

Notes on Belarusian Mythology Studies: Personalities and Research

Anastasiya Gulak

Abstract: The article examines the formation and evolution of Belarusian mythology studies from the mid-19th to the early 20th century, focusing on the key representatives of the mythological school and their contribution to the development of Belarusian folkloristics. The study traces the methodological shifts from early romantic mythologisation and prescientific interpretations (Pavel Shpilevsky) to empirical documentation and the integration of comparative-historical approaches (Adam Kirkor), and later to positivist models centred on systematisation, classification, and the concept of survivals (Pavel Shein, Piotr Bessonov, Dovnar-Zapolsky, Lyatsky, Nikiforovsky). The article highlights how Belarusian scholars aligned mythological research with broader European academic trends—linguistic theories of myth, evolutionism, and cultural-historical paradigms—while simultaneously constructing a national scholarly tradition. The legacy of the mythologists is assessed through their influence on contemporary Belarusian humanities, especially the modern encyclopaedic projects and interdisciplinary approaches combining

folkloristics, linguistics, ethnography, and semiotics. The article argues that despite methodological limitations, the foundational work of the 19th-century mythologists remains crucial for the reconstruction of Belarusian mythopoetic consciousness and for understanding the deep symbolic structures of traditional culture.

Keywords: Belarusian mythology, mythological school, folkloristics; evolutionism; demonology; Slavic mythology; Belarusian folklore studies

The history of academic reflections on the folklore and mythology tradition of Belarus is associated with the first academic direction in the Belarusian ethnography, which dates back to the 1840–1890s period. Soviet linguists and folklorists recognised that Shpilevsky, Kirkor, Bessonov, Shein, as well as Bahdanovich, Dovnar-Zapolsky, Lyatsky, Nikiforovsky and Romanov paid tribute to mythologists' philosophical and methodological principles (Kabashnikau 2004: 15–16). Their inputs into the scholarly field were represented by a significant number of works, from reviews in the periodicals of the 1850–1870s period to modern historiographical and folklore research. However, the conceptual understanding of the nineteenth century mythologists' contribution to the study of archaic consciousness and culture has become the focus of Scientists' attention relatively recently.

In Soviet folklore studies, which functioned within the boundaries of ideologically biased literary criticism, mythological imaginations were often identified with the early forms of religion devoid of ethno-cultural elements. Such an approach did not facilitate an objective assessment of the mythologists' academic works. They were either regarded as students and members of the brothers Grimm school, or identified with Slavophiles. Such an interpretation asserted that the mythological direction was regarded as reactionary for a long time. Despite adhering to an

opposite point of view, mythologists' critics could not deny that the representatives of the mythological direction played "a positive role in raising interest in the people's spiritual culture within the comparative study of the folklore, belief and rituals of the Slavic peoples" (Bandarchyk 1964: 52). The problem was further complicated by the fact that the concept of an *academic school* in the humanities was undeveloped (Bayev 1977: 503) and a biographical and descriptive approach was prevailing in the analysis of the academic works of earlier researchers.

Contemporary analysis of mythologists' theories accounts for the fact that the establishment of Belarusian folklore studies was tightly connected with the academic schools and trends that existed in the European and Russian science of the 19th century. It is important to understand that in the first half of the 19th century the study of mythology played a unifying role for several individual disciplines. According to Toporkov, academic interpretations of myth was only partially carried out within the disciplines of mythology and archaic belief studies. The most notable researchers of mythology and folklore of the 19th and early 20th centuries were also either linguists, literary historians or ethnographers (Toporkov 1997: 17). It also is necessary to add that a significant part of the mythological studies of the mid-nineteenth century appeared within the context of journalism and local history studies.

On the one hand, the mythological direction in Belarusian folklore studies should be treated as a functional autonomy of its representatives conditioned by a common theoretical background. On the other hand, the differentiation between these representatives should also be taken into consideration as it helps to reveal individual research paradigms of every scholar. The mythological direction existed as a non-institutional community of Belarusian researchers of oral and poetic heritage; the focus of this community was the concept of myth as the basis of spiritual culture. Academic communication between the members of the community was

generally impersonal (it was carried out through academic, methodological and journalistic texts). The theoretical principles and methodological approaches towards mythology were formed and implemented in different locations independently and relatively simultaneously. As a result, new conceptual ideas of the genesis and semantics of Belarusian mythopoetic heritage and folklore emerged within the context of folklore research and journalism.

In search of the Belarusian Atlantis

The initial phase of the mythological school research is dominated by the artistic mythologisation of Belarusian folk culture, correlated with the romantic idea of the discovery of the Belarusian religion. This was exemplified by the corpus of Slavic mythical characters of Pavel Shpilevsky (1840–1850s). His articles about Slavic antiquities, under the title “Belarusian Folk Tales” (part 1, 1846; parts 2–3 titled “Belarusian Folk Beliefs”, 1852) are the most characteristic examples of this tendency. Shpilevsky’s work “The Study of Werewolves in Belarusian Belief” (1853) is also dedicated to mythological research. Pavel Shpilevsky’s belonging to the mythological school also appears in his article cycle “Belarus in Characteristic Descriptions and Fantastic Fairy Tales” published in *Pantheon* magazine (1853–1856).

