



Spiders and their Webs in Russian Superstitions

by Dmitri V. Logunov

Folk omens and superstitions belong to the oldest genre of folklore and represent a treasure-house of centuries-old human experience and knowledge. They have absorbed numerous mythological and magic notions of the universe and Man's place in it, and are the remnants of a former integral picture of the universe. The majority of Russian popular beliefs and superstitions originated in peasant culture and represent firm opinions and ideas concerning forecasts for the future. A distinctive feature of Russian tradition is the so-called double faith: a peculiar mixture of Christian beliefs and deeply rooted ancient superstitions. Russian superstitions combine poetry and mystery in their eternal folk wisdom.

Unfortunately, no complete synopsis of Russian superstitions has been produced; during Soviet times this folk genre, as well as many other areas of traditional Russian culture, was stigmatised as a religious prejudice unbecoming an educated person. Only during the last decade have popular collections of thousands of old Russian folk omens and superstitions from the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries started to be published. Some of these collections (e.g. Dal', 1996; Grushko & Medvedev, 1996; Kul'matov & Kul'matova, 1997) have served as sources for this survey of Russian superstitions dealing with spiders. Altogether, 30 examples are presented here.

After reviewing the 'arachnological' superstitions, it became clear that in the past spiders caused less superstitious disgust and fear in Russians than they do at present. Quite the contrary—an encounter with a spider not only foretold weather changes [1–6, 24–28], arrival of a guest [8], bad or good news [9–11], or appearance of a hidden enemy [15], but also (which is surprising) this event was most commonly regarded as a harbinger of financial [7, 14] or other [12, 13, 18] success. In addition, a person who crushed an encountered spider could even expect to be pardoned from forty sins [17]. In over a quarter of all cases (eight out of 30 listed superstitions) an encounter with a spider betokened luck, gift or profit, i.e. was considered a favourable event. For sure, spiders were not always believed to be 'injurious to everybody from young to old', as stated by Zabylin (1996). Further special studies may possibly explain this, at least to me, surprising fact.

Sometimes, the colour of the spider was considered important for the forecast of an event: an encounter with a white spider was potentially favourable [18], whereas to meet or see a red or black one foretold trouble. Traditionally, Russians associate the colour white with notions of good hopes and cleanliness. However, a black spider could also be a sign of good tidings or a letter [10]. To dream about spiders or their webs was usually considered a troublesome event [21, 22, 29]. And to eat a spider was clearly to be avoided [20, but see 23].

Spiders



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It is interesting to notice that most of the reported superstitions seem to describe either orb-web spiders (Araneidae, and likely Tetragnathidae) or other spiders building a web, as spiders are usually described as descending from the ceiling [8–11, etc.], hanging above a head [12] or hiding (probably in retreats) [1]. Actually these spiders are big enough to be first encountered in the garden or on/inside the izba (a Russian peasant hut). Spiders positioned above a bed [18, 19], curtaining over icons [17], or simply living inside houses during the winter time [2, 3], are likely to be pholcids. When flying webs are mentioned [24–28], araneids are almost certainly involved.

Only one superstition dealing with the burrowing lycosids [23], which are still commonly known in present-day Russian villages (e.g. *Lycosa singoriensis* in Siberia), has been found. A similar superstition exists in the folklore of Central Asian nomads, for instance Kazakhs, who also believe that sheep eat karakurts (= the Central Asian black widows, *Latrodectus* spp.). It is noticeable that

'poisonous' in this superstition [23] means 'dangerous to man'; Russians usually consider all spiders poisonous. Another interesting fact is that the Russian word 'tarantul' clearly (and without exception) refers to the large burrowing wolf spiders, and not to the true tarantulas (the mygalomorph spiders) as in most Western countries.

It would be interesting to find out how spiders feature in the superstitions and folklore of other nations. I hope others will be encouraged to introduce readers to the traditional wisdom regarding spiders of their own countries.

