

# CALENDAR FESTIVALS AS A FORM OF TRANSNATIONALISM AND CULTURAL STRATEGY IN THE MIXED FINNISH-LITHUANIAN AND GREEK-LITHUANIAN FAMILIES

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**Abstract:** The object of the paper is to research the celebration of calendar festivals within Finnish-Lithuanian and Greek-Lithuanian families in Finland and Greece respectively. The subject was approached mainly from the Lithuanian women's perspective, since most of the mixed marriages involved Lithuanian females and rarely Lithuanian men in the countries chosen. Six main Lithuanian calendar festivals of different origins were in focus of the study. Three festivals belong to the Christian calendar: Christmas Eve (*Kūčios*), Christmas (*Šv. Kalėdos*) and Easter Day (*Šv. Velykos*); and the other three are national festivals significant for the State of Lithuania historically: 16<sup>th</sup> February (Day of Reinstating of the State of Lithuania), 11<sup>th</sup> March (Day of the Re-Establishment of the State of Lithuania) and 6<sup>th</sup> July (Statehood Day). The aim of the research is to reveal how the calendar festivals referred to above are celebrated in the particular context of emigration: within mixed marriages. Available transnational connections suggest different forms of celebrating, which are shaped following certain strategies.

**Keywords:** calendar festivals, cultural strategy, identity, mixed marriage, transnationalism

Lithuanian ethnologists attribute the Christian celebrations to the traditional festivals and national festivals are characterised as being modern. (Concerning classification of festivals, see Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2016: 13.) All these days have certain meaning from the individual point of view, which is externalised with the help of various traditions, symbols, rites, individual or communal actions and performances. Celebrations usually prompt certain emotional involvement and particular experiences or they carry sentimental attachments from the past. The externalisation has different levels and forms based on individual or family actions and initiatives, informal group or communal arrangements and festive events organised by formal institutions and organisations. Different secondary subjects (like mass media, information technologies, local or global market, advertisement or fashion) can influence the construction of celebrations or make various impacts. Also, celebration of the festivals is affected by the present social circle, place of residence or sojourning (urban or rural in Lithuania or emigration) and accessible resources.

The main ethnographic material was collected using the semi-structural interview method in the period of the years 2009–2012 and 2017. Eleven women agreed to give an interview in depth in Finland and nineteen – in Greece. Most of the families researched reside in urban areas of Finland and Greece. In this context, ways of celebrating (or not celebrating) of the festivals are affected by the local cultural environment, private and public social circles, effectiveness of formal or informal local organisations (e.g., Lithuanian community and its initiatives) and accessible resources. To focus on an individual, ways of celebrating also depends on the personal attitudes, values, preferences, support of the nearest family and its emotional involvement. A strong stimulator of the Lithuanian type of celebration can be a native Lithuanian family and friends. Such culturally heterogeneous contexts impose possible building and usage of various transnational channels. The analysis of the calendar festivals suggests discussing them following the grouping referred to above. Celebration of traditional festivals (Christmas Eve, Christmas and Easter Day) has characteristics that emphasise family or more private time. Modern (but, I would argue, not less traditional) festivals of the State of Lithuania (16<sup>th</sup> February, 11<sup>th</sup> March and 6<sup>th</sup> July) are more public or communal celebrations. These features influence ways of celebration of the days within mixed families. Still, the material reveals that Lithuanian celebration of Christian festivals is sometimes transferred into the circle of local Lithuanian community.

## Festivals in the Context of Transnationalism

As it was pointed out, the research focused on Lithuanian women's experiences within mixed marriage, who reside abroad. Physical distance from the sociocultural life in Lithuania creates a certain cultural space, which is very much up to the individual initiative and preferences to which cultural elements – native, local or some other – may fill that space. This space becomes a certain medium for potential transnational movements and cultural mixing. The flows of different elements can be combined, balanced with some dominating more than others. In this context, native traditions can be adapted in the foreign environment, combined with local customs or ignored. They can also be chosen and practised according to the locality of celebration – in the native country or abroad in the place of residence. Also, the family, its social circle, communal and organisational context on the occasion may direct the form of festival, if it is being performed at all. Usage of transnational channels enables transferring Lithuanian cultural elements into the present local (foreign) context. Such cultural mobility and fluidity make impact on the women's identity reconstruction; also influence other members of the mixed family (including children), maybe even wider social circle and society. In this way, certain celebrations of calendar festivals become a form of transnationalism.

