

# THE FOLKDANCES OF THE WESTERN POLISSIA REGION OF UKRAINE: TRADITIONS AND INNOVATIONS

IRYNA FEDUN

*The Western Polissia ethnographic region of northwest Ukraine has a comparatively well-preserved traditional culture due to its naturally inaccessible woods and swamps. The territory is also unique because many scholars believe that it represents the original Slavic homeland. This article analyzes changes in the non-ritual dance repertoire of musicians of the Western Polissia region. New dances (e.g., the pol'ka, krakoviak, oberek, val's, podispan, barynia, iablochko, na riechien'ku, karapiet, etc.) were incorporated due to the influence of national minorities and other people living in the area, as well as the diffusion of urban culture and the impact of mass-media on more traditional local forms such as the krutak, hrechka, etc.*  
Keywords: innovation, dance, Western Polissia, traditional instrumental music.

*Etnografsko območje Zahodnega Polesja v severozahodni Ukrajini ima zaradi slabe dostopnosti (gozdovi in močvirja) zelo dobro ohranjeno tradicionalno kulturo. Poleg tega je po mnenju številnih znanstvenikov Zahodno Polesje posebno območje, ker predstavlja prvotno domovino Slovanov. V prispevku obravnava avtorica spremembe v repertoarju plesov, ki niso povezani z obredi, tega območja. Vplivi narodnih manjšin in sosednjih narodov, pa tudi razširitev mestne kulture in množičnih medijev so pripomogli k temu, da so se tradicionalnim lokalnim oblikam, kot so krutak, hrechka ipd., pridružili novi plesi, npr. polka, krakovjak, oberek, valček idr.*  
Ključne besede: inovacija, ples, Zahodno Polesje, tradicionalna instrumentalna glasba.

The subject of change in traditional music on different levels has attracted the attention of researchers since early times, and much work has reflected this particular area [cf. Merriam 1964: 303–319; Nettl 1964: 224–268; Hoshowsky 1971: 211–213; Žerańska-Kominek 1995: 293–338; Dadak-Kozicka 1996: 260–271; Dahlig 1998: 22–45, etc.]. This theme remains topical in modern ethnomusicology; in particular, in ethnochoreology [Giurchesku and Torp 1991].

As a matter of fact, change is evolution within a given phenomenon or, as is often reflected in folk music, its contact with something external, because almost every ethnographic environment has many historical and cultural strata:

*...not only does the entire repertoire of a certain people represent an accumulation of different epochs' creations and stratification of heritage, but also a separate melody, even very short, can belong completely to one epoch, or style, but may consist of elements that are present in different epochs and styles... [Kvitka 1925: 16–17].*

The concept of *innovation* is interpreted in different ways by various cultural scholars and is sometimes used only in the understanding of internal, evolutionary changes, in con-

trast to acculturation observed in external changes that occur under the influence of other cultures. In this article, the term “innovation” is understood in its wider and more primary sense – as the introduction or formation of something new (even if this is a re-emergence of something that already existed once, it will never be completely the same). The reason for choosing this particular term is that it is semantically more encompassing than, for example, modification, diffusion, assimilation, acculturation, globalization, and so on. Synonyms for this term include “change” and “evolution”.

Researchers have grouped all processes of innovation into either internal or external changes:

1. Internal (or endogenous) changes are those that occur evolutionarily within cultural environments. Such changes are understood in a more narrow sense (unlike the broader encompassing interpretation in anthropological literature [Żerańska-Kominiek 1995: 301–305]) as the creation of a variant of something already existing in a culture, its partial loss due to being forgotten, or its revival.<sup>1</sup> The creation of something absolutely new is possible mostly through the working of external factors.
2. External (or exogenous) changes are always related to contact between at least two different cultures (broadly, this may also include village and city traditions, for example). These external contacts and changes may take place on different planes, which have been described in other literature [Nettl 1964: 232–238; Merriam 1964: 303–319; Hoshowsky 1971: 313–318, etc.]. They include the following:
  - Borrowing of separate works and performing them in a culture's own style;
  - Penetration of individual elements: ornamentation, rhythms, performing methods, and so on;
  - Mastering the borrowed thought-process of a non-native culture, and the ability to think in two musical languages;
  - Hybridization with another culture, in which something new emerges as a result;
  - Complete absorption and elimination of one culture by another.

Therefore, in the processes of innovation specific cultural elements may remain the same, change (progressively or regressively), disappear, or be revived.

Characteristically, “inculcators” of cultural change are creative and highly gifted personalities in unique environments that not only create, but also transform traditional culture [cf. Merriam 1964: 162; Fedun 2003]. The individuals most associated with the transformation of dance music in Western Polissia<sup>2</sup> are the professional musicians of this region:

<sup>1</sup> Revival can have different levels – for example, renewal of a vanishing (but not yet fully vanished) phenomenon or, as Maciewsky describes in detail, re-creation of a phenomenon that completely vanished after some time (“post mortem life”) in circumstances favorable for this purpose [Maciewsky 2000].

