

Symbolism of Traditional Eastern Slavic Costumes

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I . An Introduction to the Traditional Eastern Slavic Costumes

The national costume is a manifestation of human activity steeped in cultural tradition. It cannot be understood without considering it a purposefully directed process of changing symbolic forms and as a reflection of the Eastern Slavic worldview.

The traditional Eastern Slavic costume has been developed gradually, and shaped by climatic as well as political and economic influences. The traditional Eastern Slavic costume has reflected beliefs about the world as well as an understanding of the beauty of the world and its harmony. The traditional Eastern Slavic culture has developed its own worldview and special forms of its figurative reflection.

In this cultural historical period, the contents of symbols of both the material and spiritual life of the people changed. The distinctive changes are seen at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. This phenomenon in a national costume exemplifies the process of gradual attenuation, and the fact that ancient pagan symbols are slowly becoming forgotten.

II . The Eastern Slavic Costumes and Their Characteristics

The traditional Eastern Slavic costume has historically served multiple functions. After merging with the human being to become his natural cover, the traditional costume communicated status in the social hierarchy on the one hand, and provided protection from the elements as well. Thus, a certain system of symbols consisting of complex combinations of ornament and color was developed to express the Eastern Slavic man's relationship to the world.

Traditional Eastern Slavic costume is marked by national symbols which date back to antiquity. These symbols represent strong figures which occur in every epoch and are critical to the development of the primary forms¹⁾.

At this moment in the traditional complexes of the clothes of the Byelorussians, the Russian and Ukrainian clothes can be traced to more general (common) features.

1. Color and patterns

An important role in Eastern Slavic national costume belongs to color.

The color scale is constructed of three primary colours: red, black and white. The



<Fig. 1> Red color in traditional costume of eastern slav (М.Н. Мерцалова, поэзия народного костюма с.77)

red colour for Eastern Slavs as well as for many other peoples, carried the meaning of protection from evil spirits²⁾. The red colour has been associated with such important things for man as blood, life, and fire, which both protects man and provides his sustenance <Fig. 1>. Symbolism of the color black is in direct opposition to the symbolism of the color red. In the ancient costume, the combination of geometrically shaped ornaments with red and black colors symbolized the binary principle of dichotomous bases: good and evil, life and death. Quantitatively, the colour red dominates the colour black and the mark or code of a good life is perceived as a wish for goodness.

The symbolism of ornaments and decorations in clothes and accessories carried significant psychological influence. The symbolism of color in wedding clothes, for example, was shown especially vividly. In the life cycle of the peasantry, marriage is a highly positive, emotional and festive ritual, and it is highlighted as a most important event by the use of brightly colored garments <Fig. 2>.



<Fig. 2> the wedding costume Mid-19 cent. Russia (М.Н. Мерцалова, поэзия народного костюма р.44)

The color white is used extensively in this ceremony. There are many examples of the white Rubaha(рубаха)(or the white sleeves of the Rubaha(рубаха)), the white seam in Ponyova(понёва) clothes in southern Russia), the white Platok(платок)(a scarf type headgear), the white Nametka(наметка)(a scarf type headgear), etc. a costume for the bride. The color white probably symbolized cleanliness, innocence, and/or grief.

Considerable value was also given to wedding clothes of the color red.

This would include garments such as the red skirt or Ponyova (понёва), the red veil, the red fur coat and the red caftan of the bridegroom. The bridegroom, bride and the matchmaker tied a red belt at their waists. On the top of a Nametka(наметка) or Platok(платок), a

red ribbon was tied. Special meaning was given to these clothes probably because the color red was associated with the color of blood. This carried the symbolism of love, marriage (spoilage), the conjugal night, and the cleanliness (virginity) of the bride.

And though the colour of clothing conveyed great symbolic value, so too did the composite arrangement of patterns, and ornaments on clothes.

