



## Ethnographic documentation of the primitive beliefs of the Slavs in the archives of the 18<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries: Methodology, representation, problems of interpretation

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**Abstract.** The relevance of the study was determined by the need to analyse how, throughout the eighteenth-twentieth centuries, approaches to recording, classifying, and interpreting the pre-Christian beliefs of the Slavs changed under the influence of political, confessional, and scientific transformations. The aim of the work was to trace the full sequence of transformations – from field recording to archival classification and public representation – and to determine which methodological and ideological factors determined the final structure of the sources. The methodology was based on a comparative analysis of handwritten corpora, censorship prescriptions, and mass publications using the concepts of the history of knowledge, critical archival studies, textual criticism, and sociolinguistic hermeneutics. It was established that in the eighteenth-nineteenth centuries, field records were created mainly by descriptive intuitive methods, and the criterion of authenticity was defined by the aesthetic and ethnopolitical expectations of collectors, which led to the systematic exclusion of syncretic and everyday forms of ritual practice. The analysis of archival classifications showed that administrative-territorial and genre rubrics separated ritual data from functional context, while standardised questionnaires, editorial reductions, and self-censorship transformed multilayered descriptions into unified statistical units. The comparison of handwritten sources with lubok publications and early cinematographic plots demonstrated that at the turn of the nineteenth-twentieth centuries, religious motifs of demonology and agrarian magic were represented mainly as decorative ethnographic markers consistent with the Enlightenment canons of the era. The generalisation of the results confirmed that multilevel selection, classification, and editorial processing stabilised certain interpretative models, while simultaneously marginalising contextual variations and situational practices of the bearers of tradition. The practical value of the study lay in the creation of a set of criteria for reconstructing the original ritual context from fragmentary and conceptually altered sources, contributing to a deeper understanding of ethnographic materials within archival and scholarly practices

**Keywords:** field materials; archaism; syncretism; ritual; systematisation; culture

### Introduction

The relevance of the study was determined by the need to comprehend how the primitive pre-Christian beliefs of the Slavs, throughout a long historical period, served not only as an object of ethnographic description but

also as an instrument in the formation of cultural memory, national identity, and confessional policy. Attention to archival sources containing fragments of mythological concepts, rituals, and demonology required not

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only recording of the content but also an analysis of the methodological limitations and interpretative paradigms within which these materials were collected, classified, and presented in the public sphere. Such an approach allowed not only to reconstruct the content of pre-Christian beliefs but also to critically assess the very structure of the source base, which influences modern scientific perceptions of these beliefs.

The Christian tradition, introducing an official liturgical and dogmatic system, preserved and transformed a number of pre-Christian achievements that continued to function in parish life, the family calendar, and the agrarian cycle up to the turn of the twenty-first century. The cult of ancestors combined with memorial services, the celebration of natural cycles integrated into the church calendar, and apotropaic actions (protective pendants, consecrated herbs, ritual bonfires) were adapted to Christian blessings and processions. Thus, Christian culture did not “displace” pre-Christian motifs but created a dual symbolic system in which old rituals acquired new theological interpretations while retaining the regulatory role in the social and economic life of the community (Halperin, 2022).

Throughout the twentieth century, processes of modernisation, secularisation, and political catastrophes caused a revision of religious practices; however, elements of pre-Christian ritualism continued to be preserved in folklore texts, parish notes, and ethnographic diaries (Horák, 2022). Field materials by P. Chubinsky (1872), R.F. Kindl (2000), and interwar and post-war expeditions confirmed that demonological narratives, rites of passage, and agrarian rituals remained important indicators of local identity even within the context of Soviet atheistic policy or radical economic transformations. In mass publications and visual media, these motifs were gradually reinterpreted: from instruments regulating the life cycle, the motifs turned into cultural symbols that required additional semiotic modification to correspond to the aesthetic and educational needs of the era. Such transformation confirmed the resilience of archaic relics, and at the same time demonstrated the necessity of interpreting these elements beyond the frameworks of linear evolutionist schemes.

J.A. Álvarez-Pedrosa (2021) collected and systematised primary sources that revealed the characteristics of Slavic pre-Christian religion. The author's work established that texts of the early Middle Ages contained fragmentary but valuable evidence of mythological concepts and rituals of the Slavs. The results emphasised the difficulty of reconstructing religious practices due to the limitation and heterogeneity of the sources. The work identified key narratives indicating the syncretic nature of the beliefs of Slavic communities. S.S. Alymov (2019) revealed the contribution of Ukrainian scholars to the formation of the theory of ethos, emphasising its intellectual origins. The study established that the ideas of Ukrainian

thinkers significantly influenced the concepts of ethnic identity in Russian and international scientific contexts. The results highlighted the unique role of Ukrainian intellectual traditions in global ethnological approaches. The analysis demonstrated the deep interconnection between local cultural narratives and universal theoretical concepts of ethnicity. S. Borbély (2023) studied the relationship between theory and practice in the preservation of cultural heritage, drawing on ethnographic approaches. The author's work revealed that in Western Ukraine, local communities actively integrated traditional practices into modern strategies of cultural heritage preservation. The results emphasised the significance of local knowledge in the formation of effective models of heritage management. The analysis demonstrated how ethnographic methods contributed to a deeper understanding of the cultural dynamics of the region.

Y. Chernukhin (2020) reconstructed the archives of the Sheptytsky family in Prylbichi, discovering documents that shed light on the activities. The author's research showed that these materials revealed the family's significant contribution to the cultural and religious life of Galicia. The analysis underlined the importance of archival sources for understanding the historical context of the region. Y. Harasym (2023) analysed the activities of M. Hrushevsky as a folklorist-historian, proving that in the research, the systematisation of oral poetic texts served as an instrument for constructing the national historical narrative. It was emphasised that M. Hrushevsky's historiographical corpus integrated folk creativity as evidence of the historical continuity of Ukrainians, thereby outlining a new model of interaction between ethnographic material and the narrative of the previous times. O. Koshel (2021) focused on the participation of the Orthodox clergy of the Right Bank in the local history movement of the second half of the nineteenth – early twentieth centuries. In this research, it was established that the clergy not only collected local historical records but also initiated the popularisation among the laity, thus forming regional historical awareness and increasing the practical value of ethnographic collections for communities.

