The Role of Symbolic Clothing in Ukrainian Gender and Power

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Traditional clothing of a specific culture clearly and succinctly reflects attitudes and mores of the people within that society. But what happens when modernization, religion, or political forces distort and transform the meaning behind the clothing, as well as corrupt and alter its material expression? If they continue to exist, how do the original mores and attitudes manifest and change?

Ukraine’s rich tradition of feminine clothing, with its references to ancient goddess worship, prophylactic magic, and fertility suffered at the hands of Soviet bans and a subsequent state-mandated revival. Relegated to theatrical derivations and shows of artificially induced nationalism, the clothing was standardized in order to be recognizable to other Soviet nations. After 1991, Ukrainians sought to restore authentic nationalism, and recreate their lost cultural identity. Traditional clothing took on new meanings. This article is based on field observations conducted in the summer of 2008, and discusses the creative way that cultural attitudes, repressed during the Soviet era, reappear and find expression in the contemporary “folk” practices of everyday life.

Founded in the thirteenth century and miraculously undeestroyed by Mongols, Nazis and Soviets, L’viv’s beauty is reflected in its cobblestone streets, gnarled ancient trees, architecture, public artworks, church interiors… and its stunning women. Ukrainian women go to great lengths and great pains to emphasize their best features. Their hair, nails and make-up are routinely and meticulously polished, and their clothing is of western high fashion with a decidedly ultra-feminine emphasis. They accentuate their bodies, emphasizing traditionally feminine attributes like cleavage and long, thin legs. Despite the dangerous terrain of uneven cobblestones and decaying sidewalks, high-heeled shoes are a contemporary cultural norm (see fig. 1).

While the intent of this study in Ukraine initially focused on traditional costuming, it is apparent that the everyday clothing worn on the streets of L’viv and Kyiv, Ukraine is not only shaped by the
area’s distinct history, rooted in pagan, Christian, and Soviet times, but also represents the natural, organic evolutionary forms of the same peasant outfits donned in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As traditional clothing kept its form, but transformed its meaning, ultra-feminine high-fashion clothing now encompasses the spirit that initially gave genesis to the attire of the traditional peasant.

**Traditional Ukrainian Clothing**

Oksana Kosmina, in her book, *Ukrainian Folk Costume*, describes the Ukrainian peasant costume as:

…an embroidered chemise made of a whole piece of linen, *plakkha* (a wrap-around skirt) with wings, *zapaska-fartukh* fixed on the waist, *keretka* (sleeveless blouse made of costly embroidered cloth), a broad sash round the waist, a wedding wreath of natural or artificial flowers with multicoloured ribbons. (9–10)

Hanna Vrochynska informs us, moreover, that, “The jewelry and other items of adornment … were a requisite component of traditional Ukrainian folk apparel…” (213). She describes these adornments as “…necklaces (made of pearls, coral, amber, coins, etc.), medallions - “dukachi,” head wreaths, ribbons, earrings, rings and other types of personal adornment…” (213). Her outstanding publication,
Ukrainian Folk Jewelry, showcases numerous archival photographs, that provide a clear conception of such peasant costuming, along with added adornments. The effect is show-stopping. As Kosmina explains, “Baroque splendor, decorative richness, and plastic expressiveness found its reflection in Ukrainian attire…” (9).

Although variations in specific components of costuming existed regionally, the most universal element of Ukrainian folk dress is the white linen shirt or chemise. These garments were, almost always, symbolically and colorfully embroidered, most commonly with red, black, or a combination of the two, displayed against a white backdrop. There are occasional examples of polychrome. While in contemporary Ukraine, the embroidery stitch is most often the cross-stitch, more types of stitch existed historically. Olena Kulynych-Stakhurska, who traveled extensively through Ukraine, documented over one hundred different stitches in Ukrainian folk embroidery (13). Although now considered mere aesthetic decoration, these embroidered motifs were originally invested with tremendous power and represented symbolic forces important to pagan beliefs. Archaic motifs were embroidered along sleeves, hems, necklines and across the arms—as prophylactics—positioned at any opening through which evil could enter. The main function of these motifs was to protect the wearer and thus help ensure fertility, often by representing the figure of the goddess, whether in her own form, or as her extensions, which include flowers, birds and trees of life (Kelly, Goddess 10; see figs. 2, 3, 4).

