

RITUALS OF SOCIAL LEGITIMIZATION IN THE LITHUANIAN CHILDBIRTH CUSTOMS SYSTEM: TRADITIONS AND INNOVATIONS

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Abstract: By comparing data of the descriptions of birth customs of Lithuania Minor at the end of the seventeenth century and personal fieldwork data collected in the villages and small towns of south-eastern Lithuania (Dzūkija ethnographic region) in 1992–2007, I discuss the problem of modernization of Lithuanian culture through the diachronic change of structural elements of the birth cycle performed after the birth of a child. I distinguish the three consecutive stages in the cycle of birth customs – the first visit to the baby and the mother (*lankynos*), baptism, and churching of the woman – and make an attempt to reveal changes in them in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in terms of historical development, chronological duration, and social interaction.

Keywords: baptism, contemporary society, cycle of birth customs, Lithuania Minor, social changes, south-eastern Lithuania

INTRODUCTION

Rituals in a person's life cycle reveal and mark the most important moments in their life, including the birth and socio-cultural legitimization of the baby. As Ronald L. Grimes mentioned, "Even a single rite of passage can divide a person's life into 'before' and 'after'. An entire system of such rites organizes a life into stages. These ceremonial occasions inscribe images into the memories of participants, and they etch values into the cornerstones of social institutions" (Grimes 2000: 5). The cycle of birth customs in the Lithuanian village in the late nineteenth–early twentieth centuries began with the woman falling pregnant, and ended with a ritualized return to regular social life after giving birth. Throughout this period, the woman acquired a special status in

the family and village community (Paukštytė 1999). As research has shown, the ethnic factor plays a minimal role in the cycle of birth customs. According to Natalia Gratsianskaia and Aleksandr Kozhanovskii, compared to birth cycle customs in other European countries, unique features cannot even be noticed in Slavic nations whose ethno-cultural specifics in other topics are often widely declared (Gratsianskaia & Kozhanovskii 1999 [1997]: 515). The customs associated with the social legitimization of a child's birth span the first months of his or her life, rarely going beyond a year. One of the most important acts of a child's social legitimization was and still is baptism, which is the most fundamental Christian rite of passage. It is one of the additional rituals which Christianity brings to the catalogue of rites performed by the humanity in the normal course of human life. By the use of water and in the name of the Holy Trinity, a person becomes a member of the Church (Davies 1994: 41–42). On the other hand, baptism has been not only a church sacrament but also a social act.¹ This ritual constructed neighbourhood, community, and extended family bonds, while also carrying religious meaning for the child, family, and parish (Cressy 1999 [1997]: 149).

When analysing the life cycle of a person, Arnold van Gennep's "passage rites" theory from 1909 is still the most often cited reference point, which distinguishes three structural functional types of rituals that mark changes in the social status: rites of separation, transition rites, and rites of incorporation (Gennep 1960 [1909]: 11). Yet, this ritual theory often helps ascertain similarities in cultural characteristics rather than model how they change; nonetheless, it is an excellent instrument for revealing the structure of transition rituals, facilitating their diachronic comparison in relation to the social processes surrounding the ritual. According to Ursula Rao, "Ritual is seen as a medium for the integration of society. Interestingly, this idea remains important even where attention is shifted to conflict and change" (Rao 2006: 145).

The earliest sources describing the life led by the Baltic tribes show that people opposed Christian baptism and even tried to erase it by conducting home-based rituals (Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2009: 164–165), but ever since the baptism of Lithuania (in the late fourteenth–early fifteenth centuries) it was the church baptism that dominated and carried legal power. Up until the Soviet occupation, a person's birth, marriage, and death were legitimized in church across most of Lithuania. Besides, the ritual should not necessarily be related to religion or an archaic society (Grimes 2013). I would agree with the idea of Pascal Lardellier that all human societies are matrices of rituals. They permanently nourish social cohesion in their materiality and symbolism (Lardellier 2019: XXI). From 1945, church registry no longer carried any legal power, and baptism in church became unacceptable in Lithuania.² Meanwhile, with the

introduction of civil name-giving (in 1962), people still ignored the non-religious ritual in all manner of ways, often adding a Christian ritual in secret, i.e., by performing baptism before or after the secular name-giving. The social links to the local community and extended family were established during both of these rituals, which could have been different in each community or even in individual families.

This prompted me to analyse the socio-cultural acknowledgement rituals associated with a person's birth in Lithuania in two "critical" periods: the formation of the Christian legitimization ritual in the case of a child's birth, and the implementation of the socialist name-giving ritual. The aim of the first one was to replace pre-Christian rituals with Christian ones, while the second one was supposed to replace Christian rituals with secular ones.³ Looking at birth rituals from the perspective of the woman (from pregnancy to the return to "normal" life after giving birth) and the child (from birth to its socio-cultural legitimization), they consist of Church and/or state-regulated rituals as well as those based on folk beliefs and community traditions, whose interaction changes in the perspective of time. These rituals add significance to one or another element in the cycle of birth customs.

Many ethnologists who conduct diachronic cultural research prioritize the ethnographic field research method in their investigation. Undoubtedly, the potential of ethnographic field research allows us to focus on the situation in the twentieth century, while descriptions of birth cycle customs from the sixteenth–seventeenth centuries and earlier periods can be analysed only based on the available written sources. Their reliability is inconsistent as the authors did not always know Lithuanian, and they might not have had the chance to observe a specific community for themselves, and/or personal motives might have swayed them from presenting an objective image of life at the time.

In order to compare the seventeenth-century birth cycle customs with those from the twentieth century, the situation in two Lithuanian regions had to be compared. Most of the data about the earliest Lithuanian birth customs comes from Lithuania Minor.⁴ As the local population from this region had practically disappeared by the second half of the twentieth century, the Dzūkija ethnographic region in south-eastern Lithuania, where birth cycle customs in this period had retained the most traditional cultural elements, was selected for field research. The historical context and natural environment pre-determined a slower modernization of this region (as compared to other Lithuanian regions).

