

‘A Woman Was Beating a Man Taking Him by the Forelock’: How a Sacred Thing Became a Comical in Ukraine

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Abstract. The paper deals with one famous plot on Ukrainian *rushnyks*. This is about a scene of beating a man by his wife and the appropriate inscription to it “*A woman was beating a man taking him by the forelock*”. Notwithstanding the fact that nowadays it is mostly perceived as a humorous scene, the meaning of it may vary up to the sacred one. Is it connected with the fact that Ukrainian *rushnyks* had been regarded as things of particular significance?

The author traces the roots of this embroidered plot in oral culture (folk humorous and dancing songs, narratives, sayings), lubok literature and fictions, showing a change of perceptions according to the context. Also, the issue of renewing the old jokes is considered. When the comic scene became irrelevant or not enough humorous, embroideresses combined it with other scenes to make it more ridiculous. The author concludes that all folk meanings of one and the same plot may exist.

Keywords: *Rushnyk*; Plot and Epigraphic Embroidery; Sacred; Humorous; Folklore; Popular Culture.

[es] ‘*Una mujer golpeaba a un hombre tomándolo por el copete*’: cómo una cosa sagrada se convirtió en cómica en Ucrania

Resumen. El artículo trata de una trama famosa sobre los *rushnyks* ucranianos. Se trata de una escena en la que su esposa golpea a un hombre y la inscripción correspondiente “*Una mujer golpeaba a un hombre tomándolo por el copete*”. A pesar de que hoy en día se percibe mayoritariamente como una escena humorística, su significado puede variar hasta llegar al sagrado. ¿Está relacionado con el hecho de que se consideraba que los *rushnyks* ucranianos eran cosas de especial importancia? El autor rastrea las raíces de esta trama bordada en la cultura oral (canciones folklóricas, narrativas, dichos), la literatura lubok y las ficciones, mostrando un cambio de percepciones según el contexto. Además, se considera el tema de renovar los viejos chistes. Cuando la escena cómica se volvió irrelevante o poco graciosa, los bordadores la combinaron con otras escenas para hacerla más ridícula. El autor concluye que todos los significados populares de una misma trama pueden existir.

Palabras clave: *rushnyk*; trama y bordado epigráfico; sagrado; humorístico; folklore; cultura popular.

Summary. 1. Introduction. 2. Beating a Man by a Woman in Verbal and Visual Popular Cultures. 2.1. The Motive “*A Woman Was Beating a Man...*” in Oral Ukrainian Culture. 2.2. Motive of Beating a Man by a Woman in Lubok Literature. 2.3. Placing the Scene of Beating a Man by a Woman with an Appropriate Inscription on Textile. 3. Humorous or Not? 3.1. –Humorous?– No, It’s an Ethnographical Fact. One Should Go Back to History! (Or How This Formula Is Perceived by Modern Ukrainians?). 3.2. –Humorous?– No, It’s Sacred. One Should Understand It as a Folklore Formula! (Or How it Was Perceived on an Early Stage?). 3.3. Humorous? –No, It’s Not Enough Humorous. It Should Be Converted to Be More Humorous! (Or How It Was Perceived at Times of Massive Embroidering of Such Scenes?). 4. Conclusions. 5. Written sources and bibliographical references.

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1. Introduction

Embroidered towels are known as *rushnyks* in Ukraine. Being used in the most important ceremonies, including birth, wedding and death, they were usually considered as sacred things². By the early 20th century, their symbolism was largely forgotten in folk environment³. Many women continued to embroider the patterns, but without being able to explain their meaning. At the same time, modern people often present embroidered towels as amulets from evil forces. With regard to geometrical, floral or animal ornaments on *rushnyks*, it is rather easy to attribute them some form of sacred properties, in such a way creating new beliefs of our times. From today's perspective, a rhombus with dots inside of it, for instance, may symbolize fertility, as it looks like a field, and so on.

Embroidering towels was an obligatory occupation for all Ukrainian girls and women. There is no doubt that women embroidered ornaments with a certain sacred sense, though today we do not know the exact meaning of this or that sign. However, at the end of the 19th century a principally new type of embroideries emerged. They are much more difficult to identify as sacred. I mean plot and epigraphic embroidery, that is embroidery which contains naturalistic images of everyday life's scenes and plots and is appended by inscriptions⁴.

On the surface, some of them were not only far from sacredness, but also contained humorous or even obscene elements. As an example, there were popular embroidered *rushnyks* with the image of beating a man by his wife (see Fig. 1). In addition, they contained the inscription: "A woman was beating a man taking him by the forelock" [*Byla zhinka muzhyka za chuprynu vziavshy*"].



Figure 1. Scheme depicting gender inversion of the physical abuse: a man beaten (publicly) by a woman.

Source: Tetiana Brovarets.

² Svitlana Kytova, *Polotnianyi litopys Ukrainy. Semantyka ornamentu ukrainskoho rushnyka* [Linen Chronicle of Ukraine. Semantics of Ukrainian Rushnyk's Ornament] (Cherkasy: Brama, 2003), 38.

³ Vadym Shcherbakivskiy, *Ornamentatsiia Ukrainkoi Khaty* [Ornamentation of Ukrainian Home] (Rome: Bohosloviya, 1980 [1941]): 26.

⁴ Tetiana Volkovicher, *Verbalni Texty u Narodni Vyshyvtsi Kintsia XIX – Pershoi Polovyny XX St.: Geneza, Semantyka, Prahmatyka* [Verbal Texts in Folk Embroidery from the End of the 19th Century to the First Half of the 20th Century: Genesis, Semantics, Pragmatics] (Kyiv: Naukova dumka, 2019).

Was the mentioned plot perceived as a sacred or a humorous one? Is it even possible that such a scene could be perceived as a sacred one? If it is a humorous one, how could a sacred thing (which was *rushnyk* for Ukrainians) become a comical one? First of all, let us consider the roots of this plot in verbal and visual Ukrainian cultures.

2. Beating a Man by a Woman in Verbal and Visual Popular Cultures

2.1. Motive "A Woman Was Beating a Man..." in Oral Ukrainian Culture

The motive whereby a woman uses physical force against a man (as a rule, her husband) is well known in Ukrainian popular culture. In this regard, the most famous verbal formula is "A woman was beating a man taking him by the forelock". Although nowadays Ukrainians identify it mostly as the first line from a very popular humorous song, this formula has still been incorporated in many different folk genres, including folk prose.

In particular, *Ukrainian Sayings, Proverbs and So On* by Matviy Nomys (1864)⁵ includes this phrase as an amplified folk saying in the form of a dialogue: "– Well, well, well, a woman was beating her husband. And on top of that, she sued him. – The woman was beating her husband. Then, she sued him. The court's decision was that the man had to apologize to his wife". Sometimes, they are used as aphorisms⁶. Also, this verbal formula is presented in folk narratives⁷.

