

TRADITIONAL WINTER HOLIDAYS IN UKRAINE

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Анотація: В статті розглядаються традиційні зимові свята в Україні, звичаї та обряди, які з ними пов'язані, в контексті їхнього загальноєвропейського походження та християнських традицій. Найбільш значущі свята зимового календаря українців розглядаються в аспекті їхньої ролі у формуванні світогляду давніх українців.

Ключові слова: традиційні зимові свята, християнство, зимове сонцестояння, українські календарні свята.

Winter holidays in Ukraine have a long history and belong to the Ukrainian calendar holidays. The winter traditions and rites of Ukrainians reveal some crucial elements of the formation of mentality of Ukrainians throughout the ages. Before the Middle Ages Ukrainian peasants used to celebrating the New Year on the 1st of March as the beginning of a new agricultural year (Курочкін 1978: 13). In the XIV century the Church obliged people to celebrate the New Year on the 1st of September, what was met with resistance by the ordinary peasants, who were still associating the New Year with spring. Due to polish influences in the XV-XVI centuries and introducing of Julian calendar the New Year shifted on the 1st of January, which was officially formalized with the order of the Tsar Peter I in the year 1700. From that time on the New Year and Christmas have been established on special days of a year. Even the promulgation of the Gregorian calendar in 1582 in Europe did not mean that the new calendar could replace without any resistance the Julian calendar especially in civil life and in the church. Russia and Ukraine remained on the Julian calendar until 1918, when the Gregorian calendar was officially established by the government (Курочкін 1978: 15). This historical remark justifies actually the fact that now Ukrainians, who mostly belong to the Eastern Orthodox Church, which have not refused using the Julian calendar, celebrate Christmas two weeks later after it has been celebrated in Europe and when it was traditionally celebrated in Ukraine before the year 1918. Moreover this historical overview makes it clear, where the Old New Year has its origin: the holiday appeared due to the compulsory introduction of the new calendar in the early XX century, which common Ukrainians refused to accept.

These not very ancient historical events illustrate the new interpretations of the winter calendar holidays of Ukrainians. But traditionally winter holidays in Ukraine as well as in Europe were deeply rooted in the pre-Christian or pagan times and were tightly connected with the Sun. To be more precise, winter holidays were solstice feasts and were commemorating to the winter solstice. The winter solstice was viewed in ancient times as being a crucial moment of the annual cycle of the year. Winter solstice was initially associated with the battle of the evil spirits and the good ones, which the sun symbolized. The concepts of the birth or rebirth of the sun were fundamental for the ancestors, so that the culmination of the holidays was the birth of the sun on that very day, when it turned to the spring, which meant that the darkness and the cold would be surely defeated.

The winter solstice may have been immensely important because of some reasons (Winter solstice 2013): communities of ancient people were not certain of living through the winter, and had to ask the nature to protect them; ancestors wanted to thank the nature for the crops and harvests and ask it to be as generous in the next year; communities had to honour their ancestors, who could also protect them from the evil spirits and the cold winter; people wanted to predict the future, and if possible to ask the nature to be as benevolent as possible.

Traditionally winter holidays were and are still celebrated very cheerfully and joyfully. Winter holidays Ukrainians began for Ukrainian peasants actually with Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary which was celebrated on the 4th of December. It was the day of the first footer or *полазник*, – as it was traditionally called in Ukrainian families. The rite of the first footer as a sign for future telling was very common for many European cultures. It was the first person to cross the threshold of a house. Besides that day the first footer was also treated in Ukraine on the St. Nikolas' Day and on Christmas. If it were a good looking man to come into the house, the year would be prosperous and healthy, if an old or, God save, a sick lady came in, the year were expected to be complicated (Франко 1898: 205). That was why elderly women were trying not to leave their houses and visit the relatives on those days.

From that day on the youth in villages began to gather together in what was called *вечорниці* or *досвідки*. The youth usually rent a house, paid for it where girls were spinning yarns or embroidering or even sewing and singing folk songs and the boys were doing their male work, they could repair harness, make nets or ropes in so doing they were joking, laughing, telling each other funny stories, sometimes dancing and having fun in order to get to know each other, to communicate and to find a future husband or a wife (Українці 1999: 299).

The next holiday in the traditional Ukrainian calendar was a St. Catherine's Day, celebrated on the 7th of December. The St. Catherine's Day was and is widely known in Ukraine as time, when one can look into the future and ask the fate to be generous, benevolent and well-disposed in the coming year. Usually in the evening the girls were gathering in a house for fortune-telling trying to predict whether they were going to marry the next year, what the name of their husband, his field of activity, habits would be. Many years ago girls were using water, candles and corns for their fortune-telling. On that day girls used to cut down some twigs of fruit trees and put them into a glass of water, if any twig had begun to blossom before Christmas came, it meant that the year would have been happy for the family. Actually hat twigs were the only green elements of the traditional Ukrainian winter holidays, they were the ancient forerunners of our modern Christmas trees.