Figs. 2, 3, 4.
Theory of a Goddess Worshipping Past

The existence of a goddess based matri-focal society in pre-Christian Kievan Rus' surfaces in scholarly discourse, and in the publications of academics such as Marija Gimbutas (Rubchak 321). Assembling, classifying and symbolically interpreting over two thousand artifacts from the earliest Neolithic village sites in Europe, Gimbutas reconstructs a time when goddess worship was the prevailing belief system, before “Kurgan” peoples emerged in the Volga basin of South Russia, spread westward to include the area around the Black Sea, and into Eastern and Western Europe. This invasion of Kurgan culture, she argues, changed a “gylanic” and matrilineal culture into one that was androcratic and patrilineal, roughly between 4300 and 2800 B.C.E. (Gimbutas xx). Artifacts and material objects created prior to this incursion of domesticated-horse riding, weapon-bearing conquerors are rich in symbolic representations of the prominent deity of the time, the great mother-goddess in her forms as bird-woman, voluptuously round fertility figure, or the white mother of death, and richly decorated with female-symbolic chevrons, triangles, meanders and streams. According to Kelly, “the cult of the goddess appears strongest in the Carpathian Basin and east and north into the Ukraine and Soviet Union…” (Goddess 73). Gimbutas also points out that a “remarkable surge of discoveries in Bulgaria, Romania, Moldavia, and the Western Ukraine after World War II revealed treasures of sculptures and painted pottery, as well as temples and temple models. Most of these date from the 6th and 5th millennia B.C.” (xvii). Through this analysis it is possible to imagine that Ukraine, and Kievan Rus’, once supported a culture that held feminine fertility and power in great esteem.

Symbolic Traditional Clothing

The belief in a past in which women are empowered and deified, contrasted against a historical mythology in which only males are venerated, helps shape contemporary notions of the worth of femininity. Motifs depicting the Great Goddess Berehynia continued to be embroidered on talismanic textiles like ceremonial pysanky and on clothing well into the eras of early Christianity, Soviet rule, and into contemporary times despite the fact that “these symbolic systems have survived as mere patterns…” (Kulynych-Starhurska 12). These ancient symbols of a goddess-empowered and protected fertility are now projected onto a new post-Soviet nationalistic perspective of
Ukrainian idealized femininity (Rubchak 315).

During the most repressive years of the Soviet regime, “…the expression of national or regional identity through costume was a sign of anti-Soviet sentiment, endangering the wearer’s job and family” (Saliklis 212). Kelly relates an anecdote of visiting a peasant woman across the Ukrainian border in Slovakia in which there was a “kind of wholesale purge of folk costume. Soon after the war, people were encouraged to give up wearing folk dress…many people simply threw their embroidered vests and skirts in the dump” (Goddess 127). As an unbroken tradition passed from generation to generation, folk costuming in countries under Soviet domination came to a halt. These symbolically meaningful costumes were replaced with modern, western-style clothing. Later, in an attempt to forge a re-invented pride amongst the various peoples inhabiting the Soviet bloc, folkloric song and dance troupes were developed, and performed historically inaccurate renditions of folk music and dance for the purposes of propaganda. These troupes were outfitted in theatrical versions of traditional costuming that were comic caricatures and empty carcasses of their original power-loaded versions (Saliklis 220).

After 1991, nations that were formerly a part of the USSR were left with a void. A flurry of activity followed as nations endeavored to grapple with new economic, political and ideological systems of independence. These former republics also longed for a new cultural identity. One way of forging this new identity was through traditional folk costuming. As Schneider and Weiner explain in Cloth and Human Experience, “…ancient cloths and traditions of making them continue to reemerge with political—indeed often subversive intent—above all in societies emerging from colonial domination” (9).