As concerns folk lyrics, it was very popular. Famous collections of folk songs usually included songs with this formula⁸. Even one of the most ancient folk songbooks had this text.

In the chapter *Little Russian Songs* of the book *A Youngster and a Young Girl at the Party with Songbooks, or New Collection of the Most Popular Songs: Simple, Urban, Country, Dance, Dashing, Lyrical, Holly, Wedding, Military and Little Russian Ones*, the first song is namely "A woman was beating a man taking him by the forelock". Let me cite the translated text fully:

⁵ Matviy Nomys, *Ukrainski Prykazky, Pryslivlia i Take Inshe* [Ukrainian Sayings, Proverbs and So On] (Kyiv: Lybid, 1993 [1864]), 401.

⁶ Piotr Semenov (ed.), *Zhivopisnaya Rossiya. Otechestvo Nashe v Ego Zemelnom, Istoricheskom, Plemennom, Ekonomicheskom i Bytovom Znachenii* [Picturesque Russia. Our Homeland in Its Land, Historic, Tribal, Economic and Household Importance], in 12 vol, vol. 5, part 1: Little Russia, Poltava, Chernihiv, Volyn, Podol, Kharkiv and Kyiv Governorates (Saint Petersburg: Edition of M. O. Volf's Fellowship, 1897), 12.

⁷ Nikolai Sumtsov, "Malorusskie Pyanitskie Pesni" ["Little Russian Alcohol Songs"], *Kievskaya Starina* 15, no. 6 (1886): 278.

⁸ Oleksiy Dey (comp.), *Folklorni Zapysy Marka Vovchka ta Opanasa Markovycha* [Folk Records by Marko Vovchok and Opanas Markovych] (Kyiv: Naukova Dumka, 1983), 393; Stepan Rudanskyi, *Narodni Pisni v Zapysakh Stepana Rudanskoho* [Folk Songs in the Records by Stepan Rudanskyi] (Kyiv: Muzychna Ukraina, 1972), 231.

A woman was beating her husband
 Taking him by the forelock,
 And he bowed to her,
 Taking his cap off.
 She was beating and beating him,
 Then she went to trial,
 The court came to the verdict –
 He had to make peace with her.
 - Thank you, my dear,
 That you beat up me.
 I'll buy you a bucket of honey
 And a tub of beer,
 Because I wish you, my dear,
 To love me more,
 To love me more,
 To beat me less,
 And no go to trial
 For the second time⁹.

In the *Newest General and Full Songbook, or Collection of All Popular and Well-Known New and Old Selected Songs by the Best of Their Kind Creators* in 6 parts (Part 2) one can find almost the same variant of this song. Also, its classification as “Little Russian song” coincides with one presented above. The only difference is in the third line. Instead of the previous one “and he bowed to her”, in the last-mentioned variant we read “and he didn't bow to her”¹⁰. To wit, in the first case the woman sued her husband despite his bowing, while in the second case she apparently was waiting for his bowing, but he did not do it, so she sued him.

Anyway, this song in both variants sounds as a humorous one. There are mentions about it not only in the modern, but also in some old sources: “Little Russian humor is featured in many songs, for example, *A woman was beating a man*”¹¹.

2.2. Motive of Beating a Man by a Woman in Lubok Literature

Representation of verbal folk texts on material objects is typical phenomenon for the period encompassing the end of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century. It is not just about embroidered towels (*rushnyks*). There were many other household items or personal belong-

ings with plot scenes and relevant inscriptions derived from folklore.

Concerning namely the plot at issue, one may find, for instance, a faience plate (see Fig. 2) with the genre scene and inscription “*A woman was beating a man taking him by the forelock*” (1900s) in different online stores or web auctions¹².



Figure 2. Faience plate with a scene of beating a man by a woman and an appropriate inscription “*A woman was beating a man taking him by the forelock*”. Source: https://auction.ru/offer/tarelka_19_v_bila_zhinka_muzhika_za_chuprinu_vzjavshi-i18991383540283.html.

The existence of this plot in such form of art as faience painting is also mentioned in an academic paper devoted to *rushnyks*¹³. The author of this work states that the source for paintings on faience, as well as embroidered towels, has been a lubok print (in two variants) entitled *Little Russian Song*.

I have to note that there were many more than two variants of this plot in lubok printing. It should also be noted that the plot of Ukrainian song about beating a man by a woman was very popular in lubok printing of the second half of the 19th century. In this connection, it should be added that although lubok printing is widely known as a woodcut tradition of mostly Russians, many of them, including those ones which were edited in Moscow, had Ukrainian roots¹⁴.

Due to its popularity, the plot under consideration is frequently mentioned in different research works and other sources concerning this topic. Particularly, in *Ukrainian Literature Encyclopedia in 5 volumes*, the encyclopedic entry under the heading *Lubok Literature* states that

⁹ Piotr Bogdanovich, *Molodchik s Molodkoyu na Gulyane s Pesennikami, ili Novoe Sobranie Samykh Upotrebitelneyshikh Pesen Prostykh, Gorodskikh, Derevenskikh, Ukharskikh, Nezhnykh, Plyasovykh, Svyatoshnykh, Svadebnykh, Voennykh i Malorossiyskikh* [A Youngster and a Young Girl at the Party with Songbooks, or New Collection of the Most Popular Songs: Simple, Urban, Country, Dance, Dashing, Lyrical, Holly, Wedding, Military and Little Russian Ones] (Saint Petersburg: Bogdanovich's Typography, 1790), 169.

¹⁰ I. Glazunov (ed.), *Noveyshiye Vseobshchiye i Polnyye Pesenniki, ili Sobranie Vsekh Upotrebitelnykh, Dosele Izvestnykh Novykh i Starykh Otbornykh Pesen Luchshikh v Sem Rode Sochiniteley* [The Newest General and Full Songbook, or Collection of All Popular and Well-Known New and Old Selected Songs by the Best of Their Kind Creators] in 6 parts, part 2 (Saint Petersburg: Glazunov's Typography, 1819), 149.

¹¹ Nikolay Kostomarov, *Ob Istoricheskom Znachenii Russkoy Narodnoy Poezii* [About Historical Value of Russian Folk Poetry] (Kharkiv: University Typography, 1843), 176-177.

