

## “MALANKA”: UKRAINIAN MUMMERY ON THE PRAIRIES\*

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Among Canada's early Ukrainian settlers in western Canada, a major and pronounced pattern of ritualistic folkloric behaviour consisted of four basic elements: fasting, church-going, feasting, and merry-making. This pattern obtained on two occasions during the calendar year: at Christmas (where the pattern constitutes the so-called winter cycle of folkloric behaviour), and at Easter (where the pattern forms the so-called spring cycle). Insofar as the winter cycle is concerned, the merry-making portion of the pattern included not only house-to-house Christmas carolling but mumming practices as well.<sup>1</sup> On the prairies, Ukrainian mummary was a popular secular activity that celebrated the arrival of a new year by focussing attention on a fictitious comical female figure named Malanka.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to similar mumming practices in Newfoundland, the Ukrainian tradition on the prairies included special Malanka songs, and the mummies themselves were never female but always male. To heighten the sense of gaiety, the most ungraceful, lanky, awkward and gangling specimen would be chosen to masquerade in female dress as Malanka herself; her entourage of costumed mummies would include a boisterous assortment of personages who were dressed up to represent an array of comical figures drawn from the old country village inventory of eccentric personages and stock characters such as a tottering old man, stern-looking captain, a gendarme, an old hag, crafty gypsies, and bearded Jews. As mummies, their hilarious antics ranged from prankish tom-foolery inside the home to boisterous music-making, singing, and dancing.

Field interviews<sup>3</sup> suggest that Malanka mummies made a special effort to visit families that included unmarried young girls who, for their part, looked forward and indeed expected to receive the revellers in their homes over the New Year holiday season. One Malanka-song that I recorded 20 years ago in 1965 in Vegreville, Alberta, articulates the courting function of Ukrainian mummary as follows (in English translation):

1. O sweet basil,<sup>4</sup> I shall sow you in my garden  
And care for you:  
I'll water you three times each day  
And on Sunday I'll braid you into my hair.
2. *With such a braid is one betrothed!*  
O sweetheart of mine —  
We'll marry in one and a half year's time<sup>5</sup>  
But don't tell anyone!
3. If anyone finds out, they'll blab about it everywhere  
And then we'll not have any happiness in our lives.  
Off in the field by the side of the road  
There's sweet Basil ploughing the field.
4. He has seeded a field with wheat —  
For cakes for the wedding!  
When the girl realized this  
She began to encourage the kozak.

5. Make sure you come for Malanka,  
I'll wait for you all night long!  
I have brewed beer for you  
And some whisky as well!
6. There are cakes on the shelf  
And sacks full of nuts, —  
Our home is not wealthy  
But it's dressed up like a castle.
7. If I kill one gosling, it won't suffice,  
For my sweetheart, I'll even kill two!<sup>6</sup>

As shown by this excerpt, Malanka songs are essentially non-narrative in nature. They are immediate, direct, and to the point as reflected in the following excerpt (in English translation) from a Malanka-song recorded in Manitoba in 1963:

Let us come into the house! We'll sing and dance!  
It's freezing outside and we can't stand out here!  
I know for whom I'm going to sing and dance —  
The maiden will give me a gold coin!  
Give, give, if you've something to give!  
If you've nothing to give, then chase us out of the house!<sup>7</sup>

The Malanka-song does not seek to tell a story, as is characteristic, for example, of a ballad. If scrutinized at face value and outside their ritualistic context, Malanka-songs sometimes appear to be lyrical courting songs. The following excerpt with its description of Malanka as being "light as a bundle" and as slender as flax is a typical lyrical moment:

O gay Basil!  
Whither are you riding, dear friend?  
Whither are you riding, dear friend?  
Take our Malanka along!  
She'll not be too heavy for you,  
She'll not overstrain the horse.  
For she is as light as a bundle  
And as thin as flax.<sup>8</sup>

However, as the Malanka-song continues, it becomes evident that there is a strong discrepancy between the Malanka depicted in song and the actual Malanka in costume parading before the onlooker; this on-going frustration between the verbalized Malanka verses and the visualized Malanka provides the device that acts as the essential spring for merriment and hilarity. In effect, one begins to sense that what is seen or heard cannot be believed; the topsy-turviness of the whole Malanka event is this suspension of normalcy; abnormalacy, absurdity, and anomaly take over. Even the song of the mummer(s) comes to a point where it admits that Malanka, far from being "beautiful and virtuous," is nothing but a promiscuous flirt who drinks meads and cavorts with kozaks, and a terrible housekeeper whose method of doing the dishes is to hide them away under furniture where they are left to grow over with moss.

