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## **The Ritual Year of Domestic Animals: Zoofolkloristic Aspects**

**Abstract.** This article focuses on changes in human-animal relationships and strives to characterise the ritual year traditions in modern society, where attitudes and relationships with pets are developing towards greater equality. The custom of greeting and wishing animals well during celebrations of the ritual year has undergone major changes, while the almost fully normative traditions of agrarian communities has been on the decline. In modern urban environments, pets receive gifts, similarly to other family members. Many families celebrate special occasions in an animal's life (such as birthdays and family get-togethers). The last part of this article describes the public celebration of the first birthday of Laura, the dog in a state institution. All cases characterise, and are part of the continuum in, the evolution of human-pets relations.

**Keywords:** birthday, gifts, human-animal relations, pet culture, ritual year traditions.

*Dedicated to the generations of cats who were and are  
our friends and lived, or live, with us.*

### **Introduction**

Changes in contemporary urban society concern humans and non-humans both on macro and micro levels. In contrast to the past, miniature narratives indicate that ethical attitudes are equalizing both groups. Pets have become friends, relatives, and more. The increasing number of humans who treat their pets as family members, as well as the multilevel social bonds between humans and their pets, draws attention to the field of human–animal relationships.

This article focuses on human-animal relationships in the following areas, relying on methods employed in folklore/zoofolkloristic studies:

- giving special expressions of love and kindness to animals during celebrations of the ritual year in the earlier agrarian tradition;
- celebrations of the ritual year in modern urban environment during which pets receive gifts, similarly to other family members;
- celebrating special occasions in an animal’s life (birthdays, family get-togethers);
- description of an individual case: public celebration of the first birthday of Laura the dog in a state institution.<sup>1</sup>

This article provides an overview of a number of behavioural tendencies associated with wild animals and birds. This paper draws on data gathered from a survey conducted in 2007 among school children in which one question about spending leisure time concerned pets (see also Vesik 2011, Kõiva 2015) as well as on information obtained by the Department of Folklore Studies through interviews, as well as from the internet and social media. As for earlier periods, a 2002 internet study (Jaago & Kõiva 2002) and digitalised hand-written materials from folklore archives (Skriptoorium 2014) were used. The respondents were from various geographical regions in Estonia and represent the average pet or animal owner.

This article is intended to characterise traditions popular in modern society and their development dynamics, drawing on folklore sources. This article also is intended to describe how humans influence an animal’s life. Additionally, there is reflection on how an ethnic group, especially city people, coexist with their pet animals and include them in rights and customs traditionally reserved for humans.

### **Theoretical background**

Social anthropologist Tim Ingold has characterised the evolution of complex relations between human animals and nonhuman animals, highlighting three major attitudes toward animals:

- domestic animal, pet—anthropomorphised, sentimentalised, a named creature;
- animals as living creatures with certain attributes, properties that allow their classification—animals have been rendered anonymous and are considered objects;

– animals as evolving and changing creatures, so we are dealing with a process where the central tenet is *being alive* (Ingold 2011: 174).

Ingold also argued on the topic of culture and humanness and stressed the opinion that “[i]n modern Western societies to have a name is to be human. The fact that we often give names to domestic animals or to animated characters in children’s stories only lends support to this presumption. <...> Our tendency is to treat certain animals *as if* they are the humans, or they are commonly understood as humans” (Ingold 2011: 166). The second possibility is “<...> they are quasi-human companions” (Ingold 2011: 167). In conclusion Ingold proposes that “[O]utside the domestic domain animals are ‘living things’” (Ingold 2011: 166).

