

Ritual Examined in Ukrainian *Pysanky* Tradition

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Summary of Ritual:

On Saturday, March 2, I attended a free workshop with my grandmother. It took place at the Ukrainian National Hall where participants were taught how to paint raw eggs by a traditional Ukrainian method called *pysanky*. Cathy-Paroschy Harris of Ukrainian descent was the instructor. Cathy works as a dietitian but in her spare time, she practices *pysanky* which she has been doing for decades as well as being involved in Ukrainian dancing. Cathy is a main contributor to Ukrainian cultural events in Thunder Bay and I was very excited to be a part of the tradition. My grandmother is of Swedish descent but the two of us love to get involved in numerous cultures that differ from our own in our hometown. A description of the workshop is required to understand the ritual elements of the practice. Different rites are observable in the workshop and literature associated with *pysanky* as well as variations from the ritual script.

We were greeted at the door by an older woman who was perhaps a member of the Ukrainian National Hall. She wore a name tag but I could not make out what it read. The woman was wearing what looked to be a traditional Ukrainian design embroidered shirt. I assumed it was a Ukrainian style shirt as Cathy was wearing a similar one. She directed us to the area of the Hall where the workshop was taking place. About twenty people were already gathered, some sitting at the tables, some conversing with Cathy. Several large rectangular tables were arranged together, complete with all the materials we would use. At around five minutes after two o'clock, seemingly waiting for all the late-comers to settle in, Cathy greeted us all and introduced herself and another helper named Michelle who would be circulating to

assess our progress and offer tips. My grandmother and I were seated at a table closer to the front of where Cathy was talking with four other people: two older women around my grandmother's age, named Dorothy and Darlene and a younger man and woman couple probably in their mid-30s. We did not talk much to the couple as they were sitting farther down on the table from the four of us. Instead of first explaining the methodology of pysanky, Cathy begins with a brief history of the tradition. Pysanky is a pre-Christian tradition in Ukraine that started with Pagan communities. The designs etched on the eggs are symbolic of many different themes, though the overarching theme is rebirth and resurrection that accompanies the start of springtime and the Easter holiday. Since the appearance of Christianity in Ukraine, the designs and meanings behind them are an integration of elements from both faiths. She further explains that we will not be painting on the eggs but rather writing on them, as pysanky comes from the Ukrainian word *pysaty* which means to write. The word itself is the equivalent of Easter eggs and also refers to the art form. *Pysanka* is singular. When doing pysanky, one is writing messages or depicting a story. The finished products are usually given to family and friends around Easter to spread messages wishing good fortune and health of others.

After the introduction to the centuries-old tradition, Cathy and Michelle began to display the material we would use which included raw extra-large white eggs, containers full of different coloured dyes, candles, and finally an important tool called a *kistka*. A *kistka* is a tool especially used for pysanky art, traditionally made from bone, but ours were wooden. The tool features a pointed brass end fitted onto the wood which serves as a pen-type instrument to etch

designs with the beeswax, functioning as ink. However, we were given candle wax to use rather than the traditionally employed beeswax. The pysanky workshop varied from ritual script as we were not using the traditionally employed materials like a kistka made of bone, beeswax as the ink, and dye from vegetables. Cathy advised beginners to first use a pencil to create designs on our eggs before making them more permanent with candle wax. She stressed not to erase any lines as this prevents the dye from setting on the eggs and often leads to broken eggs. If the eggs have any holes they will begin to rot and smell. A pysanka with no holes or cracks in the shell can last forever, perhaps why this medium of art is so popular; it is an everlasting symbol of good wishes.

Hand sanitizer pumps could also be found at each table. Reducing the amount of oil on one's hands prevents fingers from smudging the dyes after they are applied to the eggs.

My grandmother and I began sketching in pencil. Dorothy and the younger couple went straight to using the kistka. We were told to put hot wax on the areas of our design we wished to stay white. The white of the egg symbolizes purity and innocence. After using the kistka to save the white of the eggs, Cathy demonstrated the process of dying. She started with the lightest of our dyes, yellow. In order for the colours to show up, we had to dip the eggs in lighter dyes to darker ones. The process is repeated until one feels satisfied with the colouring of the egg. Dorothy and Darlene incorporated crosses into their designs. I sketched hearts and geometric star-shaped patterns on my pysanka. My grandmother also used a geometric star

design with yellow trees around the perimeter. In total, the time required to sketch a design and trace over it with the kistka and finally immerse the egg in dyes was close to three hours.