If the St. Catherine's Day used to be initially a time when the girls could have fun, the next feast which was the St. Andrew's Day was more important for guys. The St Andrew's Day was celebrated on the 13th of December and it was time for mischievous guy pranks such as putting a plough on a house roof or taking a gate off its hinges, especially that of a girl's father, whom a guy loved, but who did not allow his daughter to have night dates. These tricks were treated to be a part of the carnival culture, when the guys were allowed to do everything they wanted, and none could be punished after. All those pre-Christian traditions described above were tightly connected all in all with courtship and marriage of young people. Besides that girls celebrated the St. Andrew's Day in Ukraine with fortune-telling in order to find out whether they would marry the next year or not. Winter holidays were special time for ritual pastries. On that day girls baked usually a special round pancake (called *коляда*) and pastries (in Ukrainian – *балабушки*). The guys came into the house, where the girls had already fastened a pancake with a hole inside to the ceiling and the participants of the competition with no smile on their lips had to take a bite off a pancake without using their hands, otherwise they could be stripped with soot by Pan Koliadynskyj. All these games and competitions were supposed to help girls and guys to get married (Боронай 1993: 19).

After the St. Andrew's Day the three traditional feasts followed one another: the St. Barbara's Day on the 17th of December, the St. Sava's or Sabbas's Day was held on the next day. These two holidays were regarded as time for preparation for more important feasts, which were expected to come in few days. One of the most important holidays in the winter calendar of ancient Ukrainians was the St. Nicholas Day or the Day of the Nikolas the Wonderworker, which was celebrated on the 19th of December. St. Nicholas was treated in Ukraine as a special saint, for it was Prince Vladimir who

brought back tales of the saint after he had gone to Constantinople to be baptized in the X century. Since that time there were a lot of folk tales and legends about the wonders of the Saint.

On that day people usually brewed up beer. Besides, it was a special holiday for young children, which they were and still are looking forward. Because obedient children would receive gifts from St. Nicholas, and the naughty ones would be granted with a birch, so that they could be better brought up by their parents and grandparents (Canira 1993). In the Western regions of Ukraine children found usually their Christmas gifts under their pillow in the morning. In our days soon after the breakup of the Soviet Union that tradition expanded throughout the other regions of the country. Even in the last decades of the XX century the rite with the presents under the pillows were unknown in Kyiv, in the southern and eastern regions of Ukraine, and now the tradition is very popular, so that a lot of Ukrainian children usually find toys and sweets under their pillows in the early morning of the 19th December. These gifts are now called *миколайчики* but initially it was special sweet pastries, baked on that day, which were called that way.

The youth was also celebrating the St. Nicholas Day. They were making their parties or *вечорниці* in the evening. Girls cooked some special pastries or *миколайчики* for the evening in the house they had rented and paid for it, and invited guys, who had bought wine and candies, came to them and together they were making jokes and playing folk games, dancing as well.

The culmination of the winter holidays in Ukraine was Christmas. Christianity was introduced into Ukraine in 988, when the Eastern Orthodox Church was established. The flourishing pagan religion and traditions associated with it were too deeply rooted in the world-view of ancient Ukrainians to allow the Church to eradicate them completely. Therefore, the Church adopted a policy of tolerance towards most of the ancient customs and accepted many of them as part of the Christian traditions. In this way the ancient pagan feasts of winter solstice, feasts of fertility, became part of Christian Christmas customs. That is why Ukrainian Christmas customs combine both Christian traditions as well as pagan believes, what now makes it really unique and deeply symbolic.

Ukrainian Christmas festivities began on Christmas Eve that is on the 6th of January. Nobody in the family ate anything during the Day before Christmas, because it was a strict fast day, when all members of the family were preparing for the one of the greatest holidays in the year. As soon as the first star had appeared in the sky, which in Christian tradition was believed to symbolize the Star of Bethlehem, the family gathered to begin supper. That special supper was called Christmas Eve Supper or Holy Supper (in Ukrainian *Свята вечеря* or *Святвечір*). It was time when all the members

of the family were usually brought together to participate in special foods and the holiday with ancient customs and variety of traditions began. It was strictly prohibited not to be at home on Christmas Eve, because it were widely believed, that one would be absent during the whole year (Воронай 1993: 46).