On the other hand, old written sources (seventeenth century and earlier) do not reveal birth rituals related to a woman's pregnancy or the birth itself. Therefore, I will limit myself to the analysis of the customs and rituals of social

legitimization performed after the birth of a baby, which covers only a part of the cycle of birth customs.

Based on these provisions, the aim is to analyse diachronic changes of rituals of a child's social legitimization in the Lithuanian childbirth customs system in terms of the socio-cultural aspect. By using personal field research results and published ethnographic accounts, I shall aim to: 1) analyse the implementation of Christian baptism and the functioning of the child's social legitimization customs at the end of the seventeenth century; 2) reveal the customs and rituals related to the birth of a child in the twentieth–beginning of the twenty-first century; 3) analyse the duration and stability of baptism and *lankynos* (visiting of the baby and mother) in the perspective of history; 4) reveal changes in social interaction in the customs of baptism and *lankynos*.

The most comprehensive local ethnological research of contemporary birth customs in Dzūkija (spanning the second half of the twentieth century) was the research I conducted in the Merkinė (Varėna district) area in 2000–2001, with the results published in two articles (Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2002a; 2002b). Later, other locations in Dzūkija were similarly studied. In 2006–2007, I conducted research of baptism customs across 24 locations in this region, which encompassed the situation from the last quarter of the twentieth century to the beginning of the twenty-first century (Paukštytė-Šaknienė et al. 2009).

Birth customs research by other authors conducted in the late nineteenth–mid-twentieth centuries is important for the diachronic analysis. Among the publications dedicated to Dzūkija, I would distinguish the study by Vincas Krėvė-Mickevičius on the late nineteenth–early twentieth centuries (Krėvė-Mickevičius 1933). This is probably the most thorough study of baptism customs to have been made in the inter-war years (1918–1940), which helps us understand the traditional customs of the *dzūkai* (the locals of this region) and remains significant to this day.

The regional particularities of birth customs in Lithuania were examined in monographs by me (Paukštytė 1995 (second edition Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2008); Paukštytė 1999) and Rasa Račiūnaitė (2002).

In order to understand the birth customs of the twentieth century in the perspective of time, the earliest sources testifying to their existence must be analysed. Of the earliest written sources, I would highlight the book by Theodor Lepner (Theodoras Lepneris), titled *Der Preusche Littauer*, which could be considered the first Lithuanian local ethnographic monograph, with a whole chapter dedicated to baptism (out of the total of 15). The author collected data from the local population starting in 1665, when he was serving as a priest in the Būdviečiai parish in the Ragainė (Ragnit) district, and wrote the book in 1690 (the first edition was published only in 1744) (see Lepner 1744; Lepneris

2011). Baptism from around the same period was also described by Matthaeus Praetorius (Matas Pretorijus). The material was based on his findings in the Nybūdžiai parish in the Įsrūtis (Insterburg) district, with data for comparison from other locales in Lithuania Minor (the final draft was prepared before 1699) (Pretorijus 2006: 644–657).

In addition, attention should also be turned to the situation in 1940–1990, when religious baptism was no longer tolerated and a non-religious “name-giving” ritual was being intensively formed and implemented. I have analysed the Soviet name-giving rituals in several papers, and also published a comprehensive article on this theme (Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2007).

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF CHRISTIAN BAPTISM AND THE FUNCTIONING OF THE CHILD'S SOCIAL LEGITIMIZATION CUSTOMS AT THE END OF THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

Lithuania was one of the last countries to adopt Christianity in Europe. Part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania became Christian in 1387, while the western lands – Samogitia – were Christianized in 1413. In the nearby territories in Latvia and Prussia, inhabited by the Balts, this process had taken place several centuries earlier.

The earliest sources describing Baltic tribal culture testify to a forced implementation of Christian baptism. The Teutonic Order's peace treaty of 1249 with the Pomesanian, Warmian, and Notangian Prussians reveals the radical measures used to introduce baptism. The treaty explains how a newborn had to be baptized within no more than eight days, and those who were not baptized within that time had a month, after which time they would have their property confiscated and be driven out *beyond the Christian lands* (Vėlius 1996: 241–242). Baptism was rather difficult to implement as, for example, the events from the late twelfth–early thirteenth centuries described in the Livonian Chronicle of Henry tell us that Christian baptism could be washed away with river water (*ibid.*: 285). This fact is confirmed by later sources as well. The decree of the Sambian bishop Michael Jung (believed to have been written in 1426) indicates that children baptized by Christian clergymen could not be *re-baptized* in rivers or elsewhere, or change the names given to them at baptism. Violators of this decree were threatened with fines or lashings (*ibid.*: 483).

A source from 1647 reveals the motives behind re-baptism and granting another name in Livonia: “... if they remained unsettled for six weeks after being baptized, they would secretly re-baptize them and give them another name, believing that the child was so irritated and could not settle because

it had received an unsuitable or uncomfortable name” (Vėlius 2003: 679). We can come to understand the birth customs of the early Lithuanians based on sources from Lithuania Minor, which presented more thorough data from the seventeenth–eighteenth centuries as well. An analysis of sources from that time and later birth customs from Lithuania Minor form the assumption that the goal was to baptize an infant as soon as possible (fearing that an unbaptized newborn would otherwise die, and the prevailing folk belief that an unbaptized infant was not protected from harm) and the self-inscribed honour to be chosen as godparents or the expectation to arrange an as large as possible baptism feast were not necessarily related to the Christian ritual. The unique features of the folk understanding of baptism were determined by beliefs that had been around for centuries and had nothing in common with Christian ideology. The analysis of early written sources proved that the cultural uniqueness of Lithuania Minor is important in order to reveal the birth customs in this and other regions around Lithuania (Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2011: 10–12).