<sup>2</sup> The geographical borders of this region are defined in various ways, most often: a line following the Western Buh, Pryp'iat', and Horyn' rivers on the west, north, and east, and on the south a line along the cities of Volodymyr-Volyns'k, Luts'k, and Rivne.

1. *Lirnyky* (wandering bards who sang and accompanied themselves on *lira* – hurdy-gurdy) [Oshurkevych and Rybak 2002] had a repertoire consisting mostly of epic compositions of a historical, religious, or moralizing character. However, sometimes listeners requested dances or even invited them to dance parties (although these were exceptions).
2. Musician-shepherds, for whom music was an integral part of their occupation, played on woodwind instruments [Fedun 2001]. Their music often included ritual signals, as well as music for their pleasure while resting on the pastures. The shepherds incorporated dance melodies into this “rest” music.
3. *Troïsti* ‘triple’ musicians<sup>3</sup>, gathered into ensembles, with instruments including the fiddle, tambourine, and drum. Later the clarinet and accordion were added to the ensemble [Fedun 2004: 116]. This group of musicians performed dance music. This was their primary activity, which made up the majority of their repertoire. They played not only at dance parties, but also throughout the calendar year and during family rituals, where there also existed a separate group of dance compositions (in the widest sense, from dance to magic-sacral pantomime).

This last group thus dealt with changes in dance more actively than others; bards or shepherds used dance tunes in music mainly for passive listening.

Innovations in dance were caused by historical-cultural events that transpired on these territories, increasing communication possibilities in the environment, and so on. This article describes non-ritual dances in the repertoire of these musicians<sup>4</sup> in chronological order of their evolution (first specifically Ukrainian dances, and then borrowed, non-Ukrainian dances), although the terms offered will be provisional, because: 1) it is generally considered impossible to establish exact events in unwritten music without direct written sources (one can use only contiguous archaeological, historical, ethnographic, and other fixed materials); 2) the appearance of these or other dances could be linked not only with common events for an entire region, but also with local ones – that is, the same work could appear in different settlements for different reasons.

<sup>3</sup> These mostly included two to five persons, but with three main musical functions in the ensemble: melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic.

<sup>4</sup> The materials include field records of the Archive... [see bibliography and sources] from this region, approximately 7,000 pieces (including vocal, instrumental, and vocal-instrumental melodies, not only for dancing) were recorded here. Sometimes only verbal information about the dances was collected. Approximately 2,000 pieces were recorded in the region by the author herself; among other collectors of folk music in Western Polissia in the Archive are O. Oshurkevych (recordings from the 1970s and 1980s), and L. Dobrians'ka, L. Lukashenko, A. Potoczniak, and I. Rybak (recordings between 1996 and 2004). Additional materials are from publications about the region's dance repertoire were also examined (e.g., O. Kolberg and A. Humeniuk, and more contemporary works by B. Yaremko, M. Khay, V. Koval'chuk, I. Rybak, V. Trynchuk, etc.).


## LOCALLY SPECIFIC

In most parts of Western Polissia, the *krutak* (*krutiak*, *krutiakh*, *krutachok*) is considered the oldest (i.e., it is difficult to determine when it appeared) and the most popular local dance. One can still find similar names in the Hutsul region – for example, *krubliek*, *krublyk*, and *krubliak* (Harasymczuk attributes this dance to the old *kozachky* group [cf. Harasymczuk 1939: 93–98; Saban 1987: 354]) – and among other people; for example, the Slovak *kruta*, *krut*, *krucena*, and *krútivé tance* [Důžek and Garaj 2001]. The *krutak* is a paired dance, in which dancers move in a circle in one direction and exchange partners. It is performed in duple meter, sometimes with singing. Geographically, *krutak* dances are found only within the limits of the Ratne, Kamin'-Kashyrs'k, and Liubeshiv regions – that is, in the central part of Western Polissia. Vocal music research by Rybak on the same area (to be precise, on the Verhnioprypiat's'ka lowland) shows that the oldest song types intersect here ... *between the Vyzhivka and Stokhid rivers. ... [where] the most original and sufficiently conservative tradition is located* [Rybak 2004: 166–167].

Among other ancient local dances that were documented more episodically is the *solkha*. As one violinist from the Ratne region explained, it is the same dance as the *krutak*, but with a different name [*Archive...* EK–176]. Another name for the melody is *kapusta*, as well as what are probably dances from the same song source, also in 2/4 meter, but later in origin (judging by their sporadic localization): *ternytsia*, *chumak*, and *brechka* (regarding the last, cf. Trynchuk [2004]).

