

## THE OLDEST ELEMENTS OF WOMEN'S WEDDING FOLK COSTUMES IN EUROPE ON THE EXAMPLES OF MORDOVIAN AND MACEDONIAN COSTUMES

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**Abstract:** Studies of wedding women's folk costumes show a mysterious similarity between the Ugro-Finnish costume in the North of Europe and some of the costumes of North Macedonia in the South of Europe. The most important elements of this similarity are the ornaments, especially the fringes. The article describes these similarities and suggests their historical origin.

**Keywords:** wedding folk costumes, archaism, Mordova, Macedonia, fringes

### Introduction

My research on Mordovian<sup>1</sup> folk costume which I realized in the years 2023-2024 (Laskowska-Otwinowska, Skóra, Tomasik: 2024) led me to notice the unusual similarity of elements of old women's garments from Mordovia to folk costumes from other parts of Europe, especially from Macedonia. The resemblance concerned women's decorations on aprons and headgear. The possibility of such a close similarity both among the Mordovian-Finno-Ugric minority group from Central Russia and the South Slavs in Macedonia seems a mystery. The following article deals with this similarity and its origin.

### Historical background and nowadays of Mordva group

Finno-Ugric people arrived in Europe from beyond the Ural Mountains and spread across the East European Plain to the Volga Upland all the way to Karelia and the Scandinavian Peninsula to the north and into the Pannonian Basin (Hungary) to the west. This migration took place at the turn from the Mesolithic to the Neolithic period. The Mordovians arrived in the territory of present-day Russia in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Until the 15<sup>th</sup> century, their original territory in Russia was the basins of the Oka, Volga

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<sup>1</sup> Project: "Mordvian costume in State Ethnographic Museum in Warsaw collection, 2023–2024", realized by Laskowska-Otwinowska, Skóra, Tomasik. A more in-depth discussion of the Mordovian research project was recently published in Poland. Please see: J. Laskowska-Otwinowska, K. Tomasik, J. M. del Hoy-Melendez, A. Kopyciak, M. Obarzanowski, K. Skóra and T. Wilkosz. 2024. *Stroje mordwińskie w kolekcji Państwowego Muzeum etnograficznego w Warszawie. Analiza historyczna i technologiczna. Etnografia Nova*, no. 13. Warszawa: Wyd. PME w Warszawie.

and Sura rivers. Gradually, these nomadic groups settled and began to practice agriculture. They also built urban settlements (fortresses) around kurgan burial grounds. The most famous Mordvin kurgan is the Andrijevski necropolis dating to the beginning of the Common Era. Already writing about the European Mordvins was Jordanes, author of the book “Getica” from the year 550–551 and they appear in old east Slavic writings in the 6<sup>th</sup> century.

With the invasion of this part of the East European Plain by Tatar-Mongolian tribes, some Mordovian groups found themselves under the rule of the Khanate of Kazan, which would leave an influence on various aspects of their culture, including the traditional costume, especially so among the Moksha group. Having a similar significance on the evolution of the costume was the influx of the Slavs. Mordvins appear in the Russian old epic poems known as *bylinas*. In these poems, they were portrayed as enemies who were pesky, uproarious and savage people, and offspring of the wild woman Salygorka. Russian folklore contains information on Finno-Ugric mythology, in which birds played a prominent role: the thrush, nightingale, skylark and woodpecker (Drozd, Solow, Skowrec and Dlatłowuja).

Nowadays, the Mordvins inhabit two Russian republics: Mordovia and Tatarstan. They speak the Mordvinic languages of Erzya and Moksha (main groups of Mordvins) of the Finno-Ugric language family, alongside Russian and Tatar. They cultivate traditional archaic religious beliefs: Erzya and Moksha, with some members of the ethnicity also being Orthodox Christian, Lutheran and Molokan (an offshoot of Orthodoxy). Inhabiting European Russia are other, loosely-integrated Finno-Ugric groups, the largest of which are the Mari and the Karelians. In the past, there were many other such groups, like the Teriukhans from the area of Nizhny Novgorod, the Karatayevs, the Merva, the Meshchena and others. Beyond Europe, Finno-Ugric people can be encountered in Siberia (Republic of Komi in Russia).

