

Jonas Mardosa

Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences, Vilnius, Lithuania

Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary (*Žolinė*) in the Ethnoconfessionally Mixed Environment of Modern Vilnius

Abstract. The article is dedicated to the celebration of the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, also known as *Žolinė*, which has been observed as a nationwide public holiday in the Republic of Lithuania since 2000, in Vilnius. It investigates the importance of the liturgical, folk as well as national meaning of the feast in Lithuanian, Polish and Russian families residing in Vilnius. Ethnographical fieldwork shows that it is most commonly celebrated as a religious holiday in Polish families, less commonly in Lithuanian and least commonly in Russian families. In addition to traditional consecration of greenery in the church, Poles also mark the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary by a celebration in the family, whereas the majority of Russian and Lithuanian families neither celebrate it as a traditional nor as a public holiday. The article argues that apart from a secular relationship with the holidays of religious type, the aspect of citizenship is a significant argument for their celebration. What is more, the peculiar relationship of Russians with the holiday is also influenced by the differences in the religious calendar of the Catholic and the Orthodox churches.

Keywords: bouquet of greenery, Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, folk piety, public holiday, *Žolinė*.

Introduction

Following the restoration of independence, a new calendar of public holidays was introduced in Lithuania at the end of the 20th century. Religious holidays, which were banned in the Soviet times, were revived; new holidays important to the state and the nation were added to the ritual calendar of the year. The Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary (August 15), known by people as *Žolinė* (literally *Day of Herbs*), which was designated as a public holiday by the decision of the Seimas (Parliament) of the Republic of Lithuania in 2000, is one of such holidays which had no established tradition in political public life. Before gaining the status of a public holiday, it had been deeply rooted in the Christian holiday calendar. Therefore, by the decision taken by the hierarchs of the Lithuanian Catholic Church in 1996,

the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary (August 15), *Žolinė*, was declared a holy day of obligation (Bažnyčios žinios 1996: 3) with its solemn nationwide celebration in Pivašiūnai town whose church is home to a miraculous painting of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Garsieji Žolinės atlaidai Pivašiūnuose 2000: 7). The designation of this as well as other Catholic holidays as public holidays brought the complexity of their celebration in the multinational and multiconfessional urban environment to the fore. The investigation of the celebration of *Žolinė* in Vilnius is especially relevant because it may reveal the theoretical and practical problems of celebration of public holidays coming from the Catholic ritual calendar in contemporary society. Therefore, the celebration of *Žolinė* in the city of Vilnius among Lithuanian, Polish and Russian residents has been selected as the research object in the article. They constitute the most numerous ethnic groups as well as the groups representing different confessions in the city. The goal is to determine how important the liturgical and folk meaning of the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary is to contemporary Vilnius residents of different confessions and what peculiarities describe the celebration of August 15 as the public holiday in the families of Vilnius residents.

The topic of *Žolinė* is rather important in research terms because this holiday has not been the object of more thorough ethnological research in Lithuania. The studies and articles of Lithuanian ethnologists addressing calendar holidays attempted to discuss the liturgical and especially folk meaning of the holiday in the traditional Lithuanian village (Vyšniauskaitė 1993: 105—107; Gutautas 1991: 79—80). The article by Jonas Mardosa is dedicated to the feast of *Žolinė* held at Pivašiūnai church (Mardosa 2004: 93—112). However, the celebration of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary in the city has not been a focus of attention. Hence, the principal source of material for the article is the data from the ethnographical fieldwork carried out in Vilnius in 2012—2013 (for more on the study: Šaknys 2014: 106).