In Ukraine, the resurrection of traditional folk clothing adopted new meanings of nationalism, cultural identity and pride. Musical ensembles, choral groups and folk dance troupes, cement the neo-tradition through the continued wear of theatrical “folk-dress.” A degenerate form of original folk costuming is found in specialty outfits like bridesmaids’ garments and cartoonish waitress uniforms (see fig. 5). In a more artistic vein, Maria Hnylyakevych creates elegant, evening, bridal and formal clothing to which she refers as “ethno-design in clothing” (n.p.). These handmade, hybrid garments are of a universal style, and yet are clearly inspired by the traditional forms and motifs of Ukrainian folk dress. In addition, there are several interesting manifestations of the revival in traditional dress.
EVERYDAY LIFE

At contemporary rock, folk, and pop music concerts, modern interpretations of folk blouses and shirts, worn with blue jeans, are a popular choice of attire (“Ethno-Fest Freedom!” 18–21); these are spawned, perhaps, by an Orange Revolution era concert featuring rock musician Oleg Skripka, where admittance was free to those who wore traditional clothing. Businessmen proudly appeared on streets and in restaurants wearing expensive, western-style suits with traditional embroidered men’s shirts in place of the expected button-down shirt and tie. Another pattern is wearing traditional costuming during the celebration of neo-pagan rituals such as Ivan Kupalo, (“Ethno-Fest Freedom!” 10) reinstated as another quest for an authentic Ukraine.

Traditional dress is clearly still alive. Its meaning and intent, however, have changed dramatically. Rather than promoting magical protection and advertising one’s fertility, the revival of traditional Ukrainian folk clothing is theatrical, derivative, neo-religious and is used as a political tool to promote nationalism.

Old Mores, New Expressions

What form of clothing replaced traditional costuming to reflect the attitudes that originally inspired and informed those garments? In her survey of the history of women in Russia, *Women in Russian History from the Tenth to the Twentieth Century*, Pushkareva pays close attention to feminine costuming as a sociological and historical manifestation. Much of the study follows the ruling class of women, and highlights heroic figures like Olga, ruler of Kievan Rus' from 945 to 964, as well as more contemporary urban trends in fashion. Some mention is made of peasant, or folk traditional clothing. Pushkareva
reminds us that, “Women in the countryside continued to adorn their clothing with amulets and embroidery designs reflecting their pre-Christian beliefs” (120). She also allows that “peasants and women of the lower classes often preferred traditional clothing…” as it “…gave clues about their ethnic identity and social class, as well as their wealth, age, origin, and marital status” (241). Her conclusion regarding the transference of meaning from traditional peasant attire to western clothing asserts that, “The symbolic significance of Russian women’s costume ha[s] not disappeared, but it changed form and [has been] obscured behind European fashion” (241). Because of common origins dating from Kievan Rus’, a sometimes shared political history, and similar folk iconography on embroidered textiles and clothing (Kelly, “Ritual Fabrics” 152), the same is true of Ukrainian women’s costume. Modern, western-style high-fashion with a decidedly ultra-sexy and ultra-feminine twist has become the new advertisement of fertility and device of protection in the post-Soviet space (Arnold 109, 111).

Other Factors

Along with being a continuation from the original purposes of Ukrainian folk clothing, the evolution of the specific style of western clothing worn by women in L’viv and Kyiv is shaped by other forces, as well. The possible existence of a matri-focal, perhaps even matriarchal, goddess-worshipping culture in the area of the Carpathian Basin, Ukraine and parts of Russia inspires a lively dialogue amongst scholars. Within existing village celebrations, remnants of ritualistic activity persist that may support this notion. In a description of the summer solstice festival, Ivan Kupalo, Kelly remarks that, “A mid-summer doll was made and decorated with flowers and branches. This was given to the most beautiful girl in the village, for both the girl and the doll represented the goddess” (Goddess 26). There was no shame in being represented as a fully sexualized, fertile being. After the advent of Christianity in Kievan Rus’, which functions and continues to exist as dvoeverie (“dual faith”) along with paganism, the cult of the Virgin Mary became the primary manifestation of goddess worship. As Rubchak explains, “Together, the two symbols have been blended into a new metasymbol of Ukrainian femininity as a divinely ordained entity…” (320).

