

## COVID-19 Vaccination and Ukrainians: Myths, Memes and Narratives

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### Abstract

The paper deals with human cultural stereotypes embedded in mythological consciousness, which have influenced the formation of fear of vaccination against COVID-19. The material was collected in Ukraine in the period from September 2021 to January 2022. By analysing oral narratives and comments from social media users, the authors demonstrate the cultural mechanisms of fear of vaccination, specifically fear of death and fear of metamorphosis, and how they can be overcome. The profusion of memes, anecdotes, and jokes that people read and shared on social media or told each other became a way of overcoming collective fear. Nowadays, not only oral tradition but also social media can constitute a source for studying cultural stereotypes. A folkloristic and culturally anthropological perspective on the fear of vaccination allows us to trace folkloristic phenomena back to our everyday lives and to see folklore as a living, dynamic process that has become part of human culture.

### Keywords

contemporary folklore, cultural stereotypes, covid-19 vaccination, internet folklore, mythologisation of disease, urban legend

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## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began in 2020, has changed our world and poses challenges not only for scholars of the natural sciences but also those of the humanities. Folkloristics is a discipline which involves the methods necessary for the interpretation of national cultures attributed to both the past and the present. Folklore studies also has the potential to become a sensitive indicator of social processes (Krawczyk-Wasilewska 2000; Krawczyk-Wasilewska 2003; Labashchuk – Reshetukha – Derkach 2020; Labashchuk – Reshetukha – Harasym 2020; Narvselius 2009; Nowina-Sroczyńska 1997; Orshuliak-Dudkovska 2010). It helps to explain, for example, how people perceive the COVID-19 pandemic, what kind of public fears the virus activates, and why the issue of vaccination triggers such overwhelming fear in some people.

Vaccination is recognized as the primary means of ending the pandemic by the international scientific community of physicians and virologists. The WHO estimated that at least 70% of the world's population needs to be vaccinated for the pandemic to end (International organizations 2021). At the same time, many governments and medical professionals have struggled with the reluctance of a great number of people to be vaccinated, who argue there are good reasons for this behaviour (Bilshist ukraintsiv 2021; Konstantinova 2021; Tyshchenko 2021).

The situation concerning the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccination has already been the subject of several studies. One of the first anthropological responses to the pandemic was the extensive study by Violetta Krawczyk-Wasilewska. The researcher examined the pandemic from an eco-anthropological perspective and placed it in the context of a cultural-historical study of the epidemic (Krawczyk-Wasilewska 2020). A study on how people formed beliefs in the context of pandemic risk in France was conducted by members of the Coconel team (Attema et al. 2021). Doug Most attributed some of the most widespread myths to facts given by two leading infectious disease experts (Most 2021). Jenna Clark claimed that anti-vaccination beliefs are highly dependent on cultural and social context and attempted to explain the reasons why some Americans rejected the vaccination (Clark 2021). Monographs and scientific articles exploring conspiracy theories, perceived fears and prejudices of people concerning COVID-19 are of particular interest for our research (Bodner et al. 2021; Shahsavari et al. 2020; Oberiri – Bahiyah 2021). The Ukrainian data discussed in this article can be potentially viewed as a part of world anthropological research on the COVID-19 pandemic.

A research group of Polish scientists investigated the relationship between vaccination hesitancy and the way people feel about their national groups

(Cislak et al. 2021). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on return migration to the Czech Republic (Macková – Filipec 2022) and Ireland's returning young migrants (Donnelly 2022) aimed at highlighting the uneasiness between the voluntary-forced migration dichotomy and understanding the role of transnationalism and migration networks in return migration.

Governments around the world have faced an anti-vaccination movement. In Ukraine, however, the population's reluctance to be vaccinated is perhaps one of the most acute. The fact that the vaccination issue was very actively discussed in the country is evidenced by the fact that the word "vaccine" was declared the word of the year in 2021 in the *Dictionary of Modern Ukrainian Language and Slang* (Slovnyk 2022).

The vaccination statistics for autumn 2021 were rather bleak (Vaccination data 2021), since the vaccination rate for adults in Ukraine was only 20.2% in November 2021 during a severe period of COVID-19. Meanwhile, in the European Union, the rate was 75.6% (Hodcy – Orenshtein 2021). Such poor statistics are confirmed by a number of social surveys conducted by Internews Ukraine in July–August 2021. Around 70% of respondents had come across the fake news that the COVID vaccination was more dangerous than the coronavirus itself, while 49% said they thought it was true (Ukrainsiv 2021).

The even more deadly COVID-19 wave that Ukraine experienced in the autumn of 2021 in combination with government action that put significant restrictions on work, participation in public events and travel activities for the unvaccinated greatly increased the number of people willing to be vaccinated, either voluntarily or under duress. However, negative attitudes towards vaccination persisted in the majority of society.