¹² Auction.Ru, *Plate with the Genre Scene and Inscription “Byla Zhinka Muzhyka za Chuprynu Vzjavshy”* [“A Woman Was Beating a Man Taking Him by the Forelock”] (1900s), https://auction.ru/offer/tarelka_19_v_bila_zhinka_muzhika_za_chuprinu_vzjavshi-i18991383540283.html; Meshok, *Plate with the Genre Scene and Inscription “Byla Zhinka Muzhyka za Chuprynu Vzjavshy”* [“A Woman Was Beating a Man Taking Him by the Forelock”] (1900s), <https://meshok.net/item/32032777>.

¹³ Liliya Brylova, “Syuzhetnye Rushniki Kubani i Dona Kontsa XIX – Nachala XX Veka: Formalno-Soderzhatelnyy Analiz (na Materiale Muzeynykh Kollektsey)” [“Plot *Rushnyks* in Kuban and Don from the End of the 19th till the Early 20th Century: Formal and Meaningful Analysis (on the Materials of Museums' Collections)”], *Kuban – Ukraine: The Issues of Historical and Cultural Interactions* 6 (2012): 140.

¹⁴ Olena Donets, “Lubok”, in *Encyclopedia of Modern Ukraine* (2017).

lubok literature included, inter alia, those pictures with descriptions wherein “the everyday life of people was depicted with humor, in a simplified manner”. As an example, the famous lubok “*A woman was beating a man taking him by the forelock*” is given¹⁵.

In the work *Lubok Prints on Little Russian Topics* by Ir. Zh.¹⁶ we also can see a description of the plot about beating a man by a woman. According to the author’s mind, this topic is based on the idea that Ukrainian men are primitive and Ukrainian women are perky, so the last ones have the leading role in Ukrainian families. “From the ethnographic point of view, these pictures about everyday Little Russian’s life content are the most important. Unfortunately, all of them are characterized by farcical manner: the uglier and sillier, the funnier”¹⁷. The author compares two variants of the plot “*A Woman Was Beating a Man, Taking Him by the Forelock*” (one and the same edition by M. Solovev), saying that the last version (1887) is much better than the previous one (1885) on all the criteria: the concept of the image, as well as ethnographic truth¹⁸.

S. Klepikov gave short descriptions of seven variants of the mentioned motive¹⁹. These luboks are by lithography of Ye. Yakovlev (1871), lithography of V. Vasilev (1887), edition of I. Sytin (1894), edition of I. Sytin and lithography of I. Yermakov (1894), lithography of A. Morozov (1872), lithography of A. Morozov (1875) and chromolithography of M. Solovev (1887). Unfortunately, in this old edition, there were no photos of them. Fortunately, in this day and age, we have an opportunity to see some of them in web-sources.

In particular, the Russian State Library has recently digitized their archives, including luboks. All these photos are freely available. There are several items concerning this motive. Six samples are entitled here as *A Woman Was Beating a Man*: they belong to A. Morozov’s metallography (1857)²⁰, by P. A. Glushkov’s lithography (1870)²¹, by Morozov’s lithography (1878)²², by V. V. Vasilev’s chromolithography (1885)²³, by V. V. Vasilev’s chromolithography (1889)²⁴ and by unknown editor’s lithography (n.d.)²⁵. Also, this website presents five samples on the same topic, but with the heading *Little Russian*

Song: they are by P. Shyrapov metallography (1857)²⁶, by A. Abramov and C^o lithography (1862)²⁷, by P. A. Glushkov’s lithography (1870)²⁸, by M. T. Solovev’s Lithography (1881)²⁹ and by I. Sytin and C^o lithography (1887)³⁰. In general, one can find eleven items on the topic of beating a man by a woman in these digitized archives.

Here are some of them.

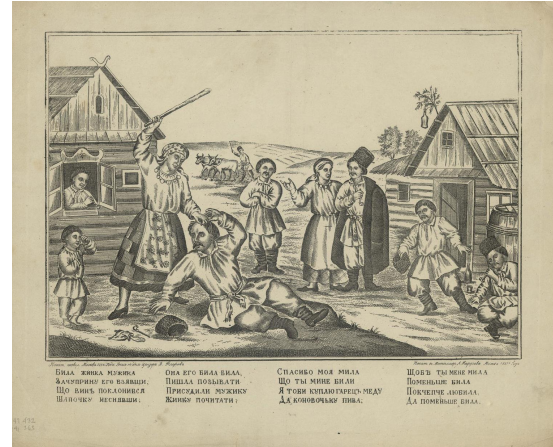


Figure 3. Lubok *A Woman Was Beating a Man* by A. Morozov’s metallography (1857). Source: <https://kp.rusneb.ru/item/material/bila-zhinka-muzhika-4>.

On the image above (see Fig. 3) we can see one of the oldest known variants. The first verse of the song sounds like:

*A woman was beating a man
Taking him by the forelock,
Because he has bowed to her,
Not taking his cap off.*



Figure 4. Lubok *Little Russian Song* by A. Abramov and Co lithography (1862). Source: <https://kp.rusneb.ru/item/material/malorossiyskaya-pesnya-5>.

¹⁵ Viktoriya Kolosova, “Lubochnaya Literatura” [“Lubok Literature”], in *Ukrainian Literature Encyclopedia in 5 Vol.*, vol. 3 (K–N) (Kyiv: Shevchenko Institute of Literature, 1995).

¹⁶ Zh. Ir., “Lubochnyia Kartynky na Malorusskiiia Temy” [“Lubok Prints on Little Russian Topics”], *Kievskaya Starina* 31, no. 12 (1890): 503-507.

¹⁷ Zh., “Lubochnyia Kartynky na Malorusskiiia Temy” [“Lubok Prints on Little Russian Topics”], 506.

¹⁸ Zh., “Lubochnyia Kartynky na Malorusskiiia Temy” [“Lubok Prints on Little Russian Topics”], 507.

¹⁹ Sokrat A. Klepikov (comp.), *Lubok: Russkaya Pesnya* [Lubok: Russian Song] (Moscow: State Literature Museum, 1939), 26-27.

²⁰ A. Morozov, *Lubok “Byla Zhinka Muzhyka”* [“A Woman Was Beating a Man”] (Moscow: A. Morozov’s Metallography, 1857).

²¹ P. A. Glushkov, *Lubok “Byla Zhinka Muzhyka”* [“A Woman Was Beating a Man”] (Moscow: P. A. Glushkov’s Lithography, 1870).

²² Morozov, *Lubok “Byla Zhinka Muzhyka”* [“A Woman Was Beating a Man”] (Moscow: Morozov’s Lithography, 1878).

²³ V. V. Vasilev, *Lubok “Byla Zhinka Muzhyka”* [“A Woman Was Beating a Man”] (Moscow: V. V. Vasilev’s Chromolithography, 1885).