The traditional Christmas supper in Ukraine combined many elements and rites, each of them had ancient roots and were strictly followed, because it was believed that they predetermined the life of a family and of a whole settlement in the coming year. At the beginning of the supper, a hand-made creature made of a sheaf of wheat stalks was placed under the icons in the house. It was called *дидох*, which meant “ancestors”, in that way the stalk of grain symbolized all ancestors of a family, which were treated to be good spirits. In pagan times ancestors were considered to be benevolent spirits, who, when properly respected, could bring good fortune to the living members of family, could held to overcome frost and to have rich harvest in the next season. After that a father or a head of a household placed a bowl of a specially cooked *кутя*, which was actually boiled wheat mixed with honey, poppy seeds, nuts, and a jug of stewed fruits, called *узвар*, in the center of the table. After that a father together with the other family members prayed and ended their prayers with the words: “*Христос рождається! Славимо його!*” (Christ is born! Let’s sing our praises to Him!), a whole family sat down to a twelve-course meatless Christmas Eve Supper. The Christian tradition explained twelve courses in the Supper on the Holy Evening by the Number of the Christ's Apostles. According to the ancient pagan belief each course represented every full moon in the course of the year. The first course on the Holy Supper was always kutia. After that one could taste a variety of dishes that belonged to the Ukrainian cuisine: borshch, vushka (dumplings filled with mushrooms and onions), different kinds of fish – broiled, baked, fried, cold in aspic, marinated herring, different types of varenyky (dumplings filled with cabbage, buckwheat grains, potatoes, prunes), holubtsi (cabbage stuffed with carrot) (Brama 2013).

After the Supper, a father went outside with a plate of kutia and with a special verse invited the Frost to taste the kutia together with him asking him in that way not to be so devastating for winter wheat in his fields and for his family.

Ukrainian Christmas Eve traditions included different types of rites: the ones that implied solemn family traditions and the others were joyful and merry such as custom of caroling. Actually there were two main groups of Christmas songs in Ukraine: the *колядки*, whose name was probably derived from the word *коло* which meant “circle” (Українці 1999: 307). Koliadky could be heard on Christmas Eve and on the Christmas Day in many Ukrainian regions. The second group of

traditional Ukrainian Christmas songs was called *щедрівки*, which was a derivation from the word with the meaning “generous”. The latter were sung during New Year and Feast of Epiphany. Some researchers claim, that Ukrainian *koliadky* included also *shchedrivky*, as its separate type, because they revealed common motives and very similar ways they used to being performed (Курочкін 1978: 71).

Both *koliadky* and *shchedrivky* have pagan elements in them, and both have been Christianized. They narrated about prosperous future of the family, about rich harvest and catch, about the coming wedding and also about the birth of Jesus Christ. There is one of the most famous Ukrainian folk carols, which tells about a landowner, who is awakened by a swallow and told to make preparations, because three guests are coming to his house: the sun, the moon and the rain. The bird in the *shchedrivka* symbolizes a herald of spring, and the astral elements stand for the main pagan idols, which the ancient Ukrainians used to worship. In the Christianized version of the Christmas song the three guests turned into Jesus Christ, St. Nicholas and St. George. Now this Ukrainian carol, which a famous Ukrainian composer Mykola Leontovych set to music, is widely known as a very popular in the United States song “Carol of the Bells”. Though originally it is an ancient Ukrainian *shchedrivka* about a swallow which visits a householder.

Usually it were guys who sang Christmas carols. Caroling required careful preparations. Guys gathered in groups, each of them had a leader. One of the guys was dressed as a goat, with a goat mask on his face. Another one was a bag carrier, who had to collect gifts, which people gave them for their caroling. The other guy carried a five- or seven-pointed star attached to a long stick with a light in its center, which according to the Christian traditions symbolized the Star of Bethlehem or the rebirth of the new Sun according to the pagan belief (Українці 1999: 308). In some regions of Ukraine guys had even musical instruments.

Tradition Ukrainian caroling included not only simple singing of Christmas songs; it was a kind of folk performance. The carolers came to the house and had to ask the owner of the house for permission to sing. If the answer was yes, the group of guys entered the house and sang carols for each member of the family, even for the smallest child. They had also to present a humorous skit with a goat. In the pagan times the goat represented the god of fertility. The skit narrated about the goat dying and then being brought back to life, which symbolized the death of winter and the birth of spring. The caroling always ended with short well-wishing poems for all members of the family. The family usually gave the guys sweets, money and something from the Holy Supper table.

