

## WOMEN'S RITUAL PRACTICES IN THE CULTURE OF BELARUSIANS

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This article aims to highlight the dominant position of women within the symbolic space of Belarusian rural culture from the nineteenth to the early twenty-first century, and show the specific features of women's ritual practices known among Belarusians as *abrok* (a votive offering) and *abydzennik* (a one-day communal ritual to avert misfortune). The cultural anthropological analysis of these practices is based on the author's long-term field research and ethnographic literature. The study takes an ethno-sociological approach, and draws on concepts from gift and ritual theory, as well as gender studies. The first part of the article examines the status of women in rural society and their social responsibility within the symbolic field of relations among humans, ancestors, and the sacred, as well as the connection between women's rituals and traditional activities, such as spinning and weaving. The second part describes and interprets the votive ritual of offering textile gifts (*abroki*) at roadside crosses, other sacred sites and in churches, a practice which is still carried out today. The following section analyses the practice of making *abydzennik* and its associated rituals. The article emphasises that this ritual was revitalised in Belarusian villages during the Second World War and in Minsk in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. A conclusion is drawn about the significance of traditional women's socio-cultural experience and the need to consider its existence in culture and collective memory when assessing the social potential of modern Belarusian society.

KEYWORDS: folk culture, rural culture, women's ritual practices, *abrok*, *abydzennik*, Belarus.

The 2020 Belarusian revolution brought women onto the political stage and showed them as a force, not in the form of dominant leadership, but in its collective identity. The role of the three women who united and became the leaders of the new democratic movement, female white-and-red marches with flowers, symbolic women's actions that became media artefacts, the "imprisoned" Eve, a painting by Chaïm Soutine, which was arrested and became a symbol of resistance, as well as other manifestations of the new feminist force in the political field during the explosion

of social aspirations for democratic change and after its suppression in Belarus in recent years have become the subject of reflection by political scientists, sociologists and cultural anthropologists outside Belarus (Bekus 2021, Shparaga 2022, Kirshbaum 2023, Shitcova 2024).

The explosion of creative energy in 2020, the manifestations of which were filtered out of the social and media spheres in Belarus, is further amplified by numerous creative initiatives and projects in the emigrant community. Among them, one cannot ignore women's voices, whose narratives are becoming increasingly loud and visible. While it is not the purpose of this article to elaborate on this topic, I will point out what interests me as a researcher of traditional forms of women's culture in the Belarusian village: the increasingly evident trend in women's discourse is the reversion to the experience of their predecessors, to their rural cultural origins, searching for and rediscovering them. This is perhaps most vividly reflected in the words of Belarusian women writers. In this relation, one can recall the stories of female writer Eva Viežnaviec (2023) in *What Are You Coming for, Wolf?* and the debut by Golya z Opolya (2024), *My Granny – The Funeral Director*, written in the Polesian dialect. The authors embodied their childhood and adolescent experience of belonging to a rural women's community, absorbing knowledge from their grandmothers, including the sacred experience of traditional rituals and secret practices. Taking into account the materialised interest in books, albums and exhibitions (Leskec' 2022) devoted to women's practices of incantations and whispering, lending personality to village whisperers, it becomes clear that the public consciousness, manifested by the voice of the artists, exercises its interest in a topic that has never been a subject of attention or in demand as a cultural value before, nor has it been conceptualised or articulated in the Belarusian scientific discourse.

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To this day, the Belarusian countryside has preserved cultural forms and relics that developed in ancient times under an agrarian, pre-industrial society. The patterns of the traditional culture of Belarusians were passed on mainly through the female line. The patterns, symbols, canons and norms of the culture of traditional rural society were preserved in women's cultural memory, reproduced by women and passed on to the younger generation. Along with the function of keeping traditions, the woman's prerogative in traditional society included keeping the social balance at the level of family and kin, communication between the living and ancestors, helping the dead during their transition to the netherworld, as well as symbolic relations with the sacred.

The role and place of women in traditional culture have not been addressed in Belarusian ethnology and have not been confirmed as a subject of cultural and anthropological research. My previous publications were devoted to the traditional

activities of a rural woman – spinning, weaving and creating a beautiful visual environment in the form of clothing, interior and ceremonial fabrics. In analysing the phenomenon of women's creativity, I sought to present it as a distinctive form of female existence within traditional culture (Lobachevskaja 2003, 2013). This article aims to show that women dominate the symbolic space of Belarusian rural culture and to reveal the specifics of women's ritual practices, which are called *abrok* and *abydzennik*. Of course, this can be achieved only partially, as a rough estimate, within the framework of this article. Uncovering some aspects and forms of the gender specifics of the traditional culture of the Belarusian countryside, which is characterised as a peasant agrarian culture that has retained many archaic elements, and the significant role of the Belarusian women in it, allows us to gain a better understanding of the important social and political processes currently taking place in Belarusian society.

The concept of "traditional culture" is not a generally accepted scientific category. In Belarusian and Russian ethnology, cultural studies and folklore studies, the concept is synonymous with the term "folk culture" or "rural culture". The concept of traditional culture characterises a specific way of organising life activities based on the inheritance of collective meanings, values and norms. I use the concept without any ideological connotations to refer to village culture both in terms of the past and to its relics (rituals, folklore and mythology) in contemporary rural culture.

