COMMERCE AND TRADITIONS

THE RITUAL YEAR 14

Collective monograph

The Ritual Year Working Group, Société Internationale d'Ethnologie et de Folklore (SIEF)
Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art of the University of Latvia
Archives of Latvian Folklore

COMMERCE AND TRADITIONS

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EDITED BY
Aigars Lielbārdis

ELM SCHOLARLY PRESS

THE RITUAL YEAR 14: Collective Monograph

Authors: Cătălin Alexa; Elena Boganeva; Mariyanka Borisova; Laurent Sébastien Fournier; Lina Gergova; Evy Johanne Håland; Svetla I. Kazalarska; Mare Kõiva; Andres Kuperjanov; Aigars Lielbārdis; Oksana Mykytenko; Rasa Paukštytė-Šaknienė; Žilvytis Šaknys; Skaidrė Urbonienė; Aušra Žičkienė

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Contents

Introduction
Aigars Lielbārdis 7
https://doi.org/10.7592/RY14.00

Re-Localizing Cultural Economy through Heritage Building
Laurent Sébastien Fournier 14
https://doi.org/10.7592/RY14.01

The Commercialisation of the *Căluș* Tradition
Cătălin Alexa 28
https://doi.org/10.7592/RY14.02

Kyustendil Spring Day:
Post-Socialist Re-inventions and Transformations of a Socialist Festival
Svetla Kazalarska 42
https://doi.org/10.7592/RY14.03

A Festival For Locals or For Tourists? The Ritual Year in Three Southeastern Lithuanian Settlements
Žilvytis Šaknys 67
https://doi.org/10.7592/RY14.04

Winter Carnival in Vevchani (North Macedonia): Between Commercial Holiday and Folklore Traditions
Oksana Mykytenko 85
https://doi.org/10.7592/RY14.05

A Village for a Day:
Annual Meetings of Relocated and Flooded Villages in Bulgaria
Mariyanka Borisova 109
https://doi.org/10.7592/RY14.06

Songs as Folklore, Popular Culture, and Emotional Resources for Commerce
Aušra Žičkienė 126
https://doi.org/10.7592/RY14.07

The Communicative Aspect of Festival and Pilgrimage in Greece, Modern and Ancient
Evy Johanne Håland 139
https://doi.org/10.7592/RY14.08

Images of Saints at Annual Fairs in Vilnius:
Ritual Attributes, Souvenirs, Works of Art
Skaidrė Urbonienė 163
https://doi.org/10.7592/RY14.09

Annual Fairs and Town Holidays in Haskovo and Byala, Bulgaria
Lina Gergova 180
https://doi.org/10.7592/RY14.10

St. Nicholas and St. Cornelius, Transcultural Relations
Mare Kõiva, Elena Boganeva 196
https://doi.org/10.7592/RY14.11

Gifts to Children and the Ritual Year in Eastern Lithuania and
Western Belarus in the late 19th – first half of the 20th centuries
Rasa Paukštytė-Šaknienė 223
https://doi.org/10.7592/RY14.12

Transborder Routes and Rituals: Between Global, Local and Niche
Mare Kõiva, Andres Kuperjanov 240
https://doi.org/10.7592/RY14.13

https://doi.org/10.7592/RY14.00

Commerce and Traditions. Introduction.

Aigars Lielbārdis

Since its establishment in 2004 the Ritual Year Working Group of the International Society for Ethnology and Folklore (SIEF)[1] has brought together scholars who have devoted their academic interests and careers to studying traditions, cultural experiences, and codes embedded in the cycle of the year. Almost every year, the conferences take place in different cities around the world, bringing researchers together to discuss thematic issues and values. Often, the ideas presented at the conferences are later published in a series of Yearbooks of Ritual Year.

This publication comprises articles presented at the conference held in Riga, Latvia, on 1–4 June 2022. Due to Covid-19, the conference was postponed from 2020. The pandemic has brought significant changes to our habits and personal lives, affected community traditions, and had a global impact. It has also shifted research agendas, topics, and priorities. The restrictions affected, and even destroyed, some usual channels and forms of communication in society, including annual customs, while also creating opportunities for certain commercial practices and conspiracy theories to flourish. The pandemic was one of the triggers that tested the resilience and durability of traditions, especially those performed for centuries. Although the pandemic has forced us to adapt to new circumstances, Russia's war against Ukraine poses no less of a challenge to European societies and cultures, particularly to the people of Ukraine.

The 2022 conference focused on the role and presence of commercialisation and the commodification of cultural values in everyday life and across a wide range of traditions and festivities. Often, everyday life, as well as our social and cultural environment, leads us to adopt the role of observer, rather than active participant, simply going with the flow. We have all experienced the pre-Christmas gift-buying madness or visited souvenir counters at major historical sites and cultural venues in different countries, each promoting its 'brands'. In marketing terms, traditional cultural values are treated as 'products' to be branded, marketed, and sold, yielding personal benefits and even touching the interests of state or religious institutions.

Historically, annual church fairs, town markets and pilgrimages, along with household goods, provided opportunities to buy, sell, and trade divine and eternal values. These included religious symbols, protective items, and healing substances, similar to some of those found in modern-day souvenir shops. At the time, advertising for such goods was

limited and took place only through specific communication channels. Today, advertising and marketing campaigns are everywhere, especially in social and mass media. Many people protest against what they see as the excessive commercialisation of their secular or religious traditions, festivals, and even memories and feelings.

However, marketing practices attract larger crowds and help preserve and popularise values and traditions that might otherwise be lost. Commercialisation has made selling traditional crafts financially viable, preserving them for future generations. Thus, craftspeople can continue practising their traditional way of life. Not only have traditional artisans benefited, but religious institutions are also interested in increasing their income to maintain facilities and attract growing numbers of visitors and confessional attendants.

New or changed forms, and content, of traditions touched by commercialisation, with the development of new festivals and their transformation into local tourist brands, can be seen worldwide (Mullins and Batra-Wells 2019). Institutional and cultural processes, especially those related to the administration and protection of intangible cultural values by the European Union or UNESCO, are common in many other countries. In these processes, marketing takes an important, even central role in the performance and maintenance of traditions, showing both positive trends and prompting researchers to take a critical view.

Part of the world's and Europe's cultural heritage today exists largely within the framework of UNESCO's interpretations and the application of its regulations. Including various traditions and cultural sites in UNESCO's World Heritage List or national registers generates interest from outsiders in national cultures, while also raising the value of regional culture in the eyes of the local people. On the one hand, international visibility attracts tourists, creating development opportunities for local businesses and fostering cultural tourism. It generates revenue while shaping national identity, fostering local patriotism, and enabling traditions to continue or ensuring the preservation and accessibility of sites. On the other hand, a tradition can become an object of entertainment, often losing its original function, the intimacy of the tradition or ritual, its emotional depth and religious significance. Cultural values, including traditions, become objects of advertising and turn into intangible commodities that can be sold.

While folklorists and ethnographers continue to search for authenticity (Benix 1997; Willow 2019), which is still relevant in the context and content of tradition, some of the aforementioned cultural and institutional processes are expanded and discoverable in terms of UNESCOisation (Berliner 2012), festivalisation (Hafstein 2018; Lukic Krstanovic 2011), Ritualesque, Carnivalesque (Santino 2011), and folkloresque (Foster 2016). Attention is also focused on 'consumerism', 'commercialisation', and 'commodification' (Kockel and Craith 2007; Gauthier and Martikainen 2013). Although these terms overlap, they nevertheless centre on traditions that are subject to change depending on external factors – such as changes in lifestyle (rural environment/urban environment; traditional community/multiculturalism), the durability and function of traditions (authenticity/invented traditions), etc., as well as the deep personal needs of society and the individual.

This book largely concerns the economic and cultural sphere of the Western world and the cultural heritage of European nation-states, which is at the centre of attention – and even under the patronage – of the European Union and international organisations, or is striving to be so. This volume presents research and case studies from Bulgaria, Estonia,

Greece, France, Italy, Lithuania, North Macedonia, Romania, and Scotland. The authors highlight current issues in studying traditions and cultural processes at the national level and reveal broader interconnections within contemporary European cultural processes, rooted in a shared past of trade and religion and administratively bounded today.

Researchers in this collection analyse how traditions change and adapt to new circumstances, exploring the historical dimension of research discourse on festivals, religion and annual customs, as the authors engage in dialogue with older, well-known works, such as those by Émile Durkheim (Durkheim [1912] 2007), Bronislaw Malinowski (Malinowski 1922), Marcel Mauss (Mauss 1924), and Peter Burke (Burke 1978), discussing festivals, rites, masks, and gifts, among others. It also considers later publications and contemporary authors addressing the book's topic (Bourdieu 1985; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Santino 2011, 2016; Bronner 2016; Testa 2014, 2019; Rindzevičiūtė 2010; Fournier 2017, 2019), etc. Equally valuable contributions to international discussion provide new research discourses and trends rooted in local particularities but shaped by current global geopolitical events.

The volume opens with an article by Laurent Sébastien Fournier, **Re-Localising Cultural Economy through Heritage Building**, which examines the cultural and socio-economic processes involved in obtaining UNESCO intangible cultural heritage status for local festive rituals in France, Scotland, and Italy. He examines shifts in economic development theories and assesses whether "intangible cultural heritage" status helps current traditions to be practised more widely and actively, and whether it has an economic impact on the local economy, and on practitioners in maintaining tradition. He provides case studies on the Tarasque festival in the Provence region of Mediterranean France, Scottish folk-football games in the city of Jedburgh in the Borders Region, southern Scotland, and a local carnival in the village of Castiglione, Messer Marino, in the Abruzzi region, central Italy.

In the following article, **The Commercialisation of the *Căluș* Tradition,** Cătălin Alexa examines the evolution and commercialisation of the Căluș ritual, a significant element of Romanian folk culture. Recognised by UNESCO, this traditional performance is analysed through a historical lens to understand how its original ritual functions (protective, healing) and mythology have shifted towards spectacle and economic gain. Alexa traces the transition from the communist era to the present, showing how Călușar dancers' motivations and audiences' expectations have altered the tradition and turned it into a stage performance. The study highlights how intangible heritage adapts to contemporary influences and how a living tradition can generate new cultural meanings while balancing authenticity. He also asks whether preservers of these traditions should be blamed for this excess in practising a secular tradition; are they to be blamed for using this tradition for purely economic purposes?

Svetla Kazalarska, in the article **Kyustendil Spring Day: Post-Socialist Re-inventions and Transformations of a Socialist Festival,** presents a case study of Kyustendil Spring Day, exploring the historical evolution of the spring equinox celebration in Bulgaria, which was (re)invented as a socialist festival in the late 1960s. She examines how the event survived the collapse of communism in 1989 and adapted to new economic and political conditions. In the 1990s, the celebration became increasingly commercialised and attracted private sponsorship from local businessmen. More recently, the local municipality has reclaimed

the holiday to focus on town branding and to restore traditional elements, for example, by dressing participants in the beauty contest. Despite the festival's longevity, it faces contemporary challenges regarding its social relevance and future meaning for the community.

The topic of festivalisation continues in Žilvytis Šaknys›s article, **A Festival for Locals or for Tourists? The Ritual Year in Three Southeastern Lithuanian Settlements**. Šaknys explores how commercialisation affects traditional and modern festivals across three historic settlements in southeastern Lithuania. By examining the ritual calendars of Trakai, Kernavė, and Medininkai, the author assesses how local residents perceive newly established, tourism-focused events compared with older traditions. The study draws on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2017 and 2019 to evaluate whether these celebrations hold genuine cultural value for the community or merely serve as profit-driven spectacles. It concludes that high production values and heritage branding are insufficient for a holiday's success if the event lacks a meaningful connection to the community's identity or history. Specifically, the article highlights that celebrations such as St. John's Day and State Day remain significant because they carry deep-seated political (resistance against Soviet ideology) and historical importance for locals, whereas some religious celebrations, for example, the Assumption of the Virgin Mary on 15th August, have lost their importance. Ultimately, the source offers a critical examination of the complex relationship between cultural heritage, economic interests, and authentic local engagement.

In the article **Winter Carnival in Vevchani (North Macedonia): Between Commercial Festivity and Folklore Tradition**, Oksana Mykytenko discusses the Vasilitsa winter carnival in Vevchani, North Macedonia, and explores how ancient customs persist alongside modern commercial trends. The event blends traditional wedding parodies with contemporary political commentary, reflecting the community's social relevance. Drawing on fieldwork, the author describes a performance in which masked participants use traditional elements, for example, satire and noise-making, to symbolise fertility and renewal. By balancing folk heritage with the demands of global tourism, the carnival marks local cultural identity and illustrates how inherited rituals can be reinterpreted within consumption and globalisation in the 21st century.

Moving from North Macedonia to neighbouring Bulgaria, the next article, **A Village for a Day: Annual Meetings of Relocated and Flooded Villages in Bulgaria,** by Mariyanka Borisova, examines annual meetings where people forcibly relocated for reservoir construction gather. By studying two flooded villages – Popovo and Zhrebchevo – the author demonstrates how a shared experience (collective trauma and cultural memory) encourages former residents to gather each year, symbolically reviving their lost villages for a single day and thereby forging bonds between generations and former neighbours. The study draws on literature, archival analysis and interviews to understand the rituals that sustain a sense of belonging despite the physical destruction of their homes. The article reveals aspects of local identity and the significance of commemorative gatherings in preserving local history and shared memories.

Aušra Žičkienė, in the article **Songs as Folklore, Popular Culture, and Emotional Resources for Commerce**, examines how traditional music adapts to global cultural and economic processes. By analysing a specific Lithuanian song, the author shows that folk traditions do not disappear with technological progress, but adapt and continue to exist

in new environments. This case study illustrates the 'folklorisation' of a Lithuanian singer-songwriter's work over the last few decades, emphasising how singing enables individuals to find their bearings both within their community's heritage and in the wider commercial world. The author regards folk music as a hybrid cultural phenomenon rooted in a specific cultural identity that also contributes to the commercial success of individual songs. This study offers insight into the commercialisation of local folklore heritage as it encounters global trends, touching on the term 'folkloreque'.

In **The Communicative Aspect of Festival and Pilgrimage in Greece, Modern and Ancient,** Evy Johanne Håland explores the enduring role of reciprocity in Greek religious festivals, drawing parallels between contemporary Orthodox traditions and ancient rituals. The author argues that these spiritual events unfold within a symbolic economy in which people offer gifts to the divine in hopes of receiving blessings or healing. For example, during the festival of Agios Nektarios, a piece of the blessed bread might be used as a healing remedy. At the heart of this study is the concept of 'antidōro' or 'counter-gift', which illustrates how holy bread serves as a physical link between humans and the supernatural world. By comparing contemporary practices with Hesiod's writings, the article highlights an ancient cultural logic in which social and religious bonds are maintained through mutual obligations.

Skaidrė Urbonienė explores the relationship between humans and saints in her article **Images of Saints at Annual Fairs in Vilnius: Ritual Attributes, Souvenirs, Works of Art.** This research examines the evolution of religious folk art sold at annual fairs in Vilnius, focusing on St. Casimir's Day, Christmas and Palm Sunday. The author draws on fieldwork to document a significant shift in how the public perceives carved figures of saints and angels. Once vital devotional objects, these items are now primarily treated as decorative souvenirs or modern interior design pieces. The study notes that while traditional large-scale sculptures are attracting less interest, small-scale statuettes remain highly marketable in a commercialised environment. Finally, the author suggests that folk artists must adapt their creative techniques to meet contemporary consumers' aesthetic preferences. This analysis offers a deep look at the intersection of heritage, commerce, and faith in Lithuanian culture.

In turn, Lina Gergova discusses annual fairs in Bulgaria in the article **Annual Fairs and Town Holidays in Haskovo and Byala, Bulgaria**. This study traces the historical development of Bulgarian fairs from their origins as livestock markets during the Ottoman Empire to their modern-day role as official town festivals. The author examines how socio-political changes and the centralisation of markets throughout the 20th century stripped these events of their original commercial functions. The study highlights the resilience of these local festivals and how their trade-related heritage adapts to contemporary needs. Focusing on market days in Haskovo and Byala, the author shows how local communities transformed these events into cultural festivals and town holidays, also tied to the Christian calendar and to specific saints.

Two authors, Mare Kõiva and Elena Boganeva, examine the transcultural nature of church saints in the article **St. Nicholas and St. Cornelius, Transcultural Relations**, highlighting the intertwined folk traditions and religious legends surrounding St. Nicholas, St. Cornelius, and other holy figures in Eastern European cultures. The authors explore how

hagiographic narratives merge with folklore and mythological motifs creating a distinctive form of religious syncretism or folk religion. Drawing on historical texts and contemporary fieldwork materials from Estonia and Belarus, the research highlights shared cultural paradigms across Russian, Estonian Seto, and Belarusian communities. The article offers a comparative folkloristic analysis of how historical events and church saints are reimagined through oral history and transcultural relations.

The article by Rasa Paukštytė-Šaknienė, **Gifts to Children and the Ritual Year in Eastern Lithuania and Western Belarus in the Late 19th and First Half of the 20th Century**, explores the tradition of giving gifts to children in rural areas of Lithuania and Belarus from the late 19th century to the mid-20th century. The author reveals that traditional gifts mainly consisted of eggs and food, which were distributed to one's own children, godchildren, and young workers. Gift-giving usually took place in spring, between Easter and Whitsunday. Although the items given were often similar across different social classes, the ways in which they were presented differed – parents often used intermediaries to present gifts to their children, whilst godparents presented gifts themselves. The study highlights the significance and role of these gifts in maintaining family and religious traditions.

The book ends with the article by Mare Kõiva and Andres Kuperjanov, **Transborder Routes and Rituals: Between Global, Local and Niche**, which examines the Setos, a distinct ethnic and cultural group living in Estonia along the Russian border. In the article, the authors discuss Seto identity, which is shaped by shifting political borders and historical memory. The authors highlight the Seto community's cultural resilience, expressed through distinctive Orthodox religious practices, traditional polyphonic singing (*leelo*), and a local dialect. The article focuses on the topography of specific saints and religious figures, such as Paraskeva Pjatnitsa, Pious Onuphrius, and St. George, and the legends associated with them in Malyi/Myla, Värska, and Saatse. The study also analyses the role of tourism in the sustainability of cultural heritage, in preserving local traditions (Seto Kingdom Day and Leelo Day), and in supporting the regional economy.

In preparing and publishing this collective monograph, along with the postponed Riga conference, I would like to thank the authors, who have continued their research despite uncertain geopolitical circumstances. As all the articles have undergone double-blind peer review, I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to the reviewers, who – as always – remain behind the scenes, yet without whose involvement and valuable recommendations the collection would not have achieved its current quality. The cover design by the Latvian artist Krišs Salmanis lends the collection a distinctive atmosphere. Special thanks also go to Mare Kõiva, Head of the Folklore Department at the Estonian Literary Museum and the ELM Scholarly Press for her involvement and efforts to ensure this collection reaches its readers.

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Notes

[1] https://www.siefhome.org/, accessed 20/12/2025.

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Re-Localising Cultural Economy through Heritage Building

Laurent Sébastien Fournier
LAPCOS UPR 7278 Université Côte d'Azur, Nice (France)
laurent.fournier@univ-cotedazur.fr

Abstract: In this article I consider contemporary heritage building as a productive process helping the re-localisation of cultural economy in a post-crisis context. I recall the debates concerning cultural development in economic anthropology, showing how heritage building processes have become a widespread manner of fuelling the local economy. As a social-cultural anthropologist, I use the data collected during my fieldwork to show that the transformation of festive rituals into local economic resources also has a deep influence on the complex structures and meanings of local traditions. This eventually creates the opportunity to compare 'traditional' and 'modern' ways of thinking about the place of festive rituals in the economy. First, I use examples of festive rituals that have been granted the status of intangible cultural heritage in France by UNESCO, to show what economic effects were desired by local practitioners of the rituals when they proposed their candidature, and what real effects can be observed ten years later. Second, I document some British festive rituals that have not asked for intangible cultural heritage status and explain how they nevertheless have a strong relationship with the local economy. Third, I focus on Italian festive rituals that have asked for intangible cultural heritage status but which have not yet received it. Through these various examples I try to understand how local practitioners use the UNESCO candidature process itself as a means to re-localise regional cultural economies.

Keywords: Festivals, commodification, intangible cultural heritage, anthropology, cultural economy, Europe

In this article I would like to consider contemporary heritage building as a productive process that helps the re-localisation of cultural economy in a post-crisis context. Economists have traditionally tried to think about cultural development at a global level, emphasizing the role of cities and central marketplaces as motors

for the production of wealth. However, in the 1970s, the oil crisis gave birth to some alternative theories on local development and the place of local resources in the economy was re-evaluated. A few decades later, heritage building has become a widespread manner of fuelling the local economy. I would like to focus on a few examples in Western Europe (France, Scotland and Italy) where local actors and practitioners of festive rituals have recently revitalised local festive practices in order to build them up as cultural heritage in the hope of boosting local growth and development. Studying the effects of such processes on the economy is not an easy task, and it often comes to making simple economic assessments on the 'positive' versus 'negative' aspects of the commodification of traditions. As a social-cultural anthropologist, I will use data collected during my fieldwork to show that the transformation of festive rituals into local economic resources also has a deep influence on the complex structures and meanings of local traditions. This article will ultimately give the opportunity to compare 'traditional' and 'modern' ways of thinking about the place of festive rituals in the economy.

First, I will explain the context of the scale changes in economic development theories. Second, I will use examples of festive rituals that have been granted the status of intangible cultural heritage in France by UNESCO experts, to show what economic effects were desired by the local practitioners of the rituals when they proposed their candidature, and what real effects can be observed a few years later. Third, I will document some Scottish festive rituals for which local actors have not asked for intangible cultural heritage status and explain how they nevertheless have a strong relationship with the local economy. I will then focus on some cases of Italian festive rituals where the actors have asked for intangible cultural heritage status but where this status has not yet been granted. Through these different case studies I will try to understand how local practitioners use the UNESCO candidature process itself as a means to re-localise regional cultural economies.

Theory and Context

In order to understand better why cultural heritage appears today as a new means to boost the local economies in a post-crisis context, it is important to propose first some elements connected with the theory. The idea is not to discuss theories which would be cut-off from the social practices recovered by the term "cultural heritage". Rather, I would like to emphasize the ways cultural heritage has been more and more used as synonymous of a productive process in the local economy.

Cultural heritage, in the common sense, is mainly thought of as a stock of items historically inherited from the past. In this sense, it is connected with preservation policies and with the monuments or museums that basically refer to this past. However, from an anthropological perspective, cultural heritage has another

meaning. It is connected with a productive process, based on choices and selections operated in the present, through which communities claim their past and can therefore be in competition with each other. Indeed, authors such as Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) have suggested that cultural heritage, in the form of 'traditions', could be 'invented' rather than 'inherited'. This perspective has opened the door to interpretations of traditions and cultural heritage as being actively produced in the present rather than passively inherited from the ancestors. For a lot of sociologists and semioticians (Davallon 2000; Micoud 1991), cultural heritage has little to do with the past and has to be analysed as a modern feature. I tested this hypothesis during fieldwork in France and found that the older popular festivals were called 'traditional' whereas the newer ones were called 'cultural heritage'. In this respect, cultural heritage features modernity rather than tradition (Fournier 2005). If 'tradition' refers to the inheritance of past customs or practices, 'cultural heritage' is more turned towards the present and the future because it is a pretext by which to actively claim present values.

Moreover, cultural heritage can be analysed as a productive process that helps the re-localisation of cultural economy. Each local community, as soon as it is present in the global cultural market, is called to define its own cultural heritage. In the market economy, everything is susceptible to being sold and bought, even culture. Cultural heritage has then become a new form of cultural good, which can be related to other sorts of cultural good. Cultural institutions, from local museums and associations to global institutions such as UNESCO, push cultural heritage forward to bring in new values to local communities. According to UNESCO, cultural heritage is a means to reach a better balance between different countries. If a country has few economic resources, they might be compensated by a rich culture. In this respect, cultural heritage can be understood as a new means to fuel local development and projects, using local amenities to give some added value to poorer countries. This is why, unlike the economy, cultural heritage is better balanced between the different countries of the world.

In order to understand the stakes of this debate fully, it is important to think of the economy from an anthropological perspective. It is then necessary to look at the economy in an empirical way instead of following abstract models. From the beginning, anthropologists have insisted on the fact that traditional economies are deeply embedded in social structures. According to famous classical anthropological works (Malinowski 1922; Mauss 1924), market exchanges in the traditional societies are always connected with 'spiritual' notions such as gift and prestige. Things circulate independently from their exchange values. They are connected with the beliefs of the partners participating in the exchanges. In this way, profit can be symbolic as well as commercial. In the classical potlatch example, Indian chiefs give most of their wealth to their people because they use it only in order to

increase their prestige. The more redistribution they practice, the more powerful they will be considered. In such traditional systems, the economy obeys complex cultural laws, and the market serves local collective values more than it enables individuals to accumulate money. Anthropologists interested in economic matters have differentiated formal and substantive economies (Polanyi 1944). In the first case the form taken by the exchange is the most important, but in all other cases it is the substance that is predominant, which means that the economy cannot be separated from its social, cultural and symbolic subtracts. Looking at this problem on a global scale enables us to understand that the great majority of human societies are caught in substantive economies, whereas only the Occidental modern society follows the formal model.

In this situation, anthropologists can very easily criticise formal economy and recall that our market-based liberal model is far from the only one. Indeed, most of the traditional economies studied by anthropologists present cases of embedded and substantive economy, and it would be rather ethnocentric not to consider these traditional economic systems. I suggest that the notion of 'cultural economy' and the economy of cultural heritage is a means to better connect the modern market economy and the ideal of a more traditional economy. In fact, three different stages can be distinguished when looking historically at economic theories. The first stage is connected with the theory of globalisation. This assumes that bigger cities are the best central market places and that they are the major motors in the production of wealth. According to this theory there is a hierarchy between centres and peripheries. The economy is driven by the centres and the peripheries have only the secondary role of following what is decided in the central market places. According to this theoretical model the economy is a global necessity to which every country must contribute. This model was dominant from the end of the 18th century to the middle of the 20th century. This model was formalised by Adam Smith (1776) and largely developed in the context of the industrial revolution, leading to global enterprises such as Henry Ford's car factory in the USA. Neo-liberal economists still believe in the efficiency of this model of capitalism today.

However, the global market model has also been criticised as overly abstract. At the end of the 19th century, Karl Marx's proposals on the value of human labour indicated another possible way to think of the economy globally. According to Marx (1867), the market is something fictional and the economy should be theorised in relation to the concrete actions of individuals rather than the value of goods, which is always highly variable. Concerning development theories, Marxism has led to the postulation that the more developed countries manage to develop, the less the underdeveloped countries manage to do so. This second model is also an abstract one, as it supposes that the earth is a unified place where economy has the same global rules and where human work has the same value for everybody.

Therefore, a third development theory appeared later on, in the 1970s. This theory is a local development theory and considers that each place has its own wealth to develop. The oil crisis gave credit to this theory and in the last decades the places that local resources have in the economy has been significantly re-evaluated. Local development theories believe that each region is specific and has its own resources which can be developed in an endogenous manner. It is a model within which each region is economically creative through the principle of specialised flexibility. Micro-regions can specialise as industrial districts in very specific production and conquer the world market through this specificity. Such a way of thinking has given much credit to the local scale of the economy and has pushed forward the ideas of "creative economies" and "local productive systems" (Pecqueur 1990). Of course, looking at local amenities would then be a way to balance the effects of the global crisis and to come back to more traditional ways of thinking about the economy.

In this context, cultural heritage building and the emphasis put on local cultural resources has become a widespread manner of fuelling local economies. Anthropologists have analysed the transformation from mass tourism systems to local cultural tourism (Boissevain 2013). They have shown that a small cultural resource might be more attractive, due to its specificity, than a natural landscape which could easily be found in other places. Such a way of thinking has led to the emphasis of local cultural projects and, for instance, to the creation of local museums to enhance the local culture and boost the local economy. Knowledge related to local traditions can therefore be valued as a means to enforce the attractiveness of a given region. In this respect, the notion of cultural heritage, which is becoming more and more developed, is not disconnected from economic considerations and from the idea of bringing more money to the local economy. These local economy centred models then become more useful than global development models in the search for sustainable development strategies and respect for local environments.