²⁴ V. V. Vasilev, *Lubok “Byla Zhinka Muzhyka”* [“A Woman Was Beating a Man”] (Moscow: V. V. Vasilev’s Chromolithography, 1889).

²⁵ [Unknown editor], *Lubok “Byla Zhinka Muzhyka”* [“A Woman Was Beating a Man”] (n. d.).

²⁶ P. N. Shyrapov, *Lubok “Malorosiiska Pisnia”* [“Little Russian Song”] (Moscow: P. Shyrapov Metallography, 1857).

²⁷ A. Abramov, *Lubok “Malorosiiska Pisnia”* [“Little Russian Song”] (Moscow: A. Abramov and C^o Lithography, 1862).

²⁸ P. A. Glushkov, *Lubok “Malorosiiska Pisnia”* [“Little Russian Song”] (Moscow: P. A. Glushkov’s Lithography, 1870).

²⁹ Mihail Solovev, *Lubok “Malorosiiska Pisnia”* [“Little Russian Song”] (Moscow: M. T. Solovev’s Lithography, 1881).

³⁰ Ivan Sytin, *Lubok “Malorosiiska Pisnia”* [“Little Russian Song”] (Moscow: I. Sytin and C^o Lithography, 1887).

The next example (see Fig. 4) differs from the previous one both visually and verbally. In the first variant the man's only fault was that he bowed not correctly, namely not taking his cap off, while the second variant states that he has not bowed at all:

*A woman was beating a man
Taking him by the forelock,
Because he has not bowed to her,
Taking his cap off.*

The next two, more recent examples (see Fig. 5 and Fig. 6) have the same verbal part, as the previous one. However, the poses of the lying man, as well as spectators of public beating vary very much.



Figure 5. Lubok *Little Russian Song* by M. T. Solovev's lithography (1881). Source: <https://kp.rusneb.ru/item/material/malorossiyskaya-pesnya-3>.



Figure 6. Lubok *A Woman Was Beating a Man* by V. V. Vasilev's chromolithography (1889). Source: <https://kp.rusneb.ru/item/material/bila-zhinka-muzhika-6>.

As we can see, both verbal and visual parts of the luboks present a more or less wide range of variations. This makes it abundantly clear that beating a man by a woman was a highly sought-after plot.

2.3. Placing the Scene of Beating a Man by a Woman with an Appropriate Inscription on Textile

Reflections of lubok prints occurred on many household items, especially on embroidered towels. Before falling onto textile, this plot has moved to printed cross-stitch papers. Specifically, the lithography *Patterns for Embroi-*

der by M. Karagodina³¹ published in V. Til and C^o contains a cross-stitch scheme (see Fig. 7), highly reminiscent of the lubok which was produced by M. T. Solovev's lithography (1881). The version of M. Karagodina is a reduced variant of it, as some minor characters (spectators of public beating) have been eliminated and the verbal part has been shortened to the first two lines of the song.



Figure 7. Cross-stitch paper presenting image of beating a man by a woman and an appropriate inscription "A woman was beating a man taking him by the forelock" (by Karagodina). Source: <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/326933254180905465/>.

As I show, the overwhelming number of *rushnyks* on this topic have been embroidered namely after this cross-stitch paper. However, there also may be exceptions. On the image below (see Fig. 8) we can see on the embroidered towel the image which is much closer to the variant by A. Abramov and C^o lithography (1862).



Figure 8. Embroidered *rushnyk* presenting image of beating a man by a woman and an appropriate inscription "A woman was beating a man, she sued him, the court came to the verdict – he had to apologize to her. – Oh, forgive me, my dear; (from the one side) For my beating by you. I'll buy you a bucket of honey and a tub of beer. – Oh, my back hurts from beer and my head hurts from honey. Buy..." (from the other side). (Ukraine, Kyiv region, the first half of the 20th century). Source: <http://volkovicher.com/napisi/byla-zhinka-muzhyka->

³¹ M. Karagodina, *Uzory dlya Vyshivaniya* [Patterns for Embroidery] (Odesa: V. Til and C^o Litography, 1897).

pishla-pozyvaty-prysudyly-muzhyku-zhinku-poprohaty-prosty-mene-myla-shho-ty-mene-byly-kuplyu-tobi-tseber-medu-i-konovochku-pyva-a-ot-pyva-bulyt-spyna-a-ot-medu-golova-kupy-mij-m/.

So, it could be supposed that more than one printed scheme existed for this plot. It is also possible that the embroideress of this *rushnyk* copied the figures from the lubok without a cross-stitch paper. Anyway, such a battered man's position is not typical on textile, on the contrary to the next one (see Fig. 9).



Figure 9. Embroidered *rushnyk* presenting image of beating a man by a woman and the inscription “A woman was beating a man, taking him by the forelock” (repeated from the both sides). (Ukraine, Chernihiv region, the first half of the 20th century). Source: <http://volkovicher.com/napisi/bila-zhinka-muzhika-za-chuprynu-vzyavshi-4/>.

Although tradition of embroidering plots and inscriptions on *rushnyks* was more typical for Ukraine than for other countries³² (as well as the plot of beating a man by his wife had a strong national flavor), it also spread across neighbors' territories, including Russia³³, primarily because of migrations.

A soviet historian, M. Rabinovich recalled about mother who had to wander in many places during the first fifteen years of her marriage (after 1905). He wrote in his memoirs:

Wherever fate led her, mother sought to transform her temporary accommodation with the features which she adopted in her childhood. One of the first memorable decorations of the room were embroidered Ukrainian *rushnyks*. One stood out in particular. There was a whole genre scene. Dressed in bloomers and white shirt, a figure laid in front of the house. Also dressed in Ukrainian clothes, a woman with a formidably raised hand towered above this figure. Several spectators were in the background. The inscription stated: “A woman was beating a man taking him by the forelock”. At the other edge of this *rushnyk* was the same scene, but an

embroideress had missed one letter. We (children) enjoyed to read this inscription with a mistake... “This was my dowry”, mother said about our *rushnyks* half in jest³⁴.

Accent here is on Ukrainian textile products which were *rushnyks* and Ukrainian costumes of the embroidered figures. Namely, in this context, the described *rushnyk* symbolizes Ukraine and flashback to home country. But what was the general meaning of such a scene on the embroidered *rushnyks*? Was it humorous or not?

3. Humorous or Not?

3.1. Humorous?– No, It's an Ethnographical Fact. One Should Go Back to History! (Or How This Formula Is Perceived by Modern Ukrainians?)

Ukrainians celebrate the World Embroidery Day (Day of Ukrainian *Vyshyvanka*) on the third Thursday of May. In 2020, on the following day after this holiday (May 22th), a Ukrainian restorer and art critic Mykola Bendiuk posted a *rushnyk*'s photo (see Fig. 10) on his Facebook page and wrote the heading to it: *After the Embroidery Day. About Feminism in Ukrainian Traditional Sewing*³⁵.