Contemporary scientific and ethic (bioethics) positions, however, emphasise new lines of social and cultural behaviour. In the 1990s and later, several researchers demonstrated that animals are an inseparable part of culture (Serpell 1994; 1996; Arluke & Sanders 1996; Podberscek, Paul & Serpell 2005). Certain more recent approaches also look for commonalities between the nonhuman-animal and human-animal culture as well as for similar features characterising their memory and communication (for example, Thompson 2010; Haraway 2008). Over the last decades, animal populations that have adapted to living in a city or have accepted urban areas as their natural habitat (for example, water fowl, mallards, foxes, hedgehogs, and others) are on the rise. What is more, the number of animals patronized by people, coexisting with humans in their domestic domain, and synanthropic species have also increased. As a result, attempts have been made to analyse the essence and motivational aspects of such relationships as well as to gain insight into the age, social status, and economic situation of pet and animal owners. For the purposes of this article it is vital to keep in mind that human-animal relationships in various regions are characterised by an unprecedented level of closeness. According to Bonas, McNicolas and Collis (2005: 212), since the early 1980s in the United States and Great Britain, a high proportion of households have regarded their companion animals as family members, ranging from 70 per cent to 99 per cent. According to Australian researcher Steven White (2009: 856) “[a] major 2006 report by BIS Shrapnel prepared for the Australian Companion

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Animal Council Inc asserted that “[p]ets today are being treated more like one of the family than in any previous generation.” Reports from Japan also indicate an increased closeness between humans and pets (Hansen 2013).

### **Animals during celebrations of the ritual year in the agrarian tradition**

Archived materials from the 19th century and monuments in manor compounds point to a clear division between the traditions of the elite (the upper and middle class of Baltic German and Russian origin) and peasant culture (the lower class of farmers and craftsmen of Estonian origin). Pets of the elite class were allowed to stay indoors, and they received special treatment. Gravestones and burial monuments were erected for favourite horses and dogs. For example, there is a monument dedicated to a horse at Sangaste Castle and Tākusammas (the Stallion’s Monument) on Valgehobusemägi (White Horse Hill) at Mõdriku Manor. According to a legend, the latter monument was erected in honour of the manor owner’s white horse who carried his injured master away from a battlefield.

In the agrarian tradition, farm animals were predominantly kept for subsistence purposes. According to data from folklore archives, specific protection and prevention rituals were carried out at the start of important periods (in spring when livestock was let out to pasture for the first time, St. George’s Day, Holy Week, and Midsummer’s Day) as well as when large domestic animals were giving birth or fell ill. As for special occasions in spring, ceremonial rites and offering a symbolic piece of food coincided with the animals leaving the domestic sphere. Rituals were performed to protect animals from dangers, such as wild animals, in the external domain. Rituals observed at the end of the same half-year were inspired by such factors as the desire to protect the animals and increase fertility and productivity.

Animals kept for subsistence purposes also received special treatment during celebrations important to people. From 1880—1939, domestic animals were given food at Christmas and New Year’s Eve. Cattle and horses got choice food – bread with salt; some of the feast bread was saved for later. When giving bread to animals, the master or lady of the house called out to them with the following words:

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*"Christmas has arrived, and the holidays have begun!"* Sometimes a greeting was followed by a brief prayer. If possible, livestock were given better hay and sheep whisks made in summer, better food was given to poultry, and dogs and cats enjoyed morsels from the holiday table; in this way, all farm animals received special treatment and some received celebratory food. In a similar manner, animals were greeted and given choice morsels on New Year's Eve and during the Easter period. *"At [E]aster time animals were given special treats"* (E 82354).<sup>2</sup>

Although in some far-off regions the custom of greeting animals was kept alive even in the early 20th century, the answers of young respondents in M.J. Eisen's survey<sup>2</sup> indicate a shift in attitudes. In the 1920s, pupils reported that feeding domestic animals on farms during Christmas Eve was old-fashioned and that this tradition should be abandoned because it was not appropriate for the modern times. There are no references to this tradition in the following decades. It is most likely that the tradition died out due to modernisation efforts, World War II, and the restructuring and forced collectivization of farms that took place in the post-war period. These developments brought along a number of economic, social, and emotional effects as well as the emergence of factory farms in which the human-animal relationship underwent dramatic changes.