That being said, I would like to focus on some examples of festive traditions in Western Europe within which local actors have invested in revitalisation processes in the past decades and have built up their traditions as cultural heritage in the hope of boosting local economies.

The Effects of Heritage Building

In this section I would like to insist on a twofold process that combines quantitative and qualitative aspects. When looking at the effects of heritage building, a first perspective can be purely economic. This perspective is connected with the quantification of the effects of a given cultural heritage policy. Indeed, it is possible to make assessments on the 'positive' versus 'negative' aspects of the commodification of traditions. Direct quantitative indicators can simply count the number of

people attending a given festival and get an idea of the attractiveness of the event. However, this approach raises a lot of questions because the more people attend a traditional cultural event, the more this event is considered modern and commoditised. In this respect, a 'positive' effect using quantitative criteria might also be a 'negative' effect in terms of genuineness and authenticity. There is a risk that the advertisement and the commodification process would ultimately have a negative effect and would be off-putting for visitors looking for cultural authenticity. Moreover, it is difficult to count the audience of a traditional festival except if there is an entrance fee.

When there is no entrance fee and when the traditional festivals are free of charge for the audience, which is most often the case, it is necessary to use indirect indicators to quantify the effects of heritage building. Indirect indicators can be measured through hotel and restaurant turnover and through the journeys made to come to a particular place. Building a traditional festival as a new cultural heritage event could then help re-localise the economy, but it is quite difficult to know up to what point the local economy is fuelled by a cultural heritage policy because it is difficult to establish a strict separation between the market generated by the festival itself and the local market as a whole.

This is why the economic perspective is not sufficient to understand the effect of commodification. In the traditional festivals I have studied in France, I have found some differences between the ones where the organisers used global strategies to present their festivals as cultural heritage, i.e. through the UNESCO intangible cultural heritage label, and the ones where the organisers simply decided to promote local cultural heritage without getting any formal recognition from outside cultural institutions. At this point of our reflection, it could be interesting to use the example of a real local festival, the Tarasque Festival in Tarascon-sur-Rhône (in the Provence region of Mediterranean France) to understand better what is at stake when speaking of heritage building processes.

This festival is an old Christian ceremony dating from the Middle Ages, featuring a battle between a dragon called the Tarasque and a little girl, St. Martha (Dumont 1951). The local legend says that each year the inhabitants of Tarascon had to give six of their best youngsters to the dragon, until St. Martha who delivered them from their fate and managed to kill the dragon. In the legend, the dragon was awfully harmful to the local economy as it killed six men every year. The legend is a civilisation myth from the time when Christianity succeeded over Paganism. Without having to give its sons to the monster, the city eventually became prosperous in modern times. Until the end of the 20th century the festival and its connected rituals remained the same in the context of an increasingly secularised society. However, these festivals progressively faded out with the global economic crises when people began to flee Tarascon for bigger cities to find jobs and better lives.

In this case the decision to build up the city festival as a heritage feature comes from the wish to revive it and to attract a touristic audience. In this respect the 'traditional' festival has been transformed into a new 'heritage' celebration, connected with other dragons in other European cities through a new UNESCO network. Interestingly, the decision to make the festival into new cultural heritage has been followed by the production of small by-products sold by local shopkeepers. In terms of cultural economy, it is important to note the presence of specific keyrings, mugs, and little objects featuring the dragon motif that bring some income to tourist shops. This specific tourist economy can be quite significant although it raises the question of where the artefacts are fabricated, in order to know if the local economy is really benefitting.



Fig. 1. The Tarasque monster in the city of Tarascon, France.
Photo: L. S. Fournier, 2009.



Fig. 2. Keyrings featuring the Tarasque monster, Tarascon, France.
Photo: L. S. Fournier, 2009.

The impact is not limited to this new tourist economy. Commodification and the building up of a traditional festival as cultural heritage also give rise to other consequences influencing the structure and meanings of the rituals. In Tarascon I have noted for instance that the dragon has become much more visible than in the past since the decision to emphasize it as a major heritage motif (Fournier 2011). Usually hidden in the past, the dragon was suddenly shown everywhere. At the same time, it became much quieter and gentler with the people, unlike in the past when it used to be scary and dangerous. The effect is then more in the image of the festival than in the economy itself. In the same way, the dates of the festivals often change to reach a touristic audience. Festivals are organised at weekends instead of on the traditional day of the Christian celebration. In Tarascon, a new medieval festival has even been added to the local festive calendar, using the dragon as a central feature, but without any explicit reference to the older local legend. In this case, the local dragon joins the global dragons as successful features that are able to reach a global imaginary.

Using the example of Tarascon-sur-Rhône, it is possible to modify our questioning. Instead of analysing the added value of commodification and asking "how much money does it bring in?", it seems better to ask "when a festival enters a commodification process, what changes, and how?" It is then more interesting to study the qualitative dimensions of the effects of heritage building processes on local festivals, than to consider their quantitative aspects. In terms of methods, social and cultural anthropology will give better results than economy here, using surveys and fieldwork studies instead of tables and figures. But this methodological note

also affects epistemological thought, as it leads us to compare the traditional and the modern ways of thinking and the place of festive rituals in the economy. One more time, it is important here not to remain ethnocentric, and to remember that in traditional societies the economy is deeply embedded in the social structure as well as in local cultural values. In this respect, it is necessary to differentiate between traditional societies, where the local communities used fairs and other occasions for economic exchange, usually adapting them to the ritual occasion, and modern societies, where it works the other way round with communities increasingly adapting rituals to the market's needs.

To put it in other words, it is impossible to use the lenses of our capitalist economy to understand the complex role played by cultural goods in past societies. Looking at traditional festivals and rituals, it would be an error to look at them as having a simple economic function in their cultural context. Rather, they have to be understood in the frame of social and symbolic relations between the different parts of society. The situation is different in our globalised world, where the market has become a shared value enabling the valuation of any cultural good, even the most symbolic ritual.

Towards a General Comparison

In the previous section I have suggested that qualitative approaches are important in order to understand the most concrete aspects of the economy of traditions. This is due to the fact that traditional economy is always an embedded economy. It cannot be reduced to quantitative data and has to be extended to analysis of the social and symbolic values of the societies to which it is connected. That being said, it is possible to open the discussion to a general comparison concerning the relations between heritage building processes and local economies.

At this point of the discussion I contend that the UNESCO category intangible cultural heritage, which appeared with the famous UNESCO Convention (2003), is an interesting category to better understand the claims of the practitioners who try to gain financial benefits from their traditions. Researchers have suggested that the new UNESCO categories strongly influenced the local interpretations of global rights (Cornu, Fromageau and Hottin 2013), but how does this process work in practice? Here, I call practitioners people who are involved in the transmission and performance of local traditions. I use intangible cultural heritage as an extensive category fit to encompass not only the traditional elements already accepted on the UNESCO lists but also other elements that could ask for entry to these lists but have not yet obtained a UNESCO label. It is then possible to propose a longitudinal approach and to focus on three different situations: before, during, and after the institutional heritage building process. This way of sorting traditions enables

a comparison between the different possible situations, asking for each one what the role of economy is.

In the first case, the festive rituals have already been granted intangible cultural heritage status. Here, it is possible to examine again the case of the French Tarasque festival, which is part of the international Processional Giants and Dragons UNESCO file. This candidature was accepted in 2005 by UNESCO so it has been acknowledged as cultural heritage for nearly 20 years. I have already noticed that there were many changes in the festival as soon as it was promoted as cultural heritage. But beyond these changes in the meanings and in the image of the festival, what happened on a purely economic basis? Interviews with local stakeholders on this question have been interesting, as I was told more than once: "UNESCO doesn't give us any money, the label is only a chocolate medal". In this situation, the heritage building policy works as an incentive from the outside and developing on a global level, but it has little to do with the local economy. Locals are proud of being granted the new label, and this pride replaces the more traditional pride in organising the festival. The economy, in this case, develops in a modern way, i.e. in a sphere which is more or less separated from the traditional cultural sphere. It may use the new label, when related products are commercialised, but it is not directly connected with the label, which relates primarily to the cultural aspects.

The second case is when festive rituals have not yet been granted heritage status and when they don't even imagine asking for it. In order to document this case I would like to talk about the Scottish folk-football games, which I have already spoken about in previous publications (Fournier 2012). Fieldwork brings some evidence about strong links between these traditional rituals and the local economy. For instance in the small city of Jedburgh in the Borders Region, southern Scotland, several leather balls the size of tennis balls are ritually thrown to the crowd in February and March each year and they are awarded £20 each. The players have to bring back the balls to the persons who have thrown them, in order to win the game. The winners get the £20 award, which is an inside incentive to participate in the games. The award comes from local shopkeepers, from pub owners, or from people who celebrate a wedding anniversary and who are traditionally invited to throw a ball to the crowd for this occasion. Between the players and the people throwing the balls, there is therefore a customary relationship based on confidence as well as on money exchange. For most of the players, the £20 'contained' in the ball are not enough to cover their costs for coming to Jedburgh to play the game, but they still come because the game represents something more than just an economic activity. Moreover, massive crowds come to attend the game as a spectacle, which represents even more input in the local economy as all the people present in the streets of the city for the day eat, drink and buy things at the local shops. Interestingly, the local organisers of the game say they don't want to have any for-

mal relationship with intangible cultural heritage, in spite of some proposals that have been made to grant the game this label, because they believe that such a label might 'freeze' the ritual and standardise it. Against this eventuality, they feel the game has to be kept in its 'traditional' shape and shouldn't become commoditised. The game only remains alive because it maintains strong relations with traditional values and beliefs. If it was changed to become a tourist attraction and promoted as cultural heritage, it could lose its symbolical power and would bring less to the local community, both in cultural and financial terms.



Fig. 3. The game of handba' in the city of Jedburgh, Scotland.
Photo: L. S. Fournier, 2016.

The third case concerns the many festive rituals that have asked for intangible cultural heritage status but which have not yet obtained it. Thousands of rituals are in this situation and only a few hundred have so far been granted official UNESCO labels. Each state that is party to the UNESCO Convention has its own national inventory, from which only a few proposals are picked each year to receive UNESCO recognition. Looking at French carnivals for instance, several dozen local festive events have already been put on the national inventory list, although only one has been presented to UNESCO, the Carnival of Granville, in Normandy. For a lot of local festival organisers, obtaining the UNESCO label has then become a most desirable end, as they think that it will make the event they organise famous and that it will constitute a great added value both on a symbolic and on an economic level.

Here, I would like to use two Italian examples to show better the expectations local stakeholders have about UNESCO labels. In Verona, which is already famous as a destination for cultural tourism, a few years ago a local association launched a street games festival under the name of the Tocati Festival. This event gathers players of traditional games from all over Europe for one weekend each year in September when the different traditions can be compared through street practice, exhibitions, talks and conferences. The idea is to reiterate the value of local traditional games as important to hand down to the younger generations, in modern societies where most of the games have progressively been replaced by global standardised sports. According to the festival organisers, granting intangible cultural heritage status to this event would bring even more people to Verona city centre and would offer an alternative to classical tourism. There is in this case a true economic strategy connected with heritage building, as the festival would bring people to Verona out of the cultural season, adding a new audience to the people already coming in the summer for the opera spectacles or to visit the Romeo and Juliet house, a famous Verona attraction. This case is interesting as it shows the different possible acceptations of the word 'culture', which can either allude to the 'high culture' of the opera or to the 'popular culture' of street games. In a saturated cultural market, heritage building is a means to renew the image of a city and to add new amenities to the more accepted ones. Traditional popular culture can help re-localise cultural economy, extending the notion of culture beyond its usual acceptation.

Another interesting Italian case is given by the small village of Castiglione Messer Marino in the Abruzzi region, central Italy, where I did some fieldwork at the beginning of 2020 and where the local carnival costumes and celebrations have been documented by local anthropologists (Liberatore 2019). In this case the town council is struggling to keep people living in the village, which is in a remote mountain area more than 2,000 metres above sea level. Like this village, a lot of Italian villages were deserted due to emigration in the 20th century and are now trying to find solutions to avoid disappearing. Here, the material culture of the local carnival has been studied and identified as a strong local cultural resource. Intangible cultural heritage policies are then seen locally as a means to stop emigration and to attract new people to the community. In the eyes of the town council representatives, heritage building is a basis for the re-localisation of economy through the recognition of local cultural traditions. Interestingly, this positive vision of cultural heritage as a local resource is contrasted by Liberatore's point of view as he assess heritage building processes critically and points out the risks of local cultures becoming stereotypes. Looking at the economy from the local perspective eventually leads to a softening of the criticism usually addressed by anthropologists to heritage building processes. Anthropologists are reminded that they should help public development programs instead of criticising them (Giancristofaro 2020).



Fig. 4. Carnival caps in the village of Castiglione Messer Marino, Italy.
Photo: L. S. Fournier, 2020.

Conclusion

Comparing all the different cases shows that heritage building can have very different meanings in the economy according to the place and to the local situation. There are for instance major differences between cases where the intangible cultural heritage label has already been granted, and cases where this label is not yet present. There are also major differences according to the regions observed, as the economy is not the same in urban and in rural settings. However, in spite of all these differences it has become obvious that local practitioners and tradition stakeholders use UNESCO labels as a means to re-localise regional cultural economies.

The different case studies eventually teach us that the economy of tradition is not only a question of money. Of course the local communities are happy if they get increased income from heritage building processes. However, the economy of tradition is more a question of creativity and of motivation for local practitioners. Indeed, in order to commoditise their traditional rituals, local stakeholders have first to document them, which implies that they ask anthropologists and folklorists to participate in the process. It is otherwise difficult to make money out of local traditions, as traditions always need knowledge and documentation to be fully understood. As soon as the local communities enter a heritage building process, they should be prepared to replace traditional values with new universal values associated with cultural heritage. There is no way to directly change tradition into money.

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Bibliographical Note

Laurent Sébastien Fournier completed his PhD in Montpellier (France) in 2002. He is full professor in social and cultural anthropology at the University Côte d'Azur in Nice (France). He is president of the Eurethno network (Council of Europe) and co-chair of the Ritual Year Working Group (Société Internationale d'Ethnologie et de Folklore). He is a specialist in the revitalisation of European festivals, in traditional sports and games and in the history of European ethnology.

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The Commercialisation of the *Căluș* Tradition

Cătălin Alexa
Constantin Brăiloiu Institute of Ethnography and Folklore Bucharest
alexa.catalin@gmail.com

Abstract: The paper presents a diachronic analysis of the Căluș ritual, a component of Romanian popular culture included on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2008. We are considering the most important aspects of Căluș's genuine performative model, the specifics of its keepers and the changes occurring over time. Our analysis considers those evolutionary aspects that led to the diversification of the performative model and the repercussions of these changes, both in the traditional form of the ritual and in the way it is perceived by its own performers and direct beneficiaries. Following its evolution from the communist and post-communist period, we highlight the appetite of the protagonists to enhance in particular the spectacular and economic functions of Căluș, a trend that could significantly influence the performative model. The study also exposes the new contexts in which Căluș is presented today, proving that we are facing a living phenomenon, a constant process capable of generating new cultural models and beliefs.

Keywords: ritual, cultural product, Căluș, ritual dance, intangible, tradition

With an origin that remains uncertain even to this day, and is considered by many researchers to have strong pagan roots (Vuia 1922: 215; Oprișan 1969: 243; Bucșan 1976: 5; Ispas 2003: 152; Cristea 2008: 31–46), the Căluș ritual is one of the oldest and most valued traditions in Romania. As a demonstration of this, in 2008 Căluș was the first Romanian proposed entry for the UNESCO Representative List of the Immaterial Cultural Heritage of Humanity, thus confirming the special interest given to this ritualistic practice, which has been preserved in numerous localities.

First attested at the beginning of the 18th century (Cantemir 1909), the Căluș ritual has been shown through time to possess a remarkable capacity to adapt to social, cultural and economic conditions.

A diachronic analysis of the Căluș bears witness to a great variety of performative models that introduce different nuances from one area to another. In this paper,

I will refer to the Căluș variant preserved in the villages of southern Romania, a model considered to be the closest to the genuine form of the ritualistic dance, performed even today during the Whitsuntide (Rom. *Rusalii*) celebration.

Bearers of this tradition choose to practice and cherish Căluș in more novel contexts than before, frequently diverging from the ritualistic spatial and temporal framework that defines the traditionally acknowledged model. My purpose is to analyse in what way these new performative models can be considered part of an evolution that involves a diversification of the contexts in which the Căluș is present; or, on the contrary, if we are facing a deviation that introduces significant change to the traditional model, change that affect its heritage value and which transforms it and uses it more like a product or a cultural commodity (Giurchescu 2009a), with evident consequences at the level of known meanings.

In its traditional forms, Căluș was a masculine dance practiced in the week of Whitsuntide by a group of adults. The dances were performed in village squares as well as in cities or at fairs. The foregoing days of the ritualistic period were dedicated to practising the dance, preparing the costumes and specific props, and establishing the group members and its hierarchy, depending on the availability of the dancers and their abilities. The musicians of the group were also established during this period and they had to accompany the Căluș dancers for the entire period of the ritualistic performance. The costume worn by the Căluș dancers differentiated them during the ritual time. In the past, the garments used were day to day clothes embellished with specific decorations, and there is data which attests that in previous centuries all the protagonists were masked (Cantemir 1909: 232; del Chiaro 1718: 35). The shirt worn by a man was adorned with woven bands across the chest, while the hat displayed different decorations. Men also wore a special girdle tied to their waist. Depending on the region, some groups would wear an adorned red Turkish fez. Woven bands were also used to decorate the lower legs of the dancers, and below the knee there would be some small bells that were meant to produce sounds during the dance. In the past, a lot of the garments worn by the Căluș dancers were borrowed from community members (woven bands, shirts, handkerchiefs) (Oprișan 1969: 158; Ispas 2003: 173), with people believing that once they were worn by Căluș dancers during the ritual, the garments can help their rightful owners become healthier, or the garments can ward off illness, help younger women get married or adult women become pregnant. In the same period, the leader of the group was also chosen (the Bailiff, Rom. *Vătaful*) and, in places where this was the case, the man who would play the role of the burlesque character (the Mute, Rom. *Mutul*) was usually included in the structure of the group. The beginning of the ritual period was marked by the elaboration of the group's flag and by the swearing of an oath, defining moments for the ritual group now established. These acts, which were done in secret, involved a series of rules and

prohibitions for all the Căluș dancers. They promised not to abandon the group, to respect the hierarchy and to remain chaste, not to let themselves be touched by women or to have any sexual relations, and to conduct themselves appropriately inside the group and during the performance of the ritual (Kligman 2000). The sacred oath was valued as a form of communication and related to the supernatural, which dominates that period, embodied by the mythical female representations named *Iele* or *Rusalii* known for their ambivalent character (good or evil). They were considered responsible for punishing and causing illnesses to those who violated the community norms specific to the Whitsuntide period, a time that was dedicated to celebration, when agricultural work and numerous household activities (such as washing, sewing, sweeping courtyards, cleaning the trees[1]) were strictly forbidden. The sicknesses that befell individuals who violated these well-known rules, popularly called *luat din Căluș* (literally 'taken from the Căluș'), could only be cured during the Whitsuntide week if the sick person witnessed the Căluș dance because the dancers were connected to intangible sources as a result of their oath (Neagota, Benga 2011: 128–131). Preserving the good health of the ritual group was achieved through the chastity the dancers had sworn to observe.

The ritual dance was usually performed around a pot filled with water and a plate with salt and a few garlic cloves and wormwood threads. These items were brought by the landlord of the house, who got them back after they have been used in the Căluș dance, the objects being considered beneficial for the household which would use them for prophylactic purposes (to maintain the health of people and animals, to guard and enrich the house, and so on). The Mute played an incredibly important role in the ritualistic structure and the scenes performed by the Căluș dancers in domestic courtyards or during movement from one host to another. Being differentiated from the rest of the group by his appearance, with torn garments and wearing (or not wearing) a ritualistic mask and using props (a phallus, a wooden sword, a whip, a bag filled with prophylactic plants, usually wormwood and garlic), this character contributed richly to the spectacle performed by the Căluș group. Apart from helping the Căluș dancers to rest, the Mute's comical interludes also gave a memorable show and were greatly appreciated by the public. The special status of the Mute, a role with an ambivalent character, was also demonstrated by the distinct reward that he received in the form of a special payment that was not shared with the other protagonists, another aspect that differentiated him from other group members. The ritualistic period concluded with the releasing of the group from their oath and the burial of the flag on the Sunday of Whitsuntide week.



Fig. 1. Căluș ritual performed in Merișani (Teleorman County). In the middle of the group, the Mute oversees the dancers. Photo: C. Alexa, 12 June 2022.

Apart from the obvious preventative and healing functions, the Căluș dance was associated with matchmaking and the summoning of fertility (suggested by the actions of the Mute with the help of the phallus), and also had performative and economic aspects. Thanks to the impressive dance, many groups, including those who performed in previous centuries, were appreciated and highly spoken of for the spectacle that they performed. In time, the Căluș dance would come to be perceived more for its entertaining features in many places, with the participants' energetic dancing greatly contributing to the popularising of the dance more as a performance and less as a healing and protecting activity, two functions that were previously considered essential. The brief interludes of popular theatre performed by the Căluș dancers also contributed to this perception, with the representations staged by the performers watched by considerable audiences.

As to economic function, Căluș dancers were given payment at the end of the performances, an obligatory condition in the ritualistic context that illustrates how counter-gift was necessary to validate the magical functions of the ritualistic dance (Mauss 1997).

The payment was made with money and with food products. During tough economic times, the Căluș dancers were paid, it seems, only in food (Alexa 2022: 185). It is certain that the dance has always been compensated in one way or another, a fact that influenced the preference of the groups in choosing certain hosts, choosing those who had better material possibilities. This is a normal situation,

preserved to the present day. Moreover, the community prestige earned after receiving the healing group convinced many rich people to invite the Căluș dancers into their courtyards year after year. In this way, the authority of the călușari[2] also benefited, as performing in different contexts increased their fame. Evidently, the final payment was also more than necessary from a practical point of view. The expenses during the ritualistic period had to be covered, the musicians had to be paid. The end of the ritual period was marked by the burial or destruction of the group's flag, after which the money was shared between members of the group, with a small party following to mark the end of the Căluș.

The sociocultural and political changes during the 20th century considerably influenced the evolution of the Căluș phenomenon, a situation that became more noticeable especially after World War II. During the communist regime that was installed in this period, special attention was given to practicing and cherishing public manifestations of heritage belonging to popular culture, the Căluș ritual being exploited intensely and with priority. Being valued as a national symbol, the Căluș ritual was celebrated year after year, beginning in 1969 with a specially dedicated festival, and starting in 1976 as part of the manifestations of the Cântarea României festival (Stoian 2015: 248–252). Although the traditional model would co-exist with new forms of practicing the ritual during festivals, in many localities the staged form would become the most important, the Căluș being presented by performers from those villages only in festival contexts. In some situations, the traditional dance performed in private courtyards would be abandoned. In these cases, we witness an obvious change of paradigm. The new performative model would introduce significant changes, not only with respect to the spatial and temporal context of the presentation of a non-ritualistic Căluș, but also with respect to the aesthetics of the garments and dance repertoires. The performance became more spectacular on the stage in terms of group composition, props and the impact it had on the beneficiaries. The famous Mute would be included more rarely in these performances. The stage would prove inadequate for the traditional, village theatrics presented in people's backyards. The Mute's props would also be considered improper, with explicit displays of the phallus being perceived with reservations on the part of many Căluș dancers and some festival organisers. Another defining ritualistic element of the Căluș, its healing function, was also abandoned.

The dance could now be seen all year round, not only during Whitsuntide, when the impact of the performance was quite impressive. In its new form, the Căluș would be present on numerous national and international stages, becoming a common commodity that could be watched in different non-ritual contexts. In these circumstances, special attention was given to the chorological component, which drew the attention of certain specialists whose intervention aimed to raise the entertaining aspect of the dance repertoire. We are witnessing a change of

paradigm which practically redefines the Căluș tradition after many decades in which this model was established and diversified, and is now perceived by its performers as having authentic value even within these new circumstances, despite the obvious differences from the genuine model. In spite of this, many groups that were used to performing strictly on stage said, when asked, that they could easily adapt their performative model, accepting the solicitations that involved the presentation of the traditional dance and even including, when needed, healing rituals (Giurchescu 2009b: 91; Alexa 2022: 389–391).

Participation in these kinds of festival would become so common that the festivals became an integral part of the phenomenon, without any negative perception from the participants, performers or audience. On the contrary, an appreciation developed for the visibility and the assurances given to the groups, as well as the possibility of supplemental financial gain through the Căluș dance. In time such motivations produced evident structural modifications of the performances on stages. Stemming from the desire to impress juries at some festivals, Căluș groups became grander and grander. The visual and auditory impact of the performance was a primary objective for the participants and groups started to include tens of Căluș dancers from different generations, from the oldest men to young children. As for the children, it was considered that their involvement would be beneficial for maintaining the tradition, although using them was also certainly intended to influence the jury and the public. In this way, the ritual initiation of younger Căluș dancers was no longer marked by the emotion and rigor of the traditional dance, but by their ability to deal with factors associated with the stage such as the presence of judges and the importance of prizes. In this way, there was a change to a new status quo that modified the perception of the dance, given that at the most important festivals such large groups had, many times, the status of winners. And so a new performative model was born that clearly explains actions of the kind that, in 2017, brought together more than 1,000 Căluș dancers. They were encouraged to perform a dance figure in the central square in Slatina with the purpose of the World Record Book officially recording the moment. In this way, the tradition of staged performance is continued, while the Căluș parade becomes a national brand with no ties to the traditional model. This is then sustained and appreciated in this form by its many guardians who are sensitive to the prestige of the Căluș as well as to the personal fame gained in this way.



Fig. 2. Căluș group from Stolnici photographed on stage. Photo: C. Alexa, Hârsești (Argeș County), 16 June 2019.

The moving of the rural ritual from its original environment and its transformation into an easy to sell commodity that is promoted on national and especially international stages, could be considered a consequence of the interventions made by the authorities of the times. Evidently, in the case of the Căluș, the communist period marked its evolution in the most definitive manner, even if activities aimed at constructing a national identity based on popular cultural phenomena had been promoted since the interwar period (the first official presentation of the Căluș dance on stage took place in London in 1935). How such an evolution, evidently prejudicing the traditional model that was followed prior to commercialisation, could have been avoided, is hard to say. Thanks to its spectacular character, we can consider that the Căluș was meant to be changed to fit the stage. This was suggested in a short newspaper article by Valeriu Branişte on the Transylvanian Călușer, which was previously enacted during the Pentecost period but which from the end of the 18th century came to be performed during the Christmas season (Branişte 1891: 231). Certainly, the international context in this period could be considered somewhat responsible as this period is clearly marked by trends that encouraged festivals (which frequently included prizes for participants). Evidently, these circumstances involved a certain competitional tension, capable of affecting the psycho-emotional state of the participants. In such conditions, with performance of the Căluș we are witnessing a major mutation that marks a change in the protagonist's status from community *healer*, to performer whose *staged ritual* produces joy in the public as beneficiary as well as producing a similar state of well-being as produced by the

music and dance of other consecrated healing rituals (Lüdtke 2009). The giving of prizes and distinctions after such staged performances would prove to have a great impact on the simple Căluș dancers. For most unprofessional Căluș performers this type of recognition equates to a tremendous success, one that will last in the collective memory for multiple generations.

As proof of its specific variety, the Căluș is constituted from a mix of performative models, with contemporary groups constantly adapting to the local conditions and contexts in which the dance is preserved in one form or another. In numerous localities, one can encounter groups of Căluș dancers who have knowledge of the purposes of the ritual and respect the conditions that uphold the consecrated functions, including the preservation of its esoteric character. However, the number of days in which the dance is performed in villages has dropped significantly, and it is now performed on only one or two days, in comparison to the three to five days or even a week in the past. The depopulation of rural communities in Romania has affected the Căluș groups, as well as the level of the performance dynamics. The traditional model of the masculine dance is no longer respected today, and in some places the groups now also include female dancers, which constitutes an important mutation to the framework of the Căluș, whose performers were obliged to avoid contact with women. The festival-like actions, considered in the academic community to be responsible for the mutations of numerous phenomena in traditional popular culture, have increased. The Căluș is valued on stage in the some big Romanian cities as well as in numerous towns, which organise events dedicated to the ritual dance during the period of Whitsuntide. Evidently, this stops the dance following the traditional model, with numerous groups of Căluș dancers accepting invitations from festival organisers because of the prestige earned through performance or because of the prize money offered, resulting in something that changes the usual Căluș performed in village and town squares.