There are certain methods and laws governing how traditional Eastern Slavic garment ornamentation and decoration is done—specifically along edge ways, seams, and on sleeves. The ornament of the traditional Belarussian women's costume is an example of the formation of the closed composite circuit in an arrangement of decorative patterns: from the shoulder down the sleeve, and then on the bottom of the apron and again on to a sleeve finishing with the neckline and headgear. Such a sight of red colour in a traditional costume (a similar principle is traced in Russian and Ukrainian national costumes), specifies the formation of typical ancient shape, which consisted of a shell around the body. Thus, the semantic circle is formed, mirroring the human circulatory system. Blood here symbolizes the beginning of life <Fig. 3>.

The integrity and longevity of the decoration's composition stems from its multiple functions. This phenomenon which persists not only in Eastern Slavic traditional costume, but also in other Slavic traditional costumes and in other native traditional costumes outside the Slavic region³), has resulted in the world recognition of Eastern Slavic traditional costume.

The attention given to the ornamentation of the Rubaha (рубaha) is no surprise because the Rubaha (рубaha) is basic wear, which comes into direct contact with the body. The ornamenting of seams, bottom, neckline, collar, and cuff was done to protect the wearer from physical harm as well as from evil spirits.

Long ago people obviously deemed it unthinkable to sell the Rubaha (рубaha). To sell one's Rubaha (рубaha) was seen as the equivalent of selling off one's happiness.

For the Belarussians, the Russian and Ukrainian conjugal Rubaha (рубaha) has added meaning. Traditionally the bridegroom's Rubaha (рубaha) was to be sewn by the bride, worn by her and then presented by her to her future spouse. The exchange of clothes in the wedding ceremony was rather widely practiced among Eastern Slavs and was a symbol of connection between the husband and wife. After bathing, the bride donned the clothes she had specially prepared for the parents of her new



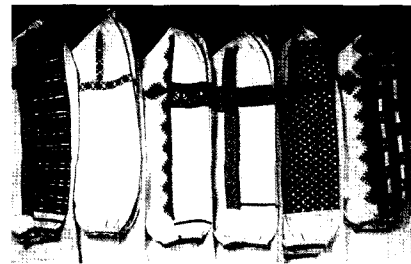
<Fig. 3> Traditional women's costume. Late 19 - early 20 cent. Belarus (Романюк М. Ф., Беларускае народнае адзенне, p.136)

husband. This ritual was practiced to ingratiate the bride with her in-laws⁴).

The conjugal Rubaha(рубaha) has various forms but they are used in one common wedding ceremony. The ceremonial bridal Rubaha(рубaha) was worn to show the innocence and "honesty" of the bride on her wedding night. According to researchers of national culture, Eastern Slavs who participated in ceremonies with the Rubaha(рубaha) of the bride most probably believed that it conferred apotropaic power and fruitfulness⁵). This superstitious power was said to affect not only the bride and groom and their respective families, but also the fertility of the village cattle and the bounty of the harvest.

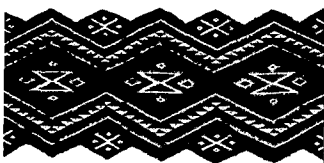
The wedding Rubaha(рубaha) was worn during the most crucial times in an Eastern Slavs life, such as during a difficult delivery or during a serious illness. The wedding Rubaha(рубaha) was kept by its owner for his or her entire life and was ultimately worn as a funeral costume. The origin of this symbolism dates back to ancient times.

Clothes with most complex geometrical ornaments protected the most vital body parts -the hands and shoulders of the man and the belly of the woman. On the Rubaha(рубaha) for festivals and even on the everyday Rubaha(рубaha), the greatest amount of ornamentation is always placed at the top of a sleeve. For Eastern Slavs and other peoples, this not only strengthened amulets, but also increased the power of the hand <Fig. 4>.



