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## IMPROVISATION IN TRADITIONAL CULTURE

**Abstract:** In this article, based on the author's field research, specific examples of improvisation in different areas of traditional culture are examined: calendar and family rituals as well as ornamentation of weaving products. The manifestations of improvisation in specific calendar holidays and rituals have been traced. These materials indicate that there is a common basis in ritual practices. The main ritual characters, attributes, and verbal accompaniment of ritual actions are distinguished by the relative stability of their image, structure, and functioning. At the same time, the content variability reflects innovations that are mainly the result of improvisations at the local level within a particular rural community or several neighboring villages

**Keywords:** improvisation, calendar rituals, a Malanka rite, traditional culture of Ukrainians.

## RELEVANCE OF THE RESEARCH SUBJECT

It is well known that traditional culture is variable. Its local or regional features are shaped under the influence of various factors and manifest themselves in each ethnocultural segment. Its versatile complexes arise, develop and then its structural components acquire a new meaningful content, and improvisations are a key player in this process.

In dictionaries and reference books, improvisation is considered to be innovations that arise in the process of performing a composition (musical, vocal, etc.). Improvisation is considered a spontaneous, unprepared response of a subject to an action, thing, object, and so on.

The initiators of improvisations were and are mostly creative, energetic individuals motivated by the desire to upgrade the rite, to fill in the verbal or effective plot gap formed for various reasons. And nowadays, we can observe discussions of the rural community members about the "accuracy" of performing a particular rite or its individual component. The

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ultimate decision depends on the opinion of an authoritative and experienced person, older in age, and not on the arguments regarding the clarification of its semantics.

Improvisations take place even in such conservative rites as funerals, in which we can trace differences even in neighboring villages. They relate to details, the totality of which, however, reflects variability as a result of improvisations.

The phenomenon of improvisation is still not the subject of research in the traditional culture of Ukrainians. This article deals with specific examples of improvisation in different sectors of traditional culture: calendar and family ritualism, ornamentation of weaving products.

To consider this topic, we have used the author's field research sources, in particular, those of Malanka celebration in the village of Osychky, Savransky district, the Odesa region, and in the village of Kurlozy, Krivoozersky district, the Mykolaiv region. We use here the materials of field research on the culture of Ukrainians in Budzhak, Northern Dobrudja in Romania, weaving products of embroiderers of the Kodyma region located in the Odessa region. They represent vividly expressed samples of improvisation.

### BASIC CONTENT

Improvisations, as performers' response to circumstances, can be divided into situational and improvisational types that are designed for the longer term. Situational ones occur during the immediate performance of a rite or action (greeting, gift-giving, performing rituals with a complex, multi-component plot, etc.). Long term ones involve preparations for changes in advance, if it proves impossible to perform a particular ritual or use a particular ritual attribute. Sometimes innovations are associated with the desire to make the action more attractive and solemn.

This trend is continuing with the transformation of life stance, the loss of faith in the sacred meaning of ritualism, followed by a gradual deviation from the established conventional canons. The number of manifestations of improvisation increased with reducing the role of rites as sanctioning actions, which gradually evolved from sacred actions to theatrical and entertaining ones. As for example, in Christmas or New Year's carols and *shchedrivky*, which turn their purpose of reeting into a way to receive material benefits in the form of gifts.

Improvisation is often the introduction of information from third-party sources, such as periodicals, into the local traditional texture. «... I

read in the newspaper, what is necessary is to have grapes on a wedding rushnyk. There must be a green color and acorns as well" (Мухан, 1969).

Now we will look at some elements of improvisation in certain weaving products. In 2017, the Kodyma Museum of local lore turned to the local amistresses-embroiderers with the initiative to create a symbolic rushnyk of the district. On a long homespun hemp cloth, there should be copies of typical patterns for each specific village. The task was efficiently performed, but we should note one detail inherent in almost all samples: the copies differ from the originals. At first glance these differences are insignificant but they are still additions: the color and additional components to the composition of mostly straight, undulating and zigzag lines. They illustrate improvisations, show the creative approach of the embroiderers, the development of tradition at the local level (Figures 1-3).