The other tradition related to Christmas in Ukraine was the *vertep*. *Vertep* was

actually Ukrainian Christmas puppet theater and had originated from the XVII century. The puppet theater consisted of a miniature two-storied structure, which served as a stage, where the performance was shown. The puppets were made mostly of wood. Each puppet had a wire attached to its legs so that it could move. The play itself had two separate acts that were not connected to each other. The first act took place in the upper floor of the vertep and was dedicated to religious themes related to the birth of Jesus Christ. The second act of the play was performed on the lower floor of the theater. It consisted of variety of humorous short scenes, which had to amuse viewers. These scenes were based on real life situations of ordinary people and performed in colloquial language and dialects that was why they were really popular among Ukrainian villagers. During the Christmas holidays the performers of vertep went from town to town, from village to village, from house to house with their shot scenes and puppet theaters and gave performances (Brama 2013).

The celebration of New Year in Ukraine was traditionally associated with two feasts, when two saints of the Orthodox Church were commemorated. Despite that fact, the scientist claim (Курочкін 1978: 87), that New Year was the most secular of all winter holidays in Ukraine. As far as the church did not propose an elaborated Christian legend which explained the origin of the new year, the traditions of its celebration in Ukraine were based completely on folk carnival culture and rites. The celebration of the traditional new year in Ukraine included the feasts of St. Melania and of St. Vasyl, which were also known by their folk names *Маланки* and *Василя*. Malanka was a Ukrainian folk holiday celebrated on the January 13th, in accordance with the Julian calendar. Malanka commemorated initially Saint Melania the Younger. The feast of St. Vasyl was celebrated on the next day, the 14th of January. Although it was widely believed that Vasyl had been Malanka's husband, the history proved that St. Vasyl or Saint Basil the Great and St. Melania could not even meet each other because they lived in different centuries. This fact reveals actually the deep pagan origin of the folk feast Malanka and Vasyliia. In pagan times the two feasts had also been held one after another. The first one had been dedicated to the ancient Slavic goddess Makosha, who had been associated with female activities and motherhood, and on the next day the major Slavic supernatural force Veles had been commemorated, who had been responsible for cattle. The phonetic similarities of the words Malanka and Makosha, as well as Vasyl and Veles can only prove, that these events have common origin in Ukrainian culture.

Feast of Malanka was actually time, when kutja for the second time was cooked. That was the second kutja in Ukrainian winter calendar. All members of a family gathered together for a supper. That supper was called generous or rich kutja, because the fast ended on the Christmas Day,

and a variety of meat dishes were allowed to be served.

It was widely believed, that the night on the Day of St. Vasyl was a special one, when miracles could occur, when the sky could open its clouds and people could ask the God whatever they wanted, and the God would give them that. After the supper the folk festivities titled *Malanka* began. Usually it were fellows, who were wearing elaborated costumes and masks which depicted different social characters, such as Devils, Bears, Goats, Warriors, Police, Witches, Old Women and Men, Death, Blacksmith, Jews, Gypsies, Turks, a Peasant, who was sowing wheat, a Peasant, who was plowing his field and some others. Among all the characters, the role of Malanka was usually played by a young man who was parodying a girl. He was wearing woman's clothes, straw wigs, woman's shoes. That crowd of people moved from house to house and performed their short plays and improvisations for those who wanted to see that. They were playing loudly music, they were very noisy, the guys could play jokes on members of a family and passerby — but no one ever felt insulted. Since it was a kind of carnival and everything was allowed. Malanka as a main character in the performance was an intentionally clumsy lady. She could overturn things or knock them all down, spill water and also did some preposterous things like whitewashing the furniture instead of the stove, she could litter, and did everything one should avoid doing. All that was done to encourage people to be as diligent and careful as one ought to be. The group of funny dressed young fellows gave performances not only in houses, they poured out into the streets encouraging spectators to have fun with them, which could last even till the midday of the next day. On that night carolers traditionally went from house to house singing their carols called *щедрикки*, which actually were well-wishing poems for a householder, for his wife, children and cattle as well.

And on the next day, the 14th of January, the Feast of Saint Vasyl was held. Actually that holiday had not much to do with any religious traditions and was celebrated initially as the first day of a new year. On that day villagers were gathering somewhere in the center of their settlement and were having marry dances, wearing funny costumes and bright masks, especially the young guys. That kind of folk party was called *схід, пляс, or данець*. Besides that folk parties it was a common tradition in Ukraine on the first day of a new year to say good bye to the old year and to welcome the new one. That rite survived completely and now it has become an impotent element of modern celebrations of the New Year in Ukraine. In ancient times, a man in old clothes symbolized an old year came into a house; a householder usually invited him to the table and then insisted on his going away. Instead of him a young boy in new clothes came then into a house and he was greeted generously. Nowadays the

first glass of champagne on the new year party is usually drunk in the old year and the next one in a coming year.