However, to skilled pysanky artists like Dorothy who was unable to finish her pysanka, three hours is more like the minimum amount required. Typically it takes closer to six hours.

The final step consisted of letting the pysanky dry and melting off the wax with the flame of our candle, revealing the finished product. We were given the option to have Cathy and Michelle puncture one end of the pysanky to allow a small pump to be inserted and remove the inside but most chose to leave them in their raw state. In my view, some of us did not want to risk breaking our pysanky in any way after all the care that went into creating them.

Cathy and Michelle then came around to each table and asked if they could take a picture of our pysanky. They then congratulated everyone on completing the workshop and commended our work. In wishing us a happy Easter, Cathy hoped that the pysanky would bring good blessings into our homes.



Figure 1: Jacquie's pysanka



Figure 2: Carol's (Jacquie's grandmother) pysanka

Analysis

During the pysanky workshop, I became aware of the ritual elements at play. There was definite symbolic expression of sentiments. The materials and methodology used served a higher purpose that related to religious themes of resurrection and renewal come springtime and the Easter holiday. Each colour in the containers of aniline dye relay different messages. Yellow “connotes warmth and joy”, green reveals “freshness and carefreeness”, blues “convey melancholy”, and red “symbolizes the passion of the Christ” (Danko-McGhee 1999: 313). These are the original colours used in pysanky art derived from fruit and vegetable skins and juice. Symbols used also speak to a higher power and represent the sentiments of the pysanka creator who expresses messages of goodness to be spread to friends and family or whoever the pysanky are given to in lieu of Easter celebrations.

Furthermore, the beeswax drawn on the egg being melted off by the flame of a candle symbolizes bees reuniting with the sun, in this case the flame, when the spring season arrives. The art of pysanky is fueled by ritualistic and religious sentiment. In this regard, pysanky is a very orthodox tradition. Every design and colour possible can be interpreted to represent themes associated with spring, Easter and Pagan or Christian religion. Considering the amount of forethought and effort that is required of the art, it is difficult not to bestow any meaning or sentiment to the symbols and colours chosen for one’s pysanka.

Unaware of all the meanings behind the symbols and colours expressed on my pysanka (Figure 1), I discovered later that eight point star represents the ancient sun god in Pagan beliefs

(Gibbons 1991: 28). Interestingly, my grandmother unknowingly painted similar star shapes (Figure 2). An eight point star simply seemed to fill the space best. Though we were unaware of the imagery behind our designs, we incorporated bright colours that reminded us of spring and the Easter holiday and symbols like hearts and trees to represent love and new life (Figure 1 & 2). Our pysanky expressed our sentiments in a symbolic manner, despite being novices to the art form and its meanings. Ultimately, pysanky builds the Ukrainian community and culture in Thunder Bay.

In addition, it was apparent that several kinds of rites are associated with the ritual of pysanky. Firstly, participating in pysanky in my interpretation is a rite of passage, although there is no “change of status of an individual or group” (Kutsche 1998: 52) but rather a change of season which marks the end of winter and the beginning of spring with the resurrection of Jesus and new life on Earth. Pysanky are used to reinforce this stage and many motifs represent new beginnings. However, rites of passage are more clearly represented in the ritual script of pysanky in which “pysanky took on mystical meaning [...] at points of passage in a person’s life” (Wisuk-De Angelo 1998: 3) Different symbols and colours were used depending on the person the pysanka was intended for. Expert pysanky artist Patty Wisuk-De Angelo elaborates on the significance of pysanky in rites of passage:

Children were given pysanky with floral designs in a usually light color. Teenagers would receive pysanky with predominantly white coloring to signify the blank page of their future. Married couples were given pysanky with the popular 40 triangles design which in Ukrainian culture symbolized the forty

tasks of life. An older person of advanced age received black pysanky with belts, ladders and gates to remind them of their bridge to heaven” (Wiszuk-De Angelo 1998: 3).

