

# RUSSIAN MUSHROOM FORAGING

from survival  
to symbol

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## ABSTRACT

Mushroom foraging in Russia is a deeply rooted cultural practice that encompasses practical, psychological, and symbolic dimensions. Historically embedded in everyday life, it has developed as both a vital food source and a seasonal ritual tied to the forest landscape. Beyond its economic role, mushroom picking offers relaxation, contemplation, and reconnection with nature, often described as a meditative experience. Psychologically, it fulfills multiple needs: pleasure, social bonding, intergenerational transmission, and reinforcement of cultural belonging. At a symbolic level, mushrooms embody meanings of hidden abundance, continuity, survival, and identity, appearing in folklore, myths, and artistic representations. This practice thus operates simultaneously as a daily activity, a cultural ritual, and a symbolic system, offering individuals and communities a structured way to experience meaning, belonging, and renewal within the natural world.

**Keywords:** *mushroom foraging, Russia, cultural ritual, identity, symbolism.*

### Article info

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Wild mushroom foraging is one of the most prevalent ancestral rituals in the Slavic-Russian space, with deep cultural and psychological significance. This paper aims to provide the necessary background to understand the anthropological phenomenon of mushroom foraging among Russians, which may appear enigmatic or even weird to representatives of other cultures, through a multiple approach: historical, psychological, scientific, and symbolic.

Methods used include analysis of folklore content, semiotic analysis of symbols, and psychological and comparative interpretation, with an emphasis on published popular materials and contemporary scientific works. We analyzed the traditions transmitted across generations, the associated rituals, and the identity and social dimensions, incorporating the contemporary contributions of the Russian mycologist M. V. Vishnevsky and the recent observations of the vlogger Sergey Bey (Russian from Afar). In addition, foraging activity is examined through Hofstede's cultural dimensions, highlighting how cultural values influence Russians' behavior and perception of this mass cultural practice.

Mushroom foraging has been present in Russian historical sources since the Middle Ages. Medieval documents and manuscripts indicate that Russians not only consumed mushrooms but also used them for ritual and medicinal purposes. In folk literature and folklore, wild fungi frequently appear as symbols of forest wealth, fertility, and man-nature communion. "... the forest is not only a source of food, but a ritualistic space of rest and communion with nature" (Sheludkova, 2019, p. 12). The tradition of foraging was often passed on from the family, almost like an initiatory ritual, with unwritten rules on the season, favorite places, and harvesting methods.

Vishnevsky (2024, pp. 210-213) remarks in his books and video presentations that "peaceful hunting", as the Russians call it metaphorically, preserves the features of an archaic custom, with man entering the forest as another world, with its own laws, requiring respect, vigilance, and inner balance.

In Russian folklore, fairy tales, proverbs, folk songs (for example, in the traditional song "Oy griby, gribochiki" [Oh, mushrooms, mushrooms] are mentioned over ten species of mushrooms, creating a difficult situation for any translator), dress motifs, games for children reflect deep respect for the forest and all plants, similar to animist cultures, but also a sense of community, because this foraging was not only an individual activity, but also a social one, with clear moral norms and

rituals. For example, in some regions, the first basket of mushrooms is always donated to an elderly person as a sign of respect and gratitude (caring for the elderly is a cultural value among Russians).

The mushrooms are represented in folklore as a transitional element between the mystical and the ordinary, a symbol that is repeated and thus provides a rich source of material for linguistic analysis. There are also a number of popular superstitions about fungi, many of them dating back to the pre-Christian period (for example, fungi growing on the outside walls of a house is a sign of wealth and abundance in the family, or the superstition that fungi grow better if not looked at, and they may be affected by the human gaze).

In the Russian Orthodox tradition, during the fasting period, mushrooms were an accessible alternative to meat and fish, which greatly increased their nutritional importance. Ethnologists point out that the lexicon associated with fungi in the North Russian languages indicates not only culinary preferences but also social and territorial rules, as well as the delimitation of their own and foreign places (Osipova, 2021, pp. 32-35).

A study by Odintsov (2025) finds that 38% of Russians occasionally practice wild mushroom foraging, and 37% regularly do so. The quoted study reports that most Russians (75%) have engaged in this activity, but the motivations are diverse: intrinsic, since 65% practice it to spend time in nature; extrinsic, as 53% practice it for the harvest itself; and 12% to save money. The experience is individual for 27% of the respondents, who choose it for the excitement of the competition and the surprise of discovery. For 21% of the respondents, it is collective - they prefer it in order to be together with friends and family. These figures demonstrate that the social, economic, and recreational sides play an important role in the life of the Russian people.

Also, 87% of Russians responded that they distinguish harmless from poisonous fungi strictly based on their general culture, 28% ask more informed friends, 15% use applications or the internet, and 13% search for information in books and guides. Only 2% of respondents said they could not distinguish edible mushrooms from poisonous ones, indicating the extent of transgenerational information transmission. Children grow up observing the adults they go with to pick mushrooms season after season, creating psychological continuity, a competence in recognizing species, and an opportunity for intergenerational connection. However, Vishnevsky (2024, p. 218) emphasizes that an experienced gatherer must demonstrate a high capacity for selecting among

shapes, colors, and textures. This process turns the gathering into a real visual and spatial memory training, and the gatherer into a connoisseur of the forest.

In modern society, we can observe a multitude of thematic events - festivals, local and regional championships of the "mushroom hunting", forums, groups on Vkontakte or Telegram, where Russians frequently post maps and photos with their "prey" and even the GPS coordinates, useful data for a more complex SOCINT analysis of social and geographical patterns of the phenomenon. In some articles, this activity is also referred to as a "national sport".

