

# The Ritual Aspects of Ukrainian Beekeeping

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**Abstract.** The article deals to research of Ukrainian ritual context of apiculture. The complex research of symbolic and semantic aspects of Ukrainian apiculture is based on separation of three fundamental ritual “units”: folk Ukrainian vision of a bee along with an insect’s status in a worldview tradition, historical process of developing the institute of patronage and defining the role of patron saints in Ukrainian apiculture; its place in a system of traditional national ritualism and, in particular, outlining the general portrait of an apiarist against the background of the past, as well as ambivalence of his character, narrative and conceptual accentuation and integral conceptualization of apiarian motives of the folk calendar (ritual activities of spring-summer and autumn-winter cycles); role of apicultural products in the Ukrainians’ ritual life (worldview visions, calendar and occasional ritualism, rituals of human life cycle, magic ritual practice). The comparative ethnological analysis of apiarian ritualism of the Ukrainians has found both local feature of separate visions and beliefs and all-Ukrainian worldview matrix of apiarian spiritual phenomenon. While comparing the data, of field and literary sources, on the ritual aspects of traditional apiculture of the residents of Ukraine and some Slavonic (and, in the broader sense – European) countries, we detect a considerable range of common features.

**Keywords:** Beekeeping, ritual, Ukrainian, apiculture, folk calendar.

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The complex research of symbolic and semantic aspects of Ukrainian apiculture is based on separation of three fundamental ritual “units” — a sort of “whales” of the given range of problems: folk Ukrainian vision of a bee along with an insect’s status in a worldview tradition, historical process of developing the institute of patronage and defining the role of patron saints in Ukrainian apiculture; its place in a system of traditional national ritualism and, in particular, outlining the general portrait of an apiarist against the

background of the past, as well as ambivalence of his character, narrative and conceptual accentuation and integral conceptualization of apiarian motives of the folk calendar (ritual activities of spring-summer and autumn-winter cycles); role of apicultural products in the Ukrainians' ritual life (worldview visions, calendar and occasional ritualism, rituals of human life cycle, magic ritual practice).

For a long time, the Ukrainian Ethnological School did not have scientific works specifically devoted to the consideration of traditional beekeeping throughout the whole ethnic territorian as a spiritual and ideological system. Instead, scientists from many European and American countries – Romania (S. Marian), Great Britain (H. Rensom), the United States (A. Faif), Poland (M. Zhuk, K. Lenska-Bonk), Serbia (M. Biletych), Russia (T. Shchepanska, N. Tolstoi, A. Hura, A. Nikitina) have overcome the long-term path of studying worldview backgrounds of beekeeping in national, Common Slavic and wider worldwide aspects, paying attention to a bee as an object of folk ritual as a sacral being and the products of its life activity in ritual context and folk tradition of different nations of the world starting from prehistoric times to the present (Ancient Egypt, Sumer, Babylon, Assyria, India, China, Western Asia, Crete, Muslim nations, Greece, Rome, German and Slavic nations, France, America, representatives of modern “primitive” civilizations), considered the concept of sacred concerning bees, honey and wax in the folk Christian tradition, conducted lexical and semantic analysis of the term “bee”, studies of the ritual functionality of the honey in the Polish folk culture, wrote about the “bele pčele” (white bee) as an allegory of the soul in the Balkan Slavs, analyzed the ritual component of North Russian beekeeping, published the so-called “bee songs” as texts of early Slavic ritual poetry, considered the symbolic load of wax candle in the rites of the passage of the Eastern Slavs. The French philosopher, ethnologist and sociologist, the “father” of the structural typology of the myth C. Levi-Strauss made a significant contribution to the researched issues, publishing in 1966 in Paris the second part of the fundamental four-volume “Mythology: from honey to ashes” [Lévi-Strauss 1966], in which he continued to describe logical mechanisms of primitive thinking. As a result of a structural analysis of the narrative folklore (myths) of American Indians, it has been demonstrated how such empirical categories as honey and tobacco can serve as conceptual tools for developing abstract concepts interconnected; it is stated that honey-related metaphors are the oldest in both the French and ancient languages of the nations of the world, and honey and tobacco are paired and serve to express multilevel antithesis ideas.