Social media during this period started to circulate rumours exploring negative stories, such as ideas that vaccines contain nanobots that are implanted in people, they can rewrite human DNA and cause infertility, and that they benefit Bill Gates or the global pharmaceutical companies that launched the virus first, who are now forcing everyone to be vaccinated. Rumours like these are not just a Ukrainian problem, but a worldwide one. But why are they so common in Eastern Europe in general and in Ukraine in particular? Why do Ukrainians believe such rumours *en masse*?

From our perspective, it is not only a medical issue, it is also a social one, which can be solved by means of deeper research in the fields of Anthropology and Folkloristics. In 2021, anti-vaccination movements were spreading all over the world (Covid 2021; Covid vaccination 2021; Höppner 2021) and Ukraine was no exception. Many people were and still are reluctant to be vaccinated, and a strong anti-vaccination movement developed. Therefore, the reaction of Ukrainians to vaccination is an interesting research

subject. An important question for us was why some people were willing to tolerate forced social isolation, restrictions on their civil rights, travel bans, and even dismissal from work in order to avoid vaccination. What are the cultural mechanisms that generate fear of vaccination? What drives the anti-vaccination movement?

## Methods and materials

Description of the research methods and materials implies a focus on the specifics of the transmission of oral tradition. In the era of digital culture, folklore tradition can function in two ways. The first way is the traditional oral transmission of discreet information by means of inter-personal communication. In this case, stories can be classified as non-fiction prose. Such texts function widely in urban environments and embody human fears and anxieties conveying semi-legal information “among close friends” (Barber 2007; Czubala 2005). Today, folklorists focus their attention on the ability of modern folklore to express hidden symbolic meanings (Krawczyk-Wasilewska 2000; Krawczyk-Wasilewska 2003; Orshuliak-Dudkowska 2010; Sedakova 2007).

Folklore is a form of direct communication among people, conveying informal knowledge, stereotypes, values, and codes of behaviour of the human community. Through symbolic codes, folklore transmits people’s important values, prejudices and fears, and their attitudes towards their own bodies, new technologies, risky decisions and so on. The second way of transmission lies in passing important information through internet streams, such as social networks (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, TikTok) and information platforms for communication (e.g., Viber, Telegram, Messenger).

Internet folklore should be understood as a phenomenon of mass communication, satisfying human needs for creative self-expression, which has features applicable to traditional folklore such as anonymity, variability, and collectivity. The theoretical basis for understanding internet folklore as a part of integral folk culture can be found in the views of the eminent American Folklorist Dan Ben-Amos, who argued that artistic communication within a small group can be considered folklore (Ben-Amos 1971). Early forms of internet folklore were studied in the works of John Dorst, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Daryl C. Dance and Robert G. Howard (Dorst 1990; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1996; Dance 2002; Howard 2008). B. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett drew attention to multimedia as an important feature of internet folklore (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998).

Polish folklore specialist V. Krawczyk-Wasilewska pointed out the possibility of considering the internet as an important form of folklore transmission. She emphasized that most of the features typical for folklore communication

in traditional culture are also preserved in digital culture. Krawczyk-Wasilewska calls mobile and internet communication “an encyclopaedia of global folklore”, which fulfils communication, entertainment and emotional discharge functions. “*This type of immediate social reaction to new phenomena and problems tends to create a special kind of written, oral, and visual folklore of a global character, which could be termed ‘e-folklore’*” (Krawczyk-Wasilewska 2006: 250). The concept of the emergence of e-folklore correlates with the idea of a secondary orality of electronic culture proposed by Walter Jackson Ong (Ong 1977).

The vision of contemporary folklore described in this article determined the various ways data was collected for the research. The first source of information is the 57 stories that were recorded in the form of open-ended narrative interviews. The material was recorded by the authors of the research and students of Ternopil Volodymyr Hnatiuk National Pedagogical University (Ukraine) in the period from September to November 2021. The participants were asked to describe their attitude towards vaccination and share their thoughts on the topic. The interviewer attempted to avoid evaluative judgements as much as possible and to be a neutral and attentive listener. The conversation between the collector and the informant was digitally recorded and then decoded (transcribed) in accordance with modern requirements for storing lexical, grammatical, and syntactic aspects of the narrator’s speech (Hrinchenko 2006). The material was mainly recorded in an induced context. Firstly, it should be noted that the respondents were residents of Western Ukraine and the largest amount of the material was recorded in the city of Ternopil and the Ternopil region. However, due to the global nature of information on coronavirus vaccination, this material may also be representative of Ukraine as a whole.

