

Vishivanka Parade and Day of Vishivanka as New Traditions for Ukrainians of 21st Century

Tanya Matanova, Institute for Ethnology and Folklore studies with Ethnographic Museum, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

Abstract: *In contrast to the past, when traditional clothes are worn mainly at celebrations regarding national, local or religious holidays, nowadays embroidered garments are often used to express one's ethnic origin, worldview and willingness to keep elements of a given culture alive. On the territory of Ukraine such an element of the native traditional costume is the embroidered shirt – vishivanka. In the past, as an oberig (amulet), it is believed to protect against harm and diseases. Nowadays, it is seen as a means to express one's ethnic and national identity. As such, it takes central place in new invented traditions – marches in embroidered shirts (since 2008) and the Day of the embroidered shirt (since 2006) – introduced by young Ukrainians to preserve Ukrainian values and folk costumes and rites. In the text are considered both new traditions, i.e. their origin, spread, characteristics in Ukraine as well as by the Ukrainian diaspora in Bulgaria. Empirical data has been gathered for the period of three years (2016-2018) by means of semi-structured interviews and virtual ethnography methods.*

Keywords: Embroideries in Ukraine and abroad, vishivanka related events, Ukrainians in Bulgaria

Research aim, empirical data and methodology

Vishivanka (Ukr.), *vyshivka* (Russ.) are called the embroidered shirts and the embroideries on Ukrainian costumes. Their presence in the life of Ukrainians has different functions in the Ukrainian history. Respectively, the aim of the following paper is to compare *vyshivanka* traditions and related to them functions in the past and today.

In the past traditional clothes are worn mainly at celebrations of religious feasts or at family festive events. Since the late 19th and early 20th centuries *vishivankas* are considered to be an integral part of the Ukrainian national costume. With their white, red, yellow, blue and green colors they have always made children, men and women look nice. Considering the symbolism of *vishivanka*, plant symbols reflect the beauty of the nature: apple – love, laurel – eternal life, a. o., and zoomorphic figures – horse, rabbit, fish, frog, dove, fly, spider a. o. – give the producer the freedom to make each shirt look individual¹. By the patterns on the embroideries could also be identified the status and origin of its producer and owner, as every

¹ See <http://vushuvki.blogspot.bg/2014/04/20.html> (accessed 28 July 2017, not active anymore).

region in Ukraine had its own characteristics. Many prejudices arose along with the use of the embroidered shirts. For instance, Ukrainians believed that a pattern of a shirt cannot be taken for another as in this way a person would take or repeat someone else's fate. People also believed that an embroidered shirt that is adjoined to the body transferred magical power. That is why pregnant women were given embroidered linen and hemp clothes, as people thought that these plants protect them from all evil. New born babies were also given embroidered shirts to protect them from evil spirits. In this context, cross-stitch embroidered geometric elements on the shirt's sleeves, collar and front were also believed to give the shirt and the person wearing it a sacral protective function.

During the years of the communistic regime vishivankas 'live' in the spheres of culture and art. They return to the public lives of ordinary people after Ukraine's declaration of independence on 24th August 1991. The declaration of independence in Ukraine created favorable conditions for the initiation of nationalistic actions strengthening the national awareness and identity of the people living in the given territory. Such actions since the end of the 20th century have been the vishivanka events, which are in fact new traditions invented from old traditional elements (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983). In this sense, nowadays, traditional costumes function also as marks of one's ethnic origin, worldview and willingness to keep certain ethnic-cultural elements alive.

Today they could be seen again in public spaces. On the one hand, this happens through patriotic actions of Ukrainians, who willing to stand up against the appearing modernizations in their country, renew the organization of gatherings at celebrations, cultural and other official events where they experience the Ukrainian music and dance folklore and culinary traditions dressed in clothes with traditional patterns and colors. On the other hand, young Ukrainians introduce initiatives in which embroidered shirts take a central place. Two such new and large scale events since the end of the 20th century have been the marches in embroidered shirts and the Day of the Ukrainian embroidered shirt.