Figure 10. Embroidered *rushnyk* with the image of beating a man by a woman and the inscription “A woman was beating a man taking him by the forelock” (from the one side) and the image of brooding female and male figures and the inscription “Why is he so sad? Perhaps he didn't love, didn't love” (from the other side).

Source: <http://volkovicher.com/pokazhchik-tekstiv/a-d/byla-zhinka-muzhyka-za-chuprynu-vzyavshy-chogo-zh-tse-vin-zazhuryvsya-pevno-togo-ne-kohav-ne-yuhav/>.

The local newspaper *Volyn News* has taken an interest in the post above. Almost immediately (two days later) after the publication by M. Bendiuk on his Facebook page, the newspaper reporter wrote a short article about this. It is entitled *Feminism in Embroidering: A Photo of the Embroidery Wherein a Woman Is Pulling Her Husband's Forelock Appeared in Social Media*. It is told there that the mentioned embroidery was about

³² Tetiana Volkovicher, *Verbalni Texty u Narodnii Vyshyvtsi Kintsia XIX – Pershoi Polovyny XX St.: Geneza, Semantyka, Prahmatyka* [Verbal Texts in Folk Embroidery from the End of the 19th Century to the First Half of the 20th Century: Genesis, Semantics, Pragmatics] (Kyiv: Naukova dumka, 2019).

³³ Tetiana Brovarets (Volkovicher), *Interaktyvnyi Elektronnyi Pokazhchik Folklornykh Formul (Epigrafichna Vyshyvka)* [The Interactive Online Index of Folklore Formulas (Epigraphic Embroidery)] (2016–2022), <http://volkovicher.com> (password: 2707).

³⁴ Mihail Rabinovich, Zapiski Sovetskogo Intellektuala [Notes of the Soviet intellectual] in *New Literature Review* (International Research Center of Russian and Eastern European Jewishness, 2005), <https://www.rulit.me/books/zapiski-sovetskogo-intellektuala-read-391301-10.html>.

³⁵ Mykola Bendiuk, *Navzdohin dnia Vyshyvanky. Pro Feminizm v Ukrainkomu Tradytsiinomu Shytvi* [After the Embroidery Day. About Feminism in Ukrainian Traditional Sewing], the post on Facebook (22 May 2020), <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=3094752833919636&set=a.684117121649898&type=3&theater>.

relations in Ukrainian family. Citing the post of M. Beniuk, the author of the newspaper article states that this song is usually classified as a “Ukrainian folk humorous song” and immediately doubts: “Or perhaps not quite a humorous one?”³⁶. These uncertainties indeed present one of our core issues in the current paper: what is the true essence of this verbal formula? Is it humorous or not?

As it is well-known, Ukraine has been regarded as a female-dominant society. However, in this regard, it should be clarified that the idea of Ukrainian matriarchy exists rather as a national myth. In particular, O. Kis described in detail the origins and causes of such a tradition in her article³⁷. But whatever it was, under certain conditions, faith means more than fact. Faith in matriarchy is firmly rooted in the minds of the Ukrainian people. References to their matriarchal traditions occur in academic papers, as well as folklore and fiction.

Concerning researches of the second half of the 19th century, many of them contain mentions about folk texts with the formula “*A woman was beating a man*” in the context of a female-dominant society.

Comparing Ukrainian and Russian national characters, P. Semenov states that the status of Little Russian women is better than the status of Great Russian women. Then, the author claims that “history and everyday life created the following aphorisms: ‘*A woman was beating her husband, in addition, she sued him*’; and the husband says before the court: ‘*Forgive me, my dear, that I have beaten you*’”³⁸.

Describing Ukrainian round dances, A. Tereshchenko states that “there is a round dance song that outlines the weakness of Little Russian married men”. Here, girls go around the circle while singing:

A woman was beating her husband,
She went to trial,
The court came to the verdict –
He had to apologize to her.
- Oh, forgive me, my dear,
For my beating by you.
I’ll buy you a bucket of honey
And a tub of beer.
- Oh, my back hurts from beer
And my head hurts from honey.
Buy me horilka [a Ukrainian alcoholic beverage],

³⁶ Volyn News, “Feminizm u Vyshytti: v Sotsmerezhi Zivavlosia Foto Vyshyvanky, na Yakii Zhinka Tiahaie Cholovika za Chuprynu” [“Feminism in Embroidering: A Photo of the Embroidery wherein a Woman is Pulling Her Husband’s Forelock Appeared in Social Media”], *Volyn News* (24 May 2020), <https://www.volyn.com.ua/news/153014-feminizm-u-vyshytti-v-sotsmerezhi-zivavlosia-foto-vyshyvanky-na-iyakii-zhinka-tiahaie-cholovika-za-chuprynu>.

³⁷ Oksana Kis, Koho Oberihaie Berehynia, abo Matriarkhat yak Cholovychyi Vynakhid [Who Is Protected by Berehynia, or Matriarchy as a Male Invention], *Ya 4*, no. 16 (2006), 11-16.

³⁸ Piotr Semenov (ed.), *Zhivopisnaya Rossiya. Otechestvo Nashe v Ego Zemelnom, Istoricheskom, Plemennom, Ekonomicheskom i Bytovom Znachenii* [Picturesque Russia. Our Homeland in Its Land, Historic, Tribal, Economic and Household Importance], in 12 vol., vol. 5, part 1: Little Russia, Poltava, Chernihiv, Volyn, Podol, Kharkiv and Kyiv Governates (Saint Petersburg: Edition of M. O. Volf’s Fellowship, 1897), 12.

*To make me fun*³⁹.

Underlying the high respect of a married Ukrainian woman, M. Sumtsov explains the reasons of it:

In Little Russia a husband mostly obeys his wife and her moral impact. Generally, a married woman in Little Russia enjoys high respect. Even unmarried girls did not dare to fraternize with married women, due to the respect to the last ones... A distinctive expression of the married woman’s right to be respected is in stories and songs how “*a woman was beating a man taking him by the forelock*”. The most curious thing here is that a wife beats her husband not out of arbitrariness, but after sentencing of all the society. On top of that, she beats him for the fault that he has not bowed to her, “*taking his cap off*”. This motive also moved to lubok prints. The influence of a married woman on her husband is due mainly to a Ukrainian woman’s superiority over a Ukrainian man in the strength of character⁴⁰.