As for wild animals, symbolic treats were given to wild birds during the Christmas and New Year's period. Whisks of cereal crops were offered to forest birds, placed on the rooftops, or in a forest clearing during the same period. This custom is directly associated with the need to protect the coming year's crops. In areas where Orthodoxy prevailed, the Day of the Forty Martyrs (9 March) conveyed the same message: small loaves of bread (locally known as *paistekakk* or *vatsk*) were made for birds and laid out on higher spots, magic rituals were performed, and spells were said to keep the birds away from crops and berries for the whole year.

Another significant phenomenon was the ban on hunting and fishing during Christmas, New Year's Eve, and church services. This ban was further upheld by various superstitions which served as a warning about punishments that would befall those who dared to ignore

the custom. Traditions of the 20th century included declaring symbolic peace to wild animals during Christmas, when hunting was stopped, as well as hunting societies and city people bringing hay, corn, and the like, for wild animals and birds living in forests. Awareness campaigns in schools urged students to pay attention to wild animals who had a hard time getting food in winter, and people were encouraged to put food in birdhouses to help birds in their neighbourhood survive the cold season.

It follows from a discussion inspired by the section “Man and animals” (Jaago and Kõiva 2002) that urbanised Estonians and people living on farms in rural areas still differ as to their behaviour with this regard: rural areas, where dog and cats are kept first and foremost for a specific purpose, represent a more utilitarian relationship to these animals.

### **Gifts during calendar celebrations**

New trends appearing in the 20th century are hard to determine. There are families where pets daily join the family at the table with their personal plate. There have also been cases where the tolerance of the local authorities has been tested – the invited guests have taken a dog along and demanded that it have a spot at the celebration table (Interview 2012).

According to archival records, the tradition of giving Christmas and New Year gifts to pets dates back to the 1970s and 1980s. Back then, better food or special treats were given to all animals in the household (from dogs to mice). The difference was that there were no pet departments in general stores, let alone specialised pet shops, during the Soviet period. This meant that animals received homemade gifts or were given squeaky rubber toys, balls, or other suitable things purchased from toy stores as presents. Gifts included food items, such as meat, liver, or canned food meant for human consumption.

Home videos recorded in the early 1990s capture the structure of holiday celebrations as well as their atmosphere and emotions. A home video of the Christmas celebrations of a family in Tartu shows how gifts are given to all family members and the cat: the cat shows keen

interest in all gifts and their unwrapping, and has to sit pretty to get its gift (Joala family).

The same tendency can be found in many families: pets receive gifts because they seem to be interested in them and appear to expect to get one. Whether as part of cause or effect, people appear to feel the need to treat their family pets as equals (Kõiva 2010):

*“Our small dachshund was the first one waiting for presents by the Christmas tree. It keeps waiting keenly and when several people have already received their gifts, it starts to fidget and tug on my clothes, as if asking, ‘Where is my gift?’ It is on cloud nine when the gift finally arrives. You just cannot keep yourself from smiling when looking at it. What a lively boy, so happy and pleased with himself.”* (Interview 2016).

Celebrating Christmas or New Year’s Eve with friends usually involves exchanging gifts; pets, as family members, are not excluded from gift giving. The smaller the pet (e.g., turtles, fish, mice), the less comprehensible the feedback given in return for a gift, and thus gifts are usually something practical: pet food, a running wheel, a climbing tube, a scratching post, a nest, a cage or something similar. There is always the question of whether to give something homemade or store-bought. Although do-it-yourself culture prevailed during the Soviet era (nest boxes and bird houses were typically made at home) despite the fact that similar items were commercially available (for example, some purchased animal cages and aquariums from stores while others made them at home), the last decade seems to indicate a preference for store-bought items.<sup>3</sup> Still, irrespective of the era, an empty cardboard box makes for a cosy nest, and sticks and stumps, homemade pillows and leftover pieces of synthetic carpeting, are excellent for sharpening one’s nails.

