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The Family and the Ritual Year in the Modern Lithuanian City

Abstract. Using the results of fieldwork conducted in Vilnius in 2011–2014, the author of the article aims to present tradition as perceived by a present-day Vilnius citizen and to analyse which festivals of the life- and year- cycles are viewed as traditional. How tradition is observed when making preparations for the most important celebration of the year, Christmas, is another issue touched upon. The author reaches the conclusion that the concept of tradition is contextual. Its content can be seen in a different way not only by an ethnologist and a person distant from the academic sphere respectively, but also by the informant himself or herself as they seek to define the concept of tradition, when speaking about traditions observed by their own family and when singling out the festivals which are traditionally observed.

Keywords: family, Lithuania, ritual year, town, tradition.

Introduction

The concept of tradition, which in ethnology is at times referred to as a synonym for culture, as related to the transfer and transmission of culture plays an important role in most branches of the humanities and social sciences (Seymour-Smith 1986: 280), or at least is perceived as a phenomenon performing a series of culture-enhancement-related functions. These functions are: introducing the adoption of cultures; acting as a vehicle for the storage of information and cultural values and for their transfer from generation to generation: being a means of people's socialization and enculturation, thus carrying out the selection of morals and values endorsed by the community (Sadokhin 2002: 148). Some ethnologists also use the concept of traditional culture which mostly encompasses cultural content and values passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth or on a territorial basis (Dobrowolski 1987: 261–277).

However, problems faced by present-day society in the sphere of knowledge transfer indicate that in times of rapid and significant changes, the transfer of culture from generation to generation is becoming increasingly complex (Eriksen 2004), whereas from the point of view of present-day ethnologists, tradition, regarded as a process encompassing cultural actors, always implies the possibility of modification of what has already been transferred through time and space (Kockel 2006: 100). Frequently scholars no longer associate this concept with opposition to modernity (Anttonen 2005: 27–40). “Socialistic”, “communistic” or even “new life traditions” initiated in Lithuania in Soviet times, were intended to replace old rituals of religious origin (Černeckis 1961) and the concept of tradition itself.

The academic research of historians, folklorists and ethnologists of the past few decades is mostly dominated by “invented”, “modern”, “changing” and even “instant” concepts of tradition (cf. Hobsbawm, Ranger 1983; Hatanaka 2002, Anttonen 2005; Hugoson 2006; Jonutytė 2011), which partially or fully dismiss the semantics of the Latin word *traditio*. On the other hand, the concept of tradition is important to both the researcher and the subject of his or her research. However, today it often loses the sense of a long-standing phenomenon which is passed down from generation to generation, while the status of tradition as a value is brought to the fore. The researcher of modern rituals, Catherine Bell, claims that a ritual which is not in any way associated with tradition is perceived as being abnormal, inauthentic and unappealing to the majority of people (Bell 1997: 45). Traditions also create the sense of bonding, just like those of dependence and restriction, and help members of a society perceive the value of unity in communal life (Hatanaka 2002: 68).

In this article I make an attempt to present tradition as perceived by a present-day Vilnius citizen and to analyse which festivals of the life- and yearcycles are viewed as traditional, and how tradition is observed when making preparations for the most important celebration of the year—Christmas. The article covers several inquiries based on ethnographic materials drawn from field research in the city of Vilnius in 2011–2014 based on self-designed questionnaires on the subjects of *Tradition in the 21st Century* and *December Presents and Festive Food*. Young Vilnius dwellers in the 20–30-year

old age group answered questions from the first questionnaire in semi-structured interviews, whereas the latter questionnaire was also offered to representatives of the older generation, in an attempt to disclose the historical perspective.