The ideas and theoretical developments of authors of classical publications: on the history of religion – M. Eliade, mythology – C. Levi-Strauss, the theory of ritual – A. van Hennepe, V. Turner, the achievements of Moscow Ethnolinguistic School and its followers, works of representatives

of the Russian Semiotic School (V. Toporov, A. Baiburin), as well as the modern German anthropologist K. Wolfe can be considered as important methodological guidelines for current scholars of folk spiritual culture.

Important for the author from the theoretical point of view of comprehension of the problem were generalizing, conceptual works of Ukrainian scientists of the past – M. Sumtsov, V. Kravchenko, L. Shulhina and others.

The origins of the archaic vision of a bee as a sacred creature and its connection to the Divine reach the Neolithic age and correlate with the cults of fertility goddesses of the Great Mothers class incarnated into a bee — and thus, they have pre-Christian grounding [Movna 2006, 161]. The Christian axiology has radically changed the way a bee is seen — its primary value has become the ability to supply wax for a church, and the Christian Creator has replaced the ancient feminine goddesses.

The bee was considered a sacred insect, surrounded by a certain mystical worship – "The Fly of God", which had a special connection with the Highest, who was its Creator. Numerous legends existed among the people about the deity of the insect. The labour qualities of the bee, in particular the hard work, have been greatly respected by Ukrainians, for what it has often been compared to a human. Consideration of the Ukrainian worldview tradition related to the people's perception of the bee is supplemented by rituals of religious and magical content (sprinkling with holy water, the first spring bees feeding in the new apiarian season), which have become quite widespread both in daily working practice of the beekeepers and during annual holidays celebration. Within people's worldview beliefs an important place had the mythological significance of the bee as a symbol of the soul, characterized by deep archaicism and its origins reaching back to pre-Christian beliefs [Nikolskyi 1929, 19]. The bee was identified with the soul; this is due to the belief in the prophetic gift of an insect capable to predict certain events in human life, natural phenomena, to recognize one's master and people by their behaviour and mental qualities. According to common beliefs, the bee belonged to the nearest home environment of the beekeeper. It was believed that insects take part in family celebrations, have fun with the farmstead on holidays, grieve over the death of the landlord. Among Ukrainian beekeepers it was widespread the belief about the bees' attachment to their landlord. Insects recognized him when he came to work near them or pick honey and did not bite him. Similarly to the relation of bees and their owners in the imagination of Ukrainians, there was a direct connection between domestic happiness and apiary; a swarm that flew into someone else's yard, proclaimed happiness to the owner of the house, and with the loss of the bees the family lost their fortune. As people considered the bee a holy insect, its stealing or killing was thought to be a grave sin. The culmination of an insect's glorification is its equation on a number of features to a human, that is proved

by the fixed expression – “the bee does not die (as an animal), but passes away (as a human)” in the Ukrainian folk verbal culture.

The conducted analysis of a bee’s image in a folk worldview tradition of the Ukrainians of the end of the 19th – beginning of the 20th c. has discovered presence of both Christian-church worldview interpretations and that of pre-Christian etiology, and this mix has created the integral religious and mythological system with stratification of its separate elements (the disappearing manifestations of anima world perception, chthonian connotations – mythological value of a bee as symbol of a soul, its gift of providence, marked by the explicit influences of Christian ideology: bee’s ability to use wax for maintaining the sacred flame of the God’s shrine, divine nature of this creature, creative role of God with respect to the insect in the etiological legends, rituals and spells of religious and magical sense, ritual use of the consecrated objects, high semiotic status of an insect with an archaic origin, having found its reflection in wedding ritualism). In the process of historically long-lasting development and adoption of Christian axiological orientations in terms of Christian pantheon, the peculiar functions of the saints have institutionalized, and the field of their activity – the market position, having found its adequate reflection in folk visions, has distilled out. The emergence of the institute of patrons of Ukrainian apiculture among the Christian saints took place in the 11-12th c. at the earliest. The new patrons were St. Alexius, St. Zosimus and St. Savvatius and they acquired this status by appending the existing pre-Christian calendar with the commemorative days named after Christian saints in a church calendar, after what it received additional connotations. These days coincided with traditional dates when the bees were taken out of their winter accommodations, mixed with several images of the saints whose commemorative days were on these dates.