The other sources of information analysed in the research were from social networking services popular in Ukraine such as Facebook, Telegram, and Viber, which were screened primarily to collect stories, anecdotes, memes, and jokes about vaccination. Readers’ comments on social media posts were extremely valuable samples of data, as their spontaneous remarks reflected the sincere interest and emotions of the correspondents. In addition, the internet implies a certain anonymity, as anyone can hide behind a pseudonym. In our study, we used comments to the publication “*Aliens’ Inside Us*” (“Chuzniye” vnutri nas, ChVN), which were posted on the social network Facebook on the page of the Huxley Almanac. The page is followed by more than 34,000 subscribers. The material was published on October 19, 2021, it has more than 1,800 comments and has been shared 2,482 times.<sup>1</sup>

1 “CHUZHIYE” VNUTRI NAS: zachem prirode nuzhny epidemii virusov? Facebook Huxley [on-line], 19. 10. 2021 – 30. 12. 2021 [2021-10-19–2021-12-30]. Available at: <https://1url.cz/Crazp> [in Ukrainian; in Russian]

With reference to recordings of contemporary folklore, following Elizabeth Fine and Oleksandra Britsyna, we distinguish between natural, induced, and artificial contexts of folklore work fixation (Britsyna 2006; Fine 1994). When recording statements about coronavirus, we understand that the best texts can be obtained by a folklorist in a natural context. Unfortunately, during a narrative interview, when a supportive environment is created, we can only speak about an induced context of folklore performance. If the interaction between the collector and the informant failed, it means that the recording was done in an artificial context.

The anti-vaccine movement is unquestionably fuelled not only by human fears, but also by particular anti-government organizations. It should be noted that we were not interested in protests, posts and comments organized by specific groups. Our attention was focused primarily on the synergistic component of the anti-vaccination movement: why the fear of vaccination has a considerable resonance among some parts of the population. Why are people willing to lose money or a job or experience social isolation and still refuse to be vaccinated?

Consequently, the objective of this paper is to elucidate and interpret people's global fear arising from need to be vaccinated against COVID-19 and to identify the cultural mechanisms that help to overcome this fear.

## Presentation of the material

The anti-vaccination movement has a history as long as vaccination itself. The first smallpox vaccination was carried out by Edward Jenner in 1796 and the anti-vaccination movement (Anti-Vaccination Society) emerged in England in 1798. Andrea Kitta writes about this in *Vaccinations and Public Concern in History* (Kitta 2011). Rumours circulated in the country at that time that the vaccinated person also received a part of the animal's body, and therefore should not be surprised if they were to grow horns and a tail. A cartoon from that time mocked these unfounded fears. (Figure 1)

Without going into historical detail, it should be noted that little has changed in over 200 years. People are still afraid of vaccination, associating their fears and prejudices with the vaccine. The question of the anthropology of fear has been raised by researchers since the late twentieth century and now has an extensive bibliography (Scruton 1986). Detailed analysis allows us to categorize the fears associated with vaccination into two groups: the fear of death and the fear of metamorphosis. The concept of "death" is one of the basic folklore concepts in traditional Ukrainian folklore. This primarily refers to genres that reflect human experience in the most tragic moments of the era: wars, deportations and famine (Kuzmenko 2018).





**Figure 1** *The cow-pock, - or - The wonderful effects of the new inoculation!* Edward Jenner vaccinating patients in the Smallpox and Inoculation Hospital at St. Pancras: the patients develop features of cows. Coloured etching by J. Gillray, 1802. Source: Wellcome Collection. CC Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0). Available at: <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/dsu7wxau/items>

## Fear of Death

Antivaxxers claim that the vaccine kills. We documented the following characteristic rumour:

*“The first dose of vaccine weakens our immunity, the second implants the virus into the human body, the third again strengthens immunity, but the virus is already in the body, so one gets such a violent reaction that it leads to death.”* (Labashchuk, BAB, 58)<sup>2</sup>

Similar messages were found in the comments to an article about the coronavirus *“Aliens” Inside Us* (ChvN), posted on Facebook:

*“[...] Most vaccines (especially the current experimental COVID PSEUDO VACCINES<sup>3</sup> some kind of gene modifying special formula) are used*

- 2 The data in the references are presented in the following order: the collector’s name, three letters denoting the initials of the narrator and the age of the narrator. All recordings were made in September-December 2021.
- 3 The capitals letters are used in the original comments.

*despite and to the detriment of the natural ones normally produced by the human body's IMMUNITY [...]*

*Vaccination is essentially DE-IMMUNIZATION – disorganization, suppression, and depletion of the body's self-defence forces in the long term [...]* (ChVN, Serhiy Motorny, 2021).

