

# UKRAINIAN FOLK *DUMY*: PROBLEMS OF HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT AND MODERN PERFORMANCE

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**Abstract:** The Ukrainian *dumy* are late-stage heroic epics dating back to the 15th–17th centuries, reflecting significant historical events and figures closely related to Ukraine’s history. *Dumy* exhibit a unique poetic and musical structure, characterized by uneven syllabic lines, monorhymes, the absence of stanzas, as well as a particular musical composition, ornamented cadences, and musical formulas, and the chromaticized Dorian or narrow range diatonic scale. *Dumy* were performed predominantly by men in a recitative style and were accompanied by instruments such as the kobza and bandura.

An important condition for maintaining the *duma* tradition was the kobzar *tsekh* (guilds), which were associations of musicians playing the kobza, bandura, and wheel lyre. These musical unions where melodies were passed down orally existed until the early 20th century. After the establishment of Soviet rule in Ukraine, kobzar *tsekh* were destroyed. The proposed study is devoted to analyzing the ways of reviving kobzar *tsekh* in Ukraine and, along with them, the *duma* tradition as an important component of the spiritual legacy of the Ukrainian people. To highlight the role of performers in this process is also the purpose of this article. In 2024, the practices of kobza, bandura, and lyre playing were recognized by UNESCO as an intangible cultural heritage of humanity.

**Keywords:** Ukrainian epic songs, *dumy*, cultural heritage, kobzar *tsekh* (guilds), bandura player, kobza player, traditional performer

## INTRODUCTION

The Ukrainian *dumy* represent the cultural legacy of the Ukrainian people. The *dumy* are a late-stage heroic epic dating back to the 15th–17th centuries and have become deeply intertwined with significant events in Ukrainian history: “Ukrainian folk *dumy* are epic monumental verbal and musical works of heroic, social and everyday order that reflect the modus operandi of creative thinking of the Cossack era<sup>1</sup>, the Baroque, and the culminating stage of the formation of the ethnic group’s national identity and the idea of statehood” (Dmytrenko 2009: 15).

The main peculiarities of Ukrainian *dumy* include their unique poetic form, characterized by uneven syllable lines, monorhymes, and the absence of stanzas, as well as their special musical composition, which is based on musical phrase-formulas, ornamented cadences, and uses chromaticized Dorian or diatonic mode. The melody of a recitative nature is usually performed to the accompaniment of musical instruments such as the kobza, bandura, and, less often, the wheel lyre (*lira* or *relya*)<sup>2</sup>. Along with the general characteristics of the epic – the presence of a narrative, a large number of verses, and a narrator with his storytelling style – *dumy* possess certain distinctive characteristics, such as significant dramatization of the storyline. The main narrators of *dumy* could only be kobzars, mostly blind men. In some resources, kobzars are also called bards, rhapsodists or Ukrainian minstrels (Kononenko 2019). In total, 48 plots of Ukrainian *dumy* are known, and more than three hundred variants of those.

The performers called *dumy* differently: *kozats’ki prytychi* (Cossack parables), *psal’mi* (psalms), or *staryny*, songs about old times. As a genre of purely oral tradition, the *duma* existed until the end of the 19th century. It was at this time that the first printed collections of *duma* melodies and poetry appeared, the most famous of which is Mykola Lysenko’s (1874), and some kobza and bandura players began to turn to printed sources. During the Soviet period, kobzars and bandura players were forced to create ‘Soviet *dumy*’ that had nothing to do with the epic tradition. It was only during the period of Ukraine’s independence (since 1991) that the *duma* tradition was revived and presented to a wider audience through the efforts of performers. Diatonic bandura and kobza which are part of the Ukrainian epic song tradition were also revived. Modern performers have the opportunity to learn the *duma* tradition from both audio sources and sheet music.

Thus, *dumy* occupy a significant place in Ukrainian folklore. The problem with the study of the *dumy* in Ukraine is the existence of binary concepts about their origin. Some researchers believe that the *dumy* emerged based on ancient epics, particularly the *bylynas*<sup>3</sup> of the Kyivan cycle (Hrytsa 1979, 2000, 2016, Horniatkevych 1992), while others deny this view (Kushpet 2007; Kononenko 2019).

Although bylynas and *dumy* represent different historical periods, they have many commonalities. These include similar storylines, common heroes, and shared verbal and musical compositional structures, such as metrical flexibility, types of melostrophes, and an improvisatory accompaniment of a string instrument.

The primary research aim of this article is to deepen and expand our understanding of the genesis of the Ukrainian folk epic, *dumy*. Our study builds on the work of ethnomusicologist Sofiia Hrytsa (1932–2022), a student of the founder of Ukrainian ethnomusicology, Filaret Kolessa (1871–1947), whose research included the study of *dumy*. In numerous studies by Hrytsa (1979; 2000; 2002; 2009; 2016) on various aspects of *dumy*, she emphasised the parallel existence of two melodic styles of the *duma* tradition, one of which is associated with the bylynas of the Kyivan cycle. Based on an ethnomusicological analysis of *dumy* from the northern and central regions of Ukraine and the available melodies of bylynas, recorded in northern Russia, mostly in the Arkhangelsk and Novgorod regions, i.e. in the area of 10th and 11th century Kyivan Rus', Hrytsa concluded that both genres represent one epic tradition connected to the musical traditions of the Kyivan principality. Since these genres represent different historical periods, the bylyna tradition evolved into *dumy*, and the unifying element of these genres was their specific structure of the musical composition, recitative melody, and stringed instrument accompaniment.

