

A Study of Traditional Russian Women's Costumes

May Myat Thu¹

Abstract

Traditional Russian women's costume is designed to highlight every Russian woman's dignity and the beauty. Everyday casual wears, clothes for special occasions, married women, and young ladies are different in the decorations, variety of colors and accessories in traditional Russian female dresses. The purpose of this research is to know more about the terms and details related to the traditional Russian female clothes: rubakha, sarafan, kokoshnik, shuba, etc. and to understand some of their traditions, culture and rituals through their folk costumes. The information required for this research was acquired mainly from the textbook of Masters' course - Traditions of Russian People; written by Alexandrova. N. M, St. Petersburg State University, published in 2010, dictionaries and Internet websites. The research methods used in this study are the descriptive and analytical methods. The results of this study would be helpful for graduate Myanmar students who are learning Russian literature, history and culture in Master's course not only to understand diverse culture in Russian women costumes, but also to be able to compare the differences between traditional Myanmar and Russian attires.

Keywords: sarafan, kokoshnik, rubakha, shuba, Traditional Russian Women's costume.

Introduction

Traditional clothes can tell us about the people who wear them: about their class, their rank, their job, and their country. Traditional Russian women costumes can be found during religious festivals, or on the traditional nesting dolls – martryoshka dolls, which are usually painted to depict smiling women in lace shawls.

Russia is a big country with diverse climate zones: from subtropical to arctic. In every region of vast Russia, different styles of clothing emerged. Traditional costumes are worn during important holidays and occasions: Easter, the Trinity day festivals and weddings. Some traditional dresses were sewn over hundred years ago, and the costumes have been kept as family heritage by a number of generations. Russian costumes reveal their conception of the world and their way of life.

The Russian women's costume is richly decorated with specific fabrics and colors. The variety of colors used in the traditional costumes display ethnic diversity and it is interesting to note that the Russian word for "beautiful" comes from "krasny", which means "red" in Russian. The traditional Russian costumes are specially created to be not only beautiful, but also very convenient to wear.

The women's costume include: a long-sleeved shirt (rubakha), a sarafan (long dress), a head-dress (kokoshnik) and short boots. These costumes reveal the beauty of morals. The costumes reflect the peasants' own taste in ornamentation, favorite colors, and particular way of wearing specific articles. There is a typical Old Russian conception of beauty. The ideal of a beautiful woman was considered to be a tall, strong and stately woman with red cheeks, blue eyes and blonde hair.

By wearing the traditional costume, a woman reveals the social status and her age. Young married women wore clothes mainly with bright colors, and their costumes were adorned with a great number of beads, buttons and necklaces. Old women wore black, white and brown colors. Married women wore the scarf in such a way that it completely covered the hair. People believed that a woman with uncovered hair can bring misfortune to her family. The young, unmarried women wore their scarves in such a way as to reveal the hair and braid.

¹ Daw, Assistant lecturer, Department of Russian, Mandalay University of Foreign Languages

But every social class wore specific clothes. Rich people tried to show their wealth and prosperity through their clothes.

Aim and Objectives

The aim of this research is to study Russian literature, history and culture and to know about the terms of clothes related with Russian traditional women's costumes in ancient time. The objective of this paper is to point out the different terms of Russian traditional women's clothes and their rituals.

Research Questions

The research questions for this paper are:

1. How significant traditional Russian women's costume?
2. What are the main features of the traditional Russian women's costume?
3. Why did ancient Russian women wear clothes to hide their figure?

Materials and Method

The required data for this study is obtained from the textbooks of Russian literature, culture and history for Myanmar students who are studying Master's course, dictionaries and Internet websites. The descriptive and analytical research methods are used in this research.

Literature Review

"The singularity of my style is the result of long studies on the Russian costume, its history and extremely rich traditions" (Valentine Yudashkin) (2008). There are numerous studies and researches focusing on traditional Russian costume, also known as Russian national costume. Russian clothing shows the art of the enormous diversity of ethnic groups, who are living in the various regions of Russia.

In the textbook "Traditions of Russian People", Alexandrova. N. M (2010), explains the manner of Russian women and indicates the Russian ideal of beauty. Russian women have to move like a Swan, and are supposed to hold her head up proudly with bright red cheeks and black eyebrows.

Findings

The origins of the formation of the Russian national costume

It is said that the Russian national costume was first designed in the 12-13th centuries, and until the 18th century it was worn by almost all level of Russian society — kings (*tsars*) and boyars, merchants, artists and peasants.

Later, after the cultural transformations of Peter I, the costume received a division according to social status into "urban" and "rural" peasant. The city began to follow Western European patterns, and the peasant kept its national identity until the beginning of the 20th century.

Russian costume has roots in Russian folk attire, which, as historians of fashion claim, reflects Russian national character. Bright colors, many embellishments, ornaments, and patterns show the cheerful nature of Russian people with the long-standing tradition of Russian folk art. Since the Russian people had a passion for bright colors that bring joy, the most common are red, blue, gold, white, pink, green, and gray. Besides them, each province had its own preferences in shades and colors. But black color was used only in elements of some regions, and then for a long time it was associated exclusively with mourning attire.