The works of Pavel Shpilevsky should be regarded as a prescientific approach to the description of Slavic mythology that was conditioned by its very nature as it was perceived by a researcher of the first half of the 19th century. The main meaning-making principle of this approach is the modality principle, which implies an author’s subjective relationship with the scientific facts; their interpretation is simultaneously a basis for the assertion of these facts. We should take into consideration that Pavel Shpilevsky’s texts include references to a fairly high number of 19th century

scholarly works, although these references are often fragmentary. But the aspiration to refer to a large number of sources indicates that Shpilevsky aimed to educate his potential audience. The analysis of his belonging to the mythological school should account for the fact that he did not aim to reconstruct the mythology as a type of culture or a form of consciousness based on archaic forms of mentality, but was rather constructing “the narrative and personified basis” (Pivoev 1991: 14) of Belarusian paganism.

Shpilevsky expresses thoughts that resonate with the ideas of German romanticism: “Different studies about the antiquities of Athens and Rome constantly appear on the pages of our magazines ... Whereas the antiquities of Western Russia, and especially Belarus, seem to be considered too insignificant to be discussed in the periodicals’ publications. I do not know how to explain the indifference of our scholars towards Belarus. Perhaps it can be explained by the fact that it is easier to write about the Roman and Greek antiquities in the office using foreign sources, but in order to write about Belarus, it was necessary to know it, live there, observe all its antiquities for a few years onsite” (Shpilevsky 1846: 1).

In search of mythological characters Shpilevsky turns to folklore, following the lead of Jacob Grimm and Fedor Buslaev and treating Slavic folklore as a relic of the ancient myths. He argues that mythology is present in folklore texts in a distorted, altered form, and the task of a researcher is to reconstruct the ancient myths from their relics.

Levkievskaya (2002: 311–352) conducted a thorough analysis of the characters of “Belarusian folk tales” according to several criteria. It is important for our study that being a mythologist Shpilevsky understood that, on the one hand Slavic demons lack the morphological detail, but on the other hand, they are numerous and diverse. Moreover, it is possible to argue that he comprehended the significance of folk demonology as an important and integral part of the archaic Slavic culture. For example, he thoroughly

analysed the folklore and mythological semantics of the image of a werewolf that was later referred to by almost all the researchers of Belarusian mythology.

The image of the werewolf in the “Belarusian folk tales” can be considered entirely correct, although there is a tendency of significant subjectivisation of its text. The pattern of the folk story about the werewolf is fictionalised by Shpilevsky and is thus turned into a sentimental novel. Shpilevsky’s journalistic text illustrates the method of the compilation of genuine mythological functions of certain characters of Belarusian traditional culture with the motifs and functions that exist in or are determined by the literary tradition. For example, fictionalised essays about the Belarusian folk characters Klyaskun, Bagan, Bordzya, Kumyalgan, etc., are among the examples of the author’s myth-making, as his critics pointed out.

Generally speaking, “Belarusian folk tales” lack verification (the absence of verification being a typical feature of the mythological school) as a logical and methodological procedure for establishing the authenticity of a theoretical postulate based on its congruence with empirical data (Gulak 2009). Shpilevsky’s “scientific and poetic love of people” causes factual errors in his ethnographic descriptions. Pypin (1892: 75) commented on them in the following way: “unfortunately, he had no ethnographic training; moreover, the general literary principles did not contain enough knowledge about the proper handling of folk life and poetic heritage; a large part of his essays has only a fictional value and does not have sufficient scientific validity”.

Thus, the elements of academic knowledge that transpire at the level of the artistic mythologising of Belarusian folk culture phenomena can be spotted in Shpilevsky’s, and other researchers’, inconsistent use of works on lexicography and the origin of the language. That leads to the organic connection between the names of some mythical characters of the corpus and the word

formation paradigm of the East Slavic mythological vocabulary. The idea that the mythical characters first described by Shpilevsky in his works on Belarusian folklore belong to the category of so-called armchair mythology has become common in folklore studies. While acknowledging the correctness of such criticism it should be noted that examples of the armchair mythology should be considered within the context of the history of folklore studies; it is thus necessary to take into account the level of development of mythological study in the 19th century, which was in its early stages back then. The arguments of the researchers of 19th century mythology should be interpreted within the context of the formation of the theory and practice of scientific research. The main ways in which Shpilevsky expressed his personal opinion of the scientific facts were the author's interpretation of the facts of Belarusian culture in the absence of verification as a logical and methodological procedure to establish the scientific authenticity of a postulate, the author's compilation of the genuine mythological functions of certain characters of Belarusian traditional culture with the motives and functions conditioned by literary tradition.

Empiricism and the first theories

The second stage of the mythological direction development is characterised by the shaping of the empirical base for the study of mythology. It is embodied by the academic and journalistic activities of another notable representative of this school, namely, Adam Kirkor. His principal research work, which lays out his analysis of Belarusian mythology, is titled *An Ethnographic Overview of the Vilna Governorate* (1857).

Kirkor's academic worldview was shaped by the linguistic theory of myth. He consistently refers to Müller and Kuhn's solar-meteorological theory (Gulak 2008). The comparative-

historical method in Kirkor's research takes the shape of a typological comparison of the mythical characters of different cultures (Ancient, Germanic, Slavic), with the focus on the facts of the East Slavic/Belarusian traditional culture. The empirical base of Belarusian mythology research is significantly enriched in the middle of the 19th century thanks to Kirkor embracing materials from Western European medieval texts, the relicts of Slavic palaeography and the publications of the Slavic Pantheon categorisations of the second half of the 18th century. He also put these data into the context of Belarusian culture.