According to the latest statistics available to us, from 2002, the Mordvin population in Russia was 843,350, and in the Republic of Mordovia – 559,489, which accounts for 66.3% of the republic’s total population. The group’s population is in decline. Anthropologically, this is a very diverse group as its members often intermixed with their non-Mordvin neighbours like the Persians, Turks, Baltic peoples and Slavs.

### **Mordovian women’s costume**

The Erzya women’s ceremonial costume consists of numerous pieces and was so complex that the process of getting dressed could take several hours, with assistance from 2 or 3 helpers. The foundation of the outfit was a floor-length collarless shirt – a *panar*, its everyday version made from hemp fibres and the ceremonial from linen. Next was a loose-fitting, flared canvas frock called a *rutsya* or *impanar*. Worn over the shirt was a

sleeveless thigh-length kaftan that was closely fitting and had a large number of ruffles on the back. In the spring and autumn, Erzya women wore a canvas kaftan called a *suman*, and in the winter – a shearling coat called an *op*. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, an embroidered, decorative apron was incorporated in the Mordvin costume.



Fig. 1: Kaftan (Estonian National Museum, ENM B 3–4)

The traditional footwear was mainly bast shoes made from linden or elm bark fastened with hemp, linen, cotton or leather laces, the ceremonial version of which were multicoloured. These shoes were worn on bare feet or over canvas footwraps or woollen socks, the latter particularly in the ceremonial version. On holidays, fashionable young women wore shoes with somewhat higher leather uppers, densely layered folds on the calves and pointed tips. The surface of the shoe was lined with red Morocco leather with a butterfly-shaped ornament affixed with copper tacks at the heel. Such shoes were still commonly worn in the 1960s. Shoes with a smooth upper were worn by both sexes, but those with a folded upper were worn only by women. Also produced were leggings – originally woven with a chicken-bone needle. These had a geometric or black-and-white checked pattern. With the appearance of knitting needles in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Mordvins began to also produce woollen knee socks with heels (before the use of knitting needles, they were heelless). Being a foreign element, these socks never got a Mordvinic name. In the 1950s and 1960s, silk stockings became readily available and this also enjoyed great popularity. In the 1940s, the bast shoes became work shoes and they disappeared altogether in the 1960s. They were replaced by wellingtons and felt-lined gumboots, which started to appear in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Originally, clothes-making was the work of women, while the shoes were made by men. The clothing was made mainly from hemp (and occasionally linen) and wool. The Mordvins were famous in the neighbouring countries and beyond for their hemp production and their

excellent dying craftsmanship. As early as in the year 921, the traveller Ibn-Fodan mentioned these practices in his writings. By the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Mordvin hemp was being exported as far afield as England. Some scholars even suggest that the Germanic words *hemp* and *hamf* derive from the Mordvinic word *kantf* or *kant*. The ribbon used in shirt cuffs and hems was woven on a lath or in hand by two women working together. These archaic weaving methods disappeared between the 1920s and 1960s.

Holding a special place in the costume worn by Mordvin women was jewellery – beads, bracelets and rings. Worn on the ears were earrings with suspended silver coins or tokens, beads and puffs of goose down. The Mordvin costume contains cues relating to the Mordvins' contact with other cultures throughout their territorial movements, like metal ornaments that were archaisms from the Mongols, Scythians and Volga Bulgarians. The oldest element common to the entire Finno-Ugric group is the *sjulam* pin worn at the neckline of a women's blouse and other spiral-shaped broaches with bronze-age patterns. Moksha and Erzya ornaments began to diverge in the second millennium CE, with the most pronounced changes coming in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Erzya pins were made from copper wire in the shape of an oval with fine chains and beads (including glass ones) and metal fringes.