In the case of the festival-like manifestations, there are also some performances that make themselves noticeable by allowing the unfolding of the dances in open spaces (squares, parks), where the access of the public is no longer limited by a stage-like construction, as it is the case in Craiova or Giurgiu. In these conditions, those that are watching the spectacle of the groups of Căluș dancers have the liberty to buy the plants used in the performance (garlic, wormwood), to bring their children to be held by the Căluș dancers, or to join the dance at the end, thus obtaining the quality of beneficiary of the Căluș ritual, reiterating, practically, the traditional model. In addition, during such manifestations one can easily observe the preference of the public for certain groups, the spectators demonstrating a good knowledge of them and of their performative style. In this way, the prophylactic plants are bought only from preferred or known groups, and the children are given only to certain Căluș dancers to participate in dance figures where the dancers jump on one leg over the

child. Such manifestations, resulting from the *tradition* of the Căluș festival, prove that these festivals constitute not only cultural events that bring about changes in the structure of ritual practices, but can also ensure, under certain conditions, a form of continuity for them. From this point of view, we can even talk about a cyclicity in the evolution of the Căluș, whose image, radically changed at the level of public perception as a consequence of staged manifestation, could reinvigorate its old messages even through these cultural events. Evidence of this is seen in the new festival format proposed in Olt County, beginning in 2021. Apart from classical staged demonstrations the Călușul Oltenesc festival aims to promote the genuine model of the traditional dance, inviting groups of Căluș dancers to perform in the courtyards of the inhabitants of organising towns. In this way, we are witnessing a novel form of preservation and promotion of the Căluș, with thr purpose of entertaining communities where the dance was not known or where local groups became inactive, as well as with the purpose of activating some mechanisms of carrying on the tradition in some localities, resulting in the reactivation of some old groups or in the initiation of some local projects that propose the formation of new groups. At the same time, we notice an aspect relating to the number of days in which the groups are active during the period of Whitsuntide. As lots of these events are organised during this week, there are some groups that, in addition to performing for their local communities, always participate in festivals, succeeding in remaining active in this way for three to five days. Likewise, some group leaders consider that we are experiencing a continuity of the tradition from a temporal point of view, even if in the villages the dance is performed only on one day, or at most on two days, with the rest of the performances involving driving to unique, staged performance.

Apart from festival-like initiatives organised by local authorities, the preservers of the Căluș are also responsible for practicing the dances in some contexts that we can consider to be slightly atypical. We are referring to actions organised especially outside of the ritualistic period that involve groups known for their staged dances which are capable of creating a great show and a specific atmosphere. Presently, there is nothing unusual in encountering a Căluș group at private events (weddings, christenings) or at corporate events (a brand release or product promotion), on stages organised for the anniversary of a locality, during electoral promotion shows, at sports events or scientific conferences and even on TV. With the exception of TV shows like Romania's Got Talent, where the decision to participate is presumably taken strictly by the protagonists, in the other cases the Căluș dancers are invited to perform and are applauded and paid, reiterating, in a certain form, the classical performative model. Are the preservers of these traditions to be blamed for this excess in practicing a secular tradition? Are they to be blamed for using this tradition for purely economic purposes? Or are we witnessing a reinvention of



Fig. 3. To ensure that they will be healthier for the rest or the year, the children are brought to the *călușari* to be held. Even though we are dealing with a festival context, the protective rites are still performed. Photo: C. Alexa, Craiova (Dolj County), 27 May 2018.

tradition, as has been proposed in the literature (Hobsbawm 1983), a reinvention that involves the intensification of the entertaining and economic functions of the Căluș dance? At first sight, we could consider that we are facing a distortion of a particular heritage value, the importance of which has been recognised internationally (UNESCO, 2008). Of course, the Căluș is present in such contexts outside the acknowledged period and, apparently, devoid of the purposes that confirmed its community importance and the other known purposes (the healing and protecting of the community).

However, as I mentioned earlier, the staged practice of ritual dance has occurred since the interwar period. In these circumstances, perception of the contemporary Căluș dancers, who consider such performative models an integral part of what they call today the tradition of Căluș, should not take us by surprise. From the point of view of the protagonists, the two models, although perceived differently, are not mutually exclusive; on the contrary, they are part of the same whole. In these conditions, the use of the Căluș in such contexts, sometimes blamed on the academic environment, are considered normal by the Căluș dancers, and even desired since they generate income and authority. This is one of the reasons why we witness the constant promotion of the Căluș as a *commodity* by the same performers of this dance. Thanks to modern means of communication (Facebook, YouTube, etc.), Căluș performers can promote themselves, thus making sure they have greater visibility, even when considering the traditional dance or the staged version. Promotion is meant to increase the impact the performers have with their

existing public, and also to attract potential new beneficiaries who could solicit them to dance. By repeatedly presenting a certain type of spectacle, a *cultural product* is proposed, loaded with a certain set of beliefs that attain the status of an *offer*. The visibility and successes of some groups, especially those that travel internationally, have consequences at the level of the whole phenomenon and bring these groups a models of success that sustains them financially as well as keeping them active and making them famous.

Promoted in this way, it is not surprising that the dance of the Căluș performers can be encountered today in many milieus that researchers of the phenomenon could find atypical. At present, the number of Căluș groups that are invited to entertain at private events is not low, confirming the spectacular function of the dance. With respect to the presence of the Căluș dancers at weddings, a situation attested to also in the past (Burada 1915: 91), even if incredibly rare, could be easily justified if we take into account the energy and good spirit produced by the music and dances, as well as the function of invoking fertility attributed to the old ritual, which is more than suitable in this context, although these events take place outside the consecrated ritual period. Less known by those who invite the Căluș performers to such events, these archaic purposes could, in time, be reintroduced at the level of the beliefs associated with the ritual, which could be revitalised in this way and in these contexts. Surely, such a process of returning the significance of ritual meaning would also be proposed by the protagonists of the dance who choose to promote themselves in this way, making sure they have a great effect on the direct beneficiaries. This is how we could explain certain gestures made by the protagonists in these situations, which confirms their status as performer of a ritual and acknowledged authority, as well as the capacity to introduce some rites that could possibly generate new beliefs. In this manner one can explain the throwing of garlic attached to a performer's girdle and given to the public in the final part of the staged presentation of the Căluș. In the past prophylactic plants were offered to the public as beneficiaries of the ritualistic dance, and so some Căluș performers attempt to establish a connection with the public even in the context of stage performance. In other situations, even event organisers try to endow the stage with a certain significance by symbolically breaking a clay pot, inspired by the tradition of călușari breaking pots filled with water or salt in people's courtyards. This is an attempt to substitute the stage for the acknowledged space of the rural household, where the Călușar groups would originally presented their performances. In the category of original acts, we also include the custom of the bailiff (Rom. *vătaf*) breaking his stick on the stage and offering the pieces to the people present. In this way, a novel practice is introduced, endowed with magical significance, and the audience is assured of the beneficial properties of the pieces of wood despite the fact the event not taking place during the ritual period dedicated to the Căluș.

We are witnessing the birth of a ritual practice which, although associated with new, non-ritual, contexts that were launched and promoted by well-known bailiffs, could easily be introduced into and absorbed by the practices and beliefs associated with the Căluș. Such actions, together with the reestablishment of significance of some abandoned practices, are rewriting the image and the script with which the Căluș is performed today.

As for the preference for a certain performative model, the decision belongs to the guardians of the Căluș, who choose to maintain the local tradition without taking into account recommendations made by authorities unknown to them, and who are limitative and not directly involved (UNESCO, The Ministry of Culture). In addition, from the discussions that we had with numerous Căluș performers, such regulations are not even familiar to them. The decisions are made locally, and belong to the people directly involved. This is obvious when one analyses the connection between Căluș groups and local authorities. The Town Halls that directly support the local groups, for example by covering transport expenses, payment for the musicians or costume costs, can be directly involved even in the performative programme of the groups in the Whitsuntide period. In such villages, the authority of local mayors is evident, and there have been cases in which the final performance, the greatest of all, has been staged in the mayor's own courtyard.



Fig. 4. Audience members buying wormwood threads at the end of the performance.
Photo: C. Alexa, Craiova (Dolj County), 27 May 2018.

The *reinvention* of the Căluș, in one direction or another, will be performed without any doubt by those who, year after year, make efforts to preserve it. It is hard to believe that certain external interventions, such as those by festivals, where par-

ticipation is allowed under certain conditions (traditional costumes, no females in the group, mandatory live music), will significantly influence the evolution of the Căluș. Today's Căluș performers need to adapt to local conditions when needed, for example they make their own costumes within the confines of their financial possibilities, they include women in the groups, they use modern audio technology instead of live bands, which are becoming more and more scarce and expensive. And, if they could ever profit in any way from their cultural commodity, i.e. from this from local heritage, they will not hesitate to do so, especially if the interests of the group are at stake, as some of them argue.

The research done in numerous localities where the Căluș is preserved, confirm the tendencies of change in the performative model, without it being, at this moment, generalised. The traditional model is still encountered in numerous villages, where there are also groups that do not participate at festivals, the tradition being maintained strictly in the place where the group members live, with a significant presence during Whitsuntide within their own community. From a diachronic point of view, the Căluș shows a specific capacity for adaptation, confirmed by today's groups. Treated or not treated excessively as a commodity in some localities, exploited by certain people for surprising reasons, the ritual of Căluș seems to be constantly resourceful and resistant in many different forms, making it, as it was in past centuries, a true reflection of the societies and communities that support it.

Notes

[1] Cleaning the trees is a spring activity. People do this every year in their yards, they take care of their trees by removing the old branches, preventing the spread of diseases.

[2] Călușari are the participants to an old traditional Romanian dance known as the căluș.

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Bibliographical Note

Cătălin Alexa is a researcher at the Constantin Brăiloiu Institute of Ethnography and Folklore. He graduated from the Faculty of Geography, University of Bucharest, and has been a member of the team publishing the five volumes of the Romanian Ethnographical Atlas. He is working on the recovery and usage of IEF archive material, specialising in traditional food. Since 2013, he has been a member of the teams that conducted research in the Aromanian communities in the Balkan countries. His academic interest in the Căluș tradition is represented in his PhD thesis "The Căluș Ritual in the Present Social and Cultural Context", published in 2002, together with another volume on the same topic: *Portrait of a Căluș Performer*.

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Kyustendil Spring Day: Post-Socialist Re-inventions and Transformations of a Socialist Festival

Svetla Kazalarska

Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

svetla.kazalarska@iefem.bas.bg

Abstract: The article presents a case study of Kyustendil Spring Day, a traditional local holiday associated with the spring equinox, (re)invented as a socialist festival in the late 1960s, which has continued to take place uninterrupted to date. It traces the transformations that the festival has gone through in the years of post-socialist transition in Bulgaria looking into the challenges posed to both the (ritual) form and the (semantic) content of the festival after the collapse of the Bulgarian socialist state in 1989.

As the analysis shows, the imperatives of global popular culture and the new economic and political realities have brought about new actors, symbols, rituals and venues in the old festive scenario of Kyustendil Spring Day. Two distinct periods in its post-socialist development are distinguished: the early post-socialist years of the 1990s when the holiday was radically privatised by local businessmen (i.e. sponsors), commercialised (i.e. patented as a festival), and spectacularised; and the most recent years, when it was re-claimed by the local municipality, re-traditionalised, and instrumentalised in local town branding strategies. In spite of the seemingly undisputed success of Kyustendil Spring Day as a town holiday today, the critical voices raised about the festival's exhausted social function and its commercialisation in the present suggest that it might have reached a critical point in its life course, and that new re-inventions, i.e. new re-semantisation, would be needed to save its relevance for the local community in the future.

Keywords: spring equinox, Kyustendil Spring Day, socialist festival, post-socialist transition, commercialisation, festivalisation, traditionalisation

Introduction

Festivalisation as a contemporary phenomenon is usually theoretically conceived of as originating in the context of Western capitalist consumer society. It emerged in the 1960s, flourished in the 1970s and in the following decades, and proliferated even further in the new millennium, as testified by both the surge in the number and the diversification of the types of festival registered in the recent years. It might then appear paradoxical that at about the same time as festivalisation was making its way in the West – in the late 1960s and early 1970s – socialist Bulgaria also experienced a festival boom, even if not on the same scale, but still rather conspicuous. Although often not labelled festivals per se, these newly invented festivities clearly made use of the festival format and typically included a miscellaneous mix of elements: a carnival, a procession, a fair, and various cultural events such as music concerts, art exhibitions, dance and theatre performances, etc.

The growing number and types of festival, both national and local, and town holidays in socialist Bulgaria from the late 1960s onwards, however, were conditioned by different factors. First and foremost, by the socialist authorities' attempt to radically reshape the festive calendar by discarding the old religious holidays and supplanting them with new ideologically sanctioned ones, thus structuring social time in a novel way. Furthermore, the authorities sought to maintain tight control over working people's everyday lives and use of free time[1] by cultivating a new socialist culture of leisure and recreation. Not only did these efforts leave an imprint on the structure and rhythm of social time, but they also affected public space inasmuch as they modified the functions of the old cult sites and festive venues and created new places specifically designed to suit the needs of the socialist politics of culture. Last but not least, the introduction of a socialist festive calendar was strongly tied to the authorities' aspirations to inculcate socialist ideology in all spheres of social life, thus having a bearing upon the collective notions of history, memory and identity.

This paper traces the transformations that Kyustendil Spring Day, a traditional local holiday, (re)invented as a socialist festival in the late 1960s, has gone through in the years of post-socialist transition in Bulgaria. It looks into the challenges posed to both the (ritual) form and the (semantic) content of the festival after the collapse of the Bulgarian socialist state in 1989. Taking into account the generally observed trends in the transformation of the festive cultures of the former socialist countries, the paper examines the changing functions of Kyustendil Spring Day and the involvement of various social actors (municipal officers, local businessmen, politicians, local elites, and others) in its adaptation, modification and instrumentalisation in the context of the post-socialist politics and economics of culture.

The study is situated within the emerging interdisciplinary field of festive studies[2] at its intersection with ritual studies and the anthropology of socialism and post-socialism. The analysis takes as a point of departure the findings of anthropological studies on the transformations of the festive cultures of former socialist states, customarily focusing on single case studies rather than undertaking a comprehensive, comparative transnational approach[3]. A fairly broad consensus has been reached, however, around the proposition that "the festive culture in the ex-socialist countries represents a mixture of the legacy of socialist celebrations, holidays introduced slightly before or after the 1989–1991, and religious revivals in the form of both pagan/ancestral and Church festivities" (Cojocaru, Cash 2013: 8; cf. also Sedakova 2011). Furthermore, the analysis takes into account the outcomes of studies of the relationship of ritual and economy in the post-socialist context (e.g. Gudeman, Hann 2015; Hann 2018; Creed 2011), oscillating between the hypothesis of ritual decline, contingent on the economic crisis in the 1990s (e.g. Creed 2002), and the hypothesis of ritual revitalisation and re-enchantment (e.g. Fosztó 2009; Creed 2011). Last but not least, it deals critically with the conventional perspective on the commercialisation and commodification of holidays, celebrations, festivals, rituals, and traditions as implying a moral opposition between culture and commerce (cf. Frost 2016: 576). As has been widely acknowledged by anthropologists, the role of festivals is far more complex and manifold. Apart from being sites of economic activity and cultural consumption, festivals can also serve as political platforms, and more importantly, as means for promoting social integration and cohesion and strengthening local identity.

In terms of methodology, the analysis is based on a productive mix of primary and secondary sources: fieldwork and interviews conducted by the author; archive documents; articles in the local press; posts, photographs, and comments in social media. The author observed in person the 2021 and 2022 editions of Kyustendil Spring Day although the festival took place only virtually in 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. For the same reason the number of interviews conducted was rather limited at seven in total, four of which were carried out online. The respondents included three former and current municipal officers, two teachers, an engineer and a journalist, all within the age group of 50 to 70. The analysis was therefore supplemented with secondary data collected through the social media such as discussions and comments on posts and photographs published in the Old Photos from Kyustendil Facebook group[4], as well as on the Kyustendil Spring Day in the Past and Today Facebook page[5] administered by the Culture Department of the municipality (unfortunately, no longer accessible). Another set of materials, which proved useful in the reconstruction of the public discourse on Kyustendil Spring Day, included: publications in local newspapers (*Zvezda*, *Kyustendil*, *Nova Bulgaria*, *Pautalia*, *Vyara*, and others), and particularly in the eponymous news-

paper *Kyustendil Spring* published on an annual basis from 1996 to 2008; the Kyustendil Spring Girl in the Local Press documentary exhibition (2021) arranged by the Regional Library in Kyustendil; press releases from the Municipality of Kyustendil, as well as archive documents deposited in the regional branch of the Archives State Agency.

The paper starts with brief introductory notes on the town of Kyustendil and a historical detour to the invention of Kyustendil Spring Day as a socialist festival in the 1960s, thus setting the context for the analysis that follows. The study's main lines of enquiry concern the adaptation of the festival to the new political, social and cultural realities that conditioned its privatisation and commercialisation, festivalisation and spectacularisation, (re)traditionalisation and folklorisation. Based on the assumption that cultural identities are articulated, enacted and negotiated through festive culture, among other things, the paper further explores Kyustendil Spring Day's embeddedness in the local identity discourse and its inherent political implications.

The town of Kyustendil

Kyustendil, the administrative centre of Kyustendil District, is a middle-sized town of about 40,000 inhabitants[6], located in the southwestern part of Bulgaria, about 90 km southwest of Sofia close to the border with the Republic of North Macedonia, and Serbia.

It has been referred to as "the town of springs" as there are about 40 hot mineral water springs on its territory. It was the healing qualities of the mineral water that attracted the Thracians to settle there in the 5th to 4th century BC. The settlement further developed as a market town and as a Roman resort under the name Pautalia in the mid-1st century AD. Ulpia Pautalia was conferred the status of a town in the early 2nd century during the rule of emperor Marcus Ulpius Traianus (98–117 AD). It was noted for its temple of Asclepius, the god of medicine in ancient Greek mythology and patron of the town[7]. In the 2nd and 3rd centuries Ulpia Pautalia minted its own coins with Asclepius engraved on their tails. A fortress was built on the top of the hill in the 4th century, which was in continuous use until the 15th century. In the Middle Ages Kyustendil switched hands between the Byzantine Empire, the Bulgarian, and the Serbian kingdoms before it fell under Ottoman rule at the end of the 14th century. After five centuries of Ottoman domination it became part of the newly re-established Bulgarian state in 1878.

In addition to its mineral springs and mild climate offering excellent potential for wellness and spa tourism, the town is well known for its fruit growing traditions, apple, plum and cherry in particular, but also pears, apricots, peaches, almonds and

walnuts. It is for that reason that Kyustendil has been labelled "the fruit tree garden of Bulgaria" and "the motherland of Bulgarian fruit growing" in popular discourse.[8]

Kyustendil Spring Day as an invented tradition[9]

Since time immemorial, or so the local saying goes, the residents of Kyustendil have greeted the coming of spring on March 21st, the day of the spring equinox, by climbing up the Hisarlaka hill above the town with their families, sitting on a blanket spread on the ground (should the weather allow), feasting together with homemade round loaves of bread, *banitsa*, cheese, honey or halvah, raki and wine[10], singing and dancing.

The local tradition of welcoming spring is usually interpreted as syncretically integrating pre-Christian rituals related to the day of the spring equinox, and the solar cult in particular[11], the Day of the Holy Forty in the Eastern Orthodox calendar[12], the Kirklar (Nevruz) feast in the Alevi Islam tradition, and the feast of *Mladentsi* in the folk calendar (e.g. Spasova 2004; Kotev 2016; Farkov 1990). Irrespective of which of these hypotheses holds true, it is more important that the tradition of celebrating the first day of spring up on the hill was still pretty much alive in the 1940s and 1950s, hence the local authorities had to rearrange work shifts so that the workers would be able to take part in the festivities in the afternoon of March 21st when it happened to be a working day (Stankov 1965: 25).

In the 1950s and 1960s, the holiday was gradually 'domesticated'[13] by the socialist authorities, purged of its religious elements and re-invented, i.e. loaded with new, socialist, content. In addition to the traditional public celebration up on Hisarlaka hill with improvised family meal gatherings and folk dances, it included three new elements: a beauty contest, a crowning ceremony, and a carnival procession[14]. In the beauty contest (inaccurately presented by the municipality as the "first beauty contest" in the country) three girls were selected, a Kyustendil Spring Girl[15] title-holder along with two assistants. The crowning ceremony was a ritualised act in which the Old Spring (the girl selected the previous year) would hand over her crown and sceptre to the New Spring along with the symbols of the town: a symbolic town key and an apple (Fig. 1.)



Fig. 1. Kyustendil Spring Day, 1967. State Archives, Kyustendil, Private Fund, 1898.

The carnival (Fig. 2), one of the most spectacular elements of the festival, included various performances such as a procession of children dressed up as fruit, flowers and migratory birds; folk ritual reenactments (mummers, traditional wedding, etc.); acrobatic stunts; and amateur theatrical acts performing an ideologically sanctioned critique of the social vices blemishing the socialist way of life. In addition, there was also a rich accompanying program of cultural and sports events. Despite the significant changes it has undergone since its inception in 1967, Kyustendil Spring Day has taken place without interruption to date, with the only exception being 2020, when the festival was cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic.



Fig. 2. Kyustendil Spring Day, 1967. State Archives, Kyustendil, Private Fund, 1898.

Privatisation and commercialisation

The vitality and social importance of Kyustendil Spring Day for the local community is evidenced by the fact that it was not swept away as socialist legacy in the aftermath of 1989. In fact, it was even pronounced an official holiday in the municipality and a non-working day in 1992. A few years later, in 1998, in the spirit of the time, Kyustendil Spring Day was patented as a festival by the municipality, i.e. registered as a trademark in the Bulgarian Patent Office. As I have argued elsewhere (Kazalarska 2022a; 2022b), the success of the holiday in the years of socialism was to a large extent conditioned by its seemingly less ideologised content and its alleged continuity with local traditions. At the same time, however, it was precisely the well-suitedness and universality of spring as a metaphor for the socialist ideological project that contributed to its resonance with the local community. In fact, the hopes for "a bright socialist future", which used to be associated with the coming of spring were easily substituted with the newly grown hopes for well-being and prosperity in a democratic society in the wake of 1989. "The first spring in a reviving post-November[16] Bulgaria carries along unprecedented concerns and anxieties, along with traditional and new hopes", wrote the local newspaper *Zvezda* in 1990[17].

In the turbulent 1990s, marked by sweeping economic and political reforms which eventually re-arranged the distribution of economic capital and reshuffled social hierarchies in the country, the local municipality ended up financially vulnerable and unable to support Kyustendil Spring Day in its full-fledged format[18]. For that reason, the scope of the holiday was reduced to the beauty contest to the extent that the two became nearly synonymous, whereas the accompanying cultural program was significantly curtailed[19] and the carnival, its most ideologically charged element, was altogether discarded from the program. In the early 1990s, the crowning ceremony continued to follow the scenario established in the years of socialism, most likely out of institutional inertia. In the late 1990s, however, slight changes were already to be noticed. In 1997, the crowning ceremony took place in the theatre hall, thus becoming a closed event with limited public attendance. Although the public procession from the town centre to Hisarlaka hill, headed by the newly selected Kyustendil Spring girls, lingered on throughout most of the 1990s, it would eventually drop off the program.

In the early years of the post-socialist transition the organisation and management of the holiday was gradually taken over by a handful of local businessmen who provided the necessary funding. In return, as could be expected, the sponsors of the event not only used it to advertise their business and gain social prestige from associating their names with it, but also served as members and heads of the jury of the beauty contest. Such practices gave grounds for the popular belief, still shared by many today, that the selection of the Kyustendil Spring titleholders is

genuinely corrupt. "Well, it's going to be a put-up job, as always", "It goes without saying – he who pays the piper calls the tune" and other comments of this kind are commonplace when discussing the beauty contest in social media.

Among the event's sponsors, as the popular rumour goes, was Vassil Iliev, a former Kyustendil-born wrestler and boss of one of the most powerful organised crime groups in the country in the 1990s [20]. Apart from respectable local business enterprises, occasionally individuals and political parties too, the sponsors of the show in the 1990s regularly included three of the most prominent local businessmen, Yordan Chipev, Alexander Tasev, and Valeri Nenov, all three of them enjoying somewhat dubious reputations. Chipev served as chair of the local Chamber of Commerce in the early 1990s, and later on his name was associated with a range of criminal acts such as drug trafficking, smuggling cigarettes, and forging documents, as well as with his aspirations for a political career: he ran three times for mayor in the local elections and twice for member of parliament, albeit unsuccessfully. Tasev owned several factories and petrol stations in the town, but became particularly infamous for his involvement in the so-called local cherry wars. Eventually he became the largest cherry exporter in the country, until his assassination in 2007. Tasev was also politically implicated. He stood as a candidate for the Bulgarian Business Bloc in the parliamentary elections in 1997, and had sponsored several political parties. Furthermore, Tasev was linked to Kyustendil Spring Day in yet another way as he was married to a former titleholder, the winner of the 1986 beauty contest. Nenov, a lawyer and a businessman, leader of the local organisation of the nationalist political party VMRO[21], former municipal councillor and former president of the local football club, served a three-year prison sentence for real estate fraud in 2011, and a couple of years later, in 2014, had part of his property confiscated by the *Commission* for *Anti-Corruption* and *Illegal Assets* Forfeiture.

This slight digression, calling to mind the crime section in the tabloid press, provides compelling evidence for the intricate interweaving of semi-criminal business, politics, and culture in the first post-socialist decade. The profile of Kyustendil Spring Day's sponsors, however, would gradually change after the turn of the century with local shady businessmen replaced by the municipality, and, unsurprisingly, by one of the largest mobile network operators in the country[22].

The 'privatisation' of Kyustendil Spring Day in the 1990s went hand in hand with its commercialisation, as the burgeoning capitalist system was rapidly permeating all spheres of social life, including culture and entertainment. In addition to a modest sum of money granted by the municipality[23], winners of the beauty contest were also conferred various material awards by the sponsors. Throughout the years, these awards, being the most conspicuous form of advertising, have included: a travel excursion to an exotic tourist destination; a modelling course; a driving course; higher education vouchers; and sportswear, swimsuits, shoes and

other goods from local firms, among which some rather peculiar items such as skeins of yarn produced by Velbazhd, a former socialist enterprise. In 1996, one of the major sponsors, Alexander Tasev, started bestowing gold and silver medallions engraved with the festival's emblem on the winners, a tradition which was continued by his widow after his death. In comparison, during the socialist period, apart from the symbolic prestige and popularity gained, Kyustendil Spring girls would be awarded free public transport and use of the public baths for a full year. In recent years, winners would also keep the formal dresses and the shoes provided by the municipality for the contest, a shift away from the early practice in the 1990s when contestants had to finance their outfits either themselves or through a personal sponsor, which not only meant unfair competition but was also detrimental to the overall aesthetic impact of the show.