These social media users believe that vaccination will cause most or all of the vaccinated people to die. They say that the coronavirus has been created artificially and vaccination is not the way to protect people. Moreover, there will be famine, so we should be stocking up on food and strengthening our immunity:

*“The majority of humanity will die out and only the ‘golden billion’ will remain, i.e., mostly intelligent people. All this was planned at least 40 years ago. It is also written in the Bible.”* (Shchudlo, ShchYuI, 56)

*“Personally, I know of more than 6 deaths after vaccination already. Why? They don't warn people about the possible side effects and they don't examine them. Is this responsible? Is this a good thing for society?”*<sup>4</sup>

*“I don't want to sound like a cynic. God forbids Ukrainians to start burning candles in their windows in memory of the ‘fallen innocents’ from the Vaccinomor [Vaccine genocide].”*<sup>5</sup>

It should be noted that both our articles and the comments on social media posts assert the view that the vaccine is an artificial weapon created specifically for the destruction of humanity. We encountered the idea that the vaccine is a type of biological weapon in the comments below:

*“Vaccination is not just for nothing. This is real biological warfare! In fact, there are those who really want to destroy humanity and leave only a chosen few.”* (Reshetukha, ShOV, 45)

*“What will happen to those who are now getting vaccinated? The clairvoyants' reply is: ‘All these politicians and vaccine supporters will start dying out before 2030. Many will be wiped out by the military,*

4 Facebook status. I. D., 12. 10. 2021. Available at: [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=3021620394825024&id=100009312780108](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=3021620394825024&id=100009312780108)

5 Facebook status. E. A., 27. 10. 2021. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/eugene.avramchuk/posts/5085592934805476>



*others will become invalids, and a lot of them will simply be thrown out of their positions. As for vaccinated people, they will die out in 3 years. Victory will be for intelligent people, who think straight regardless of media propaganda. Vaccination is a test of human sanity.”* (Shchudlo, ShchYuI, 56)

Stories about the likely victims of the coronavirus vaccination are extremely interesting. These texts have all the hallmarks of non-fiction prose genre, namely, reference to a reliable source, absolute belief in the veracity of what is said, and the irreversibly negative effects of the vaccine on human life and health.

*“A neighbour told me that her sister works as a doctor in Khmelnytskyi region. There lived a healthy young woman who had no diseases but was vaccinated and died of unknown causes. She could have lived and lived.”* (Derkach, SUM, 44)

*“People are dying like flies from this vaccine. Everyone says so. I mean, elderly couple living in the countryside. Why did they need to be vaccinated? They got vaccinated and died!”* (Kushnir, TOV, 40)

*“One man, due to health problems, had complications after the vaccine – his doctor prescribed it, but he didn’t need it and he died after a certain time.”* (Kasiyanchuk, KYuR, 23)

Moreover, similar examples were found in the internet sources:

*“I’m against vaccination... except voluntarily. A person feels good, he gets injected and after that, he has a fever, his arm hurts...”*<sup>6</sup>

*“One pregnant woman got the vaccine and died the next day.”* (ChvN, E. T., 2021)

There are typical statements related to the danger of vaccination in general and the danger of this vaccine for humans claiming that both the COVID-19 virus itself and the vaccine against it are the products of secret laboratories aimed at destroying humanity. Violetta. Krawczyk-Wasilewska

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6 Facebook status. T. P., 29. 09. 2021. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/taras.taras.3557/posts/1034813513731485>

writes in her monograph that similar beliefs were expressed by people regarding the artificial origin of the AIDS virus (Krawczyk-Wasilewska 2000). Here are a few examples:

*“Do you think this virus originated on its own? The Americans invented it all in their secret laboratories.”* (Labashchuk, BAB, 58)

*“What is there to say... You should read the Bible in such cases. It provides answers for everything. Both about the number of the beast and those vaccines. People already know everything. But there are many who don't want to listen!”* (Kushnir, TOV, 40)

*“I can't say for sure I won't get vaccinated ... I haven't dared yet. I will explain why. I believe what is written in the Bible. As the Book of Life writes about the beast, it will put a mark on a human's right hand or forehead.”* (Hryhorkiv, HOV, 57)

*“It wasn't nature that invented it, as you write there, but idiots invented it and produced it to destroy people.”* (ChVN, Larisa Bondar, 2021).

**“PEOPLE HAVE NOT YET UNDERSTOOD THAT IT IS A BACTERIOLOGICAL WEAPON AIMED AT DESTRUCTION, THIS IS THE FIRST TOUCHSTONE, AND IT WILL GET FUNNIER SOON!!!”** (ChVN, 2021).