### **Celebrating the special occasions in a pet’s life**

The previous section refers to a number of typical—and multifunctional – gifts. Birthday parties for pets and giving gifts to them were popular during the last, approximately, forty years. These parties were for family, or for family and friends, or for the family and relatives of the pet and pet owners. This list indicates that it is relatives

and friends or, for example, the pet's relatives, or acquaintances who have a dog of the same breed that get invited to such birthday parties. Celebrating a pet's birthday differs from celebrating a child birthday only in details. The difference lies primarily in the fact that while current social norms regard celebrating a child's birthday as a must, celebrating a pet's birthday is seen as voluntary. Statistical data gathered by White demonstrates that some 20 % of pet owners follow the practice.

According to social media pages and websites, birthdays of dogs are celebrated most often and those of cats and other small pets are mentioned considerably less frequently (for example, Dog people of Estonia, Cats and friends, Hansen 2013). The tradition of birthday celebrations emphasises the social connection between humans and animals. In other words, it indicates the extent to which time and emotional, as well as material, resources are invested in a pet, the degree to which a family pet is seen as an equal to humans, and the place it has in the family hierarchy. It is only logical that a high place in the family hierarchy and a deep emotional connection with family members are a guarantee for well-being and equal treatment, the latter including birthday celebrations. Regarding these celebrations, social media data seem to indicate that people view as significant the opportunity these occasions provide to express their creativity as well as the fun and satisfaction derived from organising such events.

Generally, the first birthday in a pet's life is often celebrated as a significant milestone: dogs and cats have become young grown-ups, while small pets have passed the one-third mark of their life. The subsequent birthdays mark how long they have held the status of family member. For example, one dog owner describes birthday celebrations as follows:

*"11-year-old German shepherd: our family has the tradition to celebrate the dog's birthday with special cake and a birthday party on the sea shore"* (social media, personal page 1).

In addition to customary elements determined by humans, another special feature is a customised birthday cake (for dogs) and gifts. As a rule, the cake is savoury and made of ingredients palatable for



the animal, although sometimes store-bought savoury cakes for human consumption are also used (savoury sandwich cakes with meat-based or fish-based filling and garnish). Another important feature is a home-made or special-order cake which tends to underline the closeness of such a relationship as well as the pet's higher status. Pet birthday cake recipes are published in printed and electronic media as well as in social media, in particular in specialised groups, such as Dog people of Estonia, United dogs, etc. It is worth mentioning that recipes for and information on organising pet parties is published in mainstream media as well.

A birthday cake may be decorated with an image (depicting a simple scene, a stylised cartoon character or the birthday animal). A cake may be customised with the name of a birthday dog/cat or birthday wishes (for example, a birthday cake for a dog with the following writing: Bosse 5 yrs). Sometimes a cake comes with candles, but that is a risky practice because inquisitive pets may end up with burnt whiskers as a consequence.

The following example illustrates the fact that birthday celebrations for pets are dictated by their owners who like to draw special attention to the event:

*“To celebrate this special occasion, we made a cake for Betty. We used canned food, cheese and pasta. Betty has not eaten the cake yet. We wanted to give it to her in the morning, but our digital camera batteries were dead and so we decided to wait until the evening to be able to take photos and upload them to kutsu.ee! The birthday girl loved the cake! She put her paws on the table immediately (which she never does)”* (social media, personal page 2).

Dog birthdays are sometimes celebrated in nature, for example, in parks, by the seaside, or elsewhere outdoors, all excellent opportunities to go for a hike or a picnic. A hike in nature brings great enjoyment for all present—humans and animals alike can move around freely, enjoy the company of their kind, and relish food prepared specially for them.<sup>4</sup>

Another type of birthday celebration, slightly different from that described above, is family re-union parties with a pet's relatives, father

or mother, uncles and aunts, brothers and sisters, etc., present. This custom is rooted in a close relationship between the pet's first caretaker and current owner who are connected as relatives or friends of the pet.