Our research questions are as follows: how did kobzar brotherhoods contribute to the preservation and transmission of the *duma* tradition before the 20th century, and what efforts have been made to revive this tradition in contemporary Ukraine? How has the recognition of kobzar practice by UNESCO influenced its status as an intangible cultural heritage, and what role do modern performers play in sustaining and adapting the *duma* tradition today?

The study of the Ukrainian epic tradition requires a multifaceted theoretical background due to its complexity and rich cultural context. To understand the relationship between the *duma* and bylyna genres, we compare the results of scientific studies on the bylynas of the Kyivan cycle by Ukrainian and international researchers outlining their binary positions. We will highlight signs of cultural appropriation of the bylyna genre by Russian researchers, supported by some other scholars (e.g. Novikov 2000, Torres Prieto 2022). We also present the perspectives of Ukrainian researchers, which are still *terra incognita* for the international community (e.g. Koncha 2009, 2010).

Our research is based on published and archival materials (in M. Rylsky Institute of Art Studies, Folkloristics and Ethnology of the National Academy of Sciences, and D. Yavornytsky Dnipro National Historical Museum in Ukraine), online audio and video recordings, personal communication with contemporary performers and carriers of the tradition, and analysis of their performances.

We used the folkloristic method to study *dumy* as an epic genre and to investigate the role of kobzar, bandura, and wheel lyre players in preserving the oral tradition. Specific research methods in musicology and ethnomusicology enable us to carry out a structural and typological analysis of the tunes of *dumy*. Performance Studies has become important for the study of vocal and instrumental features of *dumy*, and for the analysis of contemporary practices of performing *dumy*. The historical method allowed us to analyse the development of the *duma* genre in historical retrospect for a deeper understanding of the roots of the Ukrainian epic tradition.

In the next section, we examine the genesis and development of *dumy* as explored by Ukrainian and international researchers. Following this, we identify the bearers of the Ukrainian *duma* tradition and their musical instruments. The subsequent section discusses the kobzar *tsekh* (guilds) and its role in preserving the *duma* tradition, focusing on the tradition bearers and the methods of transmission. Finally, we address the challenges of reviving the epic tradition and ensuring its continuity in the contemporary context.

## **HISTORICAL RESEARCH AND CURRENT STUDIES ON THE GENESIS OF UKRAINIAN *DUMY***

Since the *duma* is a significant phenomenon associated with national identity, at different historical periods it has attracted the attention of Ukrainian and international researchers, especially those of Ukrainian origin. In the first half of the 19th century, in the wake of pan-European romanticism, *dumy*' lyrics by kobzar, bandura and wheel lyre players were recorded and published (Tsertelev 1819; Metlinsky 1854). The first sheet music editions of *duma* recitations were recorded and published in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Lysenko 1874; Kolessa 1969 [1910, 1913]). The Soviet time made it impossible to conduct an objective study of the heroic epic of the Ukrainian people. Unfortunately, a number of works by Soviet-era researchers contain ideological content. Nevertheless, they remain a valuable source of facts, despite the obligatory ideological component at that time (e.g. Kirdan 1962; 1965). The Ukrainian diaspora in Canada researched the literary side of the *dumy* and published them, including English translations (Ukrainian Dumy 1979).

Since Ukraine's independence (1991), various aspects of the *duma* have again attracted researchers' attention: folklorists (Lanovyk & Lanovyk 2005; Hrymych 2016; Kononenko 2019, 2022), linguists (Rosovetsky 2016; 2018; Palamarchuk et al. 2022), and archaeologists (Koncha 2008; 2009; 2010). Along with learning the melodies and texts of *dumy*, researchers, taking care of authenticity, paid

attention not only to their performers but also to the people who recorded them (Cherneta 2017). A significant contribution to the development of Ukrainian *dumy* studies was made by ethnomusicologists such as Sofia Hrytsa (2000; 2002; 2009; 2016), who thoroughly researched the melodies of Ukrainian folk *dumy*, identified melodic types of *dumy*, and pointed out their common roots with the *bylynas* of the Kyivan cycle. Mykhaylo Khai (2010; 2016) studied the genesis of the ancient Kyivan *gusli*<sup>4</sup>, diatonic bandura, kobza, and wheel lyre, which are part of the Ukrainian epic tradition. He developed and substantiated the hypothesis of the transformation of pentatonic *gusli* into diatonic bandura. Volodymyr Kushpet (2007) researched repertoire of kobzars and bandura players and their social status in society.