The common view of the beekeeper's personality, spread within pre-industrial society, was a demonstration of the society's dual approach to the evaluation of its personality. On the one hand, there was a widespread respect for beekeepers, since people believed that beekeeping should be done only by personalities with high moral qualities, and communication with bees ennobles, inclines to calm and prudence. The beekeepers from the earliest times were highly respected among the villagers as honest, conscientious, hard-working and generally right-minded people, what defined their traditionally high status of moral authority within the village community. On the other hand, some representatives of this rather closed professional corporation in people’s imagination were associated with wizards. To be a beekeeper meant to be a “hoodoo doctor”, “mage”, “to know something”, “to be able to inflict”, that is to have a certain mysterious knowledge [Archive of the Ethnology Institute of National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine; Podolskyi 1882, 195; Bystron 1917, 37-38; Beekeeping 1961, 5]. Some experienced beekeepers were suspected of having business contacts with "evil

spirit" (khovantsi (house spirit) "for apiary", "devil-beekeepers" started and multiplied their honey farms), in witchcraft (stealing finished honey from apiaries, enticing or killing someone else's bees), as well as inclination to do harm to other beekeepers by hoodooing bees (owning a bad eye, heavy hand).

The whole complex of calendar ceremonies traditionally split into two large calendar periods – spring-summer and autumn-winter, covering the entire natural and economic cycle from spring awakening to winter fading. The folk calendar regulated the course of the annual time cycle of natural changes and related cycles of economic, domestic and social activity of a human. The main ritual events of the apiarian calendar are the days of celebration of St. Eudokia (1/14 March, the first day of spring, divination regarding the weather and prospects of apiarian activity), Warm Alexius (17/30 March, spring placing of bees on apiaries, beginning of the apiarian season), Venerable Zosimus (17/30 April, icons of the saint in the apiary, candles in front of the images in the church), Palm Sunday (putting the sacred willow into hives), Easter (visiting bees with consecrated things, magical influence on the conservation and multiplication of insects), Trinity (garnishing with green branches in apiaries) – spring-summer period; the Second Blessed Virgin's Holyday [Nativity of Mary] (September 8/21, beginning of autumn, warming and placing bees for the winter), Conception of St. Anne (December 9/22, ritual visit to the bees in the cellars, symbolic beginning of the future clusters), Christmas and New Year holiday season as a key point of the autumn-winter calendar cycle with their dominant motives for contact with the world of dead and the magic of the first day, happy beginning, forecasting of apiarian well-being in the new year, the Presentation of Our Lord (February 2/15, divination over the prospects of receiving new honey) – autumn-winter cycle. All of them are related to three basic concepts: high breed of bees, wealth of honey, safety and health of insects, and, thus, they are implemented mainly in three major semantic aspects – producing, apotropaion and tabooed actions.

As universal ritual symbols, the main products of the life of bees are honey and wax, which, over a long historical period, have "grown into" calendar and family rituals of Ukrainians. During the research, it was revealed the main ritual purpose of honey as a mediator between the bee and man, with other world and souls of the ancestors, the conductor and the amplifier of the processes of transition at the moment of passing by the human the corresponding stages of age and social hierarchy. While having in a ceremonial situation primarily mediative functions, honey at the same time was an effective protective mean and a magic warrant of fertility with greeting, erotic and magically-multiplying symbolism, a symbol of sweetness and gentleness, an offering to dead ancestors, powerful cleaning tool, a carrier of healing properties. The centuries-old Slavic tradition of ritual use of honey, proved by medieval written sources ("Book of Exquisite Treasures" by Ibn Dast X c., "The Tale of Past Years" XI-XII c., "The Questions of Kyryk" XII

c., "Word of Pious Person" XIV, "Household" ["Domostroi"] (16th c.), has been kept by Ukrainians until the end of XIX - beginning of XX centuries in the detailed form of ritual life. In a modified form, it is partly observed nowadays in celebration of calendar festivities and ceremonies of the human life cycle (birth, wedding, funeral-commemorative).

