, as if time could go backward. In another song she wishes that the logs return to the stumps of the trees from which they were cut: “Uzh vy stan’te, eti brevnyshki, / Chto na starye na penushki.” She goes on to sing:

Ты постой, да жарка банка,
Для престарелого да всхожа солнышка,
Для желанной моей мамушки,
Для родимых моих брателков!

You stop, hot little bath,
For the sake of the aged, rising sun,
For the sake of my dear mamushka,
For the sake of my dear brothers.\textsuperscript{82}

The bride is expressing intense ambivalence about her mother here. She tears apart the bania, her “second mother” in fantasy (cf. the nasty treatment accorded the birch tree during Semik ceremonies). Yet she also wants to maintain the relationship with the loving mother. She wants everything she is going through to stop (“Ty postoi”), so that the relationship with the mother can be preserved as is: “For the sake of my dear mamushka.”

The break with the mother was very important. In another song the “krašota” to be washed away in the bania is the mother herself: “Matushka—div’ia krasota.”\textsuperscript{83}

The future was indeed bleak for the bride. She was about to be separated from the very friends who were bathing her. She was also about to be separated from her parents, to acquire an “alien mother” (“chuzhaia matushka”) and an “alien father” (“chuzhoi batiushka”)\textsuperscript{84} in her new, patrilocal domicile. What is more, she was about to become the lowest-ranking individual in the new household, with only her (possibly abusive) husband to protect her. The groom suffered no comparable trauma, and it is hardly surprising that there are practically no wedding laments for men, or sung by men.
The new restrictions being placed on the bride added up to a loss of her former “volia.” This loss was sustained not at the wedding itself, but earlier, at the prenuptial bath:

Kak zashla v teplu parnu evtu bainiku,—
Moya volyushka s golovushki kidalase....

As I stepped into this warm bath
My freedom flew away from my little head.85

Kolpakova quite rightly pays close attention to those bridal laments which depict the loss of the “volia.” In her desperation the bride gives the “volia” many forms: “... it throws itself onto the walls and ceiling in the form of a white swan, it turns into white steam, in the wash-tub it ends up being a little duck, it transforms itself first into a venik, then soap, then fire, until finally it turns into a bird and flies out the window or door of the bania.”86 The bride’s “volia” does not stay in one place, it does not remain one thing, it is a very slippery creature. According to Kolpakova it is a kind of werewolf or shapeshifter (“oboroten’”). Sometimes it is a girlfriend of the bride, sometimes even the bride’s double. Its ability to metamorphose is remarkable. In its very slipperiness it is the epitome of freedom, “volia.” To part with it is very painful for the bride, for the next stage of her life will be the epitome of unfreedom, that is, bondage, “nevolia.” But part with it she does, and voluntarily. The prenuptial bath she submits herself to is emblematic of the masochism which will characterize the rest of her life. Not pulling off the boot of her new, paternal husband, but losing her “volia” in the maternal bania represents her true sud’ba.

If the bania is indeed a “second mother,” as Dahl’s informant says, then it is also possible to view the prenuptial bath as a “second birth,” that is, a rebirth. The bride might in fact have been born in the very bania where her prenuptial ritual was taking place.87 One song in the Propp collection makes an explicit reference to birth:

Ya posha, molodezhchanka,
Vo tepluyu bainiku
So milyma so podruzhkami
Pomytsya-poparitsya,—
Ne smyt by mnene devyu krasu,
Otrudu mine ne vo pervye,
A vo devyey krasu v poslednie.
I set off, young one,  
For the warm bania  
With my dear girlfriends  
To wash myself, to steam myself.  
I cannot /don't want to wash away my maidenly beauty,  
Not for the first time since birth,  
But for the last time in my maidenly beauty.  

This girl has been to the bania many times since she was born ("otrodu"), but this time is special, for it is her last time as a maiden. All subsequent times will be in a new, married life. By bathing ritually the girl becomes a new person, the old person being taken away in metonymized form—the "krasota"—and hung up on a birch tree (but the birch will be chopped down), or thrown into a field among flowers (but the flowers will be mown down).  

Or, the old person might be dried from the skin of the newly-washed, newly-born person and wrapped in a towel—rather like an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes:

Мы пошли, белые лебеди,  
В жаркую парную баенку  
По твою да девьу красоту.  
Отворили двери узёхонько,  
Заходили потихонько;  
Взяли твою девьу красоту,  
Завернули в полотенушко.

Off we went, white swans,  
To the hot steam bath  
After your maidenly beauty.  
We opened the door a little,  
We went in very quietly.  
We took your maidenly beauty  
And wrapped it in a little towel.

In some cases water wrung out of the towel used to wash the bride was utilized to bake dumplings ("pirogi"), which the groom would later eat. In some areas, milk was poured on the bride, then dried from her body with dough to be used in the dumplings. The milk poured over the bride's body might even be fed directly to the groom. These practices were supposed to increase the groom's love for the bride. Van Gennep would term these rites of union. Psychoanalytically viewed, they represent an oral destruction of the "old" person, so that the "new," reborn masochist can function.
Despite a few indications, the idea of rebirth does not play a very important role in the bridal rites. The life a bride could look forward to was not bright enough. If anything, indeed, her new life might better be characterized as death. In one song the bride describes herself as having died during the prenuptial bath ("... umerla-de krasna devushka / Vo toi, vo bane zharkoi"). Scholars have in fact noticed the considerable similarity between bridal rites and funeral practices in Russia. As Natalie Moyle says, "In many senses, Russian women are considered to die at marriage." Moyle notes, for example, that the ritual washing in the bania resembles the washing of a corpse. In some areas the bride is removed from her home the way a corpse is removed, that is, through a window rather than through a door.

The symbolism here is important, but the bride did in fact remain alive after the wedding. Without her no family could form, no children could come into the world. She may have been "dead" in some sense, but she was very much alive and would become the central masochist around which her family would grow.

The bania, then, is not just a physical facility where one may wash oneself. It is a cultural practice permeating many aspects of Russian life, it is an archaic institution of pain distributed over a diverse geographic space. For any individual Russian it extends (or extended) across the entire life span, from birth to death.

The masochism of the bania is both physical and moral. On the one hand there is the welcomed heat and flagellation. This intense physical stimulation is apparently pleasurable for most Russians, and for some it may even be erotically gratifying (although it would be a mistake, despite Vasil'eva's paintings, to claim that the bania is normally a theater of erotogenic masochism, properly speaking).

On the other hand, the bania offers a scene for playing out moral masochism. This is especially evident in the bride's prenuptial bath, where freedom ("volia") is definitively relinquished, and future bondage to a parental substitute is implied. The prenuptial bath was an opportunity to master anxiety about future abnegation. It was itself an anticipatory abnegation of self.

The bania is a particularly clear instance of the psychoanalytic notion that masochism originates in painful interaction with the early (pre-Oedipal) mother. Not only was the bania traditionally referred to as a
“second mother,” it was one place where early interaction with the mother was painful, for the child must initially have experienced the “steaming” and flagellation by the midwife, and later by the mother herself, as painful. As the child developed, this manner of abusing the child was incorporated into the child’s own repertoire of activities, that is, the child learned to abuse himself or herself within the body of that famous maternal icon, the Russian bania.