Despite showing different folk genres, the ideas of all the mentioned sources are identical: Ukrainian women lead their husbands on, and this is a reliable ethnographical fact. It was also reflected in the works of contemporaneous poets. For example, S. Rudanskyi (whose records of the folk song *A woman Was Beating a Man* we have already mentioned) not only fixed folklore, but also used it in his own works. The first verse of his poetry *The Married Man* (first published in 1859) is below:

*A woman was beating a man,
She threw him out of the house.
The unhappy man went out in the fields
To find a place to stay.*

Then, he saw a mumbling bull and envied him and his liberty:

*The unhappy man sighed:
“Oh, my fellow, you are lucky,
Once upon a time, I also sang,
When I was unmarried”*⁴¹.

From the last two sources, we can see that the marriage strengthened the position of a woman and, vice versa, reduced opportunities of a man in Ukraine at that time.

Let me consider some more literary works where this formula as a part of the folk song is directly included. In the famous Ukrainian operetta *Matchmaking in Honcharivka* by H. Kvitka-Osnovianenko⁴² and the eponymous musical comedy after this operetta by I. Zemhalo⁴³ namely a

³⁹ Aleksandr Tereshchenko, *Byt Russkogo Naroda* [Life of Russian People] in 7 vol., vol. 4. Amusements (Games and Round Dances) (Saint Petersburg: Printing House of the Ministry of the Interior, 1848), 183.

⁴⁰ Nikolai Sumtsov, “Malorusskie Pyanitskie Pesni” [“Little Russian Alcohol Songs”], *Kievskaya Starina* 15, no. 6 (1886): 278-279.

⁴¹ Stepan Rudanskyi, *Zhenaty: Poeziya* [A Married Man: Poetry] (1859), <https://myslenedrevo.com.ua/uk/Lit/R/Rudansky/Prykazky/Zhonatyj.html>.

⁴² Hrytsko Kvitka-Osnovianenko, *Svatannia na Honcharivtsi: Opereta v 3-kh Diiakh* [Matchmaking in Honcharivka: Ukrainian three-action operetta] (Jersey City: Svoboda, 1919), 6.

⁴³ Ihor Zemhalo (screenwriter), *Svatannia na Honcharivtsi: Muzychna Komediia* [Matchmaking in Honcharivka: Musical Comedy] (1958), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kfGVUzE4YoI>.

man, *Prokip*, sings a song with such a motive. In doing so, he threatens to tell everybody about his battering by the wife. *Odarka*, a *Prokip's* wife, also sings a song. Replying to him, she denies the fact of beating. *Prokip*, nonetheless, insists on the fact that she has beaten him.

The story *Dead Men's Easter* by the same author (H. Kvitka-Osnovianenko)⁴⁴ has a scene of beating *Nechypor* by his wife *Priska*. It is perceived as an amplified version of the folk song *A Woman Was Beating a Man*⁴⁵. *Priska* beats her husband for his drunkenness. Then, she makes him bow and apologize to her, as she has tired while beating him. Finally, he bows, apologizes and promises not to drink any more. However, the situation repeats.

This verbal formula may also be plot-forming for the modern fiction. Using poetic form rondo, a modern writer Ye. Koliuchkina wrote a short story *A Woman Was Beating Her Husband* (2016) based on this folklore formula. The story begins with the mentioned song which is put in the mouth of *Ivan*. Preparing for fishing with his friends, he is humming the lines:

*A woman was beating a man, beating, beating,
And was pushing him!*

Suddenly, one of his friends phones him to inform that he can not to go fishing that day. It turns out his wife has beaten him for his drinking. Thinking about this, *Ivan* remembers that his sternum also hurts after his every drunkenness: does his wife *Nadyka* also beat him?! Then, the story ends identically as it begins:

*A woman was beating a man, beating, beating,
And was pushing him!*⁴⁶

Here is another example from contemporary literature. This is a story *Petro Was Courting Hapka, while Father Was Cutting Rushnyks* by M. Rudak about one married couple: a husband *Petro* and his wife *Hapka*. After the war, many women have remained widows. No doubt, they needed somebody who would do a man's job. *Petro* always went to the aid of these women. *Hapka* was understandably jealous. She was constantly making a scene in this regard. In reply, he used to sing with a smile: "*A woman was beating her husband, she sued him. The court came to the verdict – he had to apologize to her. – Oh, forgive me, my dear, for my beating by you. I'll buy you a bucket of honey and a tub of beer*". After that, *Hapka* was laughing and they were making peace⁴⁷.

Nevertheless, men are naturally stronger than women. And the situation where a man is beaten by his wife may be highly exaggerated. Using physical force, at any rate, has always been considered as a man's privilege. Even

describing perky Ukrainian women, researchers underlined that these features were "masculine" and they had sometimes comic forms, giving the example of folk art with many variations on topic of beating a man by a woman⁴⁸.

As it can be noticed, in fiction the performers of the famous song are namely the male characters. If in reality it was so, one may apply here the theory of Alan Dundes⁴⁹, developed in many other researches (e.g., V. Schanoes⁵⁰). This is about projective inversion where one person contributes his / her own wishes and intentions to another person. It is reasonable to assume that men who indeed commit violence against women because of their physical strength may create such texts to shift blame.

But embroideresses were women. So, this text in the embroidered context is a feminine text. Apparently, it has other connotations, than exactly the same text, but with a masculine performance. Gender inversion can hardly be applied in this case. And we still have a question: is this scene has more direct or figurative (humoristic) meaning?

So, let us go to the roots of folk perception.

3.2. – Humorous? – No, It's Sacred. One Should Understand It as a Folklore Formula! (Or How it Was Perceived on an Early Stage?)

Curiously, one case connected with lubok on the topic of beating a man by a woman was analyzed in the light of Education Studies more than one hundred years ago.

In 1911, A. Nechaev in his *Psychological Sketches for Tutors and Teachers*⁵¹ wrote about one interesting episode from the priest's work. Walking from door to door with sacred icons, the priest has noticed a lubok in one of the houses. This lubok illustrated Ukrainian song *A Woman Was Beating a Man Taking Him for the Forelock*. The priest has been shocked at the place designated for this picture. It hung in the red corner among sacred icons. Undoubtedly, the priest commented that to locate such pictures in the sacred corner is unseemly. But the owner of the house explained with concern that he bought this lubok from one dealer who had convinced him that the image is about Beheading of Saint John, the Baptist. Later, A. Nechaev gave the same example in his *Course of Educational Psychology for National Teachers*⁵². As he states, this case is the evidence how difficult

⁴⁸ Yevhen Malaniuk, Zhinocha Muzhnist Ukrainkoi Zhinky [Feminine Manhood of a Ukrainian Woman], in *Nova Hata* 12 (1931): 2-4.