In general, rituals mark points of particular importance in space and time; they occur at the change of times of the year or organize the transition from one public position or institution to another. In this process, according to the theory of rituals transition of A. van Hennepe [van Hennepe 1999, 15], three sequential phases are monitored – the separation (release from the previous situation), transition (with transformation and change) and new integration (reaching a new state).

In some historical and ethnographic regions of Ukraine (Hutsulshchyna, Boikivshchyna, Lemkivshchyna, Pokuttia, plain *Transcarpathia*, Volyn) honey had a key place in the whole group of Christmas and New Year rituals [Movna 2017, 204]. These celebrations actualized the multi-vector symbolism of honey, which acted as a universal symbol of sweetness and gentleness, a mediator with the otherworldly, acquired important ritual significance as a component of the memorial kutia (ceremonial grain dish served during Christmas) – offering to ancestors, which was eaten not only by living members of the family, but also by their distant and close ancestors. For them, the kutia was left on the table or the bow, which is clearly articulated not only in ethnographic records of the XIX – early XX centuries [Myloradovych 1897, 171; Baiher 1899, 67; Ethnographic profile 2017, 96], as well as in modern writings [Movna 2011, 50; Bukovyna dialects 2006, 159; Koval 2011, 214; Tolstaia 2005, 453]. Honey acquired healing properties as a result of the presence at the Holy Supper, and in the Carpathians – the properties of the love potion. Charming function was manifested in the girls' Easter divination with honey. The first honey that was brought to the temples for consecration at Easter, Makovei holiday, and the Transfiguration of the God (Spas), was handed to relatives and neighbours, and was not originally intended for human consumption, but was considered to be the fate of the gods whose favour people wanted to gain by offerings, hoping in return to get bounties necessary for life completeness. The mandatory gift of honey was usually associated with the idea of multiplication; the first honey was preferred to donate in order to receive it a lot later.

Honey, as a ritual symbol, accompanied the man at all gradual stages of his/her life scenario – from birth to death. Already at the beginning of life, it appeared in the context of fulfilling the prescriptions of traditional birth rites (during births, visits to birthing mother by womankind of the community, the first font, baptisms). At different stages of the wedding act, the mutual honey consumption by a newly married couple was a way of symbolizing

those ritual transformations they underwent in the process of its gradual deployment. These included: public sanctioning of a marriage choice for the first time publicly expressed during the engagement, preparation for emotional and sexual union of the newlyweds during wreaths making and wedding ceremony, securing by post-wedding bonding rituals with honey of a two-person union, practical and sexual and emotional union of the newlyweds, meeting of just-married by their parents and the final part of the wedding rites with tying a kerchief on the bride's head, which symbolized the acquisition of new social roles and relationships and manifested the completion of the initial trials and the transition of the bride into the age-sex group of married women and the creation of a new family.