The format of the contest also changed in the 1990s. In addition to the traditional round in evening gowns, a round in swimsuits (with an extra round in evening gowns provided by one of the sponsors) and a round in folk costumes were introduced in 1994 and 1997 respectively. Thus, for the first time, the physical appearance of the contestants was openly brought to the fore in the contest, and detailed information about their height, weight, and other body measurements (along with their astral sign) was announced. In fact, in its socialist version, the contest was formally never advertised as a beauty contest as such, a label that was ideologically inacceptable. It nevertheless took place under the guise of cultivating socialist virtues and a refined aesthetic taste in young women. The winners were thus typically described as exemplary shock-workers and outstanding members of the Komsomol organisation. Remnants of this view are still recognisable in the public discourse, as indicated by the following social media comments: "This contest dates back to 1966 and is not like the other beauty contests in Bulgaria attended by illiterate dolls"[24] and "it is natural beauty that we are looking for in this contest, not spiffed up hair and vampire-like makeup"[25]. Such an understanding defies the widespread view that beauty contests of this kind serve as a breeding-place for *mutresi*[26] (for example "these contests help *mutri* not to waste time picking out beauties in the crowd, but to get them on a silver platter and carry on with their business"[27]). One could further speculate that the Kyustendil Spring contest serves as a symbolic battlefield, i.e. that when discussing the social relevance of the contest and the qualities of one contestant or another, Kyustendil residents are in fact engaged in the negotiation of post-socialist moral values.

The jury of the beauty contest has been rather diverse throughout the years: local businessmen (i.e. the sponsors) and political figures seem to have prevailed in the 1990s (with the deputy mayor and local parliament members having a 'reserved' place); later on the jury would also include representatives of various occupations, predominantly the arts and culture sphere, for example prominent journalists,

artists, writers, musicians, etc. Whereas in the early 1990s the jury often consisted of male members only ("so as to highlight Kyustendil women's beauty against the background of the strongest possible male presence"[28]), a more balanced jury in terms of gender composition was seen in the late 1990s. In recent years, former Kyustendil Spring titleholders have been invited to serve as members of the jury, thus making an exclusively female jury. Although interpreting this radical shift in the jury's gender composition as a sign of raised public awareness and a critical stance towards gendered social hierarchy and hegemonic masculinity seems to be far-fetched, it was nevertheless a step toward clearing the contest's somewhat tarnished past reputation.

All in all, the economic impact of the festival appears to be rather moderate. It is limited to the revenues generated by street vendors (as in any town fair, one of the main streets is lined with stalls selling souvenirs and petty merchandise) and by local restaurants and cafes in the town centre which are habitually full to the brim on that day. Neither does it have a significant impact on local cultural heritage tourism as it takes place out of the high tourist season (as opposed to the other two newly launched festivals, the Cherry Festival in June and the Harvest Festival in September, which attract much larger tourist crowds). Its significance still lies predominantly with the locals, as it is an occasion for those who have left their hometown to come back and re-unite with their families and friends, even if only for a day.

Spectacularisation and festivalisation

Not only did the emphasis in organising Kyustendil Spring Day in the 1990s lie primarily on the beauty contest at the expense of the other elements in the festival program, but special efforts were also made to turn the event into a genuine spectacle. Professional producers and script writers were engaged, the most celebrated TV stars, singers and actors were invited as hosts of the show, and the top performers on the Bulgarian music scene were attracted. In line with popular music taste, the musical program of the show mixed pop-folk (*chalga*), which was in its heyday in the 1990s, socialist Estrada, folklore, and contemporary pop and rock music. Local performers were also regularly featured, particularly the folklore dance ensemble Pautalia and the children's choir Srebarnite zvancheta (The Silver Bells). The high status of the event is confirmed by the number of high-ranking officials who attended throughout the years, including the Bulgarian president and prime minister, ministers, political leaders, foreign ambassadors and diplomats, mayors of nearby towns in Greece and Macedonia, etc.[29]

For about ten years in the 1990s and early 2000s, the production of the show was in the hands of Niki Aprilov, an actor and theatre director who gained popu-

larity as the host of a TV show for gifted children, and his brother Vladi Aprilov, a DJ and rapper. The two brothers' long-term engagement with the show has visibly raised it to a higher professional level, although at the same time it has left a strong personal imprint on its aesthetics. The professionalisation of the show was advanced further by other prominent figures who had been engaged in directing the show such as Hacho Boyadzhiev, well known as the director of numerous New Year's eve TV shows broadcast by Bulgarian national television.

Unlike in the 1990s, when it was not that uncommon to have contestants stumbling and blundering on stage, as the spectators would point out (for example "the public was dumbfounded when the beauties struggled to reproduce their poorly memorised lines"[30]; "there were girls who walked rather sluggishly and unsteadily on the stage"[31]), in the last decade or so the candidates selected at the preliminary casting undergo training on how to behave and perform on stage and attend numerous rehearsals so as to make a good show[32].

The impulse for spectacularisation of the contest is also observed in the introduction of a swimsuit round in the early 1990s, an innovation that the local media unequivocally applauded as it supposedly "illuminated the beauty and youthfulness of the candidates at their best"[33]. Although director Niki Aprilov tried to make the appearance of the girls in swimsuits on stage more discreet by having them wear voile scarves around their waists and by using theatrical effects such as smoke and fog (thus allegedly recreating the atmosphere of the Roman baths), the swimsuit round was nevertheless symptomatic of the invasion of global popular culture in the post-socialist world in the 1990s, promoting notions of beauty, eroticism and sexuality, commodified and objectified through products such as beauty pageants. The swimsuit round remained an indispensable element of the contest until 2008 when it was replaced with a round in sports outfit (wearing high heels nonetheless), and later on with a choreographed dance performance that varied each year[34]. For the sake of spectacularity, notwithstanding the typically cold weather in March (there was 60 cm of snow on that day in 2009, for instance), the contestants invariably wear long, open shoulder sleeveless formal dresses (even at the outdoor ceremony) and are visibly freezing most of the time.

The year 2008, shortly after a new mayor took office, was a watershed year for the festival and for the municipality's festive calendar as a whole. Among the changes introduced was a new ritual scenario for the crowning ceremony including a specially choreographed dance, conceived by the newly installed head of the Culture Department Dima Ukalska, a choreographer herself. In this "mystical" (as the hostess of the 2022 ceremony called it) ritual dance the Old Spring contestants would hand over the symbols of the town to the New Spring contestants. At the sound of spiritual instrumental music, the girls would raise their arms and lift the symbolic objects into the air in slow, solemn, and exaggerated moves, calling

to mind priestesses performing an ancient ritual (Fig. 3). The symbols themselves were changed: the town key, the sceptre and the apple were replaced with a round loaf of bread, an 'antique' Roman vessel filled with local mineral water, and a bowl of fruit, in line with the overall re-branding of the town, placing a strong emphasis on the town's Roman heritage and spa tourism potential in addition to its fruit growing traditions[35].



Fig. 3. The ritual ceremony of crowning the newly selected Kyustendil Spring Girl performed in the town centre, 2022. Photo: Svetla Kazalarska.

As Dima Ukalska said, the guiding idea of the new festivals in Kyustendil was "to express gratitude to nature, to Mother Earth, to the universe, to God for all that has been bestowed upon us here, all that our eyes don't see, but our souls feel"[36]. This implicit call to reinstate spirituality, restore the primal link to nature, preserve local traditions and pass them on to the younger generations, somewhat resonant with New Age spirituality and Neopaganism, goes hand in hand with Kyustendil Spring Day's overriding concerns with producing a spectacular effect. A case at hand is the recently introduced practice of performing the crowning ceremony twice, first in the town centre, and once again up on the Hisarlaka hill, so that more people can watch and appreciate it. Repeating a ritual ceremony might appear questionable in terms of ritual efficacy but it is justifiable in as much as it attracts a much larger spectatorship. Furthermore, the ritual of giving away bread and fruit (the symbols of local abundance and fertility) to the public after the ceremony (Fig. 4), although aesthetically effective and appealing to the public, seems somewhat problematic. As the festival takes place in March, when there are no local grapes and apples

available, it can only be presumed that the fruit given away is probably imported from abroad.



Fig. 4. A Kyustendil Spring contestant giving away bread to the audience after the crowing ceremony at the stage in Hisarlaka, 2022. Photo: Svetla Kazalarska.

Re-traditionalisation and folklorisation

In addition to the recurrent and omnipresent references to the uniqueness and ancient origin of the tradition of welcoming spring in Kyustendil in the official discourse, a number of recent innovations in the festive scenario provide further evidence for its ongoing (re-)traditionalisation and folklorisation.

An outdoor public prayer for the health, well-being and prosperity of Kyustendil and its residents was held by the local priests on March 21st for the first time, in 1996, and since then it has become a permanent element in the Kyustendil Spring Day program. Furthermore, in an attempt to restore the association of the holiday with the Eastern Orthodox tradition a new ritual has been invented recently. After the repeated performance of the crowning ceremony on Hisarlaka hill, the small party of old and new Kyustendil Spring girls would walk down the pathway to the sanctuary of the Holy Forty, situated right below the ruins of the fortress. In an almost private ceremony they would light candles, place a piece of the bread and some fruit as an offering on the stone (a fragment of an ancient aedicule), and give a libation of water on the ground in a highly ritualistic manner, allegedly re-enacting a tradition dating back to the pre-socialist times (Fig. 5). Indeed, in their accounts

of the holiday, going back to the 1960s and earlier, my respondents recall lighting candles at the sanctuary on their way up the hill to welcome spring on March 21st. As clarified above, after the Bulgarian Orthodox Church adopted the revised Julian calendar in 1968, the Day of the Holy Forty was no longer observed on March 21st, but 12 days earlier on March 9th. Thus, apart from making a conspicuous display of Orthodox revivalism, this 're-enactment' clearly appears unjustifiable today. In fact, the sanctuary seems nearly forgotten by the local community, regardless of the fact that a new chapel dedicated to the Holy Forty was built next to it with European funds in 2005 [37].



Fig. 5. Kyustendil Spring Girl titleholders at the sanctuary of the Holy Forty, 2023. Source: Kyustendil Municipality, Department of Culture and Spiritual Development. Available at https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=599902092183061&set=pb.100064898252141.-2207520000 (accessed 10/01/2025).

The other major innovation in the festive scenario, the 1997 introduction of a round in authentic folk costumes[38] from the region of Kyustendil, eventually became rather emblematic of the beauty contest. For a couple of years, the swimsuit round and the folk costume round co-existed, but with the new mayor coming to power at the end of 2007 the balance was tipped in favour of folk costumes, the erotic spectacular of the early post-socialist years thus giving way to the ethno-spectacular.

A slight digression here might offer an explanation of why this formula turned out to be so successful. Often referred to as "the town of painters", Kyustendil is strongly associated with the name of Vladimir Dimitrov 'the Master' (1882–1960), a renowned Bulgarian painter born in a nearby village[39]. Although he had worked in a number of genres (portraits, landscape, still life, war paintings), it is his colour-

ful paintings of peasant women and young girls in folk costume against the background of fruit trees and flowers that have become deeply embedded in the national imagination. Although these paintings were meant to allude to the universal link between man and nature, between the spiritual and the material (in accord with the ideas of Tolstoyism, which had influenced Dimitrov), their popular meaning has been reduced to an essentialisation of the beauty of Bulgarian women, and more generally of Bulgarianness. References to the beauty of Bulgarian women, and to the beauty of Kyustendil women in particular, are, in fact, among the most common comments on photos of Kyustendil Spring contestants in folk costumes posted in social media (for example, "Our national folk costumes highlight the beauty and spirituality of Bulgarian woman", "Beautiful girls wearing beautiful Kyustendil folk costumes, worthy of the paintbrush of Vladimir Dimitrov 'the Master'", or "They didn't need any makeup because they all looked as if they've come out of the Master's paintings"). Whether deliberately or not, the beauty contest has recently started re-creating 'living pictures' inspired by the Master's emblematic works, thus fostering strong ethno-cultural nationalist sentiments. The image of attractive young girls posing in folk costumes against the background of flowers, fruit, blossoming trees and folk embroidery patterns has thus become the iconic visual representation of Kyustendil Spring Day today (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6. Kyustendil Spring Girl contestants with a painting by Vladimir Dimitrov in the background, 2012. Kyustendil Municipality, Department of Culture and Spiritual Development. Available at https://www.facebook.com/pages/Кюстендилска-пролет-в-миналото-и-днес (accessed 22/11/2021), no longer available.

Political implications

As already suggested, the form and the content of the festival were contingent on political factors such as changes in the local government: a new mayor would inevitably come up with innovations in the festive scenario. Nevertheless, the festival was openly politicised only in single cases, for example in 2004 one of the candidates for mayor, Lyudmil Stoyanov, won the elections leading a campaign under the motto "Let there be Kyustendil Spring", Kyustendil Spring thus serving as a metaphor for the region's prosperity. More often than not, the political implications of the holiday have been rather subtle. For instance, some of the criticism raised at Kyustendil Spring Day – as concerns, for example, the non-transparency of the festival's funding, the concentration of its management in the hands of the same people for years, its outdated aesthetics, etc. – has actually implied criticism of the overall politics of the mayor currently in power.

The issue of the public accessibility of the festival also has an implicit political dimension. In line with the gradual privatisation of the event in the early years of post-socialist transition, public access to the beauty contest in particular became restricted in the 1990s and 2000s, even if the event was broadcasted live on the local cable TV. Free passes and paid tickets for the beauty contest, which in this period took place in the theatre hall, were limited in number and their distribution was largely in the hands of the municipality and the sponsors. In 2008, for instance, 300 free passes were distributed by the mayor, 229 tickets were sold as donations to the festival, 78 seats were offered to the sponsors, and 41 seats reserved for media representatives[40], meaning that only one third of the theatre seats were available for sale to the public. The situation changed in 2009, when the local government decided to move the contest outdoors to the town square (despite the heavy snowfall that year), thus making it truly public again, free and accessible to all.

The crowning ceremony, on the other hand, has mainly been performed outdoors with some variations in its venue. It took place in the town square in the 1960s and 1970s, then due to the festival's growing ambitions and popularity it moved to the town stadium in the late 1980s, afterwards it was staged either in the town square or in the area in front of the art gallery, which provides sufficient space for an open-air event. The newly built open-air stage, called the Bazilikata, up on Hisarlaka hill, built after the reconstruction of the fortress in 2015, has become the venue for the crowning ceremony in recent years.

The availability of new communication technologies in the new century, which allowed voting by SMS, for instance, further facilitated the participation of the public in the beauty contest, i.e. in its democratisation. The selection of the public's favourite contestant, an allegedly new democratic practice had, however, already been introduced in the late socialist years.

In terms of social inclusivity, however, the Kyustendil Spring beauty contest appears to have been pronouncedly ethnically monocultural throughout the years. Although there is a considerable Roma minority living in the town, I have only come upon a single case of a Roma entrant listed among the final contestants, in 2010. In fact, an alternative Miss Roma Spring contest was organised on March 22nd by a local NGO called Roma Centre for Regional Development for a couple of years, from 2010 to 2017.

When it comes to the instrumentalisation of Kyustendil Spring Girl titleholders as town ambassadors, their function has been rather limited, i.e. it is mainly 'decorative'. Apart from advertising the town's cultural and natural heritage sites, they are expected, occasionally, to welcome official guests, take part in charity initiatives organised by the municipality, participate in town celebrations (for example, to give away national flags to town residents and guests on March 3rd, Bulgaria's Liberation Day holiday), and attend some of the newly introduced town festivals. None of the titleholders, however, has taken advantage of her status to raise awareness of a given social or political cause that she is personally committed to[41].

Kyustendil Spring Day in local identity discourse

That Kyustendil Spring Day is emblematic for the town, is indisputable in the public discourse. Perceived as an ancient tradition that has been passed down from generation to generation, its significance for the local community lies in the fact that it offers an opportunity not only for social gathering, but also for self-representation. Even if the socialist version of the festival had already been strongly committed to constructing and promoting images of local identity – the fruit-growing traditions, the mineral water, the ancient Roman heritage[42] were frequently alluded to in the carnival – it was only recently that Kyustendil Spring Day has been deliberately and strategically used for town branding and the promotion of cultural tourism. Once again, it appears that this change was contingent on the new local government which came to power at the end of 2007 and, among other things, applied a more integral approach to the management of the festival.

In recent years, Kyustendil Spring contestants have been actively engaged in advertising the local historic and cultural sites, in particular the local Orthodox churches and Hisarlaka fortress. Needless to say the Ottoman heritage of Kyustendil (i.e. two mosques, a Turkish bath, Pirgova kula (an Ottoman medieval tower house)) was altogether excluded from these representations[43]. Promoting local art heritage has also been on the agenda, as the largest event in the cultural program of the festival is the opening of an eponymous fine arts exhibition in the local art gallery (named after Vladimir Dimitrov the Master). Furthermore, the contestants have been involved in the promotion of natural heritage sites, for example, in 2018,

they took part in a photo session advertising the adjacent Osogovo mountain and its potential for skiing and winter tourism; they also supported the nomination of the gigantic sequoias in nearby Yuchbunar for the annual European Tree of the Year contest.

Conclusion

The imperatives of global popular culture and the new economic and political realities after the collapse of the socialist regime in Bulgaria have brought about the introduction of new actors, symbols, rituals and venues in the old festive scenario of Kyustendil Spring Day. As the analysis has shown, two distinct periods in its development in the post-socialist period can be distinguished. In the tumultuous 1990s, in the context of severe economic and political crises, the holiday was radically "privatised" by local businessmen (i.e. sponsors), commercialised (i.e. patented as a festival), and spectacularised (i.e. professionally produced as a show). In recent years, however, after a new mayor took office at the end of 2007, the year Bulgaria became a member of the European Union, the festival was re-claimed by the local municipality, re-traditionalised, and instrumentalised in local town branding strategies. In a sense, these two periods could be interpreted along the lines of ritual decline in the 1990s, and ritual revitalisation and re-enchantment in the past two decades or so.

The major changes the festival underwent since 1989 could be summarised as follows: the traditional family picnic up on the hill was once and for all left behind in the past and replaced with fast-food snacking or dining downtown; the carnival was discontinued and overshadowed by the beauty contest; swimsuits were introduced in the contest and later substituted with folk costumes; the venue of the contest changed from an indoor hall to an outdoor stage in the town square (implying a shift from restricted to free public access); the sponsorship of the festival was transferred from local semi-criminal businessmen to the municipality and large corporate sponsors. In other words, from a traditional community holiday (i.e. a *feast*), a spontaneous, participatory outburst of public joy with dominant social functions, Kyustendil Spring Day has gradually become a professionally produced cultural event (i.e. a *festival*), meant for passive spectatorship and consumption of local patriotism and identity with a national ethno-cultural twist. Paradoxically, this shift from a feast to a festival predates 1989, as these processes were already underway in the socialist years.

The post-socialist attempts at re-semantising Kyustendil Spring Day seem coherent with the ongoing processes of reconfiguring tradition(s) in Europe in general, grasped through notions such as re-enchantment, ritualisation, and heritage-making (cf. Isnart, Testa 2020). The newly re-invented aesthetic form and symbolic

content of Kyustendil Spring Day – borrowing from the 'ancient traditions' of the Romans and Thracians, integrating both Orthodox religious ceremonies and ritualised performances evoking neo-pagan spirituality, and reproducing the imagery of ethno-cultural nationalism – appear to be in sync with the observations of other scholars studying the post-socialist transformations of festive cultures in Central and Eastern Europe.

In my interpretation, in spite of its subtle political implications and entanglement with local business dynamics, the festival's significance remains largely centred on its meaning for the local community and its embeddedness in the local identity discourse. Kyustendil Spring Day has failed, however, to move beyond the 'carnivalesque' and become 'ritualesque' (in Jack Santino's terms)[44], i.e. to achieve "a permanent social impact beyond the space and time of the event itself" through its performative use of symbolic actions and objects (Santino 2016: 90).

The seemingly undisputed success of Kyustendil Spring Day as a town holiday today, in fact, has been challenged by some of my respondents, who raise critical voices about its exhausted social function and commercialisation in the present: "it has been running round in circles"; "it has become suspended in time"; "these are pseudo-images of pseudo-symbols of fertility"; "it needs more artistry and more spontaneity"; "it has become a sugary, bland, overused provincial chewing gum for local patriotic showiness, without an adequate, meaningful, and useful content, relevant to the changing reality". As marginal as these voices may seem, they indicate that the holiday might have reached a critical point in its 'life course', and that new re-inventions, i.e. new re-semantisation, would be needed to save its relevance for the local community in the future.

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Notes

[1] On December 30th, 1967, the Presidium of the National Assembly issued a decree on the gradual introduction of a five-day work week, a process completed in mid-1970s that eventually brought about substantial changes in the structure of the free time of the working people.

[2] On the emergence of anthropology of festivals and festive studies, see, for example, Svoboda 2011, Frost 2016, Rusu and Kantola 2016, Fournier 2017, 2019, Testa 2014, 2019.

[3] The present paper, admittedly, adds yet another case study to this expanding body of scholarship, as undertaking a comprehensive, comparative transnational approach is well beyond the scope of any single paper, neither is making an exhaustive survey of the existing literature on the post-socialist transformations of the festive cultures and festive calendars of Eastern and Central Europe.

[4] Old photos from Kyustendil Facebook group. Available: https://www.facebook.com/groups/924100421037224/ (accessed 15/01/2023).

[5] Kyustendil Spring Day in the Past and Today Facebook page. No longer available: https://www.facebook.com/pages/Кюстендилска-пролет-в-миналото-и-днес.

[6] Similarly to most small and middle-sized towns in Bulgaria, Kyustendil has a shrinking population. It reached a peak of 54,000 residents in 1985 and has been gradually declining since then. As per the Civil Registration and Administrative Services General Directorate it had around 43,000 residents in 2024.

[7] The Pautalian Asclepeion (built 1st to 2nd century AD) was situated at the foot of the hill, known today as Hisarlaka, and was the second largest on the Balkan peninsula comparable in size to the temple in Pergamum. It included not only baths but also a number of public buildings such as temples to other deities, a gymnasium, a stadium, a theatre and a park.

[8] As early as 1896 the first national fruit-growing trade exhibition was organized in Kyustendil with over 130 exhibitors from the region (Entsiklopedichen rechnik Kyustendil 1988: 455).

[9] The relatively recent "birth date" of the festival, its explicit authorship, as well as its presumed rootedness in "ancient traditions" all provide grounds for employing Hobsbawm and Ranger's well-established term (1983).

[10] On the symbolism of the food brought to the feast, see Kotev 2016: 65-66.

[11] Other interpretations associate the local tradition of welcoming spring on March 21st also with the Dionysian mysteries, the cult of the Thracian/Phrygian god Sabazios, the cult of ancient Phrygian mother-goddess Cybele and her consort Attis, and the cult of the patrons of Pautalia's mineral springs – Asclepius, his daughter Hygeia, her brother Telesphorus and the three graces (Spasova 2004; Kotev 2016; Farkov 1990).

[12] The day of spring equinox used to coincide with the day on which the Orthodox Church honored the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste (the Holy Forty) but after the revised Julian calendar was adopted by the Bulgarian Orthodox Church in 1968, the Day of the Holy Forty was no longer observed on March 21st, but 12 days earlier – on March 9th.

[13] I have borrowed Gerald Creed's fitting metaphor (Creed 1998).

[14] The first edition of the festival took place in 1967 when, for the first time, it followed a specially developed scenario written by Kiril Poromanski – head of the local culture department at the time.

[15] The actual name of the contest in Bulgarian is Devoyka Kyustendilska Prolet, i.e. Kyustendil Spring Maiden. However, it is usually referred to as Miss Kyustendil Spring in popular discourse.

[16] It was on November 10th, 1989, that Todor Zhivkov, Bulgaria's long-standing communist leader, was forced to resign all his posts after an internal party coup.

[17] Chavdarov, Nikola 1990. "Dobre doshla, prolet zhivotvorna" (Welcome, Life-Giving Spring). *Zvezda*, No. 23, 23 March.

[18] Numerous letters signed by the mayor of Kyustendil seeking funding from prospective sponsors in the 1990s testify to the festival's precarious financial situation (cf. State Archives – Kyustendil, Fond 562, Inventory 8, File 142).

[19] An indispensable element in the cultural program, however, is the eponymous fine arts exhibition, launched in 1978.

[20] After Vasil Iliev's assassination in 1995, his brother – Georgi Iliev (assassinated ten years later – in 2005), took over his sponsorship "duties".

[21] VMRO is an acronym for "Vatreshna makedonska revolyutsionna organizatsia" [Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization].

[22] Telecommunication companies and mobile network operators, along with banks, retail chains, cosmetics, and food and beverage companies, emerged as major advertisers and sponsors in the years of post-socialist transition.

[23] As of 2023, the Kyustendil Spring titleholder receives a monetary award of only 1,500 leva, i.e. about the size of the average monthly salary.

[24] Unknown 2018. 16-godishnata Militsa stana Devoyka Kyustendilska prolet (16-year-old Militsa became Miss Kyustendil Spring). *Dnes.bg*, 18 March. Available: https://m.dnes.bg/comments.php?id=371065&cp=1 (accessed 15/01/2023.)

[25] A quote from comments to a photo from 2012, posted in the Kyustendil Spring Day in the Past and Today Facebook group (no longer available). The photo features the contestants wearing folk costumes, standing in front of paintings by Vladimir Dimitrov 'the Master', exhibited in the town's art gallery.

[26] *Mutresa* is a slang word for the wife or mistress of a *mutra* (literally meaning mug-face), a Bulgarian gangster, typically a former athlete in sports such as weightlifting, wrestling, boxing, etc., involved in organised crime groups; also implying a specific post-socialist subculture and lifestyle.

[27] Unknown 2018. 16-godishnata Militsa stana Devoyka Kyustendilska prolet [16-year-old Militsa became Miss Kyustendil Spring]. *Dnes.bg*, 18 March. Available: https://m.dnes.bg/comments.php?id=371065&cp=1 [Accessed 15.01.2023.]

[28] Nikov, Detelin 1995. Shou spektakal, po-dobar ot vseki [A show spectacle better than the rest]. *Pautalia*, No. 20, 14 March.

[29] In 2011, even the United States ambassador to Bulgaria, James Warlick, served as a member of the jury.

[30] Unknown 1995. Kyustendil izbra simvola na proletta (Kyustendil has chosen its spring symbol). *Nova Balgaria*, No. 310, 13 March.

[31] Kirilova, Dimitrinka 2003. Vesela Stoyanova e devoyka 'Kyustendilska prolet 2003' (Vesela Stoyanova is Miss Kyustendil Spring 2003). *Nova Balgaria*, No. 2723, 17 March 2003.

[32] Not much attention was paid to their intellectual qualities or personal aspirations. Their hobbies, as shared with the public during the contest or in interviews published in the local press, were most often rather predictable: hanging out with friends, travelling, listening to music, watching movies, dancing, and occasionally reading.

[33] Atanasova, Kornelia 1995. Parvoto proletno taynstvo sabra 13 krasivi momicheta (The first spring mystery brought together 13 beautiful girls). *Kyustendil*, No. 11, 16–22 March.

[34] For example, a dance with umbrellas in 2012, a Brazilian dance in 2013, a Spanish dance in 2014, a folk dance and a review in Roman gowns in 2015, a dance with hoops in 2016, etc.

[35] The new festive calendar of the town also corresponded with these re-branding efforts: the newly introduced and re-introduced festivals (the Cherry Festival in June, the Panagia Cultural Forum on August 15th, the Day of the Assumption of Virgin Mary (essentially a festival dedicated to bread), the Ulpia Pautalia: Awakening of the Town of Springs Antique Festival in August, and the Harvest Festival in September) were all designed to highlight Kyustendil's cultural and economic assets.

[36] Interview with Dima Ukalska conducted on July 14th, 2021.

[37] The chapel, however, was not consecrated because of violations of the iconographic canon and was sealed off by the authorities in 2010. When I visited it in 2021 and 2022, although visibly neglected, it was open and an improvised place for lighting candles was arranged inside.

[38] The costumes were provided by the local historical museum.

[39] Vladimir Dimitrov 'the Master' (1882–1960) is among the most prominent representatives of the Rodno izkustvo (National Art) movement in Bulgarian art and literature of the 1920s.

[40] Unknown 2008. *Shto mi e milo i drago, che se e prolet puknala!* (How sweet and nice it feels that spring has set in). *Kyustendilska prolet*, No. 12, p. 4.

[41] The only exception I have come across is Aleksandra Decheva – Miss Kyustendil Spring 2004 – who made a commitment to visit local orphanages along with her assistants at least once a month throughout the year.

[42] On the local appropriation and re-valorisation of ancient Roman heritage in Bulgaria (as a "proof of belonging to the European civilization"), and its incorporation into the national past, both in the socialist period and today, see Strahilov 2021.