A more complete overview of Lithuanians’ birth rites can be reconstructed from the data in Lepner’s late seventeenth-century work titled *Der Preusche Littauer*, in the chapter “On Lithuanian baptisms”, and the summary that follows, “The baptism feast is odd, there are so many Lithuanian women involved”. The chapter begins with a description of the situation up to the baptism:

Sometimes the woman blessed with child in her womb asks the priest to pray for her and her unborn child in church. When the infant enters this world, the parents make an announcement to others in their household and to neighbours that the šešauninkė [henceforth translated as the newborn’s mother – RPŠ] has given birth and that they are invited to come over and are offered vodka (if they have some) as well as other drinks and food. The neighbouring women and close relatives who are invited bring the newborn’s mother flat crackers and eggs, and this feast, which can last for a shorter or longer time depending on how much there is to eat and drink, they call rodynas.⁵ The kūmai (godparents) (of which there are usually three or even five) are invited to the rodynas, which is organized by the father if he is at home, or in other cases – by someone else. (Lepneris 2011: 159)

After this feast, the infant was taken to be baptized. When the infant was baptized and everyone returned home, another round of feasting was usually held where only women participated. The midwife would kill a chicken on the spot where the child was born or nearby. The newborn’s mother would have to pluck that chicken in the house or nearby, and leave the feathers to lie where they were. The midwife would boil this chicken, adding mutton, pork or some

other kind of meat to the broth. Kneeling to say a prayer before having this feast, some women would call upon the Virgin Mary “to help the mother and infant”. The women would begin their feast with a drink. When the midwife would take a drink from a large cup whilst kneeling, the other women would do likewise. Before drinking, each woman had to say the Our Father prayer. Then they would eat the boiled chicken and other meat and have some more drinks. However, this feast was not intended for women who had not given birth, or men. When they had finished, the bones would be wrapped into a cloth and dug into the ground where the chicken had been slaughtered; then they would say another prayer, and drink to the health of each other and the men sitting at another table. Six weeks later, women and the godparents would come to the infant’s mother and they would all go to church.⁶ After church, they would gather again for another feast (Lepneris 2011: 160–161).

Lepner’s description indicates such parts of the birth customs as the first visiting of the baby and the mother, the baptism and the presentation at church (“churching”), known as of the late nineteenth–early twentieth centuries. However, the baptism feast would be divided into two parts: 1) a feast just for those women who had given birth themselves, and 2) a feast set up at another table for women who had not given birth, and for men.

Another description analysing the period portrayed also by Praetorius gives a somewhat different account of the visiting (“showing the baby”). This account mentions a ritualized round of drinking and eating by the midwife and the newborn’s mother and father. There would also be a sacrifice made to the goddess Žemyna⁷, and a prayer to the goddess Laima (Layme)⁸ or the Virgin Mary. Guests would be at a different table and be given different foods. When the godparents arrived, drinking and eating would continue with them, yet even the beer could not come from the same barrel that the newborn’s mother had drunk (together with the midwife and father). When the child was taken away for baptism, the midwife would kill a chicken with a ladle, and cook it to be eaten only by the godmothers. However, instead of being presented at the church as mentioned by Lepner, a hair-cutting rite was performed:

...That would not be all – several weeks later (some would do this after several years), the godparents would be invited back and during a special ritual the child would be given over to the most respected godparent; they would pray and drink from a filled cup. Then this godparent would take the child on the knees and cut the hair off its head; the hair would usually be placed into a cup with the godparent saying a prayer above it, then they would drink the contents of the cup, the beer and hair, and they would have to give the family a gift, for example, a shirt or something; this person

would be highly respected by all; by doing this the parents would buy back their child from the godparent, so to speak; some would repeat the hair-cutting rite mentioned above several times. (Pretorijus 2006: 653–657)

The ritualized hair-cutting used to be performed among the Eastern Slavs as recently as the end of the nineteenth century. The ritual would be performed on children one year old or older (Zelenin 1991: 331).⁹ Children of a similar age (even up to three years old) used to have their first haircut this way in eastern Lithuania in the late nineteenth century, believing that this would make them more intelligent and help start talking sooner (Balys 2004: 51). Around the same time analogous beliefs were known in Poland as well (Gantskaia 1999: 16). However, unlike in Lithuania Minor, the first haircut in Poland was not related to birth rituals and did not make up a separate part of the birth customs cycle.

An even earlier source tells us of the reliability of the hair-cutting rite. The German-Lithuanian dictionary (*Clavis Germanico-Lithvana*) by Fridericus Praetorius the Elder released in around 1680 indicates:

The Lithuanians used to have a custom where, when the child was already a few weeks old, another feast would be held during which a woman (not a man) would be invited to be a godparent: this godmother would cut the child's hair above a bowl or a pitcher filled with a drink and covered with a cloth, or, as they used to call it, a veil for catching the cut hair. Then she would throw in as much money as she could spare and this donation would be called "apgėlai". After that, she would take the veil out of the drink and squeeze the liquid away, then the new godmother and the infant's mother would both drink from the bowl or the pitcher. This ritual would protect the child from water and fire and ensure a healthy head of hair. The cut hair would be dug under a hop pole. ... Thus, becoming a godparent was known as "apgėlu, apgėlau, apgėlesu, apgėlėti". (Vėlius 2003: 96–97)

The notion "new godmother" or "new baptism mother" presumes the fact of practising pre-Christian elements of baptism, or even of attempts at repeating or overriding the Christian baptism.¹⁰ The purpose of this act was to protect the infant from fire and water. The combination of the ritual act with a seemingly unimportant aim, to ensure a healthy head of hair for the child, would indicate a reduction in the sacredness of the *apgėlai* rite. German ethnologist Elard Hugo Meyer believed that the German baptism was a synthesis of pagan ancient Germanic and Christian customs (Filimonova 1999 [1997]: 174). It appears that a similar situation can be observed in Lithuania Minor in the seventeenth century. The accounts presented here reveal associations with both Christian (Mary) and pre-Christian (Žemyna, Laima) guardians of infants. The available material reveals the following order of birth customs performed after the birth

of the baby: the first visiting of the baby and mother (*rodynos*) → baptism → ritual cutting of the hair (*apgėlai*) → “churching” (i.e., presentation at church).