Further manifestations of goddess worship are prevalent in downtown L’viv. In the heart of town, there is a prominent area de-
voted to the Blessed Virgin Mary (see fig. 6). Four small, life-size Marys surround a large, central statue of her figure. Devotees stop on their way to work or school, or simply as they are walking downtown. They make the sign of the cross, pray with deep concentration amid the noise of traffic, and bring flowers as an offering. One particularly zealous woman, dressed entirely in black, spent over an hour praying to one of the statues, talking to her, kissing her, and lying prostrate on the ground in front of the figure.

Other depictions of the Blessed Virgin are in churches, on cornices, and inside apartment buildings. Aside from the countless large and small depictions of the Blessed Virgin Mary, there are also decorative statues, cornices, relief sculptures, paintings, and stained glass images of various forms of goddesses and beautiful, powerful women. Statues of Diana and Aphrodite surround the town hall, fe-
male representations of the continents embellish the George Hotel, and naked, idealized women adorn buildings, cornices, and balustrades everywhere (see figs. 7, 8, 9). There is even a depiction of Lady Liberty on the roof of a former bank (now the Lviv Ethnographic Museum). In this version, however, she is seated, lounging, and surrounded by adoring men (see fig. 10).

In Kyiv, sculptural depictions of women, outside of churches are less frequent than in Lviv, but are still prevalent in the important centers of the city. Near Maidan Nezalezhnosti, there is the newly constructed Monument of Independence (2001), the white and gold pillar which supports the figure of the Goddess Berehynia at the top. Close to the monument is a bronze sculpture of the founders of Kiev. Lybid, the fabled sister of the three brother seamen who rides at the front of the ship, reportedly chose exactly where the city would be founded. St. Michael’s Square houses a monument to Princess Olga. It seems impossible for a young girl to not be affected in this environ-
ment of idealized feminine beauty, surrounded by heroic women, while also inspired by notions of the power of a woman’s sexuality and beauty.

Even the mainstay of patriarchal power, the Christian Church, offers models of baroque splendor for feminine attire. Ukrainian churches, whether Orthodox, Uniate, or Catholic, are for the most part ornate, marked with an opulence that is non-existent in Protestant places of worship or Western Catholic churches (see fig. 11). Icons of the Blessed Virgin are surrounded by lavish iconostases of curling golden woodwork and jewels, and worshipped with bees-wax candles and flowers. The gold domes of Pecherska Lavra shelter ancient mumified monks whose fragile bodies are protected with elaborate brocaded gowns and embroidered slippers. There is, however, no dichotomy between the devout women, dressed in short skirts, sequins, coquettish heels, fish net hose, plunging necklines—and demure scarves—and the highly-decorated churches where they reverently make the sign of the cross, light candles, and pray. They, in fact, fit right in (see figs. 12 and 13).