<Fig. 4> Detail of women's Rubaha. Sleeves. late 19-early 20 cent. Belarus(Беларускі музей, рр. 120-121)

Traditional ornaments of Eastern Slavs have a



<Fig. 5> Apron's(Perednik's) detail, mid-end 19 cent. belarus Lozenge-geometrical ornament(В.Я. Фадзеева, Беларуская народная вышыўка, р.171)

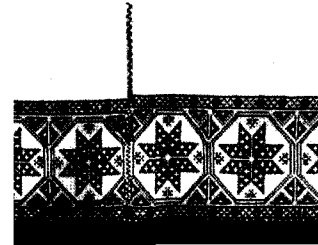
complex connection and are constructed with geometrical motifs, which originated in northern and western areas of the Belarussians, Ukraine <Fig. 5>. Traditional costume with subject ornament was in existence in northern areas of Russia. Similar motifs were in use across hundreds and thousands of kilometers with the basic composite circuits intact, which allows one to perceive the geometrical ornament as a system of abstract symbols.

Each symbol of a certain historical stage carried concrete semantic loading. Take the circle, for instance. For many Indo-European peoples the wheel is the most ancient symbol of the sun. In the Middle Ages, the idea of a circle was connected to the world. A circle symbolized integrity and universal harmony. The concept of the circle came to connote the image of God and the world. The square was seen as the ideal stable structure and was, therefore, a symbol of the earth, sun and sky. The triangle,

a symbol of fire, conveyed misfortune and created a feeling of dependence.

Eight- and six-petaled flowers symbolize the concept of vivifying solar heat and the plentiful growth of plants and flowers on the Earth. A cross stood for fire, the sun, eternal life and the idea of infinity. This figure was perceived as the center of the world, an intermediary between the material and ideal worlds. <Fig. 6>

Lozenge shaped ornaments of Eastern Slavic tradition are connected to symbols of fertility not only for the Earth, but also for man. Therefore, it is not accidental that a Belarussian girl could only wear a costume decorated with lozenge shaped ornaments after she reached her fifteenth birthday.



<Fig. 6> Apron's(Perednik's) detail, mid-end 19 cent. Belarus Lozenge-geometrical ornament(В.Я. Фадзеева, Беларуская народная вышыўка, р.78)

2. Symbolism of Gender Roles

The symbols in deep antiquity have delineated different understandings of the roles of men and women. This means that the formation of an aesthetic ideal of male and female beauty was divided by gender role. The woman was perceived as the bearer of new life. The female image was associated with the fertility of the Earth, birds, animals, and people. The ancient farmers viewed tilled earth as a fecund woman. The "woman" first had to conceive for the earth to become fertile and produce. Therefore, women's dress and other accessories (headgear, Rubaha(рубaha), skirt, Perednik(передник-apron) and their decorations were determined by the symbolism of procreation.



<Fig. 7> Costume at different life stage: child, girl, bride, young married woman, elder and old woman

The symbolism in every period of the life cycle determined the costume and the aesthetic image, especially in each of the life stages of women: young girl, adolescent girl, affianced girl, bride, newly married woman, new mother, middle-aged woman and the elderly woman <Fig. 7>.

At each stage of life, the quantity of ornaments and elements of dress were changed through local custom. Traditionally in ordinary times, the Eastern Slavic girls wore only the Rubaha(рубaha) and tied a belt on the Rubaha(рубaha). If the girl wore a skirt attached to the belt, it signified the reaching of sexual maturity and the possibility of marriage.

Even the quantity of ornaments on a Rubaha(рубaha) was dictated according to the specific age group of the wearer. In Russian tradition, the Rubaha(рубaha) for a

married woman featured ornamental embroidery on the entire sleeve, whereas the Rubaha(рубaha) for an unmarried woman was embroidered only on the shoulder⁶).

It is possible with confidence to assert that the costume with the richest, most colourful and abundant decorations could be worn by a woman in the first year of marriage. This is observed in the national costume of Eastern Slavs <Fig. 8>.