Throughout the Malanka event, then, there is a constant play of tension between masquerade, fiction, and allusion on the one hand, and the reality

of the now-situation on the other hand. The Malanka-songs themselves waver back and forth between these two contrastive poles.

The mummers attempt to introduce their Malanka as though she were a genuine and real personage; their evidence, however, is ridiculed rather than supported by subsequent details in their song and, of course, by the appearance of the fake Malanka herself. But if all is false and unreliable, what's the purpose of it all? In this regard, as suggested earlier, the overt ambiance of merry-making, music, and dance serves to screen the mask the Malanka event as a form of preliminary, unofficial matchmaking. With no room for open rejection or acceptance, the Malanka event on the prairies functioned to provide an opportunity for young people to scrutinize one another, and to test and hint at intentions of betrothal. The hints emerge only sporadically. The following excerpt from a Malanka-song recorded in Alberta constitutes two quatrains out of a total of sixteen:

10. Behold this bunch of dancing fellows!  
Come out, young girl, and give us your hand!
11. Give us your hand, - don't go back inside,  
Come and celebrate New Year's with us!  
You'll really like our Malanka —  
Just choose whomever you like!
12. The problem is that everyone of us is spirited and knows lots of  
tricks,  
Whomever you choose, will send matchmakers tomorrow!...<sup>9</sup>

In effect, then, Malanka and her comical entourage arrive in midwinter as an undercover bridal party headed by a camouflaged bridegroom. (In Newfoundland, some male mummers reportedly wear wedding dress.<sup>10</sup>) But the entourage does not come to capture or purchase the bride in keeping with traditional marriage rituals, but merely to test the waters without making or seeking any formal commitments.

The party of Malanka mummers is received, allowed to perform, and sent off, but not before the mummers are hosted and presented with token gifts of money. The male mummers watch closely and evaluate the actions of any young, unmarried girl who witnesses their antics. Does she laugh at the appropriate places or does she appear untouched by the merry-makers? Does she make any encouraging signs or gestures whatsoever? When the mummers prepare to leave, does she coax them to stay and share in food and drink; does she, moreover, present the coin or coins to mummers as a token of her or her family's appreciation; and if she does, has she made any indication that she perhaps favours a particular mummer? This kind of ambivalence and guessing arises out of the serious versus joking dichotomy of the Malanka event; it presents a situation that goes a step beyond private intimacies and the chance flirtatious encounters between boy and girl since instead of privacy there is public scrutiny and witnesses — friends and relatives, the inside of the home. Everything is personalized and personified but not privatized; the chance gesture is open to interpretation; and in this way, relationships can be promoted, fostered, and cemented.<sup>11</sup> In other words, the Malanka event was able to raise the issue of betrothal, but nothing more.

By the end of the first world war, the Malanka mummering tradition as

described here was beginning to weaken, and though it survived the initial trauma of relocation, one cannot say that it flourished in the new Canadian environment. During the early period of settlement on the prairies, several factors such as the harsh climate and the nature of settlement patterns worked against the continuation of this custom in the new world. The compact old country village that was so conducive to the fostering of local tradition (“*selo*”) never obtained among the Ukrainians in western Canada where neighbours lived right on their land holdings and fairly distant from one another. And besides this, what outsiders saw as solid Ukrainian colonies and block settlements were in reality composed of settlers representing different village traditions, each with its own variants, its own preferences, its own idiosyncracies, quirks, and predilections. Some shared the Malanka tradition; others didn’t.

The demise of the Malanka tradition was accelerated by other factors as well. With the passage of time and by World War Two, the Ukrainian community showed a marked preference for Christmas carolling rather than the old Malanka mumming custom. The former became a much more popular kind of group activity since not only did it allow for the same courting function performed by Malanka, but it did so without all the extra fuss and bother. From the pragmatic point of view, Malanka and her entourage of old-world personages were all out of sync, so to speak, with the new world, and the custom only seemed to underline the backwardness of old world traditions. Moreover, house-to-house Christmas carolling was almost universally sanctioned by the early Ukrainian farm community as a method of collecting much needed funds to build and support local churches and parish activities. These needs and the encouragement of church officials heightened the importance of Christmas carolling as an approved mixed activity open to both genders. House-to-house carollers were looked upon as fund-raisers whose songs were delivered to collect monies as well as to praise the holy nativity and glorify the new-born king.