#### METHODOLOGY

The article is based on an extensive body of field material collected by the author as part of a comprehensive study of folk culture across all regions of Belarus, conducted during the 1990s and 2000s by the Belarusian State Institute of Cultural Studies, the Belarusian State University of Culture and Arts and the K. Krapiva Institute of Art Studies, Ethnography and Folklore of the Centre for Belarusian Culture, Language and Literature Research at the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus. The numerous oral testimonies gathered by me throughout almost the entire territory of Belarus regarding the existence of ritual obligations and the creation of everyday textiles have been partially summarised in the relevant sections of the multi-volume series of collective monographs *Traditional Artistic Culture of Belarusians*, volumes of which are devoted to six historical-ethnographic regions of Belarus: Poozerye, Eastern and Western Polesie, Ponemanye, Podneprovye and Central Belarus (Varfalameeva 2001–2013). Rich material on women's ritual practices was collected by me and under my supervision by participants of the International Interdisciplinary Humanities School of Central and Eastern Europe of the Centre for the Study of Traditions of Ancient Culture at the University of Warsaw (MSH OBTA) during

the implementation of the project “Belarus and Its Borderlands: History, Culture, Language” (2004–2006). The materials were collected through oral interviews with respondents – rural women of older and middle age – in the Gomel and Mogilev regions of Belarus and Belarusian settlements in the Podlaskie Voivodeship of Poland (audio recordings and their transcriptions are stored in the MSH OBTA archive in Warsaw).

At the beginning of my field research, my respondents were women of the older generation, born at the end of the nineteenth and in the first decade of the twentieth century, many of whom were illiterate. They conveyed the memories of their mothers and grandmothers regarding the practices of the *abydzennik* ritual in the second half of the nineteenth century. Subsequent research included the *kolkhoz* (Soviet collective farm) generation of rural women born in the 1920s to 1950s, who mostly had primary and secondary education. The research was conducted using a refined questionnaire and supplemented the previously collected materials with new details and testimonies, including numerous accounts of the *abydzennik* ritual during World War II.

In my independent research in recent years, the focus has been primarily on ritual practice, which continues to be consistently practised by rural women of the older and middle generations regardless of their education level and occupations, as well as by urban women originating from rural areas. Audio recordings of narratives, their transcriptions and visual documentation of contemporary ritual tradition are preserved in the author’s archive. The material on the female ritual culture of the Belarusian countryside, gathered in the nineteenth, twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, describes facts and requires analysis and contemporary interpretation.

Unlike the ritual of making *abydzonnaya* fabric (ritual fabric woven in one day), which was described by Belarusian and Russian ethnographers such as Adam Bohdanovich, Vladimir Dobrovolsky, Dmitry Zelenin and others in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, the women’s practice of *abrok* has only recently attracted the attention of researchers, notably Tatsiana Volodina (2023).

The ethnographic material gathered serves as a foundation for understanding the broader issues of the role of women in traditional culture and their ritual functions in society which have not been thoroughly explored in Belarusian anthropology. Nevertheless, studying it is an important task, as it may provide us with key insights into the nature of current social processes in Belarusian society.

The research methodology is grounded in the cultural-anthropological approach. To determine the nature of folk religiosity, of which the women’s ritual practices studied are a part, I have employed an ethnosociological approach (Obreński 2022), principles from gift theory and work on ritual theory (Mauss 2000, Cassirer 2011, Turner 1983, Eliade 2001), including contemporary studies on disaster rituals and gender studies by Russian scholars (Adonyeva 1998, 2004, Kabakova 2001).

## STATUS OF BELARUSIAN WOMEN IN THE CULTURE OF RURAL SOCIETY

In order to understand the cultural and social nature of women's ritual practices, it is necessary to outline, at least in brief, the status of Belarusian women in traditional rural society, as described in ethnographic literature.

The social status of Belarusian women in rural society until the beginning of the twentieth century was characterised by relative independence, the consolidation of certain freedoms in customary law and the established gender order: possession of dowry as property, leaving the marriage relationship through *prochki* (divorce as a result of a disagreement) or through *razluchyny* (breakup, when a woman could leave her husband's house permanently without any formalities and return to her parent's house) (Lastouski 1928, 40–42). After *prochki* or *razluchyny*, the woman retained the right to that part of the dowry, which consisted of fabrics and clothes she had made herself, inviolable since the Middle Ages, and all her personal property (Dovnar-Zapol'skij 1897, 117).

Divorces were not uncommon in peasant society, for which there were various reasons, including bigamy. This was encountered, for example, by members of a research expedition in 1927 in the villages of Stamagyli near Starobin and Knyaz-Voziera<sup>1</sup> (Mikitinski 1929, 31, 40). Recognising a woman's property rights under customary family law gave her a certain freedom as the mistress of the house, not as a servant of her husband. Although the man was officially considered the head of the family, in practice, the woman's role was very significant. The historian and ethnographer Mitrofan Dovnar-Zapolski wrote that in a "normal" peasant family, the wife enjoyed respect and equal rights with her husband, and "cases of cruel treatment of the wife by the husband are extremely rare and are explained by some exceptional circumstances" (Dovnar-Zapol'skij 1897, 106). In 1880, the priest Felix Stsepura wrote about family relations in the town of Semežava, emphasising the role of women: "The woman in the house is not a slave who must obey her husband's will and satisfy his whims, but a full-fledged mistress of the house. In all the most important points of domestic order, the husband will never do anything without his wife's consent and advice" (Stsepura 1880, 367). With male dominance in the public sphere, the relatively independent status of Belarusian peasant women in the family had a definite positive impact on their gender identity and the fulfilment of special cultural functions in traditional society.

Until the early twentieth century, the relics of the matricentric form of social organisation were preserved in the ritual sphere of the Belarusians. Ethnographer Vladimir Dobrovol'skij described a rare Belarusian wedding custom, when the groom allowed the bride to tumble over him three times during the wedding if he agreed that his wife's

1 Former village in the Pervomayskiy village council of Soligorsk district, Minsk region.

authority in the family would be higher than his and as a sign of consent to participate in the couvade ceremony. He believed: “This rite undoubtedly expresses subordination to the woman: a preliminary agreement for this rite is concluded only when the woman’s authority exceeds that of the man” (Dobrovol’skij 1893, 370, 372).