Thus, Kirkor used the medieval Russian epic poem "The Tale of Igor's Campaign" as material for mythological interpretation. The poem was published in 1800 and is considered to date back to the late twelfth century. In 1818 one of the pioneers of Slavic studies Zorian Dołęga-Chodakowski discussed the value of this poem for mythology and folklore studies in his work "On Slavism and Christianity". Drawing upon Dołęga-Chodakowski's ideas Kirkor's essay "The Artefacts of Ancient Times" begins with literary and journalistic reminiscences related to this poem. Kirkor lists "the old gods that lived in folk memory despite the people's conversion to Christianity": Boyan the diviner, the grandson of Veles, who was able to give wisdom and poetic inspiration; the winds that were the grandchildren of Stregod; and a prince's army, the soldiers of which were the grandchildren of powerful Dazhdbog the son of Perun. Kirkor (1993: 236) argued that "these gods have been reigning in Belarus for such a long time that they are not alien to people even now". The author also refers to the East Slavic chronicle titled *The Tale of Bygone Years*, published in different compilations between 1804 and 1841, the *Russian Chronicle of the Reverend Nestor* (14th century), etc.

Kirkor reflects on the mythological aspect of the research works on (local) history and archaeology. According to Tolstoy, "the almost complete absence of the data on Slavic religion until the sixth

century and the scarcity of information on it dating back to the period between the 6th and the 11th centuries compelled researchers to reconstruct the ancient Slavic religion with the help of later material” (Tolstoy 1996: 145). This later material was published by Teodor Narbutt and Józef Kraszewski. Kirkor also starts actively using the data on history and traditional culture collected by the Provincial Statistical Committee, as well as material published in periodicals, ‘commemorative books’ and the collections of Russian Geographical Society in the academic research.

While conducting his research on local history Kirkor meticulously documents ancient Slavic artefacts. He writes that many ancient settlements, assembly of the people sites, court locations, places of sacrifice and meeting points for local residents have been preserved in Belarus. He publishes original toponymic legends on historical topics, such as a legend about Lake Knyaz and the castle of the Slutskys-Olelkovich princes, a legend about church bell that dates back to the times of the Great Northern War, a legend about the capture of Mogilev by the armies of Charles XII and Peter the Great during the Great Northern War, a legend about Dubrowna in Orsha district and a legend about the Rogneda mountain in Polotsk in the *Picturesque Russia* edited volumes. The legends about Krichev and Turov are of particular interest because their mythological potential lies in the use of motifs of petrification, drowning or falling through the ground, vanishing into the earth/water spells, stealing unbaptised children, impossible tasks and supernatural guards.

The fictionalised descriptions that Kirkor published in *Picturesque Russia* aimed to reaffirm mythologists’ idea of the extraordinary archaism of traditional Belarusian culture: “Belarus, with the majestic Dnieper and Dvina rivers, with its dense forests, impassable tundra and swamps, is the kingdom of wolves and roe deer, forest spirits and mermaids, witches and fairies ... Although it accepted Christianity early, it preserved ancient pagan legends

and rituals for a long time. Even now a Belarusian appreciates his home penate *Tshur*¹, he still knows the gods of each season of the year and can even describe the appearance of each of them. He remembers the appearance of *Yarila*² and still evokes *Lada*³ when calling the spring, he is able to hide from the *Lesun*⁴ in the forest, and sometimes even deceives him, he knows how to tease the mermaids, but not be caught by them. He cherishes his *Lyolya*, the goddess of spring, his nourisher, the goddess of summer *Tsyotsya*, when she takes the form of a beautiful, well-built woman with the ripe ears of corn on her head and with fruit in her hands, but he knows how to please the terrible *Zyzya*⁵, the severe and deadly *Karachun*⁶” (Kirkor 1993: 236). The inclusion of the characters that have no pronounced mythological status in the demonological system of Belarusian mythology is evidence of the researcher’s desire to construct a demonological level for Belarusian mythology. Such inclusion is appropriate in many cases. However, the attempts to reconstruct the myth, to create a hierarchy of mythical characters, as well as a disregard of the idea of folklore genres evolution sometimes led Kirkor towards ungrounded conclusions.

Kirkor’s important field of activity within the area of mythology is his participation in data collection for the archaeological dictionary that was published in the journal *Antiquities: The Proceedings of the Moscow Archaeological Society* (1865–1867). Kirkor’s short articles describing his own research on the artefacts of Slavic and Baltic material culture (including some of its mythological aspects) “still provoke interest today, although they are sometimes controversial” (Karsky 1903: 60). The materials of the archaeological dictionary illustrate how linguistic data, such as analysis of the naming forms, are elevated to the status of major source in the study of mythology. This status “facilitates the transition from the field of linguistic into the field of historical comparative mythology” (Toporov 1996: 162). A case in point is Kirkor’s analysis of

the Svintarog valley micro toponym. The image of the legendary Lithuanian prince Svintarog (Šventaragis, 13th century), who was considered the founder of the funerary cremation ritual, was obviously attractive for Kirkor as a mythologist, archaeologist and explorer of the numerous mounds on Lithuanian and Belarusian territory.

Kirkor expands the sources of mythological study “adding new information to the mythological concept of his predecessor Pavel Shpilevsky that aimed to reinforce the academic perspective on the Belarusian oral poetry as a deeply archaic art form” (Cishchanka 1986: 198). This information comprised the prosaic genres of folklore, calendar rites, customs, beliefs and ritual regulations, and partly also the song texts.

The legends that included the motifs of cultural hero, petrification, punishment for insulting a holy stone, as well as toponymic legends and tales of evil spirits published by Kirkor (1993: 275– 351) reveal significant aspects of the mythology.

In his research into Slavic mythology Kirkor relied on the descriptions of rituals, customs, and prosaic genres of folklore to a much greater extent than Shpilevsky, however, he did not consider the texts of traditional songs to be a significant source for the study of mythology. Generally speaking, Kirkor’s historical and archaeological experience supports the idea of the commonality of Slavic and Baltic mythology. The researcher is the first to analyse the mythological aspect of many genres of Belarusian ritual and non-ritual culture.