Some stories compared the effects of vaccination to the effects of AIDS or other diseases:

*“For now, free, they will kill our immunity with those vaccines, make artificial AIDS, and then we will work for them... this is one of the versions of mass injections.”* (ChVN, Valentyna Kyrychenko, 2021)

*“Humanity itself is the virus on earth. We all are viruses. Nature cannot stand us anymore.”* (Reshetukha, KAN, 66)

*“There is another version of what all this is happening. We are using too many of the planet's resources, that is, we are like parasites for it, and parasites must be eliminated.”* (Shudlo, ShchYuI, 56)

*“Don't write such nonsense. Humans have polluted the planet so badly that it has decided to get rid of the virus called HUMAN. Mindless*

*deforestation, shifting riverbeds, 'the peaceful atom', etc. Man is the king of nature? We have ruled the world too much, haven't we?"*  
(ChVN, Lyudmyla Zujeva, 2021)

The last of those comments is interesting, since it claims that the Earth is using a virus to protect itself from humans. The folkloric motif that the Earth is tired of overpopulation and asks the Gods for wars or pestilences for humans has been around since the time of Homer. One of the myths about the Trojan War was that Earth-Gaia was so tired of overpopulation that she asked Zeus to start a war to cull the population.

The motif of spraying an unknown substance from an aircraft that poses a threat to people is also of folkloric origin. Folklorists associate the motif of spraying substances with diseases over the city with the well-known ritual in the Ukrainian tradition of ploughing a furrow around the village or tying the church with a cloth woven by all the women of the village as a way of avoiding a plague or cholera epidemic (Antsybor 2011). Such beliefs were quite common among Ukrainian peasants in the 19th century (Shcherbakivskyi 1991). In the perception of the modern urban dweller, these amuletic activities have become a threat that is directly detrimental to human life and health. The following comments reflect this motif:

*"Look! The aircraft is flying! Every night they spray chemicals!"* (Reshetukha, KVI, 62)

*"Stop spraying us with all kinds of sickness from the air and there will be no viruses! (Someone benefits a lot from this epidemic! That's why they made it! We are being poisoned like cockroaches!)"* (ChVN, Vladimir Sazonov, 2021)

*"Some kind of powder is being dropped from aeroplanes... there are already videos of a driver removing a layer of unknown dust from the bonnet of his car in the morning."* (ChVN, Lyubov Homenko, 2021)

In our opinion, these motifs of a virus created in secret laboratories for the purpose of destroying humanity, of the overpopulation of the Earth and its weariness with people and their bad behaviour, and of spraying a mysterious substance from an aircraft – either a virus, or an antidote, or a vaccine, with the intention of harming people, have a folkloric origin. But a more common motif in similar accounts is fear of death by the vaccine. Let us speculate on possible origins of this fear.

Let us consider in detail some traditional Ukrainian beliefs related to diseases and their causes. A typical belief presupposes that sickness comes from the other world and is of a demonic nature. In the Ukrainian rituals, it was there, into the dry woods and marshes, where the rooster never sings and no human voice is heard, that sickness was sent away.

*“There I give you the way  
To the far-far mountain,  
To the other end of the world  
Go, run, carry your arrow!  
Faster than a bullet from a rifle!  
Go back to the woods,  
To the lakes, to the seas, where your  
kinsmen are!”* (Franko 1898: 69)

In traditional perceptions of Ukrainian peasants, disease often took on human form, appearing to peasants, predicting their death, or the death of a fellow villager. In other words, it acted exactly like the representatives of the wicked in Ukrainian legends, such as the devil, witches, and sorcerers (Shcherbakivskiy 1991). All demonic beings are from the other world. Man’s task is to keep disease out of the village or his home, or, in the case of illness, to summon and expel disease from the human body and send it back where it belongs – to the netherworld.

The question thus arises of why modern Ukrainians are less afraid of the disease than the vaccine. In our respondents’ statements, we can observe a substitution of notions according to the principle of metonymy, whereby the COVID vaccine substitutes for COVID-19 itself:

*“For great sins that virus and that vaccine have been sent to us.  
A person will be saved if he repents [his sins].”* (Derkach, SOM, 71)

*“Don’t blame nature, the virus is in ampoules.”* (ChVN, Svitlana Damaskin, 2021)

## Fear of Metamorphosis

Another very common fear associated with COVID-19 vaccination is the fear of significant and irreversible changes in the human body. It is interesting that people try to justify such judgements with reference to pseudoscientific evidence:

*“Why do the media speak with one voice in favour of the vaccine, but don’t talk about the many people who are incompatible with the vaccine, and why are they silent about the number of deaths, developmental delays, and changes in human RNA and DNA?” (Bilyk, BMM, 26)*