Some local dances had song analogues and more recent musical features from the 19th and 20th centuries. These include the *molodychmyk*, the *chumak* (a more popular tune for the dance mentioned above with the same name), and the *podushechky* (an illustrative dance). The same melodies are found in other regions of Ukraine, but they are not so widespread that they can be considered national.

## NATIONALLY SPECIALIZED

This group of dances is well known throughout Ukraine and includes the *kozak*, *kozachok*, and *hopak*, which were probably created by the Cossacks in the 16th century. The three dances are similar in their musical and rhythmic characteristics (4-part square structure, 2/4, typically the phrases end with the rhythm  with the accent falling on the last note). The oldest among these are believed to be the male dances the *kozak* and *hopak* (originally these were competitive dances in which men performed various rapid motions, such as jumps and squats [Nahachewsky 2001, Humeniuk 1962: 18–20]), and the paired dance the *kozachok* [Harasymczuk 1939: 105–107] is considered newer.

It is interesting that informants in Western Polissia almost unanimously stated that the *kozak* and *hopak* in this region were not differentiated from the *kozachok* and, that they

asserted that (1) such a dance was not present, (2) it was the same as the *kozak*, or (3) the *kozachok* appeared only in “Polish times” (by this they meant the last “Polish” period, when, after the 1921 Treaty of Riga was concluded between Russia and Poland, Polissia and other Western Ukrainian lands became part of the Polish state). Thus the *kozak* and *hopak* could have spread throughout Western Polissia even as early as the 16th century,<sup>5</sup> whereas the *kozachok* probably appeared in the 19th or 20th century and did not have time to become sufficiently rooted among the local population.

#### BORROWED REPERTOIRE

The absolute “leader” of this group of dances is the *pol'ka*, which is of Czech origin. The latest period when the polka could have appeared in Western Polissia region was the 1860s, when Czech migrants settled in compact groups in these areas (possibly further south of this territory, although there were large settlements, for example, in the city limits of Kovel') [Vaculík 1997; Hofman 1998]. In the earlier period, before the 1860s, this dance could have been brought from an urban environment or transporters of European repertoire such as other ethnic musicians – probably Gypsy or Jewish. The acceptance of this genre in the Polissian environment was so swift, that already by the second half of 19th and the 20th century the polka had almost forced out older local dances in popularity<sup>6</sup> and the number of variants (even local ones), possibly through their musical similarities.

Another single example probably from the same period is a Jewish dance, which was remembered by one musician from the village of Sudche in the Liubeshiv district. The *haim* is a dance in duple meter and performed in a moderate tempo. However the composition sounds more like music to accompany singing or stepping, rather than dancing.

In the 1920s and 1930s, when the greater part of Polissia was under Polish rule (the rest was under Soviet rule [Magocsi 2002: 138]), almost everywhere informants asserted that the Polish dances the *krakowjak* and the *oberek* – and, more infrequently, the *kujawjak* – appeared. (It is not impossible that they could have spread considerably earlier in separate places.) Many well known foreign dances were adopted from Poland in numerous localities just after World War II, including the waltz, tango, *podispan* (from *pas d'Espagne*, ‘Spanish step’), *kadril'* ‘quadrille’, foxtrot, shimmy, and two-step [Ivleva, Sokolov-Kaminsky 1991: 111, 153, 166, 175–176, 208; Keldysh 1991: 93–94, 224–225, 276, 288, 389, 535, 558, 579, 638; Trynchuk 2004].

In the 1940s, especially after World War II and the establishment of Soviet rule

<sup>5</sup> Even then the Belarusians referred to Ukrainians as various forms of “Cossacks.” Movements of Cossack detachments occurred here except from the end of 16th to the mid 17th century, during the anti-Catholic peasant-Cossack revolts [Bondarchik and Kyrchiv 1988: 80].

<sup>6</sup> When questioned what the oldest dance was, in separate villages the answer was consistently the polka.

[Magocsi 2002: 138], Russian folk and urban dances were especially popular in this region. These included the *chastushki*, *barynia*, *kamaryns'ka*, *na riechien'ku*, *iabluchko*, *siemionovna*, *korobochka*, *karapiet*, and *oira (orja)* [Ivleva, Sokolov-Kaminsky 1991: 153, 207–211, 213; Keldysh 1991:57, 621]. Even so, some of these could have arrived earlier through Ukrainian-Russian contact, when, for example, during the second and third partitions of Poland (1793, 1795) the Volyn' district along with other lands of right-bank Ukraine was annexed by Russia and a greater part of the population from Russia migrated to Polissia [Bondarchik and Kyrchiv 1988: 83; Magocsi 2002: 71].