In the mid-1860s mythologists’ works centred on generalising concepts that integrated the study of mythology, ritual and verbal folk art, and language. Mythologists adopted a broad perspective on the object of their study and defined it as “a holistic culture that integrates its verbal, material and symbolic manifestations” (Toporkov 1997: 381). However, in line with the romantic quest for national particularities, the study of oral folk poetry and folk belief

gradually shifted towards the establishment of a realistic worldview in the middle of the 19th century. Historicism, evolutionary methods of thinking, attention to specific facts and the surrounding reality were formed “within romanticism” (Myagkov 2000: 19–20). Other scientific theories influenced the concepts of the mythological school in the late 1860s and early 1870s. Moreover, according to Myagkov, a researcher from the Russian historical school, the relationship between romantic aesthetics and romantic artistic creativity, on the one hand, and the realism of the middle of the 19th century, on the other hand, has the features of both a sharp shift and a smooth transition.

Research under the umbrella of positivism

The third stage of the academic study of Belarusian mythology is marked by the formation of a new methodology. There is a gradual departure from the focus on abstract, speculative problems, from the interpretation of folklore texts as evidence of the bygone mythological consciousness. There is a tendency towards factual accuracy, collection and systematisation of various empirical materials, as indicated by a clear dominance of the empirical data in the academic works that adhere to the spirit of positivism, for example ‘provisional descriptions’, ‘artefacts’, ‘reviews’, ‘materials for study’, ‘collections’ and ‘assemblages’. New approaches to the understanding of folklore are created, and new concepts of the archaic folk culture genesis emerge. Researchers’ adoption of positivist philosophical concepts gives the humanities a powerful impetus for development. The mythological study of the Belarusian past is gradually evolving from a romantic fascination with antiquity and archaism to the positivist ordering and analysis of national heritage.

This is evident in the tendency to collect examples of oral poetry and generalise them via systematisation and classification. Such generalisation became possible because researchers of mythology of the 1860–1870s drew upon the legacy of Slavic folklore studies from the first half of the nineteenth century. The general theoretical framework of the studies conducted by collectors and researchers belonging to the romantic and democratic intellectual traditions, such as Dołęga-Chodakowski, Kireevsky, Maksimovic, Holovatsky, Sreznevsky, Bodansky, Metlinsky already implied a desire for objectivity and specificity of knowledge. They gradually withdrew historical cultural heritage “from the scope of pseudohistorical schemes and subjected it to consistent historical analysis that takes into consideration its particular aspects” (Myagkov 2000: 19–20). This manifested itself in the creation of the collection tradition and the development of the principles of folklore documentation (Sojmonov 1960: 148–150).

In the 1860–1870s notable mythologists Pavel Shein and Piotr Bessonov deconstruct the original ideas that were prevalent in early mythological research and adopt other scientific theories of the second half of the nineteenth century. While trying to identify the scientific schools that influenced these researchers in the most profound way, it is first necessary to consider the fact that various scientific directions and elements of different schools coexisted in the 1860s, and could also coexist within the work of a single researcher.

Bessonov’s main work in the field of Belarusian mythology studies is the folklore collection *Belarusian Songs Accompanied by a Detailed Explanation of their Creativity and Language: Essays on Folk Rituals, Customs, and Everyday Life* (hereinafter *Belarusian Songs*). Evdokim Romanov appreciated Bessonov’s comments and explanations and wrote that “Bessonov’s essay should be a handbook for a folklore collector, if he wants to engage thoroughly with it” (Romanov: viii).

Bessonov applied the method of synthetic analysis to Belarusian oral poetry within a broad cultural context in the comments to the collection. He interprets Belarusian calendar ritual poetry within the framework of the people's mythological worldview. He argues that the ritual language of Belarusian folklore is more ancient than the epic language of Russian folk legend and historical epic. He also consistently uncovers Slavic mythopoetic and ritual counterparts in the Belarusian calendar and ritual folklore phenomena. For example, *Belarusian Songs* describes the Belarusian rite of *Kust*⁷, outlining the general ritual actions, chronology and locality, i.e. the "Pinsk area where Belarusian features already mix with Little Russian ones" (Bessonov 1871: 25). In the context of analysis of the *Kust* and *Kupala*⁸ rituals Bessonov cites the examples of the Serbian rituals Kraljice and Dodola, which involve songs and protagonists with the same names as the Belarusian rituals. Bessonov compares the songs of the Belarusian Kupala Night ritual with the Ukrainian, Galician and Polish Sobótka songs. These and a number of other ideas illustrate that the information on mythology contributes to the scientific value of *Belarusian Songs*. The influence of the cultural-historical school on Bessonov's work can be traced in his handwritten essays about Belarus (1865-end of the 1870s) where he analyses the processes of ethnogenesis and class and religious differentiation in Belarusian society, and promotes the idea of the uniqueness of Belarusian national culture as well as its historical and cultural specificity.

In parallel with the adoption of postulates from the cultural-historical school, from the mid-1870s East Slavic folklore studies start to embrace ideas of evolutionism that were laid out by British social anthropologists Edward Tylor, James Fraser and Herbert Spencer. The evolutionists' ideas form the basis of the anthropological (ethnographic) school in Eastern Slavic folklore studies. Its main postulate was the discrete spontaneous generation of folklore motifs and themes (the theory of the spontaneous generation of

motifs). This is interpreted as proof that different people went through the identical stages of evolution.