*“It is also said that vaccinated people exhibit a noticeable change in their behaviour, they become reserved, sometimes aggressive.” (Shchudlo, ShchYuI, 56)*

One motif goes back to the previously mentioned idea that a vaccine is a virus that infects a person:

*“In fact, a vaccination is the artificial injection of a virus, which allows you to check the effects on your body.” (Hryhorkiv, HOV, 57)*

Some people claim that the coronavirus vaccine is of extra-terrestrial origin and it was invented by aliens from other planets:

*“Viruses, microbes ... a thought occurred to me ... If the ancestors of animals and humans have lived together on this planet from the very beginning, then all microbes and viruses must be common ... Then how can we catch something foreign? The conclusion then, either people or animals, but most likely the world government came from another planet.” (ChVN, Liudmyla Herman, 2021)*

*“Those who invented the vaccine are not humans but seem to be aliens.” (ChVN, Andrei Andrei, 2021)*

Some people are afraid of all the technical innovations that civilization brings. Some respondents believe the vaccine is a means of gaining total control over people:

*“Along with a dose of the vaccine, a chip is implanted into the body, so that the vaccinated person can be tracked. From stories, I also heard the case of a man who was vaccinated, and his vaccine number was displayed as a Bluetooth device.” (Hryhorkiv, HOV, 57)*

*“I have heard many times that some people could lean a spoon, scissors, or a coin against the spot where they were vaccinated and the thing would stick to their arm like a magnet.” (Knyaziuk, KSI, 44)*

*“Well, that’s what they say! They cut someone’s arm at the injection site, and metal plates fell out. Well, what do you think of that? How can a vaccine have metal plates?”* (Labashchuk, KNZ, 59)

*“Because there are microchips in the vaccine.”* (ChVN, Bondarenko Bondarenko, 2021)

Some of the people interviewed believed that the aim of vaccination is to introduce special devices into the human body in order to control the people and make them obedient. The direct organisers of this process were even named. The American billionaire and computer corporation founder Bill Gates was identified and the people who invented 5G mobile communication, as can be seen from the comments below.

*“They will put up towers and those who have been vaccinated will be controlled from them. And people will be like zombies.”* (Labashchuk, LRY, 78)

*“The Americans invented it all. Bill Gates invested a lot of money in that vaccine. And now he wants to get that money back. It’s all for a reason.”* (Reshetukha, LVD, 75)

*“This is nature itself – the perception of an alien entering the human body is the perception of genetic changes in our bodies after vaccination, and that vaccination can cause infertility. These changes are genetically caused by the vaccine. Therefore, we will already be genetically modified organisms, no doubt about it.”* (Derkach, NOP, 57)

*“Sure, some people say that the vaccine causes infertility. And I know what it is. There’s no data yet. We all are the laboratory mice, absolutely...”* (Hrytsak, HRO, 54)

*“I have heard that the Pfizer vaccine causes female infertility, this information is now very common and that is why young girls are afraid to get vaccinated.”* (Firman, RYuV, 27)

In this regard, there is some interesting information on the subject to be found on the internet. The social network dialogue below is a case in point:

*N: “Under no circumstances will I give my child to a vaccinated teacher. I will not expose my child to the infection of the spike protein.”*



*Also, vaccinated people have problems with the 8th gene, which is responsible for consciousness.”*

*A: “Can you please tell me more about the 8th gene?”*

*N: “This gene is responsible for emotions, consciousness, and connection to God. In the soul, there are detectors by which it is tuned to the vibrations of God. The vaccine closes those sensors and as a result, the person loses contact with the Creator.”*

*N: “If you do not know anything, it does not mean that it does not exist.”  
(F 4634, 2021)<sup>7</sup>*

It seems that internet sources are partial sources of folklore on vaccination. The following statement illustrates this.

*“A woman from Odessa complained that her son had constant headaches at school that were caused by a vaccinated teacher.” (Luba, LOV, 45)*

The fear of irreversible transformations of the human body is indicated by the following remark:

*“There is a belief that vaccinated people are not allowed to be blood donors.”  
(Firman, RYuV, 27)*

Some respondents believe that the vaccination is the introduction of a mythical alien into the body. This alien does not have any morphological features. It is simply an infernal alien being that is present in the body:

*“‘Aliens’ are always inside [the human body]. Always. Inside.” (ChVN, Svetlana Dzhepko, 2021)*

The widespread vaccination memes on the web are usually of similar content. The adenovirus used in the AstraZeneca vaccine will turn humans into monkeys, according to the authors of the following meme. (Figure 2)

It should be noted that such a fear is actively influenced by the mass media and mass cultural phenomena, particularly contemporary cinematography. After all, the screenwriters of horror scenarios draw their inspiration from the phenomena of mass mythology.