The custom known as the *kuvada* involved a man, during his wife’s pregnancy, demonstrating or asserting his rights to the child by dressing in women’s clothing and, imitating the physical act of childbirth, “assisting” the woman with moans. Sometimes, the midwife who delivered the child made the man, against his will, but with the help of magic, feel the pangs of childbirth synchronously with his wife (Dobrovol’skij 1893, 369–371). According to an existing Polesian legend explaining the origin of the rite, in the past, all husbands could take upon themselves the labour pains of their wives.

The story of how it happened was recorded at the beginning of the twentieth century by ethnographer Alexander Serzhputovski: “Before giving birth, the husband would stare into his wife’s eyes for a long time and then disappear from the house, go into the forest and there scream and beat himself against a tree” (quoted in Kabakova 2001, 68). There was also a preventive reason for a man’s agreement to participate in the couvade rite, that is, in this way he protected himself from possible magical actions performed by the woman in case of his *perelub* (adultery) (Dobrovol’skij 1893, 371). The materials of the Polesie archive<sup>2</sup>, to which the Russian anthropologist Galina Kabakova refers, testify that the archaic rite of *kuvada* was widespread in Polesie even in the twentieth century.

In anthropology, there are different approaches to interpreting the rite of couvade (Głazewska 2014, 83–192). However, I would like to underline the fact that the description of the Belarusian couvade emphasises the man’s empathy towards the woman and his voluntary sharing of family suffering with his wife by “suffering” himself. Observers of nineteenth century Belarusian folk life noted cases when a husband wholly obeyed his wife in the family and everyday life (Dovnar-Zapol’skij 1897, 107).

The gender relations of traditional Belarusian society stipulated the unconditional dominance of women in the ritual sphere and their responsibility for maintaining the life of the family, especially children, symbolic sacred relations with ancestors, as well as with supernatural beings and supreme divine patrons. The knowledge transfer in the female collective ensured these functions, and the process itself was naturally connected with labour and household activities.

In the common cultural space of traditional village society, until the middle of the twentieth century—until the completion of collectivisation and the socio-cultural

2 The database “Polesie Archive” is maintained by the Department of Ethnolinguistics and Folklore of the Institute of Slavic Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences. The material was collected from the 1970s to the 1990s under the direction of Russian ethnolinguist Nikita Tolstoy.

modernisation of the Belarusian village – there was an exclusively female segment, filled with specific female practices aimed at preparing young girls for female work in spinning, weaving and marital relations, as well as preparing married women for mastering magical healing practices and specific forms of ritual communication with the world of dead ancestors and the higher sphere of divine presence.

The social life of a peasant woman took place in the space of the female collective and centred around the main female occupations – harvesting, flax processing and spinning. Even in the middle of the twentieth century, the collective nature of such work was still preserved in villages. In Soviet collective farms, women also worked together on jobs requiring a large number of workers.

The autumn stage of raw flax processing, which included spinning, took place in women's collectives in the villages. This cycle of women's labour took up a significant period of every village woman's life. The exceptional importance of spinning for women of all social classes is reflected (Sikorskaja-Kulesha 2003, 63) in the term of kinship in the female line, *pa kudzeli* (by flax), which was used by the nobility in our lands together with the definition of origin in the male line, *pa miachy* (by the sword). This reflects not only the attributes of the basic activities of women and men but also symbolically embodies the gender opposition of female and male character, softness and metal, pliability and strength.

The complete spinning cycle of women's labour took place at evening sit-ins, talks or spinning parties when women of different ages gathered in a large, specially rented house. Here, their social and spiritual unity was formed. It was a closed sphere of women's lives, isolated from the male part of village society and patriarchal authority. The exception was the youth evening – spinning meetings with young men that had a marital intentions.

While mastering the spinning craft and improving their skills in this important business, the girls of the women's collective learned from the older women the secret knowledge of charm and protection magic with the use of spinning thread and woven cloth. Joint spinning for young girls was of initiatory and educational importance, preparing them for marriage and sexual life. Paremic folklore texts – riddles about weaving with erotic overtones, in which spinning tools were identified with female and male reproductive organs and sexual acts – served as tools of sexual education. In such riddles, the whole process of weaving, from flax processing to the production of cloth on looms, is described metaphorically, through the symbolism of bodily experience, as an act of the union of female and male, necessary for the continuation of the human race (Lobachevskaja 2007, 53–55).

With a woman's transition to a new social and age group and, thus, a new social status, a married woman received new knowledge and was vested with new responsibilities. Marriage and childbirth inducted a young woman into the community

of women who had children, allowing her to receive practical and magical knowledge from older women on caring for and raising children. At the same time as getting married, a woman assumed her first ritual responsibility, the scope of which was initially limited to her family. If young women knew the ritual practices necessary to preserve themselves and future children, older women were responsible not only for their children and grandchildren but also for all members of the family and kin, both living and deceased, as well as for everything that surrounded them: house, land, animals and household. Having become a housewife, the chief woman in the house, the eldest daughter-in-law in a large or undivided family unit, a woman became responsible for the distribution of work among other women and unmarried boys, and the upbringing and care of children. She also assumed broader ritual responsibilities to mediate between the world of the living and deceased ancestors.

The Russian researcher Svetlana Adonyeva, based on the material of the Russian North, has determined that the transmission of magic and ritual traditions was carried out not by kinship but by “attribute”, that is, from the eldest woman of the family, who was the mother-in-law (Adonyeva 1988, 27). Old women who no longer shared a bed with their husbands or were widowed undertook all of the ritual activity of the peasant community in regard to organising the everyday life of its members (childbirth, weddings and funerals), as well as organising “public opinion” about the normative or non-normative behaviour of its members.

Weaving activity modelled the personal life of the peasant woman herself and, at the same time, allowed her to symbolically model a significant segment of rural culture for which she was responsible. It is worth noting that a woman’s clothing used its own “woman’s measure”, a textile system of measuring threads, warp and cloth.