Mangart's program, which was published in 1867 as an appendix to *The Antiquities of the Moscow Archaeological Society*, inspired Shein's collecting and publishing activities. As a tribute to Mangart, Shein published a special article in the *Etnographicheskoe obozrenie* ('Ethnographic Review') in 1890.

Shein's ideas on mythology are most comprehensively outlined in his works titled *Belarusian Folk Songs with the Rituals, Customs and Superstitions* (1874) and *The Materials for the Study of Everyday Life and Language of the Russian Population of the North-West Region (Part I Belarusians Everyday and Family Life through the Prism of Rituals and Songs, 1887)*. Shein came close to the folklore tradition via large-scale and active communication with his correspondents. The communication followed Mangart's model. This sets him apart from Bessonov, who interpreted folk texts but had only indirect knowledge of the living folk tradition as he accessed it via other sources. Shein does not rely on random materials from other researchers' collections, but seeks to create its own sources for the study of particular mythological phenomena.

The analysis of harvest rituals semantics and the functional characteristics of mythological characters such as Sparysh⁹, Valos,¹⁰ etc., are among Shein's relevant contributions to the study of Belarusian mythology. For example, when conducting an etymological analysis of the semiotised lexeme *Raj* (Paradise) in Belarusian traditional culture Shein aims to incorporate "the data of the Indo-Germanic peoples comparative mythology into it at least to a small extent" and begins with Sanskrit, referring to the entries from the *Sanskrit Dictionary* (which comprises seven volumes, 1855–1875). "The word rai is defined by the concepts Besetz, Habe, Gut, Kostbarkeit, which mean possession, property, wealth, value ... Is it a coincidence that these words have a closer etymological connection with the Belarusian word ... but all the

variants we have cited seem to justify fully its Sanskrit meaning” (Shein 1874: 18).

The large number of references to the Indo-European languages in mythological studies of the second half of the nineteenth century indicates the significant influence of the migration theory. However, the folklore and mythological research that relied on this theory had several limitations, such as ignoring national and social factors in the spread of folklore, formal and structural comparisons of the plots and motifs, a sometimes non-critical approach to the indications of borrowing and identifying ‘Indian influences’ in very diverse materials. In line with Bessonov’s ideas, Shein advocates the great potential of the Belarusian calendar and ritual folklore as a source for mythological studies, in contrast to epic poetry, which was of primary importance to the representatives of the Russian mythological school.

Makhnach, the researcher into evolutionism in the national ethnography, notes that from the mid-1890s researchers were increasingly interested in the evolution of Belarusian social institutions and material culture (Makhnach 2005: 49). Nikolay Nikiforovsky, Mitrofan Dovnar-Zapolsky, Evgeny Lyatsky and Adam Bahdanovich published studies of the archaic phenomena of Belarusian traditional culture. These researchers discussed the relicts of mythological consciousness in their works, which through certain historiographic studies claimed that they belong to the mythological school. Indeed, their research still partly relies on the legacy of the mythological school.

Nikiforovsky’s essay “Evil Spirits: A Collection of Common Folk Legends About Evil Spirits in the Vitebsk Region of Belarus” (hereinafter “Evil Spirits”), written in 1898 (Vol. 2, 1907) is considered by some researchers to represent the first systematic scientific description of Belarusian demonology that was based on popular legends and lore. Indeed, “Evil Spirits” clearly has certain features that illustrate the influence of the mythological school. This is a

detailed and somewhat fictional description of the origin, hierarchy, localisation and function of demonological beings which primarily advocates the idea of their significant number, diversity and omnipresence (Nikiforovsky 1907). The hierarchy of mythological characters that Nikiforovsky constructs evokes a certain methodological paradigm that was created by researchers of the mythological school in the middle of the 19th century.

Nikiforovsky almost entirely omits the theoretical aspects of mythology. The only exception is the idea about the helplessness of the ancient ancestors before the forces of nature that is outlined in the introduction. This alleged helplessness is considered the reason for the deification of the natural elements; the deification is transmitted from generation to generation within traditional culture. Guided by the ideas of the anthropological (ethnographic) school, Nikiforovsky interprets the phenomena of spiritual culture as survivals that are kept in a modified form and which adapt to new conditions and acquire new functions.

The influence of Western European evolutionism on Bahdanovich and Dovnar-Zapolsky is evidenced in their use of British evolutionists' research models. For example, Bahdanovich's essay "Survivals of the Ancient Belarusian Worldview" (1895) borrows the basic theoretical background (in particular, the concept of survivals) directly from Tylor's research. But in their study of the genesis of Belarusian mythological belief Bahdanovich, and later also Karsky, rely on the postulate of the solar-meteorological theory of myth (Bogdanovich 1895: 80–127; Karsky 2001: 128). However, they interpret the development of the primitive forms of religious beliefs within the framework of evolutionary theory. Karsky writes that "the images of the gods are a result of the cultural evolution of individual peoples ... However, the still undivided Indo-Europeans already laid a solid foundation for mythology. The main deity was the sky ... other phenomena and forces of nature also found their place in religion, but compara-

tive mythology has not yet managed to accurately determine their meaning” (2001: 128).