Figure 1-3. Originals and copies of rushnyks

We observe improvisations both in specific ritual practices and in complexes of ritual activities, for example, in wedding ceremonies. The variety of pre-wedding, actually wedding and post-wedding rituals is largely the result of improvisations (as the uttering of wishes to the newlyweds), which give the rite or an attribute a new touch.

Some customs and ritual activities are areal in nature (within several neighboring villages) or have even local (within the village) character. Some of them are unique, and it is difficult to find others like them.

The well-known rite of Kolodia in Ukraine has many variants, since at the time it was very popular with the young. At the end of the season when weddings were allowed on Masnytsa, guys who were already supposed to get married by age, but had not done it yet, were "punished" with a deck (koloda). Over time, only some of its components remained, and they were recorded in the Odessa region. In the street, in the yard or in the house, a girl tied the koloda (a headscarf or rushnyk) around the arm, or tied it over the shoulder of a guy she liked. But there were also some manifestations of improvisation that contradicted the logic of this rite purpose. In the 1950s, the same koloda was tied not only for guys but also for married men. A mother with her sister came to her married son, who had children, tied him up with a rushnyk, then they set the table and celebrated Kolodia (Кушнір, Петрова, Поломарьов, 2010, 36). Some interesting manifestations of improvisation were recorded in the Ukrainian village of Letya (Tulcea district, Romania). Here, in the middle of the twentieth century, the koloda was also attached, but only to those who had done military service. Aunts or relatives used to take a shirt, a rushnyk and come to those parents, who had a guy, then tied him up and gave gifts. The parents set the table and all had fun together. In the village, on the island of the same name, there are interesting improvisations of other rituals and holidays. Here they do not remember the traditional name "Green holidays", but the holiday is called the Holy Trinity. On Whitsunday, the floor of the dwelling was sprinkled with herbs, wormwood and linden. They decorated their dwellings with walnut branches. On the third day, the greens were removed and thrown into the river. But after moving to an area where there is no river, the greens are taken to the grave of deceased relatives (Чоборчану). Thus, the ability to adhere to established norms disappears and there come new customary actions.

Certain elements of improvisation we can find while comparing, for example, the Malanka rite in the village of Osychky and that of the village of Kurlozy. This rite is sufficiently studied in Ukraine (Глушко, 2000; Кожолянко, 2013; Курінний, 1955; Курочкін, 1978, 1993, 1995, 1998; Курочкин, 2000; Скуратівський, 1991; Пригаріна, 1999; Спарару, 1982), but there are not many of them in the Odessa region. However, such a ritual filled with deep meaning as Malanka, has not been preserved in the village anymore.

The village has two groups of malankar-schedrovalniks. One of them is in a part of the village called Bondarivka, the other group is in a part of

the village called Kempa (Ткачук). Both groups used to prepare beforehand and carefully according to the established custom. It should be noted that preparations for the holiday were also carried out in accordance with the established procedure and were assigned to three groups of participants. One group trained the old men (didy), one of the main ritual characters. Another training group was assigned to the performers of shchedrivky. The third group, that mostly consisted of girls, dressed up Malanka and the Cossack.

It is the Old Man (did, didok) who stands out first of all among the principal characters.

Outwardly, this character does not resemble any human being. In the first place, there is a mask of an unidentified monster on his head. Secondly, they stuffed straw under his clothes, and this gave the physique an ugly look, and thirdly, the old man deliberately wheezed and hissed, pretending not to master "human speech" (Figure 4).

The task of the old men is to find girls to dress up Malanka, protect her from possible abduction, clear the way for Malanka and carolers, drive away evil spirits by ringing bells.

A 5-6-year-old boy was dressed up as Malanka. Regardless of his age, they painted his face like an adult girl. All the time Malanka was accompanied by the Cossack and the old man. During caroling, Malanka was "cleaning" the house, sweeping the floor with a bunch of tow.

The Cossack is a young man dressed in a military greatcoat, wearing boots, and a service cap. He carried a bundle of tow in his hands and led Malanka by the hand.

The Goat. The image is quite conditional. It's an effigy covered with cowhide. The Goat is taken only on the second day (January 14), when the carolers go to the border, namely to the appointed meeting place of two groups of malankars. The Goat seems to have ceased to be an important ritual character: it was not part of the group of carolers.