These customs were reinforced through rituals where the main participants and actors were women. As we can guess from several accounts from the late seventeenth century, the ritual functions of women were narrowed down (e.g. the case of cutting the infant’s hair).

The *rodynos* (*radynos*) and *apgėlai* terms mentioned in the accounts functioned in Lithuania in the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries. The concept of *radynos* as the custom of visiting the newborn’s mother was known in south-eastern Lithuania, but in this territory the word could have also meant the fact of the child’s birth (Vyšniauskaitė 1964: 466). The word *apgėlai* was used in eastern Lithuania as well, yet not in the sense of cutting hair but to signify the visiting of the infant’s mother (Balys 2004: 31–32). This is evident from the relations between customs in Lithuania Minor and Dzūkija, even though a distance of over 300 kilometres separated these lands, and a whole three centuries – the rituals themselves. On the other hand, in the perspective of time and territory, we can see a change in the birth cycle custom titles. *Rodynos* (*radynos*) referred to visiting the infant (both in the seventeenth and twentieth centuries) and the infant’s birth (twentieth century), whereas *apgėlai* signified the cutting of the baby’s hair (seventeenth century) and visiting the baby (twentieth century). This shows a possible dynamics in the structure of the birth customs cycle, which I shall analyse in the chapters below.

CUSTOMS AND RITUALS RELATED TO THE BIRTH OF A CHILD FROM THE BEGINNING OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY TO THE BEGINNING OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Pregnancy was a state which distinguished the mother, or a woman who had given birth, from other women and obliged her to adhere to certain inherited customs related to the infant’s life and future. Up until the mid-twentieth century, women would be assisted during childbirth by a midwife. Her duty was to make giving birth easier, to perform a ritual cleansing of the newborn and handle the placenta, as well as take care of the mother and the infant. In addition, it was believed that the midwife looked after the infant’s current state but would also perform rituals to try to determine his or her future. Immediately after birth, the newborn and the mother would be visited by the local women. This custom was a display of the village community’s attention and assistance. Traditionally, the ultimate social legitimization of the newborn’s existence was baptism. In the late nineteenth–first half of the twentieth centuries, baptism

consisted of two parts: baptism in church and in line with secular customs. During these rituals, the newborn was introduced into the religious and village community (with the help of godparents, the midwife, parents, and guests). The end of the cycle of birth customs was marked by the mother's "churching", or presentation at church (in some places, she would be presented at the sauna as well). After the ritual rites in the church, the woman would return to regular village community life (previous taboos were now lifted: she could walk across strangers' fields, go to the common village bathhouse and attend church services) (Paukštytė 1999).

All of these stages were related to the woman's obligations towards her child, her family, the village and the church communities, and also to the care and control exerted by the afore-mentioned institutions. This social interaction formed the cycle of birth customs and stopped people from losing sight of the ideal lifestyle model propagated at that time. How did this model change in the second half of the twentieth–early twenty-first centuries?

When we observe the transformation of the cycle of birth customs in the twentieth century, we notice rapid changes in the traditional cycle. This includes the transformation or change of the customs of baptism and the rituals of the first visit of the baby and the mother. The radical shifts to the structural elements of birth customs depended not only on political and ideological circumstances (Soviet occupation and the atheist policies of the occupant regime) but on reforms within the Church itself. In the second half of the twentieth century, we see the disappearance of the presentation at the church (churching), which marked the end of the birth customs cycle and the mother's return to regular social life. Up to the point of her presentation at church, Lithuanians and other nations would consider the woman "unclean", and capable of harming the welfare of the neighbours (Balys 1979: 41–42). The function of concluding the cycle of birth customs was now performed by the increasingly delayed baptism (it was no longer associated with the return to the "not dangerous" state of the mother). However, during the Soviet period, this church sacrament was often given in secret.

Secular life cycle rituals were developed and introduced in many countries in order to complement or replace the Christian rituals (Roth & Roth 1990: 114). The history of the Lithuanian name-giving ceremony is very simple. In 1962 the first model name-giving event was organized at the community centre (called culture house) of the "Aušra" collective farm in Kaunas district. At the request of the Culture Department of the Lithuanian SSR, the ceremony was filed officially to provide methodological guidance for culture and education workers authorized to organize such festivities in their local residential districts. A study on Lithuanian family traditions published by Angelė Vyšniauskaitė in 1967