A. Leśniewska (2023) analysed the travel notes of Zorian Dołęga-Chodakowski, identifying travel as the main source of the mythological narratives. The research was based on a textual-comparative analysis of diaries and correspondence, which made it possible to trace the transformation of personal topographical impressions into folkloric-ethnographic concepts. The author established that these narratives enriched Polish and Ukrainian folklore studies by integrating the image of the “archaic landscape” into national historiographies. The article demonstrated the mechanism of transforming travelling experience into a methodological resource of early Romantic ethnogeography. D. Yesypenko (2020) studied the evolution of scholarly editing of Slavic texts, comparing pre-reform printed editions with modern dig-

ital corpora. The author focused on the impact of OCR (Optical Character Recognition) technologies and TEI (Text Encoding Initiative) markup, showing that digitalisation ensured the preservation of variant readings and expanded research access to texts. The analysis demonstrated how digital tools corrected historical limitations of printed series, restoring removed dialectisms and contextual notes. The work outlined new perspectives for philological and ethnographic studies in the digital age.

Previous studies were largely limited to descriptive cataloguing of ritual practices and the comparison with reconstructions of mythological pantheons, leaving aside the mechanisms of institutional selection, editorial modification, and self-censorship that shaped the available corpus of sources. As a result, there was a lack of comprehensive research integrating field, archival, and public levels of representation of beliefs. The aim of the article was to explain the mechanisms of transformation of pre-Christian beliefs from primary recording to printed representation within the framework of archival practices of the eighteenth-twentieth centuries.

### Materials and Methods

The first block consisted of works that laid the foundations of the Romantic and archaeographic approaches: the treatise by A. Czarnocki & W. Surowiecki (1834), processed from a copy in the digital library Polona, and the two-volume work by G. Uspensky (1818), available on the Internet Archive platform. The middle phase of methodological development was represented by the works of M.I. Kostomarov (1847) and P. Chubinsky (1872), which contained the most complete field descriptions, analysed from editions in the Internet Archive digital library. The institutional standards of the late imperial period were represented by Reports and Records of Ethnographic Department of Emperor's Society of Friends of Natural History, Anthropology and Ethnography (1888) and *Ethnographic Review*, vol. LXIII (1904), examined from the digital collections of the Internet Archive online resource. For comparison with the Austro-Hungarian tradition, the Ukrainian translation of R.F. Kindl (2000) monograph, based on the author's field notes of the late nineteenth century, was used. The second, regulatory layer of sources reflected the influence of state censorship. Official texts – in particular, the Censorship Act (1826), the Valuyev Circular (1863), and the Ems Decree (1876) – were studied from digitised copies stored in electronic archives of legal documents and historical portals. The third block consisted of visual sources that allowed tracing the transition of sacred content into mass culture: the lubok sheet *Tale about how a craftsman tricked the devil* (1867), analysed from the digitised version on the portal of the New York Public Library, and the feature film *Viy* (1967), available on official film-studio channels on the YouTube platform.

The source-study analysis verified the origin and degree of authenticity of each item in the sample. By

comparing title pages, publishing notes, and internal colophons, the primary editions of texts were identified, and later layers were determined. This made it possible to separate purely field fragments from scholarly or ideological processing and to form a basis for further comparison. The comparative-historical method was used to compare plots and terminology in sources from different decades, allowing the tracing of the dynamics in the description of the same ritual actions. The method helped to identify changes in thematic priorities and in the formulation of the categories "archaic", "authentic", and "pagan".

The critical archival approach made it possible to consider the archive itself as a factor of power. The rules for accepting manuscripts into district, university, and editorial collections, as well as censorship instructions regulating the permissible content of descriptions of "superstitions", were analysed. The method explained the uneven representation of demonological plots and revealed how institutional selection set the subsequent research horizon. The method of sociolinguistic hermeneutics focused on the linguistic codes of recorded rituals: dialectisms, Church Slavonicisms, and notes of administrative style. The distribution of regional lexemes was analysed in connection with the social status of informants and editors. This made it possible to determine which linguistic forms were subject to normalisation and which were preserved – helping to interpret accurately the semantic nuances of the terms "spirit", "devil", and "Perun" in various records and to identify latent meanings "hidden" behind censorship-acceptable words. Within the framework of the historical-legal analysis of the censorship regulations, the Censorship Act (1826), the Valuyev Circular (1863), the Ems Decree (1876), and later decrees of the Main Directorate of Censorship were examined.

### Results

The formation of the ethnographic archive of primitive beliefs in Eastern Europe from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century took place under the influence of profound transformations in the humanities and in social self-perception. Ethnography as a scientific practice emerged in an era when national projects gradually replaced the universalist paradigm of the Enlightenment. In this context, attention to the pre-Christian beliefs of peoples – particularly the Slavs – acquired political and ideological significance. Archives that began to form within historical, archaeographic, and later folkloric-ethnographic societies accumulated materials not only as relics of the previous times but also as evidence of the deep cultural continuity of nations. Special importance was given to records attesting to the uniqueness, "primordially", and ideological completeness of the pre-civilisational worldview. At the turn of the eighteenth-nineteenth centuries, a combination of historiographical interest and ideas of national revival was observed, which encouraged the archiving of oral sources, legends, apocrypha, ritual texts, and mentions of the

deification of natural forces (Rohde, 2019). The work of G. Uspensky (1818) was analysed – the original is preserved at the Vernadsky National Library of Ukraine (Kyiv), and its digitised version was obtained from the Internet Archive digital library – where it was determined that primitive beliefs were presented as part of the “Russian antiquities” deserving description and preservation. At the same time, collectors often preferred materials that corresponded to the idea of the “authentic” and the “archaic”, neglecting mixed or adapted forms. In the mid-nineteenth century, the narrative shifted under the influence of Slavophilism and romantic historicism – mythological elements became not only a subject of analysis but also an instrument of cultural legitimisation (Halperin, 2022). The work of M.I. Kostomarov (1847) was analysed – the original is preserved at the Vernadsky National Library of Ukraine (Kyiv), and its digitised version was obtained from the Internet Archive digital library – where it was determined that the study sought to reconstruct the system of pre-Christian beliefs as integral, logical, and organic to the Slavic ethos, which corresponded to the general trend of “intellectualising” myth as evidence of the depth of national tradition.