Ritual attributes. There are very few of them: bells, the Old Man`s whips and the Cossack`s bunch of tow.

Quite similar, according to its numerous components, was a malankuvannya rite in the village of Kurlozy in the Mykolaiv region, which is also located, like Osyckyy, in the transition zone of Podillja and Steppe Ukraine.

What they have in common is the time of the rite (January 13), ritual characters and attributes, lyrics in shchedrivky. At the same time, quite expressive differences can be traced. They are not so drastic as to be considered markers of different traditions, in fact, they can be a reason for considering them as the results of improvisations.

The main characters in Kurlozy are also an old man, goat and Gypsies. As in Osychky, they had the same advance preparation for a malankuvannya rite. A month before the holiday they used to start preparations. They made masks for Gypsies, as they called malankari-shchedrovalnyky in Kurlozy. They also manufactured a mask and clothing elements for a goat, a mask and attributes for an old man.

Future "Gypsies" used to make masks at home, in advance. They differed from the same characters in Osychky. While in Osychky they looked more like monsters and nothing in them resembled a human, the mask in Kurlozy was more modified, similar to the head of a soldier of the 18th - 19th centuries (Figure 5). The differences can also be traced in carnival clothing. In Osychky, the old men's clothes were "stuffed" with straw, which also minimized the similarity of the "did" to a person. There were no similar cases in Kurlozy, although there is still something in common between them: a white outfit.



Figure 4. Malanka, the Old Man and the Cossack



Figure 5. Mask, the village of Kurlozy



Figure 6. "Khaida"

The ritual character Old Man (did) is one of the key characters in both Osychky and Kurlozy. But in Kurlozy he is alone and in addition, he is also the flawless manager of actions, while in Osychky this commitment belongs mainly to the Birch. However, this duty is only organizational, and the responsibility for the ritual and sacred aspects is still assigned to the Old Men (didky). They, as we noted, drive away evil spirits with a loud bell, protect Malanka both in the house and during her movement. They

have effectively unlimited right and power both among malankar-shchedrovalniky, and in relation to ordinary villagers.

Outwardly, the Old Man in Kurlozy differed from the others with his outfit, first of all, with a mask. He put on a sheepskin coat inside out. His mandatory attribute was also a mace (here they say "Khaida") (Figure 6). They made it from felt, an old felt boot, so that it would be light and not injure the participants of the actions. The mace was decorated with its details, emphasizing its status, and the status distinctiveness of its owner, the Old Man (did).

While in Osychky the Goat appeared on the second day and in fact was not involved in rituals, in Kurlozy, on the contrary, this character was present at important events. The role of the Goat was played by a guy covered with goat skin, with a dummy head of this animal.

Kurlozy stood out for its holidays: both Malanka and Vasily. They did not find a place among the ritual characters in Osychky. But in Kurlozy Vasily walked around the village wearing a hat, with a painted face and with a mustache.

In Osychky Malanka was represented by a boy, and Kurlozy's Malanka wore a colorful scarf and skirt. Both a boy and a girl could act as Malanka.

We also notice both common and different things in the Ukrainian villages of Budzhak. First of all, we note that a malankuvannya rite was carried out in all these villages, at the same time, on January 13. They prepared for Malanka carefully and in advance. In Tatarbunary, older children aged 19-25 years went to one of the boys' houses, in which they gathered for 2-3 months to learn carols and make clothes (checkers, caps).

Ritual characters stand out for their novelty as well. The main character, of course, is Malanka. It was a man, or mostly a guy, disguised as a woman (Tatarbunary). In the village of Pershotravneve (Tatarbunary district), as in Osychky, a little kid changed into Malanka. Outwardly, the image of Malanka necessarily differed from others. In Tatarbunary, for example, Malanka wore several skirts, red belts. One of the malankari projected himself into a goat.

This ritual character is known in the villages of Desantne, Pershotravneve, Kyslytsia, Trudove, and in Kyslytsia, besides the Goat, there could be other horned creatures.