The human fear of an alien being penetrating and possessing a human body was brilliantly portrayed in the 1979 science fiction horror film *Alien*, which was directed by Ridley Scott.

It is interesting that traditional Ukrainian culture also has examples of representations of disease as a demonic creature with no definite form

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7 “Baba i kit”. Telegram, 9. 9. 2021 [2021-10-10]. Available at: [https://t.me/baba\\_i\\_kit/4634](https://t.me/baba_i_kit/4634) [in Ukrainian].

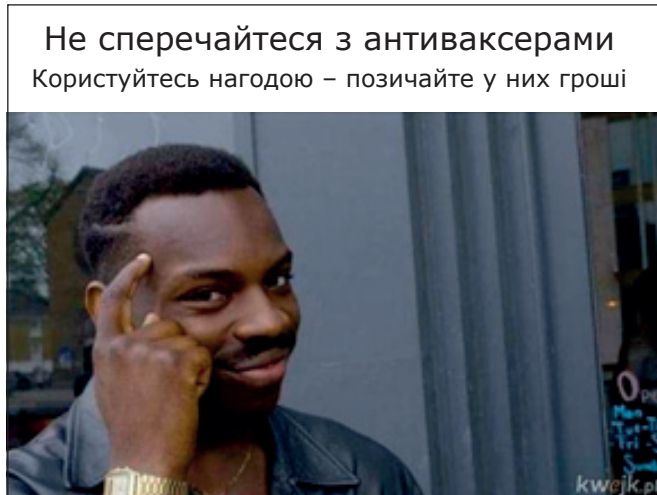


**Figure 2** Cartoon from Telegram. Source: Hussain, Danyal. CHQ spies launch cyber counter-attack against anti-vaccine propaganda being spread by Russia. *Mailonline* [on-line], 9. 11. 2020. [2021-12-21]. Available at: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8927865/GCHQ-spies-launch-cyber-counter-attack-against-anti-vaccine-propaganda-spread-Russia.html>

that is not like anything else. In stories about cholera recorded by Danylo Scherbakivsky in the Kyiv region there is the following description of disease:

*“I looked, there was a sack on the road [...]. I reached the sack and saw something like a mushroom, Morchella – the foam was growing, snorting, as if spreading its wings: growing, and growing more, already taller than me. I was petrified, and it was almost leaning on my chest, and snorting, and growing. I couldn’t see anything, no eyes, nothing – something like foam was growing. And my dogs just stood around with their tails up like they were standing to attention. I slowly left, and on the second day the cholera started with Naum Terpyts’ sister-in-law.”* (Shcherbakivskyi 1991: 542)

Both traditional and modern mass cultures interpret disease as an alien entering the body. Given that many believe that the vaccine is the same as the virus, with the vaccine the disease enters the human body and causes irreversible changes, such as infertility, changes at the genetic level, or turning people into a zombies in order to then control them.



**Figure 3** Cartoon from Telegram (“Baba i kit”, 2021).  
The caption reads: “Don’t argue with anti-vaccinationists. Make use of the opportunity – borrow money from them.”

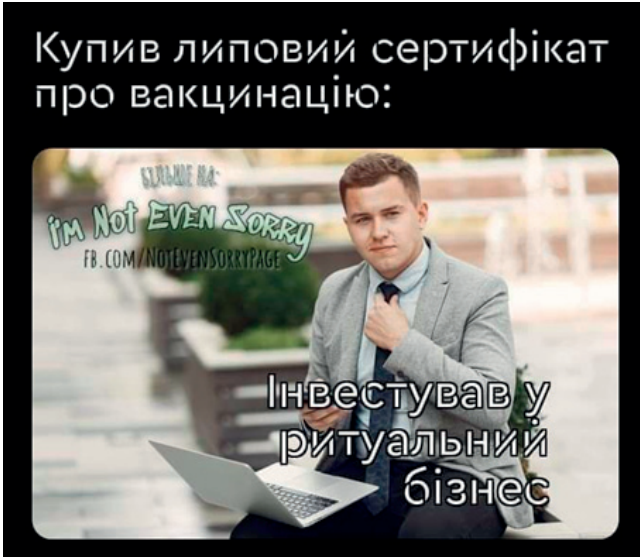
### Fighting fear with laughter

Living in constant fear is extremely uncomfortable and unhealthy for people, and they try to overcome global problems and fears with laughter, which is a typical manifestation of human culture since ancient times (Bakhtin 1990; Toporov 1988). It was the mocking of one’s fears and the adaptation to reality through laughter that occurred during the global threat of terrorism after the attacks on the American Twin Towers on 11 September 2001 (Kravchyk-Wasilewska 2003).