[43] On the problematic 'heritagisation' of the Ottoman legacy in Bulgaria, see Karakusheva, Strahilov 2015, 2018.

[44] On Jack Santino's notion of 'ritualesque', see also Santino 2009, 2011.

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Bibliographical Note

Svetla Kazalarska is an Assistant Professor at the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. She was awarded a PhD in Cultural Anthropology from Sofia St. Kliment Ohridski University in 2011. She is the author of *The Museum of Communism: Between Memory and History, Politics and the Market* (2013), published in Bulgarian, and numerous articles in the fields of her research interests: anthropology of socialism and post-socialism; critical heritage studies; museology; festive studies; urban anthropology.

E-mail: svetla.kazalarska@gmail.com, svetla.kazalarska@iefem.bas.bg

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A Festival For Locals or For Tourists? The Ritual Year in Three Southeastern Lithuanian Settlements

Žilvytis Šaknys

Department of Ethnology and Anthropology, Lithuanian Institute of History, Vilnius, Lithuania

shaknys@gmail.com

Abstract: This article deals with the ritual year in the famous historical settlements of southeastern Lithuania – Trakai, Kernavė, and Medininkai. My aim is to show how newly created commercial holidays are perceived by local populations and to show the locations of these holidays in their 'personal ritual year'. In order to achieve this goal I have analysed the current state (non-working days), parish church and newly created local 'historical' festivals, analysing their duration, seasonality and how they are appreciated by local populations. The main source is ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2017 and 2019 within the framework of the Lithuanian Institute of History's Leisure, Celebrations and Rituals in the Vicinity of Vilnius: Social and Cultural Aspects programme. Online ethnographic sources were also used. In the article I come to the conclusion that the formation of new holidays is a rather complex process. Even the mobilisation of cultural heritage, the introduction of a commercial character, the longer duration of the holiday, and the right season cannot guarantee that the local people will really appreciate a holiday if it is not linked to a specific date with valuable content. Such holidays are St. John's Day, as a symbol of resistance to Soviet ideology, and the day of the coronation of the first Lithuanian king, i.e. State Day.

Keywords: local population, cultural heritage, commercialisation, ritual year

Introduction

According to the research of archaeologist Arvydas Molonaitis, who analysed local people's attitudes towards hillforts in Lithuania, despite the fact that the majority of his respondents mention the hillfort as a witness of the past, they first of all

view it through emotional and family prisms. Though residents cannot say much about 'their' hillfort, it is still a strong centre of attraction, a refuge where one can spend some time on one's own, relax, admire the view, take a breath, dream about something. Hillforts are places where children, grandchildren and guests are taken and shown around. As shown by the answers of his respondents, most residents are satisfied with hillfort neighbourhoods, which have become indispensable parts of their lives (Malonaitis 2019: 137). This is one of the rare glimpses of cultural heritage through the eyes of locals rather than tourists.

However, cultural heritage can be closely related to tourism and commercialisation. As John Helsloot noticed, in the 1970s new rituals and celebrations were devised on a mass scale in Western Europe. Their organisers sought to 'revive' and legitimise these celebrations. They usually formed a locally suitable product from the ingredients of folklore, tradition and history. In these kinds of festival, commerce, no less than other interest groups, tends to turn people's emotions towards specific rituals (Helsloot 2008: 98–99). In Lithuania, this process has been delayed for several decades. However, after Lithuania joined the European Union, we can already see those processes that took place in Europe being expressed in this country. As Reinhard Johler mentioned, in many parts of Europe, we can observe a massive mobilisation of "cultural heritage". The "local" became a museum object of interest, regional foodstuffs are extremely popular and trade fairs, farmers markets, regional festivals and customs are being revitalised in many places all over Europe (Johler 2002: 12). I have no doubt (and I have confirmed this during fieldwork) that cultural heritage is important to local people as a source of economic well-being. Many local people are involved in one way or another in serving tourists and organising public events. It changes the daily life of the local population. Leisure and entertainment infrastructure is being formed at their place of residence. But questions arise: how are people's festive lives changing, and what is their attitude towards these new local 'historical' holidays? And how do they value these holidays in comparison with the religious holidays of their parish and the state holidays?

This article deals with the ritual year in the famous historical settlements of southeastern Lithuania – Trakai, Kernavė, and Medininkai. My aim is to show how newly created commercial festivals are perceived by local populations and to show the place of these holidays in their 'personal ritual year'. It is very important to show this process when comparing holidays in settlements in different administrative affiliations and of different sizes. To achieve this goal, in this article I shall analyse current state holidays, parish church holidays and newly created local 'historical' festivities, analysing their duration, seasonality and how they are appreciated by local populations.

The main source for understanding the festivals celebrated in these areas is ethnographic fieldwork. My ethnographic fieldwork was conducted during short

one-day field trips between 2017 and 2019 within the framework of the Lithuanian Institute of History's Leisure, Celebrations and Rituals in the Vicinity of Vilnius: Social and Cultural Aspects programme. Through semi-structured interviews respondents were asked questions about the holidays they celebrated with friends[1] in the current year. The researched areas can be defined as a multicultural space. My respondents were mainly Lithuanians and Poles (15 and 4 respectively; all were Roman Catholic) as well as two Karaims (Karaite religion), one Russian (Orthodox), and one Byelorussian (Roman Catholic). Among the respondents, women dominated (18 females, 5 males); the age of the respondents ranged from 19 to 93, with most aged between 40 and 60. Online sources were also used, which became a form of supplementary material for field research on the examined locations. In order to obtain information on the most important public 'historical' festivals promoted by local authorities in these areas, I focused on online information from 2019, the last year before the Covid-19 pandemic (during which all festivals in Lithuania were banned).

Briefly about the studied areas

The history of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania's important political centres has led these areas to fulfil a different destiny today. The former capital of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (before 1323), Trakai, is a city and the administrative centre of Trakai District Municipality (5,426 inhabitants, majority Lithuanian). In 2020, it was the Cultural Capital of Lithuania. At the same time, it is most famous for its 15th-century island castle. Trakai is also famous for its Karaite cultural heritage (dating back to the late 14th century); its beautiful natural surroundings also attract tourists. According to Lina Leparskienė, "The people of Trakai were quite poor, but their lives improved significantly in the 1960s and 1970s. As soon as the rebuilt island castle became a museum, tourists flocked to the area. Construction of restaurants and apartment buildings began in the city, as did the paving of old and new streets" (Leparskienė, Baltėnas 2019: 27). Trakai is the only case among the areas studied where tourism began to develop during the years of Soviet occupation. Trakai Castle was reconstructed in 1961 and was the largest state investment in Lithuanian culture during the occupation (Rindzevičiūtė 2010: 181–203). In the last decade, Trakai has been the only area among those studied that has experienced population growth.



Fig. 1. Trakai, 2021. Photo: Ž. Šaknys.

Kernavė is the former administrative centre of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. It was a large city in the 12th to 14th centuries and is often referred to as the former capital of Lithuania. Today, it is a small town (238 inhabitants, the majority of whom are Lithuanian). In 1938, it was described as a small church town with dozens of farms, three shops, a post office and a police station. Only a majestic church and a modern two-storey brick elementary school adorn the poor village (Lučūnas, Grigonienė 2021: 6). The State Cultural Reserve of Kernavė was established in 1989. The present cultural reserve, declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2004, contains complex archaeological layers from prehistoric times, and the entire area is used only for cultural tourism and scientific research (Kernavė Archaeological Site 2004). The majority of the town's population is involved in tourism and scientific activity. Kernavė is also home to the Museum of History and Archaeology, which dates back to the 1930s and was completely reconstructed and modernised in 2012 (Lučūnas, Grigonienė 2021: 7).



Fig. 2. Kernavė hillforts, 2021. Photo: Ž. Šaknys. 2021.

Medininkai village (413 inhabitants, mainly Poles Polish nationality) is famous for Medininkai Castle, the largest in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. It was considered a town from the 14th to 17th century. Later, Medininkai fell into disrepair and has recently been reduced to the size of a village. In addition to the castle, there is a high school, a school for border guards, a library, and a post office. Since 2004, the castle has belonged to the Trakai History Museum, which adapted it for tourist purposes and restored the northeastern tower of the castle, the so-called *donjon* (dungeon). Between 2010 and 2012, the castle was further restored and turned into a museum. Educational activities are conducted there, as well as many events that attract tourists. Medininkai, like Kernavė, changes a lot during the holidays, when the number of visitors is many times higher than the local population.

These three places are small settlements close to Vilnius (within a radius of 30–35 km to the north, east, and west). However, all three are rich in tourist attractions and experience an increase in traffic during festivals and holidays. In addition to traditional, religious and ethnic festivals, newly created festivals are also celebrated, such as the Medieval Festival (Medininkai, Trakai), the International Festival of Experimental Archaeology, known as the Days of Live Archaeology in Kernavė, the Trakai Summer city festival, the Festival of Old Crafts (Medininkai, Trakai) and others (Šaknys 2023a: 48–51).



Fig. 3. Fragment of the Medininkai Castle, 2018. Photo: Ž. Šaknys.

State, church, and local newly created 'historical' festivities

Current state holidays (non-working days) in Lithuania can be divided into two categories. The first are traditional holidays, including Christmas Eve and the first and second days of Christmas (25 and 26 December), New Year's Day, Easter Sunday and Easter Monday, St. John's Day (24 June), Assumption Day (15 August), and All Saints' Day (1 November). Modern public holidays have no connection with religion and are a relatively recent concept, dating back at least 150 years. The oldest is International Labour Day (1 May, first celebrated in 1886), as well as three national holidays: State Restoration Day (16 February, celebrated since 1919), Restoration of Independence Day (11 March, since 1991) and State Day (6 July, since 1990); state holidays also include Mother's Day and Father's Day (always on a Sunday, both celebrated as state holidays in Lithuania since 1990) (Šaknys 2023b: 256–268).

Church holidays are specific parish holidays that are unique to one locality and distinguish it from others. These are defined as specific local holidays that bring together not only the people of the area, but also their relatives and friends, or complete strangers. According to Orvar Löfgren, the emergence of modern leisure is historically linked to religious tourism (Löfgren 1999). In the words of ethnologist Juozas Kudirka, in the 19th and early 20th centuries church holidays were not only

celebrated by the parish, but were also a traditional annual occasion for people to come together (Kudirka 1996: 18). The church holiday was a good opportunity for young people from several villages to get together; for girls it was often the only opportunity to visit another village or town and have fun (Šaknys 2001: 25). The Holidays and Recreation Laws of 1925 and 1930 state that "...holidays and days of rest are also local parish holidays, but only in the places where they are celebrated" (Švenčių ir poilsio įstatymas 1925; Švenčių ir poilsio įstatymas 1930). During the Soviet occupation, public celebration of religious festivals was restricted, with these holidays moved to weekends (Streikus 2002; Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2016: 9–34). In recent years, church holidays have usually been moved to a Sunday if they do not coincide with a state holiday, as local parish church holidays are working days.

Church holidays are usually held several times a year; the most important are the feasts of the saints after whom a particular church is named. In Kernavė, for example, the church of Our Lady of the Scapular is celebrated on three feast days: Our Lady of the Scapular (16 July), St. Roch (16 August), and St. George (23 April). All three holidays are moved to the following Sunday. In Medininkai, we have the Church of the Holy Trinity and St. Casimir, with the feast of St. Casimir (4 March), the Blessed Virgin Mary, Queen of Angels (2 August), the transfer of the relics of St. Casimir (26 August), St. Francis of Assisi (4 October), and Pentecost (11 May to 12 June). This last holiday is celebrated at the traditional time, as the first day of the church holiday always falls on a Sunday. In Trakai, at the Basilica of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Day of Our Lady of Trakai, the patron saint of Lithuania, is celebrated for eight days, from the 1st to the 8th of September. This is the most important feast in Trakai, characterised by a large number of believers and numerous events. The holiday is characterised exclusively by religious events, with pilgrims receiving the most attention. Every year, on 15 August, during the celebration of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, and on 8 September, during the celebration of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary, religious holidays are held in the church of New Trakai. These holidays are often called Trakiniai. Pilgrimage processions are organised from the Gates of Dawn, Aušros vartai, in Vilnius to Trakai. The tradition of such journeys, which was restricted and disappeared during the Soviet era, was revived after Lithuania regained its independence. Today, we can also see changes in the way the Nativity of the Virgin Mary is celebrated[2]. If we compare the religious holidays in Trakai with those in other areas, we can highlight more public events related to the services offered in this city. For example, during the feast of Our Lady of Trakai, the Festival of Coloured Smiles is held, during which the town community, pilgrims, and guests socialise to the sound of music. Creative workshops are organised for children and everyone feasts on so-called 'military porridge' and cakes baked by parishioners (Semionovė 2020: 371). On the feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, in addition to solemn services, a

procession is organised through the town in honour of the painted image of Our Lady of Trakai – the patron saint of Lithuania, famous for her miraculous powers, a *Kopūstinis kermošius* (cabbage market) is held, and there are many events (traditional historical games, handicraft demonstrations) and performances by artistic folklore groups (Semionovė 2020: 371). This event attracts great interest from tourists from all over Lithuania and abroad. Meanwhile, Orthodox and Karaite believers in the city are known to celebrate their holidays more within the boundaries of the religious community.

However, we should distinguish the new, non-religious, local holidays celebrated in certain towns and villages. As the population of the areas surveyed is not the same and the number of holidays can vary, we used online sources to highlight the most frequently mentioned holidays in 2019.

In 2019, the main focus of the media was the celebration of Trakai Summer 2019. The celebration lasted three days, from 31 May to 2 June. There were events for children, an amateur art festival, a wind orchestra festival, an international tourism fair, a yacht regatta, an international children's football tournament, a fair, a concert with the castle as a backdrop, and a festival of national minorities with Lithuanian, Polish, Russian, Jewish, Karaite, Tatar, Roma, Greek, German and Armenian song and dance ensembles (Trakai kvapą gniaužiančiu... 2019). According to the fieldwork, the festival was primarily aimed at tourists. Therefore, my interviewees couldn't say anything about it. The festival is named after the Summer Opening Festival, a popular festival genre from the Soviet era. However, its history as a city festival began in the 1990s. That was the year when Lithuania was finally free of atheist propaganda, and it was possible to celebrate traditional holidays.

The town of Kernavė, based on online sources, still celebrates two of its most important festivals, which are related to the state calendar and were well known to my respondents, many of whom were involved in their organisation. Rasos (St. John's Day) is worth distinguishing here. According to the promotional information for 2019, during the festival, bonfires are lit, wreaths are woven and floated on local lakes, people search for a mythical fern flower, and they sail, dance and sing. The event ends in the morning with people greeting the rising sun (Joninės Kernavėje 2019). The next festival – Live Archaeology Days in Kernavė – lasted three days, from 5 to 7 July 2019. It is a festival of experimental archaeology and historical reconstruction, a celebration of archaic crafts, warfare, and music that has been bringing like-minded people from different places in Lithuania and Europe together for 20 years (Kernavė Archaeological Site 2019).

Rasos in Kernavė can be called not only a traditional but also a historical holiday. This holiday has been celebrated by academic youth since 1967 as a reconstruction of pre-Christian customs. In an effort to avoid the attention of the Soviet authorities, the first festival was organised in 1967 in the ancient Lithuanian capital of

Kernavė by the Society of Friends of India, which was founded in Vilnius and included a number of philology professors and students from Vilnius University. In reality, the festival should be associated with the Ramuva Club of Vilnius Regional Ethnographers, which was founded only in 1969. Three festivals (in 1967, 1968 and 1969) were held on a semi-legal basis. In 1969, the highest government institutions banned the festival. As early as 1970, participants in the Rasos festival in Kernavė were evicted on the pretext that the festival could not be held in the reserve. In KGB documents, the Rasos festival in Kernavė was called a "nationalist rally", and the organisation of the festival was considered anti-Soviet activity. However, despite all the obstacles, bans and persecution, the Rasos festival continued to be celebrated in Kernavė and other Lithuanian towns (Ramanauskaitė 2004: 55–56; Matulevičienė 2007: 64–69; Šidiškis 2008: 56–63; Šaknys 2014: 141). It is true, as the people of Kernavė said, that during the Soviet era the locals did not take part in these celebrations, rather it was a celebration by and for visiting academic youth. The locals were attracted to St. John's Day when it started to be celebrated legally and the holiday took on a commercial character.

Mindaugas' Coronation Day, on the other hand, was 'invented' as a holiday only in 1990. And the Days of Live Archaeology in Kernavė have only been celebrated since 1999.

The two-day Medieval Festival is held at Medininkai castle. In 2019, it was the main festival in that town. It is organised by the Trakai Museum, of which the castle is a branch. According to Alvyga Zmejevskienė, director of the Trakai Museum, the Medieval Festival was born and held in the castle on the Trakai peninsula for 21 years. In 2019, however, the castle was reconstructed and the festival moved to Medininkai. This festival is also held in June. The festival features not only medieval warfare, weapons demonstrations and knight's tournaments, but also handicrafts, medieval dances, and music.

In the words of Pierre Nora, history is a reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present (Nora 1989: 8). The question therefore arises as to whether these celebrations, from the point of view of the local population, can be called a *lieu de mémoire*, a memory space?

The duration of the holidays

Traditionally, the most important holidays in Lithuania lasted several days. In eastern Lithuania, at the beginning of the 20th century, the three most important annual holidays – Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost – were celebrated for four days each. The Holidays and Recreation Laws of 1925 and 1930 stipulated that two days should be set aside for the celebration of these holidays. Good Friday and Holy

Saturday before Easter, and Christmas Eve were also designated non-working days (Švenčių ir poilsio įstatymas 1925; Švenčių ir poilsio įstatymas 1930). During the Soviet occupation, Labour Day was celebrated on two days (1 and 2 May), as was the anniversary of the October Revolution (7 and 8 November). Thus, we see that several days of rest (non-working days) were reserved for more important holidays. In recent years, Christmas and Easter have been celebrated on two days each in Lithuania, and Christmas Eve is also considered a day off work or school (Šaknys 2015:103–107).

The feasts of the Trakai Catholic Church and the accompanying secular events vary in their duration. The Day of Our Lady of Trakai lasts the longest, up to eight days, and the Feast of the Assumption in this town and its accompanying events (in 2019) lasted four days. From the local festivals we analysed, we can see that the Trakai Summer festival and Live Archaeology Days in Kernavė were celebrated for three days, the Medieval Festival in Medininkai for two days, and only Rasos (St. John's Day) was celebrated for one day. However, this holiday also began in Kernavė on 23 June at 12 noon with the opening of the craft, folk art, and culinary heritage fair and ended on 24 June at 4.30 am with greeting the rising sun and washing in dew on the hills. The duration of these events thus corresponded to the duration of the most important holidays. On the other hand, this duration was important for tourists and for the organisation of commercial aspects. But is this an important indicator of the popularity of the holiday among the local population?

Holiday and season

Another question is whether the seasonality of the newly created 'local holiday' is important for tourists and locals. Due to Lithuania's climate, most tourists arrive in the summer. For example, in 2019, 37.4% of tourists who came to Lithuania that year arrived between June and August. Thus, summer is the best time to organise festivals and attract tourists (Turizmo statistika). The visitor statistics of the Trakai Tourism Information Centre also show very different tourist flows in different months. In February 2019, 3,950 tourists were served, while in August this was 24,095 (Trakų turizmo informacijos centro lankytojų statistika)[3].

The first attempt to commercialise holidays was made during the Lithuanian national revival at the end of the 19th century. Martynas Jankus and other public figures from Lithuania Minor initiated the revival of certain Lithuanian customs in 1884. Midsummer on Rambynas Hill was celebrated with a magnificent bonfire and an eloquent programme that included not only pagan priests and priestesses, but also speeches exhorting the audience to hold on to their national aspirations, not to be broken in spirit, and to retain their Lithuanian identity. The festival became a tradition. In 1896, Lithuanian activists bought part of the hill. The formerly private

land became an area for Lithuanian public events in the Kingdom of Prussia. The purchase of the rest of the hill for Lithuanian needs was planned. However, the need to create a Lithuanian identity was accompanied by the desire to raise funds for Lithuanian organisations. There were plans to build a restaurant on the reclaimed land, which would bring profit to the Lithuanian associations (Šaknys 2014: 138).

However, the seasonality of the holiday does not always guarantee its popularity. Previous analysis of the dynamics of the development of national holidays shows that four holidays were considered the most important between 1919 and 1940: the Day of the Restoration of the State of Lithuania (16 February) 1919–1923, the Day of the Constituent Assembly of Lithuania (15 May) 1924–1928, Žolinė (Assumption, 15 August) in 1929, and the Day of the Coronation of Vytautas the Great (8 September) 1930–1939. These holidays acquired special significance at different times. The most important state holiday chosen by the government was called National Day. Each change in National Day was justified by the fact that the climatic conditions and the (heavy) workload of the people on the farms made it more convenient for the general public to celebrate the holiday. However, the timing of a particular festival in spring or summer did not guarantee its longevity; the most important holiday today is still the celebration on 16 February (Šaknys 2018: 129–154), even though it is in winter, during the coldest month in Lithuania.

If we compare the seasonality of state holidays, parish church holidays, and the most important new local holidays from 2019, we notice some differences. While state holidays are celebrated in all seasons, church holidays are concentrated in the warmer seasons and local holidays are celebrated only in summer. Undoubtedly, the cold season is more suitable for family celebrations, while parish church holidays are associated with pilgrimages and public entertainment, and are therefore more suitable for the warm period. Local festivities, which began a few decades ago, were combined with the interests of tourists and the best summer months were chosen for these events. However, only the local holidays in Kernavė have been adapted to the Lithuanian ritual year (state holidays). Of the church holidays, only the Assumption of the Virgin Mary in Trakai coincided with a state holiday. But how do the locals perceive these holidays?

Season	Local festivals	Church holidays	State holidays
Winter			Christmas Eve 24 Dec. Christmas 25–26 Dec. New Year's Day 1 Jan. State Restoration Day 16 Feb.
Spring		St. Casimir in Medininkai 4 Mar. St. George in Kernavė 23 Apr.	Restoration of Independence Day 11 Mar. Easter 22–23 Apr. Labour Day 1 May. Mothers' Day 5 May.
Summer	Trakai Summer 31 May–2 Jun. Medieval Festival in Medininkai 15–16 Jun. Rasos (St. John's Day) in Kernavė 24 Jun. Live Archaeology Days in Kernavė 5–7 Jul.	Pentecost in Medininkai 9 Jun. (in 2019) Our Lady of the Scapular in Kernavė 16 Jul. Blessed Virgin Mary, Queen of Angels in Medininkai 02 Aug. Assumption of the Virgin Mary in Trakai 15 Aug. (public events 15–18 Aug.) St. Roch in Kernavė 16 Aug. Transfer of St. Casimir's Relics in Medininkai 26 Aug.	Fathers' Day 06 Jun. St. John's Day 24 Jun. State Day 07 Jun. Assumption Day 15 Aug.
Autumn		Holiday of Our Lady of Trakai 1–8 Sep. St. Francis of Assisi in Medininkai 4 Oct.	All Saints' Day 1 Nov.

Figure 4. Seasonality of local festivals, church and state holidays in 2019.

Most popular holiday among friends

To determine the popularity of the holiday among local people, we chose a social community of friends that is not constrained by place of residence or neighbourhood, and friendship is not a biological but a culturally determined social category. It is formed by free choice, common interests and the need to spend some leisure time together. Respondents were asked which holidays they celebrated with their friends, in the hope that their answers would reveal the most popular holidays for the local population. When I asked which holidays were most important for

the residents of these areas to get together with their friends, they pointed to the following.

Most popular celebrations with friends	First	Second	Third
Trakai	New Year	Easter	**St. John's Day**
Kernavė	**St. John's Day**	Christmas	**State Day** and Valentine's Day
Medininkai	Christmas and **St. John's Day**		Easter and International Women's Day

Figure 5. Popularity of holidays and festivals

As you can see, state holidays are the most popular holidays among friends. Only in Kernavė did the holidays singled out by the media as the main town/village (local) holiday coincide with those celebrated by my respondents with friends. St John's Day is popular in all localities, but State Day, as one of the most popular holidays, was only mentioned in Kernavė, where the Live Archaeology Days are celebrated at the same time[4]. So, we can agree that cultural traditions, being a part of cultural heritage, are significant factors that shape local, regional, national, and European identities (Kockel et al. 2020: 2).

The mood of the holiday reminds us of the Church holidays of the past. According to a 75-year-old woman, relatives and friends came to visit her, and she gave them a tour. A 64-year-old woman said that she spent this holiday on the castle mound with family members, friends and former colleagues. The status of St. John's Day as the most celebrated name day in Lithuania is also an important factor explaining the popularity of St. John's Day. I have been celebrating my name day since I was 18, said a 63-year-old man. "With friends, we go to the mound, then we gather at my place to celebrate, because my name is Jonas (John). Friends used to give me a tie, a shirt on this occasion, now they usually give flowers." On the other hand, some respondents worked on State Day: "I am working on that day, there is no time to celebrate, the Live Archaeology Days are the main working days for me," said a 39-year-old respondent.

In all localities, Christmas and Easter were singled out, as well as the popular New Year holiday. The second day of Christmas and Easter are traditionally designated for meeting friends. For example, a 37-year-old respondent from Trakai stated that he celebrates the first day of these holidays with his family. On the second day, he goes to his friends, and sometimes they light a fire. A 55-year-old Russian Orthodox believer from Medininkai celebrates these holidays with friends according to the Gregorian (Catholic and official) and Julian (Orthodox) calendars. For

one respondent from Kernavė, it was important to meet with his friends on State Restoration Day (16 February).

Other calendar festivals, which are working days, are also celebrated with friends. In the village of Medininkai, International Women's Day is popular, which, from 1965 to 1990 was considered an official holiday in Soviet Lithuania. As people of all ages were interviewed, Valentine's Day was mentioned quite often, which has been celebrated in Lithuania only since 1993. It is more of a youth festival. For example, the youngest respondent, a 19-year-old from Medininkai, meets her friends and exchanges gifts on this day. In this area, according to this submitter, informal holidays such as the beginning and end of summer (which were created during the Soviet era to replace religious holidays) are also celebrated among friends, as well as the beginning of the school year, 1 September.

Only two respondents mentioned that they met their friends during Church holidays, on the feast day of St. Roch (16 August), and one respondent mentioned the Feast of Our Lady of the Scapular (16 July) in Kernavė and the Assumption (15 August) in Trakai, although festive events lasted for as long as four days in 2019 in Trakai. It is interesting that some inhabitants of Trakai do not celebrate the Assumption at all. A Lithuanian man, born in 1955, said that only his grandparents used to celebrate this holiday. Meanwhile, a Polish nationality woman born in 1970 in Trakai did not celebrate this holiday, although she jokingly admitted that she was a botanist by profession (Assumption in Lithuanian is *Žolinė*, which can be translated as 'grass day') but did not celebrate this 'professional' holiday. With the decline of religiosity and the increasing number of mass secular events in the town, Church holidays have lost their former social value, and the secular entertainment associated with the holiday has become more of a tourist attraction.

Ethnic holidays also bring friends together in a multicultural environment. A Karaite respondent from Trakai mentioned the ethnoconfessional spring festival Tymbyl chydžy, which brings Karaim friends together (celebrated for a week at a similar time to Easter)[5]. However, friends of other faiths are not forgotten. For example, according to a 47-year-old Polish Catholic woman from Trakai, Karaims treat their friends to Easter meals, and their co-workers sometimes replace them at work during this holiday.

Conclusion

So, to summarise my article, I would like to point out that the creation of new holidays is a rather complex process. Even the introduction of a commercial character, a longer duration and the right season cannot guarantee that the locals will really appreciate the holiday if it is not linked to a specific date with valuable content. Examples are St. John's Day as a symbol of resistance against Soviet ideology, and the

day of the coronation of the first Lithuanian king – State Day. Kernavė, the smallest of the areas studied, attracts both tourists and locals to the town's celebrations, who rate them as one of the most important holidays to celebrate with friends. Comparing state, parish church, and local commercial holidays and festivals we can say that state holidays are the most important for communities of friends. In general, the most important holidays for friends are St. John's Day, Christmas and Easter (including the second days of both holidays), New Year, and in some cases also festivals such as International Women's Day and, in Kernavė, Valentine's Day. Thus, the ritual year of friends includes both traditional holidays and those created in recent decades. Religious holidays, which in the past were of great importance in facilitating communication between local people, are losing their former significance due to the decline in religiosity. An example of this is the fact that the Feast of the Assumption in Trakai is not celebrated by the local population, although it is also a state holiday.