After the birth of the first child, the ornamentation of a costume became somewhat lessened. The Kokoshnik(кокошник), horned Kichka(кичка) or other formal headgear was worn by childless married women only in especially solemn ceremonies. For example, Sarafan(сарафан), which became fashionable in some southern Russian areas at the end of the nineteenth century, could be worn by women in ceremonies only before the birth of their first child. After the birth of the first child,



<Fig. 8> Young married woman's costume. 19 cent. Russia Н. Мерцалова, поэзия народного костюма р.68)



<Fig. 9> Young married woman and unmarried woman's costume. Russia(М.Н. Мерцалова, поэзия народного костюма р. 73)

women began to wear Ponyova(понёва)-traditionally skirt-type clothes. However, the idea of fertility and the continuing need to produce offspring during this stage was a determining factor. This obviously explained those severe restrictions on a woman's costume and its components <Fig. 9>. For example, it was impossible to appear in society without an apron, belt, and headgear (an uncovered head). Menopause was also marked by changes in the female costume-namely a decrease in color and a reduction in the amount of ornaments. This is demonstrated by the tradition of replacement in old age. An older woman, for instance, would wear a Kichka(кичка) without horns, or a Sapoka(Сапока) without a kichka(кичка) in the area of southern Russia. The decorations attached to the Rubaha(рубaha) for young married women and adolescent girls were sewn with a red fabric, while older women and very young girls used a white fabric.

Instead of red ornaments on a Rubaha(рубaha), white ornaments were frequently substituted as a symbol of a woman's elderly age. The white color was associated with the end of the life cycle. Therefore, in traditional culture of the Belarussians, Russians, and Ukrainians, white embroidery, as well as the white clothes, were present in funeral ceremonies.

3. Hairstyle and Headgear

The image of a costume developed under the influence of ancient performances about the magic force of hair. The change from the maiden hairstyle to the headgear of the married woman is a practice seen in many cultures that can only be explained by a shared universal myth dating back to the Stone Age. The symbolism of hair directly dictated the assignment of headgear among the Eastern Slavs. Rules regarding the wearing of headgear among the peasants required completely enclosing the hair, which was thought to promote productivity and well being in the economy.

With regard to the national perception of hair, the binary principle is again clearly seen. On the one hand, hair could cause harm. On the other hand, it could protect. This would likely be the reason that embroidery was sewn with hairs along the seams of the funeral Rubaha(рубaha). Besides being an old custom of the Russian women, it was also considered to be an amulet of protection for the journey into the afterlife⁷).

More than any other aspect of the Eastern Slavic woman's costume, headgear most strongly reflected age and social changes in the life of a girl. The age distinctions were marked in headgear from childhood on. The maiden headgear differed from the adult female type in that some hair at the top of the head was not completely enclosed and remained loose. All basic kinds of Eastern Slavic maiden headgear are the type that cover the head and the type that tie the hair up on the head. In times of old, a girl's hair was probably let down <Fig. 10>.



<Fig. 11> chaplets type headgear early 20 cent. Belarus Романюк М.Ф., Беларускае народнае адзенне, р.97)



<Fig. 10> women & children in formal costume or everyday clothes (Романюк М.Ф., Беларускае народнае адзенне, р.112)

The headgear of the affianced girl varied according to region. The Ukrainian girl wore a Venok with flowers, but an engaged girl's Venok(венюк) was decorated with a peacock feather, or tied up with a Platok(платок), leaving the top of the head open. One week prior to the wedding, she would put on a Venok(венюк) with flowers that would be braided into her hair along with more than 20 multi-colored ribbons that would be given to her by the bridegroom <Fig. 11>. The Russian traditional types of headgear were especially varied. In northern areas of Russia, the affianced girl wore a Povyaska(повязка), in which the top was already closed by a special lace or fabric. The rather interesting form of transitive headgear was the so-called "honour cap". It was knitted



<Fig. 12> Caps for girl & women. late 19-early 20 cent. Russia

and had a conical shape. It indicated the girl was a bride-to-be and simultaneously certified her purity <Fig. 12>.