The differences between casual and special Russian Clothing

There was a very distinct line in traditional Russian dress between clothing for everyday use and clothing for special occasions.

Everyday clothing was simple, and there were fewer pieces to be worn (no more than seven). The materials were inexpensive, and the design made them comfortable to work and move in.

For special occasions, there could be 20 or more elements to be worn. More expensive clothes were used, including wool, brocade, and velvet. These outfits were only brought out for special celebrations and festivals, and the rest of the time they were stored in large chests. Some types of dress were for rituals and special events, such as attending church, funerals, or christenings.

Decorations

Women of any age loved a variety of decorations. Russian clothing was covered in beads and worn with luxurious necklaces, earrings, and pendants. In wealthy families, buttons were decorated with precious stones, filigrees, and engraving.

Headdresses were also often decorated. Unmarried girls wore bright ribbons, headbands, wraps, and other various intricately tied scarves. After marriage, women completely changed their clothing. Married women completely hid their hair under a headdress with a scarf on top. These richly decorated headdresses were part of special clothing, while everyday wear was bonnets with a scarf made of cotton or linen.

The main characteristics of Russian traditional female costumes

The traditional Russian costume was noted for its straight-cut freely flowing lines. The cut was based on the width of the homespun or purchased fabric and accounted for the ancient style of traditional Russian garments: the considerable length of the dress, and especially the long-sleeved women's shirts, worn in some districts. General features included the nature of the décor and the manner of wearing garments intended to produce a "multi-layer" costume ensemble, consisting of several garments worn one over the other. All these peculiarities of the peasant garments reflected the original nature of the Russian costume which had retained its main features from the times of Ancient Rus.

Items of traditional Russian women's costume:

- (1) Рубаха—rubakha
- (2) Сарафан —sarafan
- (3) Понева—Poneva
- (4) Пояс - Belt
- (5) Головные уборы - Hats
 - (a) Кокосник - Kokoshnik
 - (b) Кика—Kika
 - (c) Сорока - Soroka
 - (d) Деви́чий венец – Devichivenes (Crown)
 - (e) Платок – Platok (Russian scarf)
- (6) Шуба - Shuba (furcoat)

(7) Подволока - Podvoloka

(8) Лапти - Lapti(Traditional shoes)

(9) Валенки- Valenki(winter footwear)

1.Рубаха—rubakha(oversize shirt)

The traditional Russian costume рубаха—rubakha is a shirt originally made of fine linen. The name comes from the word руб—rub—a piece of fabric. It was an important part of the wardrobes of both men and women, worn daily and on festive occasions, as well. The sleeves of the shirt were richly decorated with embroidery and were quite long—one needed to tuck them in to do manual labor. This feature has given rise to the saying—работатьспустярукава—literally translated as “to work with the sleeves un-tucked” — not to work with the left hand.

The basic element of any traditional Russian wardrobe was the rubakha, which could be worn by both men and women. Basically, this is the old style variant of the contemporary shirt. Rubakhas were worn as street clothes among the poor and as home clothes among the rich. The overall look was what is now called ‘oversize’ as it didn’t have any specific silhouette. Depending on the financial status, different materials were used for rubakha manufacturing and tailoring, from cheap linen or cotton to expensive imported silk.

2. Сарафан —sarafan(long dress)

Another item considered by some as the symbol of the traditional Russian costume is сарафан —sarafan(a floor-length dress). It is comprised of many components and can be very heavy. The name of this bright dress, which is predominantly red in color, comes from the Iranian language. Interestingly, sarafans were long worn by both women and men, and only in the 17th century did they gain the status as a symbol of femininity.

Sarafan was the main part of the female wardrobe of northern regions of Russia(Archangelsk, Vologda, Moscow, and Smolensk provinces). It is a long dress which was often worn on top of a rubakha. The most common colors for sarafans were red, light or deep blue, wine and white. Sarafan dresses were often decorated with intricate embroidery.

It is mentioned as a men’s outerwear in the 14th century documents. Before Peter the First sarafan was customary among boyars; the tsar Mikhail Fyodorovich also had various kinds of sarafans.

3.Понева -Poneva

In the southern regions of Russia (Ryazan, Tula, Oryol, Kaluga provinces), instead of a sarafan, they wore a skirt. This is a skirt made from three woolen cloths; weaving fabric at home, alternating woolen and hemp thread. This created a pattern of cells on the fabric. Ponevy decorated with fringe, tassels, sparkles, and the younger the woman was, the brighter her skirt was decorated. It was worn only by married women, and the figure in her seemed not as slim as in a sarafan, as often she was wearing a shirt to the belt, which hid the waistline.

4. Пояс - Belt

Belt is a mandatory part of traditional Russian clothing for both men and women. Belt was considered to have protective powers, acted as an amulet. Girls wore on their belts pocket-“lakomki”, and women wore on their belts purses for money and little things. Women tied their belts under their chest or under the belly.