Ukrainian researchers of the early 20th century expressed an opinion on the link of the genesis of the *duma* to the *bylynas* of the Kyivan cycle (Hrushevsky 1923; Krypakevych 2002 [1937]). As mentioned by Filaret Kolessa (1969 [1910], 1913: 35, 69), the *dumy* developed from the poetic structural elements of the *bylynas* of the Kyivan cycle, the “glories”<sup>5</sup>. Kateryna Hrushevsky (1927: 153) argued that the *bylynas* are the basis of the ancient Ukrainian epic. Later, the Canadian researcher Andriy Horniatkevych (1992: V) called *bylynas* the “genre ancestors of Cossack *dumy*”. According to Hrytsa’s ideas, already presented above, *bylynas* existed in Ukraine until the early 17th century; after that, they were replaced by *dumy* (Hrytsa 2016: 189). Stanislav Rosovetsky (2018: 293) has claimed that *bylynas* and *dumy* existed in Ukraine in parallel.

The genesis of Ukrainian *dumy* remains hotly debated. Kushpet expressed a contrasting opinion to that of Hrytsa and others who claimed that the heroic *dumy* became a continuation of the ancient Kyivan *bylynas*. He pointed out that in Ukraine, neither epics nor the names of the performers were documented. He argued that isolated recordings of *bylynas* do not provide evidence of a tradition, and therefore, *dumy* do not share common ground with the *bylynas* of the Kyivan cycle (Kushpet 2007: 257). The Canadian folklorist of Ukrainian origin Natali Kononenko (2019: 292) also denies the connection between *dumy* and *bylynas*: “*Dumy* do indeed reflect the birth of Ukrainian national consciousness. They are unlike Russian epic songs, and they do not resemble the epic poems of Ukraine’s other neighbours, both Slavic and Turkic”. Iryna Zinkiv (2019: 141) investigated the etymology of the word “*duma*” and posited that the word “*duma*” is related to the Persian-Iranian culture.

As with the *dumy*, the origins of the *bylynas* of the Kyivan cycle and their heroes remain a subject of considerable debate (see, for instance, Koncha 2009; Petrov 2017; Balabushka 2017; Torres Prieto 2022). To provide context for these discussions, we will summarize the fundamental facts about *bylynas* and their historical background.

Research on the historical context of bylynas has identified the real-life prototypes of the heroes mentioned in the Kyivan cycle (Sarkanych et al. 2022). The main hero of the bylyna is Grand Prince Volodymyr<sup>6</sup>. In bylynas, Grand Prince Volodymyr is often called Krasne sonechko (Volodymyr the Beautiful Sun). Other famous heroes from the Kyivan cycle include Ilya Muromets, Dobrynya, and Alyosha Popovych, who defended Kyivan Rus' from enemy attackers. The heroes of the bylynas of the Kyivan cycle were called *bohatyrs*<sup>7</sup>. One of the most famous researchers of the bylynas, Varvara Andrianova-Peretz (1953: 185), noted that “[...] only the heroes of the Kyivan cycle are called bohatyrs [...] Those who see primarily the reflection of ‘Muscovy’ in Russian epics are mistaken”. According to Bohdan Kindratiuk, “Potential impulses to create bylynas as musical and poetic compositions could arise during downtime after the battle, in the field, when returning with recent impressions of the event” (Kindratiuk 2020: 207).

The fact that the bylynas of the Kyivan cycle describe the events of the Kyivan principality of the 9th–13th centuries is also evidenced by the names of the cities that were part of Kyivan Rus', such as Chernihiv, Volodymyr (in Volyn), Halych, Novgorod<sup>8</sup> (the northern city of the Kyivan state, see Figure 1). The attacks of the Tatar-Mongols and the Muscovite prince Yuri Dolgoruky devastated Kyivan Rus' in the 13th and 14th centuries (Pavlychko 2005: 7–20). Together with the people who survived the wars, the bylynas of the Kyivan cycle found their way to several territories: the western part (the principality of Galician-Volhynian<sup>9</sup>), the north of the Kyivan state (Novgorod), and Kuban (the north Caucasus).

Outlining the historical development of bylynas, Sofia Hrytsa and Ukrainian historian and archaeologist Serhiy Koncha have revealed the noteworthy fact that the bylynas of the Kyivan cycle, the *dumy*, and Ukrainian ballads share common heroes and storylines. For instance, the bylyna “Al’osha Popovych” (“Alyosha Popovych”) and the *duma* “Pro Oleksiia Popovycha” (“About Oleksiy Popovych”); the ballad about a Cossack’s attack on a Turk and the liberation of his sister and the bylyna about Kazarin; the ballad about Dzhenzhura and the bylyna about Churylo (Hrytsa 1990: 69). According to Serhiy Koncha (2016: 70), the *duma* “About Oleksiy Popovych” has common parallels with the bylynas about “Dobrynya and Alyosha” or “The Marriage of Alyosha Popovych”. Having analyzed and compared the narratives in detail, he noted: “Dobrynya’s prayer for the sea, which has been preserved among the main corpus of bylyna examples, is almost identical to the prayer of Alyosha Popovych of the Ukrainian *duma*, indicating that the ancient epic works in question belonged to the same bylynas tradition” (Koncha 2016: 70). Instead, Oleksandr Potebnya came to the unequivocal conclusion that the image of Oleksiy Popovych from

the Ukrainian *duma* of the same name is related to Serbian songs about Leka Dukadinets and Marko Kralevic and Bulgarian songs about Stanković Duku (cited in Skrypyuk 2009: 20).