In conclusion, we see two different ritual years in the areas studied. One has a clear seasonal character and is aligned with the tourist season. Some local people associate these holidays with work rather than days off. The second is based on the most popular holidays for local people, the opportunity to meet with loved ones. In most cases this category has nothing to do with the tourist season, with the exception of holidays celebrated in Kernavė.

Notes

[1] The concept of friendship is taken to mean social relations between people of the same gender, leaving aside any intimate relationships between people of the same or different genders (Šaknys 2019: 298).

[2] In 2022 this day was mentioned as the birthday of the city of Trakai (Trakai was first mentioned in 1322) and the celebration acquired not only a religious but also a secular and more commercial character.

[3] In 2019 4,849 visitors were served in January, 3,950 in February, 5,235 in March, 9,333 in April, 13,501 in May, 19,882 in June, 20,453 in July, 14,788 in September, 7,826 in October, 5,013 in November and 9,130 in December.

[4] For example, according to my research data, in Vilnius, State Day was not celebrated by more than half of my respondents, and only International Labour Day and Assumption were less popular (Šaknys 2019: 256).

[5] For more about this holiday, see Šaknys 2015: 125.

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Bibliographical Note

Žilvytis Šaknys, PhD, is Senior Researcher at the Department of Ethnology and Anthropology, Lithuanian Institute of History, Vilnius, Lithuania. His research interests are in the field of traditional and modern culture, ethnology of youth, ethnology of the city, ethnology of tourism, history of ethnology, ethnic and confessional tolerance, and the ritual year. He is the author and/or editor of several monographs and thematic journals. He is a member of the editorial board for several journals: *Lietuvos etnologija: socialinės antropologijos ir etnologijos studijos*, *Latvijas vēstures institūta žurnāls*, *Būdas*, *Žiemgala*, *Etnografija*, *Gimtasai kraštas*, *Lituanistica*, and co-editor (with E. Anastasova, M. Kõiva and I. Runce) of the journal *The Yearbook of Balkan and Baltic Studies*.

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Winter Carnival in Vevchani (North Macedonia): Between Commercial Festivity and Folklore Tradition

Oksana Mykytenko
oksana_mykytenko@hotmail.com

Abstract: This paper is based on fieldwork conducted in the Republic of North Macedonia, where in 2019 I observed the Vasilitsa winter folklore carnival held annually on January 12–13 in the village of Vevchani, near Ohrid. The tradition of winter masked carnivals exists throughout the Macedonian cultural area, with local variations and different names for the participants. The core structure of the event is a ritual drama that parodies a wedding ceremony and symbolically enacts themes of fertility and renewal. Masking practices and the use of noisemaking implements – jingling, clattering, and striking – serve both traditional ritual and modern entertainment purposes. The performances combine elements of folk drama, with prescribed roles, alongside improvised satirical scenes addressing contemporary political and social issues. Today, the carnival demonstrates the coexistence of traditional ritual forms and modern expressions, including theatrical spectacle and tourism-oriented activities. This interplay sustains the event's status as a marker of both local identity and national cultural heritage. Examined in the context of globalisation – with its emphasis on multiculturalism and consumption – the Vevchani Carnival exemplifies the dynamic synergy between inherited ritual culture and contemporary festive practice. It reveals how tradition can be adapted and reinterpreted within modern frameworks, without losing its cultural resonance.

Keywords: Vevchani, winter carnival, folk tradition, cultural identity, commercialisation.

Introduction: Holiday as a Sign of Identity

Ritual, as a semiotic system that constructs a *model of group identity*, plays a central role in the structure of traditional culture (Havryliuk 1999: 7). It functions as a marker of a specific local tradition and determines the affiliation of individuals

and rural communities to that tradition. *Ritual identity* emerges during ritual performance: it brings participants into sensuous and emotional unity, forming a shared atmosphere and revealing the sacred values of the group. Within this framework, the traditional festive custom – understood as a process that channels emotions and sentiments, thus generating a sense of *"we-ness"*, or community (Skyba 2004: 33) – acquires particular significance in the formation of identity. It becomes a meaningful phenomenon of sociocultural life operating at both micro- and macro-levels, including ethnic and national dimensions.

Social integration and self-identification – whether at the collective or individual level – are widely recognised as core functions of festive practice. These functions become especially evident in the context of globalisation and multiculturalism. Unlike in traditional society, where the holiday served to sacralise foundational cultural values, contemporary festive forms often lose this sacral dimension. Today, a holiday is not only part of cultural heritage but also a modern cultural construct. It actualises tradition while responding to the needs, opportunities, and challenges of the present. Amidst a crisis of cultural identity, the national holiday, as an integrative framework, serves as a cultural nexus. Owing to its deep *emotional legitimacy*, it fosters interpersonal engagement and becomes a basis for intercultural communication.

The Traditional Vasilitsa Holiday: The Example of Vevchani Village

The calendar cycle of traditional rituals – distinguished by their high symbolic density and mythological meaning – includes, in particular, festive events and rites connected with the New Year and Christmas season, many of which remain vibrant today. Folkloric celebrations in North Macedonia represent a multilayered cultural phenomenon that merges Christian rites with pre-Christian customs and beliefs. These holidays were highly significant in the past and continue to hold meaning in the present (Kitevski 2001: 5–28).

In 2019, I had the opportunity to observe such a folk celebration, *Vasilitsa*, a vivid carnival held annually in the village of Vevchani, located approximately 25 km northwest of Ohrid. The Vevchani Carnival has never lapsed or been discontinued, and since 1993 it has been a member of the International Federation of Carnival Cities[1]. Inspired by its example, a national association of carnivals was formed, including towns such as Strumica, Prilep, and others. In this and other New Year-related festivities in Macedonia, one can trace traditional patterns of celebration alongside more recent models and elements introduced over time.

A key feature of the Vevchani Carnival involves two groups of participants setting out from opposite ends of the village. Central characters in the ritual performance

include the son-in-law, the daughter-in-law, and the fool. The celebration involves masquerading, greeting fellow villagers named Vasyl, visiting water sources, gathering in the village centre, and collective merrymaking (Kytevsky 2009: 91).

The name of the festival is linked to the feast of St. Basil on January 14 (January 1, Julian calendar), which symbolically opens the new year. It falls within the twelve so-called "unbaptized days", a liminal period between Christmas and Epiphany, traditionally considered one of heightened supernatural danger and governed by numerous ritual prescriptions and taboos (Popovski 1975: 251). These twelve days, infused with beliefs originating in the pre-Christian era, are perceived by Macedonians – like many other peoples – as especially perilous. According to popular belief, demonic entities such as fairies, *karakondzuls*, vampires, and *tolosums* are particularly active during this time, threatening humans, livestock, and property. The entire period is accompanied by prohibitions meant to ward off these dangers (Mirchevska 2008: 162). New Year rites and songs from this cycle are among those in which pagan features have persisted, while Christian elements introduced later remain marginal or absent (Kitevski 2002: 123). Ritual merriment, regarded as a protective charm against otherworldly forces, played an especially important role in these practices (Tolstoy 1995: 306). The most widespread was a folk performance, traditionally restricted to men, which incorporated all the elements of dramatic action: personae, masks, monologues and dialogues, staging, scenography, audience, and more. This ritual play was taken with great seriousness, and the performance itself was considered of crucial importance (Kitevski 2001: 49; Kytevsky 2009: 89). According to popular belief, the primary aim was to expel all that remained evil from the old year, most notably to drive out *Karakondzhula*, a mythological creature embodying evil, thereby demonstrating the participants' own power and agency (Mladenoski 1975: 380).

Among the characters in the Vasilitsa ritual performance – held from midnight until sunrise – were lead figures such as the old man and old woman, the son-in-law and the daughter-in-law, and village elders, as well as auxiliary roles such as the army (priest, guards, gendarmes, blackamoor, camel-driver, etc.). Disguise and role-playing were central aspects: participants transformed themselves through masking and costuming to embody these figures. In the past, faces were painted with soot or vivid pigments, whereas today ready-made cosmetics are used. Traditional masks were crafted from paper or animal skins and often adorned with horns. Beards and moustaches were made of hemp or wool. Ritual accessories included bells and wooden clappers tied to belts, believed to possess protective power. An essential attribute of the participants were branches of cornelian cherry or other fruit trees, which were used playfully to whip girls, family members, and even domestic animals. This action held ritual significance and aligned with the broader symbolic logic of the festive performance.

Morphology of the Ritual Text: Geography, Terminology, Participants, Verbal Communication

The 'grammar' of a ritual text consists of a sequence of symbols organised according to ritual syntax, while the 'action' code – embodied in ritual practices – forms its predicative structure. Within this structure, actions take on the meaning of ritual behaviour, integrated into the broader code system of traditional culture. According to Ljubinko Radenković, elements such as participants, temporal and spatial coordinates, ritual objects, and verbal formulae constitute a symbolic ensemble that not only enacts ritual but also sustains the transmission of tradition (Radenković 2019: 96).

Across different parts of Macedonia, the masked participants in these rituals bear different names. In the case of the widely known Vasilitsa rite, local terminology varies: near Ohrid, Struga, and Veles, they are called *vasilichari*; in the Prilep and Bitola regions *babari*; in Skopje and Tikveš *džamalari* or *džalamari*; near Razlog *survakari*; and in Kostur and other parts of Aegean Macedonia *eshkari*. Among the southern Slavs, further variants include *surati*, *mechkari* or *machkari*, *kamilari*, *bushari*, *buchani*, *zvonchari*, *kugachi*, *nap hantsi*, and others (Kitevski 2001: 50; Plotnikova 2004: 105; Mirchevska 2008: 162; Konstantinov 1975: 375). Considerable differences can be found in the symbolic systems and performative structures of the ritual across regions. For instance, in Smilevo, the ritual was performed as a pantomime, devoid of verbal elements; in other areas, such as near Kruševo, Bitola, and Prilep, songs and spoken dialogues were integral components (Zdravev 1975: 369; Konstantinov 1975: 377).

Petrovska-Kuzmanova notes:

> In our region, we encounter vasilichari – masked groups known under different names ("vasilichari", "sirovari", "babari", "jamalari", etc.). What is common to all is that only men participate, enacting a symbolic wedding procession which includes: 1) the 'fortune-teller' and 'father-in-law'; 2) the 'feller', 'blackamoor', and 'son-in-law'; 3) the 'daughter-in-law'; 4) the 'priest'; 5) the 'bear' and 'bear-leader'; and 6) the 'master' of the house, who plays an important role in the ceremony (2006: 70).

The name of the ritual often corresponds to its principal characters – masked members of the ritual troupe – who show striking similarities across different local traditions, a trait typical of Balkan customary practices (Mishkova 2017: 300). The region encompassing Macedonia, southern Serbia, and western Bulgaria is often

regarded as a coherent cultural complex within the South Slavic domain of festive masquerade (Tolstoy 1995: 115).

According to Nikita Tolstoy, there are "dialectal features" in the ritual performances of Macedonian and western Bulgarian masking traditions, reflecting a broader pattern of dialectal diversity in ritual practice (1995: 115–118). For example, terms such as сурвакари – derived from the Slavic root *суров-* 'strong', 'healthy', 'raw' – are common across South Slavic territories for winter ritual rounds, while New Year's games marked by *obscene motifs* and imitation *weddings* are typical to Macedonia, western Bulgaria, and southeastern Serbia.

The most general semantic value of these processions is symbolic inclusion: to *encompass, belong*, or *be admitted* to the community (Radenković 2019: 111). Ethnographic data identifies two types of New Year's procession in Macedonia, for example carnival-style masked games, and ceremonial processions of groups such as the *survakari*. While the use of surva-related terminology is limited in Macedonia – sometimes the procession has no fixed name –, the word *сурва* appears in traditional greetings and folklore texts (Plotnikova 2004: 104–105; Kitevski 2001: 50). Symbolic acts such as whipping with branches, considered "universal manifestations of ritual behavior", are a form of symbolic communication (Radenković 2019: 107). The term суровење refers to the rite as a whole, in which the semantics of *суров-* are enacted in language, gesture, and ritual paraphernalia.

Greeting formulas derived from *сурва* were common in the Christmas and New Year ritual cycles, often accompanied by raking ashes in the hearth to encourage the birth of a male child. In Ohrid villages, *vasilichari* processions included ritual striking with plum twigs and the wish to be healthy "Суров*(а)* да си*!*" In Peshtani, similar wishes were uttered during New Year's bread rituals. In Maleshevo (eastern Macedonia), boys walked the village on New Year's Eve, gently striking elders while saying "Сурова дедо*!*" or "Сурова баба*!*", and parents would wake their sons at midnight to run outside shouting "Сурва*!*" to herald the New Year (Plotnikova 2004: 106).

Traditionally, children participated separately from adults in Christmas and New Year customs, with similar but age-specific roles and songs. Today, children play an active role in *vasilichari* carnival performances. They dress in bright costumes, wear masks, and visit the homes of relatives and neighbours. However, the structure has changed: where previously children went in small groups, each embodying a ritual figure such as the 'son-in-law' or the 'daughter-in-law', today they often go individually (Petrovska-Kuzmanova 2006: 77). Ritual songs performed by children differ from those of adult groups. While adult *vasilichari* often sing songs with erotic or coarse content, children's songs during *Vasilitsa* resemble or directly replicate Christmas carols (Kitevski 2002: 128).

Blaže Ristovski was among the first to emphasize the need to collect and study ceremonial male erotic folk songs, performed on Holy Evening and St. Basil's Day around the communal fire, songs which exhibit a distinct *orgiastic* character. He stressed their importance for understanding *human experience and spiritual culture* (Ristovski 1975: 219).

At *Vasilitsa*, as at Christmas, groups of school-age children would first gather around a communal fire before moving through the village, entering homes and chanting greetings akin to carols. These wishes for the New Year were rewarded with sweets, nuts, apples, and other small gifts (Kitevski 2001: 53; Kitevski 2002: 128–129; Nikolovski 1992: 195). Carrying *surva* twigs made of plum, hawthorn, or other fertile trees, the children would gently strike people, especially the elderly, as well as livestock, wishing them good health for the coming year. Common phrases included: "Suro, suro, in a year even more cheerful, even happier" (Kitevski 2001: 50–51; Malinov 2006: 217; Nikolovski 1992: 195).

In each district and village, the composition of the groups and the actions performed varied. In the Ohrid and Struga region, where the rite took place on the eve of St. Basil's Day, the groups – often comprising 30 to 50 young unmarried men and several older men known for their wit and knowledge of custom – divided into two processional troupes, one from the lower and one from the upper part of the village. The leaders, dressed in folk costume, represented the bride and bridegroom and led their group from house to house. The presence of this symbolic bridal couple is also noted among other ethnic groups (Mirchevska 2008: 162). Traditionally, the group gathered on the eve of the festival in the village centre, lit a large fire, and at midnight set out with music and singing. Older instruments included the гајда (bagpipes), кавал (large flute), and шупелка (flute); in more recent times, clarinet, accordion and drum are commonly used. The group would return by dawn to the same central point from which they had departed (Nikolovski 1992: 194).

Ritual Game: Masks and Texts

At the core of the concept of calendrical ritual performance lies the antinomy of the old and the new, when, following Bakhtin, the "dethronement of the old and the crowning of the new" takes place. The fusion of various forms of folk spectacle with the concept of time – time becoming "the true hero of the holiday" – defines the carnivalesque character of the event, where time acquires the features of "festivity" (Bakhtin 1990: 243).

Magical merriment in the context of Christmas and New Year celebrations manifested itself in both verbal and actional forms and constituted ritually prescribed behaviour. This reflected the semantic and functional equivalence of action, word, and object within the broader pragmatics of ritual games associated with festive

masquerade. "All three codes serve to express a single meaning, a single idea, which gives many rituals a cumulative character, that is, the quality of 'stringing together' synonyms along one ritual 'axis'", as N. I. Tolstoy emphasized. "Such a three-coded ritual structure … allows for the relatively free and easy reduction of certain inter- or intra-code 'synonyms'; or, conversely, their excessive accumulation and emphatic intensification, following the principle that 'you can't spoil porridge with butter'" (1981: 46).

Given the ambivalent meaning of carnival as "a death pregnant with life" (Bakhtin), carnivalesque is defined not only as a set of features forming the festive atmosphere but also as a manifestation of a specific worldview intrinsic to folk culture. This worldview is based on the notion of the unity of essential oppositions – birth and death, high and low, praise and insult, weeping and laughter, and so on. The intensification of themes of death, funerals, and beings from the "other world" continues the cult of ancestors, which in ritual merges with both solar symbolism and the cult of fertility (Tolstoy 2003: 17).

The system of travesty (disguise, mystification, costuming) and of inversion (hierarchical or role reversals, opposition to official norms, disproportion, etc.) is considered a defining feature of carnival performance (Nekrylova 1993: 110). At the same time, given that the notion of carnival is somewhat conventional in the context of Slavic traditions, since, unlike in Western Europe, the process of unifying diverse local phenomena has not been completed, various forms of folk festive merriment (Shrovetide, Christmas, fairground entertainment, etc.) have remained unintegrated. Thus, it is more accurate to speak of the "carnivalesque atmosphere" of folk festivals and the "genetic sources of festive and ludic imagery" (Bakhtin 1990: 242, 259). The world represented by costumed performers, into which they drew the audience, was not comparable to the world of everyday life as it was a world of play and celebration. The semantic 'gravitational pull' and the lexico-semantic correlation of the concept of play with the nominative field of merriment, joy, delight, all deriving from the Old Slavic root **vessel-*, underlie the synonymy of the verbs *to play* and *to rejoice,* both of which share the notion of vital energy, as demonstrated by Tolstoy. One of the primary semantic spheres of this convergence is "the celebration of Christmas and its ritually and mythologically connected counterpart, the New Year (the feast of St. Basil)", where the magical force of well-wishes for prosperity is inseparable from the broader sacred semantics of the beginning of the year and of the life cycle (Tolstoy 1995: 294–312).

In Slavic traditional culture, the term *igrishche* has long been used to denote the carnivalesque atmosphere of a ritual festival, an event in which songs, dances, disguises, games, fortune telling and other performative elements were organically combined. In Vladimir Dal's *Dictionary*, the term is glossed as "gatherings, evening festivities, especially those during Yuletide" (Dal 1955 [1881], vol. 2: 7). The

carnival igrishche was characterised by its tragicomic nature and its vivid diversity of expressive and artistic means, including costumes, disguise, songs, dances, instrumental music, and verbal forms (Gusev 1993: 91). At the conceptual level, the affinity between carnival and masquerade in the context of the Slavic Orthodox tradition can also be observed in contemporary New Year masquerade games practiced among ethnic Macedonians in the villages of Kali Vrysi, Volakas, and Petroussa in the Drama region of Greece (Mishkova 2017: 300).

Ritual games involving masks are a distinctly male domain of festive performance (Mirchevska 2008: 162). Women, in contrast, typically participated in the celebration through visits to relatives and neighbours, during which they would throw small pieces of firewood into the hearth while uttering ritual wishes such as "let children be born, and also chickens, lambs, calves, goats, foals…" (Nikolovski 1992: 195).

The ritual masking performed by male *vasilichar* groups in Macedonia, as elsewhere in the Balkans, belongs to a group-based form of ritual travesty. This form of costumed performance functions as an expression of *anti-behaviour*, a temporary suspension or reversal of everyday norms characteristic of the liminal period between Christmas and the New Year. As Radenković notes, "the mask, in the eyes of the observer, transforms one reality into another: from the everyday and real to the fantastic; through it, ordinary people become mythological figures" (2019: 127). In a broad sense, a mask is also a character into whom the masquerader transforms, regardless of whether a facial mask is physically present or not. As with other attributes of masquerade, the mask facilitated the performer's role transformation, served as a marker of a specific character type, and helped create a distinctive play situation. One of the main aims of the masked figures, particularly in the South Slavic folk tradition, was to frighten the audience.



Fig. 1. Vevchani, North Macedonia.
Photo: O. Mikitenko, 13 January 2019.

The masks worn by Christmas carollers in southeastern Serbia and North Macedonia, or by the Bulgarian Shrovetide masqueraders known as *kukeri*, were intricately crafted ritual objects. These masks were often combined with towering constructions on the head, composed of exotic headdresses adorned with feathers, plants, strings of red pepper pods, beads made of beans and minerals, brightly coloured ribbons, and other decorations (Vinogradova 2004: 192). Today, however, the practice of masking has shifted notably: it now represents a mixture of traditional and contemporary expressive forms in which the *magical dimension* has largely disappeared (Mirchevska 2008: 164).



Fig. 2. Vevchani, North Macedonia. Photo: O. Mikitenko, 13 January 2019.

In a broader cultural and philosophical sense, the role of the mask in folk festivity has been explored by Mikhail Bakhtin, who describes it as one of the "most complex and ambiguous motifs" of traditional culture. "The mask," he writes, "is associated with the joy of change and transformation, with a cheerful relativism, with the playful denial of fixed identity and singular meaning." It symbolises transition, metamorphosis, the crossing of natural boundaries, and acts of ritualised mockery. It represents "the playful principle of life", grounded in a relationship between reality and image that is characteristic of the most archaic ritual and performative forms. This meaning of the mask is most fully revealed when it functions within the *organic wholeness of folk culture*, where the mask signifies the "inexhaustibility and diversity of life" (Bakhtin 1990: 48).

The term *mask*, derived from Latin, is not native to the Macedonian language and did not appear in local usage until the early twentieth century. Within the

South Slavic cultural tradition, the related Macedonian term *маскара*, *машкара* – meaning 'mask', 'man in a mask', or 'person in disguise' – was borrowed from Judeo-Spanish dialects and originally carried an unpleasant or mocking connotation (Konstantinov 1975: 376). In contrast, the word *cypam/u* (from Arabic, via Turkish mediation) has been more widely used historically and remains common today. A synonym of *maškara* 'disguised' is *krabonosica* (from *krabulja* 'mask'); numerous derivatives carry the meanings 'to joke', 'to make merry', 'to mock', 'to play the fool', 'to dress grotesquely', and the like (Skok 1972: 381).

In particular, carnival events in Ohrid, known by the name *Cypam*, involved both the purchase and creation of masks by local residents. These masks were crafted from a wide array of materials, including fabric, cardboard, animal pelts, bones, wood, dried grasses, and metals. The most popular characters represented in masks included the "Arab in a turban with a tassel", "son-in-law and daughter-in-law", "grandfather and grandmother", and "male and female Roma figures" (Malenko 1975: 385). Among the customary roles in groups of *vasilichari* were the masks of the 'bride' (*невеста* or *неста*) and the 'groom' (*зет*), played by appropriately dressed young men (the 'bride' was usually a boy who had not yet started shaving, wearing women's clothes and a headscarf); the 'roller' (*валкач*, *валегач*), also called *тркаљаш*, *тркалач* ('the one who runs errands'), dressed in a *gunj* (thick shepherd's coat) with a straw hump on his back (this character could sometimes represent the 'groom'); and the 'healer' (*гаталец*, *гатач* or *багач*), occasionally also the 'father-in-law' (*свекор*), an older and experienced participant, a jester who was not shy of bawdy jokes, dressed in a tattered *gunj*, his face smeared with soot, and with a beard and mustache made of hemp. Both the 'roller' and the 'healer' wore belts with small bells and rattles attached, which jingled and clattered as they moved. They carried sticks used to knock on doors, and the 'healer' would beat the 'roller' on his straw hump with one of these sticks.

In other cases, the masqueraders included two ragged 'beggars', a 'bride', and a 'prostitute'. When the main characters included a 'priest', a mock wedding ceremony would take place. Sometimes this 'wedding' was staged in the centre of the village and featured a 'guard' and 'elders', who were supposed to protect the 'bride' from being kidnapped by onlookers (Malinov 2006: 213; Spirovska 1975: 366). Other group members wore normal clothing and included musicians who accompanied the *vasilichari*, as well as collectors of food offerings such as flour, meat, *rakija*, wine, onions, and so forth.

The ritual play, generally known as *The Death and Resurrection of the Old One*, usually began in the courtyard. The 'healer' would knock on the door and shout: Очкрапи домаќине, ух. Да не ти влезам втемнина да ти ги рушам децата. Да видиш домаќине наша војска, кое куцо, кое слепо, све е на врата. Да видиш наша невестица како ука на врата. Домаќине, ако ти е куриштето во

пеплиштето, удри го од кланичиштето! (Open up, householder, oof. If we come in in the dark, we might scare the children. Look, householder, at our army, lame, blind, but all at your door. Look at our bride, how she weeps at your doorstep. Householder, if your rooster is in the ashes, strike it on the butcher's block!)

The host would open the door, and the 'healer' would continue: Добро вечер, домаќине. Да е среќна Новата година, да даде Господ здравје во луѓето и стоката, голем бериќет по нивите, мир во земјата и слога меѓу луѓето. Дали е слободо да влеземе во куќата? (Good evening, householder. May the New Year be joyful. May God grant health to people and livestock, a bountiful harvest in the fields, peace in the land, and harmony among people. May we enter your home?)

Upon gaining the host's permission, the group would enter with singing and music. The 'groom' would begin to lead the *oro* (traditional dance), but after one round, he would suddenly collapse. Panic ensued among the *vasilichari*, with cries that something had happened to him. The 'healer' would turn to the host and say: Е, домаќине, што е ова несреќа што не снајде во твојата куќа. Преку Црно море поминавме на лушпа ореова, ова чудо не не снајде. Да не имаш некоја беља направено со домаќинката. Кажувај сега што да правиме. (Oh, householder, what misfortune has struck us in your home! We crossed the Black Sea in a walnut shell and nothing happened to us, yet now this horror! Perhaps you and your wife have committed some sin? Tell us what to do).

A suggestion would follow that the house was unlucky, draughty (*ветерничава, аталија*, 'holey', 'ill-fated'), a place where evil spirits gathered. The host, shrugging, would respond: Вие го донесовте и што сакате правете му! (You brought him, do with him as you wish!)

The 'bride' would wail over the 'dead'. The 'healer' would then ask: *Таксај што ќе таксаш за да го извадиме од овдека*, *башто ако ти го оставиме ќе се смерди* и *орлите не ќе го креваат*! (Say what you will give us to take him away. If we leave him here, he'll stink so much even the vultures won't touch him!)

To which the host would reply: *Аман*, *се ќе таксам само да го однесете*! (All right, I'll give whatever you want, just take him away!)

The 'healer' would list the required offerings: *Таксај каца со месо*, *низалка колбаси*, *каца сирење*, *вреќа брашно*, *шише со ракија*, *бочва со вино*, *каца со зелка*, *венец кромид*, *низа пиперки* и *др*. (Give us a tub of meat, a string of sausages, a tub of cheese, a sack of flour, a bottle of rakija, a barrel of wine, a barrel of sauerkraut, a wreath of onions, a string of peppers, and more.)

The host would comply, and the 'healer' would begin a mock incantation over the 'dead'. This would involve rhymed gibberish, vulgar language, and a list of body parts that might be useful on the farm and could be given away to the crowd. The 'healer' would then ask the 'bride' to 'inject' the 'dead' man, upon which she would lift her skirt, bend over, and touch him three times with her knee and breasts. The

'groom' would then revive, leap up, grab the 'bride' and toss her in the air three times. In other versions, the 'groom' would be revived by being given a 'medicinal' herb with life-giving power. Music played, people rejoiced, sang, and danced. The housewife distributed gifts such as flour, meat, peas, oil, wine, rakija, and so on. The 'healer' would bless the host and his household with traditional formulas: *Колку зрна*, *презрна – толку амбари пчејница*! *Колку капки сланина – толку прасци и кочиња*! *Колку трошки сирење – толку* јагиња, јариња! (As many grains, grainlets – as many granaries full of wheat! As many drops of lard – as many piglets and goats! As many crumbs of cheese – as many lambs and kids!) Each blessing was echoed by the entire group with a resounding: *Амин!* (Amen!).