mentions that as early as in the 1st half of 1963 name-giving guidelines were introduced in many Lithuanian regions at the suggestion of residential district authorities. By 1965 “the name-giving tradition had become universally present in towns and collectivized villages of Soviet Lithuania” (Vyšniauskaitė 1967: 57–58). However, the Soviet regime failed to empower the newly created ritual of name-giving even though definite borrowings from the ritual of baptism and even wedding customs were used in it. Certain ritual functions were prescribed for the newborn’s grandmother, who replaced the “old lady” (the midwife). As per the living traditions in Lithuanian village weddings, it was suggested to create “blocks” (a barrier to passage mostly made of wood) when welcoming the name-parents, or to organize “imposter name-parents” to take the place of the real name-parents at the dinner table, and so on (Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2014: 60). Parents with a higher social status, who carried more responsibility in the eyes of the community and the authorities, were offered the alternative of ending the cycle of birth customs with a civil name-giving ceremony. Thus, left with this choice, the birth customs cycle could be ended with a civil name-giving. As I already mentioned, often after this official name-giving ceremony the same infant would be baptized in church (or the other way round), while the celebration reinforcing the birth of the child would be the party at the parents’ home attended by the participants in both the civil and religious acts. Babies were commonly taken to church for the baptism ritual either before or after the civil name-giving ceremony. For example, in the Merkinė area, in most cases the godparents and name-parents were the same individuals. But they were called godparents, not name-parents (Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2002a: 168). The unification of the civil and religious acts that was practised during the Soviet period (the name-giving ceremony held at a so-called culture house or other official office → baptism in church → a party at the parents’ home) was not very long-lived. With the demise of the Soviet regime, the name-giving ritual disappeared. Theoretically, the ritual of name-giving is also possible in our days, yet it has never been practiced in recent decades. Baptism at church (in some cases chosen even by agnostics) prevails as a “family tradition”; it is practised by individuals seeking to act like Christians, and also by those who do not wish to stand out among the members of a local, professional or kindred community, or by those who just want an excuse for a celebration (Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2002a: 167–169).

When independence was restored in Lithuania (1990), people no longer had to hide the fact of the sacrament of baptism. The more so, in the 1990s this sacrament started being given to adults, young and even senior people. It was a way of bringing the cycle of birth customs to a close, but not so much on the initiative of the parents but on the individual’s own initiative. This phenomenon

cannot be associated with the “ending” of the birth customs cycle in terms of the mother’s social status. When baptizing young adults (often those who wanted to get married in church), the decision is mostly based on the will to become a member of the Christian community and to acquire the spiritual preparation to become parents.

Dzūkija is a Lithuanian ethnographic region where *lankynos* remained as a ritual up to the beginning of the twenty-first century. As baptisms were not held in the Soviet years, the *lankynos* marked the end of the birth customs cycle. In this case, according to Vyšniauskaitė, who wrote about these customs in the 1960s, they were much more ceremonial:

Radynos (lankynos) would be celebrated in a very lively way in collective farm villages in Dzūkija if a baptism was not held. In these cases, women and their husbands would participate, but usually they would arrive separately, the husbands coming later on after being invited by the father. (Vyšniauskaitė 1964: 468)

As the material from my field research shows, in the Soviet period, women from Dzūkija would bring their husbands along to the *lankynos* much more often, and as more visitors would gather, the feast would become larger. Becoming purely a social phenomenon, *lankynos* remained popular throughout the whole twentieth century. However, the changing cultural environment corrected not just the cycle of birth customs in the second half of the twentieth century but also the stages of the woman’s return to regular life. Work on the collective farm, the changing duration of maternity leave periods, and the establishment of public nurseries changed the terms regulating a woman’s return to the work collective. The *lankynos* element as an end to the cycle of birth customs, baptism, name-giving ceremonies, and presentation at church no longer correlated with the traditional end to the birth customs cycle.

Table 1. Diachronic changes of structural elements of the cycle of birth customs performed after the birth of a child

↓ →	First visiting of the baby and mother (<i>lankynos</i>)	Baptism	Ritual cutting of the hair	Churching
1680–1699 Lithuania Minor	widespread	widespread	known	widespread
1900–1944 SE Lithuania	widespread	widespread	not recorded	common → disappearance of the ritual

1945–1989 SE Lithuania	widespread	common → forming an alternative	not recorded	only a few cases recorded
1990–2007 SE Lithuania	widespread	widespread	not recorded	not recorded

BAPTISM AND *LANKYNOS* IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF HISTORY

As we saw in the seventeenth-century accounts, the motivation behind baptism led to an early baptism in Lithuania Minor. Fast baptism was also recorded in Dzūkija in the late nineteenth century. Archival baptism documents from the Alytus church books of the Merkinė deanery for the years 1865, 1870, 1880, and 1890 show that infants were usually baptized the day after they were born (18 percent), less commonly two days (15 percent) or three days (15 percent) after they were born, or even on the day of their birth (8 percent) (Paukštytė 1999: 71).

Hurrying to baptize in Dzūkija in the late nineteenth–early twentieth centuries was caused not only by a high level of piety among the population, but also by the belief that the newborn needed special protection up to the point of baptism. According to this belief, the midwife had to constantly watch over the infant until it was baptized. A lantern would burn beside the baby at night to ward off witches who could kidnap the child or swap it for another; girls and young women would also sit by to watch over the baby. Not relying just on these measures, the midwife would also make the sign of the cross at windows, doors, on the ground and the ceiling. Windows and doors were marked with chalk blessed on the Feast of the Epiphany, the chimney and keyholes would be stuffed with sorb branches, and incense would be burned around the house each night (Krėvė-Mickevičius 1933: 37–38). In Western Europe, it was believed right up to the fourteenth century that a child who had died before being baptized would go to hell. Later, this belief changed to the child being stuck in limbo – an intermediate state between heaven and hell (Heywood 2001: 51). These beliefs were carried into the early twentieth century. According to people from Pavarenis (Varėna district), an unbaptized infant would not find peace until the Judgement Day. God would not allow infants to suffer, but they would have to wait on the threshold to heaven (Marcinkevičienė 1998: 134). The place where an unbaptized infant was buried was also important. Even up to 1940, unbaptized children would be buried separately from the other deceased, near those who had been hung or committed suicide. These graves were located separately in the corner of a cemetery or even outside the cemetery fence, on non-sacred land (Paukštytė 1999: 69–70). In critical cases, a dying infant could have

been baptized by the midwife, and if the infant survived it would be baptized properly in church, yet the name given by the midwife would remain. During difficult births, before she knew the baby's gender, the midwife would give the child two names – one male and one female (Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2008: 469).