Additionally, such important facts as toponyms and hydronyms associated with the names of modern Ukrainian cities, rivers and seas were not taken into account by Russian researchers, as well as the links of bylynas to the folklore of Ukraine through the *duma* tradition (Propp 1955; Novikov 2000; Petrov 2017). These perspectives, disseminated in Russian scholarship as well as in the broader public discourse, can be regarded as a particular instance of cultural appropriation (e.g. Matthes 2016). Researchers from other countries have often adopted the views of Russian researchers without criticism (Bailey 1998; Torres Prieto 2022).



KIEVAN RUS'

1. Borders of Kiev Principality
2. Borders of the expanded Kiev Principality (1054)
3. Borders of other states
4. Campaigns of Sviatoslav I
5. Campaigns of Volodymyr the Great
6. Campaigns of Yaroslav the Wise
7. Western territories annexed by Volodymyr the Great (980 to 1015)
8. Northwestern territories annexed by Yaroslav the Wise (1019 to 1054)
9. The southern border of Kievan Rus' under Sviatoslav I
10. Fortification walls
11. Varangian trade route from Scandinavia to Constantinople
12. Pecheneg and Polovtsian raids
13. Pecheneg and Polovtsian migrations

**Figure 1.** Map of Kyivan Rus' (Kievan Rus') (980–1054).<sup>10</sup>

The Spanish researcher Susana Torres Prieto (2022: 348), supporting the position of the origin of the Kyivan cycle in northern Russia, nevertheless stated that “[...] the bylynas constitute a very important part of the national heritage of at least one, if not two, modern countries”. By these countries, the researcher means modern Russia and Ukraine. However, other views on the bylynas can be found. For example, American researcher of Estonian descent Felix Oinas argued that the bylynas are part of a broader traditional genre connected with all Slavic cultures (1997). This assertion is important in the context of our study and emphasizes the integrity of the bylyna and the *duma* epic tradition.

Until the 19th century, the singers of bylynas and *dumy* called songs of both genres *staryny* (“about the old days”), which gave grounds to interpret these genres as related. The words “bylyna” and “*duma*” entered literature at approximately the same time – the beginning of the 19th century, a period of national identity formation for many nations. For a long time, Ukrainian researchers believed that the word “*duma*” was of literary origin. However, recent scholarly research has shown that the term “*duma*” in the sense of a message, is mentioned as early as in the Ipatiev Chronicle of 1169, and in 1587 by the Polish chronicler Stanisław Sarnicki in his “Annales, sive origine et rebus gestis Polonorum et Lithuanorum libri, VIII” (Hrytsa 2016: 119).

## **CARRIERS OF THE UKRAINIAN *DUMA* TRADITION AND THEIR MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS**

This section is devoted to the study of the development of the performing epic tradition of the medieval Kyivan state, which includes a close synthesis of poetic and musical components and the transformation of the tradition, accompanied by changes in the epic style and construction of the instrument.

The medieval Old Ukrainian epic tradition is represented by the bylynas of the Kyivan cycle. The earliest written mentions of epic singers in the territory of modern Ukraine appear in “The Tale of Igor’s Campaign”, which references the singer Boyan, who praised the heroic deeds of princes (Palamarchuk et al. 2022). In the “Galician-Volhynian Chronicle”, which is part of the Hypatian Codex (The Hypatian Codex 1973), a singer named Mytusa is mentioned. He served as a court musician for Prince Danylo of Halych but faced persecution due to his political views. These sources indicate the existence of an ancient tradition of epic performers who not only preserved oral heroic narratives but also played a crucial social role as custodians of historical memory and national identity.

The carriers of the bylyna tradition in the medieval Kyivan state were the “skomorokhs”<sup>11</sup> (Lanovyk & Lanovyk 2005: 246). The depiction of skomorokhs – folk musicians with stringed plucked instruments – can be seen in the 14th century sacral literature of Kyivan Rus’ (Uspensky 1965: 52–53). According to Mykhaylo Khai (2016: 394–395), skomorokhs were called “musicians who played to dance”, but once they reached the northern territories (present-day Russia), skomorokhs became associated exclusively with court entertainers. The prohibition of *skomorokshevo* (a community of skomorokhs) in Ukraine in the 16th century contributed to the emergence of new performance forms. Kindra-tiuk (2000: 208) believes that “the heirs of the skomorokhs in the Carpathians were musicians’ trios (*troisty muzyky*) – professional artists of a newer type, who replaced the ancient gusli and panpipes with the violin, tymbaly and bell tambourine and played at weddings and other village parties. The skomorokhs are well reminiscent of groups of Ukrainian carolers”.<sup>12</sup>

As noted in the previous sections, bylynas were often performed with the accompaniment of the plucked string instrument gusli. There is no consensus among researchers about the name of the instrument and its origin. Iryna Zinkiv (2014: 12) explores that:

*a medieval term ‘husly’ has a very wide range of meanings, that are reduced to a single invariant – stringed musical instrument. Under this general term during Christianization of Rus’, the chronicles concealed the ancient name of the pagan ritual instrument (which modern specialists in instruments conventionally define as the term ‘lyre-type gusli’). The instrument remained in use almost until the 13th–14th centuries among the Slavs who had already converted to Christianity.*

The change in the performance tradition of bylynas and *dumy* was accompanied by the transformation of repertoire and musical instruments. The Ukrainian ethno-organologist Mykhailo Khai (2010: 120) considered that diatonic and pentatonic gusli were transformed into the bandura with a diatonic tuning. This idea was first expressed by bandura practitioners, reconstructors of old Ukrainian musical instruments: Heorhiy Tkachenko, in the late 1980s, and his follower Mykola Budnyk (Cheremsky 2002: 38).