Fig. 2: Erzya breastpin (Estonian National Museum, ENM B 189: 79)

The Moksha pin, meanwhile, while also made from copper, was triangular in shape, with beads, circles, bumps, bells and silver or copper coins or tokens.



Fig. 3: Moksha breastpin (Estonian National Museum, ENM A 559: 474)

The Moksha used geometric patterns in their jewellery, creating, for example, latticework neck bands, necklaces and collars from beads and buttons. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, making their way into the Moksha costume were also collars and even capes made from ribbons sewn together and decorated with bows. The *kombonie* cape covering both the back and chest was a wedding ornament as well as a festive article worn by young women.

Occurring among the Erzya, meanwhile, was an ornament known as the *kolobka*, meaning silver bread loaf. It was much simpler than Moksha ornaments: beads (including glass ones) were strung on a piece of wire, bark or even cardboard with coins and metal tabs suspended from the bottom. In the region of Insar, girls and young women would wear two strings of black and white beads with one string of coins (tokens) up to the 1950s. One ornament that was specific to the Erzya was a woven ribbon for a crucifix. Sewn to them were colourful strings of beads, bells, amulets and coins. Attached would be up to three crucifixes made of iron or copper. Appearing in the 1960s was a version with white beads, shells and coins and a crucifix or round icon under mica glass. Erzya women also wore neck bands made of strips of textile decorated with coins and beads. Earrings and bracelets made of copper and silver did not stay in fashion. The variety of jewellery worn by the Mordvins distinguished these peoples from the other ethnicities inhabiting Russia.

### **Bridal wedding headgears in Mordva and in Macedonia**

Calling for a separate discussion are Mordovian women's headdresses. The wearer's age and position in the family and society can be determined via this part of the wardrobe: they range from simple bonnets to tall, intricately decorated hats in the shape of a cylinder or pointed ones with strange and magical names: *snake's head (Kumbra)*, *horns (Syrot)*, *moon (Kov)*, *frog (Vatraksh)*, *hare's ear (Numolon pile)*, *spruce top (Kuz pria)*, *bird's eyes (Narmunen selminet)*, *stars (Teshtinet)*, etc. In the light of information in Russian *bylina* poems pointing to the magical role of the animal world in the beliefs of the Mordvins, it seems likely that such headdress forms may have been understood to bestow magical powers. Girls aged 16–17 wore flat and round ornamented caps with strings of beads or ribbons hanging down at the back, and with orange or green thread pompons attached at the sides. Young women also wore small kerchiefs pulled over the forehead with ornamented fronts. Unmarried women wove beads and hare's fur, copper combs, keys and thimbles on thread into their braids. After marriage, they would pass these ornaments down to their younger sisters. Adult women's headdresses were most often rectangular, covering the forehead and ears and with an elongated back. That part of the hat was called the *fmala pula*, which simply means tail. On the fringe or near the face were pompons made of down (goose or duck) or red fur. On the forehead they were decorated with shells, feathers or bulges. On the wedding day, the back of the bride's headdress was additionally bedecked with a fringe made from grass and paper flowers. For some time after the wedding, the bride would attach that fringe to an ordinary kerchief on feast days. This tradition persisted until the 1950s. In some regions, until the 1920s, women dressing for their wedding would also put on a *sorochka* or *kabluk* – an embroidered semi cylindrical headdress consisting of a front part, wings and a tail. Worn over the *sorochka* was a kerchief, though in the Starosazjgorsk region the *sorochka* was put on over a mobcap. This was a ceremonial headdress. The everyday headdress was a soft mobcap, a *kokorka*, or a fez-like hat with a brim, a *kosinka*, made of red satin, attached to the forehead side of which was a piece of percale ornamented with sequins, beads, cord trim and pleated fabric, and sewn together with ribbons at the back. Colourful *kosinkas* were worn by women until the age of 35 to 40, after which they wore white ones. Worn by the Moksha was also a *kauzur* headband with ribbon or fabric trim and covered in tulle. Becoming commonplace in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century were factory-produced kerchiefs, colourful ones for young women and darker shades for older women. Moksha women tended to wear two kerchiefs – a white one beneath a colourful one tied like a turban. Appearing in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century were “French-style” kerchiefs made of silk; they were colourful, with floral patterns on a red or brown background and with a fringe. In the Teryukhan region, Mordvin women dressed in the Russian manner and wore raspberry-