5.Головныеуборы - Hats

In Russia, hats for unmarried girls and married women are different. Girl's hats left some of the hair open, and were pretty simple. These were ribbons, scarfs, crowns, and folded handkerchiefs.

(a) Кокосник - Kokoshnik

Decorations for the head and hair were also a part of the common wardrobe. In the case of women, the way the hair was arranged could tell a lot about civil status: young women could show off their hair arranged in a single braid decorated with flowers and other elements. Married women were not allowed to show their hair in public, so they covered their head with different decorations. One of the most iconic and intricately decorated examples of this was the kokoshnik.

(b) Кика - Kika

Married women had to completely cover their hair under a headdress. Kika was a woman's elegant headdress for married women. According to the ancient Russian custom, a scarf was worn over the kika.

(c) Сорока - Soroka

Soroka is an old Russian headdress of married women. It was widely used in central and southern Russia.

(d) Девичий венец – Devichivene (Crown)

“Kokoshnik and the girls' crown symbolize the holiness of the Russian woman, always conquering everyday difficulties with her piety and diligence.” (Valentina Averyanova)

(e) Платок – Platok (Russian scarf)

The scarf is an additional accessory in the wardrobe. Scarves are known from ancient times: they were worn by warriors in ancient China and Rome. The Israelis believe that Jesus was covering the head with the cloth, later called the “plates,” when he was crucified on the cross; cravats used knights under their armor as protection against chafing.

6. Шуба - Shuba (furcoat)

This is probably the only element of Russian traditional costume that has survived over the centuries and is still popular in the country – severe climate conditions are the reason. The shuba, a Russian word for fur coat, was an inevitable part of both male and female wardrobes. Back in the day, the technique of assembling fur coats was different: the fur was left on the inside of the coat, while the outside was decorated with bright colorful textiles. Nowadays, the shuba design has evolved to match modern fashions, but it still serves its primary purpose: keeping Russians warm during long and cold winters.

7. Подволока - Podvoloka

Podvoloka was a rich Russian woman's mantle. It was made of silk, usually gold or silver, with lids. The edges of the mantle were decorated with gold embroidery, precious stones, and pearls.

8. Лапти – Lapti (Traditional shoes)

In Russian the braided footwear known as lapti is one of the most important symbols of the traditional national mode of living. The lapti made of bast or birch bark were the main type of peasant footwear in Russia till the mid-19th century. The lapti were worn with the Onucha, i.e. a puttee, a strip of cloth wrapped round the foot.

9. Валенки - Valenki (winter footwear)

Valenki are men's and women's winter footwear made of sheep wool. These are flat footwear with high tops, round toes, and flat soles without high heels.

Discussion and Recommendation

Traditional Russian women's costume had a long history, even though many elements had been forgotten over the years or labeled as "old style". The Russian women's dress differs mainly and in details from Northern and Southern regions. Traditionally, Russian women's clothes have two main colors – a natural color of the material- white and red. "Red" has the same meaning as "Beautiful" that was used in the olden days – "kresny". White color was considered as a symbol of holiness; therefore wedding dresses were made in white color. Black color is regarded as the color of bad luck for women. Traditional women's costume includes long dress, shoes, and hats.

The main element of traditional Russian women's dress is oversized shirt (rubakha), over that shirt, put on a sarafan (long dress). On the headwear and skirts sometimes wear an apron. Traditional Russian women's clothing almost completely hid the female figures and focused on the face with the help of a headdress. According to their headwear, it is possible to guess women's marital status. Married women wore headdress to hide completely their hairs with the help of Kika or Soroka.

The idea is to cover the woman's most beautiful asset so that men could focus their thoughts on something else. Young girls could go around with their hair uncovered but once married, their hair was only for their husband to see. This custom does not exist anymore but in Russian churches women are still required to cover their heads.

Based on the findings of this study, the results would be interesting and knowledgeable for Russian language learners. Moreover, students could understand the cultural and traditional values by learning the variety of traditional Russian female costume. Future research should include and focus on diverse ethnic styles, their rituals and specific eras.

Conclusion

This research paper includes the collection of Russian women costume of old-time Russian clothes dating back to the 16th-17th centuries, as they developed till the 18th – early 20th century. Studying the Russian traditional dresses is not an easy thing for language learners. Traditional costume usually relates to a geographic area or a period of time in history, also indicates social, marital and religious status. It is a long and slow process that takes a lot of time and efforts. However, it is very interesting to learn different cultures and rituals related with Russian traditional women clothes. Besides, students can learn vocabulary of Russian ancient female clothes and imagine the way of beautiful clothing in old time of Russia. To conclude, hopefully, this research would assist Myanmar students to know about Russian culture and rituals through their dresses and to get more interest in language study.



Sarafan (Long dress)



Kokoshnik (headdress)



Lapti (Traditional shoes)



Платок – Platok (Russian scarf)



Married women

Young unmarried women

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