The methodology of field research aimed at recording the oral tradition containing remnants of primitive beliefs in the second half of the nineteenth – early twentieth centuries developed at the intersection of observation, descriptive surveying, and limited researcher participation in ritual processes (Reports and Records..., 1888). During this period, there was no unified methodological standard, and therefore each researcher acted according to the own intuition, goals, and experience. Oral tradition was regarded primarily as an artefact of the previous times that required preservation before its final disappearance due to modernisation processes, religious standardisation, or urbanisation.

This research attitude – consisting of a romantic desire to record the “archaic” and “authentic” elements of pre-Christian beliefs as evidence of cultural continuity and national identity – determined the intensive and often unsystematic character of ethnographic collection. As a result, empirical accumulation of materials often outpaced the analytical comprehension and theoretical interpretation. The methods included mainly observing the behaviour of bearers of tradition during rituals, recording oral reports about beliefs, and noting incidental expressions, omens, and incantations. A significant part of the field materials consisted of answers to questionnaires distributed to educational institutions or local intellectuals, which cast doubt on the immediacy and reliability of testimonies (Horák, 2022).

The collection of materials was mainly carried out through local respondents who simultaneously served as interpretative intermediaries, transforming information according to the own educational level, moral views, and notions of scholarly legitimacy. This created a

potentially subjective situation in which the primitive was perceived through the prism of contemporary rationalist or Christian concepts. The practice of P. Chubinsky (1872) was analysed; P. Chubinsky’s expedition materials are preserved in the archival collections of the M.T. Rylsky Institute of Art History, Folklore Studies and Ethnology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine and are gradually being digitised, providing new opportunities for study – where, particularly in the third volume of the ethnographic corpus, the recording of calendar rituals was carried out through observation of cyclical ceremonies in a specific region. The researcher consistently registered seasonal customs in which Christian symbols coexisted with traces of pre-Christian beliefs – including magical practices, the cult of natural forces, and the cult of the dead (Diakiv, 2018).

The methodology of P. Chubinsky had a descriptive nature but preserved an important empirical component – the sense of the researcher’s involvement in the space of rural life. The work of R.F. Kindl (2000) devoted to the Hutsuls was analysed – the original is preserved in the Archive of the University of Graz (Austria), and its digitised version was obtained from the Chytyvo digital library – where it was determined that it displayed a narrower but deeper approach to recording beliefs, considering these beliefs as an inseparable part of everyday life. Unlike most authors, R.F. Kindl focused on observing ritual actions in the “living” forms, particularly during rites of passage, seasonal festivals, or agricultural practices. R.F. Kindl’s attention to syncretic forms of belief allowed the “primitive” to be seen not as an isolated phenomenon but as an active element in the structures of later rituality. The most complex aspect of field documentation was the identification of genuinely archaic elements in mixed rituals. Researchers tended to highlight what seemed the “oldest”, neglecting the complex contexts of religious adaptation. The primitive appeared not as a fact but as a construct – the result of selection carried out not only by the bearers of tradition but also by researchers operating within a particular cultural horizon of expectations.

In the process of ethnographic recording of primitive beliefs, the problem of distinguishing between folklore as a cultural form and religious experience as an intimate, existential practice acquired particular significance (Ethnographic Review, vol. LXIII, 1904). This division was not explicitly articulated in the terminology of the scholars of the time, yet it was clearly traced in the manner of description and categorisation of material. Collected myths, legends, charms, conceptions of spirits, demons, or the otherworld were rarely regarded as religion in the full sense of the word. Such materials were mainly treated as remnants, rudiments, or cultural layers that had lost the sacred meaning. In this context, ethnographers followed classificatory schemes in which folklore – unlike religion – was viewed as a nationally marked but largely secularised form of collective memory.

In the course of this research, the work of A. Czarnocki & W. Surowiecki (1834) was analysed – the manuscripts of which are preserved in the archives of the Russian State Library and the Library of Vilnius University and are available to researchers as high-quality digital copies – where an attempt was observed to grant mythology the status of a complete worldview system. The authors emphasised the internal logic of beliefs in which the deification of nature, the cult of ancestors, and conceptions of the division of the world and spiritual hierarchy functioned as elements of a coherent and organised outlook. This indicated an aspiration to restore to archaic content the dignity of a system which, in the context of the nineteenth century, could compete with Christianity as the dominant ideology of the time. Such an approach blurred the boundary between the religious and the folkloric, seeking to integrate both spheres into a shared mythological structure represented as a coherent worldview system (Deinega, 2024).

A completely different model of representation was chosen by P. Chubinsky (1872), particularly in the seventh volume, which presents ethnographic material from the territory inhabited by “Little Russians” – a term used in the official, administrative, and scholarly discourse of the Russian Empire to denote the Ukrainian population, primarily of the Left Bank, Slobozhanshchyna, and partly the South. The use of this term carried not only geographical but also ideological connotations – “Little Russians” were regarded as a regional ethnographic group of a single “Great Russian people”, rather than as a distinct nation with its own historical, linguistic, and cultural continuity. This terminology reflected an imperial strategy of unification that subordinated local identities to a centralised model. P. Chubinsky, operating within the official terminology of that time, used the term “Little Russians” in statistical and descriptive classifications without questioning its ideological foundation (Chikalo, 2019). At the same time, the author’s material demonstrates the actual cultural distinctiveness of the studied population, expressed in its system of beliefs, rituals, and linguistic features – thereby opening space for further rethinking of ethnic categorisation imposed from outside.

The author’s description had a distinctly ethnographic orientation – beliefs were presented as part of folk life, linguistic specificity, and social practices. Rituals associated with spirits, the dead, thresholds, or wild places were considered not as expressions of a religious system but as traditions rooted in the “folk character” (Lebid & Shevchenko, 2021). P. Chubinsky avoided metaphysical judgements, instead paying attention to the diversity of ritual forms linked to specific elements of the environment – dwellings, the calendar, and the agricultural cycle. In this way, folklore in the author’s description was separated from religion, yielding the role of a marker of ethnic identity. An indirect, but extremely important problem of such desacralisation was those primitive beliefs, when entering texts, lost part of the ontological

meaning. Researchers, failing to perceive behind these materials a living religious experience, reduced such evidence to cultural tradition, ritual custom, or verbal formula. Thus, in the descriptions, folklore often displaced the sacred, creating the impression of the pre-Christian not as a worldview reality but as a colourful background of folk mentality (Gülüm, 2023).