coloured or red sateen kerchiefs on holidays. This headdress remained fashionable until the 1920s, when it was replaced with a woven shawl having golden flowers on a blue or red background. The abundance and diversity of women's headdresses could have resulted from the fact that young women were forbidden to go barefoot and have their head uncovered in the company of men, with the same applying to married women in the company of their father-in-law.

Barbara Bazielić, the best Polish researcher of European traditional costumes draws attention to the similarity, both formal and nomenclature, between the old elements of women's costumes of Finno-Ugric ethnic groups from the former USSR and women's outfit in Bulgaria and Macedonia. Bazielić focuses especially on the bride wedding headgears:

According to old beliefs, the forces of life are concentrated in the hair, so married women (...) protected their hair with appropriate coverings (...). In the Balkan countries, similarly to the Maryjts, Cheremis, Udmurts, Mordvins [Finno-Ugric groups – J.L-O], these headgears were both rectangular, square, triangle, shawl-shaped scarves, as well as long embroidered linen strips called <<sokaj>> (...)

(Bazielić 1997: 57–58).

Similarly, the *sokaj* headgear occurred in Mordva also with other names: “Just as <<shimaksh>> resembles the Macedonian <<sokaj>>, so <<szynaszowic>> corresponds to the local <<ubrusi>>” (Bazielić 1997: 58).

Macedonian researchers confirm the importance of women's wedding headgear in Macedonia: „The particularly outstanding headgears are <<sokaj>> and <<ubrusi>>. They are abundantly decorated with red, black or white fringes, as well as other ornaments, such as old coins, small beads, *monistra*, shells etc.” (Dodovska & Roganovic 1999: 10). They call this kind of headgear in Macedonia: „the oldest pieces representing archaic elements of apotropaic cult symbolism” (Dodovska & Roganovic 1999:10).

Depending on the region and local beliefs, a woman was obliged to wear it for a year after the wedding, until the birth of her first child or after that.

### **Magic aprons in Mordva and in Macedonia**

The part of the Mordva costume with the greatest magical significance was the *pulai* (local names: *pulaj*, *pulagaj*, *pulaksh*, *pulokarks* – the word *pulo* meaning “tail”): a rear adornment which also signified the wearer's regional affiliation and material status. The *pulai* consisted of many fringes in black, red, blue or green, which were boiled in oil to make them rustle as the wearer walked. Also sewn onto the belt were pieces of canvas abundantly decorated with cowrie shells, copper buttons, metal discs and chains.



Fig. 4: Pulaj (Estonian National Museum, ENM B 2: 32)

The *pulai* was first put on by a young girl at the time of puberty and worn at all times, even during fieldwork, despite its considerable weight of up to several kilograms. It was not, however, put on the body of deceased women in the coffin. The *pulai* protected the wearer against evil forces, especially those that could bring infertility. The belief was that the evil force would be entangled in the fringes before reaching the body.



Fig. 5: Pulaj (Estonian National Museum, ENM B 2: 46)

Unfortunately, Bazielich doesn't mention the similarity between both Mordvins and Macedonian women aprons with fringes and doesn't point to the processes that led to the existence of such similarities in costumes in such distant parts of Europe. However, it should be assumed that aprons with fringes also had magical significance.

During the time of Macedonian costumes exhibition in State Ethnographic Museum in Warsaw in 2002,<sup>2</sup> curator Jelica Dodovska also mentioned the magical properties and social symbolism of these costume elements:

The right clothes were intended for the right period of life. When a young girl grew up, she put on clothes specific to her age and condition, which signaled that she was ready for marriage. The bride wore her extremely rich wedding outfit until the birth of her first child, and then carefully hid it. It was put into the woman's coffin after death so that she could meet her husband in the next world. Clothes had symbolic meaning and were sometimes given almost magical powers

(Dodovska 12–13.09.2002).

