

Contemporary Expressions of Traditional Slavic Culture in North America

Robert B. Klymasz and Bohdan Medwidsky

Volume 7, Number 1-2, 1985

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081330ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081330ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this note

Klymasz, R. B. & Medwidsky, B. (1985). Contemporary Expressions of Traditional Slavic Culture in North America. *Ethnologies*, 7(1-2), 195–200. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081330ar>

Research Note/Note de recherche

Contemporary Expressions of Traditional Slavic Culture in North America

Robert B. KLYMASZ and Bohdan MEDWIDSKY

In spite of profound differences between the Slavic homelands and the new environment in North America¹ Slavic folklore continues to obtain abroad as a vital and productive phenomenon. Its primary function in the new habitat is to heighten and reinforce the Slavic community's sense of identity. In addition, however, spurred by the growing appreciation of Slavic folklore on the part of other, non-Slavic elements of North America's population, various aspects of Slavic folklore also obtain among mixed and/or non-Slavic groups.

The process of adaptation to a new environment can be viewed in terms of a sequence of stages. Historically, the first successful attempts to establish any Slavic group as a contributory cultural component within the overall matrix of North American society start with the imitation of traditional lore from the Old Country; subsequently, this is followed by a pronounced loss of verbal forms of the folklore tradition. The residue, so to speak, is discovered to be particularly appropriate to group maintenance and is streamlined accordingly in

1. For authoritative accounts regarding various Slavic groups in North America see, for example, Stephan Thernstrom, ed., *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* (Harvard University Press, 1980) which includes pertinent entries under Belorussians, Bulgarians, Carpatho-Rusyns, Cossacks, Croatians, Czechs, Macedonians, Poles, Russians, Serbs, Slovaks, Slovenes, Wends, and Ukrainians; *The Canadian Encyclopedia* (Edmonton, Hurtig, 1985) includes entries for the following: Byelorussians, Croatians, Czechs, Doukhobors, Poles, Russians, Serbs, Slovaks, Slovenes, and Ukrainians.

keeping with a variety of internal and external demands and requirements.

It is noteworthy that the features and developments which shaped and characterized the classic Slavic folklore complex are in many instances still in evidence in North America.² Recordings and publications of Slavic folklore continue to appear. At times they can be found in their genuine Slavic form and at others in English translation and/or in other reworked versions. A fairly good overview of this phenomenon can be obtained by gauging the Slavic entries in a recently (1982) published bibliography of American and Canadian immigrant and ethnic folklore.³ In terms of numbers the largest single group of Slavic entries in this bibliography consists of publications concerning the Poles in North America followed by works on Ukrain-

2. A concise and important survey of "Slavic Folklore" is provided by Svatava Pirková Jakobson in *The Funk and Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend* Maria Leach ed., (New York, Funk and Wagnalls, 1950, pp. 1019-1025).
3. Robert A. Georges and Stephen Stern, comps., *American and Canadian Immigrant and Ethnic Folklore: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York, Garland, 1982).

ians.⁴ In regard to folklore studies among ethnic and immigrant groups in Canada and the United States, the only group whose lore seems to have aroused a greater interest in researchers the Slavs, was the Germans. This seems to imply a viable environment for transplanted Slavic cultures. Nonetheless, notwithstanding the survival of Old Country folklore among Slavs in North America, many of the formative factors that fostered the preservation or maintenance and development of Slavic folklore *in situ* do not obtain in Canada or the United States today where, for example, rurality and illiteracy seldom typify the contemporary North American of Slavic descent.

-
4. The Polish folksong collection by John M. Głowczeskie, *Folk Music of Canada's Oldest Polish Community* (Ottawa, National Museum of Man, 1980) can be considered typical. It deals with the musical life of the Kashubs of Renfrew County, Ontario. Three types of music, i.e., performed at weddings, wakes and daily life, are studied. Most of these songs were brought to North America from the Old World and represent a non-productive and shrinking tradition. Nevertheless, some instances of small textual variations in traditional songs or minor folksong genres of the ditty or limerick type provided in this study may be taken as proof of the still productive nature of Slavic verbal folklore in North America. The following three texts may serve as illustrations of this phenomenon. In the first case we have a simple substitution of a personal name for the last two words in a folksong: "Siwy koń, siwy koń, malowane sanki// Pojade, pojade do swojej kochanki" [Gray horse, gray horse, painted sleigh// I am going to my loved one] which becomes "... [Pojade, pojade do Buchowi Annki" [I am going to Annie Buch] (p. 69). The second text is an example of a macaronic counting out rhyme:

Jeden, dwa, trzy, cztery, pięć
 Gdzie się podział ten mój zięć?
 We linie w "kitchenie".
 On tam nigdy nie zginie.
 [One, two, three, four, five
 Where on earth has my son-in-law gone?
 In line in the kitchen.
 He will never perish there] (p. 71).

Finally, we have an example of a Polish ditty or *franówka*:

Szła krowa, pierdział wół
 Szła to wszystko w jeden dół
 Przyszło ciele, zazdrało,
 Jeszcze więcej naszała.
 [The cow shit, the ox farted
 Everything went into the one hole.
 The calf came along, looked in,
 And shit some more] (p. 71).

For some similar developments of Ukrainian verbal folklore in Canada see Robert Klymasz and Bohdan Medwidsky, "Macaronic Poetics in Ukrainian Canadian Folklore," (Canadian Contributions to the IX International Congress of Slavists, Kiev 1983), *Canadian Slavonic Papers* XXV:1 (1983), 206-215.

Moreover, pressures to conform to and adopt the socio-cultural norms of a foreign environment have provided a catalyst for the splintering of the Slavic folklore complex in North America into a system of genetically interrelated but in practice often highly differentiated pockets or enclaves of specific Slavic folklore traditions. Thus, for instance, non-verbal manifestations of South Slavic folklore in North America appear to thrive in dance and instrumental music, while East Slavic and to a lesser degree West Slavic folklore seems to be the most productive in terms of folk arts, crafts and cuisine. Some phenomena are common to all three branches of the Slavic folklore legacy in North America: traditional calendric and/or family customs, for example, are in some measure at least popular with most of the Slavic communities in North America.⁵

The close and intensive ties of North America's Slavic communities with groups of other, non-Slavic ethnic backgrounds have fostered the emergence of transitional folkloric forms and phenomena — blends between old and new that emerge primarily as non-verbal folklore on various levels of observation and analysis.

Non-verbal Slavic folklore in North America can be characterized comprehensively according to a variety of non-lingual communicative features:⁶ acoustic, optical, ideational, tactile and olfactory. When these sensory features obtain in tradition, the folklore complex expands, as it were, to include, besides verbal lore, other yet inextricably related non-verbal manifestations of folk expression: dance, arts and crafts (including traditional cuisine), beliefs and customs, and music-making. Folk dance, traditional Slavic cookery or foods, and a limited number of folk arts (such as Easter egg ornamentation) are among the most productive Slavic non-verbal forms in North America. Each species obtains both individually in isolation and in combination with others to elaborate collectively formulated eth-

5. In this regard, several important theoretical insights are found in Svatava Pírková Jakobson's study of "Harvest Festivals among Czechs and Slovaks in America," *Journal of American Folklore* LIX (1956): 266-280. Other descriptive materials are listed in Georges and Stern, *op. cit.*,

6. See Jevhen Kaharov's investigation of the forms and elements of folk ritual, "Formy ta elementy narodn'oji obrjadovosty," *Pervisne hromadjanstvo* and his identification of three elements: acoustic, verbal and movements of the body. See also the more recent publication edited by Manoly R. Lupul, *Visible Symbols: Cultural Expression among Canada's Ukrainians* (Edmonton, University of Alberta, 1984) with its focus on material culture, art, music, and dance.

nic folk festivals⁷ and weddings.⁸

As far as folk dance phenomena are concerned, South Slavic folk dances and folk dancing (mainly Bulgarian, Croatian and Servian) have become especially popular in North America as a form of recreational pastime.⁹ The general popularity of the South Slavic dance tradition in North America has evolved and crystallized in a manner that is distinctly different from other Slavic dance traditions in America: West and East Slavic folk dances currently seem to operate almost exclusively *within* particular Slavic communities (such as the Polish and Ukrainian) where the folk dance is generally refined for stage purposes and highly choreographed (often in imitation of touring companies from their respective homelands) in order to serve primarily as a vehicle for the promotion of the group's specific ethnic pride and allegiance, not merely for leisure or recreational purposes.