Russian omens and superstitions about spiders:

1. Spiders hide when bad weather is in prospect and vice versa.
2. In winter, if spiders actively weave their webs, run backwards and forwards, fight with each other and hang on new threads, it means that there will be a cold spell in nine to ten days.
3. In winter, if spiders hide, there will soon be a thaw.
4. In summer, spiders do not build new webs or destroy old webs in the face of rain or storm.
5. In summer, if spiders build new webs or restore old ones, this forecasts a change to better weather ('doing the spiders' best' means fine weather).
6. In summer, if there are no spiders in sight, it will inevitably be raining; if there are a lot of spiders in sight, one should expect fine weather.
7. Discovering a spider on clothes betokens a profit.
8. If a spider descends from the ceiling in front of someone, there will be a sudden guest or unexpected good tidings (a letter, money, reward, promotion, etc.).
9. If one comes across a descending spider in the morning, there will be sad news.
10. If a black spider descends from the ceiling, one will get good tidings or a letter.
11. If a red spider descends from the ceiling, one will get troublesome news.
12. If a spider hangs over someone's head, this betokens luck or happiness.
13. If a spider drops onto someone's head, that person will get a present.
14. If a spider drops onto a hand, this betokens a money profit.
15. If a spider drops onto the table during a meal, this signifies that the household has got a new secret enemy.
16. If a spider drops onto a threshold, someone will die.
17. One who crushes a spider will be pardoned from forty sins, since spider webs curtain over the icons.
18. If a white spider has its dwelling above a bed, there will be luck.
19. If a black spider has its dwelling above a bed, there will be misfortune.
20. If one eats a spider, one will suffer from dropsy or a tumour in the stomach.
21. If one dreams about a spider, there will be litigation.
22. If one dreams about killing a spider, it betokens a loss of money or a precious thing.
23. Sheep eat the poisonous 'tarantulas'; other animals die or suffer from lengthy illness when bitten by these spiders.

Russian omens and superstitions about spider webs:

24. In summer and autumn, if a flying web sticks to a man, he will get rich.
25. In autumn, spider webs flying forecast fine weather.
26. If spider webs creep, there will be a lengthy spell of fine warm weather.
27. If there are lots of webs in spring, the next autumn will be a good one.
28. If there are lots of webs in autumn, the next spring will be a warm one.
29. If one dreams about clearing a house of spiders' webs, this signifies changing a habitation.
30. Web is considered one of the best wound-healing materials if put on a freshly wounded place.

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Notes on Moulting, Courtship Behaviour and Brood Care of the 'Buckspoor Spider' *Seothyra fasciata* Purcell, 1903 (Eresidae)

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'Buckspoor' spiders are well-known inhabitants of sandy desert areas in southern Africa. Although there is detailed information on, for example, habitat selection (Henschel & Lubin, 1997), foraging behaviour (Lubin & Henschel, 1996), environmental influences on activity and prey capture (Lubin & Henschel, 1990; Henschel & Lubin, 1992; Turner *et al.*, 1993) and silk production (Peters, 1992), very little is known about their behaviour. This is probably because of their subterranean habits: the spiders themselves are rarely seen.

The webs of the commonest Kalahari species, *Seothyra fasciata* Purcell, 1903, tend to occur in groups on the crests and slopes of dunes where there is little vegetation. Their main prey in these areas, from remains found in the web, are *Camponotus* ants. When hunting, the spider hangs upside down under the typical 2-4 lobed web constructed on the surface and, from this position, 'lunges' at prey entangled in the cribellate silk at the edge of the lobes, captures it and takes it down a 12-14 cm long, silk-lined burrow running vertically from the surface web (Henschel & Lubin, 1992).

The males of this species have only relatively recently been described (Dippenaar-Schoeman, 1990). In contrast to the fawn and dark-brown females, they are brightly coloured, with a bright brick-red cephalothorax and black abdomen with cream spots reminiscent of those of mutillid wasps. Perhaps their most obvious feature is their long, thick, black-and-white striped forelegs, which are waved conspicuously when the spider is active.

We collected six *Seothyra fasciata* from Kalahari Trails Nature Reserve, 35 km south of Twee Rivieren, Kalahari Gemsbok National Park, in mid-March 1999. They were housed in our laboratory at Bonn University, Germany, in 20 cm deep glass containers (8-10 cm in diameter) filled with 15 cm of damp Kalahari sand. Before introducing the spiders singly into the containers, an attempt was made to sex them. Two were adult females, the remainder were all monomorphic female-type juveniles with no pedipalpic development which could indicate their potential sex. Approximately two months after they had settled in captivity, the sand in the containers was thoroughly wetted, simulating a rainfall of approximately 10 mm. All immatures moulted within 3 days of wetting of the sand, which became apparent as either the exuvia were found at the edge of the webs or obviously newly