*"One of my greatest hobbies is having a dog. Two years ago I got a dachshund we called Sofi. She is very dear to me and I like being with her. Sometimes we visit a good friend of mine who also has a dachshund, called Betty, or another friend whose dachshund is called Pille. But sometimes Sofi's mother Kupi and brother Juss come to visit us"* (EFA, KP 13, 169/70 (1c)).

A community of friends may be formed of people who all own animals of the same breed (Siberian huskies, Alaskan malamutes, Labrador retrievers, Newfoundland dogs, etc.). In this case, it is the activities that dog owners with pets of the same breed—all individuals probably brought the dogs from different countries—enjoy together rather than family ties between their pets which are seen as a connecting factor. This kind of hike or get-together was common as early as during the Soviet era among the members of informal and formal associations for owners of pedigree dogs and play a significant role in traditions of the later period as well.

### **Case study: the birthday party of Laura the dog**

The following is a case study: the celebration of the birthday of Laura the dog in a state institution with 120 employees of whom about 25 are pet owners. Dogs and cats have temporarily stayed in their owners' work premises when waiting to be taken for a vet appointment during the working hours of the institution or in connection with other necessary errands. For some time, the institution has been headed by a person who does not tolerate the presence of pets on institution premises and has repeatedly ordered them to be sent off. However, there are two dogs who used to accompany their owners to work in this institution.

One of the dogs who accompanies its owners to work is a small, bravehearted dog whose owner works in a separate office, and the other one is Laura. Laura's owner started taking the puppy along to work because she did not dare leave her home alone and did not want

to make home visits in order to feed and care for the puppy during the day. The puppy accompanied her owner to work until one year old. After that, she did not accompany her on a daily basis.

Laura's owner kept a diary to record the puppy's development and milestone life events. Following are a few excerpts from the diary, provided with the kind permission of Laura's owner. We will see that a number of minor celebrations were held before Laura turned one year old, as is customary for human babies who have not reached their first birthday yet.

*"Now we have lived together for more than 1 week and have celebrated her 2-month birthday. EQ [= Edgar, my brother] and Kristofer [son of my brother] visited us and brought a gift—candies for cats. [smile]"*

*"Yesterday we celebrated Laura's birthday at work as well. Actually, we celebrated the birthdays of Laura and Rutt [a colleague]—Laura is 2 months old, Rutt a bit older."<sup>5</sup>*

The first year birthday is an important milestone and Laura's owner decided to take a major step towards introducing her pet beyond her department, that is, to the entire institution. The diary provides an overview of how the idea came to be. The author's notes seem to indicate that unspoken rules or potential dislike of animals could not dampen her determination.

*"Today is an important day—Laura's birthday! 1 year old! Congratulations to all of us! [smile] After thinking carefully what would be the best gift for Laura I found—a birthday party! It's not important how many gifts there will be or what will be on the table. The most important thing is that there will be a lot of people.*

*In conclusion—at my workplace will be a huge birthday party for Laura.*

*I am planning to go home during lunch time and bring Laura back with me. After that we will visit all the offices in the building and ask people to the birthday party. It is good plan—Laura can greet all the people in the building twice—when inviting them to the birthday party and then when they come to the party."*

The invitation included the director and administrative staff. No-one declined or refused, and the dog was not sent home (as had happened previously with animals taken to work). Then, a festive birthday party was held, complete with cake, presents, and invited guests. The majority of guests were from the so-called home department, but some people from other departments of the institution showed up as well. The dog was entertained and fed. The cake was a special order, displaying the puppy's name, with one burning birthday candle.