Even though baptism continued to be viewed as a Christian requirement in the second half of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the time of baptism started to be postponed more and more. In the Merkinė area, in 1940–1965 christening on the 8th to 30th days after birth dominated, while in 1975–1999 baptisms done on the 31st to the 180th days prevailed (Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2002a: 154–156). In terms of Dzūkija in general, in 1974–1980 baptisms would be performed on children aged 0.87 months on average, in 1981–1990 – aged 3.79 months, in 1991–2000 – aged 4.67 months, and in 2001–2007, on children aged 5.84 months (Paukštytė-Šaknienė et al. 2009: 154–156).¹¹

In the first half of the twentieth century, an infant would be visited when the mother had recovered some time after giving birth and before the baptism. When the baptism was performed after a longer interval, especially with the disappearance of midwives, people would wait until the mother felt strong enough to receive visitors. Thus, the time of the first visit was shifted by changes to the time of baptism and the trend to postpone the baptism for an increasingly longer time. Nonetheless, it was considered acceptable to visit the child before it was baptized. In the late twentieth–early twenty-first centuries, an opinion started to form that an infant could be visited after baptism, i.e., if the person wanting to see the baby had not visited the baby before it was baptized or had not been invited to the baptism ceremony or feast. According to a respondent born in 1967, sometimes babies would be visited up until they turned one year old, or people would express astonishment at the fact that “the child's already walking and some people are still visiting”. Nonetheless, the survey of respondents showed that the *lankynos* usually lasted from one week up to 2–3 months. A certain order for visiting was followed up to the early twenty-first century: the first to visit would be the closest relatives and neighbours (1–2 weeks), then more distant relatives, co-workers, etc. In the case a child was not baptized or would be baptized already when they were older or had reached adulthood, the *lankynos* could be considered as the final structural element in the birth customs cycle.

Nevertheless, based on the experiences of the *dzūkai*, I can say that the *lankynos* and baptisms of the early twenty-first century still retained the traditional order of events, as there were only one-off cases where visiting would happen after the baptism. The timing of baptism in the first half of the twentieth century also depended on a stable period for being presented at church (from 3 to 9, usually 6 weeks). As the custom of presenting the mother

to church started to disappear, these terms started to be followed less rigidly. For example, a respondent born in 1928 (and married in 1948) stressed that a breastfeeding woman would not be taken into church and that she herself had only been taken into church a year after giving birth. Once this custom diminished in importance, the timing of the baptism rite was corrected in line with the traditional provision of not delaying an infant's baptism too long, and he or she was baptized according to the established customs for the particular period in the social environment. The personal decisions of women have also affected these customs. According to a female respondent from Kalesninkai (Šalčininkai district), born in 1951, it was best to baptize children while they were small, as up until then the parents would always "feel uneasy, so it paid not to drag out the process"; while being asked when a child should be baptized, some women responded that this depended on their health (Paukštytė-Šaknienė et al. 2009: 23).

According to this research, it may be concluded that the timing of baptism and the disappearance of the custom of being presented at church had a certain influence on birth cycle customs and their structure. On the other hand, all these structural chains in the cycle of birth customs are inseparable from social interaction factors.

SOCIAL INTERACTION IN THE CUSTOMS OF BAPTISM AND LANKYNOS

The rites that make up the cycle of birth customs mirror the social links that are active in a specific community. This is a space in which both magical and rational measures are harnessed by the family, local and religious communities to shield the mother and the child. In the late nineteenth–early twentieth centuries, a pregnant woman was held in high respect in daily life in Dzūkija. Members of the immediate and extended family as well as neighbours had to protect her from any discomfort and annoyances, yet on the other hand, in order to ensure a suitable appearance, character, physical and moral qualities and destiny for her child, the woman's social life was restricted (Krėvė-Mickevičius 1933: 30; Dundulienė 1999: 58–60). In these aspects, in the birthing period (and the first days after birth) the midwives truly stood out, and in the case of baptism, the role of the godparents was also important (Paukštytė 1995, 1999; Račiūnaitė 2002; Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2008). In the Soviet period and especially in the post-Soviet period, a woman's socio-cultural space underwent rapid changes. In the early twentieth century the range of her cultural contacts was considerably narrower (her home, village, the parish town, less frequently – journeys to visit relatives

living in nearby parishes). In the Soviet years meanwhile, in the geographical sense, the circle of friends and relatives to be visited started to expand. The accelerated development of information and communication technology has had a significant influence on a person's way of thinking, behaviour, and perception of space in the twenty-first century (Floridi 2018). However, up until the twenty-first century, various superstitions that were related to determining the infant's future were still alive in Dzūkija (Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2002a: 143–172; Paukštytė-Šaknienė et al. 2009: 17–62). Being passed down from the grandparents' generation, they were often reinforced through personal experience and are thus recalled over the decades (Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2002a: 149); however, the place of giving birth has changed. Already in the Soviet period, home births with environmental and emotional links maintained in the village community via the midwife were replaced by the socially unfamiliar surroundings of medical institutions and interaction with professional medical personnel.