Given the aim of research in this study is used a multi-sited approach, which includes the analysis of social phenomena at different locations in the real world (Dimitrova, 2011; Marcus, 1995) but also the virtual communication around a given topic on the Internet. In regard to the text, these are Ukrainians who live in Ukraine or in Bulgaria and communicate with other co-ethnics in their social group or on the Internet commenting Ukrainian embroidery events, happening since the beginning of the 21st century.

The empirical data was gathered in 2016-2018 by means of semi-structured interviews and virtual ethnography methods (Hine, 2000) as analysis of different people's activities and narratives on the Internet (websites, forums, blogs, Facebook, YouTube videos), the 'internet-worlds', but also the different contexts, giving sense to the online (inter-)actions (Hine, 2000: 27; Hine, 2008: 923). A congruent part is also an online questionnaire 'Marches with embroidered shirts', published in ten Facebook groups of Ukrainians and Ukrainian institutions in Bulgaria². Kozinets's method of netnography has been applied as it allows the analysis of internet consumers' behavior as well as of online communities, consolidated through computer mediated communication. With regards to the latter Kozinets differentiates between communities online and online communities, defining the first as groups existing not only on the Internet, but also meeting face to face – in the context of this study: the Ukrainian embroidery events and the communities and groups they consolidate online and offline³. For the processing of the written data, text- and content-analysis have been applied as methodical frameworks because they focus on each individual situation and the statements of the actors.

Vishivanka marches

As a precursor of the marches in Ukraine could be considered the politically motivated '*Great walk along the Zaporozhye*' in 1990 which 500000 Zaporozhian Cossacks from all over Ukraine dressed in traditional garments gather to celebrate their 500th jubilee. The event has occurred spontaneously until 2011 and has taken place each year on August 23th since then (National Flag Day) (Pobigun, 2016: 215-216).

A '*Vishivanka megamarch*' happened for the first time in Kiev in 2008, as an implementation of the idea of several students at local universities. Only four people took part in the first march, organized by Andrey Babinskiy. The next big walks were attended by forty people, and in 2011 they had more than two hundred participants (Pobigun, 2016: 215-216). On the first megamarch was started a contest for the most beautiful vishivanka and has been held since. Other contests for art symbols were also organized during the event: in 2008 – for a *rushnik* (towel), in 2012 – for a *pisanka* (painted Easter egg), in 2013 – for a *chudo-ptitsa* (miracle bird) and in 2014 – for a Ukrainian wedding (see Torski, 2014).

² Three of the six answers are of Ukrainians and the others of Bulgarians or Bessarabian Bulgarians. Gender relation is 5 women and 1 man.

³ The method for analysis of these communities he calls 'blended ethnography' (Kosinets, 2010) – combining virtual and classical ethnography – which studies various social activities, regardless of spatial boundaries and of the presence of the researcher in the field of research (Janowitz, 2011: 6).

Other cities followed the initiative and also started to organize marches. In Poltava the first walk happened as a student action in 2011 around the Ukrainian Cossacks Day, October 14th (Pobigun, 2016: 216). In Lvov the march was held for the first time in 2010 on the Memorial Day of the division ‘*Galitsia*’ of the Ukrainian World War II volunteers when 2000 participants walked from the monument of the Ukrainian politician S. Bandera to the one of the Ukrainian poet and artist T. Shevchenko, where – after a minute’s silence – they laid flowers at the places of memory (Narodniy Oglyadach, 2010). Wearing vishivanka at these marches is seen as a means to popularize the Ukrainian traditional costume in the fight against the ‘russification’ of young people. The following year the number of participants at the parade, organized for the Independence Day, increased to 3000⁴. In Odessa, a vishivanka parade has been held since 2009 as an idea of the youth association ‘Democratic Alliance’. A ‘*Vishivankoviy festival*’ (vishivanka festival) is also organized as part of it and the whole event, conducted every year around the National Flag Day and the Independence Day (August 23rd and 24th), is perceived as the greatest patriotic project in South Ukraine (Pobigun, 2016: 217). Other festival activities are concerts, exhibitions of Ukrainian national costume collections, a human chain of people dressed in clothes with Ukrainian embroideries, children paintings exhibition-bazars, a memory flash-mob of people with burning candles, forming the national coat of arms of Ukraine, a. o. All of them aim to popularize Ukrainian costume and culture.