Some dances penetrated certain Western Polissian villages in the second half of the 20th century. This occurred mainly through contact with the local population in the amateur performances during Soviet times, such as festivals, and other mass-media venues. These include the Belarusian *liavonikha*, the Georgian *lezginka*, and probably the more quasi-Gypsy than authentically Gypsy *tsyhanochka (tsybanka, tsyhan)*. Very often the older dance tunes were replaced by the latest style from published sources, especially adopted from popular music during the period (such as the waltzes *Aliosha* and *Crutitsia-vertitsia* [Archive... EK–176, EK–181]).

If the dance repertoire of musicians of Western Polissia is assessed on the whole, the percentage of specific Ukrainian works here is considerably less than that of borrowed works. This testifies to a change in musical tastes in the area, especially in the latter half of the 19th and in the 20th century. There is also a tendency for the simplification of dance steps and movements of older dances, or the choice of dances that are simpler to perform, which causes the gradual extinction of more difficult ones. And dances, especially non-ritual dances from the range of folk genres, react to change very quickly.

The events started with the early settlement of these lands, then the formation and migration of tribes in times of the Kyivan Rus' and later could have influenced the development of the old dance traditions. The new layer owed more to late relations with informants from other regions (which migrated to the region in various times and under various circumstances), neighboring cultures, national minorities, and so on. Regarding these minorities, each of them (Poles, Jews, Germans, Czechs, Russians, Tatars, etc.) tried on the one hand to preserve their cultural originality, including musical phenomena, although sometimes they were assimilated (in the ethnographic meaning) by the indigenous population. On the other hand, national minorities, being more open to foreign influence, brought popular trends known throughout Europe to the traditional peasant world.

All the innovations mentioned above in the dances of Western Polissia are explainable not only through internal changes and certain historical interrelations between Western Polissia and neighboring regions, but also through the emergence of written culture, which was influencing oral tradition. External innovative processes in the dance of Western Polissia took place in the simplest ways – by borrowing pieces and using them as one's own music, (e.g., separate elements such as certain rhythms and performance methods, etc.). However,

regardless of the stormy historical and cultural contacts of this region with other cultures, local originality nevertheless remains well preserved.

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## LJUDSKI PLESI ZAHODNEGA POLESJA (UKRAJINA): IZROČILO IN NOVOSTI

*V prispevku so v kronološkem redu pojavljanja opisani plesi iz repertoarja glasbenikov Zahodnega Polesja (najprej ukrajinske oblike, nato prevzete).*

*Krutak je najstarejši in najbolj razširjen lokalni ples. V to skupino spadajo tudi solokha, kapusta, ternytsia, hrechka. Lokalni plesi, ki imajo že novejšo izvirne glasbene značilnosti, so se pojavili na prehodu 19. v 20. stoletje: molodychnyk, chumak, poduchechky. Plesa kozak in hopak pripadata posebnemu nacionalnemu tipu (ki naj bi se razširil v Zahodno Polesje med 16. in 17. stoletjem), prav tako pripada temu tipu tudi novejši kozachok (ki se je verjetno pojavil v 19. ali 20. stol.). Polka, ki se je na tem področju pojavila v šestdesetih letih 19. stoletja, je postala najbolj razširjen sposojeni ples. Že v drugi polovici 19. in v 20. stoletju je polka zaradi svoje popularnosti in številnih variant izpodrinila druge lokalne plese. Iz tega obdobja je verjetno tudi judovski ples haim. V dvajsetih in tridesetih letih 20. stol., ko je bil velik del Zahodnega Polesja pod poljsko oblastjo, so se pojavili poljski plesi krakovjak, oberek in redkeje kajuwjak, pa tudi znani tuji plesi (valček, tango, podispan, kadril, fokstrot, šimi, two-step). Od štiridesetih let dvajsetega stoletja dalje, posebej pa po drugi svetovni vojni ter po vzpostavitvi sovjetske oblasti so se zelo razširili ruski ljudski in mestni plesi, ki so postali zelo popularni: chastushki, barynia, kamarynska, na*

*riechien'ku, jabluchko, siemiovna, korobochka, karapiet, ojra. V nekaterih vaseh najdemo plese, ki so se uveljavili v drugi polovici 20. stol., posebej preko množičnih medijev, med njimi so npr. liavonikha, legzinka, tshanochka.*

*Procesi inovacij v plesnem ustvarjanju Zahodnega Polesja so se dogajali samo v najpreprostejših oblikah. Ljudje so sposojene delčke plesov s posameznimi elementi (nekaterimi ritmi, izvajalskimi načini ipd.) vključili v lastno izročilo. Toda kljub številnim zgodovinsko-kulturnim stikom regije z drugimi kulturami se je lokalna izvirnost dobro ohranila.*

mag. Iryna Fedun  
Scientific-Research Laboratory of Music Ethnology  
Mykola Lysenko Lviv State Academy of Music  
5 Nyzhankivs'kyi St., 79005 Lviv, Ukrajina, irynafedun@inbox.ru