Mushroom foraging combines recreational, cognitive, and social components. The activity is much more than a mere hobby; it involves permanent botanical documentation, careful observation, species recognition and selection, careful planning, and anticipation. For many Russians, going out into the forest after mushrooms equates to a form of meditation, "a therapy, such activity allowing them to detach themselves from stress", from the urban rhythm and the challenges of everyday life (Vishnevsky, 2021, p. 17).

From a psychological perspective, this activity develops the gatherer's patience, attention, and practical competence, as well as a sense of cultural belonging. The sensation of "peaceful hunting" offers the satisfaction of discovery and control in an unpredictable universe and can also be considered a mechanism for adapting to stressful situations in a tense society. Associated rituals (intergenerational rules, respect for nature) confer stability and reduce risk-related anxiety (food poisoning). Vishnevsky (2021, pp. 15-17) also emphasizes the psychological dimensions of fear and prudence, making knowledge of poisonous specimens not only biologically necessary but also culturally internalized as part of family experience.

Applying Hofstede's cultural dimensions model, wild mushroom foraging can also be understood as an expression of Russian cultural values. Thus, a strong emphasis on collectivism is evident, as this activity often takes place in family or community groups, and rules and traditions are shared and respected by all. There is also a preference for avoiding uncertainty, as Russians develop reliable methods for identifying and preparing mushrooms, reducing the risks associated with consumption. In terms of distance from power, the relationship with the forest and with traditions is respectful but not hierarchical - the rules are followed by everyone, not imposed. The orientation is long-term because harvest planning, mushroom conservation, and

knowledge transmission are investments in the future. Regarding masculinity/femininity, there is a balance between competition and care, reflecting both the desire to pick more and the responsibility for the safety of the group and of nature. It follows that this gathering is not only a practical activity but also a cultural ritual that crystallizes collective values and forms social identity.

Russian mycologist Mikhail Vishnevsky offers practical and educational guidance on mushroom foraging. He identifies the most mushroom-rich areas of the Moscow region and recommends several methods of thermal preparation, grinding, or drying to preserve nutrients and avoid poisoning. He also demonstrates that the human body does not produce enzymes to digest mushrooms, so they do not provide significant nutritional value and do not appear to be meant for consumption. Why are Russians then so passionate about both picking and consuming them?

Placing his research in the not-very-distant past, 300-400 years ago, the mycologist proves that until the XVII century, in Russian culture, wild fungi were used only for medicinal and ritualistic purposes. As one of the great problems of people in pre-industrial times was the provision of food, for the individual and his family, the great periods of famine, this nowadays unknown affliction, brought a major change in the psychology of the affected people.

Famine had a devastating impact in Europe and Asia from the early centuries of the Middle Ages through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries due to multiple causes: adverse climatic conditions, natural disasters that damaged crops, pest outbreaks, epidemics, and armed conflicts. During periods marked by food shortages and atrocities (including anthropophagy), Russians discovered that the post-ingestive state of fullness after eating mushrooms helped them survive famine, especially in harsh winters. Therefore, the great collectivism of the Russian people led their representatives to inform and support one another, transforming this activity into a true ritual of survival, education, and identity that naturally penetrated the collective consciousness. According to Vishnevsky's observations (2024, pp. 218-221), mushroom foraging requires a particular state of concentration and rapid decision-making, which generates a special kind of "forestry intuition" in the gatherers.

In recent years, digital ethnography and content creators' materials have become valuable sources for cultural studies, complementing traditional academic data with field stories, anecdotes, and public interactions.

An example relevant to our theme is the podcast Russian from Afar by Sergey, a Russian vlogger based in Vietnam, who produces episodes about life in exile and the preservation of cultural values and traditions, including foraging mushrooms, a practice the Russian diaspora engages in everywhere. Although he does not present academic data, his ethnographic observations show how rituals are adapted to diasporal contexts and how cultural memory is preserved through narrative and storytelling. His contribution adds a contemporary, qualitative perspective to the understanding of the psychology of mushroom foraging.

If we formulate a conceptual opposition between mycophilic and mycophobic cultures, we can spot this theme in other cultures as well, but differently. Thus, while in the Slavic-Russian space mushroom foraging appears as a strong, animistic cultural-identity practice, in Scandinavia, although the practice is common, the motivation is more recreational and urban, the knowledge is less extensive, and the cultural integration is more recent. In the US, there are online communities; they are a hobby and a form of tourism. In Ethiopia, it is tradition, medicine, and food. In Japan, the harvest has a gastronomic component, but a more specialized, refined one and a superior, prominent status. In Congo, women are the main collectors and possess extensive

expertise in mycology; in Mexico, it is associated with food, tradition, and ecology, while in Australia and New Zealand, the emphasis is on safety, as in all mycophobic cultures. Vishnevsky (2021, pp. 15-17) emphasizes that fear of poisonous fungi is culturally transmitted and influences gatherers' behavior.

Mushroom foraging among the Russian people is a complex phenomenon that combines scientific knowledge, tradition, psychology, and cultural symbolism. The present work has a mainly exploratory and interpretive character. The restricted access to original archives and Russian ethnographic collections limited the number of available primary sources. Also, it was not possible to conduct interviews with contemporary gatherers, so we based our research on surveys and indirect observations. These limitations do not affect the theoretical relevance, but suggest that future research should include participatory observations and additional empirical data. By integrating the Hofstede cultural dimensions, we can observe that the activity reflects collective values, tolerance for uncertainty, long-term orientation, and responsibility. The contributions of Vishnevsky and Sergey Bey demonstrate that the tradition is preserved and adapted, maintaining its relevance in a modern society.

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