Historically, only male kobza, bandura or wheel lyre players, mostly visually impaired, performed the *dumy* solo. Society recognized them as the carriers of the epic tradition and treated this category of singers as special, as “mediators” between God and people. Part of the reason for this association is that blindness was interpreted as otherness in the sense of connection with the other-worldly.<sup>13</sup> The Balkan countries, among the southern Slavs, also have a tradition of blind

performers of epic songs (Mykhailova 2000: 133). According to Albert Lord, Central Asian and Balkan epics are characterized by three components: a plot, a hero with a horse, and a musical instrument (1991: 211–212). These three components are also inherent in the Ukrainian *duma* tradition: the image of the narrator, the horse, and the musical instrument, the “faithful friend” – the kobza or bandura (for more information, see Kononenko 2019: 45–48).

Performers of *dumy* have a special manner of improvisation and a unique “communication” with the listener through melodies. Even in the 19th century, every performer would tune the instrument to suit his voice range. The number of strings was not fixed, and the instruments were of different sizes and tunings.

### **KOBZAR TSEKH AND THEIR ROLE IN PRESERVING DUMA TRADITION**

This section is devoted to the study of kobzar *tsekh*, organisations that united performers of the Ukrainian epic tradition and facilitated the transmission of the *duma* tradition until the early 20th century.

In the early 18th century, Ukrainian performers of musical epic instruments<sup>14</sup> and *stykhiivnychi* were united in a special brotherhood or *tsekh*. Kobzar *tsekh* played an important role in preserving traditions and transmitting the *dumy*. They were the centers of kobza, bandura, and wheel lyre education, where learning was carried out orally and passed on from teacher to student (see Vavryk 2006: 22–54; Kononenko 2019, 2022). As a rule, studies continued for three to five years. During the first years, the student only listened to the teacher play and sing. After the first three years, the student already knew his teacher’s repertoire by memory and was given an instrument. Thus, a student would start playing the bandura when he knew all the songs and melodies. The repertoire of performers of the 18th and 19th centuries was characterized by a combination of different genres: *dumy*, historical and humorous songs, psalms, and dance music. The student also had to learn a special language called *lebiiska mova*. To get the right to play and earn money, a kobzar, bandura player or lyre player had to go through several rituals, one of which was called ‘*vyzvilka*’ or ‘*odkilshchyna*’ (Kushpet 2007: 278–286). After this ritual, the performer had the right to practice and earn money on his own. The obligatory and most difficult piece to perform was *dumy*.

The peculiarity of kobza and bandura performance of this period was that only people with physical disabilities, most often blind people, could play the kobza and bandura. Travelling musicians played an important role as communicators. They went from village to village to hold their musical performances

in crowded places such as markets and churchyards. This activity was called *kobzariuvannia*<sup>15</sup>. Kobzar, bandura and wheel lyre players earned money by performing songs, including *dumy*.

According to Kolessa (1969 [1910, 1913]), the activities of kobza workshops contributed to the emergence of regional performing schools of kobza and bandura, namely Zinkiv (later Kharkiv), Chernihiv, and Poltava. These schools were distinguished by the way the instruments were held and the way they were played. Territorial restrictions set by kobza workshops allowed performers to practice in the territory that belonged to a particular kobza workshop. In our opinion, territorial restrictions also contributed to the formation of *duma* musical styles.

Thus, *duma* melodies of the central and northern regions of Ukraine are diatonic, with a narrow ambitus and an isosyllabic rhythmic pulsation. These melodies are closely connected to the poetic text, imitate the rhythm and accents of spoken language, and are distinguished by the repetition of certain notes, giving them a monotonous character. Syllabic singing, with one note per syllable, is quite typical of diatonic melodies. An example is the *duma* “Pro Ganzhu Andyber” (“About Hanzhu Andyber”, see Fig. 2). Hrytsa calls *duma* melodies of diatonic type “psalmodic” and shows their similarity to the psalmody<sup>16</sup>, ritual songs and bylynas (Hrytsa 2002: 111).

**Figure 2.** A fragment of a *duma* “Pro Ganzhu Andyber” (“About Hanzhu Andyber”), recorded by Klyment Kvitka in Polissya in the early 20th century (Hrytsa 2002: 111).