Cultural peculiarities of the city of Vilnius

Inquiries into urban culture in Lithuanian ethnology have not yet been frequent or intense. The country's largest cities in particular have attracted very little attention from ethnographers. Comparative research carried out by the author in 2015 in Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria, and in Vilnius revealed that the festive life of present-day Vilnius is unusual and, in contrast to that of Sofia, manifests no citified particularity.¹

Maria Znamierowska-Prüfferowa, who analysed the situation in the city in the first half of the 20th century, wrote that "Vilnius has old traditions which are inseparable from rural life and which have been for years on end passed down from father to sons and grandsons and from mother to daughters... Vilnius is located near the route from West to East and therefore finds itself on the crossroads of important powers, with emerging new layers and declining old ones, and alongside them indigenous, natural elements exist as a unique imprint—languages, forms and colours which emerge in each separate environment". The ancestors of Vilnius citizens "brought their own elements of tradition which melted here into a colourful ball rolling smoothly with unusual rites through all the seasons of the year" (Znamierowska-Prüfferowa 2009: 137). However, from the historical perspective, it is impossible today to identify stable and unchanged traditions in the calendar and cycle-of-life rituals observed by Vilnius citizens and passed down from generation to generation. Most inhabitants of the city can only indicate one or two generations of their ancestors who lived in Vilnius. During the last century the ethnic composition of Vilnius citizens has been subject to constant change. Although the majority of the population of Vilnius are ethnic Lithuanians,² in the past the city was an important cultural centre of Polish, Jewish, Belarusian and Russian people. Even today, as Yves Plasseraud has noticed, the citizens of Vilnius have not long ago relocated to the city from rural areas (Plasseraud 2006: 125—126),

therefore the attitude towards tradition, which is subjected to analysis, in a way reflects the situation nationwide.

The modern concept of tradition as perceived by young citizens of Vilnius

In 1989 Anne Eriksen, investigating the perception of tradition in Norway, surveyed two groups of respondents—those born before 1915 and those born after 1960. There were significant differences in respondents' answers. Older respondents viewed tradition as a superior value uniting the individual with society, whereas the younger generation perceived tradition as a positive value more on a private and personal level (Eriksen 1994: 14—15). This research prompted the analysis of how young people today interpret tradition in Lithuania. They had to answer the question, whether the processes of intense combatting of religious tradition in Soviet times and even framed meanings of *negative tradition* have had any impact on the notion of modern tradition. With a view to disclosing the notion of tradition as perceived by the young people of Lithuania, respondents were asked to compare the concepts of *custom* and *tradition*, express their opinion on the size of the social communities which support them and, in addition, consider the value of customs and traditions and their continuity in the perspective of time.

The research uncovered the distinction between the scientific idea and the opinion expressed by young people which is obvious in present-day culture. It also revealed different definitions of customs and traditions. There are also differences in the explanations as to the size of the social community behind them. In the answers submitted by young people family- and nation-related interpretations of traditions can be distinguished. For most respondents traditions are first and foremost coupled with the moral imperatives inherited from their parents and grandparents. A few young Vilnius citizens are apt to associate traditions with the nation and state, claiming that traditions unite the nation and make it stand out from other nations. This is reminiscent of the concepts of the great and little tradition coined by Robert Redfield, where the great tradition is perceived as an elite one passed down in the written form, whereas the little tradition is viewed as a folk one passed down by word of mouth.

The interaction and mutual influence of these traditions is undisputed (Redfield 1956).

Analysis of the perception of the continuity of traditions over a period of time revealed much less diversity of opinions. Most respondents take the view inherited from their grandparents and parents with regard to the stability of a tradition or a custom in the perspective of time and the majority of respondents make no doubt about the fact that both traditions and customs are passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth or by observing and participating in or being involved in the activity. In all cases the family is the primary environment where the process is taking place. As distinguished by the respondents, there are several ways of tradition transfer within a family. They include: 1) grandparents—parents—children; 2) parents—children; 3) grandparents—grandchildren; 4) involving the extended family, and 5) wider circle of people—the society. Hence, it has become obvious that a family custom or tradition could be understood as being more archaic, yet on the other hand, less stable than a national tradition observed in a wider social environment. Nonetheless, in most cases a custom or a tradition is associated with its continuity in time, and very few methods of introduction of new traditions are indicated. The overall majority of respondents believe that a custom or a tradition is verbally passed down from generation to generation within a family. The Internet and the rest of mass media have only been indicated as an auxiliary source of information. Hence, it could be stated that although scholars have modified their standpoint as regards traditions and perceive them as dynamic and ever-changing values, the attitude of young people towards traditions in the perspective of time has remained rather stable (Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2012: 206—217).