At the same time, the courting activities of Malanka mummery were no longer focussed on the actual house-visit but, under the guise of Christmas carolling, could obtain in transit and en route, so to speak, before and/or after any house-visit took place.

Within the last decade or so, the Malanka tradition on the prairies has been revived but given a new urban veneer to meet the needs of a streamlined Ukrainian community. The term “Malanka” is now used to designate a New Year’s supper dance that takes place on or about January 14th — New Year’s Day according to the old Julian calendar. Malanka herself and her motley entourage appear as a floor show; their antics are staged to amuse and entertain onlookers who have paid in advance to be admitted to this annual social event. This is the so-called “Malanka dance.” Its main function is to reinforce the Ukrainian community’s ethnic allegiance by using calendaric considerations to distinguish and differentiate the Ukrainians and their traditions from the outside world. In this manner then, the Ukrainian Malanka Dance links up with other phenomena such as Ukrainian Easter eggs, Ukrainian Christmas, and Ukrainian festivals to heighten and celebrate the group’s particular sense of ethnicity. The new urban Malanka tradition, with its sit-down or buffet dinner, its impersonal

interior setting, its band of musicians and throng of dancing couples, departs from the old village Malanka tradition not only by virtue of its highly acculturated forms, style, context, and content, but perhaps even more fundamentally, by serving almost exclusively as a vehicle for the expression' maintenance and transmission of ethnic distinctiveness.<sup>12</sup>

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NOTES

\*This work was originally delivered as a paper at the Annual General Meeting of the Folklore Studies Association of Canada, in Montreal, on June 3, 1985.

1. Canadian versions of mumming have been studied in Newfoundland and among German communities in Nova Scotia. See Herbert Halpert and George M. Story, eds., *Christmas Mumming in Newfoundland* (Toronto: Published for Memorial Univ. by Univ. of Toronto Press, 1969); Margaret R. Robertson, *The Newfoundland Mummers' Christmas House-Visit* (Ottawa: National Museum of Man Mercury Series, CCFCS Paper No. 49, 1984); and Richard Bauman, "Belsnickling in a Nova Scotia Island Community," *Western Folklore*, 31 (1972), 229-43.
2. The eastern Christian church commemorates two religious figures at the turn of each calendar year: the godly Meljaniia (Melanie) and Saint Basil the Great. Meljaniia is celebrated on the last day of the year, Basil on the first day of the year.
3. Field data relating to Malanka was recorded, along with other folkloric matter, in the course of fieldwork in Western Canada in the summers of 1963 to 1965, inclusive, and again in the summer of 1984. Much of this material remains unpublished and is housed by the document collections of the Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies at the National Museum of Man in Ottawa.
4. The play on "basil"/"Basil" in the first and third stanzas reinforces the song's syncretistic links with the New's Year's religious celebration of Saint Basil, as mentioned in note 2, above.
5. This corresponds with the preferred traditional timetabling of weddings for early summer, June-July, when active field operations (such as seeding and harvesting) are minimal.
6. The National Museum of Man (CCFCS) catalog no. for this song-item is KLY-B-73.2. Recorded from Mr. Jurij Shevchuk, 79 years of age, in Vegreville, Alberta, July 18, 1965.
7. Robert B. Klymasz, *The Ukrainian Winter Folksong Cycle in Canada* (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1970), p. 134.
8. *Ibid*, p. 133.
9. Recorded from Mr. Jurij Shevchuk, *op. cit.*
10. Robertson, p. 133.
11. Many Malanka songs reflect a concerned consciousness of public scrutiny, public gossip, and the so-called public eye. See the third stanza of the first song, cited above under note 6.
12. For a recent decriptive account of this phenomenon regarding Malanka, see the write-up by Olenka Melnyk, "Ringing in the New," *Heritage: Alberta's Ethno-Cultural Magazine*, 10:6 (November/December), 1982, 16.

*Resumé: Robert B. Klymasz décrit un rite ukrainien associé au solstice d'hiver dans lequel figurait un personnage comique féminin connu sous le nom de Malanka. Ce rite comprend des costumes, des chants, des danses, des farces et de nombreux autres divertissements. Les chansons, de nature contradictoires, laissent supposer qu'elles faisaient partie des préliminaires d'un rituel d'accouplement. Les anciennes activités du Malanka ont été remplacées par des chants de Noël; mais plus récemment les communautés ukrainiennes ont ravivé la tradition Malanka lors de soupers et danses du Nouvel An.*