*Dumy* of chromatic type have a certain compositional form containing three parts. The beginning or introductory part is called *zaplachka* (lament). The main part of the *duma* is called *ustups* (in common language), which are separated by instrumental interludes. *Duma* ends with the *slavoslovie* or prayer

(Kushpet 2007 et al.). However, some traditional performers of *duma* did not sing the *zaplachka* and *slavoslovie*.

Figure 3 shows an example of a *duma* of the chromatic type “Pro bidnu vdovu” (“About the Poor Widow”) from the Poltava region, north-eastern part of Ukraine. It consists of three parts: *zaplachka* (on Fig. 3 no. 1), main part (on Fig. 3 no. 2 is the first *ustup* of the main part), *slavoslovie*. The *zaplachka* contains two melodic formulas on which the following *tirades*<sup>17</sup> are based. The melody is decorated with small ornaments, such as grace notes, mordents, and accents. In the example, the most common melodic pattern can be followed, in which the melody descends in a wave-like manner from high pitches, occasionally rising by a small interval. The chromatic type of *duma* is associated with short additional words, such as “Hey!” (on Fig. 3), “Oh”, “O” etc.

**Figure 3.** Duma “Pro bidnu vdovu” (“About the Poor Widow”, beginning), recorded from Mykhailo Kravchenko in the Poltava region by Filaret Kolessa in 1908 (Hrytsa 2007: 223). 1 – *zaplachka* (lament); 2 – *ustup*; an incomplete vertical dash at the bottom of the staff marks the boundary of a *tirade*; the double vertical dash indicates a *clausula*. The chords performed as tremolo in the bandura part are written in a smaller size.

Thus, the transmission of the *duma* tradition and the formation of its characteristic features were closely linked to the activities of kobzar *tsekhs*, which disappeared in the early 20th century due to the ban on street music by the Soviet authorities.

## **PROBLEMS OF REVIVING OF *DUMY* AND THEIR TRANSMISSION IN THE CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT**

This section highlights two waves of the revival of the *duma* tradition, describes contemporary methods of organizing kobzar *tsekhs*, and explores various approaches to the transmission of the *duma* tradition in the present day.

The first wave of revival of the Ukrainian epic tradition began in the early 20th century. On the wave of interest in folk themes, the Ukrainian intelligentsia was able to collect part of the material from blind musicians, and to notate *dumy* (see Lisniak 2019: 40–61). The renowned researcher of *dumy*, Kateryna Hrushevska (1927: IX), noted on this matter:

*This is our precious cultural treasure, which has come down to us under the modest, borrowed name of ‘duma’, in meager remnants, in the form of several dozen records scattered across old collections. Nothing should be lost from these remnants: even the smallest fragments must be preserved! This is our duty to this undervalued treasure, which, after long neglect, must once again find its way into the consciousness of its people and take its rightful place in their cultural life.*



**Figure 4.** Photo of kobzars (S. Pasyuga, I. Kuchuhura-Kucherenko, P. Hashchenko, H. Kozhushko) near the Katerynoslav Historical Museum at the beginning of the 20th century. Scientific archive of D. I. Yavornytskyi Dnipro National Historical Museum, Ф-5389.

The materials collected by scholars laid the foundation for the development of the sciences of ethnology, folklore, and ethnomusicology. This was extremely important in view of further unfavourable developments for representatives of the epic tradition.

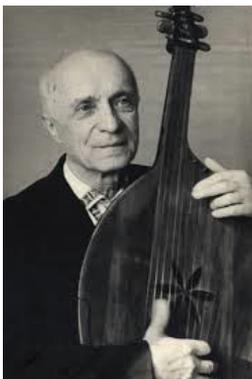
The carriers of the epic tradition were closely associated with Ukrainian identity, so the Soviet authorities viewed them as promoters of musical nationalism, representatives of the people, and bearers of historical traditions (Rhevska 2005: 80). In the 1930s, the Kharkiv Opera House hosted the Congress of Folk Singers of Soviet Ukraine, which brought together 337 delegates from different regions. The main task of the Congress was to actively involve folk singers in socialist ideas, break away from performing traditions, and define new ideological priorities. After the Congress, these blind singers disappeared. They, along with their minor guides, were taken out of the railroad cars to a forest and shot by soldiers of the special department of the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) of the Ukrainian SSR. Activist researchers found the scene of this crime, but written evidence was carefully destroyed or hidden in the NKVD archives (Cheremsky 1999).

Even during the Soviet era, under the pressure of ideology, the performers did not lose their inherent sense of being carriers of the epic tradition. But under the threat of physical destruction, the bearers of the tradition were forced to take the ideological side and create *dumy* about communist leaders as new heroes of the *dumy*. However, there is evidence that in private conversations, kobzars regretted this. For example, a blind bandura player, Yehor Movchan (1898–1968), was convinced that his illnesses were the result of creating a *duma* about Lenin: “The old bandura player was tormented by the sin of composing a false *duma* ‘There was a winter with a thaw’, which was constantly celebrated in official publications” (Vertiy 1999: 5).

