

## INTRODUCTION: BELARUSIAN FOLKLORE STUDIES

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In the centre of Europe, at the crossroads of its eastern and western cultural movements, as a result of a long-lasting and complex development, a unique culture of the Belarusian people was formed, which constitutes an integral part of modern civilization. As researchers claim, the national character and mentality of native Belarusian people (primarily, residents of rural areas) involve as one of the dominant features guidance by the cultural tradition, by which they mean the tactics (programme) of action which, on the one hand, contributes to the realization of this uniqueness and dissimilarity from other peoples, and, on the other hand, ensures stability, sustainability, ability to keep spiritual balance, and welfare in life.

*Deep addiction of native Belarusian people to the customs and culture of their ancestors has been critical in determining one of the distinguishing features of this culture – the preservation of its root layer and its current topicality. Against the background of the general European cultural landscape, Belarus can rightfully be called a cultural reserve, since it is here that the oldest forms of folk art continue existing in rural life in their authentic form as a living proof of the life of the creative genius of one of the old Slavonic nations of Europe. (Encyclopaedia 2005: 4)*

Belarusian folklore is primarily studied by the research fellows of the Institute of Art Study, Ethnography and Folklore of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus. From the very beginning when the Institute was established (1957), the study of the problems of Belarusian oral poetic art and its linkage to the folklore of other peoples, literature, and the study of ethnic musical peculiarities was among the priorities. The collection of materials of different folklore genres, recording rituals, folk traditions, and melodies was considered to be of

the utmost importance. The records of the Institute's research fellows as well as materials of some other folklorists who worked as correspondents directly from villages are kept in the Folklore Archive of the Institute.

Belarusian folklore researchers theoretically interpret the rich spiritual legacy of the Belarusian people and study modern folklore processes. Special attention is paid to the study of the genesis, content in terms of ideas and topics, poetics of individual genres and types; also comparative analysis of folklore works about Slavonic peoples is performed. In each of those directions many researchers, such as Piotr Hliebka, Alena Alforava, Halina Bartashevich, Tatsiana Valodzina, Tamara Varfalamejeva, Uladzimir Vasilievich, Mihail Hrynblat, Yanina Hrynevich, Anton Hurski, Kanstantsin Kabashnikau, Tatsiana Kukharonak, Arsen Lis, Zinaida Mazhejka, Leanila Malash, Aliaksandr Marozau, Halina Piatrouskaja, Tatsiana Rabiets, Uladzimir Sivitski, Lija Salaviej, Vasil Skidan, Uladzimir Sysou, Halina Taulaj, Aliaksandr Tsitaviets, Ivan Tsishchanka, Tatsiana Tsiapkova, Anatol Fiadosik, Kanstantsin Tsvirka, Volha Sharaja, Viktor Jalatau, and others have worked and still do. Considerable attention is paid to the study of the history of Belarusian folk art and the history of folklore research. A joint monograph, *Bielaruskaja narodnaja vusna-paetychnaja tvorchasc: Historyka-tearetychnaje dasliedavannie* (Belarusian Oral Folk Art: Historical and Theoretical Study) (1967), joint publications *Bielaruskaja falklarystyka: Zbirannie i dasliedavannie narodnaj tvorchasci 60-h. XIX-pach. XX st.* (Belarusian Folklore Science: Collection and Study of Folk Art of the 60s of the Nineteenth–Early Twentieth Centuries) (1989), *Bielaruskaja falklarystyka: Epocha fieadalizmu* (Belarusian Folkloristics: The Epoch of Feudalism) (1989), and Anatol Fiadosik's *Bielaruskaja savieckaja falklarystyka* (Belarusian Soviet Folkloristics) (1987) are dedicated to these problems. Monographs on different types and genres of folklore, their poetics and artistic peculiarities have also been published. A group of authors has prepared and published six books of the series *Bielaruski falklor: Zhanry, vidy, paetyka* (Belarusian Folklore: Genres, Types, Poetics) (2001–2004).<sup>1</sup> The historiography of the Belarusian folklore research, its genesis, peculiarities of reality reflection, functionality, the system of images, and poetics of basic folklore genres are studied by a group of authors in volume seven of the series *Bielarusy* (Belarusians), under the heading *Vusnaja paetychnaja tvorchasc* (Oral Poetic Art) (2004).