⁴⁹ Alan Dundes, "Projective Inversion in the Ancient Egyptian 'Tale of Two Brothers'", *Journal of American Folklore* 115 (2002): 378-394, doi:10.1353/jaf.2002.0031; Simon J. Bronner (ed.), "Earth-Diver: Creation of the Mythopoeic Male", in *Meaning of Folklore: The Analytical Essays of Alan Dundes* (2007): 325-351, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt4cgrzn.22; Simon J. Bronner (ed.), "The Ritual Murder or Blood Libel Legend: A Study of Anti-Semitic Victimization through Projective Inversion", in *Meaning of Folklore: The Analytical Essays of Alan Dundes* (2007): 382-409, doi: 10.2307/j.ctt4cgrzn.24

⁵⁰ Veronica Schanoes, "Thorns into Gold: Contemporary Jewish American Responses to Antisemitism in Traditional Fairy Tales", *The Journal of American Folklore* 132 (2019): 291-309.

⁵¹ Aleksandr Nechaev, *Ocherk Psikhologii dlya Vospitateley i Uchiteley* [Psychological Sketches for Tutors and Teachers] (Saint Petersburg: Typography of P. P. Soykin, 1911), 248.

⁵² Aleksandr Nechaev, *Kurs Pedagogicheskoy Psikhologii dlya Narodnykh Uchiteley* [The Course of Educational Psychology for National

⁴⁴ Hrytsko Kvitka-Osnovianenko, *Mertvetskyi Velykden: Rozpovid* [Dead Men's Easter: A Story] (1833), <https://ru.osvita.ua/school/literature/k/69789/>.

⁴⁵ Oleksiy I. Honchar, *Ukrainska Literatura Peredshevchenkivskoho Periodu i Folklor* [Ukrainian Literature of Preshevchenko's Period and Folklore] (Kyiv: Naukova Dumka, 1982): 128.

⁴⁶ Yekaterina Koliuchkina, *Byla Zhinka Muzhyka: Rozpovid* [A Woman Was Beating Her Husband: a Short Story], in *Proza. Ru.* (2016), <https://proza.ru/2016/08/19/1615>.

⁴⁷ Mariya Rudak, "Svatavsia Petro do Hapky. A Batko Rushnyky Rubav" ["Petro Was Courting Hapka, while Father Was Cutting Rushnyks"], in *Holos Ukrainy* (February 26, 2008).

may be a right understanding of this or that thing. The author deduces that every subject may be understood more or less deeply, depending on the development of a person's mental level⁵³.

Nikolay Rumyantsev is even more radical in his *Lectures on Educational Psychology for National Teachers*. Citing the example of the previous author, he claims that it shows that poorly educated are unobservant to a startling degree. N. Rumyantsev considers the owner of the lubok as a victim of illusion, as he "not having examined carefully the picture, noticed only few details in it and saw not what was really there, but what he wished to see and what he was compelled"⁵⁴.

There is another and more modern point of view on this case. Anna Yakovleva in her work *Kitsch and Artistic Culture* states:

A simpleness and a difficulty are the relevant notions. Thus, to be more precise, public consciousness is marked by increasing complexity of simple things and simplification of difficult things to a certain level and set of views (conscious and unconscious). Simple things are boring for public consciousness... That is why it dresses them in its romantic clothes, make cosmetic procedures, putting makeup of its own manufacture⁵⁵.

After these words, A. Yakovleva mentions about this same example. Like the previous authors, she stresses that the scene of beating a man by a woman has been understood by the peasant as not a scene of beating a man by a woman, but as a scene of Beheading of Saint John, the Baptist. According to A. Yakovleva's opinion, this is an example of "increasing complexity". In other words, people (peasants) tend to complicate things. In this case, the everyday scene (a wife beats her husband) appears in the eyes of a peasant as too boring or mundane act. Therefore, he tries to add a non-existent value. Here, this scene has been given a religious meaning, as it was interpreted as Beheading of Saint John, the Baptist.

It should be added that the truth probably lies somewhere in the middle. As a matter of fact, one should know how to distinguish between semantics of the original work (it may be a picture, lubok, cross-stitch scheme, etc.) and semantics of the folklorized work (it may be the same lubok, but already purchased by a peasant and moved in his house, or the embroidered towel made after the cross-stitch scheme). The appearances in the both cases may be identical, but the meanings may differ very much depending on the context.

Spreading and taking roots in folk environment, the text is becoming folklorized. Once it becomes folklor-

ized, it belongs to the other form of perception. And now we as researchers must have a certain mental level to understand this or that folklorized work properly. In short, we should admit the right of the folklorized work to have its own semantics.

Suppose that an original work consists of a certain number of parts. Each of them has its meaning. When an uneducated man perceives this work, he / she catches one of these parts' meaning especially distinctly. This one part becomes a fundament for understanding this or that work. Then, some other senses may superimpose on this basis. Formally, the other parts which proved to be not essential for this uneducated person continue to exist. In such a way, new folk formulas have been created.

For example, we have a lubok print with the image of beating a man by a woman. This image is clear, so there is no doubt what is depicted here. But a person catches only one feature from this picture, namely the fact that one figure is in the pose of laying and the other figure with a raised hand is towering above the first figure. We can see the same features on the icon depicting the Beheading of Saint John the Baptist (see Fig. 11).



Figure 11. One of the images depicting the Beheading of Saint John the Baptist. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:306_dionisiat.jpg.

Thus, the image of beating a man by a woman equals the image of the Beheading of Saint John the Baptist in the eyes of this uneducated person. Now, if we want to understand the idea of the folklorized work (still the same picture formally depicting a beating a man by a woman, but with the meaning of the Beheading of Saint John the Baptist), we, on the contrary, must put aside those parts of the work which seem to be obvious for us. It is essential for finding namely that part which was taken as the basis for a folk formula.

If we interpret the folklorized work from our usual point of view (that is to take into account all the parts of the image), we will be wrong, like that uneducated person who interpreted the picture at one time. But in this person's case he / she has not taken into account all the parts (if at all it was his aim to understand the author's work), and we, vice versa, will attribute those parts which are not implied.

Teachers] (Petrograd; Moscow: The Fellowship V. V. Dumnov, the Successors of Brothers Salaevy, 1916), 166.

⁵³ Nechaev, *Ocherk Psikhologii dlya Vospitateley i Uchiteley* [Psychological Sketches for Tutors and Teachers], 248; Nechaev, *Kurs Pedagogicheskoy Psikhologii dlya Narodnykh Uchiteley* [The Course of Educational Psychology for National Teachers], 166.