The changing social environment also altered the visiting tradition. In the early twentieth century, it was only women who participated in the *lankynos* (visiting), while from around the mid-twentieth century the husbands started to come as well. Modern visiting customs, according to the stories told by my research respondents, are often identified not just as “greeting a new person into the world”, but also as a chance to catch up with friends who might live further away. A female respondent born in 1967 believed that *lankynos* was intended for a closer friendship among families. Also, it was a good opportunity to mend any arguments between neighbours. In this sense, *lankynos* maintained the traditional provision that anybody willing to come was welcome (unlike to a baptism). In the late nineteenth–second half of the twentieth centuries, almost the same people participated in *lankynos* and baptism, as most of the village community would be invited to the baptism, while in recent years (as respondents highlighted a number of times), the baptism feast would only be open to one's closest relatives and neighbours. Thus, the *lankynos* was left for those who wanted to visit the new family, for example friends, co-workers, and neighbours. A female respondent born in 1947 noticed certain diachronic changes to the *lankynos* custom. Even though now, as in her youth, the female neighbours would often visit the new baby together, they would come in smaller groups, only to visit a woman of a similar age with whom they shared a closer bond. Traditionally, the visitors would bring gifts (often for the baby) and would always be offered something to eat or drink. The respondents often said that only the closest relatives would be invited to baptisms, as they turned out to be expensive events. Also, it was said that they tried to organize the baptism rather soon after birth, as the treats offered to the constant visitors would also add up to a significant sum. Understandably, the quantity of visitors would

depend on how many friends and relatives the parents had, and the closeness of their relationships. The difference was that during the *lankynos*, visitors would be offered what was on hand, while special meals would be organized for the baptism. However, it appears that these options were not that different in reality. The respondents replied that they had always planned ahead for the potential *lankynos* period and had thought about what they could serve their guests (especially during the Soviet years). Thus, I would say that the financial aspect of *lankynos* and the baptism feast is not as important in today's situation as the respondents claim it used to be. The difference is that there is a clearer trend where the baptism celebration is set aside for the closest relatives, while all the other community members who want to and feel obliged to visit the mother who has just had a baby choose to do so during *lankynos*. Perhaps the narrowing down of the circle of participants in the baptism ceremony was influenced by the fact of having to baptize in secret during the Soviet period, and the rejection of organizing a larger feast (so as not to draw the attention of neighbours). As a result, *lankynos* (a legal custom in all periods in history) remains as the most stable structural link in the social legitimization of a child within the cycle of birth customs. Parents could either organize the baptism and the post-ceremony feast or not, while anyone who wanted to honour the family would come under the pretext of *lankynos*.

Changes in social interaction when organizing a baptism are also evident in the choice of godparents. If in the late nineteenth–first half of the twentieth centuries it was usually reliable, religious people, relatives or neighbours (not prioritising either group specifically) who were chosen to be a child's godparents (Paukštytė 1999: 84; Paukštytė-Šaknienė et al. 2009: 23–24), in recent years in all the 24 locations I researched in Dzūkija, it was relatives chosen as godparents in 58 percent of localities, and friends as godparents chosen in 42 percent of locations. Meanwhile there were no results from any location where neighbours would be invited to act as godparents (Paukštytė-Šaknienė et al. 2009: 23–24).

When we look at the social interaction of baptism with the village community via the institution of midwives, there are also some fundamental changes that are visible. As the field research material shows, in the baptisms held in Dzūkija even today there is a symbolic “midwife” role; however, this duty is usually performed by an older woman from the family, most commonly the newborn's grandmother. In this case, for her services, i.e., preparing the infant ahead of baptism and handing it over to the godparents, she is given traditional gifts (as the midwife once was). A female respondent in the Varėna district, born in 1971, said that when her daughter was being baptized, her grandmother handed the dressed-up little girl to the godmother and received a shawl from her (Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2002a: 165). Towards the end of the baptism held

in the Vilnius area, according to a woman born in 1969, a traditional “covering the infant” ritual was performed, asking to “buy roosters” from the guests participating in the baptism. In this way, money would be collected for the infant’s grandmother (in earlier times, the midwife) (Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2009 et al.: 31). The rite of bathing¹² the infant’s grandmother (or midwife, in earlier times) also still exists in Dzūkija. In earlier times, the midwife would be taken to be bathed “in order to ensure the infant’s luck”, yet this turned into a fun form of (symbolic) entertainment (Paukštytė-Šaknienė et al. 2009: 31–33). This is an evidence of modifying the baptism customs. In the late nineteenth–early twentieth centuries, the midwife was traditionally an important figure in the baptism rites, who sought to ensure the infant’s protection until he or she acquired a new status, and she performed the role of a mediator between the family and the village community (Paukštytė 1999: 119–120). However, the experience of people from Dzūkija shows that the need to perform the midwife’s role still remains, and this has been successfully adopted by a baptized infant’s female relative. Thus, there is an obvious change in the dominant social interaction (moving from the village community to kinship networks). By looking at the customs involved in the birth cycle, we can see that even where some traditions have been preserved, the social meaning of these rites has changed. The goal to bring neighbourly relations closer in the late nineteenth–early twentieth centuries has been replaced in the late twentieth–twenty-first centuries with the need to intensify relationships between relatives of kin, enhancing blood relations with religion-based (spiritual kinship) links.

Table 2. Social interaction in birth cycle customs performed after the birth of a child

↓ →	First visiting of the baby and mother (<i>lankynos</i>)	Baptism	Ritual cutting of the hair	Churching
1680–1699 Lithuania Minor	local community, community of relatives (women)	local community, community of relatives, confessional community	local community, community of relatives (women or men)	confessional community, local community, community of relatives
1890–1944 SE Lithuania	local community, community of relatives (women)	local community, community of relatives, confessional community	not recorded	confessional community, local community → disappearance of the ritual

1945–1989 SE Lithuania	local community, community of relatives (women and men)	local community, community of relatives, partly confessional community	not recorded	only a few cases recorded
1990–2007 SE Lithuania	local community, community of relatives (women and men)	community of relatives, local community, confessional community	not recorded	not recorded

CONCLUSIONS

The rituals of social legitimization of the birth of a child, analysed in the article, are an integral part of the system of birth customs covering the period from conception to the woman’s introduction to the church after childbirth. By analysing sources testifying to the cycle of birth customs in Lithuania Minor in the seventeenth century, we find numerous analogies with the customs, their structure and social aspects in south-eastern Lithuania (the Dzūkija ethnographic region) of the late nineteenth–early twenty-first centuries. On the other hand, the changes to rite terminology over time (the same terms refer to different episodes) show a possible dynamic to the structure of birth custom cycles. Both in the seventeenth-century Lithuania Minor and in south-eastern Lithuania of the late nineteenth–early twenty-first centuries, we can distinguish a part of the childbirth custom system performed after the birth of a child: 1) *lankynos* (*rodynos*, *radynos*), 2) baptism, and 3) “churching” (being presented at church – only until the middle of the twentieth century). All of these stages were related to a woman’s obligation to her future child, family, village or religious community, along with the protection and control of the afore-mentioned social institutions.