A New Feminism

During the course of this study, upon an encounter with a beautiful and brilliant, young, female Ukrainian scholar who was translating a lecture on the subject of a complex matter of political science, and who was dressed in a manner that, in America, is considered inviting, a female fellow American student derisively declared, “No one would take her seriously in America!” But in Ukraine, “… the way of life and women’s destiny is completely different from that
of a European country’s” or of an American’s “way of understanding it” (Camatsos). The discourse regarding western-style feminism in Ukraine is relegated to scholarly debate rather than being embraced by the masses (Pavlychko, Rubchak). One sector of Ukrainian feminism, however, that made its own highly-feminized name is Femen. Founded by Anna Hutsol in 2008, this unusual activist group utilizes feminine sexuality to draw attention to their causes, which include protesting the sex trafficking of Ukrainian women, speaking out against sex tourism, challenging hegemonic notions of patriarchy (including religion), and shedding light on instances of government corruption—often referred to as government prostitution, or the rape of democracy. Their highly-sexualized behavior includes dressing as prostitutes, donning creatively conceived costuming like bikinis constructed from surgical masks, or simply taking off their clothes in public while brandishing signs, painting messages on their bodies, or chanting slogans in traditional Ukrainian floral head wreathes. These activities usually culminate in a tussle with police and eventual arrest, only bringing more attention to their cause. Femen women receive worldwide press attention by embracing the strength, beauty, and inherent power of feminized sexuality. When asked about her understanding of the mainstream feminist response to Femen’s carnivalesque glam-feminism, Hutsol remarks that, “Yes….We’re different from classic feminists. In order to gain a voice, they had to become like men. But we want a real women’s revolution. Our naked protests are part of the fight for women’s liberation” (Bidder).

According to Judith Lorber’s classifications of feminist theory, Femen would likely be listed under the category of “Resistant” feminist theories of inequality, which “coalesce around the concept of patriarchy, a system of interlocked oppressions and exploitations of women’s bodies, sexuality, labor, and emotions” (Lorber 7). Later, she more deeply explains the classification, and states that resistant feminists believe gender order cannot be made equal as a result of gender balancing, because of men’s dominance being so overwhelming. “Gender equality, they argue, ends up with women becoming like men” (Lorber 11). She also clarifies that resistant feminists “…value women and womanly attributes over men and manly attributes” and “…tend to be confrontational in challenging the confines of the male-dominated gendered social order” (Lorber 11).

While similar in approach, Femen’s unusual blend of street-theater activism and international branding and marketing defy such
categorization. Hutson “admits to being disengaged with feminist theory, history, and cultural studies—all spaces she associates with “the academy”” (Zychowicz 215). According to a recent article in the Atlantic, Femen has “…pronounced traditional feminism dead, anointed itself the standard-bearer for “a new wave of third-millennium feminism” and pledged to combat “patriarchal society in all its manifestations – dictatorship, the church, and the sex industry”” (Taylor). Even going against the rebelliousness of previous feminist manifestations, Femen appears distinctly fresh and, arguably, distinctly Ukrainian.

Femen’s street-theatre tactics are possibly the catalyst for other neo-feminist protest events, like the international phenomenon, SlutWalks, or the behavior of the Russian punk-rock group, Pussy Riot. SlutWalks originated in Toronto in 2011, and spread worldwide. In these protest marches, young women dress in provocative clothing, actively repudiating accusations that choice of dress is often the catalyst for rape. Pussy Riot expanded their punk-rock activities to include political protest during the 2012 campaign of Vladimir Putin to regain the Russian Presidency, for which several women were jailed. Neither SlutWalks nor Pussy Riot, however, professes the avowed mission of Femen, which states: “Our God is woman, our mission is protest, our weapons are bare breasts” (Shevchenko). FEMEN activist, Inna Shevchenko, remarks that:

I mean, really, we have many radical plans: one of them is to build an international organization and another is to go to the parliament. We really do believe that we can start a revolution here in this country and spread it to other countries. We want to create a revolution of women, a revolution that is made by women’s bodies and minds.

(Shevchenko)

FEMEN helps to carve a new “lipstick feminism,” one that is based on celebrating, as opposed to repressing, femininity. True to their goals, FEMEN chapters sprung up internationally in the U.S., Belarus, Holland, Spain, Poland, Brazil, France and Canada.