The next waves of revival of the *duma* tradition began in the late 1960s and early 1970s and is linked to the name of the bandurist Heorhiy Tkachenko. An architect by training, Heorhiy Tkachenko (1898–1993) learned *dumy* from blind kobzars, bandura players, in the early 20th century in Kharkiv. He also made drawings of traditional instruments. In the late 1970s, Tkachenko founded the kobzar *tsekhs* and a workshop for traditional musical instruments. Together with his disciple Mykola Budnyk, they reconstructed wing-shaped and helmet-shaped gusli, kobzas, banduras, torbans. They researched the acoustic properties of ancient musical instruments and refined the technologies for their production. All of this contributed to a renewed interest in ancient Ukrainian instruments and performance. In the late 1980s, Tkachenko passed on his knowledge to the younger generation, maintaining the oral transmission of *dumy*. Following the model of the Kyiv kobzar *tsekhs*, similar ones were established in Kharkiv

and Lviv. Volodymyr Kushpet (2014) carried out important work with archival sources and transcriptions of kobzar Ostap Veresai.

Modern Ukrainian performers reproduce the traditional performance of *dumy* both in a traditional environment (street singing, markets, churches) and on the concert stage. There are two distinct ways of preserving the tradition that are evident in contemporary times. The first is through the kobzar *tsekh* that strive to uphold the authentic tradition. Kompanichenko defines the modern kobzar *tsekh* as “[...] an association of people who aim to preserve the Ukrainian epic tradition not only as memories but as a complex of living values: freedom, love, sacrifice, truth, brotherhood” (Sanin 2024). Sighted and blind male musicians are members of these brotherhoods, passing on the epic tradition orally, with most of them being amateurs. Blind people are actively involved in modern kobza workshops, thus reviving the traditional practice. The modern kobzar *tsekh* has a close connection with the Orthodox Church, as evidenced by their organization of festivals on major Church holidays, mainly on Church premises with the ceremony of blessing instruments (see Figure 6).



**Figure 5.** Heorhiy Tkachenko (1898–1993).



**Figure 6.** Blessing of kobzar instruments during the Epic Tradition Festival “Kobzar’ska Tryytsia-2014”. Kyiv, courtyard of the St. Michael’s Golden-Domed Cathedral (Sakhno 2015).

The second way of preserving the tradition is through its reinterpretation and widespread popularization through various means. Professional educational institutions and music studios serve as hubs for this trend, where young people (boys and girls) can learn to play traditional instruments. Both approaches are essential: one aims to preserve the tradition, while the other seeks to expand its boundaries through female performance in order to popularize it.

Important actions to preserve the *dumy*, namely the creation of a website that contains important information about the current state of Ukrainian epics, are required due to the full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war (2022) and the threat of physical destruction of material artefacts. The *Duma* project (2024) contains digitised versions of about 100 vocal and instrumental pieces. Due to the use of descriptive video servers, this project is convenient for visually impaired people. In 2024, the Ukrainian kobza and wheel lyre tradition was recognized by UNESCO at the 19th session of the Intergovernmental Committee as part of the world's intangible cultural heritage (Sanin 2024). The tradition, which is an integral part of Ukraine's musical and verbal heritage, was acknowledged as a practice that has survived through the centuries and was taken under the protection of this organization.

*Dumy* were a significant part of the repertoire of kobzar, bandura and wheel lyre players in the Middle Ages and in modern times. It is extremely important that the tradition of *dumy* was continuous, passed down from generation to generation, and that it has survived to this day in its natural, oral form. This gives grounds to consider contemporary performers as the successors of a living tradition. The interest in *dumy* as a national heritage has grown significantly in the context of the full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war and demonstrates their importance for Ukrainian society.

## CONCLUSION

The study highlights the crucial role of kobzar *tsekh* in the preservation and transmission of the *duma* tradition before the 20th century. These organisations ensured the continuity of oral epic performance by maintaining strict training systems, where apprentices learned both musical and poetic elements from master performers. Through structured rituals (“*vyzvilka*”, “*odkil'shchyna*”), a special language (*lebiiska mova*) and territorial organizations (Kharkiv, Chernihiv, and Poltava kobzar *tsekh*), kobzars safeguarded the *dumy* as a living historical narrative, reflecting Ukraine's cultural memory. However, the dissolution of these kobzar *tsekh* in the Soviet time led to a significant decline

in the *duma* tradition, disrupting its organic transmission and nearly erasing its practice from public life.

Efforts to revive the kobzar tradition in contemporary Ukraine have focused on reconstructing historical performance practices and fostering new generations of performers. Folklorists, ethnomusicologists, and musicians have worked to reconstruct ancient Ukrainian instruments and restore lost melodies and techniques, often relying on archival recordings and transcriptions. In addition, modern kobzar *tsekh* in Kyiv, Kharkiv and Lviv have played a key role in integrating the learning and performance of *dumy*, especially among blind performers, as was the case in traditional practice. The recognition of kobzar practice by UNESCO as an intangible cultural heritage in 2024 has further strengthened these initiatives, providing international support for safeguarding this tradition and reaffirming its cultural significance.