The problem of material selection in the process of ethnographic documentation of primitive beliefs was crucial in the structure of the formation of archival corpora of the eighteenth-twentieth centuries. The collected field material was never neutral – it always reflected the collector’s intentions, aesthetic, ideological, or scholarly orientations. What was considered “worthy of recording” depended not only on the informativeness or prevalence of a ritual, but also on how much a particular element corresponded to the researcher’s notions of authenticity, archaism, or uniqueness. Above all, what was deemed “ancient”, “mysterious”, or “miraculous” was considered valuable – often that which stood out from the flow of everyday life (Diakiv, 2018).

In this context, interest developed in peculiar characters, ritual exotica, remnants of magical actions, or demonological imagination. It is possible to trace how researchers consciously sought the unusual – rare spell formulas, references to the deification of natural objects, or local beliefs in unclean forces. The selection had a selective nature and rarely encompassed the entire ritual system in its everyday completeness. This caused a distortion of representativeness – archives became overburdened with unusual, “colourful” cases, while the ordinary and everyday receded into the background. In analysing the work of M.I. Kostomarov (1847), preserved in the holdings of the Central State Historical Archives of Ukraine in Kyiv, digitised versions were used, which clearly revealed the priority of mythological structures – the author regarded these narratives as evidence of a high degree of organisation of the pre-Christian worldview. The researcher’s attention focused on plots that could be incorporated into the logic of pantheism or the structure of personified deities (Horák, 2022).

Within this approach, materials that did not lend to systematisation – and therefore did not fit into the “classical” model of religion – often remained overlooked. Consequently, an idealised image of a primitive religion was formed, corresponding to the expectations of the educated nineteenth-century reader. P. Chubinsky, by contrast, showed interest in the everyday rootedness of customs – P. Chubinsky valued rituals integrated into the rural rhythm of life (Skrypnyk, 2009). However, even in the author’s works, it is evident that materials were often chosen for the symbolic vividness or ritual completeness. The researcher’s volumes contained examples from different regions, but the selection and structure of presentation testified to an orientation towards the typical or the “ethnographically significant”. The absence of explanations regarding what was excluded or

considered “secondary” created unevenness in the representation of regional forms of belief.

The format of preserving ethnographic material collected throughout the eighteenth-twentieth centuries significantly influenced the way it was comprehended, reproduced, and further interpreted. The materials originally existed in the form of handwritten notebooks, diaries, individual questionnaire responses, and reports submitted by local priests, teachers, or officials. The processing and systematisation depended on the researcher’s initiative, the specific characteristics of the institution that received these records, and publishing capacities. Often, documentation was carried out according to convenient but artificial criteria – for example, by administrative-territorial principle or by the calendar cycle of holidays. This created surface orderliness, yet concealed the multilayeredness and variability of the beliefs. Field diaries played an important role in preserving context – the description of the situation, the behaviour of informants, the specific time or place of recording (Rotem, 2024). However, a significant portion of such records was never published or underwent cuts, which destroyed the structure of empirical observation. The diary format allowed the fixation of spontaneity of events, and therefore unexpected elements of rituality. Yet, when transformed into published form, this material often lost its informality, blending with typified descriptions. A special place was occupied by questionnaire surveys, which began to be widely used in the second half of the nineteenth century. Questionnaires standardised the form of responses, oriented the informant towards a certain type of knowledge, and sometimes even suggested the desired content. This created an effect of documentary accuracy which, however, could be misleading. The level of detail in responses depended not on the ritual itself, but on the literacy of the respondent, the respondent’s interpretative skills, and personal motivation. Thus, the collected material acquired an appearance of systematisation which was often the product of editorial work rather than the internal logic of the belief (Diakiv, 2018).

In the case of P. Chubinsky (1872), it is possible to see an example of large-scale work that combined all the mentioned forms of recording. The author’s multi-volume publication, especially in the volumes devoted to folk customs and rituals, demonstrated a geographical and thematic structure of presentation – each region was represented under specific rubrics: calendar, ritual, language, conceptions of the supernatural. Such systematisation contributed to surveyability, but at the same time caused the reduction of complex local contexts to generalised categories. The fragmentary character of the sources was partly compensated by editorial systematisation; however, as shown by the analysis of digitised handwritten materials from the archives of the M.T. Rylsky Institute of Art History, Folklore Studies and Ethnology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine,

this procedure eliminated the authorial stylistics of the primary records. Thus, the format of ethnographic documentation became not merely a technical instrument, but also a means of influencing the way culture was represented. It was precisely through the structure of the archive that the boundaries were established for what was considered relevant, true, and representative – and what fell beyond the scope of scholarly attention.

The representation of primitive beliefs in the first ethnographic publications of the eighteenth-nineteenth centuries was shaped under clearly defined publishing norms, ideological constraints, and regulated practices of content control over printed material (Horák, 2022). Field materials collected through observation, interviews, or direct participation in rituals generally did not appear in print in the original form. During editorial processing, the style of presentation, terminological content, structural composition of the text, and thematic emphases were altered. These modifications were determined not only by the need for systematisation and ordering of empirical data but also by external factors related to the censorship policy operating in the Russian Empire.

Censorship legislation, in particular the Censorship Act (1826), directly prohibited the publication of materials containing references to “pagan remnants”, “superstitions”, or any practices that could be interpreted as incompatible with Orthodox dogma. According to imperial circulars of the 1860s-1870s, the public reproduction of information about demonological concepts, corporeal rituals, or sexually marked ritual acts was qualified as “corruption of the national spirit” or “dissemination of harmful ideas”. In connection with this, descriptions of sacrifices, mentions of cults of demonic beings, or magical instruments were subject to removal or neutralisation during text preparation for publication. Control over ethnographic publications originating from territories with strongly expressed regional cultural specificity took on a particularly strict form. Within the framework of the Valuyev Circular (1863) and the Ems Decree (1876), restrictions were imposed on the use of the Ukrainian language in scholarly and popular texts related to folk culture. This created additional barriers to publishing descriptions of customs and beliefs, particularly from Right-Bank Ukraine and the south-western governorates, which retained distinct archaic elements.

In the work of A. Czarnocki & W. Surowiecki (1834), which presents an overview of the pre-Christian culture of the Slavs, an ideologically coloured framework was used – culture was described as an integral pre-national phenomenon in which primitive beliefs acted as markers of national character. The authors did not focus on specific rituals, did not record local variants or functional distinctions. Instead, an abstract exposition dominated, approaching a philosophical treatise in which the pre-Christian was imagined as a stage in the spiritual development of the people. Such a manner of presenting material created the impression of a completed

narrative in which ethnographic detail gave way to worldview generalisations.