Mobility and migration challenges former cultural forms of identity constructing: some may remain, new ones may arise and their relevance may alter. This is because identity in the transnational context gains new notional nuances and various alternatives. Referring to Orvar Löfgren, different kinds of mobility change people's lives, activities and ideas. But increased mobility does not have to mean increased rootlessness. Mobility can sometimes be a strategy to produce stability (Löfgren 1996: 164–165). A migrant (and not only migrant) individual may be characterised as living in cultural transit. So, the scholar spotlights the studies focusing on the ways in which the local, national and global interact, constitute each other, blend, mix or are kept apart. Sometimes the global makes the local stand out more clearly (Löfgren 1996: 167).

Thus, different festivals including appropriate symbols, ceremonies and traditions plays important role in the transnational cultural swirl and identity construction. According to Pertti Anttonen, we should consider all traditions both inventions and human interventions in the sense that they are socially constructed categories with which people structure their experience and

reproduce the social world. Tradition is today a highly contested identity space (Anttonen 2016: 106–107). Celebrations are usually of communal character. Festivals often involve groups of people who find it relevant for their cultural world even if the occasions can be signified or externalised individually. In these cases they can be characterised as familial and social. Referring to Jolanta Kuznecovienė, it is also important that individuals would not only participate in performing traditional rituals or just accept existing symbols. People must reinterpret them and impart new meanings according to the shifting circumstances that often cause changes in the community life. It is intriguing, how the belonging to community is expressed, affirmed and passed to another generation (Kuznecovienė 2008: 76). The cultural intensity of Lithuanian forms of festivals may moderate in emigration; it can also gain vitality and additional cultural meaning in the foreign context. Their practice depends a lot on individual inspirations, attitudes, motivation, also on the family's cultural context and communal organisation and accessibilities to it in the resident location.

## **The Main Christian Festivals within Mixed Families in Finland and Greece**

The ritual year of Finland and Greece is related to the Christian calendar, similarly to Lithuania and many other European countries. The majority of Lithuanians are Roman Catholics (77,2% according to the census of the year 2011)<sup>1</sup> and follows the Gregorian calendar including Christian festivals. The majority of Finns (72%)<sup>2</sup> belong to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, which follows Gregorian calendar, the same as Roman Catholics do. The majority of Greeks<sup>3</sup> belong to the Greek Orthodox Church, which has different practice concerning the dating. Regarding Christmas, the Greek Orthodox Church adopted the Gregorian calendar, so the Greek Christmas always coincides with the Catholic (and Protestant) Christmas on the 25<sup>th</sup> December. Regarding Easter Day, Greek Orthodox Church uses the Julian calendar (like Russian Orthodoxes), which is 13 days behind the Gregorian calendar (Orthodox Easter falls between 4<sup>th</sup> April and 8<sup>th</sup> May on the Gregorian calendar). That means that Greeks and Russians celebrate together Easter, but not Christmas. The Easter Day coincided in the 21<sup>st</sup> century on the years 2004, 2007 and 2011, 2014, 2017. The conjunction or disjuncture of the festival dates following different

Churches may influence ways of celebration within mixed families due to different partner's customs and congruity of the festive dates.

Although the national majority is enveloped in the transnational contexts in their everyday life, the local ethno-cultural space usually dominates the heterogeneous channels on the festal occasions. Lithuanian women within mixed marriages abroad have a possibility to observe and take part in the local festivals that may bring divergent feelings and emotions. The experiences induced by the local environment, individual inner values and attitudes, cultural heritage brought from the native family, particularly receiving family's context and interpersonal situations prompt certain cultural negotiations. Finally, women shape kind of strategies that help them to coordinate different cultural elements on the occasions. These strategies lead to a different nexus towards local and native traditions and practices on the celebratory days. The relation with annual cycle of festive days in the receiving country is influenced by the level of individual integration, social acceptance, awareness of native cultural heritage, ties with the native family, also by the impact of different accessible organisations coherent with Lithuanian culture. In time, shifting family life and changing relations may modify these strategies. For instance, experiences in raising children, husband and family-in-law's reflections on various cultural moves introduced by the Lithuanian woman may support or repress the initial attempts to bring some changes. Thus, foreign partner may identify with the nation of majority on the festive occasions; or the foreigner may identify with the native nation or state of origin in that case. I consider it as an individual choice made in the environment of 'others', which is bound by various factors. The choice to use native cultural elements and integrate them into the mixed family's life abroad would signify a form of transnationalism that can be of different intensity. These elements used and applied on the festive days and occasions can differ in individual cases: there can be selection, adaptation or improvisation, often fusion of the 'native/own' and 'foreign/local'. There is also an option to ignore some cultural forms of festivals – the 'own' or 'local'. Participation in the communal Lithuanian events abroad can be seen as transnational activity, when an individual expresses his/ her belonging to the native group abroad.