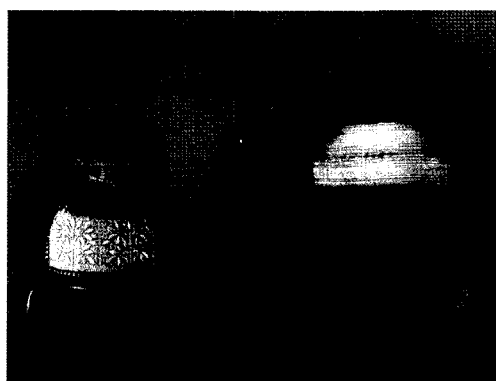
The change of a hairdo and selection of a headgear occurred during the wedding ceremony and reflected the transition of the bride. Depending on region, it could be one of the following: a Kokoshnik(кокошник), a Kitchka(кичка) with a Soroka, a Povoиник(повоиник), a Sbornik(сборник) (rus.); a Tcheretsh(чепец), a Nameta(наметка), a Kapur(капур)(bel.); a Otchpok(очипок), a Nametka(наметка), a Rantuh(рантух), or a Serpanok(серпанок)(укр.). <Fig. 13>

In those types of headgear there could be seen symbolic expression and an identification of the people with animals connected to ancient totemism.

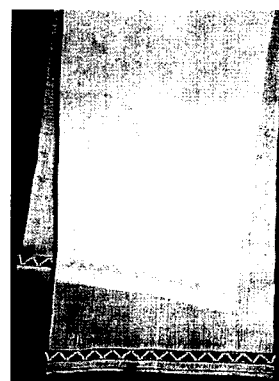
The Belarussian types of headgear have the following names: Galovatchka(головачка), Rodjki(рожки), and Saroka(сарока)⁸⁾ <Fig. 14>. Under the unique shape of the firm base, braided hair was affixed to each side of the head with the ends of the Nametka(наметка)(scarf-type headgear), giving this headgear the shape of a mono-horn or dual-horn <Fig. 15>. It is characteristic for Russian women's headgear to have names that resemble the names of birds. Take for example the Kokoshnik(кокошник), the Soroka(сорока), and the Kitchka(кичка). The form of the Kitchka(кичка) frequently reminds one of the horns of a cow <Fig. 16>. The shape of the horn is fairly common among Eastern Slavs, but it is especially prevalent in the Ponyova(понева) complex, which is found in the southern area.



<Fig. 13> kokoshnik mid-end 19cent. Russia



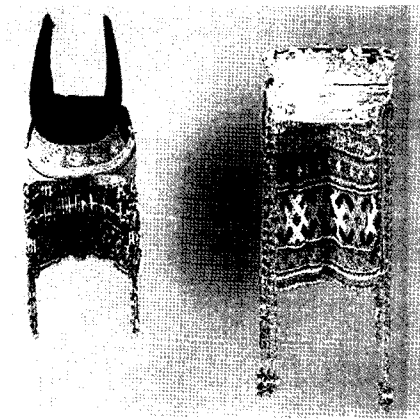
<Fig. 14> women headgears soroka (magpie) late 19 cent. Russia



<Fig. 15> Women's head-towels namitka Belarus

The characteristic hairdo of the Belarussians was to let down the hair, comb it, and then tie it to a framed base upon which it was braided. This was also the case

for the Russian traditional hairdo. The softer types of headgear, such as the Tchepetsh(чепец), (Bel.), the Моршен(моршень) (Rus.), and the Отчпок(очипок), (Ukr.), were placed directly on the hair. <Fig. 17> These types of headgear accomplished the function of enclosing the hair, symbolizing a loss of freedom and submission to the husband.