Honey got wide ritual usage at various stages of the funeral-commemorative rites of the Ukrainians (during the visitation with the deceased at home, funeral service, funeral repast, individual remembering and commemorative days of the folk calendar). Funeral rites as rituals of transition, according to K. Wolfe [Wolfe 2008, 218], formalized the death and possible transition of the dead to another world. Rooted in the distant past, the tradition of ceremonial use of honey in funerary and commemorative activities continued to be supported by the Ukrainians in the XIX – mid-XX centuries, and in short form has reached the present. In the funeral ritual honey performed an important function, purifying and freeing the soul of the sins committed during the lifetime. Kolyvo (originally boiled wheat mixed with mead) was an indispensable attribute of funeral rites, the beginnings of which date back to pre-Christian times, later adopted by the church tradition. Not only honey was the element of the cult of the dead, but also wheat porridge, which was the component of the kolyvo. It was prepared when, according to Greek folk beliefs, the underworld opened and the souls of the dead rose up into the world of the living [Ivanova 1973, 312]. The Christian belief, having rethought the primitive semantics of kolyvo, began to consider it in the context of the ideologue of bringing the human soul to the bliss of immortal paradise life, and to treat honey as a symbol of eternity, rebirth, and resurrection. The area of distribution of kolyvo ("kanun", "mead", "kutia", "wheat") as the main ritual meal of after-funeral "dinner" covered practically the whole territory of the Ukrainian ethnographic massif – the Central-Eastern district (Middle Dnieper, Slobozhanshchyna region), South, Podillia, Polissia, Volyn, the Carpathians and Subcarpathia, Kholmshchyna and Podlasie [Movna 2017, 279].

The main products of bees' life activity – honey and wax – firmly "grew" into a live tissue of calendar and family customs as the universal polysemantic ritual symbols. Honey is an important ritual symbol in calendar and family ritualism. There is a steady circle of its polysemantic definitions – a symbol of sweetness, fertility (with congratulatory, erotic and fertile, as well as magically multiplying semantics) and gentleness, mediator with another world, sacrifice to the deceased ancestors, medium of healing properties, love

potion, bearer of protective connotations and powerful purifying substance. It has been found that folk visions were influenced by mythological connotations of wax as one of “first creations”. The symbolatry of wax candle has its origins in the ancient cult of fire with its ambivalent nature – respect and fear with worship for fire as a God, and later – as a symbol of the Divine power, sign of light, light-bearing source, capable of overcoming the dark forces of the evil. The archaic symbolism of wax consisted in the supreme offering to the heaven and the souls of ancestors, and the flame of wax candle was a sign of sun, the sun beams projection. With consolidation of Christianity, the wax candle became a part of all church rituals, and in the Christian ideology the candles from Christmas, Presentation, Easter, Transfiguration acquired the meaning of an important symbol, cult objects, incarnating the dialogue of a man with the God, saints and angels. The role functions of these types of candles in the folk rites are quite universal. It is a protection against thunder, lightning, storms and hail, as well as the ceasefire, protection from evil spirit, evil eye, ailments, putting in the hands of the dying, commemoration of the dead, participation in witchcraft.

A wax candle played a significant role in the ritual life of the Ukrainian peasantry; its ritual functions were: mediation between the earthly and beyond, it was a symbol of human existence, a symbolic analogue of a human, had a powerful protective and purifying potential. Being a universally requested ritual object, an indispensable attribute of a series of family and calendar rituals, religious practices, sacrifices, daily and sacred magical actions, it constantly accompanied all life stages that were conceived and actualized only within a ritual. Many centuries of Slavonic tradition of ritual use of wax in the extended ritual form were preserved till the 19th – early 20th c. in the Ukrainians’ folk ritualism – celebration of calendar festivities and rituals of human life cycle (birth, wedding, funeral and commemorative), and they still exist in a modified form. The ritual functions of wax candles in folk ritualism – as a mediator between the earthly and the unearthly, symbol of transition to new living status, symbol of human life, symbolic analogue of a human, bearer of apotropaion and cathartic potential – purification of humans and of the deceased soils from the impurity of sin.