G. Uspensky, on the other hand, adhered to a historical-documentary approach, giving preference to fragmentary information from written sources concerning the "antiquities" of Rus'. G. Uspensky's representation had an archaeographic character, in which the authority of the chronicle, the fact of the tradition's existence, and its temporal dimension were of primary importance (Ignatusha, 2020). Such a descriptive model displaced the living religious experience into the previous times, forming the perception of beliefs as remnants rather than an active system. P. Chubinsky (1872), in the multivolume work, demonstrated a different approach – closer to empirical generalisation. The author's structured volumes provided examples of actual ritual practices, folklore, everyday beliefs, and observations collected from different regions. Yet even in this case, the text underwent editorial processing – certain themes were omitted, and the description was presented in a form that avoided potentially "controversial" aspects, such as sexual or bloody rituals. The tone of representation corresponded to the expectations of the readership of that time, which sought in ethnography a morally acceptable, aesthetically appealing, yet "exotic" picture of folk culture. As a result, the representation of primitive beliefs in early ethnographic editions turned into a form of secondary

interpretation in which factual material was subordinated to the formal and cultural demands of the time. This led not only to the loss of individual details, but also to the deformation of the very logic of beliefs – from preserved practice to an element of the narrative about the "national bygone".

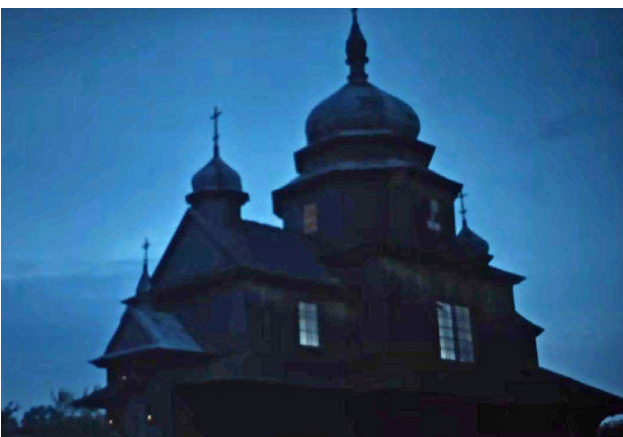
By the late nineteenth century, commercial publishers actively translated pre-Christian ritual plots into the format of inexpensive lubok prints, transforming sacred motifs into vivid graphic "icons" of mass culture. In such pictures, Kupala wreaths and fortune-telling, figures of sorceresses, and scenes of taming unclean forces were presented not as living rituals but as humorous, easily readable ornaments of rural exoticism suitable for sale at city fairs. A telling example is the single-sheet lubok Tale about how a craftsman tricked the devil (1867), now preserved in the collections of the New York Public Library, in the graphic art holdings of the Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs. In it, the confrontation between the craftsman and the devil serves as a plot for a humorous "demonic" attraction, testifying to the transformation of folk demonology into a decorative commodity for the modern audience. The visual stylisation, satirical plot, and narrative logic emphasise the transformation of pre-Christian concepts into part of the illustrated entertainment culture of the second half of the nineteenth century (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. Lubok print Tale about how a craftsman tricked the devil, interpretation of the late nineteenth century  
Source: Tale about how a craftsman tricked the devil (1867)

The mechanism of exhibition theatricalisation reinforced this process – the Moscow Ethnographic Exhibition of 1867 displayed more than three hundred mannequins placed in dioramas of “typical” wedding and funeral scenes. The ritual, transferred into the museum space, became a scientific and decorative object that legitimised the distance between the modern viewer and the “archaic” actor (Jezernik, 2019). The film version of the story *Viy* (1967) represents an example of the visual transformation of pre-Christian demonology under the conditions of Soviet mass culture. Through the means of cinematic language, the film actualised the potential of folkloric heritage as a resource of audiovisual attraction in the media environment of the late Soviet era. Built on the basis of a three-day ritual of night vigil near the coffin of a mystical deceased woman, the plot transfers the viewer into a local Ukrainian context, staged as an “other space” – a sacralised and simultaneously threatening environment.

The landscape openness of misty ravines and the wooden church contrasts with the claustrophobic intimacy of the church interior, where the conflict with the supernatural unfolds (Fig. 2). Elements such as the chalk circle, icons, amulets, or incantations lose the original ritual-protective function and transform into means of emotional impact aimed at provoking the viewer’s fear. In this context, the film acts as a representative of the process of commercialising traditional demonological themes, which, being interpreted through the tools of cinematography, acquires new forms within cultural production. In this way, nineteenth-twentieth century mass culture oscillated between romanticised ethnographic stylisation and atheistic deheroisation – each time reducing the sacred dimension of primitive beliefs to a symbolic code adapted to the needs of the market for printed, exhibition, and cinematographic formats (Ashwin, 2024).



**Figure 2.** Frame of a wooden church from the film “*Viy*”  
Source: *Viy* (1967)

Modern ethnographers of the late nineteenth – early twentieth centuries interpreted the recorded pre-Christian practices of peasants through evolutionary,

confessional, and ethnocentric frameworks, which led to systemic semantic shifts. The evolutionist paradigm inherited from Tylor and Morgan assumed a gradual transition from “natural faith” to “rational” monotheism, therefore the rituals were regarded as historical “survivals” doomed to extinction (Decter, 2020). In such a conceptual field, M.I. Kostomarov (1847), working with South Russian folklore – as evidenced by the analysis of the notes from the collections of the Vernadsky National Library of Ukraine, access to which was obtained through its digital collections – arranged local plots into a hierarchically organised “Slavic religion of nature”, although field notes demonstrated the fragmentary and situational nature of beliefs. In different communities, the “master of the forest” or “mother of rye” performed different functions and did not form a stable dogmatic system. The research bias towards the “development of forms” contributed to selective data sampling – material that did not correspond to the scheme of sequential stages was classified as “distorted” by the influence of Christianity and set aside from the main publication corpus.