Modern performers play a vital role in adapting the *duma* tradition to contemporary contexts while maintaining its core practice and historical essence. By incorporating traditional elements into new formats, including concert performances and digital media, they ensure the continued relevance of *dumy* for Ukrainian and global audiences.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The Cossacks are a group of predominantly East Slavic-speaking Orthodox Christian people who created democratic, self-governing, semi-military communities in the 16th century. They inhabited the “Wild Fields”, or steppes, north of the Black Sea near the Dnipro River.
- <sup>2</sup> Lyre, wheel lyre (or *relya*) is the Ukrainian variant of the hurdy-gurdy.
- <sup>3</sup> Epic songs of the Eastern Slavs, in Russian “*bylina*”. The term *bylina* was introduced as a scholarly designation of Russian epic in the 1830s by Ivan Sakharov. The *bylynas* were first published in 1804 under the title of “Kirsha Danilov’s Collection”.

- <sup>4</sup> In medieval literature, the term 'gusli' had a wide range of meanings to describe stringed musical instruments. The etymology of the word and the origin of the instrument itself are not established. For example, in the Ukrainian Carpathians, the folk violin is called *gusli*, and among the Southern Slavs, the *gusle* is a single-stringed bowed instrument.
- <sup>5</sup> Wishing for longevity.
- <sup>6</sup> The image of Grand Prince Volodymyr combines the features of two great princes of Kyivan Rus': Volodymyr (born unknown – died July 15, 1015), who introduced Christianity to Rus' in 988, and Volodymyr Monomakh (born 1053 – died May 19, 1125).
- <sup>7</sup> A man of extraordinary physical strength.
- <sup>8</sup> Novgorod was colonized by the Muscovites in 1478 (Gorelov 2013).
- <sup>9</sup> Galician-Volhynian Rus in the second half of the 13th – first half of the 14th century.
- <sup>10</sup> *Zhdan Mykhailo. Kyivan Rus*. 1988. The Encyclopedia of Ukraine, vol. 2. Available at [https://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/picturedisplay.asp?linkpath=pic%5CK%5CY%5CKyivan\\_Rus\\_Map.jpg&page=pages%5CK%5CY%5CKyivanRushDA.htm&id=7137&pid=3177&tyt=Kyivan%20Rus%E2%80%99&key=Kyivan+Rus%E2%80%99%2C+%D0%9A%D0%B8%D1%97%D0%B2%D1%81%D1%8C%D0%BA%D0%B0+%D0%A0%D1%83%D1%81%D1%8C%3B+Kyivska+Rus%2C+%D0%9A%D0%B8%D1%97%D0%B2%D1%81%D1%8C%D0%BA%D0%B0+%D0%A0%D1%83%D1%81%D1%8C%3B+Kyivska+Rus](https://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/picturedisplay.asp?linkpath=pic%5CK%5CY%5CKyivan_Rus_Map.jpg&page=pages%5CK%5CY%5CKyivanRushDA.htm&id=7137&pid=3177&tyt=Kyivan%20Rus%E2%80%99&key=Kyivan+Rus%E2%80%99%2C+%D0%9A%D0%B8%D1%97%D0%B2%D1%81%D1%8C%D0%BA%D0%B0+%D0%A0%D1%83%D1%81%D1%8C%3B+Kyivska+Rus%2C+%D0%9A%D0%B8%D1%97%D0%B2%D1%81%D1%8C%D0%BA%D0%B0+%D0%A0%D1%83%D1%81%D1%8C%3B+Kyivska+Rus)
- <sup>11</sup> Skomorokhs (in Ukrainian – *скоморохи*) were professional artists in the Eastern Slavic countries during the times of Kyivan Rus' in medieval and early modern times.
- <sup>12</sup> Ukrainian carolers or *koljadnyky* – a group of people who perform koljadkas. Koljadka or koljadkas (pl.) are calendar ritual songs of the winter cycle.
- <sup>13</sup> More details about the tradition of Ukrainian blind musicians, their life, training, and social significance can be found in the book by Kostyantyn Cheremsky (2002: 12–194).
- <sup>14</sup> Epic instruments in Ukraine are those used in performance practice to accompany *dumas*: kobza, diatonic bandura, and wheel lyre.
- <sup>15</sup> Kobzarstvo is included in the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Ukraine. The procedure of submitting it to the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage is ongoing.
- <sup>16</sup> Psalmody – chanting, a genre of medieval Kyivan church singing.
- <sup>17</sup> In Ukrainian academic literature, the concept of *tirade* has been interpreted in different ways. Kolessa, followed by Hrytsa, presented the following compositional structure of *dumas*: the smallest unit is a phrase, a group of phrases forms a *tirade*, a group of *tirades* forms an *ustup* (Kolessa 1910=1969; Hrytsa 2016: 203). Ivanitskyi (2004: 122) and Bohdanova (2021: 9) consider *tirade* and *ustup* as synonyms. In our study we rely on the terminology proposed by Kolessa and Hrytsa.

## ARCHIVAL SOURCES

Scientific archive of the Dnipro National Historical Museum named after Dmytro Yavornytskyi. Collection of manuscript documents. Ф-5389. Photo of kobzars Stepan Pasyuga, Ivan Kuchuhura-Kucherenko, Pavlo Hashchenko and Hryhorii Kozhushko near the Katerynoslav Historical Museum at the beginning of the 20th century.

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