According to Lyatsky, the main factor that conditions the preservation of mythological consciousness in survivor forms of culture is pagan dualism. In his work *Belarusian's Ideas about Evil Spirits* (1890) Lyatsky argues that in the people's subconsciousness “nature embodies the struggle between the two principles of good and evil, light and darkness, harm and usefulness” (1890: 25). Lyatsky argues that under the influence of Christianity dualism is transformed into, and leads to, a polarised worldview. The beliefs associated with “good patron gods” are embodied by the Christian God and the “saints that express his will”, and the ideas about the evil forces of nature are embodied in demonological characters. “The Belarusian understands any manifestation of evil forces under the term ‘evil spirits’, and the concept of the demon [--]> is not conflated with the notions of his subordinates, such as the household, forest and water spirits, and mermaids who live exclusively in this world, while the devil himself may be both in this and in the other world” (Lyatsky 1890: 26).

Dovnar-Zapolsky interpreted ethnographic materials from the standpoint of evolutionist methodology. His work *The Belarusian Wedding in the Context of Cultural and Religious Survivals* (1893) is devoted to the evolution of marriage and family relations, which is a typical research issue within the framework of evolutionism. The work discusses the folklore and ethnographic material on the Belarusian wedding that Dovnar-Zapolsky collected during fieldwork in the Ihumen, Babruysk, Rechytsa, Mazyr and Pinsk districts in 1890–1891. He argues that the dominant forms and the main “living thoughts” of the past are transformed into survivals in the later periods of cultural evolution and are kept as relics and artifacts of a “distant tradition”. According to Dovnar-Zapolsky, “the whole ceremony [of a Belarusian wedding] takes place under

circumstances that are dominated by religious survivals” [Dovnar-Zapolsky 1893: 51].

Dovnar-Zapolsky interprets a lot of the stages of the wedding ceremony (matchmaking, engagement, *pasad* (ritual sitting)¹¹, korovai ceremony¹²) as manifestations of “earlier meanings”. For example, the cult of the hearth and the veneration of the dead can be traced in the *pasad* ritual. The veneration of the dead is manifested by “walking around a table, which replaced the ancient altar, and bowing at the corner where the location of the ancestors’ spirits was moved; setting the hair on fire with ‘thunder candles’ (gromnice)¹³ that are kept throughout the year behind the icons [symbolizes] the fire that is lit on an altar” (Dovnar-Zapolsky 1893: 51). Dovnar-Zapolsky also lists the tradition of cutting the bride’s hair, covering her head while she is sitting on the *pasad*, and the use of fertility symbols (a bread bowl and sheep’s skin, etc.) among the “cultural and religious survivals” of the *pasad* ritual. Thus, Dovnar-Zapolsky follows the ideas of evolutionism by arguing that a significant number of cultural survivals exist in the Belarusian wedding ceremony.

The legacy of the mythologists in modern academic discourse

It should be noted that the academic value of the 1890s texts devoted to mythology is significantly limited by the almost complete absence of metadata on folklore materials. In terms of the methodological aspects of the first researchers into Belarusian mythology, it should be noted that they did not create any methods for collecting and analysing mythological material. The creation of a system of theoretical and cognitive categories, as well as the development of the disciplinary research methods of Belarusian folklore studies, began in the 1990s.

However, the mythologists' main methodological asset, adopted and expanded by contemporary scientists, is the reconstruction of mythological plots with the help of comparative historical research on the reflections of these plots in the Belarusian and other ethnic traditions. The study of Belarusian mythopoetic heritage at the crossroads of folkloristics, linguistics, literary history and ethnography that was initiated by the mythologists of the nineteenth century, today has transformed into the synthesis of traditional folkloristic approaches with the methodology of cultural anthropology, linguistics and semiotics, and is the main strategy in the study of East Slavic paganism.

The conceptual aspect of the mythologists' legacy defines the understanding of mythology as a primary form of consciousness and the ideological basis of Belarusian traditional culture. This legacy also defines the relationship between mythology and language and poetry and the understanding of the transformative potential of poetic forms of popular culture. Mythologists noted that Christmas, Easter and Midsummer rites are well-preserved and constitute the highlights of Belarusian folklore, and are also exclusively informative for the reconstruction of ancient beliefs (Gulak 2007). The studies of the nineteenth century mythologists were the first to reveal the interweaving of pagan and Christian traditions, the commonality of East Slavic mythology with the mythological systems of other Indo-European peoples and the distinctive features of Belarusian mythology.

The actualisation of many issues of folk tradition that were first recorded by mythologists began in the 1970s when Belarusian folklorists started publishing the *Belarusian Folk Art* academic series. Works by Kirkor, Bessonov, Shein, Dovnar-Zapolski, Lyatsky, and Romanov turned out to be valuable sources for the following volumes: *Winter Songs: Christmas Carols and Schadrunki*¹⁴ (1975), *Spring Songs* (1979), *Valachobnyja*¹⁵ *Songs* (1980), *Kupala*

and *St. Peter's Day Songs* (1985), *Ballads* (Vols 1–2, 1977–1978) and others.

In the late 1980s, Belarusian scientists had a growing interest in the mythopoetic folk heritage. Vasiljevich, Nenadovec and Konan wrote research works on mythology in the 1990s-early 2000s. A wide range of issues of Belarusian mythology are explored by Valodzina, Duchyc, Zaykovsky, Lobach, Novak, Prokharau, Sanko, Sharay, Shved.

The first edition of the encyclopaedic dictionary *Belarusian Mythology* (2004), which was compiled by Sanko (academic editor), Valodzina, Vasilevich, Duchyc, Zaykovsky, Kruk, Lobach, Prokharau, Salavey and Shved, gave an overview of Belarusian scientists' theoretical contributions to the study of mythology and gave significant impetus to further research in this field. Antropau, Bulanava, Kuharonak, Lapatsin, Filipenka, Yankousky and others joined the research team at that time.