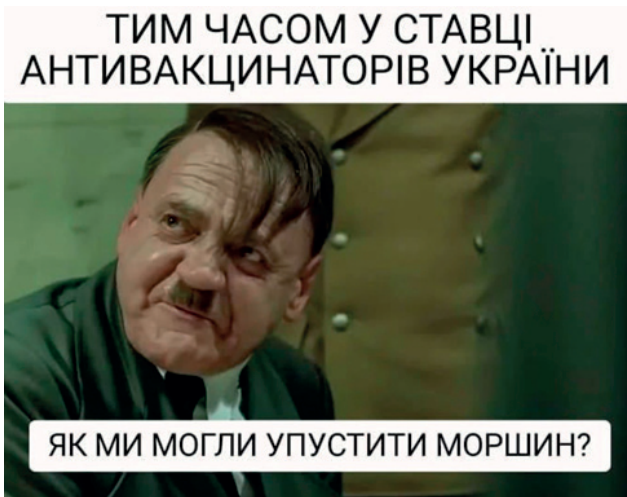
During the COVID pandemic, everyone was laughing: anti-vaccinationists were laughing at the gullible supporters of vaccination who had been fooled by the authorities and corrupt media, while the vaccinated were laughing at the anti-vaxxers. It should be noted that in 2021 the most popular jokes on Ukrainian humour pages such as “Baba i Kit” (An Old Lady and a Cat), “Koronovani Zharty” (Crowned Jokes), “Veselyy perets. Ukrainski zharty” (Jolly Pepper. Ukrainian Jokes), “Kurin’ smikhu” (A Hut of Laughter) were jokes about vaccination.

Anti-vaccinationists were ridiculed on social media. The issue of increased risk of death for them was particularly emphasised. (Figure 3)

Those who bought a false vaccination certificate in the autumn of 2021 are mocked in a similar way. (Figure 4)



**Figure 4** Cartoon from Telegram (“Baba i kit”, 2021).  
The caption reads: “Buying a fake vaccination certificate – investing in the funeral business.”



**Figure 5** Cartoon from Telegram (“Baba i kit”, 2021).  
The caption reads: “Meanwhile, in the stakes of Ukraine’s anti-vaccinationists. How could we have missed Morshyn?”



**Figure 6** Cartoon from Telegram (“Baba i kit”, 2021).  
The caption reads: “Bill Gates demonstrates a jar of stewed cabbage with prunes using a recipe that was stolen with a 5G chip from the brain of Mrs Mikhaylyna from the village of Perederylahy in the Lviv Region.”

A lot of memes addressed the phenomenon of the 75% of the population of Morshyn (Ukraine) who were vaccinated. After the vaccination hardly anyone in this small spa town contracted COVID-19. One of the jokes uses a photo of an angry Hitler. (Figure 5)

The popular belief among anti-vaccinationists that Bill Gates invented the vaccination in order to control people’s minds is ridiculed. (Figure 6)

Due to lack of space, we are only able to include a few individual examples of such humour. The profusion of humorous memes, jokes, and anecdotes on the topic of COVID vaccination can reduce social tension, ease people’s anxiety about vaccination and therefore contribute to their physical and mental health.

## Discussion

This paper is a contribution to the rich mosaic of global COVID-19 anthropological research. It demonstrates, on the one hand, the embedding of Ukrainian myths, memes, and narratives about coronavirus vaccination in the global context and, on the other hand, expresses the specificity of the Ukrainian data.

The approach suggested in the research allows the researcher to substantially expand the range of texts, in other words, the objects of folkloristic

analysis. The collected materials provide new perspectives for folklore and anthropological analysis of the most resonant issues of social life relating to human fears, hopes, or aspirations. It goes beyond the domain of human fears associated with the mythologized vaccination. The modern person mythologizes his/her attitude to diseases and physicians, his/her political view, the idea of his/her own destiny, difficult trials, and happy and dramatic events. There are possible prospects for further research in the mythologizing of various aspects of modern life.

Modern folklore tradition is characterized by the transmission of meaningful information not only in a *face-to-face* format. We believe contemporary social media act as a powerful source of folklore transmission. We recorded the respondents' views on coronavirus vaccination in an induced context, while the comments on social networks were the spontaneous utterances and live expressions of interested people. This confirms that texts on social networks are often much more vivid, interesting and emotionally intense.

Obviously, the internet has provided a "natural" context for the observed phenomenon. By focusing on material collected through narrative interviews and posted on social media, we have interpreted not only the actual folklore tradition but we have also demonstrated that folklore is an extremely sensitive indicator of social changes and processes.

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