Tradition in the contexts of contemporary calendric and life cycle festivals

Attempting to verify the rather unexpected results obtained in the survey of young people, the author set out to identify which traditions of the cycle of the year and family festivals are taken over from parents and grandparents or other sources, which festivals young people consider most important and which criteria determine

the degree of importance of a festival. In the course of the survey young people were asked to indicate the festivals that they learned about from their grandparents, parents, books and the Internet. They were also asked to name the festivals whose traditions they observe. The research revealed that for the most part citizens of Vilnius perceived tradition as a particular festival passed down from generation to generation and observed by themselves. Analysis of the gathered data evidenced that traditions of observing Christmas Eve, Christmas and Easter taken over from grandparents and parents and at times also celebration of the New Year passed down by parents together with observance of All Souls' Day taken over from grandparents and parents prevail among the respondents. Midsummer Day and the Feast of the Assumption, usually taken over from grandparents, are among rarely observed festivals. Shrove traditions, though in most cases "created", are popular among young people. They believe that books and the Internet have little influence on the changes that calendar festivals undergo. Mostly people resort to books and the Internet to search for information on Halloween, pagan (neo-pagan), Lithuanian state (The Restoration of Independence Day, The State Holiday) and foreign festivals. However, these festivals are not referred to as traditional.

With a view to finding out which festivals the respondents did not regard as traditional, they were asked to enumerate all calendar and family festivals that they had recently been observing. In the category of calendar festivals Christmas Eve and Christmas, Easter, New Year, and Midsummer Day proved to be among those which were most widely celebrated. Easter and Christmas were on numerous occasions indicated as family celebrations. Birthdays dominated in the category of cycle of life festivals leaving weddings and baptisms far behind. Christmas Eve and Christmas were indicated as the most loved festivals, with the New Year³ as second best; whereas family celebrations were dominated by birthdays⁴ and Christmas.

When the respondents were asked to indicate their favourite celebrations among all the festivals that they observe (both calendar and family), traditional festivals again were given significant prominence. The absolute majority of the surveyed people named Christmas Eve and Christmas, fewer indicated the New Year and still

fewer—birthdays. Generalizing on the criteria accountable for the choice of the celebration, the following groups can be distinguished: 1) related to the choice of company for celebration; 2) related to the satisfaction of personal needs; 3) related to the observation of traditions characteristic of that particular festival.

As respondents define the importance of a celebration, the boundaries between ancient festivals and celebrations dating back to the 19th—mid-20th century merge. Christmas Eve, Christmas and birthdays are indicated as traditional, most celebrated and favourite festivals. Young people most frequently define the concept of *tradition* as the celebration of a particular festival which has been taken over from the previous generation and is observed by themselves, whereas traditional festivals according to them are those which they celebrate, fully or partially, together with their families rather than friends.

A female respondent born in 1990 states:

“Christmas is my favourite festival as it is a family celebration with a special atmosphere, people sharing kindness, delicious dishes, the fragrance of the Christmas tree, and the spirit of Santa Claus. We start Christmas preparations a week in advance, decorate the house, and buy the Christmas tree. Then from early morning my dad and I usually decorate the Christmas tree, my mom spends the day cooking, we wrap presents, work all day, in the evening decorate the table and get ready for the arrival of relatives. When they come, we start sharing kalėdaičiai (Christmas wafers), eat, chat and then start looking for presents under the Christmas tree. The celebration, however, does not end here as then we go to my grandma’s where the ritual is repeated” (Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2013a: 313).