While spinning, laying out the threads, weaving the cloth and cutting it into garments, our rural women do not use the measures adopted in the cities and among the “cultured” and commercial classes, but rely on their own – by fingers, by the palm, by the cubit, by the arm’s length, by the waist, by the *sazhen* [about 2 metres], or even by a wall’s width or a bolt of cloth,” wrote Vatslau Lastouski in 1927<sup>3</sup>. (Czarniauski 1927)

The woman devoted a significant part of her life to textile production. Weaving was a source of ritual items and artefacts, which she used in magical practices. Women’s textile magic was based on mythological ideas about the sacredness of flax, threads and fabric, which emerged as a result of the craft of weaving, considered sacred in all cultures of the world and one of the oldest layers of culture (Lobachevskaja 2013,

3 The article was published under the pseudonym Daniil Czerniawski.



41–46). All components of textile production: threads, cloth, ends (non-woven remnant of warp); threads used to tie a weft or reed when they were handed over or passed on to someone; fluff left over from weaving, as well as a belt, shirt and apron made of woven cloth, acquired ritual and symbolic status in the context of women's rites.

In a patriarchal society, women were assigned many functions to maintain community life: both those of their family members and at the level of the whole village society. Specific female rituals and magical practices served as tools for this. These include those related to women's textile activities: spinning, weaving and textile magic, *abrok* and *abydzennik* rituals; as well as producing wedding and family rituals, incantations and healing magic, witchcraft, memorial and funeral rites and customs. These types of women's ritual practices existed outside the sphere of institutional religion, were not regulated by the church and official authorities and were virtually unaffected by them and their bans.

Christian religiosity, as the subject of the church institution in its Orthodox, Uniate or Catholic forms, was nominally common for the entire population, which was introduced to them through the sacraments of baptism and marriage. With the adoption of Christianity, church rites became compulsory, although their normativity was introduced into the lives of people in our regions asynchronously, with different levels of temporality. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the degree of Christian religiosity of Belarusian peasants remained very low and preserved many pre-Christian elements. Many authors wrote that Belarusian peasants were poorly versed in religious dogma and faithfully performed pagan and Christian rites and rituals, often combining them and explaining that the elders were told to do this (Tokts 2016, 103, 206). This is confirmed by my field interviews with rural women, who state that this is the customary way to do it, that their grandparents and great-grandparents did it this way, and that it should still be done the same way today. "Who said it should be done this way? Oh, it was the old, old people, those who were older than us. They taught us. And we did as we were taught."<sup>4</sup>

Parallel to the official institutions of the Orthodox and Catholic Churches, including priests and church-calendar festivities, a folk religiosity existed in the active practice of rituals, magical actions, and belief in their efficacy, operating independently of external regulation. Various rites were woven into everyday life and accompanied the sacred time of feasts. They belonged to those foundations of religious life rooted in the mythical consciousness of a person. With the adoption of Christianity, there was no complete replacement of the former mythopoetic picture of the world in the folk worldview, and Christian saints did not replace the sacred functions that had previously been assigned to the mythological beings of the supernatural world,

4 Recorded by V. Labacheuskaya in 2005 in the village of Kharomtsy, Aktsyabrski district, Homel region, from a woman born in 1915. Author's archive.

nor did they fully take their place in the regulation of human life. Because folk Christianity was flexible and adaptable – especially Eastern Orthodoxy – it produced various syncretic forms of belief, which coexisted within local folk culture. Folk religiosity issues represent a promising direction for the development of Belarusian cultural anthropology. Belarusian researchers have gathered a substantial amount of unique factual material that requires synthesis (Boganeva 2010; Valodzina 2021).

In this article, to determine the nature of national religiosity and to understand the high degree of preservation of female ritual practices among Belarusians, let us use the approach of Polish ethnosociologist Józef Obrębski, which he formulated during his research in Macedonia in the 1930s. He concluded that, along with religious rites, there is a class of ritual actions with a purely magical character: practices and traditions initiated only in emergencies. This category includes magical rituals such as drawing away hail clouds, a ritual intended to cause rain during a drought, and the ploughing of a village against the plague. The aim of these magical practices was to banish and protect against diseases and to counteract witchcraft. According to Józef Obrębski, their effectiveness is determined by the fact that they were given as a special privilege to the first people in the mythical cosmogonic period by God, who created these practices together with other skills and put them at the service of man. They are transmitted from generation to generation to this day, remain unchanged and cannot be initiated at the will of man. They are interpreted as part of the divine intervention in the affairs of this world, which God has granted humans as a prerogative, and they can influence the world through magical rituals. They differ from witchcraft and are always aimed at benefiting people (Obrębski 2022, 237, 239). Magic and religious rituals are necessary in places where the most vital desires of a person concentrate or in events beyond a person's control.

Obrębski's observations and conclusions provide a certain key to understanding the sustainability of Belarusian women's ritual practices unrelated to official religious forms, which were aimed at maintaining the life of an individual and the survival of the whole community in the face of existential peril.

#### RITUAL PRACTICE OF WOMEN'S *ABROK*

Belarusian material on traditional culture shows us that turning to the supernatural world and performing certain ritual activities at critical existential moments of life or aligning them with the days of the church calendar allowed the maintenance of a balance in the symbolic field of relations among humans, ancestors, and the sacred.

In peasant society, this sphere was assigned to the social responsibility of women. Human communication with the higher powers and ancestors as patrons of the living in the afterlife traditionally takes place through the ritual that Belarusian women

call *abrok* and *abrakannye*, which remains a living practice to this day. Women use the term *abrok* both for the object of the offering itself and for the act of making it, which they call *abrakannye* or *abratatsta*.