The *vasilichari* would then proceed to other homes throughout the night, ending their circuit by sunrise. Afterward, they would go home and sleep until noon. In the evening of January 14, they would gather in someone's house and prepare a communal dinner from the collected food, inviting all villagers. Everyone who came brought firewood for the bonfire and received a share of the food. The celebration would last late into the night (Nikolovski 1992: 194–195; Kitevski 2009: 90; Malinov 2006: 214).

Gift-giving was an essential part of the traditional ritual. The symbolism of donation, rooted in the principle of reciprocity, represents one of the most meaningful ritual acts establishing mutual obligation between the giver and the receiver. The actualisation of this gesture during rites of passage – especially those of the calendrical cycle – is primarily tied to its function of establishing order at the threshold between one state and another (Radenković 2019: 105), thus reflecting the overall purpose of the ritual text.

The act of giving could form a separate ritual itself, as seen in the region of Kičevo and nearby villages, as well as in other parts of Macedonia. Boys would go from house to house greeting residents for the New Year and singing *vasilicharski* ritual songs, calling on the master of the house to give them "whatever the soul desires": *Честита*, *честита*, *честита*, / *да ни* е, *чичо*, *Нова година*! / *подари не*, *чичо*, *што ти душа сака*, / *а Бог да ти наплати стократно*! (Congratulations, congratulations, congratulations, / may the New Year be joyful, uncle! / Give us, uncle, whatever your soul desires, / and may God repay you a hundredfold!) (Linin 1975: 328)

The Ambivalence of Anti-Behaviour as a Manifestation of Ritual Pragmatics and Carnival Entertainment

"What makes a carnival a 'carnival' in the most general sense?" – asks Vesna Marjanović, to which she responds: "First of all, the carnival is distinguished by the shifting boundaries between allowed and forbidden behavior" (2011: 12). Carnival

inversion is not to be understood as chaos opposed to reality, but rather as a ritual rotation of reality, a creation of an imagined, alternative world, and a ritualisation of both order and disorder (Lozica 1997: 242). Forms of *anti-behaviour* as ritual acts express the underlying logic of the celebration, operating within a system of binary oppositions that reflect the inherent ambivalence of the traditional text. Alongside masking, other performative expressions, such as "carnival-brutal communication" and the "elements of ancient cultures of laughter", underscore the mythological dimension of the ritual. As Bakhtin puts it, these elements "at once reduce and destroy, and simultaneously regenerate and renew" (1990: 23).

Anti-behaviour was especially evident in the ritual game *Death and Resurrection of the Elder* (Spirovska 1975: 365). The speech addressed to the imaginary deceased comprised improvised rhymed nonsense, vulgar phrases, and playful listings of the body parts of the 'corpse' to be redistributed for practical use: for example, "the head for the children to play football", or "the hands for a wool-combing tool". The "spindle" would go "to the daughters-in-law for spinning", and so on. The length and inventiveness of such episodes depended on the performer's wit and the number of onlookers each of whom was assigned an object, provoking general amusement and applause.

If the *vasilichari* were denied entry into the house, typically to avoid *obscene performances*, they would stage the rite in the courtyard, and still receive gifts. If refused any offering, however, they might inflict symbolic damage: breaking a plough, harrow, or cart left in the courtyard, or stealing firewood for the common fire during the night. These actions, while disruptive, were not condemned; on the contrary, they formed an accepted part of ceremonial behaviour (Kitevski 2001: 52; Ristovski 1975: 223). Villagers also made efforts to prevent encounters between two *vasilichari* groups, which could lead to fights, and at times even fatalities (Malinov 2006: 214). Although such ritual 'conflicts', as Petrovska-Kuzmanova explains, originally aimed to "ensure the community's prosperity and well-being", their function has gradually diminished or transformed, along with the symbolic meaning of ritual disguise. Typically, the two groups – each from a different part of the village (upper and lower) – would meet at the end of the event in the village centre, where they performed a ceremonial *коло* (circle dance). This was explained by the desire "not to divide the audience" (Petrovska-Kuzmanova 2006: 69), indicating a shift from ritual opposition to performative unity, a transformation of the rite into a staged communal spectacle. The symbolic role of costume, once tied to chthonic forces, now leans increasingly toward comic effect. The inversion embedded in parody, props, and garments is foregrounded as part of carnival entertainment rather than ritual magic.

One structuring principle of ritual *anti-behaviour* was the presence of a symbolic centre, especially the *vasilichar fire*. Songs performed by children while waking the

adults on St. Basil's Day included coarse and even profane expressions. Around the communal fire, men chanted erotic ritual texts, brief, rhymed, and rich in obscene vocabulary, that served as "explicit glorifications of the genitals and sexual union". This *carnival atmosphere* remained vibrant in many parts of Macedonia into the 1970s. According to elderly interlocutors, such songs were performed not only "in the time of the Turks", but also during the Yugoslav period, when even the *gendarmes* would join the festive fire (Ristovski 1975: 220–225).

This dimension of *anti-behaviour,* deeply rooted in the pragmatics of the rite, embodied the semantics of *суров-*, an imperative linked to strength, vitality, and fertility. According to Tolstoy, "the primary function of the ritual was to call forth fertility" (1995: 118). Comparable manifestations of ritual reversal can be found in other Christmas and New Year traditions in which male groups take on the role of a symbolic army (Anastasova 2004: 25).

In this light, *anti-behaviour* – as the reversal of normative conduct – should be understood not as deviance, but as a magical practice directed toward *protective functions* and the modelling of an idealised state of being (Levkievskaia 2004: 680). As with other traditional rituals, these actions aimed to guarantee fertility, regulate seasonal transitions, and reaffirm the symbolic boundaries of the local world within the annual calendar cycle.

The fertility motif also informs interpretations of the rite as a visualised myth in which masked male groups of unmarried youth act as metaphors of initiation narratives, retold through parody (Boiadzhieva-Peeva 2013: 227). Scholars drawing on both Slavic and wider Balkan traditions, particularly the motif of ritual play with the dead, situate these processions within the broader framework of ancient solstice and equinox cults. The rite marks the beginning of a new temporal cycle and confers upon it social, cultural, and spiritual meaning. Participation in such magical practices reaffirms a person's role in co-creating this cyclical renewal of time, granting it a humanised and communal dimension (Malinov 2006: 217).

Divination as a Form of Symbolic Communication

According to Bakhtin, "all forms of divination, fortune-telling, and wishing" are "inextricably linked" to the festive atmosphere of folk celebration (1990: 255). On *Vasilitsa* (St. Basil's Day), acts of divination for well-being, health, and a prosperous year traditionally accompany the holiday. These actions, which serve as symbolic forecasts of time and fate, are deeply rooted in the seasonal ritual complex of the New Year and Christmas cycle. Even today, they remain among the most enduring elements of contemporary custom.

In the village of Vevchani, for instance, one can observe a practice where a small coin is baked into freshly made puff pastry for the holiday dinner. It is be-

lieved that the person who finds the coin will enjoy good fortune and prosperity throughout the year. A similar tradition is preserved in southwestern Bulgaria, where a special festive supper is prepared for the New Year or St. Basil's Day, including pastries containing tokens of *happiness* (*късмети*) and a roast suckling pig (Anastasova 2004: 25).

Records from Struga and Ohrid collected by 19th- and early 20th-century authors such as Eftim Sprostranov and Kuzman Shapkarev describe the practice of placing a coin in *топљеница*, *топеница*, *топејница* (pieces of bread soaked in hot lard), a type of Macedonian New Year's pastry. It was believed that whoever found the coin would be lucky in the coming year. The coin, believed to *attract wealth*, might be kept in one's wallet or tied with a red thread around the neck of the first-born lamb (Malinov 2006: 218).

In the Ohrid and Struga regions, divination also involved placing grains of wheat into hot ashes or on heated shards of pottery, observing how many times the grain would jump, considered an auspicious sign indicating success. These acts of prognostication extended to both family members and agricultural matters, including livestock and crops. Another practice involved placing a frying pan between two hot tiles and interpreting the nature of the ashes: white ashes signified a positive outcome, while darkened cinders were viewed as an ominous sign, foretelling illness or misfortune. It was likewise customary for each person to wear at least one new item of clothing for Vasilitsa, a practice believed to ensure prosperity and good fortune throughout the year (Kitevski 2001: 52–53; Malinov 2006: 218).

As a ritual act aimed at establishing contact with the otherworld in order to obtain knowledge of the future (Vinogradova 1995: 482), divination symbolically activates a series of binary oppositions, for example *up–down*, *white–black*, *new–old*, and others. In doing so, it reflects a broader Slavic worldview grounded in traditional antinomies. Within this cosmological framework, divination constitutes a structured form of symbolic communication that affirms cultural notions of order, time, and existential balance.

From Ceremonial Syncretism to the Modern Theatrical Carnival Holiday: Macedonian Vasilitsa

Characteristic features of the carnival include a system of travesties (disguise, mystification) and inversions (hierarchical or role reversal; subversion of normative behaviour and daily life), along with the violation of proportions, ambivalent laughter through mockery or playful aggression, reduction of elevated imagery, alogism, and the absence of absolute negation. These traits collectively frame the carnival as a time of sanctioned disorder and symbolic reversal.

Within the South Slavic cultural space, the general equivalent of carnival is often the Serbian term *Покладе* (Shrovetide), despite the existence in the Orthodox liturgical calendar of four designated time periods associated with carnival-like celebrations. These are perceived as ritual expressions of liminality, enacted on the threshold of major Christian feasts (Marjanović 2011: 11). The word derives from the Proto-Slavic root *klad-* ('to place', "'to lay down'), which is connected with notions of laying something aside or giving something up. This semantic association underlies the ritual and symbolic meaning of the term in many Slavic traditions, where it often marks the last day before Lent, a time of abstaining from certain foods or pleasures. Although the form *Poklade* is most commonly used in Serbian, closely related variants occur in other South and West Slavic languages, such as Croatian (*Poklade*), Bulgarian (*Поклади*), and Slovak (*Fašiangy*, though older dialects sometimes preserve similar roots), reflecting a broader Slavic heritage. As noted by Max Fasmer, the term is rooted in Proto-Slavic *pokladъ*, related to the verb *pokladati* ('to put', 'to offer'), with possible sacral connotations in the ritual context (Fasmer 1964: 367). The ritual semantics is evident in Polish *pokłady* meaning 'funeral' (Brückner 1957: 426–427), as well as in the Russian dialectal *pokladishche* meaning 'cemetery' (Dal 1955 [1882], vol. 3: 241).

Theatre scholar Petrovska-Kuzmanova, analysing the *Vasilichar* carnival in the village of Vevchani as a form of cultural performance or *folk drama*, underscores the centrality of *play* as generating the action, assigning roles, and providing a "theatrical invariant" of the rite. This "play" structure, she argues, lays the groundwork for the transformation of magical practice into ritual action and, eventually, into theatricalised folk drama. Through this evolution, the magical and symbolic functions of the rite gradually diminish, while domestic, humorous, and entertainment elements become dominant. This process has been described as a form of *customary travesty* (Petrovska-Kuzmanova 2006: 68; Anguélova-Georguéva 1975: 361).

Observation of the Vevchani celebration today reveals its bifurcated structure: one segment preserves elements of the traditional rite for the local population (for example, visiting households and wells, greeting individuals named Vasyl on the evening of January 13), while the other segment, the carnival procession, has become a stylised performance for both locals and visitors. This transformation marks a shift from ritual engagement to performative detachment, turning the event into a folkloric spectacle.

Traditionally, *Vasilichar* games were performed in the village centre, alleyways, and homes, with no shortage of spectators. Viewers often formed a semicircle or full circle around the performers; when staged in the village centre, the drama could also be watched from surrounding balconies. The physical setting of the action is a crucial structural feature of the carnival. In earlier forms, the rite was enacted within a common space that reinforced a sense of communal unity, while

the domestic space (the home) retained collective significance. In its contemporary form, however, the event has predominantly been relocated to public streets and open areas where the energy of the assembled masses flows toward the centre of communal space, symbolically opposing the interior stillness of the household.

Today, the rite is increasingly shaped by performative logic and commercial appeal. Audience engagement is more pronounced, and interaction between performers and viewers lends the festival its rhythm and dramaturgy. The event unfolds in stages: anticipation, crescendo, climax, and resolution, culminating in the symbolic burning of old masks in the village centre, followed by the informal exchange of impressions and discussions among participants.

The Vevchani carnival, as an open, public festivity, reflects broader processes of cultural globalisation. It draws inspiration from well-known European carnivals and often incorporates their visual elements. Parodic representations of current political and economic events both local and international have become central to its content. One of the key masquerade figures is the Macedonian *Глупавиот Август* ('Silly August'), a carnivalesque clown who embodies absurdity and irreverence. Satirical impersonations of politicians, clergy (*pop*, *hodja*), fortune tellers, 'Gypsies' and 'Turks' are common, with performers stopping passers-by to offer mock predictions (Petrovska-Kuzmanova 2006: 77).



Fig. 3. Vevchani, North Macedonia.
Photo: O. Mikitenko, 13 January 2019.

These performances include group sketches, scripted dialogues, and the continual introduction of new characters, while others, such as the 'devil', 'widow' or 'horsemen', gradually fade from memory. Costumed depictions of political figures, government officials, transvestites, aliens, and other symbols of otherness and exoticism (often inspired by science fiction and fantasy genres) reflect the influence of Western

models. Costumes painted directly on the body and face are now common. All these elements contribute to the improvisational expansion of the carnival text, especially its burlesque and parodic dimensions (Boiadzhieva-Peeva 2013: 229; Zdravev 1975: 371).

Vevchani Carnival: Commerce as Part of Polyfunctionality

In most European countries, carnival structures have gradually undergone commercialisation and are increasingly subordinated to the vast contemporary consumer industry. This trend is reflected in numerous media and digital platforms, including the Federation of European Carnival Cities (FECC), which asserts that carnival is not only a cultural phenomenon, but also a "global industry" (Marjanović 2011: 12).

Unlike many countries where the revival of carnival culture began only in the late twentieth century, the Vevchani Carnival "never faded or ceased", and today its model inspires other regional celebrations in Macedonia such as the pilgrimage-related carnival in Strumica and Christmas events in Skopje (Kytevsky 2009: 91). With the growth of cultural tourism in Macedonia, various cultural and artistic festivals have gained significance, especially in Ohrid, where the renowned Balkan Festival of Folk Songs and Dances has been held annually since 1962.

Media narratives emphasize the uninterrupted 1400-year tradition of the Vevchani Carnival, its historical and cultural significance, and its uniqueness among Balkan festivals due to its ancient ritual roots and mysterious masks. The carnival attracts over 50,000 spectators annually, both domestic and international. Every home and street transforms into a performance space, a "theatre without borders" where costumed participants enact traditional ritual games and impromptu dramatic scenes. Among modern masks, three archetypal characters remain central: the '*bride*', the '*groom*', and the '*silly*' (fool), accompanied by musicians. Other masks, represented by smaller or larger carnival groups, engage in exaggerated, parodic performance using gestures, costume, and satire to critique politicians, mock social ills, or highlight social anomalies.

An example of grotesque political allegory is the satirical text of the statute of the metaphorical *Zoo Parliament*, published in Vevchani Carnival leaflets. The document proclaims the *Zoo Parliament* as "our pride and main attraction for three decades", with its unique composition dominated by lions, eagles, and wolves, supplemented by bears, hyenas, crows, etc. It claims to function on the principle of "parliamentary democracy": "I am for you, you are for me, he is for him, we are for us, you are for you, they are for them; when two quarrel, the minority profits, the majority suffers; consensus among groups exists only in the division of prey", and so on.



Fig. 4. Vevchani, North Macedonia. Photo: O. Mikitenko, 13 January 2019.

As a phenomenon of global culture, the modern carnival has transcended sacred time and merged various traditions into a syncretic whole. Today, in many countries, carnivals are held year-round as vehicles of cultural policy, tourism promotion, and popular entertainment. Marked by the hallmarks of mass culture, carnivals have become integral to cultural practices around the world. They enhance a region's tourist appeal, become its cultural brand or symbol, enjoy broad media coverage, and receive support from local authorities and private sponsors, thereby forming a complex infrastructure of tourist consumption.

Simultaneously, the contemporary festival is embedded in the logic of endless consumption. Holiday culture in the modern sense exists in a different context than traditional festivity (Haevska 2019: 100). "Celebrate this day joyfully, with red Vevchani wine and homemade [pork] sausage. Cheers!", urge the leaflets distributed before the Vevchani Carnival. Given that the experience of time is closely linked to food as a key communicative medium in culture, the *folk feast* has become a necessary segment of the festival and is actively incorporated into contemporary tourist packages. During the carnival, local restaurants offer themed menus with traditional dishes (meat, yeast-based pastries, desserts, etc.) that enhance the carnival's economic potential.

As an important marker of cultural identity, the *gastronomic code* is listed among the five carnival commandments or *Vasilichar* precepts: eat meat and sausages, drink homemade wine, rejoice, play, and become a *Vasilichar*. Performing these actions symbolically grants the right to receive a passport from the *Republic of Vevchani*. These bilingual (Macedonian–English) parody documents, which claim to be "valid in all countries", are cherished souvenirs for all participants.

Advertising actively encourages the consumption of local goods. Carnival behaviour not only allows, but expects, excessive indulgence, especially in food and drink. The commercial element is thus successfully integrated into the celebration and helps reinforce a collective I–we identity. As a fundamental component of self-awareness, the festival plays a central role in shaping communal identity. The community's pride in its intangible cultural heritage increasingly transforms the tradition into a resource for tourism and socio-economic development.

This prompts the question: can the so-called *marketing of tradition*, with its emphasis on cultural tourism, foster the development of tradition itself, even as the latter evolves, losing some of its original features and local specificity? Veselka Toncheva suggests that, despite inevitable commercialisation and the transformations triggered by tourism, a conscious attitude toward tradition and one's own local values can, paradoxically, contribute to a renewed sense of identity (Toncheva 2013: 155).

As Radost Ivanova points out, "in the classical sense of the word, folklore is an intricate cultural system, closely tied to the calendar of the patriarchal man and to his family and settlement life in the past. This system contains its own internal meaning, its own symbols, and encodes popular conceptions and understandings of life." In the present, "the stage enables the transformation and development of folklore as a performance art and turns it into a specific form of *folklorism*" (Ivanova 2001: 288–289).

While fulfilling somewhat different functions than in their traditional ritual contexts, today folklore and carnival have acquired special significance in terms of socio-cultural communication and pragmatic use. They increasingly serve as mechanisms of social dynamism. Traditional forms that once fulfilled spiritual and communal needs are now reinterpreted within the frameworks of mass culture and transformed tradition. By accepting this process as natural, we can define the Vevchani Carnival – paraphrasing Ilia Velev – as an example of the "modernization of folk tradition and the traditionalization of folk modernity", affirming that "man can neither escape time nor be lost in the past" (Velev 2009: 87).

Conclusions

The study of the Macedonian *Vasilitsa* as both a ritual and a modern carnival event reveals the complexity and resilience of the traditional cultural practices that are undergoing transformation in contemporary contexts. Rooted in ancient winter solstice celebrations and bearing strong connections to Slavic and Balkan ritual systems, the rite embodies a rich symbolic structure, in which masking, parody, divination, and symbolic violence converge in a coherent ritual grammar.

The anti-behaviour encoded in the performances through inversion, vulgarity, and laughter emerges not as chaos, but as a structured and pragmatic form of symbolic communication aimed at fertility, regeneration, and the cyclical renewal of time. While the traditional function of the rite was embedded in the ritual calendar and oriented toward magical efficacy, its contemporary manifestations – particularly in the village of Vevchani – demonstrate a shift toward theatricality, tourism, and mass cultural performance. Despite this transition, core structural features remain identifiable: the centrality of the masked male group, the binary oppositions organising ritual actions (life–death, order–chaos, sacred–profane), and the embodiment of fertility through both verbal and non-verbal codes.

The transformation of *Vasilitsa* from a magical ritual act into a folkloric spectacle, and ultimately into a commodified, tourist-oriented event, illustrates broader patterns of folklorism and cultural adaptation. The coexistence of traditional and modern elements such as ritual texts and carnival improvisations, fertility invocations and political satire, indicates the polyfunctionality of the contemporary carnival. This hybrid form preserves elements of symbolic heritage while simultaneously acquiring new meanings in a consumer and media-driven environment.

Commercialisation, though often viewed critically, also enables the tradition's visibility and viability. The incorporation of local gastronomic practices, parody of contemporary political life, and the issuing of symbolic passports affirm the carnival's function as both cultural memory and social commentary. Rather than signalling the death of tradition, such transformations suggest a dynamic process of cultural negotiation and identity-making. Ultimately, the Vevchani Carnival exemplifies how traditional ritual practices can endure and evolve under changing social, political, and economic conditions. It stands as a compelling case of how folk culture, when consciously maintained and creatively reimagined, continues to serve as a meaningful mode of collective expression, negotiation of identity, and cultural continuity in the modern world.

Notes

[1] Founded in the 1980s, originally as an association between the cities of Patras (Greece) and Amsterdam (Netherlands), with its centre in Amsterdam. Among the first member countries were Belgium, the Netherlands, Greece, Luxembourg, Great Britain and Malta. In 2003, a convention was signed between the members of the association in Portugal, and in 2004, at a meeting of member countries in Pernik, Bulgaria, during the Biennial Game of Masks, the association changed its name to the Federation of European Carnival Cities (FECC). Among the main tasks of the federation is the exchange of experience and ideas regarding the carnival, as well as the preservation of intangible cultural heritage (Marjanović 2011: 11).

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Bibliographical Note

Professor Oksana Mykytenko is a Doctor of philological sciences and leading scientific worker in the Department of Ukrainian and foreign folklore studies, Rylsky Institute of Art Studies, Folklore and Ethnology, Ukrainian National Academy of Sciences (Kyiv). She Graduated from the Taras Shevchenko National University (1978) and completed her PhD studies at the Institute for Balkan Studies in Moscow (1986). Mykytenko works in the sphere of Slav folklore studies and ethnology, ethnic and cultural history, and Slavistics. She is a member of the editorial boards of multiple scientific publications in Ukraine and abroad and is the author of more than 300 publications in scientific editions in Ukraine and other countries, including two monographs (1992, 2012).

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A Village for a Day: Annual Meetings of Relocated and Flooded Villages in Bulgaria[1]

Mariyanka Borisova
marizhekova@gmail.com

Abstract: The text attempts to explain the need for annual meetings of village communities after the village has been relocated due to the construction of a reservoir. The object of research are meetings in Popovo (Vitoshko), a village that was flooded by the waters of the Studena reservoir, and in Zhrebchevo, submerged later in the Zhrebchevo reservoir. The study applies the theories of collective trauma, collective memory, and cultural memory. Through analysis of interviews, archives, and literature, the study examines the motives of the former village communities to gather each year and the reasons that their leaders organise these meetings. The text attempts to answer the following questions: how do these meetings manage to revitalise the village for one day, what rituals do they include, how is generational dialogue brought to realisation, what is the meaning of memory for the submerged villages, and finally, what are the perspectives for continuing such meetings?

Keywords: village community, memory, collective trauma, flooded village, relocated people, countrymen meeting

The great hydroelectric power, irrigation and water supply projects in socialist Bulgaria included the construction of several major reservoirs. Their construction necessitated the demolition of almost seventy villages in the valleys that had to be flooded, which caused the relocation of the displaced population, mainly to nearby cities. On its own, this process is not phenomenal since it is widespread across the world and a great number of political systems are known to have obligated such measurements throughout history. What is striking about the socialist period in Bulgaria is that it is characterised by intense construction of reservoirs for the needs of industrialisation (Brunbauer 2010). This process has resulted in flooding of numerous villages, as well as in controlled internal emigration. Therefore, the migration type could be perceived as forced, for it takes place within certain time

limits through government decisions and does not give the affected villagers the opportunity to make this a personal choice. The severely affected people choose only the destination of their future resettlement. Such migration includes all generations from the respective village, ending with its administrative erasure, and is directed primarily towards the city (See e.g. Atanasov 1990: 17–29; Bokova 2000: 49; Dichev 2003; Brunbauer 2010: 184; Raeva 2011: 89–96; Raeva 2017: 79–110). State policies achieve two strategic goals simultaneously through the construction of reservoirs: the dams serve industry (along with water supply and irrigated agriculture), while the displaced population becomes the working class (so necessary for the socialist ideology and economy), which is also engaged in industry. On the one hand, the city is attractive with its expectation of better-paid or more "prestigious" work and a new, urban way of life, while on the other hand, separation from the native settlement becomes a lifelong traumatic experience (Alexander 2004: 1–30; Borisova 2021b: 162–177). Kinship ties are broken, the farmer's connection to the land is irrevocably obliterated. The closed village community (Bogdanov 1991: 13) loses its connection after relocation and is transformed into a community of common local origin and (imagined) memory (Gergova 2021: 155).

The community strategy for preserving the memory of the flooded village leads to the creation of diverse cultural practices: organising annual meetings of the former community and its descendants (on the shore of the reservoir near the flooded settlement or in the city), publishing photo albums and village history stories, arranging photo exhibitions, creating narratives about the submerged place of origin, etc.

This study analyses the annual meetings of the former village community on the shore of the reservoir as a new form of community – Village for a Day – using the example of the two flooded settlements. The Village for a Day concept, created by the author, is a metaphor for the reconstruction of the village community, of collective identity through the rituals of the holiday, albeit within the framework of one single day.

The object of the current research is meeting of fellow countrymen[2], and in essence their structure and functions. It will also explore the memories that relocated populations have of the native village, resettlement, life in the receiving places, and the motives for organising these annual gatherings.

Theoretical framework

A possible approach to interpreting the annual meetings of former village communities on the shores of the reservoir is through the theories of collective trauma and collective and cultural memory.

According to Jeffrey Alexander "[c]ultural trauma occurs when members of collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks up on their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (Alexander 2004: 1). Human beings need security, order, love, and *connection*, and the sharp undermining any of these conditions leads to the traumatisation of people or communities (ibid.: 3). American sociologist Kai Erikson distinguishes between an individual and a collective trauma and points out that collective trauma is a "blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality" (Erikson 1976: 153). The restoration of psychological health requires the lifting of societal repression and substantially restoration of memory (Alexander 2004: 7).

The bearers of memory require its essential nature to identify themselves. Maurice Halbwachs considers memory a social phenomenon (1996) and distinguishes between individual and collective memory. Collective memory is possible within a "social framework" that constructs and organises memories related to the group and spatiotemporal relevance to the reality shared by participants in the community. According to Halbwachs, only feelings are individual, memories are influenced by different social groups – i.e., the individual remembers within the framework of the community. Later, Jan Assmann (2001) further developed the idea of collective memory and divided it into the subgroups of communicative and cultural memory. According to Assmann's theory, communicative memory encompasses the memories that an individual shares with his or her contemporaries and lasts for a generation. Cultural memory, on the other hand, is tied to the past and uses symbolic forms that are transmitted between generations, preserving the memory and giving the past a sacred character. Cultural memory gives meaning to the remembered, not to factual history. Paul Ricoeur (2006) created the intermediate concept of shared memory, which softens the opposition between collective and individual memory.

As already suggested, memory is a key concept in the present work, since collective memory participates in the construction of community identity. The collective memory (Halbwachs 1996), the cultural memory (Assman 2001), and the shared memory (Rikoeur 2006) of the relocated people all reflect the sociocultural effect the construction of the dam had. This event is a turning point in the shared experience of the resettlers and divides their lives into before and after. The community's memory (Znepolski 2001; Ljubenova 2015; Ljubenova 2017; Borisova 2021a) of the flooded village is kept alive in cultural practices such as community gatherings, oral narratives, and local history studies. The study aims to reveal how annual meetings in proximity to the place of origin function as a compensatory mecha-

nism to preserve the memory of the submerged village and ensure continuity with descendants, thus maintaining collective identity.

The study uses such methods as semi-structured interview, biographical narrative, including observation[3], and analysis of archives and publications. The text is based on the author's field research in the lands of the former villages of Popovo and Zhrebchevo[4], attendance at annual meetings of the resettled people[5], interviews with residents of the former villages in their new habitats[6], work in archives[7], and exploration of local history stories[8].