Traditional music-making among North America's Slavic communities is especially productive in terms of instrumental music; the *tamburitza* tradition remains strongly rooted among Americans of South Slavic descent¹⁰ and the *bandura* tradition is especially popular among urban Ukrainian communities.¹¹

Within modern America's product- and consumer-oriented society many of the above cited traditions have become commercial-

-
7. See Robert B. Klymasz, "The Ethnic Folk Festival in North America Today," in Wsevolod W. Isajiw, ed., *Ukrainians in American and Canadian Society: Contributions to the Sociology of Ethnic Groups* (Jersey City, M.P. Kots, 1976), pp. 199-211.
 8. See, for instance, Susan G. Davis, "Old-Fashioned Polish Weddings in Utica, New York," *New York Folklore* 4:1-4 (1978), 89-102; and Philip V.R. Tilney, "The Immigrant Macedonian Wedding in Ft. Wayne," *Indiana Folklore* 3:1 (1970), 3-34.
 9. See Elsie Ivancich Dunin, *South Slavic Dance in California: A Compendium for the Years 1924-1977* (Palo Alto, California, Ragusan Press, 1979) and David F. Hoffman Jr., "The Meaning and Function of the Kolo Club 'Marian' in the Steelton, Pa., Croatian Community," *Keystone Folklore Quarterly* 16:3 (1971), 115-131.
 10. See Richard March, "The Tamburitza Tradition in the Calumet Region," *Indiana Folklore* 10:2 (1977), 127-138; and Mark Forry, "Bécar Music in the Serbian Community of Los Angeles: Evolution and Transformation," *Selected Reports in Ethnomusicology* 3:1 (1978), 174-209.
 11. For the popularity of the bandura in North America see Ja. Hurs'kyj, ed., *Zbirnyk na poshanu Hryhorija Kytastoho* (New York, UVAN, 1980). The continuing popularity of another folk music instrument, tsymbaly, has been documented in Canada by Mark J. Bandera in his unpublished Master's thesis in Ukrainian folklore for the University of Alberta's Department of Slavic and East European Studies, "The Tsymbaly Maker and His Craft: A Dynamic Musical Tradition in East Central Alberta" (Edmonton, 1985).

ized; traditional Slavic foods, crafts and music are packaged and disseminated in non-traditional ways to meet the needs of the continent's demanding and swiftly moving mores. The impact of tourism is one of several variables currently influencing the contemporary development of non-verbal manifestations of Slavic folklore in North America. Diversity within the Slavic folklore heritage in North America has been curtailed in favour of heritage consolidation and conformity. And it is evident that with the loss of Slavic languages in America as viable means of everyday communication, non-verbal Slavic folklore has taken on added importance, (1) as a compensatory mechanism that allows at least a certain degree of cultural continuity without violating the norms and strictures imposed by the culture of the host society or environment¹² and (2) as the dynamic *modus operandi* for Slavic pride and continuity in North America today.

University of Alberta
Edmonton, Alberta

-
12. It is significant that it is the dominant mainstream culture itself that dictates and furnishes the appropriate mechanisms and makes available the various generative tools and productive vehicles with which to reshape and refine the old Slavic folklore legacy in North America: "In effect, then, the reconstructed folklore complex allows its assorted carriers and enthusiasts to indulge in a fantasy of ethnic separateness and individuality without transgressing the limits and patterns prescribed and sanctioned by the surrounding English-speaking culture," Robert B. Klymasz, *Ukrainian Folklore in Canada: An Immigrant Complex in Transition* (New York, Arno Press, 1980), p. 123. An example of this process is documented by Zenon Pohorecky *et al* in their description of a commercial venture held annually in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, "Vesna Festival: A New Spring Festival," *Ukrainian Canadian Review*, 1974 Issue No. 5 (Edmonton, Ukrainian Canadian Professional and Business Federation), pp. 5-7.