Christian and secular *Žolinė* content

Eastern Christians have celebrated the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary (Natale S. Mariae) since the 5th century. Byzantine Emperor Maurice selected August 15 as the date of the feast. Later, in

the 7th century, the feast also took root in Catholic European regions. Pope Leo IV instituted the celebration of the feast of the Assumption with an octave in 847 (Vaišnora 1958: 41). The consecration of greenery is a part of the feast's liturgy. Its origin is traced back to the legend according to which in place of Mary assumed into heaven, the apostles found flowers in her coffin (Čibiras 1942: 124). The first direct testimonies to such commemoration of this event date back to the 10th century which marks the first known prayers of the ritual of consecrating flowers. The prayers appeal to God to make the consecrated greenery beneficial to the healthy and the sick, people and animals. The tradition arrived in Lithuania with Christianity, and the first testimonies to such prayers are known from the third decade of the 17th century (Vaišnora 1958: 41—43). *Žolinė* as the name of the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary in Lithuania was first mentioned in the 17th century. According to Bishop Motiejus Valančius it was then known in Samogitia (Western Lithuania) as the Feast of Herbs (Lith. *Žolių šventė*) (Valančius 1972: 370). It should be noted that the Lithuanian folk name of this holiday, *Žolinė*, is akin to the names of the neighbouring regions and is directly taken from Poland.¹

Despite the evident Christian origin of the feast, in Italy the consecration of greenery is associated with ancient agrarian rituals and harvesting festivals (Krasnovskaya 1978: 15). Elsewhere, for example in the Iberian Peninsula or according to German researchers, the rise of this liturgical tradition is traced back to pre-Christian times by associating it with harvesting rituals and cults (Serov, Tokarev 1978: 55; Filimonova 1978: 129). According to S.A. Tokarev, August 15 is connected with rye harvest-finishing customs which also meant the beginning of the autumn cycle in agriculture (Tokarev 1957: 140). In Lithuania, Libertas Klimka sees the relics of the ancient Lithuanian faith in the greenery of *Žolinė* and associates the present-day consecration of harvest with the giving of honour to the deity of the land (Klimka 2009: 91). However, the liturgy of the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary arrived in Lithuania in the established form together with the concept of the Christian feast. To promote a broader celebration of *Žolinė* after giving it the status of a public holiday, attempts were made to highlight the folk semantics of the origin of the feast at the end of the 20th century. However, the fact

that the feast, which was added into the system of Christian holidays in the first ages of Christianity, also manifests peculiar local customs in different regions does not support the argument for its non-Christian origin. The intertwining liturgy and folk customs are characteristic of folk religion and it is not contradictory to the teaching of the Church (Mardosa 2012: 18—22).

Hence, the celebration of the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary is deeply rooted in the Lithuanian ritual calendar. In 1929 the day was officially designated as a public holiday. However, the public-holiday status did not establish itself because, according to Žilvytis Šaknys, in addition to other circumstances, it interfered with a negative approach of the Protestant part of the Lithuanian population, which rejected the cult of the Virgin Mary altogether. Libertas Klimka argued that it was also prevented by political party disagreements at that time (Valstybinės kalendorinės šventės 2001: 9). However, for village residents, August 15 remained a festive day until the middle of the 20th century. Only city residents found it difficult to celebrate the feast which was a working day. Finally, after Lithuania was Sovietized in 1940, the holiday, like other religious holidays, disappeared from public discourse as a result of the bans imposed by the government; in place of August 15, the celebration of the Assumption in the church was moved from August 15 to the closest Sunday. What is more, like other religious holidays, in the second half of the 20th century the situation of the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary was influenced by the process of secularization and modernization of society. Thus, a complex of reasons determined that a political decision taken in 2000 to turn *Žolinė* into a public holiday resulted in a public debate, whereas the diversity of opinions was primarily concerned with the meaningfulness of a public celebration. Besides, considering a multinational situation in the city, a public status of *Žolinė*, as well as other Catholic holidays, also poses the problems of another type in the urban environment. For Russians, for instance, the difference between Orthodox and Catholic liturgical calendars makes August 15 a public holiday without any religious content, not to mention the believers of other confessions which do not in general have the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary in their religious calendar.

It is not by accident that the fieldwork data reveal a failure by a number of respondents to understand the meaning of the feast, because non-believers are unaware of its religious content, making the motives of inclusion of the feast into the calendar of public holidays unclear. The fact that 26 % of Poles and 12 % of Lithuanians celebrate *Žolinė* by a festive dinner can only be explained by religious motives. The Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary is mostly celebrated among believers. *Žolinė* is predominantly celebrated in the church by Poles—59 % of the respondents. Meanwhile, liturgy is attended by 33 % of Lithuanians and 17 % of Russians. In fact, the latter follow the Orthodox calendar and go to the Orthodox church on August 28. What is more, 26 % of Russians indicated that they do not celebrate the public holiday at all. No such answers were recorded in the case of Lithuanians and Poles; however, 40 % of Russians, 42 % of Lithuanians and 27 % of Poles fail to understand the meaning of the feast. Therefore, we can see a rather high (though differentiated by the nationality of the respondents) number of residents in Vilnius who celebrate the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary but fail to understand the meaning of the feast. We can thus conclude that a large part of the population in Vilnius does not recognize the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary as a public holiday.

Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary as a public holiday

Whereas *Žolinė* is also a public holiday, a question naturally arises how many Vilnius residents celebrating it mark this day as a religious holiday and how many celebrate it as a public holiday, as well as what part of the population finds both aspects important. However, the research data make it clear that to determine the ratio of the two components, special research is required. Despite the need for further research, we may nevertheless assume that the status of a public holiday is more important to Lithuanians. By assuming that the celebration of the public holiday is influenced by the citizenship of residents, we can hardly suppose that Poles who predominate among the residents celebrating the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary are most civic-minded. They bring the religious argument to the fore; Russians highlight the religious aspect as well because their feast-day does not coincide with the public holiday. Therefore, Russians, being the citizens of Lithuania, may recognize

the public status of *Žolinė* but in response to the question about their going to the church, they associate this action with the Orthodox liturgical calendar where the believers attend the festive rituals in the church on August 28. Therefore, they bring consecrated greenery home on the actual Orthodox holiday. An especially high percentage of non-celebrating residents among Lithuanians is an evident indicator of changes occurring in people's spiritual life, while reduced religiousness determines the scope of people's relationship with the church feast. It should be noted that while TV programmes remind Lithuanians of the aspect of the public holiday, Poles may partially skip them due to a language barrier. Television broadcasts are shown from Pivašiūnai, a pilgrimage site from the 19th century with a three-day feast which was not discontinued even in the period of Soviet repressions (Mardosa 2004: 93), whereas from 1988 the feast of the Assumption takes place 8 days in the town of Pivašiūnai (Vitunskas 2000: 35). However, the attempts made by the national television to make the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary more important as a public holiday do not yield the expected results. The survey shows that watching of the broadcast of the church service during the summertime does not fall into the day's celebration schedule among Vilnius residents.

The content of the consecrated bouquet

Žolinė used to be an actively celebrated church holiday featuring folk piety elements in the first half of the 20th century. Today, Vilnius believers have partially maintained this aspect and those attending the sacred service bring greenery for consecration in the church. The consecration of greenery on the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary is a part of liturgy, but the observations in different Lithuanian churches show that definitely not all believers carry a bouquet of greenery into the sacred service. Nevertheless, Vilnius falls into the area of southeastern Lithuania where greenery consecration is an important part of the ritual behaviour of people who attend church services, primarily Polish believers. On the other hand, we can observe the weakening dimension of folk piety in comparison to sacramentals. The greenery, which is associated with sacredness on the broadest scale, is attributed a religious symbolic meaning, and Vilnius residents carry the bouquets with an extended aesthetic



Fig. 1. The Assumption bouquets are the most popular symbols of the Feast, 2010, Vilnius. Photo: Jonas Mardosa

value for consecration. For instance, 32 % of Lithuanians and 54 % of Polish families keep the greenery for consecration bought outside the church (few people carry a bouquet composed at home) in a vase on the table or next to holy paintings as a home decoration while Russian families traditionally keep them attached to holy paintings (9 %). Usually, the Assumption bouquets are kept at home until they dry out. Afterwards, they are burned in the manner identical to any other consecrated item.

Until the mid-20th century, there was a tradition in the whole of Lithuania, in particular in the Vilnius Region, to carry rye seed put into small bags to the church for consecration, hoping for a good yield from the consecrated rye the following year and God's protection for it. People would also bring a wreath marking the end of rye harvest or its ears for consecration. Grain consecration fitted well in the tradition of a broader geographical and ethnocultural region (Pūtys 1998: 107; Fisher 1934: 192; Znamierowska-Prüfferowa 2009: 196;

Lozka 2002: 165). A contemporary octave feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary in Pivašiūnai highlights an agrarian aspect; one of the days is even dedicated to farmers. Observations of the Assumption in Vilnius prompt a conclusion that even though the survey results do not show crop consecration, the bouquets for consecration sold outside the church also contain crop ears. However, it is only a reminiscence of the tradition without highlighting the agricultural meaning of the action (even though the farmers arriving from the district may also consecrate bouquets in Vilnius).