On the new year day in some regions of Ukraine people used to steal some things, just for making fun, which their owners could buy back as soon as they had paid enough for them. Besides that jokes the new year eve and the first new year day were taken very seriously concerning its meaning for the future. Usually girls were trying to predict what waited for them in the coming year. There are also a variety of traditional proverbs and omens about the weather, clouds, wind and snow on these two days which helped the peasants to predict the weather in summer and spring. Thus it was believed, that when the clouds were moving from the North, the rich crop of winter wheat could be expected (Воропай 1993: 107). It was also time of marry carols, when the guys were not just singing their carols and wishing in this way the householder and his wife and their children be healthy and wealthy in the new year but were also sowing the grains in the houses, the rite, that was called *засівати, носівати, носунати*. That rite was of Slavic origin and was viewed as a kind of sacrifice that should bring rich crop in the coming year (Курочкин 1978: 106).

The other important feast in the winter calendar of the ancient Ukrainians was the Epiphany or Theophany, or in Ukrainian tradition, the Jordan which traditionally felt on January, the 19th. Epiphany is a Christian feast day when the baptism of the Lord is celebrated and thus is much more religious. The evening before the feast was called the Second holy evening or the hungry kutja (*другий Свят-вечір, голодна кутя*), because people were not allowed to eat either meat or fish. People always believed that on that day water became holy and was imbued with supernatural powers, which could help them to get rich of evil spirits and to bless their bodies and houses for the better life. Usually Ukrainians cut cross-shaped holes in the ice of lakes and rivers. They bathed in the freezing but holy water, being sure, that it could make them healthy for the whole year. Participants of the ritual could dip themselves three times under the water, washing symbolically away their sins in order to experience rebirth via the holy powers of the water. They usually took the holy water from rivers and lakes as well as from the wells near churches to their houses and sprayed it everywhere in their homes and on the cattle. They kept the holy water carefully for the whole year using it for different magical rituals as well as for treatment of some diseases.

The second part of the Feast of Epiphany Ukrainian peasants implied usually a lot of fun. People used to sledge with much revelry and jokes. Besides that the fights among the strongest men in a village were held on that day. In some regions of Ukraine the fighters were wearing costumes

and masks, so that “the bear fight” were performed (Курочкін 1978: 110). The rules could be different, for example, it could be a wrestling contest, but the winner in the contest was greeted as the bravest man in a village for the whole year.

The last feast of the Ukrainian winter holidays was Masliana or Masnytzia, also known as Butter Week or Pancake week. In Russian folk tradition the feast is usually called Maslenitsa, but in Ukraine the name Masnytzia is more common. It was celebrated during the last week before the Great Lent. Masliana has its origins in both pagan and Christian traditions. In Slavic mythology, Masnytzia was a celebrating as a feast of the imminent end of winter, when the new sowing season should begin. On the first day of the Butter Week people were not allowed any more to eat meat. It was also the last week when milk, cheese and other dairy products were permitted. The traditional food on Masliana was *mlynzi* (pancakes). It was round and golden pancakes, made from the rich foods, butter, eggs and milk, they symbolized the Sun, which managed to defeat the winter.

Traditional Masliana included also snowball fights, sledding, riding on swings and plenty of sleigh rides. In some regions, each day of Masliana implied some special rites to be performed: one day was for sleigh-riding, on the other day sons-in-law usually visited their parents-in-law, yet another day was for visiting the godparents, etc. The mascot of the celebration was a scarecrow of winter which on Sunday evening that is on the last day of the Butter week was put on flames just as old stuff from the household. The ashes of the bonfire were buried in the snow on order to fertilize the crops.

Many of the rites of the traditional Masliana were matrimonial. It were married couples or on the contrary not married girls and guys, that usually were participating in the rites of Masliana. According to the ancient tradition in Ukraine young but unmarried women used to tie a small stock *колодка* to their legs, so that everyone knew, that she had not been married yet.

These are the main feasts in the Ukrainian winter calendar. Its profound analysis proves that winter holidays in Ukraine combine four main elements: the most ancient ones are Indo-European elements, Slavic elements as well as pagan elements are much younger, and the Elements which are rooted in Christianity, which are the youngest among all. Some of the traditions and rites of winter holidays in Ukraine could survive and now we have them in somehow transformed forms, which pass our age. Some of the traditions are known just due to the ancient books, archives and special research. The others manage to revive and now become important part of the modern traditions of celebration winter holidays in Ukraine. But it is already a subject for the next research.

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