Later, in the offices, heated discussions arose on the topic of whether a pet needs an institutional birthday. Discussions were held in private, among closed groups of colleagues and friends; highly contradictory opinions were voiced. The latter reflected serious as well as humorous responses to this novel approach and to carrying the tradition of birthday celebrations from the human realm over to that of animals. Mostly, the case was approached with humour, but some people were strongly against it (in this case, birthday celebrations were viewed as an event strictly for humans and as one that should not be transferred to non-human beings). Several people did not reveal their stance but announced that they **would not discuss** this question. Resolute answers in the latter vein indicate that the matter is too sensitive for a public discussion and that people prefer not to reveal their personal opinion to avoid being drawn into fierce disputes over conflicting perspectives.

These discussions gave rise to a series of legitimate arguments for and against pet birthdays, with the aim to come up with a definitive answer. Animal anniversaries and animals as equal family members – are they a part of an acceptable future? What is the level of equality people are willing to accept? Which aspects and rights of human life are shared with animals, and which are not? Can we publicly display our relationship with our pet animals, or are these issues for the family and inner circle? Is raising children / puppies an institutional or family concern? Others focused on the ethical aspect: Does everyone need to be involved: those who are allergic to animals, the dog haters and cat lovers, the animal haters? Aren't we, human creatures, endowed with a measure of free will as well as responsibility for both ourselves and animals? Without providing an overview

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of conflicting opinions and arguments due to the limited length of this article, I would like to underline that pets are often allowed a considerable measure of freedom in the inner family circle.

### **Conclusions**

Source materials used in this article do not uniformly uphold the ideas of Tim Ingold. Attitudes towards animals are undergoing major changes: researchers are expected to adhere to stringent restrictions when performing tests on animals; animal protection associations and citizens' initiatives have taken a closer look at the exploitation and catching and selling of wild animals; and conditions in factory farms are disputed. It appears during this shift that attitudes towards and relationships with pets are developing towards greater equality between human and non-human animals. Still, it is an area where conflicting opinions abound and deeply rooted stereotypes are common; coming to an agreement poses a real challenge.

The custom of greeting and wishing animals well during celebrations of the ritual year has undergone major changes: in the early 20th century, this almost fully normative tradition, widely practised in the inner family circle of agrarian communities, was on the decline or had already died out.

As for pets, the overall relationship pattern and their closeness with owners has been taken to an entirely new level in many cultural areas. Unlike before, pets today are not viewed as gifts, but in a changed gift-making culture it is they who have every right to receive toys and presents on a daily basis as well as on special occasions, such as holiday and birthday celebrations.

Public rituals and signs of a liberalisation tendency are increasingly common in Europe, including Estonia. Aire-Piret Pärn, member of the board of NGO Society for Estonian Dog Owners, explained: "Previously, we have voted for the Most Dog-Friendly Deed of the Year, but this time we decided to draw attention to and recognise dogs as full members of our society" (Männi 2014).

An entirely new trend is dog shows and show-competitions where purebred dogs are displayed side by side with mixed-breed mongrels.

Such events are held to collect donations for dog rescue shelters. In addition, a number of public positions have been established which rely on potential benefits which certain characteristics of a specific species can bring. For example, dog-assisted programmes for providing emotional support to people with reading difficulties have been set up in some public libraries (Randoja 2014).

As for Laura, the dog, her birthday is celebrated outside of the institution as well as within the institution because her closest “human relatives” are pet lovers. By now, Laura has become a fully accepted member of the institution and has even celebrated her second birthday in the same formal setting. Last Christmas she also showed off her tricks and skills, participating in an amateur play – as such, she is as much a civil servant as anyone else employed by the institution. However, the main contribution of this small dog girl to the institution’s development is liberalising its policy toward animals and triggering a discussion on the matter.

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### Notes

1. The article does not discuss such topics as death, burial, or commemoration of animals, or associated cemetery culture.
2. In the 1920s, M. J. Eisen carried out nation-wide polls to gather information about major calendar celebrations.
3. Generalisation from social media.
4. At this point, the article does not discuss the menu of humans at such occasions, also more festive or suitable for an outing.
5. A well-known literary scholar in her 60s.

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