Each structural stage in the birth customs process signified both autonomous and general functions: becoming ready to perform the role of a mother, socially legitimizing the birth of a new person, and the woman’s return to her usual social situation. As Grimes mentioned, ritual, like art, is the child of imagination, but the ritual imagination requires an invention, a constantly renewed structure, on the basis of which a bodily and communal enactment is possible (Grimes 2000: 4). The specific features of the birth customs cycle allow us to

at least partially compensate for the disappearing structural links in this cycle. With the disappearance of the “churching” or presentation at church, some of the symbolic meanings of reintroducing a woman into her regular social situation have been taken over by baptism. By restricting the possibility of baptizing an infant and rejecting the civil name-giving ceremony as an alternative, we could say that the most stable link in the cycle – *lankynos* – has taken over the function of presentation back into regular social life. On the other hand, with the disappearance of the local community and with separate members making their own individual decisions more often, a late baptism (sometimes combining several children born in close succession) denies the meaning of this element in the birth customs cycle. The changing cultural surrounds of the second half of the twentieth century have modified the forms of these obligations, reducing the power of customs passed down from one generation to the next. Baptisms in the late nineteenth–first half of the twentieth centuries were dominated by representatives of the local community, who were replaced by family relatives, or people of kin, in the second half of the twentieth–early twenty-first centuries. Now it is usually relatives who are invited to baptisms, while the role of a female representative from the local community – the midwife – is usually performed by an older woman from the infant’s family, usually a grandmother. On the other hand, when analysing the *lankynos* custom, we notice a reduction in the significance of the female community, its precedent being the late seventeenth-century customs of *lankynos* and the ritual cutting of the infant’s hair.

Our rapidly modernizing society has preserved only separate elements of tradition in our days, leading to a narrower scope of the birth customs cycle, the local community and female ritual space. Thus, the research has revealed the expression of only single elements of traditional culture in the diachronic perspective. However, in conjunction with the changing cultural environment even these elements, often retaining their early form, are expressed with a different meaning, denoting the birth of a new person through ritualized practices.

NOTES

¹ In traditional culture, the fact of name giving is also very significant. A baby without a name is not a complete human being. Folk religiosity occasionally underlines the even bigger importance of the very name than that of christening. The death of an unbaptized unnamed baby was considered a sin, and the funeral was very different from the ‘normal’ ones (see also Sedakova 2020).

² A civil birth registry was introduced in the Klaipėda District only in 1876, and in the rest of Lithuania in 1940. During the period under Nazi occupation (1941–1944/1945)

it was abolished, before being reintroduced when Lithuania was occupied again by the Soviet Union.

- ³ In recent years, the increasingly popular Romuva Ancient Baltic Rite Society has been disclaiming Christian baptism and seeking to revive the pre-Christian name-giving/baptism rite, during which one becomes a member of a family rather than a religious community (Trinkūnas 2000: 28–31; Romuva n.d.). Thus, the mid-twentieth century goal to abolish Christian rituals is being replaced by the desire of certain members of the society to revive pagan birth rituals in the early twenty-first century. Pre-Christian name-giving/baptism ceremonies in Dzūkija were not mentioned by respondents during the field research.
- ⁴ Lithuanians lived in a part of Prussia which from 1525 was called Lithuania Minor, or Prussian Lithuania. From the sixteenth century, the Evangelical Lutheran faith predominated on this territory, with Catholicism being the main faith in the rest of Lithuania. In 1923–1939 and after 1945, some of this territory belonged to Lithuania, while after 1945 the remainder of Lithuania Minor was annexed to Russia and came to be known as the Kaliningrad oblast (region). In 1940–1941 and 1945–1990 Lithuania was under Soviet occupation and was known as the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic.
- ⁵ The term *rodynos* in historical sources is also referred to as *radynos*, but describes the same ritual. The word *rodynos* can be associated with the words in the Slavic languages: Belarusian *радзіны*, Russian *родины*. However, these concepts can be associated with the Lithuanian words “show” (*rodyti*) or “find” (*rasti*) a baby. In the twentieth century the term *lankynos* (visiting) was more commonly used.
- ⁶ Christian churches adhered to the Jewish tradition according to which a woman could not be in sacred places during 40 days after giving birth (Heywood 2001: 52–53).
- ⁷ Žemyna (from Lithuanian: *žemė* – earth) is the goddess of the earth in Lithuanian religion.
- ⁸ Laima (Laimė) is a Lithuanian and Latvian female mythical creature. In fairy tales and ethnographic sources, Laima is most often the creator of destiny, the goddess of destiny, and also the guardian of pregnant women.
- ⁹ For a review of the first hair-cutting tradition in different countries see also Hulubaş 2020.
- ¹⁰ According to Irina Sedakova, one of the specific characteristics of traditional life cycle celebrations in Bulgaria was the frequent motif expressed in a particular lexis, and the belief that magical actions and rituals repeated twice could bring negative outcomes (Sedakova 2007: 253–273). In Lithuanian culture in the seventeenth century, a repeated baptism was perceived as a positive act.
- ¹¹ Based on families who baptized their children before they turned two years old.
- ¹² Relatives or guests put the midwife or grandmother on a wheelbarrow or a cart and drove her to the nearest water body (river or pond) and then threw her into the water.

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