On the other hand, the prominence that young people give to the rather newly introduced celebration of the New Year or birthdays and to fundamental changes in wedding customs suggests that the attitude of young people towards tradition as a value passed down from generation to generation is undergoing certain changes. Although they sustain their attachment to a tradition taken over from previous generations, realise its value and are apt to continue it, young people reserve the right to choose the celebration and modify or reject certain

elements (for further reading see Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2013a: 303—322). A more dynamic attitude has been revealed which differs from the findings of preceding research and encourages us to take a closer look at the peculiarities of the preparation for Christmas which, in the respondents' opinion, is the most important celebration of the year.

Christmas and the tradition of gift giving

In 2011 John Helsloot published his article "Stress and Ritual. December Family Traditions in the Netherlands of Today" where he analysed December festivals observed in the Netherlands coupling them with the stress sustained while preparing for and participating in the celebrations (Helsloot 2011: 143—157). Encouraged by the invitation of the Dutch scholar to examine the manifestations of ritual stress in other countries, I carried out a field research exercise in the city of Vilnius by means of questioning respondents of various age groups.

Holiday gifts in the rural areas of Lithuania is a rather belated phenomenon.⁵ There was no tradition of spoiling children by giving them presents on holidays. At Easter children would receive decorated eggs, and on Whit Sunday they were given additional food or at times even money for working as shepherds. On Christmas Eve children were visited by Santa Clause dressed in a fur coat turned wrong side out who would bring dainties and presents, which sometimes included store-bought toys (Pliuraitė-Andriejaviienė 2012: 29—31). Gift (non-food) giving has for the most part been associated with the spread of Christmas trees⁶ and the presents for children placed underneath them. Adults started exchanging presents even later (Kudirka 1993: 53—57, 215). Hand-made presents prevailed in the early 20th century. However, in the second half of the century they were mostly substituted with store-bought gifts. Only children continued producing hand-made gifts.

The newly framed traditions of gift giving at Christmas soon underwent modifications. In the years of the Soviet occupation (1940—1941 and 1944—1989) an active campaign against religious customs was underway. In the said period the mass media was fully engaged in promoting the framing of the stereotypes of the New Year

as the festival embodying the symbolism of a marginal “transitional” holiday, thus abandoning Christmas traditions (Šaknys 2014: 107). Particular attention was bestowed on the promotion of the New Year celebration among children (Senvaitytė 2013: 114—115). Cartoons for children, Father Frost’s gifts and holiday trees were expected to ensure the future of the festival. And to some extent this was successful (Šaknys 2014: 107). The period of gift-giving in some families was extended towards the New Year. As of 1990, with the restoration of Lithuania’s independence, the situation shifted. In the absence of atheistic propaganda and with the allocation of two days off work at Christmas,⁷ the tradition of gift-giving as well as numerous other New Year customs were, in most cases, relocated back to Christmas time.

Inquiry into the present-day situation in families of Vilnius citizens revealed an entrenched tradition of present-giving at Christmas time and the fact that emotional tension is sustained in the pre-festive season. Gift-giving is perceived as an indispensable ritual of the celebration the thought of which going wrong causes tension to most respondents, although few referred to this tension as “stress”. Respondents’ comments reveal a striving to avoid stress or decrease it by resorting to individual measures, e.g. producing hand-made presents, extending the time allocated for gift purchasing, involving husband and children in the household chores or in some other way adjusting the experience of preparation for celebrations taken over from the parents. Younger respondents have a more rational view of the holiday situation, are able to overcome challenges and make a good celebration for themselves and those close to them. Hence, representatives of the younger generation opt for their own methods of tradition interpretation which involve modification of festival preparation-related traditions or revival of forgotten ones by, say, producing self-made presents. It appears that they are not only capable of creating their own traditions, but are also able to revive those forgotten by their parents. This corroborates Carole Lemée Gonçalves’ concept of “jumping over a generation” in passing down memories (Lemée Gonçalves 2003: 61—77) as a means of reverting to traditional observance of festivals, rejecting traditions imposed in (the) Soviet times, and relying on the experience of older people, reviving the tradition of hand-made presents, for example, and withstanding

the temptations of commercial celebrations which have been increasingly intensifying over the last decades (Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2013b: 316—327).