Today *Belarusian Mythology* (2011) is the first attempt to systematically and comprehensively describe and analyse Belarusian cultural heritage within the Belarusian humanities framework. Many Belarusian cultural heritage phenomena discussed in the volume remain relevant and illustrate the uniqueness of this heritage. The Belarusian mythopoetic worldview is represented by about 1,000 articles in the 2011 edition. The articles are thematically categorised according to the 15 main codes that constitute the internal structure of the Belarusian mythopoetic worldview. Plant and animal codes are discussed in more than 120 dictionary entries. Landscape and topographical codes include the mythopoetic images of the iconic locations and settlements. The historical and legendary aspect give an overview of folk epic and published sources, as well as chronicles. Other iconic categories include cardinal directions and the locations of cultural space. The dictionary provides the first detailed review of the meteorological code, and further discusses the calendar aspect of Belarusian rituals. The

character code is the most popular within the dictionary (more than 200 entries). It was supplemented by material collected during recent fieldwork and information from dialect sources. The essays by Shpilevsky, Nikiforovsky and several other mythologists from the nineteenth century, were also partly included in the dictionary and were accompanied by careful and objective commentary by the academic editors.

Today there is a unique publishing outlet for researchers into Belarusian folklore and mythological tradition in the form of the edited volume *Belarusian Folklore: Materials and Research* (Issues 1–6, 2014–2019). Its publication was inspired, and it was edited, by Tatsiana Valodzina, head of the Department of Folklore and Culture of the Slavic Peoples at the Institute of Art History, Ethnography and Folklore, National Academy of Sciences of Belarus.

Thus, contemporary Belarusian science has established significant conceptual generalisations on traditional folk culture, which, according to the researchers, is characterised by an unusual depth of folk memory. The existence of a large amount of material compiled by the most notable representatives of the Belarusian folklore studies from the 19th and 20th centuries (including representatives of the mythological school) allows researchers to carry out a systematic study of folk culture. Semiotic, ethnolinguistic and culturological theoretical and methodological approaches are being developed within this study.

The main assets of the mythological school that were further elaborated by contemporary Belarusian science include the approach towards the mythology as towards the basis of Belarusian traditional culture, the conceptualisation of mythological thinking as creative activity, and tracing the evolution of the mythological and folklore forms of folk culture. The issues of the reconstruction of mythological consciousness and the study of symbolic organisation forms of this culture are extremely relevant today.

Notes

- ¹ The word ‘Tshur’ is a theonym from Slavic mythology. Tshur is a family guardian, a clan’s spirit guide.
- ² One of the gods of the Slavic pantheon. Rituals and ideas about Yaril relate to vegetation and the fertility of the earth.
- ³ A mythological character, a female embodiment of the spring awakening of nature, love and marriage.
- ⁴ A mythological character, a forest spirit, potentially hostile to humans.
- ⁵ A mythological character, the embodiment of winter cold, frost.
- ⁶ The word ‘Karachun’ is a theonym from Slavic mythology. Karachun embodies the concept of sudden death and convulsions.
- ⁷ A ritual formally timed to coincide with the Christian festival of Trinity. Its mythological role relates to the worship of patriarchal clan values, fertility, and spring vegetation.
- ⁸ A ritual timed to coincide with the summer solstice. It includes worship of the sun (fire), water, and vegetation. For Belarusians, the celebration of Kupala includes a variety of ritual practices, beliefs, songs, dances, and legends.
- ⁹ A mythological character associated with grain crops fertility, harvests of wheat.
- ¹⁰ One of the gods of the Slavic pantheon. The rituals and perceptions of Valos refer to animal husbandry.
- ¹¹ One of the stages of a wedding ceremony, the blessing of a bride.
- ¹² One of the stages of a wedding ceremony, where multiple people engage in making a wedding cake.
- ¹³ A ritual attribute, candle.
- ¹⁴ These are songs sung during a door-to-door ritual that relates to the Christmas festival. The content of the songs appeals to magical powers that may ensure the prosperity and well-being of the hosts.
- ¹⁵ A unique phenomenon of Belarusian folklore. Songs sung during a door-to-door ritual, formally timed to coincide with Easter. The content

of the songs is representative of lyric-epic images of the life of a man, a woman, a boy, and a girl, as well as wishes of happiness to each listener.

References

- Bayev, A. A. 1977. O nauchnyh shkolah [On Academic Schools]. *Shkoly v nauke* [Schools in Science]. Moscow: Nauka, pp. 503–504.
- Bandarchyk, V. K. 1964. *Gistoryya belaruskaj etnografii XIX st.* [The history of Belarusian ethnography of the 19th century]. Minsk: Navuka i tehnika.
- Bessonov, Petr A. *Belorusskie pesni s podrobnymi ob'jasnenijami ih tvorčestva i jazyka, s očerkami narodnogo obrjada, obyčaja i vsego byta* [Belarusian Songs with Detailed Explanations of Their Poetics and Language, with Essays on Folk Ritual, Custom, and Daily Life]. Moscow: Bahmeteva.
- Bogdanovich, Adam E. 1895. *Perezhitki drevnego mirosozercaniya u belorusov. Etnograficheskij ocherk* [The Survivals of the Belarusians Ancient Worldview. Ethnographic Essay]. Grodna: Gubernskaja tipografia.
- Gulak, Anastasia 2007. Autentychnyi fal'klor belarusau u publikacijah drugoj palaviny XIX st. [Authentic Belarusian Folklore in the Publications of the Second Half of the 19th Century]. *Autentychny fal'klor : prablemy bytavannya, vyvučennia, peraimanny.* [Authentic Folklore: Proceedings of the Scientific Conference]. Minsk: BDUKM, pp. 111–114. <http://hdl.handle.net/123456789/4315>
- Gulak, Anastasiya & Rolya, A. 2008. Kirkora u razvicci mifalagichnaj shkoly u belaruskaj fal'klarystycy [Kirkor's Role in the Development of the Mythological School in Belarusian Folklore]. *Fal'klor i suchasnaya kul'tura: Mat. mizhnar. navuk.-prakt. kanf.* [Folklore and Contemporary Culture: The Proceedings of the International Scientific-practical Conference]. Minsk: BDU 1, pp. 28–30.
- Gulak, Anastasia 2009. Kanceptual'nyya asnovy mifalagichnaj shkoly ŷ dasledavannyah P. Shpilewskaga [Conceptual Foundations of the Mythological School in Shpilevsky's Research]. *Izvestiya*