Comparative studies of the folklore of Slavonic peoples are in the focus of attention in the books by Halina Bartashevich, Lija Salaviej, and Kanstantsin Kabashnikau, in a joint paper “Uzrouni ahulnasci falkloru ushodnich slavian” (The Levels of Unity of Eastern Slavs' Folklore) (1993), and in collections of articles by V. Jalataŭ, *Piesni ushodnieslavianskaj ahulnasci* (The Songs of Eastern Slavonic Community) (1977), and in the book titled *Bielaruska-polskija kul-*

*turnyja swiazi* (Cultural Contacts between the Belarusian and Polish Cultures), edited by S. Martseleŭ (1991). The evolution of the national musical folklore science is researched in the book *Bielaruskaja etnamuzykalohija: Narysy historyi (XIX–XX st.)* (The Belarusian Ethnomusicology: Historical Essays (19th–20th cc.)) (1997). The ethnomusicologists of the Institute have published regional collections of Belarusian folk songs, such as *Piesni Bielaruskaha Paazierja* (The Songs of Belarusian Poozerija) (1981), *Piesni Bielaruskaha Paliessia* (The Songs of Belarusian Polissya) (ed. 1 1983–1984), *Piesni Bielaruskaha Paniamonnia* (The Songs of Belarusian Neman River Basin) (1998), and *Piesni bielaruskaha Padniaprouja* (The Songs of Belarusian Dnieper River Basin) (1999).

Over the last decade theoretical folklore studies have been enriched through the use of modern methods of study, and a comprehensive approach to considering folklore facts. The scholarly paradigm of folkloristics (as a discipline studying traditional forms of lore) has undergone serious changes. In modern studies folklore is interpreted not only as an aesthetic phenomenon but also as a complex of important worldview and social and ideological functions. After a comprehensive consideration of the basic genres (separate monographs are dedicated to the description of most of them) folklorists have started researching the codes of the folklore model of the world of the Belarusian people. Over the last years, theses have been submitted, and a whole range of publications on separate codes have appeared – on dendrology (Ina Shved), ethnoastronomy (Iryna Malashuk, Tsimafei Avilin), subject matter and somatic code (Tatsiana Valodzina), vegetative (Uladzimir Sivitski), ornithology (Maryna Kamarova), and zoomorphic (Iryna Vyrva). Value and regulatory aspects of worshipping ancestors are in the focus of attention of Volha Sharaya's monograph.

Prior to the year 2000, an understanding of folklore as oral folklore, word art, etc. prevailed in the Belarusian scholarly tradition. In keeping with this understanding, the Belarusian folklorists started the new millennium with serious achievements – nearly fifty volumes of the series *Belaruskaja narodnaia tvorchasts'* (Belarusian Folklore), which contained almost all the basic genres of oral folklore, six generalizing books of the series *Bielaruski falklor: Zhanry, vidy, paetyka* (Belarusian Folklore: Genres, Types, Poetics) (2001–2004), and a two-volume encyclopaedia *Bielaruski falklor* (Belarusian Folklore) (2005–2006). Research into folklore by the traditions of philological folklore studies based on valid records of classical folklore of the nineteenth – the second half of the twentieth century in a way summed up the preliminary accumulation and interpretation of the material.

At the beginning of 2000, the trend to consider textual complexes not in their genre relations, but as a complicated system of codes, the logical interpretation of which leads to tracing and description of contents important for

the culture, regardless of the form or substance in which they are expressed, became obvious. The following codes started to be described to a certain extent: the spatial-landscape code, astronomy, ornithology, subject matter and somatic, and animalistic; in a particularly detailed way, the dendrology and coloristic codes were described in the papers by Ina Shved (*Kosmas i chalaviek u dendralahichnym kodzie bielaruskaha falkloru* (The Space and Humans in the Dendrology Code of the Belarusian Folklore) (2006); *Mifalohija kolieru u bielaruskaj tradycyjnej duchounaj kultury* (The Mythology of Colour in the Belarusian Traditional Spiritual Culture) (2011)).

Attention is already paid not to a specific genre or even text of oral poetic art, but to a unit of the symbolic language of culture. Therefore, the publication of the encyclopaedic dictionary *Mifalohija bielarusau*<sup>2</sup> (The Mythology of the Belarusian People) (2011) was absolutely logical. The mythology and poetic picture of the ethnos's world were represented in almost one thousand articles, which were grouped into approximately fifteen basic codes, establishing its inner structure by topics.