Different nations or ethnic groups distinguish by more or less diverse ways of celebration calendar festivals even if they are based on the same Christian ritual year. Lithuanian women bring own cultural heritage in these different environments and experience different outcomes in relation to that. So, it is worth dividing the study of Lithuanian women's experiences in Finland and Greece.

## Finland

The main calendar festivals in a foreign country can be seen as a critical moment, which may challenge cultural identity and feelings of belonging. It is more acute especially in the first years of living abroad in the mixed relationship or marriage. As one interviewee noted, she felt awkward during the first Christmas celebration in Finland. She was observing it and came to a realisation that they had to 'create new traditions'. (Interview No. 10. FIN-LT.) She looked for a compromise between her own and husband's customs, which could be considered as a certain cultural strategy. The interviewee did not want to make Christmas Eve supper for the husband in the Finnish way – with ham and other animal products – but stick only to the Lithuanian Lent-diet at the table. Her decision was to begin fasting period earlier and have her Lithuanian supper a day before. On the actual Christmas Eve, she would enjoy the festive table and taste all food. This way of celebration was preserved for all the following years.

In some other mixed marriages, women found a different way of compromising concerning Christmas Eve. Every second year they went to the woman's native family in Lithuania, and every other year her parents came to Finland. In both countries, they followed local traditions which satisfied family members of different cultural backgrounds (Interview No. 4. FIN-LT; Interview No. 6. FIN-LT). The forms of celebration Christmas depended on the location – Finland or Lithuania – in some other mixed families also (Interview No. 2. FIN-LT). Other women revealed an altered compromise. Her family usually spent Christmas in Lithuania with the woman's native family, but the Easter Day was always in Finland with the husband's relatives (Interview No. 3. FIN-LT). In another case, mixed family always stayed in Finland for the Christmas and travelled to Lithuania for the Easter Day (Interview No. 9. FIN-LT). The ways of celebration depended on the location. In this way, the location or place of festivals became a decisive element in the strategic organization of the mixed family's ritual forms.

The last strategy was to combine or mix different traditional elements despite the place of celebration. Women often applied it especially in the first years of life within the mixed marriage. The durability of this effort depended a lot on the feedback of the rest of the family regarding the novelties. According to one woman, 'flavors [of the traditional Lithuanian Christmas Eve dishes] were strange for kids as well as to some other family members. As a result, I was eating the dishes alone even for a few days because no one was interested in

them. So, finally I stopped making them' (Interview No. 1. FIN-LT). Strategies may change in time because of changing circumstances: modifying children's attitudes, husband and his family's responses and feedback time-wise.

Woman's individual inclinations or emotions towards a particular cultural environment may play an important role in shaping Christmas traditions within the mixed family. One interviewee mentioned that the general Christmas spirit of the Finnish city, the ritual time of peace and tasteful decorations satisfied her feelings on the occasion better comparing to the Lithuanian environment. The Finnish food and customs prevailed in her family because she considered them as more emotionally fulfilling (Interview No. 7. FIN-LT). Another woman was also aware that Finnish traditions were prevailing in her family: this made her 'life easier', not so obligatory in regard to her cultural heritage (Interview No. 8. FIN-LT). Strategic decisions applied in this case can be perceived as assimilative. Still, it does not mean that other cultural forms of the family life are organised in the same manner.

The Easter Day was not considered that prominent comparing to Christmas among the women interviewed in Finland. One informant mentioned that dyed eggs impressed the Finnish husband's family and the tradition was welcomed. Still, the egg-rolling games were considered bizarre and inappropriate: 'one must not play with food!' – as the interviewee recalled the phrase (Interview No. 3. FIN-LT). The egg-dying tradition was probably the main element that was brought into the mixed families in Finland and took transnational form. It was practised especially if the families included small children. Some women spend Easter holidays making touristic trips within Finland or other countries (Interview No. 11. FIN-LT). In this case, the occasion lost its primary meaning.

The transnational connections are actuated by the initiatives of the Lithuanian community of Finland with its core group in Helsinki. It involves not only some Lithuanian women but also their families, especially kids, which helps to transmit the cultural flows further. Referring to the interview with the community member, the traditional gathering on the Christmas and Easter events consolidated participants' identity and belonging. There was Catholic Mass arranged with a Lithuanian priest on both occasions, who sometimes was involved in the educational program for children on Easter Day. Christmas was celebrated with the performance by the pupils of the Lithuanian weekly school. Sharing the Santa Claus' gifts, common meal and interaction were important elements of the feast (Interview No. 9. FIN-LT)?