- Gomel'skogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta* [Academic News of the Gomel State University], 3 (54: 2): 7–13.
- Dovnar-Zapolsky, M. 1893 *Belorusskaya svad'ba v kul'turno-religioznykh perezhitkakh* [Belarusian Wedding in the Context of the Cultural and Religious Survivals]. *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie* [Ethnographic review], vol. 4: 26–84.
- Kabashnikau, K. P. 2004. *Historyyagrfiya belaruskaj fal'klarystyki* [Historiography of Belarusian Folklore Studies]. *Belarusy* [Belarusians], 7: 11–41.
- Karsky, Y. 2001. *Belarusy* [Belarusians]. Minsk: Bel. Knigazbor.
- Karsky, E. F. 1903. *Belorusy* [Belarusians] I–III, vol 1 (1903). Warshava: Tip. Varsh. uchebn. okr., 1903–1922.
- Kirkor, A. 1993. *Zhivopisnaya Rossiya* : Reprintnoe izdanie [Picturesque Russia: Reprint Edition]. Minsk: BelEn.
- Levkievskaya, Elena 2002. *Mekhanizmy sozdaniya mifologicheskikh fantomov v "Belorusskikh narodnykh predaniyah" P. Drevlyanskogo* [The Mechanisms of the Mythological Phantoms Creating in the "Belarusian Folk Legends" by P. Drevlyansky]. *Rukopisi, kotoryh ne bylo. Poddelki v oblasti slavianskogo fol'klora* [Manuscripts That Never Existed: Forgeries in the Field of Slavic Folklore]. Moscow: Ladomir, pp. 311–352.
- Lyatsky, E. I. 1890. *Predstavleniya belorusa o nechistoj sile* [Belarusian's Ideas about the Evil Spirits]. *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie* [Ethnographic Review], 4: 17–28.
- Makhnach, A. I. 2005. *Evolucionnoe napravlenie v etnologicheskom izuchenii Belarusi (konec XIX – nachalo XX vv.)* [Evolutionary Direction in the Ethnological Study of Belarus (late 19th – early 20th centuries)]. *Vestnik Brestskaga universiteta* [Bulletin of the Brest University], 1 (22): 48–52.
- Myagkov, G. P. 2000. *Russkaya istoricheskaya shkola: teoriya i istoriya razvitiya shkoly kak nauchnogo soobshchestva. Avtoreferat dissertacii* [Russian Historical School: The Theory and History of the School's Development as a Scientific Community. Dissertation Abstract]. Kazan': Kazan University Press.
- Nikiforovsky, N. Y. 1995 [1907]. *Nechistiki* [Demons]. Vitebsk: Pan'kov.

- Romanov, E. 1886. *Belorusskij sbornik* [Belarusian Anthology]. Kiev & Vitebsk: S. V. Kul'zhenko.
- Pivoev, V. M. 1991. *Mifologicheskoe soznanie kak sposob osvoeniya mira* [Mythological Consciousness as a Way of Understanding the World]. Petrozavodsk: Karelia.
- Pypin, A. N. 1892. *Istoriya russkoj etnografii* : v 4 t. [The History of Russian Ethnography. In 4 vol.]. Vol. 4. Sankt Petersburg: Tip. Stasyulevicha.
- Sojmonov, A. D. 1960. Pesennaya proklamaciya P. Kireevskogo [Song Proclamation by P. Kireevsky]. *Sovetskaya etnografiya* [Soviet Ethnography], 4: 147–150.
- Tolstoy, Nikita 1996. *Yazychestvo drevnih slavyan* [Ancient Slavic Paganism]. *Očerki istorii kul'tury slavyan* [Essays on the History of Slavic Culture]. Moscow: Indrik, pp. 145–160.
- Toporov, Vyacheslav 1996. *Bogi drevnih slavyan* [Ancient Slavic Gods]. *Očerki istorii kul'tury slavyan* [Essays on the History of Slavic Culture]. Moscow : Indrik, pp. 160–174.
- Toporkov, Andrei 1997. *Teoriya mifa v russkoj filologičeskoj nauke XIX veka* [The Theory of Myth in Russian Philological Science of the 19th century]. Moscow : Indrik.
- Tsishchanka, I. 1986. *Da narodnyh vytokaw. Zbiranne i vyvuchenne belaruskaga fal'kloru u 50–60 gg. XIX st.* [To the Folk Origins. Collection and Study of Belarusian Folklore in the 1850–1860s]. Minsk: Navuka i tekhnika, pp. 36–64.
- Shein, P. V. 1874. *Belorusskie narodnye pesni* [Belarusian Folk Songs]. Sankt Petersburg : Majkov
- Shpilevsky, P. M. 1846. *Belorusskie narodnye predaniya; Belorusskie pover'ya* [Belarusian folk legends; Belarusian beliefs].