These symbolic relations materialise in a distinctive feature of the Belarusian cultural landscape – *abrok* crosses, upon which specially made aprons or ready-made towels, aprons or shawls are tied as offerings, or *abrok*. These can be pieces of homemade cloth, purchased fabric or parts of used clothing. *Abrok* cloths on crosses are an unfailing means of ritual communication between a woman and the sphere of the divine and the netherworld in crisis moments, especially when a woman or her family members are ill and on holidays determined by religious tradition. *Abroks* serve as intermediaries, manifesting the sacred nature of the relationship between humans and supernatural forces. By addressing the sign of the divine presence, the *abrok* cross, or praying to icons at home or in church, a woman takes upon herself the obligation to fulfil her vow and give thanks for the favours granted. The fulfilment of the request is a condition for fulfilling the promise. Thus, ritual communication with the divine recipient is an exchange: a reward is promised for a granted favour, and a gift is given in return, which in the Christian tradition are called votive offerings – *ex-votos*.

*Abrok* is a tradition, a stereotypical reproduction of the standard female behaviour in a traditional society, on which the behaviour of each woman is superimposed. This is what older women did, and this is what should be done in the future. When asked why it is necessary and acceptable to perform *abrok*, women answer eagerly and tell stories from their own lives and about the misfortunes that have befallen their families. Here are some statements of women about the intention and reasons for *abrok* collected by the author during her field research<sup>5</sup>.

Why did you offer an *abrok*? Maybe God will grant, maybe he will grant [something] good to you. You give to the church, and God will give to you. Well, from one to another, from old to the young, that's how it went.<sup>6</sup>

Well, if someone was sick or something, they would make an *abrok* and hang it on these crosses. Towels, *rushnik*, that sort of thing. They put money on them...<sup>7</sup>

5 Given the limited scope of the article, I do not present a sample of quotes representative for all historical and ethnographic regions of Belarus.

6 Recorded by V. Labacheuskaya in 2006 in the village of Novaya Niva, Červień district, Minsk region, from a woman born in 1913. Author's archive.

7 Recorded by V. Labacheuskaya in 2003 in Batsvinava village, Čačersk district, Homiel region, from a woman born in 1939. Author's archive.



*Photo 1. A ritual apron with a cross. Yaminsk village, Lyuban district, Minsk region, 2007. Photo by V. Labacheuskaya.*

They say *abrekliasia* [performed an offering of *abrok*]. If something is wrong with the animals or with the children, the person performs an *abrok* so that everything is good. She carries it to this cross or brings it to the church or collects candles to light them on. She would bring either cloth, a *rushnik* [a ritual towel] or handkerchiefs.<sup>8</sup>

*Abrok, abrakalisia* – even my mother told me to perform *abrok* so that I would perform *abrok* already, so that I would perform *abrok* with something. Bring to the church this and that, it will be there. If you help me there or something, I will praise God, I will pray to God, and I will bring a beautiful *rushnik* towel, I will embroider it, or I will make a *nabozhnik* towel [towel for God] and bring it, I will hang it on an icon.<sup>9</sup>

I just performed an *abrok* ritual. I don't remember, I felt some pain: maybe one breast hurt and it was so black ... So I *abraklasia* [vowed] that if I get cured, I'd hang a *rushnik*. So it was healed, and I went to my mother, it was 1991, and I went there and hung it on [the cross]. And I brought it into the church: my grandson died, probably, he was thirteen then, so I brought one to the church, too. I embroidered it and brought it, too.<sup>10</sup>

Among the reasons for performing *abrok*, women named their diseases and the illnesses of children, other family members and animals. *Abrok* served as a preventive measure to ward off evil and evil spells and to avert the harmful influence of the devil and evil spirits. The existential reason for *abrok* could also be the infertility of a woman praying for a child. In the widespread practice of venerating stones in Belarus and Lithuania, women's ritual offerings of textile items, mainly homemade cloth, to these sacred objects with requests for a quick marriage or for children if a woman is childless stand out. Ethnographer Adam Bogdanovich described women's ritual sacrifices of cloth, flax and wool to the holy stones Demjan and Marya near the village of Pieražyr in the Igumen district<sup>11</sup>. He noted that "the offerings were so numerous that they were taken out in wagons" (Bogdanovich, 1895, 24).

The semantics of the word *abrok* contains such deep meanings as promise, oath and feeding, which gives a key to understanding the semantics of the *abrakannye* ritual, dating back to ancient mythological notions and practices of sacrifice to the gods.

8 Recorded by V. Labacheuskaya in 1999 in the village of Dvarec, Luninets district, Brest region, from a woman born in 1945. Author's archive.

9 Recorded V. Labachevskaja in 2003 in the village of Jesipava Rudnia, Kalinkavičy district, Homiel region, from a woman born in 1936. Author's archive.

10 Recorded by V. Labachevskaja in 2003 in the village Marozavičy, Buda-Kašaliova district, Homiel region, from a woman born in 1945. Author's archive.

11 Today Červień district, Minsk region.

It is indicative that in the Belarusian psalm about Yuri (George) and the Dragon, recorded by the researcher of the *Belarusian Folk Bible*, Alena Boganeva (2010), the lexeme *abrok* is used precisely with the meaning of sacrifice: “Give a gift to the Dragon, give an *abrok* every day / Give an *abrok* every day, give it to a man” (cited in Volodina, 2023, 155).

The universality of sacrificial acts in culture is explored in the works of the French sociologist of culture Marcel Mauss, who considered gift-sacrifices as objects with a special spiritual meaning, which gave a person the right to benefit through the sacrificial ritual of transferring those gifts to the gods (Mauss, 2000, 17). Russian researcher Svetlana Adonyeva interprets *abrok* as a sacred/holy contract between the giver and the divine recipient; an obligation that the former voluntarily imposes on him/herself to be relieved of illness and misfortune (Adonyeva, 2004, 487). Following Ernst Cassirer’s definition, the *abrok* embodied in the fabric can be understood as, “a religious means of expression, a means of establishing a connection between oneself and the deity”, which goes back to the Vedic formula for addressing the god during a sacrifice: “Give to me – I give to you. Offer to me – I offer to you. Make me an offering — I will make you an offering” (Cassirer, 2011, 234).