In general, great marches are held in different Ukrainian cities (Kiev, Odessa, Zhytomyr, Kharkiv, Poltava, etc.) and towns (Yalta, Rivne, etc.) twice a year – during spring and autumn, close to celebrated national (i.e. Independence Day) and local celebrations (i.e. town’s anniversary). Depending on the way they happen, they are called ‘parades’, ‘marches’, ‘festivals’, ‘flash-mobs’ and they all have one thing in common – the dress-code ‘vishivanka’. They aim not only to popularize the Ukrainian embroidered shirt and associated old traditions, but also to give young Ukrainians the possibility to form organizations in which they could work in accordance with their patriotic interests. Even the program is different from town to town, they all have an official part, including marches along central streets, performance of Ukrainian songs and dances, and an unofficial part – with concerts and friend circles of the

⁴ Vishivankoviy festival’. Istoriya festivalyu. Available at: <http://vf.od.ua/інформація/8-історія-фестивалю> (accessed 24 June 2016, now accessible is only <http://vf.od.ua>).

visitors⁵. Outside Ukraine, marches are organized in England, Russia, Denmark, Canada, the U.S., Turkey, Bulgaria and the capitals of other countries as well as in cities with numerous Ukrainian migrant communities. According to the head of the Ukrainian organization in Warsaw ‘Euromaidan-Warsaw’, N. Panchenko, the aim is to show the openness to the other ethnic people, ‘the own tradition and culture with which we live and which are important for us’ (Ukrains’ke natsional’ne ..., 2016). In other words, such events are not only connected to the revival of the embroidered shirt but also to the expression of the ethnocultural identification.

Vishivanka Day

The idea to celebrate a Day of the Ukrainian embroidered shirt was born in 2006⁶. Lesya Voronyuk, a student at the Faculty of History, Politics and International Relations of the National University ‘Y. Fedkovich’ in Chernivtsi is its initiator. After she observes that her classmates sometimes go to lectures dressed in vishivanka, she suggests a day when everyone could go to the university dressed in their vishivanka. Ten students and lecturers follow the call. Over the following years, thanks to social networks and media, the initiative spreads not only across university but to the city, other cities and towns in Ukraine and even large cities abroad with big Ukrainian communities (one of which is Bulgaria).

Adopted by law in 2015, every third Thursday in May is celebrated as ‘*Vishivanka Day*’, when every Ukrainian in the world can go to work, lectures, etc. dressed in a Ukrainian national costume, vishivanka or other clothes with ethnic motives (see Den’ vishivanki 2016a).

Vishivanka Day is managed by an organizational committee of the civic association ‘World Day of the embroidered shirt’. The celebration is determined to be on the third Thursday in May because it allows people to be in a vishivanka at the work place, university, etc. and thus the embroidered shirt itself could become ‘an organic part of the everyday life of Ukrainians’⁷. According to the organizers, this holiday unites Ukrainians regardless of their

⁵ Photos and videos from the event in 2015 in Kiev gathered during the project ‘Construction of identity in the context of pan-European mobility (Ukrainians in Bulgaria and Bulgarians in Ukraine)’ (2014-2018) are archived in the National Center for Intangible Heritage at the Institute for Ethnology and Folklore Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences with archive numbers PV No 1032 and FtAIF No 1494. Another archive number cited in the text is AIF I No 483.

⁶ It is important to mention that the organizers explain on their website (<http://www.denvyshyvanky.org/>) that the Vishivanka Day is not initiated as a Day of the national costume as it is published in other media sources.