Pysanky can also be viewed as a rite of intensification wherein pysanky artists and in general, those of Ukrainian descent can intensify their social bonds (Kutsche 1999: 53) such is the case with Darlene and Dorothy who attend many Ukrainian cultural events together in Thunder Bay. The pysanky when given to friends and family strengthens the relationships between the givers and receivers of the art as the pysanky, each with a special message, are meant to bring good blessings into the home of the recipient. Also indicative of a rite of intensification is the value reiteration (Kutsche 1999: 53) that occurs when participating in pysanky, especially if the individuals possess Ukrainian values. Using symbols like colours and designs representative of Ukrainian Pagan and Ukrainian Christian beliefs, pysanky artists are reaffirming their national and religious identities. Finally, rites of intensification can be recognized in the art of pysanky through the achievement of new adjustments (Kutsche 1999: 53) with which pysanky aids in the spiritual transition from winter to spring. Life is renewed from the cold and melancholic grip of winter during the appearance of spring associated with the resurrection of Christ, symbolized in pysanky motifs.

Moreover, pysanky incorporates instrumental rites as indicated in the ritual script as pysanky was done for the “symbolic suppression of evil” (Kutsche 1999: 54). According to myth, each year pre-Christian Ukraine had to meet a quota of pysanky to satisfy a monster who would otherwise unleash terror across the globe and engulf the world in evil (Frost 2007: 7-8).

Creating enough beautifully decorated pysanky would ward off evil beings and ultimately bring love and peace to the entire world during the spring season. In Pagan faith, pysanky were regarded as talismans “used to heal people, protect the home from lightning and fire, to help the shepherd in the field, [...] accompanied people to their graves, and were used in peasant rituals and religious ceremonies” (Danko-McGhee 1999: 308). Some artists or pysanka owners continue to value the eggs as talismans like pre-Christian pysanky culture did but are more commonly regarded as symbols of Jesus and Christian faith: “Women traditionally prayed before working on *pysanky* and approached egg dyeing as a holy task. The eggs, prepared throughout Lent, were brought to church on Easter to be blessed. They were then exchanged among family and friends with the jubilant cry, “Christ is risen,” a custom that continues today” (Frost 2007: 7). However, these instrumental rites were not observable during the workshop as our pysanky varied from the ritual script.

Upon reviewing the literature of pysanky art and culture, it became apparent that Cathy, Michelle and other experienced pysanky artists varied from the ritual script. The materials used at the workshop differed from the traditional materials used around the advent of the art form. Kistka translated means “bone” but our kistka tools felt to be made of wood. The funnel-shaped metal head of the kistka originally consisted of copper (Frost 2007: 7) but these kistkas had a brass tip. We were also given candle wax rather than beeswax to use and aniline dyes rather than naturally procured dyes from vegetable skins as were customarily used in early pysanky art. I suspect that cost played a factor in varying from the ritual script as the traditional

materials are probably more difficult to acquire and more costly. Nonetheless, I believe we were provided with good quality materials considering the workshop was free to attend.

Additionally, the pysanky workshop was less religiously charged and instead, more of a spiritual activity. Cathy did not emphasize the importance of one Ukrainian linked religion over another. We were not given the purpose of creating a pysanka for talismanic or religious reasons but simply for the reason of enjoying the art representative of Ukrainian culture and tradition. Perhaps Cathy wished for believers in any faith to feel welcome as everyone seemed to in my observations. All participants looked content to be part of the resurgence of this ancient art form and to be celebrating Ukrainian culture and tradition alive in Thunder Bay.

The relatively small time frame of three hours during which the workshop was operating also greatly differs from the ritual script. Dorothy stated that to complete a pysanka, it takes her nearly six hours, corresponding to the work of author Carrie Frederick Frost of *Easter in Technicolor: The Ukrainian Craft of 'Pysanky'*, who writes, "The process of decorating the egg can take up to five or six hours, and it requires patient attention throughout" (2007: 7). The time constraints prevented both skilled and novice participants from finishing their pysanky which I could see troubled some, especially a few younger girls (~12-16 years of age) who probably did not have the necessary materials at home to complete the eggs at a later time. However, people who had produced simpler designs appeared to have finished their pysanky within the three hours.

To long-time pysanky artists like Cathy and Dorothy, straying from the ritual script might have felt inauthentic. Being of Ukrainian descent and having practiced pysanky for decades, they have probably grown accustomed to participating in the ritual as it was traditionally carried out. Given that Dorothy used crosses in her design, I would suspect that she normally blesses the eggs and probably puts more religious sentiment into the ritual. However, most of the participants at the workshop that day appeared to be beginners. Having nothing to compare their experience of pysanky with and most likely knowing little of the ritual script, the participants in my interpretation believed this workshop to be an authentic representation of traditional Ukrainian pysanky art.