## Greece

The main Christian festivals – Christmas and Easter – have opposite connotation in Greece: the Resurrection of Jesus Christ usually is more highlighted in the context of the ritual year. Christmas Eve is not celebrated particularly by Greeks. This customary ‘emptiness’ of the occasion awoke different emotions for the Lithuanian women, because the traditions of the nearest social circle abroad did not correspond to the native family experiences. As one woman noted, strong nostalgia obsessed her on the Christmas Eve; she was missing that family atmosphere and traditional patterns of the day (Interview No. 5. GR-LT). Depending on the individual cases, native traditions can play a significant role in identity constructing in the new environment abroad. But, the integration of the ‘own’ elements into the mixed marriage may demand additional effort, incorporation with similar ones or some other strategic decisions like split or double celebrations, so the traditions become a part of the mixed family’s life.

In some cases, the location or place of a festival became a decisive element in the strategic organisation of the mixed family’s ritual forms, as mentioned above. One family would always celebrate Christmas in Lithuania with the woman’s native family and the Easter Day it would spend in Greece with the husband’s kin (Interview No. 12. GR-LT). In other mixed families, this ‘place’ factor was not persistent, but a diverse type of strategic celebration developed: Christmas festivities had Lithuanian connotation and the Easter was considered a Greek celebration (Interview No. 3. GR-LT; Interview No. 19. GR-LT).

The same as in Finland, some women realised that practices of the native traditions abroad demanded additional effort and endeavour. Its maintenance was strongly affected by the local husband and his circle’s acceptance and support. The awareness of importance of cultural affinity prompted some women to incorporate and arrange common Christmas Eve celebrations with their mixed families. In this way, rather intimate family festival of Christmas Eve got a more collective form abroad. Some other family cases referred to a persistent woman’s effort to practice Lithuanian Christmas and Easter traditions in the mixed marriage (Interview No. 17. GR-LT; Interview No. 16. GR-LT), or the opposite strategy – that was to adapt oneself and follow the local customs (Interview No. 1. GR-LT). The assimilative strategy was based on the viewpoint that it would be ‘egoistic to demonstrate own traditions abroad’. The woman regarded conformity to the husband’s circle as the proper way without expectations of their adjustment to her. She felt like she was a minority, and this status did not empower her for the culturally divergent acts (*ibid.*)

The conjunction or disjuncture of the Catholic and Greek Orthodox Easter dates influenced ways of celebration within the mixed families in Greece. When the dates were different, the occasion gained individual spaces time-wise. This created an opportunity for diverse cultural implementations within mixed marriage without contesting or putting into the shade some of them. The differentiation of the dates enabled women to combine societal obligations towards husband and his family's expectations and fulfil own cultural exigency. Celebration of the Greek Easter usually followed the local way in the mixed marriage, which was often combined with the wider family-in-law's reunion. Catholic Easter was signified with traditional egg-dyeing and decorating, egg tapping and rolling games, especially if there were children included. Thus, mixed families practised the tradition twice, if the Catholic and Orthodox Easter dates varied.

According to some women, sometimes it was still hard to infuse the festive Easter spirit at home when it was an uncelebrated day in the local society (Interview No. 13. GR-LT). Several women referred to the significance of the Lithuanian community's initiatives on the occasion. (Interview No. 11. GR-LT; Interview No. 2. GR-LT; Interview No. 4. GR-LT). The communal gathering, sharing of the Lithuanian dishes, coloured eggs were combined with other activities like quiz, egg-rolling games, or Lithuanian film watching, which usually involved the Greek husbands as well. Collective celebration infused the festival with cultural meaning and greater power among the participants. The opportunity to speak native language and meet other Lithuanian women in similar social position created a feeling of unity and belonging. The place of festival was often decorated with the Lithuanian flag and national colours were dominating in participants' outfit or accessories. The symbolism strengthened identity awareness and transmitted it to the children of the mixed parents.

## **National Festivals of the State of Lithuania in Finland and Greece**

The calendar festivals referring to the historically significant events of the state of Lithuania do not have equivalent celebrations on the same dates in the host countries like some Christian festivals do. Thus, there is a cultural space for the possible engagements within mixed marriages without shading or competing with the local practices. The forms of celebration – the national festivals of

Lithuania in Finland and Greece – depend a lot on formal and informal communal initiatives in the locations. Individual acts are rarer but they do exist and play a significant role in identity construction. Women look for individual forms of expression especially if the collective events can hardly be accessed. Often they involve the local husband and children, which also makes a certain cultural implication. Some women are active in both ways – privately and publicly, others prefer communal activities or confine themselves to actions in the private circle.