⁷ See their website <http://www.denvyshyvanky.org> (accessed 3 August 2017).

spoken language, gender, social status, religion and political interests and is not related to other national or religious holidays either. Their only aim is to preserve the Ukrainian values and folk traditions of crocheting and wearing national costumes, what actually is closely connected with the expression of the national and ethnocultural identity of every Ukrainian (see Den' vishivanki, 2015).

Similar to the vishivanka marches described above, different events also happen on Vishivanka Day. In 2012, the initiative 'Newborn in vishivanka' was launched in Kiev, later also in other Ukrainian cities (Lviv, Melitopol, a. o.), when every baby born on Vishivanka Day got an embroidered baby shirt as a present (see Zhinka-Ukrainka, 2016). A charity bazar in Kiev was organized in 2013, and the money from the sweets and cookies sold was donated to the Regional children hospital for the treatment of children with cancer (Den' vishivanki, 2016b). Most often observed gatherings however are the big walks through the main streets (see Den' vishivanki, 2015).

In 2017 and 2018, Ukrainians in more than sixty countries celebrated this day predominantly in form of a march but sometimes as a motor or bike race with Ukrainian flags and embroidered shirts. According to the organizers, modern Ukrainians dress in vishivanka because of a spiritual need, without even trying to learn more about the embroidered shirts.

Ukrainians and Vishivanka in Bulgaria

Statistical data of the 2011 Population and Housing Census in Bulgaria shows that about 3000 people with Ukrainian citizenship live in Bulgaria and further 1789 persons perceive themselves as belonging to the Ukrainian ethnic group. Some of these Ukrainians, predominantly those living in or close Sofia, Plovdiv, Burgas and Varna, consolidate through the foundation of Ukrainian associations. Since the beginning of the 21st century are founded, six associations – 'Mati Ukraina' (Sofia), 'Dobrudzha – Ukraina' (Dobrich), 'Diaspora – Ukraina' (Burgas), Bulgarian-Ukrainian Association 'Chernomorie' (Varna), 'Ukrainski dom' (Silistra) and Ukrainian-Bulgarian Association 'Plovdiv' In 2013 they all formed the Association of Ukrainian organizations in Bulgaria 'Mati Ukraina' (Mother Ukraine), who are actually most often the organizers of Vishivanka events in Bulgaria.

The first procession with embroidered shirts in Bulgaria was held in Sofia on September 28th in 2013. It was organized by the Union of the Ukrainian organizations in Bulgaria 'Mati Ukraina' and the youth association 'BUKI', supported by the Embassy of Ukraine in Sofia (see Zhukivskiy, 2013; Zhukivs'kiy, 2013). On that day, people with

Ukrainian roots as well as students and teachers in Ukrainian philology at Sofia University dressed in vishivanka took part in a walk starting at the National Theater ‘Ivan Vazov’ and finishing at the ‘Revival Square’, where they laid flowers in front of the monument of T. Shevchenko (Zhukivskiy, 2013). In 2015 the march took place on May 22nd, what the Ukrainians perceived as part of the festive events organized for the national day of Slavic language and culture in Bulgaria (May 24th) (Zhukivskiy, 2013; Zhukivskiy, 2015) and simultaneously as a way to express their integration into the Bulgarian society (A. Yakimova, head of the Ukrainian Sunday School at ‘Mati Ukraina’ foundation (AIF I No 483, a.u. 12). Since 2016 vishivanka proceedings have taken place on Vishivanka Day. Then participants are not just adult Ukrainians but also children from the Ukrainian Sunday School who recite verses from T. Shevchenko and sing Ukrainian songs.

Regarding the Ukrainian diaspora in Varna, Burgas and Plovdiv – cities with bigger Ukrainian communities – Ukrainian embroidered shirts are present at gatherings of Ukrainians, happening in institutional and urban settings most often on or close to official and national holidays.

