

The Belarusian Traditional Headdress “Nametka”

M. Vinnikova

Dr. Ph D of Art Criticism,

The senior scientific employee Institute of Art Criticism,
Ethnography and Folklore of the Academy of Sciences of Byelorussia.

The idea of the woman's role as the continuer of mankind and family hearth-keeper has determined the features of her dress. In comparison with the male one it has more complicated forms and deep semantics of its components and ornaments. One of the most mysterious elements of the Belarusian traditional dress is the female headdress “nametka”.

Some researches consider “nametka” to be the most ancient Slavic headdress. The Slavic women wore it already in the XX-XI centuries. In such headdresses they are depicted on the miniatures and frescos of that time. At the end of the XIX century some ethnographers noted that “nametka” quickly went out of use and in some places it became quite rare. And only on the territory of Belarus, especially in Polesye, this headdress was used almost up to the middle of the XX century. Here it is still possible to hear a lot of interesting about this mysterious headdress and come closer to the explanation of its complicated nature.

“Nametka” is a headdress worn by a married woman. Depending on the territory its sizes, ornaments and ways of wrapping varied. Its local names varied as well: “plat”, “khusta”, “sjarpjanka”, “namet”, “pavivala”, etc. But the most widespread name was “nametka”.

The unwrapped “nametka” looks rather simple. It is a narrow (35-60 cm) and very long piece of a thin white or light grey linen fabric (280-450 cm) which ends are usually decorated with rather narrow ornamental borders. For the first time “nametka” was wrapped on the bride's head after the wedding. The ceremony of wrapping the bride was one of the important stages of the Belarusian wedding. It was accompanied by various magic actions. The bride was unplaited, her hair combed, set on fire by a candle flame (ritual clarification with fire) and oiled. Then, corresponding to local traditions, a special hair-do was made for the first time. More often hair was wound on “tkanka” a special linen band. Then a thread-woven hat named “chepets” was put on. “Chepets” covered either only the hair-do, or the whole head. Sometimes “podvichka” a band which served as a frame for “nametka” was put on.

After the bride's wrapping the newly-married couple was treated with honey and tied together with another “nametka”. All these actions were accompanied by singing of ceremonial songs. Earlier in some regions special, very long (8-10 m) “nametkas” named “pavivalo” were used. One end of such “nametka” was wrapped on the bride's head, the other one tied the young couple together. This moment of the ceremony symbolized the magic union of the couple originating from the woman as the continuer of mankind.

The ceremonial wrapping of “nametka” was still practiced in some Belarusian villages in the

1950s. This fact illustrates the depth of the ceremony's roots. Really, since ancient times there was a belief in properties of hair to take up and transfer invisible energy which can negatively affect both the health of the woman and her family. It was especially dangerous after the woman's "fall" the beginning of her marriage relations. Sacred cleanliness of the white linen "nametka" was associated with the divine light, chastity and spirituality. It should reflect attacks of the evil and promote guardianship of the divine force. Thus "nametka" had **the guarding function**. The ornament in the form of crosses and rhombuses, woven or embroidered with red threads on the ends of "nametka" and its forehead parts, strengthened its guarding properties. For this reason wearing of "nametka" for a married woman was obligatory and its taking off was considered to be a great sin.

Decorated and woven in a particular way "nametkas" distinguished local dress variants. So it also had **the informative** or **demonstrative function** differentiating "native" and "alien". Thus "nametka" was the original woman's passport which specified her marital status, belonging to a certain ethnos and territory.

One more important function of "nametka" is **the intermediary one**. It was demonstrated in three basic forms of intermediary:

Between people and the God (the request of the divine guardianship and spiritual support);

Between people and members of different families ("nametka" was used as a gift on such important family occasions as wedding, childbirth, christening. By presenting "nametkas" different families and separate members could become related;

Between the alive and the dead (in this funeral function "nametka" illustrates the road, the bridge between the two worlds, and it also makes the transition easier.

As far as its main role as the headdress is concerned, it is necessary to note that "nametka" was an important part of the traditional, especially festive dress of a married woman. Draped on the head, "nametka" visually completed the dress ensemble and made a particular frame for the face. Each woman in such a headdress looked more beautiful because it made her face more graceful and refined. And it also made the eyes more attractive.