In Kyslytsia, Tatarbunary, Trudove, they also made masks to be unrecognizable. In the village of Pershotravneve, among the guisers there was an old man (did) with a stick and whip. And in Kyslytsia, there were as many as twelve such "didy" wearing an old coat (svyty), with straw placed under their clothes to imitate humps. Two or three old men (didy) with sticks were also in Trudove (Польові дослідження).

Carolers dressed up as Cossacks as well (Kyslytsia). Among the characters there were gypsies too (Tatarbunary). In the village of Kyslytsia, the characters announced their new gender: the girls changed into guys, and the guys into girls. Our respondents often name characters, combining them into a group of "others". Some clarifications indicate that they should be considered as rather late innovations that are not related to the original symbolism of the rite and the magical functions of the characters.

The set of ritual attributes is quite limited. It is ambiguous to consider this object as a ritual attribute, but it is noteworthy that in Kyslytsia and Pershotravneve the stick on which the rolls were carried is called a birch. In the same village, compared to others, the most representative set of ritual attributes consists of a bell, stick and whip.

On January 13, in the evening, adults started celebrating Malanka from sunset till midnight. From midnight they used to go round carol-singing.

We can also see some differences in the texts (Table 1).

The village of Desantne	The village of Kyslytsia	The village of Pershotravneve	The village of Trudove
And yesterday, from the evening Melanka grazed two geese-2 times She grazed, she grazed, and lost them In a field she got lost - 2 times She is looking at Melanochka Vasilchichku, my bird Sow in my kitchen- garden I will honor you I'll water three times a day I'll water three times a day I'll plug into my blond braid I'll plug out of my blond braid I'll give young guys These gifts are for our Melanka	Oh, yesterday, from the evening She grazed two geese- 2 times She grazed, grazed and lost them In a field she got lost - 2 times In a field A plough plows And behind that plough Vasilchik grows -2 times Vasilchik, my bird I'll sow you in my kitchen-garden -2 times I'll water you I'll plug you into my blond braid-2 times I'll plug you out of my blond braid Grow,braid, to the waist Grow, braid, to the waist	Our Malanka went about She carried cornflowers We cooked dumplings She gave each of shchedrivnyky Malanka went about She carried cornflowers Vasytku, our father, Let us into our hut As we reaped rye We held golden cross We had jubilant Rejoice, people For Christ will be among us Set the table Look at God And give us a roll	Oh, give us a generous evening, Mister Host, A generous evening, A good evening And get out of bed And open the door, Generous evening, Good evening Because they came to you Dear guests Generous evening Good evening Christ Himself And the Mother of God Generous evening Good evening



<p>A couple of rolls .....                  A couple of rolls .....                  Our Melanka was in the Dniester River                  She drank the Dniester water                  She drank the Dniester water                  She washed her feet on the stone                  She dropped the spoon and plate                  Then she took out the spoon and plate                  She soaked her thin apron                  And hung it on the window leaf                  Dry her apron, breeze                  So that her mother doesn't find out                  So that she doesn't call her lazy                  So that she doesn't call her lazy                  Our Melanka does not work                  She wears a guy`s shirt                  She wears a guy`s shirt                  Generous evening, good evening                  To good people for the whole evening                  To good people for the whole evening                  "Good evening!"</p>	<p>And you, Melanka, up to the waist - 2 times                  Our Melanka was in the Dniester River                  She drank the Dniester water - 2 times                  She washed her feet on the stone                  She soaked her thin apron- 2 times                  Wild wind, blow                  Dry my thin apron - 2 times                  Wild wind, blow back and forth                  Dry my apron between people-2 times                  Our Melanka doesn't walk by herself                  Cossacks drive our Melanka -2 times                  Our Melanka was treated                  They gave her a couple of rolls-2 times                  Good evening!</p>		
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In the Ukrainian villages of Budzhak, we find a lot of similar ritual actions as well.

### CONCLUSION

The materials provided herein indicate that there is a common basis in ritual practices. The main ritual characters, attributes, and verbal accompaniment of ritual actions are distinguished for the relative stability

of the image, structure, and functioning. Along with it, the content variability reflects innovations that are mainly the result of improvisations at the local level within a particular rural community or several neighboring villages.

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