Let us add that among the Mordvins, festive clothes are also placed in the coffin. Though Erzya women today dress in the modern style, they often opt to be buried in the traditional costume so as to join their ancestors in the afterlife with dignity.

Until the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the territory of Macedonia there were over 70 different kinds of costumes. The reason for so many diverse costumes, particularly for women, is the geographic isolation of the ethnic areas, as well as the frequent migrations ethnic diversity of the population. The basic characteristic of traditional costumes is that they preserve many archaic elements, especially in western Macedonia. „The features that make traditional costumes magnificent are the embroidery, appliques, woven ornaments, adornment with fringes, fine metal thread – *srma*, and braids, as well as jewellery made of metal, breads and fruits of the nature” (Dodovska & Roganovic 1999: 9). Mainly from Bitola region to Debar region we can find fringes as an element of festival women's costumes. Similarity to the Mordovian costume is also found in the case of *skutacha* – a kind of bridal apron in the Ohrid region.

“Characteristics of women's folk clothing in this region were multi-coloured, various sizes and shapes aprons, decorated with fringes, trimmings, silver thread and thin, flat wires. It was complemented by woven or braided woolen or linen belts, some with dense fringes, often decorated with silver thread” (Dodovska & Roganovic 1999: 4).

The mystery of the similarity between the folk costume of the Mordovian and the Macedonian women is shed light by archaeological

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<sup>2</sup> The exhibition: “In the Circle of Tradition. Folk Culture of Macedonia”, State Ethnographic Museum in Warsaw, 2002.

material because traces of aprons decorated with fringes we already found in archaeological material. Polish researcher Janina Przeworska interprets the decorations on women's figurines from the Early Stone Age in this way:

The so-called sex triangle on some figurines, both bone and clay (...) is more an image of an apron or an apron than such fantastically exaggerated <<gender characteristics>>. The edges of this apron are decorated with one or several rows of dots, which they probably represent fringes

(Przeworska 1951: 2).

Furthermore, Przeworska mentions that such aprons still exist, citing other archeologists: "... in Yugoslavia<sup>3</sup>, Romania<sup>4</sup>, the USSR. This is an example of the survival of one of the most primitive pieces of global clothing to this day" (Przeworska 1951: 3; Contenau 1937; Karutz 1926).

Therefore, similarity between Mordvinian, Macedonian, Romanian and Bulgarian costumes should not be considered as the geographical influences. If Przeworska's assumption is correct, the fringe ornaments may come from very ancient times:

The end of the Stone Age and the beginning of the Bronze Age was a period of development of weaving and tailoring tools, which allowed the creation of more complex costumes, elements of which have been preserved to this day. In the light of these data, the Neolithic wearable clothing was the prototype of clothing preserved to the modern times among the peasant class (...)

(Przeworska 1951: 52).

Further comparative research on the ethnography of these folk costumes and the archaeology of weaving and tailoring dating back to the Neolithic era may deepen our knowledge of the occurrence of these forms of clothing. Confirmation of their archaic provisions could show us elements of the so-called "long duration" in folk costume in Europe.

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### **НАЈСТАРИТЕ ЕЛЕМЕНТИ НА ЖЕНСКАТА НАРОДНА НОСИЈА ВО ЕВРОПА НИЗ ПРИМЕРИ ОД РУСКИТЕ И МАКЕДОНСКИТЕ НАРОДНИ НОСИИ**

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#### Резиме

Статијата служи за да укаже на сличностите меѓу женската народна свадбена носија во угрофинските групи во денешна Русија, во однос на женската народна носија во Македонија. Авторот ја поставува тезата дека овие сличности не се резултат на географски влијанија, туку дека станува збор за архаизми од минатите епохи на историјата.