⁵⁴ Nikolay Rumyantsev, "Razvitie u Detey Nablyudatelnosti" ["Children Developing the Observation Skills"] (Chapter 9 in Rumyantsev, Nikolay. *Lectures on Educational Psychology for National Teachers*. Publishing House of the Magazine "National Teacher", 1913, 167-192), *Researcher*, no. 3-4 (2012): 27.

⁵⁵ Anna Yakovleva, *Kich i Khudozhestvennaya Kultura* [Kitsch and Artistic Culture] (Moscow: Znaniye, 1990) <http://ec-dejavu.ru/k/Kitsch-3.html>.

The most difficult thing in the analysis of a folk (or folklorized) text is to realize that it is, as oppose to a literary text, heterogenous. Folklore has not only variants of forms, but also variants of meanings. For understanding a certain folk plot, one should gather as more variants as possible.

As we can see, this scene can be also perceived as a sacred one. However, this is apparently a particular case. And we have to investigate public perception of such scenes at time of mass embroidering them (the first half of the 20th centuries). If it is not sacred, is it humorous?

3.3. Humorous? – No, It’s Not Enough Humorous. It Should Be More Humorous! (Or How It Was Perceived at Times When It Was Massive Embroidering of Such Scenes?)

If we suppose that a song *A Woman Was beating a Man Taking Him by The Forelock* was considered as humorous at the 18th or 19th centuries, it still does not mean that this scene was comical for the first half of the 20th century (the time of massive embroidering such scenes). All the jokes become stale after a certain period.

However, old jokes may recover from their anachronism by adding some new elements to them. Particularly, some of the embroideries have additional explanations why a man was beaten by his wife (see Fig. 12). If at that time the topic of drunkenness was relevant, the words “because he has bowed to her, not taking his cap off” or “because he has not bowed to her, taking his cap off” (in different variants of the song) are replaced by “because he had a drink, not asking her” (on the embroidered towels). By the way, we have observed the same reason of beating in some mentioned fiction.



Figure 12. Embroidered *rushnyk* with the image of beating a man by a woman and the inscription “A woman was beating a man taking him by the forelock, because he had a drink, not asking her” (from the both sides).

Source: <http://volkovicher.com/pokazhchik-tekstiv/za-abetkoyu/bila-zhinka-muzhika-za-chuprinu-vzyavshi-shho-vin-vipiv-charochku-eyi-ne-pitavshi/>.

Alternatively, if a scene of beating a man by a woman itself is no longer a laughing matter, some additional scenes may be added. Thus, two different scenes which are not comical when they are used separately may be humorous namely due to their combination. On the image below (see Fig. 13) we can see a *rushnyk* combining two

episodes from the everyday life of Ukrainians: the ritual of matchmaking and beating a man by his wife. According to an old Ukrainian tradition, a young girl has to be modest and even shy. When a groom with matchmakers come to her home, she must sit on the sidelines. When her parents arrange with them about the marriage, the girl pokes the oven (this action was considered as a sign of her shyness). So, the comical element in this case is not just a fact that a woman is beating her husband, but the contrast of a woman’s behavior before and after her marriage.



Figure 13. Embroidered *rushnyk* with the image of matchmaking ceremony and the inscription “Matchmaking” (from the one side) and the image of beating a man by a woman and the inscription “A woman was beating a man taking him by the forelock” (from the other side). Source: <http://volkovicher.com/napisi/bila-zhinka-muzhika-za-chuprnu-vzyavshi/>.

Another embroidered *rushnyk* (see Fig. 14) is also comical due to the combination of two scenes. The first scene depicting a man’s return is usually typical with another scene where a man goes to the war. Thus, the initial meaning of this first scene with the inscription “Here my Hryts is going!” is return from the war. At the same time, exactly the same scene but combined with the image of beating a man by a woman acquires new connotations. When the meaning is homecoming from the war, the exclamation “Here my Hryts is going!” is perceived as a cheerful news. But in our case, the same exclamation acquires a sinister connotation. Perhaps, Hryts was on a bender somewhere, and now the punishment awaits him.

We can also remember the already mentioned *rushnyk* with another interesting combination (see Fig. 10). Here the scene of beating is the logical continuation of the scene depicting brooding female and male figures with the inscription “Why is he so sad? Perhaps he didn’t love, didn’t love”. The last picture may be used as a scene of separation. But in this case the sadness of a man is linked to his punishment by the wife.



Figure 14. Embroidered *rushnyk* with the image of beating a man by a woman and the inscription “*A woman was beating a man taking him by the forelock*” (from the one side) and the image of a man’s homecoming where a woman is opening the door and the inscription “*Here my Hryts is going!*” (From the other side). Source: <http://volkovicher.com/napisi/atsezh-mij-gritsyu-ide-by-la-zhinka-muzhika-za-chuprynu-vzyavshi/>.

It turns out that image of beating a man by a woman may lose its relevance as a humorous scene. For some time, it has been not enough to embroider only this scene to make a comic effect. As a result, embroideresses add new combinations to make the mentioned plot ridiculous again.

4. Conclusions

The folklore formula “*A woman was beating a man taking him by the forelock*” often appears in Ukrainian popular culture. It may be used in oral verbal art, such as humorous and round dance songs, narratives, sayings, etc. It can be also presented in luboks and embroidered

containing the identical scene which was interpreted as a scene of the Beheading of Saint John the Baptist) or, on the contrary, make them even more comical.

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rushnyks with the appropriate images. Having existed for several centuries, it naturally has been changing its semantics. Not always it has been perceived as a humorous statement.

During different times the plot of beating a man by a woman has been constantly changing its meaning from the unhumorous to the humorous one, and vice versa. It can be comic, sacral or just a constatation of fact. Concerning this scene on the embroidered *rushnyks*, it also could have all these various meanings, including humorous and non-humorous. Also, there was one interesting phenomenon connected with becoming irrelevant. When the solitary scene of beating a man by a woman was not enough for comic effect, embroideresses tried to make it humorous with the aid of combinations (modifying the inscriptions, setting the image beside some other image). Thus, adding new elements brought fresh insights to old jokes.

As far as the question “*How could a sacred thing (such as Ukrainian rushnyk) become a comical one?*”, I can answer that, from the one side, at the time of massive embroidering of plot and epigraphic towels (from the end of the 19th century to the first half of the 20th century), the meaning of ancient ornaments has been already forgotten in folk culture. From the other side, embroidered towels began to be often used outside of rituals (as an option, the rituals themselves, where *rushnyks* were used, lost their sacredness) As a result, new types of *rushnyks* were not so sacred, as they were several centuries before. So, the existence of humorous scenes on Ukrainian *rushnyks* is entirely justified during that period. Depending on the context, embroideresses could give them a sacred meaning (by analogy with a lubok

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