Appendix 1: Field Notes

- attended a workshop on Saturday, March 2 with my grandma at the Ukrainian Hall, instructed by Cathy Paroschy-Harris; a couple dozen other people were there as well—a mix of older and younger people, more women than men however
- Cathy has been painting pysanky for decades; very skilled at the art form
- greeted at the door by an older woman; name tag: Helka? Couldn't see for sure
- several large tables set up with painting stations complete with dyes, eggs, candle wax, hand sanitizer, a lit candle and the kistka (tool used to etch designs on the pysanka=name for a painted Easter egg Ukrainian style, pysanky is plural eggs)
- my grandma and I sat at a table with four other people: Dorothy who was first generation Ukrainian and her good friend Darlene who was second generation (father from Ukraine, mother from Finland), and a younger man and woman couple who were seated further down on the table
- several minutes after 2 o'clock, the time the event was supposed to start, Cathy introduced herself and welcomed us to the workshop; she also had an assistant there to help her look after the groups, named Michelle
- before explaining the methodology of the tradition, she gave us a brief history of the tradition
- the tradition started before Christian theology came about in Ukraine; it begins in the Pagan times but has since incorporated symbolic/religious elements of both faiths

-Pysanky originally made for the Sun god as he returns in spring (equivalent to Christ being resurrected is spring/at Easter)

-very ritualized act (patterns and methodology are symbolic of a higher power/purpose)

-the egg itself is a symbol of rebirth in the springtime

-pysanka comes from the verb pysaty which means to write (writing a design on the eggs not painting or drawing), writing a message on the pysanky with patterns (i.e wishing someone good health, prosperity, love)

-we used large grade white chicken eggs; can even use ostrich eggs, goose eggs, any kind of eggs

-the beginners were advised to make designs with pencil first then go over areas with a special tool called a kistka (translated to English means bone) which has a sharp point and used candle wax like ink to make it more permanent; I observed 4 women sitting near one another and Cathy who did not sketch the designs in pencil first, probably done pysanky before

-used the kistka and put into the pool of wax under the flame of the candle me, my grandmother, Dorothy, and Darlene were sharing; the tool has a funnel shape on one side to scoop up the hot wax and it flows in the pointed tubular end

-the wax resists the dye so we cover all areas of the egg that we wish to stay white; colouring goes from light to dark; Cathy demonstrated with an egg she had written a pattern on and then dipped it

into yellow; the same process is repeated, we were to cover parts of the egg we wished to stay yellow with wax

-the dyes traditionally used were oranges, yellows, green, and black (vegetable skins for example produced the colours)

-we had aniline dyes which come in powdered form and are then diluted with water and a little vinegar; they're permanent dyes so had to be careful not to get on clothes or on skin too much

-egg put in a candle flame to melt off wax (symbolic of bees getting pollen from flowers in the springtime being reunited with the sun in the springtime/at Easter time, in this case the flame, to make the beeswax)

-after they dried, the eggs are either left in its raw state (with the egg whites and yolk inside; the contents will eventually dry out) or they can be emptied by the typical Easter egg painting way that North Americans are probably familiar with which entails poking a hole in one end and blowing all the inside out; or use the special pump that removes the insides and cleans the interior so it does not smell

-eggs are then given to friends and family at Easter

-symbolic spreading of goodness between households to which the painted eggs are given

-types of patterns on eggs are more traditional (i.e no bunnies, or things now associated with easter; more of a religious act) i.e crosses, birds, fish on the pysanky

-the wavy lines design patterns on the eggs are a symbol of eternity

-white=purity

-black=eternal life

-very calming and spiritual activity; much time needed to create a well thought out/designed egg

-everyone appeared to be having a good time—very enthralled in their painting

-my grandmother and I were able to finish our pysanky; I saw some people were not able to by the time Cathy announced that things would be wrapping up; I caught the expressions of several younger girls who were perhaps in the range of 12-16 years old—they appeared very disappointed

Note: I did not intend to do the pysanky workshop for the ritual assignment. I realized after the event that it would be appropriate to use as an example of a ritual to analyze. For this reason, I do not have an appendix with interviews. My grandmother and I got to know Dorothy and Darlene a little and I gained useful information talking with them but I did not have the LU ethic forms for them to sign so I created aliases for them to avoid using their real names

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