However, Lithuanian communities play a greater role on the occasions and create cultural forms involving a bigger number of participants. They often cooperate with the formal institutions like Embassies of Lithuania in the countries under focus. Lithuanian communities can be very strong transmitters of transnationalism. Active leaders with good organising skills can develop very meaningful and expanded activities involving many nationals residing in the foreign country on a permanent or temporary basis. The organisations build ties between the native and receiving countries based on practical, cultural and educational matters. The communities can be a very strong transnational channel escalating different cultural forms based on ethnic and national principles. Their essential activity is focused on emitting so called ‘Lithuanian’ cultural elements and adapting them within the foreign environment. Thus, the celebration of the Lithuanian national festivals within mixed marriage is affected by the accessible initiatives of the organisations in the countries of residence.

The main Lithuanians’ Community of Finland is based in Helsinki. There is an equivalent organisation in Greece – the Lithuanians’ Community of Greece based in Athens. They usually coordinated celebration of the national festivals with the Embassies of Lithuania respectively. The dates of 16<sup>th</sup> of February and 11<sup>th</sup> of March were commemorated often with an arrangement of Lithuanian musicians’ concerts in Helsinki. Lithuanians in Greece would also participate in the events arranged by the Embassy of Lithuania, if there was an opportunity, and arrange an unofficial celebration in parallel. The organisers aimed to induce Lithuanian spirit by inviting participants to choose the outfit with the national colours or symbols. They also adapted local tradition that was usually practiced on the 1<sup>st</sup> January by Greek families – the cutting of ‘vasilopita’ cake (St. Basil’s Bread) with a coin hidden inside (Klimova 2015: 295–296). Adaptation and practicing of the custom within the Lithuanian community created the feeling of proximity and familiarity. The Greek tradition was shifted to the foreign circle but still did not lose its function and effectiveness.

All Lithuanian communities worldwide are invited to sing the national anthem on the 6<sup>th</sup> July, the Statehood Day. It was another occasion when some women along with the other members would gather for communal acts of identity expression in Finland and Greece. The event would often be attended by whole families, including local husbands and children because of its unofficial and open form. According to one informant, Lithuanians in Finland set up a tradition to wear symbolic crowns, which would make a connection with the coronation of Mindaugas, the First and only king of Lithuania (Interview No. 9. FIN-LT). Lithuanians in Greece would again dress in national colours and have Lithuanian flags for the occasion. The performing of the national anthem would be followed by a common meal or coffee and socialising. The very participation in the festivals of the state of Lithuania in the host country is of the utmost importance. Women as well as other participants strengthen their identity by joining the Lithuanian communities and celebrating the occasions with particular acts. It strengthens cultural awareness and creates a medium for sharing the sense of communal identity.

## Generalisation

Calendar festivals with the particular traditions, symbols and other sociocultural elements transferred into the foreign, or 'other', cultural environment gain supplementary meanings and contextualise identity construction processes. Living within mixed marriage in the 'other' space can be a certain stimulus to integrate cultural forms based on native cultural heritage, or it can prompt invention of new traditions for different occasions. In some cases, native traditions can be adapted, integrated, modified or submerged within the local context. Sometimes native traditions can be ignored or, on the contrary, dominate the local ones. In this way, the new environment may presuppose different forms of festival celebrations, which are the result of cultural flux and mixing. In other cases, even the character of a celebration can be modified along with the modified traditions: it can move from the private family circle into more public or communal festivity. It also happens that the event of public character can be commemorated in the private space using particular symbols and elements. The transition or transformation of traditions and integration of them in the foreign environment can be considered as a form of transnationalism. Different strategies are applied to find the most suitable form of celebration within

the mixed marriage abroad. It plays an important role in identity constructing and cultural life of the mixed families' members, including children and other individuals participating in the events.

## Notes

1 [https://osp.stat.gov.lt/documents/10180/217110/Gyv\\_kalba\\_tikyba.pdf/1d9dac9a-3d45-4798-93f5-941fed00503f](https://osp.stat.gov.lt/documents/10180/217110/Gyv_kalba_tikyba.pdf/1d9dac9a-3d45-4798-93f5-941fed00503f), last accessed on 07.02.2018.

2 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Finland>, last accessed on 12.02.2018.

3 The Greek government does not keep statistics on religious groups and censuses do not ask for religious affiliation. According to the U.S. State Department, an estimated 97% of Greek citizens identify themselves as Eastern Orthodox, belonging to the Greek Orthodox Church. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greece>, last accessed on 12.02.2018.

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