The comparative etiological analysis of apiarian ritualism of the Ukrainians has found both local feature of separate visions and beliefs: sprinkling of bees with consecrated water on the Eve of Epiphany (Pokuttia, Boykivshchyna, Podlachia); feeding insects with consecrated Easter bread (Hutsulshchyna, Transcarpathia); priority covering of bride’s head in the apiarist’s house (Middle Dnieper Ukraine, Sloboda Ukraine, Polissia); dependence of family happiness on the apiary (Pokuttia, Hutsulshchyna, Boykivshchyna, Transcarpathia); St. Zosimus and St. Savvatus as patrons of bees (Middle Dnieper Ukraine, Sloboda Ukraine, Eastern Podillia, Polissia); presence, in the folk demonomicon, of the apiarist devil’s image (Western Podillia,



Pokuttia, Nadsiania, Opillia, Volyn); key place of honey in the entire range of Christmas and New Year rituals (Carpathians, Pokuttia, lowland Transcarpathia, Volyn); traditional farmstead rounds with honey on the Eve of Epiphany (Boykivshchyna, Western Podillia, Volyn); marriageable girls' Easter honey charming of young men (Pokuttia, Hutsulshchyna); consecration of honey on the Day of Procession of the Venerable Wood of the Life-Creating Cross of the Lord (Boykivshchyna, Middle Dnieper Ukraine, Nadsiania, Pokuttia, Volyn and Volyn Polissia); usage of the archaic term "honey" ("med") to denominate the Dedication day with mandatory tasting of honey as a sympathy meal (Middle Dnieper Ukraine, Polissia); participation of wax candle in Christmas Eve's farmstead rounds (Hutsulshchyna, Lemkivshchyna, Western Podillia, Hutsulshchyna-Boykivshchyna-Pokuttia borderzone), wedding rituals of making wedding bread (Middle Dnieper Ukraine, Podillia, Polissia), bridal party (Sloboda Ukraine, Middle Dnieper Ukraine) and pairing of candles (Middle Dnieper Ukraine, Sloboda Ukraine, Polissia), funeral rites – as special funeral candles as a *stochok* (Pokuttia, Hutsulshchyna, Bukovyna) and a *providnychka* (Middle Dnieper Ukraine, South, Sloboda Ukraine, Polissia) and all-Ukrainian worldview matrix of apiarian spiritual phenomenon. It was stipulated by peculiarities of national historical and cultural development (folk beliefs and legends of bees as a God's creation, their equating, according to a range of signs, to a human, proximity to the closest family circle of the apiarist, rituals and spells of religious and magical sense, related to an insect, mythological meaning of a bee as a symbol of soul, regarding St. Alexius a patron of apiculture, ambivalence of character of Ukrainian apiarian, believing that people with "evil eye" have negative impact on bees, separation of apiarian motives of the folk calendar and usage of all-Ukrainian apiarian calendar (Days of St. Eudokia, St. Alexius, the Day of Annunciation, St. Zosimus and St. Savvatus, the Palm Sunday, the Easter, the Trinity Sunday, St. Elijah, Conception of St. Anne, the Christmas Eve, the Christmas, the Epiphany, the Presentation of Our Lord), occasional apiarian ritualism.

While comparing the data, of field and literary sources, on the ritual aspects of traditional apiculture of the residents of Ukraine and some Slavonic (and, in the broader sense – European) countries, we detect a considerable range of common features (a bee's sacred status, legends on the insects' Divine nature, folk vision of a bee as a soul and forerunner of death in dreams, tabooed killing of bees, privileged position and belonging to the apiarist's family, participation in family festivities, motive of bees' breeding in Christmas carols, the need of selling the insects prior to the apiarist's death as well as their awakening on the funeral day, separate ritual actions on the days of the Annunciation, Conception of St. Anne, Christmas Eve, usage of apiculture products in family rituals – honey in some birth, wedding and funeral rites,

and wax candles in the ritualism of the Day of the Presentation of Our Lord and ceromancy practices).

The research of worldview and ritual aspect of Ukrainian apiculture, contribution of national apiarists into the depository on national spiritual acquisitions have an important value for outlining many centuries of traditions of the Ukrainian ethnoses. Traditions are the basis for Ukraine's search of its place in modern spiritual contour of Europe in which each people is distinguished for its own ethnical colouring. This allows us to learn about the relic worldview phenomena, spiritual heritage, ways of thinking and constructing of the world around of our ancestors, principles of archaic consciousness functioning, and thereby to contribute to the creation of a complete worldview and axiological picture of the traditional being of the Ukrainian ethnoses.

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