The tradition of offering *abrok* existed within a narrowly female sphere. It was never subordinated to institutions or ideology or regulated by official decrees that governed the social life of peasant women at various times. In their ability to engage with the sacred communicant, women remained free at all times. These practices were regulated solely by their own volition and their spiritual needs for higher assistance. The *abrok* tradition was silently maintained during the Soviet era, when, in the BSSR (Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic), practically all churches were destroyed first in the 1930s and later in the 1960s. People believed that offering an *abrok* with a towel, for example, on a cross near a spring, was “like going to church”.

*Abrok* is a living ritual practice of women in Belarusian villages today. In addition to individual occasional *abrakannye*, in Eastern Polesie, there is a collective tradition of *abrakannye* on a common village cross. Women of the older and middle generations take part in the collective ritual. In our time, the living practice of offering *abrok* to stone crosses – known as “stone maidens” – can be observed in the villages of Danilevichi and Borovoye in the Lelchitsy district of Gomel region. This is done on the day before Easter, corresponding to the custom of putting on new clothes for Easter, either sewn or bought in advance. Similarly, the cross should also be dressed with new clothes – *abrok*. One version of the etymology of the word *abrok* suggests that donations were made *ab rok* (annually), probably in the spring, during a holiday that, in ancient times, celebrated the sun and the beginning of the agricultural season. This festival was later combined with the Christian holiday of Easter, yet among Belarusians it retained its ancient name: *Vyalikdzen*. This may indicate the deep archaic roots of the *abrok* ritual, which initially bore a collective female form.





*Photo 2. A woman removes ritual fabrics on Red Saturday, the day before Easter, from the “stone girl” and from the ritual cross to burn them. Danilevichi village, Lelchitsy district, Gomel region, 2009. Photo by V. Labacheuskaya.*

Meanwhile, the practice of offering *abrok* did not escape certain historical transformations caused by social and economic factors, as well as changes in material life during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. This explains why pragmatic intentions, rather than spiritual aspirations, often underlie the reasons for making *abrok*. Women frequently say that a cross must be cared for and should not stand without *abrok*: “the cross is not meant to be bare”, “it is a sin for the cross to stand naked”. There were also opinions expressed by women about the *abrok* tradition, such as “We ourselves don’t even know why”<sup>12</sup>. Here we have an example of an ancient tradition, its form and mode of expression transmitted and preserved, while its former sacred meaning has already been lost.

#### ABYDZENNYRITUAL – A STRATEGY FOR COPING WITH CRISIS

The most archaic female ritual practice is making a special *abydzenny* cloth. This is a collective ritual for overcoming total disasters such as drought, epidemics, epizootics or war, which affect society as a whole. The complete absence of Christian symbols in the *abydzenny* ritual was noted by its first researcher, D. Zelenin (1994, 196).

The *abydzenny* ritual is connected with the tradition of weaving and has brought us the integrity of the ancient weaving system as a craft and mythological worldview. The *abydzenny* ritual manifested itself in the symbolic attribute of metaphysical communication with divine forces: *abydzennik*. The names of the ritual fabric – *abydzennik*, *bydzennik* (a dialectal variant of *abydzennik*) and others are formed from the adjective *abydzenny* (daily) and the basic adverb *abydzen* (daylong). The word’s etymology is explained by the term used by Belarusians to define the time parameters necessary for the ritual of making such a cloth – *ab adzin dzen*, that is, to make it in one day, in twenty-four hours. This characterises the ritual object as daily or every day (*abydzennik*). According to the tradition, the cloth made in one day had special sacral purity and was used for magical purposes to purify people, animals and spaces.

The ritual was performed collectively by a group of women, preserving the full cycle of traditional weaving activities involved in making the cloth, including spinning flax threads at the very beginning, to warping the *krosny* (a traditional Belarusian loom) and weaving the fabric, *rushnik*, or *namitka* (a thin headcloth worn by women). The size of this fabric varied, approximately 150–250 cm. Simple linen fabric was decorated with several red stripes. All of this occurred within the ritual time limit of one day, *abydzen* (from sunrise to sunset, or vice versa). The process concluded with further ritual actions, such as walking around the village with the newly woven cloth, placing it on the *abrok* cross or in the church, passing people beneath it, or driving livestock through it.

12 Heard in 2004 in the village of Rog, Salihorsk district, Minsk region.



The *abydzenny* ritual was practised in Belarus until the middle of the twentieth century. During World War II, women wove abydzennik in almost every Belarusian village threatened with destruction by the Nazi invaders, praying that their sons and husbands would return alive from the front. The *abydzenny* ritual acted as one of the survival strategies for everyday life amidst the war (Lobachevskaja, 2010).

The *abydzenny* ritual was directed towards the entire kin group and village community, and it required the collective strength, labour and spiritual effort of a group of women. The ritual was resorted to only in emergencies that threatened the life of the community: during drought, during the threat of hailstorms, epidemic diseases, particularly those affecting children, epizootics of livestock, natural disasters and war. When misfortune happened in a family, such as the illness of its members or the death of children, they sometimes also made *abydzennik* cloth individually or as a family group.

Making a special *abydzenny* cloth is culturally linked to the symbolic and technological weaving cycle. The ritual of creating cloth was carried out according to mythical ideas about the cosmic creation of the world, symbolically re-enacting it. The activities within the spinning and weaving cycle were an integral part of women's craft knowledge, tactile skills and everyday bodily experience. They allowed them to ritually reconstruct the act of creation and its image: the new material of ideal primordial purity. The mythical notions of the cyclical, reversible nature of time manifested themselves in the ritual with the help of clear and mastered spinning and weaving techniques, which transformed into a way of overcoming the deterioration of the world and the state of chaos that appeared in it and made it possible to return to the original state of order as a necessary prerequisite for the existence of all being. This explanation of the ritual derives naturally from the theory of myth, the persistence of the mythical component in the human worldview and its significance in culture. Following Mircea Eliade, the *abydzenny* ritual involves the "re-actualisation of the 'absolute origin' through the reproduction of the original time of creation, the creation of the world, which is the only thing capable of ensuring the total renewal of the universe, life and society" (Eliade 2001, 63).