Conclusions

As Gerald Pocius has observed, people whom we survey often create their own traditions which meet their primary needs, yet at times are completely different from those which academic researchers consider right or authentic. *Tradition* is a relative concept which changes with each generation and in accordance with the historical context (Pocius 1999: 20, 22). To complement the findings of the Canadian ethnologist, the author could state that the concept of tradition is contextual. Its content can be perceived in a different way not only by an ethnologist and a person distant from the academic sphere respectively, but also by one and the same person seeking, on the one hand, to define the concept of tradition, when speaking about traditions observed by their own family, and, on the other, when singling out festivals observed by tradition.

In the late 20th—early 21st century the concept of revived tradition where cultural information is passed down by skipping a generation was given prominence in Lithuania, but, in addition, the moral attitude towards tradition has also undergone certain changes. As in Norway (as Anne Eriksen's data suggest), the younger generation in Lithuania perceives tradition, not as binding the individual in respect of society, but as a value on a private and personal scale. However, changes in the attitude towards traditions in Lithuania lagged behind for a few decades.

Notes

1. There is public celebration of state holidays such as Liberation Day, Bulgarian Education and Culture and Slavonic Literature Day, Unification Day, Independence Day and others in Sofia, whereas traditional calendar festivals are observed either within the family (for example Christmas, Easter and St. George's Day) or by travelling to rural areas (for example St. Lazarus' Day (*Лазаровден*), Shrove (*Сирни заговезни*) or St. John's Day (*Еньовден*)). In Sofia, there are no masked processions or ritual fires during traditional festivals as there are in Vilnius (Project of the Lithuanian Institute of History and the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences "Contemporary Festivity

in Bulgaria and Lithuania – from Traditional Culture to Post-Modern Transformations” (2015–2017)).

2. Data from the population census of 2011 suggest that the population of Vilnius at that time was 535,631, making up 17.6% of the country’s total population. 63.2% of the inhabitants of the city were ethnic Lithuanians, 16.5% Polish, and 12% Russians. Numbers of people of other nationalities were significantly smaller (Lietuvos gyventojai 2012: 23).

3. Liudvikas Adomas Jucevičius was the first to offer data on the folk customs of the New Year celebration in his book published in 1842 (Jucevičius 1959: 453–454). However, ethnologist Juozas Kudirka claims that prior to WWI there were no settled customs relating to the New Year celebration in the greater part of the country, with the exception of a dinner similar to that held on Christmas Eve (Kudirka 1993: 243–248).

4. The notion of birthday is a rather belated cultural phenomenon in the Vilnius region; as data from Ž. Šaknys’ cartographic research suggest, in the period 1920–1940 birthdays were not celebrated in most rural areas of East Lithuania (Šaknys 2008: 21, 27). In the towns, however, celebration of birthdays started much earlier (Laučkaitė 2009: 134–150).

5. Holiday gifts in a Lithuanian city of the 19th—first half of the 20th century have not previously been the subject of research. But as research into toys as holiday gifts shows, this phenomenon began in the city before it became established in villages (Pliuraitė-Andriejaviienė 2012).

6. The Christmas tree was a belated cultural phenomenon in Lithuania, not mentioned until 1853. In the late 19th—early 20th century Christmas trees spread nationwide (Kudirka 1993: 53–57).

7. In 1990; as of 2011 Christmas Eve is also a holiday.

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