Part of the reticence to embrace western-style feminism is likely influenced by attitudes developed during the Soviet era. St. George reports that, when he asked a young female Soviet doctor about women’s attitudes towards feminism and femininity, she replied:

Can you tell me in what way being feminine and
attractive interferes with woman’s freedom or
equality? …Soviet woman no longer has to be
rough and masculine to prove her equality with
men – she has already proved it; and now she can
afford to be feminine. (215)

An example of this philosophy is former Ukrainian Prime
Minister and co-leader of the Orange Revolution, Yulia Tymoshenko.
Voted by Forbes in July 2005 as the third most influential woman in
the world (“100 Most Powerful Women”), Tymoshenko embraces a
political image that highlights, rather than conceals, her feminine
strengths. No wearer of baggy, masculine pantsuits or bearer of man-
nish no-nonsense hair, Tymoshenko wears form-fitting clothing, most
often all white, and dons the Slavic crown braid or occasionally lets
her blond tresses fly free. She adopts and internalizes the image of the
Ukrainian mother-goddess Berehynia, appealing to the Ukrainian na-
tional psyche, winning the adoration of her supporters, and earning
the respect of prominent world leaders. Lest one think she is mere
feminine fluff, a likely reason for her 2012 incarceration is the threat
that she poses to current President Viktor Yanukovych’s control of
the country’s political power. She lost, by a very slim margin, in the
most recent presidential election.

Post-Soviet Beauty

The attitudes, mandates and lack of choices during the Soviet
era (Vainshtein 70; Azhgikhina and Gosciło 97-101) undeniably had a
major influence on current attitudes towards what is referred to as a
“pathological obsession with fashion.” (Gray 160). The former depre-
vation of available choices led to a spree of gleeful variety. In response
to the bleak apartment buildings to which most Soviet citizens were
relegated, a television program director declared, “…everything about
us is as drab as our apartment houses…So, decorating your outer sur-
face is like bringing flowers inside of you, it’s your only way of cheer-
ing up” (Gray 164). Likewise, in reporting tales of Soviet repression,
the director of a fashion design collective remarked that, “For decades
of our [20th] century, a person wearing a bright green skirt to the of-
face, or say, an imaginative homemade hat, was singled out for reprim-
and, could even be sent to prison for such unorthodox dress…So,
now we dress up every morning as if it were a feast day” (Gray 164).

Standards of beauty changed dramatically since the Soviet era,
likely as a reaction to the imposed restrictions on creative, flamboyant,
or provocative clothing, hairstyles, make-up, and accessories. “Simplicity and modesty constituted the ideology of beauty informing socialist bourgeois fashion” (Vainshtein 70). Hair was de-eroticized, either through short cuts and styles or through braiding. Make-up was frowned upon, not only by schools and other institutions, but by “progressive” socialist women, who harshly criticized their female friends who “…elected to dye their hair, pluck their brows and paint their lips” (Azhgikhina and Goscilo 97). Women were supposed to uphold standards of neatness, simplicity, cleanliness, and severity.

Since the 1980s, after Perestroika, and particularly after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the pendulum of beauty standards swung to welcome an over-the-top version of western high fashion, perfect make-up, long flowing hair, and status jewelry (see fig. 14). Blatant sexuality, formerly discouraged, is now welcomed and celebrated, and is even commoditized. The strict, severe, nihilist aesthetic gives way to styles of opulent, feminine, and eroticized excess.

Conclusion
Although traditional folk dress is alive and well in Ukraine, its form and its symbolic significance changed tremendously. Rather than representing fertility and promoting magical protection, the garments now primarily represent a post-colonial nationalism. Attitudes often die harder than forms, and the original attitudes that generated traditional village folk clothing are now represented by an ultra-feminine version of western high fashion. In addition, this new, true-
to-its-time “folk clothing” is shaped by a culture that embraces an idealized feminine, and equates spirituality with beauty (Gray 166). This orientation toward the feminine was temporarily suppressed by Soviet dogma and rule. Creative life, however, sprung anew as a transformed representation of sexuality, freedom and beauty.

Works Cited


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EVERYDAY LIFE

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