In Russian, Polish, and Ukrainian historiographies, pre-Christian elements were used as an argument for the antiquity of the “national spirit” (Warren, 2023). From the contradictory field corpus preserved in the archives of the Shevchenko Scientific Society in Lviv and the Polish Anthropological Society – whose publications and reports are actively being digitised – plots were selected that reinforced the concept of continuous continuity: the cult of the thunder deity was interpreted as the “state principle” of the Eastern Slavs, the Kupala element as a symbol of folk sensuality, and the ritual burning of *didukhs* as evidence of agrarian sacredness (Paliga, 2022). The variability of local practices was ignored or reduced to “insignificant deviations”, since it did not correspond to the unification programmes of cultural policy. As a result, archival corpora were filled with texts that confirmed pre-constructed schematics, while everyday, pragmatic, or ambivalent layers of beliefs remained insufficiently recorded. The cumulative effect of evolutionism, the confessional discourse of “superstition”, and ethnocentric selection contributed to the loss of contextual multilayeredness of unique field evidence (Midena & Yeo, 2022). The “archaic worldview” reconstructed in publications mostly reflected the researcher’s intellectual expectations, rather than the polyphonic and situationally variable nature of the religious practices of the bearers.

In the nineteenth century, the representation of primitive beliefs in ethnographic publications was largely determined by publishing practices, ideological contexts, and the expectations of the target audience – primarily the intelligentsia, consisting of scholars, clergy, and aristocracy. Field materials collected through observation, oral fixation, or questionnaires were rarely published without substantial editing. The style, composition, terminology, and length of texts were adapted to the scientific and cultural standards of the era. This

particularly concerned cultic and magical practices – especially those related to demonology – which were often subject to censorship, being softened, simplified, or entirely removed to meet the ethical and moral expectations of the educated reader. In the Russian Empire, ethnographic works were subject to review by censorship committees that ensured the texts did not promote “harmful” ideas or undermine the authority of power (Zavlunov, 2022).

In Western Europe, particularly in Austria-Hungary, censorship was less strict, but authors often practised self-censorship to conform to Enlightenment ideals of rationality and progress. University libraries in Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Lviv played a key role in systematising ethnographic materials. These libraries used classification systems such as Dewey Decimal Classification, developed in 1876, or locally designed systems, especially in libraries operating under the influence of the Russian Empire. By the late nineteenth – early twentieth century, some libraries began to apply the Universal Decimal Classification, developed by Paul Otlet and Henri La Fontaine, but its introduction in Ukraine before 1917 was limited due to political and economic conditions. Censorship played a significant role in shaping the content of ethnographic publications. Publishers and authors adapted materials to the tastes of the educated audience, which included scholars, clergy, and aristocracy. Descriptions of primitive beliefs – especially those concerning magic, demonology, or pagan rituals – were often edited or removed so as not to violate religious and social norms. In the Russian Empire, censorship committees reviewed texts to prevent the propagation of “uncivilised” or “immoral” beliefs (Dobko, 2018).

The cross-border exchange of ethnographic materials in the late nineteenth – early twentieth century fostered collaboration between Ukrainian and European academic institutions. In particular, the Shevchenko Scientific Society, founded in 1873 in Lviv, played a key role in such exchanges (Kuzhel, 2024). The research used data from the archive of the Shevchenko Scientific Society, as well as digitised versions of its periodical publications (Notes of the Shevchenko Scientific Society), which indicate that in the 1890s-1900s the Society cooperated with European institutions, exchanging ethnographic materials such as records of Ukrainian ritual texts and folklore. International ethnographic societies, such as the Polish Anthropological Society, founded in 1895 in Lviv, were oriented towards comparative ethnology, which facilitated the inclusion of Slavic materials in pan-European reviews. For instance, the works of Oskar Kolberg, who systematised Polish and partly Ukrainian folklore, were used for comparisons with Czech and other Slavic collections (Jasiewicz, 2022). However, the unification of formulations necessary for international standards sometimes led to the loss of local specificities. Each institution determined its own priority genres, regions, and thematic groups, which influenced the

primary scholarly selection of the corpus of pre-Christian beliefs, reflecting the ideological and cultural priorities of the era – aimed at adapting materials to the needs of the educated audience consisting of scholars, clergy, and aristocracy (Smolińska, 2023).

The digital age has introduced qualitative changes in the ways of preserving, interpreting, and popularising ethnographic heritage. Previously, manuscript corpora remained accessible only in archives and libraries, and the use was limited to researchers’ physical access to the collections. As of the early 2020s, digital technologies have made it possible to digitise, systematise, and publish ethnographic sources in open access. The transfer of materials from catalogues, reporting editions, or periodicals into digital format is carried out using tools of digital humanities such as optical character recognition, integration into multimedia platforms with hyper-text links, and historical-cartographic visualisation. OCR technologies ensure the conversion of scanned texts into machine-readable formats, opening possibilities for linguistic, semantic, and toponymic analysis of large data arrays (Dobko, 2018).

Hyperlinks, tagging, and mapping contribute to creating new reading routes, allowing materials to be integrated into educational and museum programmes, popularising such resources beyond the academic environment. Digitisation facilitates the reintegration of previously marginalised topics, such as local reports on pagan rituals or records of folk beliefs. Digital libraries not only ensure accessibility but also provoke new demands for critical rethinking – particularly concerning the origins of classifications, ideological processing, or linguistic editing. Thus, digital humanities not only provide technical conservation of ethnographic heritage but also form new epistemological approaches to its study (Hall, 2020).

The formation of the ethnographic archive of primitive beliefs in Eastern Europe throughout the eighteenth-twentieth centuries was a process determined not so much by objective documentation as by the ideological, cultural, and political factors of the epoch. From the very beginning, this process was marked by the subjectivity of romantic researchers seeking the “authentic” previous times and the imperfection of field methods. The collected material underwent further transformations through editorial systematisation, which unified local peculiarities, strict state censorship that removed “undesirable” elements, and academic interpretations that framed fragmentary data. Moreover, sacred beliefs were reduced to folkloric artefacts and commercialised by mass culture – which finally detached these beliefs from the original context. Thus, the archive is not a direct mirror of the previous times but a complex palimpsestic structure, whose critical reading has become possible only through modern digital approaches that allow analysis not only of the beliefs but also of the history of the representation.