Slow but confident dissemination of the ideas of anthropological folkloristics at the beginning of the third millennium is already bearing its fruit. Monographs are published in which semiotic and culture studies as well as other methods of folklore research add up to traditional philological methods. The monograph by Uladzimir Sivitski titled *Rusalnaja tradyцыja bielarusau: Mifapaetychnaja sistema, typalahichnyja paralieli* (The Mermaid Tradition of the Belarusian People: Mythology and Poetic System, Typology Parallels) (2006) reconstructs the mythological model of the Russian tradition of the Belarusian people against the general Slavonic background. It suggests the concept of a genetic connection of the mermaid phenomenon to purely vegetative cult, and studies the natural and philosophical and, in fact, agrarian pragmatics as well as its calendar temporal determination. The monograph by Tatsiana Valodzina, *Ciela chalavieka: Slova, mif, ritual* (Human Body: Word, Myth, Rite) (2009) is dedicated to the image of a 'physical human', as well as ethnic medicine as one of the forms of interpreting the world and humans in it. Ethnic anatomy and ethnic medicine of the Belarusian people are represented as a fragment of traditional spiritual culture which is well-preserved, logically structured, full of mythological meanings and extremely rich in specific folklore manifestations.

The most significant trend in the current stage of development of the Belarusian folkloristics is the actualization of genres and types which used to be excluded from the domain to which professional research paid attention due to ideological considerations. A novelty is collections of the texts of the so-called Folk Bible, *Bielaruskaja 'narodnaja Biblija' u suchasnych zapisach*<sup>3</sup> (The Belarusian 'Folk Bible' in Modern Records) (2010), and *Zhorstki ramans: Falklornyja*

*piesni*<sup>4</sup> (Heart-Rending Romance: Folkloric Songs) (2010). The appearance of the 'Belarusian collection' of the Folk Bible prepared by Alena Bohanieva was a very timely and important event for specialists in the field of folklore text studies and non-fantastic prose, since this edition puts new extensive authentic material into scholarly circulation and represents the Belarusian folklore tradition in all its regional diversities.

The monograph by the ethnologist Uladzimir Lobach, titled *Mif. Prastora. Chalaviek: Tradycyjny kulturny landshaft bielarusau u siemijatychnaj pierspiektyvie* (Myth. Space. Human: Traditional Cultural Landscape of the Belarusian People in the Semiotic Perspective) (2013) is dedicated to the semantics and ritual functionality of the basic elements of traditional cultural landscape of the Belarusian people of both natural and anthropogenic origin in the system of their contacts and relations. On the basis of a wide range of ethnographic, folkloric and linguistic data as well as on the basis of his own field records, Uladzimir Lobach also characterizes cosmological parameters of the living space of the Belarusian people, which are shown in all the manifestations of the traditional culture of the ethnos. In the focus of consideration are the basic spatial and simultaneously axiological parameters of the Belarusian model of the world – the ethnical territory represented in all the integrity of its taxonomic levels in the mythological and poetical world picture.

So far, as a rhetorical figure in all possible scholarly forums and, in particular, in popular science editions, a statement is expressed about the extraordinary richness of Belarusian folklore on the European scale, preservation of archaic beliefs, and special vitality of its basic forms. And with all its pathos, the statement is well-grounded since the classical peasant culture has really been preserved in the villages of Belarus in its authentic form, although in some cases passively (and each year faces irretrievable losses in its completeness and integrity). Therefore, Belarusian folklorists' most important direction of work is still the recording of the folk heritage, identification of the specifics of daily life and typology of the main types and genres, determination of the areals of song melodies, dances, plots, motifs, and images, and preparation of collections revealing the richness of the cultural landscape of the Republic of Belarus in its regional and local peculiarities.

Definitely, an event of importance was the publication of the series *Tradycyjnaja mastackaja kultura bjelarusau* (Traditional Artistic Culture of the Belarusian People) (2001–2013) in 6 volumes (ten books), the author of the idea as well as the compiler and scholarly editor of which was Tamara Varfalamiejeva. This collection is extremely rich in records of the texts made over the last decade; it constitutes a sample of a comprehensive study of the artistic tradition of the region, which represents calendar and family rituals

and rites, non-ceremonial lyrics and instrumental music, dancing folklore, folk games, folk prose, small genres, spells, traditional costumes, and folk textile. The last three volumes were published with electronic appendices: records of authentic songs, instrumental music and folk prose performed by charismatic singers, instrumental music players, and story-tellers. Authenticity of the texts, accurate rendering of dialectal peculiarities, and individual speech manner of the informants, attention to the context and personal emotional experiences of the tradition bearers, and a wide regional coverage of materials create a large-scale panorama of the daily life of the Belarusian traditional culture in its current stage. The corporate authors (Alena Bohanieva, Tamara Varfalamiejeva, Tatsiana Valodzina, Tatsiana Kukharonak, Volha Labacheuskaja, Mikalaj Kozienka, Iryna Smirnova, and others) are trying to show the vitality of ethnic culture and folklore.