In general, vishivanka marches of Ukrainians in Bulgaria follow routes passing through places and sights connected with the history of the Ukrainian community in Bulgaria. The author’s personal observations of Ukrainian gatherings, events and celebrations reveal that every meeting is seen as an opportunity to wear an embroidered shirt, dress or other clothing with a Ukrainian traditional motive. Thus, communicating in their native language with compatriots and Bulgarian friends of Ukraine, they are able to keep their Ukrainian roots, culture and Ukrainian identity alive. As one of the respondents comments: ‘I like embroideries, they are a part of me, of my culture and self-identification. Wearing a vishivanka is a civilized way to tell other people something about me and my culture without words and also to remind them of their cultural treasury’ (AIF I No 483, a.u. 25).

The answers in the online questionnaire about the respondents’ notions of these events reveal that they all see vishivanka-related activities as an opportunity to dress in clothes with ‘very beautiful embroideries and color combinations’ (AIF I No 483, a.u. 14), making them look original and different (AIF I No 483, a.u. 18). Some of them think that this is a new (invented) tradition happening in May, popularizing Ukrainian folk traditions and embroidered costumes (AIF I No 483, a.u. 15). In the opinion of others embroidered shirts are worn ‘on special occasions, as for example Independence Day’ (AIF I No 483, a.u. 15), on other Ukrainian and Bulgarian national celebrations, at events of the Ukrainian community in

the place of residence, or ‘to show a sense of complicity with Ukraine’ (AIF I No 483, a.u. 18).

Regarding the meaning and objectives of the marches, respondents say that the aims of the events in Ukraine and abroad are different. In Ukraine, such parades are organized to rally the nation oppressed for centuries. In Bulgaria and other countries – vishivanka marches are a kind of a manifestation of the Ukrainian diaspora (AIF I No 483, a.u. 15).

In this sense, vishivanka events as new “invented” traditions are important not only for the preservation and popularization of old cultural values and practices but also for the strengthening of the national awareness among the contemporary Ukrainians and Ukrainian diaspora. Furthermore, they function also as an ethnocultural image of the migrant community in the host society.

Summary

In summary could be said that is seen a revival of the use of Ukrainian embroidered shirts and national costumes. Having in mind the invented grandiose vishivanka events held at least twice a year since the beginning of the 21th century, could be concluded that the embroidered shirt proves to be an important element in the life of modern Ukrainians. Although from an etic point of view (of non-Ukrainians) it could be seen as a way to manifest Ukrainian nationalism through invention of new traditions, from an emic point of view⁸ (of Ukrainians) it has the new function of consolidating and uniting Ukrainians all over the world in online-communities and communities-online independently of their political and religious interests – ‘it has a uniting effect’ (AIF I No 483, a.u. 16), ‘uniting power’ (AIF I No 483, a.u. 18). Furthermore, many people wear it because they like it and want to preserve it for the future, and few young Ukrainians are aware of its symbolic meaning of insubordination and freedom, of preservation of the Ukrainian identity in the past, which are also relevant for the current situation in Ukraine. For Ukrainians abroad, vishivanka events provide the opportunity not only to popularize the Ukrainian embroidered shirt and keep Ukrainian costumes, traditions and the ethnic culture alive on the whole but also to chat in their native

⁸ Adapted from K. Pike’s (1967 [1954]) linguistic phoneme analysis the differentiation between emic and etic is introduced in the cognitive ethonology for the analysis of cultural knowledge. *Emic* are cultural characteristics and concepts with a specific meaning for a given culture. *Etic*, on the contrary, are characteristics and categories with a universal meaning. Thus, the *emic* point of view refers to the cognitive perspective from ‘inside’, resp. the perspective of the examined person or people; the *etic* point of view – the perspective from ‘outside’, resp. that of the observer (to this see also Headland, Pike and Harris, 1990).

language at gatherings and to show their ethnic belonging and cultural awareness, and in some sense – the ethnocultural belonging of Ukraine to Europe.

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