<Fig. 16> women's headgear kika 19 cent.
Russia



<Fig. 17> women's headgear tchepetsh(bonnet)
early 20 cent. Belarus(Романюк
М.Ф., Беларускаяе народнае адз
енне, р.304)

The Nametka(наметка) is a scarf type of headgear and is the most typical one for the Belarussians the Ukrainians. This headgear is for the married woman. Its constructive decisions are rather varied. For example, for the Belarussians there are more than 30 methods of tying. The tendency was toward the formation of a uniform, which enclosed not only the hair, but the entire head, neck and shoulders. Such an understanding of the role of the Nametka(наметка) can be explained from antiquity in the broad use of similar names-Namyotka((наметка) and Namitetsh(намитец) among the Ukrainians and Belarussians, namats among the Latvians, and nuometas among the Lithuanians⁹⁾ <Fig. 18>.

The change of a hairstyle and headgear for Eastern Slavs was accompanied by the protest of the bride against wearing the married woman's headgear.

In the early 20th century, the protest by the bride against wearing the married woman's headgear had become purely symbolic in the ceremony, but in the original ceremony it reflected the difficult situation of the young woman in the large family of her husband.



<Fig. 18> women head-towels namitka late 19- early 20 cent. Belarus (Романюк М. Ф., Беларускае народнае адзенне, р.44)

The change of a hairdo and headgear was sometimes part of theatrical performances. In the Ukraine and in Belarus, a performance would take place in a rye vat in the corners of a log hut built of rye sheaves, and money and linen would be placed upon the head of a young bride. Bread was an obligatory element of the wedding ceremony in all three Eastern Slavic regions.

Specific ceremonial elements involving the fireplace are connected to wishes for fecundity and wealth. The throwing of a Nametka into the fireplace would be an example of this. It is also necessary to note the role of linen, with which hair was tied into braids. The Belarussians and the Ukrainians made firm frames onto which hair was braided.

Obviously, a linen fiber is similar to a strand of hair. Its being combed or used in a hairdo symbolized protection and the promotion of fertility and procreation.

Other Elements of the Traditional Costume-the Coat and Accessories.

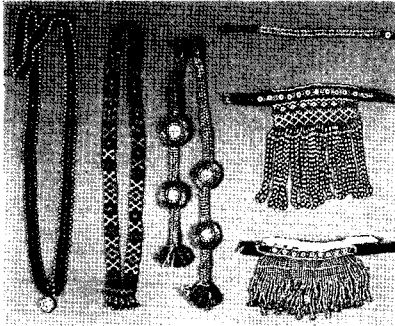
The role of the belt as an element of the national costume was not only for practical purposes. The belt was considered a sacral subject, as it was given to everyone before the baptismal ceremony. The presence of the belt as an element of the costume complex brought about diverse symbolism. The untying of the bride's belt by the bridegroom in the wedding ceremony symbolized her submission to the groom. A woman's belt was a symbol of fidelity, propriety of behaviour and feminine modesty. The man's belt according to national custom was connected to fertility, virility and the promotion of the birth of sons. The red belt, given by the wife, protected her husband from wicked eyes, slander and other men's wives.

The ancient symbolism determined the way of tying a belt on the body, its color, and ornamentation. On the Rubaha(рубaha), Panyova(панёва), Plahta(плахта), and Sarafan(сарафан), all Eastern Slavs tied the belt in the same obligatory fashion. Even in the northern area of Russia, where the Sarafan(сарафан) was made of expensive silk, the belt was tied under a Sarafan(сарафан) on the Rubaha for which the fabric was not wiped <Fig. 19>.

The traditional national costume was decorated with plenty of removable ornaments, and they each displayed their own aesthetic characteristics. However,



<Fig. 19> Traditional waist-belts late 19-early 20 cent. Belarus (Романюк М.Ф., Беларускае народнае адзенне, р.309)



<Fig. 20> Gribatki, chepochka, garussa Russia

many Eastern Slavs wore the costume or its accessories to secure the power of a supernatural guardian. For example, an amber necklace might be used because it symbolized the maintenance of good health. At the same time in Russia and Belarus, there was an interdiction against adorning oneself with accessories during a wedding ceremony. A Belarussian bride was instructed not to decorate a necklace with metal or stone ornaments, and to be especially careful not to use a cross on the necklace. This was thought to bring misfortune to the bride. Clearly, this stems from an ancient superstition against wearing metal, and metal crosses in particular <Fig. 20>.