*Abydzenny* cloth, as a product of a ritual, acquired sacred, magical properties and became a protective tool in situations of crisis. Livestock was driven through it, and people themselves passed through it. It became an intermediary, a mediator in the sacred communication of man with the forces of nature in calling rain, eliminating the threat of hailstorms and a metaphysical channel for ensuring the beneficial influence of the higher forces on people's lives.

All the above-mentioned reasons caused crises in the community and required overcoming them. At the same time, they were standard and periodically reproduced. Droughts, epidemics, epizootics and other threats to human life, such as natural

disasters and wars, are constantly repeated throughout the history of humankind. In traditional societies, human behaviour in such crises was typical and followed the norms of the ritual, which had to be performed. Every society that cares for its integrity develops a system of social behaviour codes (programmes) to be followed by its members. When there was a necessity to restore the lost norm, other programmes were used, distinct from everyday practices, in which ritual strategies for overcoming the crisis became relevant.

The gender specifics of the ritual that involved creating ritual cloth, *abydzennik*, are closely linked to spinning and weaving as women's occupations and women's magical practices aimed at ensuring reproduction. The male responsibility was to make and install the wooden cross for the *abydzennik*. Gender-divided ritual activities united the whole village community at the final stage of the ritual: the protective and magical rites, which consisted of the driving of livestock and the passage of people through the *abydzenny* cloth, fumigation of all participants with the smoke of the purifying fire, etc. The joint completion of the ritual indicates its shared social function aimed at the whole village community.

Belarusian ethnographers were the first to draw attention to the *abydzenny* ritual. The Russian ethnographer Dmitry Zelenin generalised the accumulated facts and made a scientific interpretation of the *abydzenny* ritual in his famous article "*Abydzenny* Towels and *Abydzenny* Temples (Russian Folk Customs)" (1911). Based on the descriptions of Belarusian ethnographers Pavel Shein, Michał Federowski, Adam Bogdanovich, Iulian Krachkovskij, Konstantin Tyshkevich and Ivan Eremich, the ethnographer called the ritual a "Belarusian custom" and "exclusively Belarusian" (Zelenin 1994, 193). Modern studies by the author (Labacheuskaja 2009, 837) and her Ukrainian colleagues (Vasjanovich 2022, 47) confirm the Belarusian ethno-cultural character of the *abydzenny* ritual, the area of which extended to the border and neighbouring areas of ethno-cultural interaction: Belarusian-Ukrainian Polesie and Polish Podlasie.

The memory of *abydzenny* rituals belongs to the common reservoir of collective cultural memory of local communities. It is preserved by the participants of the ritual and its witnesses. The performers included women of different age groups, with children and teenage girls carrying out some activities. Witnesses of the ritual were often children watching the rites. The extraordinary nature of group activities, performed quickly and in a particularly intense psychophysical atmosphere, sharpened the memory mechanism, and once seen in childhood, it was firmly stored in memory throughout life. This is evidenced by the narratives of witnesses to the ritual, which I recorded during field research. Stories about the exceptional events that once saved the village from disaster and calamity were passed on to their children and grandchildren, who also became inheritors of the collective memory.

The *abydzenny* ritual accounts recorded by researchers have captured a large layer of the folk collective memory, which preserved the perception of catastrophic events and incidents of local history for more than a century and a half. Only in a few cases, during conversations with people, was it possible to establish the exact date when the ritual was performed in their locality. The last instances of turning to the *abydzenny* ritual while preserving its full technological cycle of *abydzennik* creation (from spinning thread to making cloth on a loom) belong to the post-war years. For example, in 1953, when there was a severe drought in the village of Kazly in the Nesvizh district of the Minsk region, women conducted *abydzennik*, processing around the village in a cross procession and hanging them on three crosses. In the village of Bychyn in the Berezinsky district of the Minsk region, the ritual was performed in 1957 to invoke rain. Later, when the ritual was preserved in some places in the form of an annual *abrok* custom, the woven cloth was replaced by a purchased white cloth, which took on the role of a similar core of the ritual and symbolically assumed the properties of the cloth woven in compliance with all ritual requirements. For example, this was the case in the village of Bayary, Dokšytsy district, Vitsiebsk region, where the last time the annual *abrok* was performed with a purchased cloth on St Yuri's [St George's] Day in 1970, as recorded by ethnographer Uladzimir Lobač (Lobach, 2011, 284). This is also the case today in the village of Papšyčy, Hlybokaje district, Vitsiebsk region, where the ritual of "Carrying a namitka" received the status of intangible cultural heritage and was included in the State List of Historical and Cultural Heritage of the Republic of Belarus.

The social and anthropological approach to the study of "disaster rituals" was inspired by social anomie and the COVID-19 pandemic. The Russian researcher Svetlana Adonyeva interprets rituals of this kind as follows: "Negative events, such as epidemics, fires and others, seemed to be the consequences of a contract violation made within the group or carried out by the whole group: society assumes responsibility for the disaster. Accordingly, for the situation to change, the group performs an act that restores the contract between the human world and either the natural world [...] or the divine world [...] As a result, the contract-covenant is restored" ("Rituals of Disaster" 42). This interpretation of the causes of the *abydzenny* ritual and its consequences is based on the theory of gift exchange and approaches of social anthropology, which broadens the prospects of conceptualising it as a social and cultural phenomenon.