## Discussion

The results of the study reveal the complex process of forming the ethnographic archive of primitive beliefs in Eastern Europe from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century, emphasising the influence of ideological, methodological, and publishing factors on the representation of pre-Christian traditions. The analysis of the works of G. Uspensky (1818), M.I. Kostomarov (1847), P. Chubinsky (1872), and R.F. Kindl (2000) demonstrates how ethnographic documentation reflected not only empirical data but also the cultural and national projects shaped within the context of romantic historicism, Slavophilism, and imperial unification. It was found that the selective choice of materials, driven by biases regarding "archaism" or "authenticity", led to the distortion of the original context of beliefs, reducing these beliefs to folkloric or decorative elements, as seen in lubok prints and cinematographic adaptations such as Viy (1967). The significance of these results lies in revealing the mechanisms of constructing ethnographic knowledge, where ideological frameworks, censorship restrictions, and commercial interests shaped the perception of primitive beliefs as a cultural rather than a religious phenomenon. This opens new perspectives for reinterpreting archival data in digital humanities, contributing to the restoration of lost contexts and the multi-layered nature of traditions.

P. Blasen (2023) showed that in Habsburg Bukovina from the late eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century, confessional competition between Greek Catholic and Orthodox clergy contributed to the formation of "religious indifference", within which peasants chose church jurisdiction based on administrative or economic motives, reducing the need for dogmatic control over extra-ecclesiastical rituals. The conducted research established that precisely the weakness of dogmatic supervision allowed ethnographers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to record a significant array of pre-Christian practices, which the archives interpreted as "cultural survivals" rather than elements of living religiosity. The author of the study interpreted the flexible confessional identification of the population as a factor of secularisation, whereas in the present research such flexibility was viewed as a precondition for the ethnographic selection of "archaic" material suitable for national-cultural legitimisation. The author worked mainly with governmental circulars and diocesan reports and concluded that church policy diminished peasants' interest in non-confessional rituals, whereas in the conducted research the analysis of archival diaries and questionnaires showed that precisely the exclusion of these rituals from official cults reinforced the local sacred significance.

R. Hoppadietz & K. Reichenbach (2025) showed that mass exhibitions, historical festivals, and musical-theatrical performances of Central Europe from the late nineteenth to the first third of the twentieth century systematically "staged" pre-Christian motifs, transferring

these motifs from the museum or archival format into the spectacular space of popular culture. The conducted study proved that already at the stage of primary cataloguing of field records, archival and censorship filters built the canon of "archaic" plots, which later became the source for such spectacular representation. The authors of the study interpreted ethnic "performances of the previous times" as a mechanism for constructing collective memory through the emotional immersion of the viewer, whereas in the present research the emphasis was placed on the textual-documentary consolidation of mythologemes within folkloric-ethnographic collections. R. Hoppadietz & K. Reichenbach applied methods of cultural performativity and media studies, identifying the significance of directorial decisions and stage iconography, while the critical archival approach used in the conducted study highlighted structural constraints that shaped the repertoire of "pagan survivals".

T. Kosiek (2023) focused on linguistic interactions between the researcher and respondents during modern fieldwork and proved that the coexistence of Ukrainian and Polish linguistic codes determined the degree of informants' trust and the volume of collected narratives. The conducted research found that in the nineteenth century, linguistic mediation by local clerks and teachers caused material selection even before its archiving, and dialectisms and "incorrect" forms were often removed by editors, transforming the original ritual lexicon. The author interpreted linguistic contact as a dynamic "practice of position alignment", whereas in the present study, linguistic correction was considered an instrument of normalisation and unification of the text for censorship and publishing purposes. T. Kosiek used ethno-linguistic observation and reflexive notes, emphasising the importance of situational translation, while the critical archival approach employed in the conducted research allowed tracing how linguistic standardisation shaped the long-term archival canon. The author's study showed that multilingualism increased the level of empathy and detail of narration, whereas the results of the present study demonstrated that the historical reduction of multilingualism decreased the cultural variability of sources.

M. Rohde & H. Justnik (2024) demonstrated that imperial photographic documentation of the Carpathians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries constructed a visual "space of belonging", in which peasant rituals became part of the panoramic landscape and confirmed the Habsburg narrative of cultural diversity. The conducted research established those textual diaries and questionnaires of the same period represented these rituals mainly as "archaic survivals" suitable for systematisation in folkloric-ethnographic rubrics rather than for the imperial ideologue of "local landscapes". The authors of the study, through visual analysis, traced how the photographers' compositional decisions aligned with the policy of integrating local groups into the symbolic map of the monarchy, whereas in the

present research the archival-critical approach highlighted how editorial cuts and genre catalogues removed spatial context from handwritten descriptions. In the authors' study it was concluded that photography integrated ritual into the imperial discourse of multiculturalism, while the results of the present study showed that the absence of a visual layer in textual archives contributed to the interpretation of the same rituals as isolated ethnographic phenomena. The difference in approaches lay in the fact that M. Rohde & H. Justnik's work emphasised the visual politics of inclusion, whereas in the conducted research the decisive factor was the process of textual normalisation, which narrowed the potential of the ritual to proof of "pre-civilisational" authenticity.

J.H. Ward & S.C. Clark (2021) analysed the library-archival complex of the American Hungarian Foundation and proved that diaspora collections formed from émigré contributions contained a large proportion of "invisible" field records that became accessible only after complete digitisation and retro-conversion of cards. The conducted research showed that in the state archives of Eastern Europe, the pre-digital stage already at the stage of acquisition limited public access through censorship and genre rubrics, so metadata were formed under the angle of "pagan survivals" rather than ethnic diaspora. The authors of the study discovered that the main problem was the fragmentariness of descriptive fields, which hindered the search for contextual information about the ritual, whereas in the present research the decisive factor was the lack of context itself in the primary manuscripts due to editorial cuts; thus, the difference lay between the technical incompleteness of metadata and the substantive reduction of text. J.H. Ward & S.C. Clark emphasised the potential of crowdsourced annotation for restoring semantic links, whereas the conducted research proposed a critical re-evaluation of historical classifications before the transfer into the digital environment.