The bouquets sold at the approaches to the churches in Vilnius may also contain a handful of flax. Such bouquets (which are also known in the feast of Pivašiūnai) are not traditional, though. Today flax is added to other dried plants intended for consecration (Mardosa 2004: 100) or separate decorative bouquets are even composed. Southeastern Lithuania, Vilnius falling into it, also features the consecration of fruit and vegetables on the occasion of *Žolinė*. Crop consecration had also survived in the religious customs of residents from Grodno Region in Belarus in the second half of the 20th century; they used to have pears, carrots, cabbages, beetroots and other vegetables consecrated (Traditsiyaya mastatskaya kultura belarusav 2006: 233). Poland also has a surviving tradition of consecrating the goods from a fruit and vegetable garden (Uryga 2006: 299). Such attribution of sacredness to the crop as well as flax in Vilnius is more commonly encountered among Poles; 18 % of Poles and 3 % of Lithuanians specified them among the items brought for consecration. Hence, even though the crop consecration tradition is known among Lithuanians, it is essentially a phenomenon of Polish religious culture in modern Vilnius. Fieldwork data lead to a conclusion that even though Russians do not carry apples or vegetables to the sacred service of the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary in Vilnius, the Orthodox have apples consecrated on the occasion of the Feast of Transfiguration on August 19.

Consecrated greenery in the everyday life and in the custom of believers

In the history of daily life, the traditional Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary was closely linked to the individual's personal

and family life. To that end, consecrated greenery was used for apotropaic and healing purposes in the traditional culture; thus, the bouquets contained the plants which were believed by people to have such properties. The plants that were believed to be sacred were thought to become even more effective. In contemporary practice, bouquets are not made by pilgrims themselves but are bought in the randomly formed markets outside the church and feature a diversity of plants. Blooming garden flowers are more commonly used for that matter. Despite the above, the greenery consecrated on *Žolinė* retains its traditional uses in burial customs. According to C. Boduen de Kurtenė-Erenkroicova, in the first half of the 20th century, Poles in Vilnius Voivodeship used to keep the consecrated greenery behind holy paintings; after the death of a family member they were put into the coffin or into the pillow under the head of the deceased (Boduen de Kurtenė-Erenkroicova 1992—1993: 191—192). Such a custom was more widely spread in Lithuania; according to the fieldwork data, it was also known in Belarus. A survey in Vilnius revealed that such a use of consecrated greenery has survived in the ritual practice of contemporary Vilnius residents. Therefore, the answers of 15 % of Lithuanians and 18 % of Poles include a statement that dried greenery are placed into the coffin. Such data are also supported by the survey of employees from Vilnius funeral establishments carried out by R. Garnevičiūtė as part of her study on contemporary Lithuanian funerals. It became clear that in addition to putting greenery under the pillow by people themselves, there are also cases when the medical staff preparing the dead for burial are asked to spread the greenery consecrated at the time of the Feast of the Assumption or on the Feast of Corpus Christi under the deceased in the coffin (Garnevičiūtė 2014: 53—54). Russians from Vilnius are only familiar with the placing of greenery into the coffin but they or their family members have not observed such a ritual.

Meanwhile, the use of consecrated greenery for healing purposes has survived to this day and is more commonly observed in the customary behaviour of Vilnius Poles. Lithuanians and Russians in particular remember such uses of greenery to a far lesser extent. For instance, the use of dried plants as a magical attribute in the case of illness is known by 22 % of older-generation Poles, 10 % of Lithuanians and 9 % of Russians. The attribution of magical properties