Among the compilers and publishers of the Belarusian folklore, we may distinguish articles and collections by Henadzi Lapatsin from the Vetka Folk Art Museum, who is well-known by his publications in the *Zhiva Starina*, *Antropologicheskij Forum*, *Paleoslavica*, and many conference collections and materials.

The publication of the texts in recent years, and scholarly approaches applied by their authors and compilers once again convince us that the division of culture into 'material' and 'spiritual' is disappearing, and the human being rises into the centre of attention. Field interviews, talks with local residents, extended stories told by informants which naturally go beyond the limits of the genre classification of folklore and mainly constitute evaluations, considerations, and conclusions, start showing their advantages. Such texts are particularly valuable in terms of the representation of the world outlook and serve as a reliable source for researching the current state of the traditional Belarusian culture.

Though some publications, mostly descriptive and informative ones, are available, urban, student, soldier, criminal, and other kinds of folklore still remain a closed area for the Belarusian folklore studies. There are a couple of reasons for that: an extensive field for collecting and interpreting keeps offering traditional and village folklore, almost every expedition provides new, sometimes unique findings which are waiting for their scholarly identification and their turn to be included in the system; the Russian nature of the urban folklore and post-folklore demonstrates itself here, which is partially why it is sometimes rejected; the absence of not only a respective school in the country but any generalizing works of a methodological nature (which, naturally, stem from the above reasons). The effort of scholars focuses on the development of an adequate set of tools not only for the study of the current state of tradition but also for the determination of the peculiarities of the effect the mythological

models of folklore produce by means of reality interpretation, including interpretation by townspeople.

The most promising plans of the Belarusian folklorists and ethnolinguists include the compilation of the Belarusian Folklore and Ethnolinguistic Atlas (BFELA) launched by the sector of ethnolinguistics and folklore of the Centre for the Belarusian Culture, Language and Literature, under the supervision of Mikalaj Antropau and Tatsiana Valodzina. The BFELA, by its sense, the principles of its organization, objectives and tasks, shall act as a description of the traditional spiritual culture of the Belarusian people, systematized primarily on the basis of expedition data, generalized on the level of typologically significant features, and implemented in the form of maps with extended legends. The atlas will contain a detailed and consistent description of all the important meaningful elements of folklore culture of typological value, which are sustainably reproduced in a certain form characteristic of each given tradition.

Launching of a periodical – an annual collection of scholarly articles under the heading *Bielaruski falklor: Materyjaly i dasliedavanni* (Belarusian Folklore: Materials and Studies) has been a long-awaited and perspective event. Three issues of it have been published (2014–2016). The periodical has already outlined the range of topics and research priorities of the Belarusian folklorists as well as introduced into the scholarly circulation a considerable amount of authentic materials not published before. The edition has already become a fruitful and interesting platform for discussing topical problems of folklore studies.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Book 1. Arsen Lis et al. *Kaliandarna-abradavaja paezija* (Calendar Ritual Poetry), edited by Anatol Fiadosik (Minsk 2001); Book 2. Anatol Fiadosik & A. Jemialjanau & Uladzimir Sysou & Mihail Kaladzinski. *Siamiejna-abradavaja paezija: Narodny teatr* (Family Ritual Poetry: Folk Theatre) (Minsk 2001); Book 3. Anton Hurski & Halina Piatrouskaja & Lija Salaviej. *Pazaabradavaja paezija* (Non-Ritual Poetry) (Minsk 2002); Book 4. Kanstancin Kabashnikau & Anatol Fiadosik & Aliaksandr Tsitaviets. *Narodnaja proza* (Folk Prose) (Minsk 2002); Book 5. Aliaksiej Nienadaviec et al. *Mifalohija: Duchounyja viershy* (Mythology: Spiritual Poems) (Minsk 2003); Book 6. Tatsiana Valodzina et al. *Malyja zhanry: Dziciachy falklor* (Small Genres: Children's Folklore) (Minsk 2004).

<sup>2</sup> *Mifalohija bielarusau: encykl. sloun* (The Mythology of the Belarusian People: Encyclopaedic Dictionary). Compiled by Iryna Klimkovich & Viktor Autushka; edited by Tatsiana Valodzina & Siarhiej Sanko (Minsk 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Introductory article, compilation and commentary by Alena Bohanieva.

<sup>4</sup> Compiler and author of the introductory article A. Kukresh.

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