P.H. Zou & B.E. Priscilla (2023) proved that folklore narratives were formed around collectively experienced trauma and represented "shared grief" as the main mechanism of group identification. The conducted research testified that ethnographic documentation of pre-Christian beliefs in eighteenth- to twentieth-century archives-built identity primarily through the criterion of "archaic continuity" rather than through the affective experience of loss. The authors applied a discursive-psychoanalytic approach to oral narrative, whereas the present study employed critical archival science and textual criticism, which highlighted the role of censorship and editorial selection in constructing the corpus of beliefs. P.H. Zou & B.E. Priscilla interpreted demonological plots as carriers of the community's traumatic memory, whereas in the conducted analysis these same plots were considered the result of institutional selection of "exotic" elements suitable for national-romantic legitimisation. The authors' results emphasised the therapeutic function of folklore, whereas the present research revealed

that archival representation deprived texts of the original emotional multidimensionality through language normalisation and the removal of "indecent" fragments.

The results of the study reveal the complex process of forming the ethnographic archive of primitive beliefs in Eastern Europe from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century, emphasising the influence of ideological, methodological, and publishing factors on the representation of pre-Christian traditions. Ethnographic documentation reflected cultural and national projects determined by romantic historicism, Slavophilism, and imperial unification, leading to the selective choice of "archaic" materials and the reduction of the sacred to folkloric elements, as seen in lubok prints and cinematographic adaptations. Comparison with other studies shows that weak dogmatic control, linguistic standardisation, visual and textual normalisation, as well as archival constraints, shaped a distorted image of primitive beliefs as a cultural rather than a religious phenomenon. The significance of these results lies in highlighting the mechanisms of constructing ethnographic knowledge, which opens perspectives for digital humanities in restoring lost contexts and the multi-layered nature of traditions.

## Conclusions

The formation and further transformation of the ethnographic archive of pre-Christian beliefs in Eastern Europe in the nineteenth century are considered through multi-layered analysis. The work simultaneously encompasses three interrelated blocks: institutional-organisational (the development of historical-archaeographic and folkloric-ethnographic societies), methodological (the evolution of field and questionnaire practices), and representative (methods of publication, commercial "packaging", and censorship filtering of material). The comparison of a wide range of sources – from handwritten diaries and questionnaires to mass lubok editions and the Soviet cinematographic interpretation of *Viy* – made it possible to trace how the sacred meanings of the pre-Christian layer were gradually displaced by decorative-marketing strategies, and how scientific-institutional procedures shaped the "archival" image of tradition. As a result, a systematic description was proposed of how political, ideological, and commercial factors influenced the selection, description, and popularisation of pre-Christian beliefs.

The main result of the study was the identification of systemic asymmetry between primary records and the printed versions. A comparative analysis of original manuscripts and digitised copies from the collections of the Vernadsky National Library of Ukraine, the M.T. Rylsky Institute of Art History, Folklore Studies and Ethnology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, and the Archive of the University of Graz proved that researchers consciously or unconsciously cut off material that did not fit the dominant evolutionary or national schemes.



Because of this, ethnographic archives consolidated an idealised, often constructed image of “archaic religion”.

The second important result concerns the institutional circulation of sources and the cross-border movement. Based on materials from the archives of the Shevchenko Scientific Society and the Polish Anthropological Society, it was proved that from the late nineteenth century these and related centres formed a network for the exchange of printed series, through which records of Ukrainian, Polish, and other Slavic beliefs entered the pan-European scientific field. At the same time, this process had a reverse side: the need for the unification of terminology for international catalogues led to the loss of dialect names and the levelling of local variations.

The third result is related to the decisive influence of publishing and censorship practices on the final form of the texts. The analysis of manuscripts, printed volumes, and graphics from the above-mentioned archives and libraries, as well as the study of legislative acts, testified to the systematic deletion or editing of “indecent” and ideologically “harmful” elements that did not correspond to the moral and confessional norms of the imperial era. As a result, primitive beliefs were represented

as a cultural “survival” rather than a living religious system. Such interference formed an orderly and rationalised image of “Slavic mythology”, which significantly differed from the chaotic and multifaceted field reality recorded in primary sources.

The limitations of the work are connected with the partial loss of manuscript collections due to wars, editorial-censorship deletions, and uneven digitisation of archives, which complicated the reconstruction of the full context of certain plots and required recourse to secondary reconstructions. Further research should be directed towards the critical re-publication of handwritten diaries and questionnaires with minimal editing; this would make it possible to restore the excluded fragments and verify the representativeness of printed corpora.

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## Етнографічна документація первісних вірувань слов'ян у архівах XVIII-XX ст.: методологія, репрезентація, проблеми інтерпретації

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**Анотація.** Актуальність дослідження зумовлювалася необхідністю аналізу того, як упродовж XVIII-XX століть змінювались підходи до фіксації, класифікації та інтерпретації дохристиянських вірувань слов'ян під впливом політичних, конфесійних і наукових трансформацій. Метою роботи було простежити повну послідовність трансформацій – від польового фіксування до архівного класифікування й публічної репрезентації – та визначити, які методологічні й ідеологічні чинники детермінували кінцеву структуру джерел. Методологія ґрунтувалася на порівняльному аналізі рукописних корпусів, цензурних приписів та масових видань із застосуванням концептів історії знання, критичної архівістики, текстологічної критики й соціолінгвістичної герменевтики. Було встановлено, що у XVIII-XIX ст. польові записи створювалися переважно описовими інтуїтивними методами, а критерій автентичності визначався естетичними й етнополітичними очікуваннями збирачів, що зумовлювало систематичне усунення синкретичних і буденних форм обрядової практики. Аналіз архівних класифікацій показав, що адміністративно-територіальні та жанрові рубрикації відокремлювали ритуальні дані від функціонального контексту, тоді як стандартизовані анкети, редакторські скорочення й автоцензура перетворювали багаточасові описи на уніфіковані статистичні одиниці. Співставлення рукописних джерел із лубковими виданнями, та ранніми кінематографічними сюжетами засвідчило, що на межі XIX-XX ст. релігійні мотиви демонології та аграрної магії репрезентувалися переважно як декоративні етнографічні маркери, узгоджені з просвітницькими канонами епохи. Узагальнення результатів підтвердило, що багаторівнева селекція, класифікація й редакторська обробка стабілізували певні інтерпретаційні моделі, одночасно маргіналізуючи контекстуальні варіації та ситуативні практики носіїв традиції. Практична цінність дослідження полягала у створенні набору критеріїв для реконструкції первинного ритуального контексту з фрагментарних і концептуально змінених джерел, які сприяють поглибленому розумінню етнографічних матеріалів у межах архівних і наукових практик

**Ключові слова:** польові матеріали; архаїчність; синкретизм; ритуал; систематизація; культура