to consecrated greenery and the expectations associated with it are characteristic of Poles as well as Germans who used the consecrated items for various protective or fertility promoting purposes since the Middle Ages (Filimonova 1978: 129—130; Gantskaya 1978: 177—178). We can therefore conclude that the customs of the use of consecrated greenery encountered in modern-day Vilnius find a niche in the cross-European context of meanings, symbols and rituals of the feast. However, the attitude followed by contemporary Church towards such uses of consecrated greenery as well as other items which are considered sacred is rather ambiguous. By supporting folk piety traditions important to the nation, the Church disagrees with the practices of magic and rituals based on superstitious beliefs (Liaudiškojo pamaldumo ir liturgijos vadovas 2003: 18). Therefore, though greenery and even the fruits of farmers' labour are consecrated during the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, the Church does not vest them with prospective magical uses; such beliefs are nevertheless still viable in the practices of older-generation residents.

The material provided makes it clear that the liturgical continuity of celebration of the Assumption takes place in the custody of the Church. Such a form of the feast was observed before declaring August 15 a public holiday and such a form is observed by the believers to this day. In the meantime, an extra day-off provided an additional opportunity to attend the sacred service in the church and to celebrate this feast freely on an otherwise working day. However, in the circumstances of the city, the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary has its own specific characteristics. It is also typical of other calendar holidays based on folk piety. Most importantly, as indicated by ethnologist Birutė Imbrasienė, after several decades in the city, people grow apart from the context of rural holidays and folk customs are no longer that relevant. As a result, problems of the people's relationship with those holidays emerge (Imbrasienė 1992: 3). In fact, at the time of the Assumption, attempts are made to attract believers as well as secular residents to the feast based on folk customs through the press, television and radio. However, the survey shows that greenery is consecrated as a tradition of the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, and the Church as well as the believers understand *Žolinė* in a Christian way (Mardosa 2012: 22).

Thus, if the believers consider greenery a symbol of commemorating the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, its folk treatment does not become meaningful for non-believers as well as for secular residents detached from the peasant's way of life. A non-believer or a person detached from the Christian nature of the Assumption does not sense the importance of the public holiday; that is why, a considerable part of residents of the nationalities under discussion do not understand the inclusion of August 15 into the list of public holidays and they, like the Orthodox, consider it an additional day-off that does not fall into the concept of a holiday.

Conclusions

Deeply rooted in church practice, the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary has retained its liturgical part featuring the tradition of consecration of greenery unchanged. The majority of city residents do not compose bouquets by themselves but purchase them outside the church. Therefore, the composition and looks of the bouquets being consecrated are determined by the supply which is also influenced by the demand. No evident principles of composition of the greenery bouquet were identified in the research; however, the observance of the tendencies of bouquet composition apparent in the region where Vilnius is located has been established among Catholic Poles and Lithuanians. The Polish tradition of consecration of greenery supplemented with fruit and vegetables is considered exceptional.

Fieldwork shows that as a religious holiday, *Žolinė* is mostly celebrated among Poles, less commonly among Lithuanians and least commonly among Russians. In addition to participation in the sacred service held in the church and the traditional consecration of greenery, it is more common among Poles to celebrate the Assumption of the Virgin Mary in the family. Believers attend the church irrespective of the secular status of the Assumption. They consider August 15 a religious feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary with its own liturgy and symbols. The majority of Vilnius residents treat the consecration of bouquets of greenery in the course of church rituals as a festive symbol deriving from the context of folk piety.

The majority of Russians and Lithuanians in Vilnius neither celebrate *Žolinė* as a traditional Christian nor as a public holiday. Whereas the

holiday of religious origin is not celebrated due to a secular relationship of society with it, the scope of celebration of *Žolinė* as a public holiday is associated with the citizenship of residents which is relevant to all groups of the population under discussion. In the case of Russians, the peculiar characteristics of the content of the celebration of the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary are determined by the specific religious calendar of the Orthodox.

Notes

Poles call the feast *Matka Boska Zielna* (Poles from Vilnius Region also refer to it as *Zielna*). In Slovak the feast is known as *Maria Zelena*; in the Middle Ages Germans nicknamed it “a bouquet of women’s day” (Gratsianskaya 1978: 192; Gantskaya 1978: 177). In fact, next to other names, Belarusian Orthodox believers and Catholics also have the names *Zelyonaya*, *Zelnaya* (Lozka 2002: 159; 163).

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