In 2020, humankind encountered the previously unknown COVID-19 virus and a global pandemic. The declared state of emergency has brought changes in all spheres of human life: private, social and cultural. At the same time, in a crisis, the community may activate a special mobilisation mode, which the cultural anthropologist Victor Turner defined as *communitas* (Turner 1983, 170, 202).



*Photo 3. Rushnik-abydzennik, woven on March 28<sup>th</sup>, 2020, in Minsk as a response to the COVID-19 epidemic. Photo by T. Valodzina.*

Resorting to the *abydzenny* ritual amidst the pandemic in Minsk on 28 March 2020 is a unique present-day example of the community activating this mobilisation mode. On that day, twelve girls and women weaved a protective *rushnik-abydzenny* for twelve hours, and in the evening, having spread it in the open window of the car, drove it around Minsk along the ring road. This fact is not just one of the curious moments of pandemic life; rather, it makes researchers take a new approach to understanding archaic defence mechanisms of culture and the collective experience of its re-creation.

The initiators of the ritual were members of the non-governmental organisation The Student Ethnographic Society<sup>13</sup>, who decided to perform an *abydzenny* ritual by reproducing the complete weaving technological cycle. The *abydzenny* was created from 8 am to 8 pm on Saturday. A consultant and one of the participants in preparing the ritual was ethnologist and folklorist Tatsiana Valodzina. According to her, first, the group spent three hours spinning a warp of 360 threads, then took turns weaving the cloth. Some threads were brought with them, and some were spun on-site. The cloth ended up being more than three metres long. At the end of the ritual, the cloth was taken around Minsk: they encircled the metropolis with a magic circle in the course of the sun and brought it to the Museum of Boulders in the capital's Uručča neighbourhood, where they tied it on the Dzed stone, a sacred object that is revered by the youth members of the Student Ethnographic Society<sup>14</sup>.

Natalia Yarmolinskaya, who gathered a group of women in her weaving workshop: shared her experience of the collective ritual:

We all found ourselves in a situation of uncertainty in the spring of 2020. The beginning of the epidemic was very frightening, and it was unclear what to do. There was a kind of collective and irrational fear, where you understand that something needs to be done, but you don't know what. People were dying, and it was uncertain how to live further. It was chaos, panic and shock.

The idea was there, and it needed to be realised right away. We literally made the agreement the day after. And somehow, a bunch of people gathered. We didn't specifically invite anyone: we just threw out a call for anyone who wanted to come at any time. We would be weaving there, approximately, from that time. From the beginning to the end, meaning from the moment we started warping the loom to the moment we removed the fabric from the loom, exactly twelve hours passed. From 8 am to 8 pm. We sang while weaving and while spinning. There was a feeling that we were creating

13 The statutory activity of the society is to support traditional crafts and ensure their transmission to young people in urban settings.

14 <https://svajksta.by/archives/32821/> (Date of reference: 01.05.2023).

something magical: it wasn't just sitting down to weave. This wasn't a master class. What we were doing was to change what we couldn't change. That year, at least, no one got sick with COVID-19.

For me, as an educator, it was an experiment – whether it was physically possible to weave such a towel in a limited amount of time.<sup>15</sup>

The creation of a ritual object – an everyday item in today's urban environment among nationally oriented youth – serves as an example of the actualisation of cultural heritage and a return to ritual as a means of overcoming the existing social crisis. The experience of women's crafts in spinning and weaving was interpreted by the ritual's participants as an effective cultural legacy. The social significance of this fact also lies in its testimony to the community's ability for purposeful collective action, which was vividly demonstrated during the women's actions of the Belarusian revolution in 2020.

#### CONCLUSION

Women's cultural role in Belarus's rural communities has traditionally involved maintaining symbolic connections with the sacred realm – that is, with higher powers and ancestors – in order to safeguard the lives of children, family members, kin and the village community. One of the traditional ways in which this humanitarian and social responsibility has been fulfilled is through ritual practices, such as votive offerings (*abrok*) and the *abydzenny* ritual. Women turn to these practices individually and collectively, regularly or occasionally in times of illness, epidemics, threats to the harvest, natural disasters and war. In some cases, these rituals have taken the form of annual ceremonial observances. These practices help maintain balance in the symbolic relationship between humans, ancestors and the sacred.

This tradition developed within a patriarchal society in which peasant women nevertheless enjoyed a relative degree of freedom and independence. They had rights to property in the form of dowries and self-made textiles, as well as the right to leave a marriage – rights that were reflected in weddings and birth-of-a-child rituals such as the *couvade*. The formation of female identity through engagement with ritual knowledge and practices took place within the context of subsistence farming and intergenerational women's communities, where they engaged in spinning and weaving together. It also occurred within large, undivided peasant households (based on kinship), and was marked by age-based differentiation.

15 Recorded by V. Labacheuskaya in 2025 in Minsk. Author's archive.

In the culture of the Belarusian collective farm village, where domestic weaving persisted until the 1980s and where a distinctive form of folk religiosity – combining Christian and pre-Christian beliefs, concepts and rituals – was preserved, women's ritual practices retained their relevance. The *abydzenny* ritual, for example, was practised during the Second World War and remains a living cultural relic today, as seen in individual votive offerings at roadside crosses, in churches and at other sacred sites, as well as in annual votive ceremonies.

The bearers of this tradition are rural women of the older and middle generations, regardless of their level of education, who inherited it from their mothers and grandmothers, as well as urban women who were born and raised in villages. The example of an *abydzenny* ritual performed in Minsk in 2020 should be viewed in the context of modern modes of cultural transmission, as an expression of the specific cultural and gender identity of the Belarusian youth community, which is oriented towards embracing national traditions. In the context of the global crisis during the pandemic, the traditional ritual served as a tool for restoring individuals to a familiar social and psychophysical order. These factors should be taken into account when assessing the social potential of contemporary Belarusian society.

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