Next, there are several symbols associated with fur coats. Ordinarily the fur coat served the especially practical role of protecting the man from the intense cold. In the wedding ceremony, the fur coat was used because of its origins in ancient totemism. It was common for Eastern Slavic bridegrooms and brides to wear the fur coat as part of the wedding ceremony. This custom was practiced until the early 20th century. If the weather was not muggy, the bride wore a fur coat (in Russia), or went to the church in a fur coat, on top of which was placed a felt coat. The bridegroom and bride would sit down at a special table and then they would remove these coats (in Belarus). This was done so that the life of a young couple would hopefully be full of happiness and wealth. The fur clothes were like amulets worn to bring about an abundant harvest, material wealth, and as many children as there were hairs in the fur coat. It is possible that the fur coat was connected with the totem of procreation, which was believed to influence the fertility of the bride <Fig. 21>.



<Fig. 21> Peasants in wedding garments
Early 20 cent. Belarus Рома
нюк М.Ф., Беларускае народ
нае адзенне, р.421)

The contents of the symbolism have changed in the material-spiritual lives of the Eastern Slavs during the current period and during other historical and cultural periods. Traditional folk culture is distinguished from the culture of elite society, and like the culture of the elite, folk culture has gradually changed as a result of cardinal global changes in the world.

It is necessary to connect the formation of a traditional costume with ideas of renaissance, humanism and interest in man. The composition and pattern design of the costume fit the natural proportions of a human body.

It did not restrict movement and demonstrated a harmonious understanding of symmetry and moderation. For these reasons it was gradually adopted across the nation.

The side attachment functioned as a way of connecting pieces of different widths. It used a connecting insert between a sleeve and the body with additional wedges to effect an increase in volume, which created various avenues of expansion to the hip line. This reflected the new Eastern Slavic view of the world and man.

It is necessary to note that deep ancient symbols affected the formation of the folk costume. In the evolution of the folk costume, previous forms were retained. However, we also witness the tendency to preserve external forms without knowledge of the underlying symbolism. This is also seen when the contents of a certain symbol disappear and an unconscious tradition begins¹⁰). There is a great deal of consistency in the folk costumes that date back to the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Therefore, researchers of the Belarussian costume feel strongly that the pattern of the *Ponyova*(понева) textile was handed down from deep antiquity.

III. Conclusion

At the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries, the traditional clothes bear the influence of economic and social conditions as well as aesthetic considerations. The Eastern Slavic costume becomes purely festival and ceremonial dress (wedding and funeral clothes). The ceremonial costume is connected to symbols rooted in superstition. Many symbols signified the exile of evil spirits, catharsis (cleaning), and other types of sorcery.

In a number of the clothing forms, this was defined, for example, by the occurrence of unusually long sleeves.

The Eastern Slavic traditional complex of clothes represents the unique physical form of the realization of the symbolism. The symbols of fertility, fruitfulness, and procreation are represented through vivid colors and by the quantity and quality of ornaments in the traditional costume complex of a group of people for whom procreation was of utmost importance.

A number of symbols which are determined by their stability and unchanging meanings in costume are classified by ethnic, generational, and social considerations. This phenomenon originated in ancient times and in mythology. It is possible for different nations to appear similar in their understanding of the functions of a costume through similar worldviews.

The materials on the roles and symbols of the Eastern Slavic costumes reflect

their large affinity, which does not exclude regional characteristics and variants. Some parallels with other nations are marked, and that was caused by direct cultural contact and mutual influence between the Eastern Slavs and neighboring nations.

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- 3) У болгар древнейшего типа туникоподобная женская рубашка украшалась орнаментом по краям рукавов, на плечьях, по разрезам на груди и на подоле. Все швы в одежде такого типа подчеркнуты вышивкой или нашитой сверху полоской ткани.
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