The flooded villages

The Studena dam was built on the river Struma in western Bulgaria in 1953 to supply water to the city of Pernik and its surrounding villages, as well as to produce hydroelectric power. During the construction of the dam, the inhabitants of the villages of Popovo (between 1949 and its demolition in 1953 renamed to Vitoshko) and Krapets were relocated and settled in the present-day districts of Iztok and Tsarkva in the city of Pernik. The reservoir basin includes the land and some of the houses from Popovo village, which by that time had already received electricity. The relocated people of the village remember significant places, calendar events, and institutions from Popovo, for example the Sts. Cyril and Methodius primary school, the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary church[9], the masquerade games on St. Basil's Day[10], the pubs, the mills, the brandy distillery, the library, the carpentry workshop and the Wild Rooster gaming club[11]. The cooperative building (the only large building that has survived to date) housed a general store, a pastry shop, the school, and a concert hall. The population was engaged in agriculture and livestock farming. During the relocation, the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary church was blown up and covered with earth. Some residents of Popovo village brought their ancestors gravestones from the cemetery to the city[12]. The village of Popovo was removed from the records through Decree 408 of the Praesidium of the National Assembly of 9th October 1953. One thousand one hundred and twenty seven inhabitants were relocated and consequently compensated for their houses and property. The residents of the village of Popovo, who settled in hastily built residential blocks of poor quality in district Iztok[13] in Pernik city, carry lasting memories of their painful adaptation to the new place. Their village homes had not yet received electricity or running water. The respondents express a nostalgia for their native village, revealing the trauma of parting with their homes and of changed livelihood. Although the village of Popovo is not in the reservoir basin, its proximity to it and the use of the reservoir for drinking water resulted in the prohibition of access to the remains of the village until 1989. Another reason for this ban during the socialist period was the hunting area and residence built nearby for

then party leaders. The Initiative Committee of relocated people was established in the 1990s to return property to farmers from Popovo. Although their houses had been destroyed before the dam was built, locals later recognised their properties because of the fruit trees persisting there, and once more put fences around them.

The Zhrebchevo reservoir was constructed on the river Tundzha in wastern eastern Bulgaria in 1965 for the purpose of hydropower and irrigation. Its name comes from the flooded village of Zhrebchevo (which was called Atlare[14] until 1906), and was located next to the wall of the present-day dam. The reservoir basin also includes the villages of Zapalnya and parts of Dolno Panicherevo. Interlocutors there also remember important buildings and institutions in the village of Zhrebchevo, such as the primary school and the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary church[15]. The population, too, was engaged with agriculture and livestock farming. After the relocation, the residents were compensated and settled in the cities of Stara Zagora, Sliven, Nova Zagora, Tvarditsa and in the villages of Korten, Asenovets, Bryastovo, and Karanovo (Kuzmanov 1998: 61). The village of Zhrebchevo was erased from the administrative country map by Decree 57 of the Praesidium of the National Assembly of 28th January 1965. Before the displacement, the population there consisted of 532 people. Today, the village of Zhrebchevo is completely underwater. It was a poor village, and some of its residents willingly accepted the construction of the dam and relocation to the city, where there was proper medical care and plenty of guaranteed work in state-owned enterprises. The feeling of nostalgia appeared at a later point[16].

The annual countrymen's meetings

Village for a Day is a new form of community for the former villagers and their descendants. It is a form of festivity that contains certain folkloric and religious rituals. Symbolic in focus and function, these rituals serve as a means of communication, carrying meaning for the community and thus reinforcing the sense of connectedness (Elchinova 2008: 46). The relocated people organise annual countrymen's meetings on the shore of the reservoir and so bring together for a day members of the former community, who now live compactly (in the case of Popovo) or in different parts of the region (as in the case of Zhrebchevo).

Since only part of the village of Popovo falls into the basin of the Studena reservoir, and today a large amount of its land is at a distance from the shores of the lake, many former residents returned to their properties after the restoration of private ownership. As they were not allowed to build massive buildings in the water supply area, people decided instead to cultivate their gardens, put up caravans, grow fruit and vegetables and raise domestic animals for their personal use, etc.

The patron saint's day of the destroyed church in Popovo is the Assumption of the Virgin Mary (28th August according to the Julian calendar, i.e. before 1968), which was also a village feast (the so-called *sabor*) before the displacement. The church in Iztok district in the city of Pernik (where the residents of Popovo were resettled) has the same name as a form of continuity[17], and its holiday is celebrated on the same date, which is now 15th August, according to the Gregorian calendar (approved by the Bulgarian Orthodox church in 1968).

The Assumption of the Virgin Mary (28th August) was the biggest holiday in the village of Popovo. It included a festive liturgy, a *kurban*, and entertainment. The notion of *kurban* denotes both a ritual sacrifice traditional to the Balkan Peninsula and the resulting ritual food prepared in honour of the patron saint. The festive liturgy in the church was followed by a procession to the centre of the village, where the *kurban* was consecrated (see Ljubenova 2017: 62–63). After the distribution of the *kurban*, a celebration with music and folk dances began in the village meadows, which also welcomed relatives and friends from neighbouring villages. Petko Hristov and Tsvetana Manova emphasize the social function of the village-wide *kurban*, which was the ritual sacrifice to strengthen ties within the village community, as well as the community's ties with their patron saint. Ethnologists have studied the *kurban* in the lands of the former village of Popovo (Hristov, Manova 2007: 15–21), tracing its manifestations back in time to the period before internal emigration. Six farmers provided sacrificial animals for the *kurban* feast in Popovo, and the subsequent shared meal took place under the branches of a centuries-old oak in an area above the village. The ritual food included *kurban*, ritual bread (*pogacha*) and boiled wheat (ibid.: 18). In addition to the *kurban* for the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, the village community organised three more *kurbans*: on the feasts of St. George, St. Trinity and St. Pantaleon. After the resettlement, former residents of Popovo resumed their ritual practices and their holiday cycle in the city. When the new Assumption of the Virgin Mary church was built in Iztok district, Pernik, the relocated people tried to restore the *kurban* feast there, but the communist authorities' banning of religious celebrations prevented this. A couple of further attempts were made shortly afterwards in a nearby area called Zhivkovi Livadi, but they too were soon banned. Thus, the practice of sacrificial offerings was discontinued, although the feast with entertainment in the meadows continued throughout the socialist period (Ljubenova 2017: 65). The administrative authorities in Pernik tried to establish a holiday in Iztok district based on a socialist model in the late 1980s, but the residents did not accept such an imposed festivity (Hristov, Manova 2007: 19).

After democratic change in 1989, the relocated population had access to land at the village of Popovo and in 1993 the ruins of the church were cleaned[18] and the annual feast restored (Ljubenova 2015: 98). An important factor in maintaining the

community identity and collective memory of the village of Popovo has been the cult of the Holy Virgin, perceived as the patroness of the village (see Liubenova 2017: 61). Therefore, veneration of the feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary is enduring and restored annual meetings since 1993 have been organised in the same place and at the same time: near the ruins of the church at the end of August. At the beginning of the 21st century, an initiative was taken to restore the church, although this came to nothing. The celebration of the great Christian holiday Assumption of the Virgin Mary in the new (15th August) and old styles (28th August) respectively, in Iztok district in Pernik and in the former village of Popovo, provides a chance for participants to maintain the cult of the Virgin Mary. This allows them to celebrate both holidays, thus confirming their connection with the new habitat (the city of Pernik) and with the forcefully abandoned village of Popovo, declaring themselves part of the community of the district and the city, as well as part of the community of the village of Popovo.

As a member of the Emerging Heritage project I was presented with the opportunity to visit the annual meeting of the residents from the former village, held on 31th August 2019, the first day off after the day of the Assumption (Julian calendar). The gathering was organised in the square in front of the cooperative building of Popovo; the organiser of the event for multiple years was a relocated person from Popovo known as Grandpa Dancho[19]. Proactive and persistent, for years on end he has been responsible for communication with the municipality of Pernik, the finances, the hiring of the orchestra and the provision of the transport.



Fig. 1. The former village of Popovo. A priest from the city of Pernik consecrates the *kurban*. Countrymen's meeting. Photo: Mariyanka Borisova, 31st August 2019.
Photo Archive of NCICH at IEFSEM – BAS, FtAIF 1796, photo 22.

The celebration followed the established tradition and contained a solemn, and an entertaining, part. The solemn part encompassed the rituals of preparing the sacrificial animal, its consecration (Fig. 1) and sharing it with all those present; the entertaining part contained traditional folk dances in the square to the sounds of an orchestra. The solemn part can also include the rituals associated with visiting the (ruins of) the church, where some of the visitors could light candles and say prayers. The liturgy was discontinued after the destruction of the church, and so the restored holiday was moved to the square in front of the cooperative building. The *kurban* on land of the former village affirms the collective identity of the village community (see Hristov, Manova 2007: 11; Hristov 2009–2010). At the feast in 2019, a priest from Daskalovo district in Pernik city consecrated the *kurban*, which was distributed for the health of all present. After the shared meal, the celebration continued with folk music and dancing (Fig. 2) in the square. Nearby, merchants offered souvenirs and children's toys, which was a specific feature of rural holidays (*sabors*) during socialism. The annual meeting is an important marker in the collective memory of the resettled people from the former village of Popovo, also attracting relocated people from the former village of Krapec[20] (who share the same fate), descendants, and guests. The mayor of Pernik city also attended the event in 2019, which lent additional formality to the holiday.



Fig. 2. The former village of Popovo. Countrymen's meeting folk dancing.
Photo: Mariyanka Borisova, 31st August 2019.
Photo Archive of NCICH at IEFSEM – BAS, FtAIF 1796, photo 107.

The village-wide *kurban* is an essential element in the collective memory of former villagers of Popovo. Therefore, resettled people restore not only their properties (material restoration), but also their holiday with the *kurban* (social life), albeit within the framework of one day. The annual meeting of relocated people attempts to affirm the collective identity of the community. The restoration of the village holiday is indicative of the strong connection that people have with their birthplace, and the need for festivity and contact within the former village community, despite the 40 years since resettlement. Following this argument, the village feast could also be interpreted as a site of memory (by Pierre Nora 2004).

Collective memory returns the displaced people to Popovo village land during the week (in the summer, to cultivate their gardens) and during the feast (for the *kurban* and communal entertainment). After 2019, the holiday slowly faded away, the number of relocated people decreased, and the *kurban* was discontinued, although some families continue to gather at a table in their gardens for the feast of the Assumption. The relocated people and their descendants are waiting for a new leader to revitalise the village-wide holiday[21].

The resettled population from the village of Zhrebchevo and their descendants meet annually on 2nd May in the Komluka area[22] next to the Zhrebchevo reservoir, a tradition they have followed since 1976 (Fig. 3). The first meetings were well attended, with a well-organised program: music, songs and folk dances (Coneva, Conev 2019: 56). Annual meetings started after a certain time (15 years after the relocation), which caused nostalgia and the need for festivity and contact within the former village community. This ritual meeting is a consequence of displacement and did not appear in the village's festive calendar before the relocation. The date is not based on a specific occasion. According to our respondent, one of the reasons for the choice is that during the socialist period, 1st and 2nd May were not working days. On 1st May, as an official labour holiday, demonstrations were organised, and on 2nd May, the relocated people held an annual meeting at the dam. The date is also linked with the spring season, in which "nature blooms", "charging [us] with energy"[23].

The ossuary with the remains of the ancestors from the village of Zhrebchevo has been relocated to the Komluka area on the shore of the reservoir. The place was indicated by a memorial plaque. Another memorial plaque at the same place was a short lapidary chronicle of the village. These commemorative signs symbolise the connection with the ancestors and the succession of collective identity, but are also material traces of the submerged village of Zhrebchevo and so determine the location of the annual meetings. The residents of the former village and their descendants have organised fellow countrymen's meetings every year since 1976 near the two memorial plaques. In 2020, due to construction nearby, the ossuary was destroyed, and the memorial plaque for the village was moved to the nearby

village of Asenovets, which provoked a strong reaction from the descendants of Zhrebchevo villagers. After the political changes at the end of the 20th century, the date of the annual meetings moved to 1st May for practical reasons: it was a day off, and the mandatory demonstrations had already been cancelled.



Fig. 3. The Komluka area near the Zhrebchevo reservoir. Celebrating fifteen years since the displacement of people from Zhrebchevo village.
First annual meeting of the village community, 2nd May 1976. Source: (Kuzmanov 1998).

The organiser of the meetings there is Mimi Tsoneva, a descendant of a displaced family. As a community leader, she is so committed to the memory of the flooded village that she also initiated a number of related activities: a website for the flooded village of Zhrebchevo[24], and with the collaboration of her father Petar Tsonev a photo album in 2019 on the history of the village (Coneva, Conev 2019). Despite living abroad, she also organises the annual meetings of displaced people, and currently she is even preparing an extensive history of the village for publication. She was the first to raise the alarm about the removal of the two memorial plaques and the ploughing up of the Zhrebchevo ossuary.

The rituals accompanying the countrymen's meeting there include a group photo of all participants, shared food, and a walk to the reservoir. From the website of the demolished village of Zhrebchevo, we understand that the gathering in 2016 brought together about 100 to 130 participants: relatives, fellow villagers and friends.

An improvised exhibition by Petar Conev was presented at the meeting, exhibiting old photos of Zhrebchevo residents, descendants, and other photos from the annual meetings[25]. Each successive meeting activates the memory of the village, of neighbours and relatives, of important and everyday events from the village's past.



Fig. 4. Komluka area near Zhrebchevo reservoir. The annual group photo of participants in the countrymen's meeting. Photo: Mariyanka Borisova, 1st May 2019. Photo Archive of NCICH at IEFSEM – BAS, FtAIF 1776, photo 56.

The Emerged Heritage project team were guests at the countrymen's meeting of former Zhrebchevo village residents on 1st May 2019. The gathering included a group photo (Fig. 4), a shared meal where our team was welcomed, the recollection of numerous memories (which the relocated people willingly shared with the researchers), and a walk to the reservoir. The group photo visualises and fixes the village community, while it is impossible to visualise the submerged village. This tradition of annual meetings is an occasion for narratives, evoking a variety of memories and emotions. The function of the shared table is similar. The stories of the respondents, which our team recorded during the gathering, are also aimed at the descendants of villagers, who have a mediated memory of the former village. The walk to the shore of the dam, led by a resettled villager, was accompanied by stories related to different places above and below the water, with memories of childhood and youth. The meetings are an opportunity for the scattered residents of the former village of Zhrebchevo, their neighbours, relatives and descendants to

see each other, to bring the area to life for a day, to construct an imaginative collective identity through shared food, photos and stories about their common past. The organiser of the annual meeting in 2019 was again Mimi Coneva[26]. Gradually, she focused mainly on her historical book, and the organisation of the annual gatherings remained in the background. The meetings in the Komluka area continued into 2025, but not on such a scale as earlier events.

The annual gatherings at the former villages of Popovo and Zhrebchevo are gradually waning and the reason for this is beyond the Covid-19 pandemic. Although there are still some proactive descendants at these gatherings, the former villagers, bearers of the memory of the flooded settlements, become fewer and fewer with the passage of time.

These annual meetings of displaced people have relevance beyond the immediate communities through their coverage in local media[27] and on the internet. This popularisation is a potential incentive for other communities from flooded villages to create or restore similar types of cultural practice.

Conclusion

Village for a Day as a form of community and a cultural practice combines traditional (Popovo) and new (Zhrebchevo) holidays and ritual practices, thus sacralising them. These community festivals are an important element of the festive calendar, resulting in what seems at first glance to be the paradoxical presence of a settlement's festive calendar in the absence of a settlement.

The village community is in a continuous relationship with the spatiotemporal dimensions. Places become arenas of interaction, symbols of identity for society, and sites of memory (Nora 2004). For the village of Popovo, such sites of memory are the annual meetings on the Assumption feast and the material traces of the village: ruins of the church of the Assumption, the intact cooperative building, the fenced gardens, etc. The countrymen's meeting, organised on the land of the former settlement at the end of August, annually reaffirms continuity in time and place: the cultural memory of the village, the connection within the its community, the transmission of knowledge to descendants.

Since the village of Zhrebchevo is completely under the waters of the reservoir, the shore near its (now erased) memorial signs, where the community gathers annually, was transformed into a site of memory. Although the Komluka area was not important before the relocation, it acquired special functions afterwards and became a substitute for the submerged village. Therefore, the place and time of the Zhrebchevo village countrymen's meetings are a result of an accidental but motivated choice.

Another particularity of these sites of memory is their one-day-per-year occurrence and its festive character. A specific feature of the countrymen's gatherings is that the village "comes to life" during the holiday, not during the weekdays, although the residents of the former village of Popovo are also present during the working week, cultivating their properties. The connection, the feeling of collective identity, is especially vigorous during the village holiday, when rituals, created before the resettlement (Popovo) or after it (Zhrebchevo), ensure a connection within the community.

The village "comes to life" for a day through the presence of the settlement community during the annual meetings. And the fact that the village of Zhrebchevo "comes to life" not on the site of the demolished village, but on the shore of the reservoir, does not change the picture. By repeating the same pattern within the framework of the ritual action, emigrants emphasize their belonging to the settlement community. The symbolic and communicative nature of the rituals during the annual meetings strengthens the connectedness of the community performing them. The *kurban* (in Popovo) and the group photograph (in Zhrebchevo) have identical functions: they affirm the social bonding of the resettled people, reproduce cultural identity, and stimulate the imagination of the settlement community. The annual meetings also have a therapeutic effect in that they stimulate the processing of the trauma of forcibly severed connections, thus satisfying persistent nostalgia. When people talk about the demolished village, when they celebrate in its land with their fellow countrymen, seeming to revive the place as if participating in the celebration of their native village.

The residents of the former villages acknowledge the need to remember and communicate the stories of their flooded places of origin. As a result of this narration, the memory of the destroyed settlement is passed on to the villagers' descendants. The countrymen's meetings, holidays, ritual practices (sanctification, *kurban*, shared food, the group photo, etc.) on the shore of the lake strengthen the fragile ties of the former village community and represent a symbolic restoration of the settlement, albeit for one day.

Notes

[1] The study was part of a project titled Submerged Heritage, A Village at the Bottom of a Reservoir: Migration, Memory, Cultural Practices under the aegis of the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum (IEFSEM), Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (BAS). The project (2018–2023) was funded by the Bulgarian Ministry of Education, National Science Fund. The project leader was Assistant Professor Dr. Lina Gergova; the participants were six scientists from IEFSEM (BAS), one scientist from Sofia's St. Kliment Ohridski University/Institute of Art Studies (BAS), and one scientist from the National

Institute of Geophysics, Geodesy and Geography (BAS). The diverse expertise of the team allowed the project to adopt interdisciplinary approach.

[2] I use the terms 'annual meetings of the former village community' and 'fellow countrymen's meetings' in the text synonymously.

[3] During the annual meetings.

[4] Visit to and photo documentation of the Studena reservoir on 15th June 2019 – 44 pictures (Photo Archive of National Center for Intangible Cultural Heritage (NCICH) at IEFSEM (BAS), FtAIF 1792), on 14th November 2019 – 37 pictures (FtAIF 1832).

[5] The village of Popovo – 31st August 2019 (with Milena Ljubenova; 1 hour interview with 1 respondent – Phono Archive of NCICH, FnAIF 3048; 118 pictures – FtAIF 1796); the village of Zhrebchevo – 1st May 2019 (with the project team; 2-hour interviews with 4 respondents – FnAIF 3004; 171 pictures – FtAIF 1776).

[6] Three-hour interviews with 2 people from the village of Popovo, 15th June 2019, Pernik (FnAIF 3014).

[7] In the BAS Archive, Archive State Agency, Pernik Department, Central State Archive, IEFSEM Archive.

[8] Four local history stories are already published, two for the village of Zhrebchevo (Kuzmanov 1998; Coneva, Conev 2019) and two for the village of Popovo (Erulski 1999; Nikolova, Stoyanov-Georev 2003).

[9] The church was built in 1845 (see Ljubenova 2017: 62).

[10] On 14th of January (Julian calendar). See: https://balgarskaetnografia.com/praznici-i-obichai/kalendarni-praznici-i-obichai/yulianski-i-grigorianski-kalendar.html (accessed June 7, 2025).

[11] G. M., male, born in 1937 in Popovo village. Interviewer: Mariyanka Borisova, 15th June 2019, Pernik. Phono Archive NCICH at IEFSEM (BAS), FnAIF 3014, file 1–3.

[12] G. N., female, lives in the city of Pernik, a descendant of emigrants from the village of Popovo. Conversation on 29th October 2019, city of Pernik. Personal archive.

[13] At that time the name of the district was Lenin.

[14] https://www.atlare.com/jrebchevo/meet76 (accessed June 20, 2025).

[15] St. George's chapel was built in the village in 1868. It was burned by the Ottomans during the liberation of the village. The church was built in 1928 and was not consecrated until its destruction (Kuzmanov 1998: 48–49).

[16] P. B., male, born in 1941 in the village of Zhrebchevo. Interviewers: Lozanka Peycheva, Mariyanka Borisova, Grigor Grigorov, Valentin Voskresenski, 1st May 2019, Komluka area, near to Zhrebchevo reservoir. Phono Archive NCICH at IEFSEM (BAS), FnAIF 3004, file 2.

[17] The construction of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary church in the city of Pernik began in 1955 with the financial support of the relocated people.

[18] According to other sources, the ruins of the church were cleaned up in 2000 (Nikolova, Stoyanov-Georev 2003: 21).

[19] Unfortunately, grandpa Dancho passed away shortly after the annual meeting and was unable to talk to him.

[20] By analogy, the annual meetings of the resettled people from the village of Krapec are attended by resettled people from the village of Popovo.

[21] This perspective is realistic. A similar case is that of the nearby submerged village of Krapec, where after the annual meeting had stagnated for years an active descendant of one of the relocated villagers appeared, giving new impetus to the feast in 2022.

[22] P. B., male, born in 1941 in the village of Zhrebchevo. Interviewers: Lozanka Peycheva, Mariyanka Borisova, Grigor Grigorov, Valentin Voskresenski, 1st May 2019, Komluka area, near to Zhrebchevo reservoir. Phono Archive NCICH at IEFSEM (BAS), FnAIF 3004, file 2.

[23] Ibid.

[24] www.atlare.com (accessed June 18, 2025).

[25] https://www.atlare.com/jrebchevo/meet2016 (accessed June 20, 2025).

[26] In 2021, she scattered her late father's ashes in the reservoir.

[27] These events are sometimes also covered in the national media.

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Bibliographical Note

Mariyanka Borisova, PhD, is a philologist and folklorist, working as an Assistant Professor at the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. The following areas pertain to her professional and research interests: anthropology of migration, calendar masquerade games, cultural heritage, traditional and official festivities, oral and written narratives, and local history. She participates in many projects and collective monographs, and is also the author of numerous articles and editor of several volumes.

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Songs as Folklore, Popular Culture, and Emotional Resources for Commerce

Aušra Žičkienė

Research Fellow at the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore, Vilnius, Lithuania

ausra.zickiene@llti.lt

Abstract: The subject of this chapter is songs that can be considered a contemporary hybrid cultural phenomenon. The key question addressed in the article is the role of folklore as a manifestation of tradition within this phenomenon. Folklore does not disappear due to technological and economic dynamics but rather constantly recreates itself around the process of cultural modernisation, creating fruitful relationships with the technological and global world, while remaining rooted in its local cultural homelands. People who practise singing also live simultaneously in the global world and in their familiar local worlds. Thus, the object of this study, examined through a case study of one Lithuanian song, can be considered living folklore and a continuation of local tradition, while also being part of the intersection between popular culture and economics (and consequently commerce). The aim of this article is to reveal the spectrum of functions the song has as a hybrid cultural phenomenon. The conclusion is that the song's role as a key element of local cultural practice is precisely what has ensured its long-term commercial success.

Keywords: song, global milieu, local culture, popular culture, folklore, community, commerce.

Introduction

The subject of this article is songs that can be considered a contemporary hybrid cultural phenomenon. My primary focus is on the role of folklore as an expression of tradition, which is why I emphasise it. Folklore does not disappear due to technological and economic dynamics, but rather constantly recreates itself around the process of cultural modernisation and creates fruitful relationships with the technological and global world, while remaining in its local cultural homelands

(Giancristofaro 2015: 173–174). People involved with songs (creating, listening to, singing, and using them, while considering songs their own, important, and meaningful) also live simultaneously in the global world and in their local worlds. However, this does not mean that folkloric elements are the most prominent or even dominant feature of the songs we are examining. Thus, the object of my study, which I examine through the example of one Lithuanian song, can be considered living folklore, a continuation of local tradition that also represents the intersection of popular culture and economics (and thus commerce). The aim of this article is to explore the range of functions that songs serve as a hybrid cultural phenomenon in this field.

The concepts and their theoretical context

Folklore is the central concept of my study. Here, I draw on insights from researchers who seek answers in their work to the challenges arising in a digitised, globalised world. For example, emphasising the importance of a living, ongoing, dynamic process, folklore is defined as "informally learned, unofficial knowledge about the world, ourselves, our communities, our beliefs, our cultures, and our traditions that is expressed creatively through words, music, customs, actions, behaviours, and materials. It is also the interactive, dynamic process of creating, communicating, and performing as we share that knowledge with other people." (Sims, Stephens 2011: 8).

According to Simon Bronner, folklore is the material of tradition. Tradition manifests through folklore and its practice. The practice of folklore encompasses both folklore texts (such as songs) and their performance, as well as all related contextual connections: behaviour, customs, human bodily experiences with all their emotional expressions, material things, actions and reactions, effects and their social aspects, everyday routines and ritual circumstances (Bronner 2019: 13–36). Bronner defines folklore as "traditional knowledge drawn from or put into practice" (Bronner 2016: 21–22). As Bronner notes, it is precisely by observing and documenting recurring practices that folklorists can grasp the continuity and dynamics of tradition.

> "… folklore's significance in the study of repeatable practices – stylized, ritualized, and often organized — that people deem traditional, connotative, and meaningful is its evidence of the thinking that goes into the formation of culture on various levels from the individual to the nation. The manifestation of folk practice individually and socially indicates that humans have a psychological need for tradition and reshape traditions constantly in negotiation with various

> cultural forces (Bronner 1992; Bronner 2011, 1–62). The definition of "traditional knowledge drawn from or put into practice" not only serves to identify the cyclical link between thought and action in the organization of culture – folk, popular, and elite as well analog and digital – but also encompasses an array of materials with similar dynamic qualities." (Bronner 2016: 22)

Like Bronner, Lia Giancristofaro also observes practices and sees them as expressions of folklore, but she chooses an entirely different starting point: according to her, in a global environment where unique local worlds are being created simultaneously, folklore is also an integral means of establishing economic ties, and the informal economy coexists with the institutional economy (Giancristofaro 2015). Therefore, this researcher focuses on recurring domestic practices related to material expression, specifically the production of handmade goods for household needs. Such practices bring together a comprehensive cultural complex of customs, meanings, actions and techniques, in other words a whole body of knowledge or tradition. These practices, as Giancristofaro notes, are characterised by the principle of bricolage, where provisions, elements, and actions that have different origins are used and mixed at the same time; Giancristofaro considers the revelation of the expression of this principle to be the goal of her research (Giancristofaro 2015: 174). She concludes that "folklore is sustainable, popular, everyday creativity that uses material and immaterial goods" (Giancristofaro 2015: 173) and adds that "folklore, mistakenly considered abstract, reactionary, static, and taken out of context, is a cultural phenomenon that is expressive, local, programmatic, progressive, reactive, sustainable, and forward-looking" (Giancristofaro 2015: 178). The principle of bricolage identified by the author is indeed close to the principle of hybridity distinguished in my case when researching intangible expressions of folklore. I can also draw on another important insight from Giancristofaro as she considers popularity to be one of the features of her expanded concept of folklore, which allows the researcher to shift attention away from conventional categories of heritage, value, and authenticity, and encourages a broader view of the expression of folkloric creativity.

The concept of popular culture, as John Storey notes, "is in effect an empty conceptual category, one that can be filled in a wide variety of often conflicting ways, depending on the context of use" (Storey 2024: 1). In our case, when discussing popular culture, we refer to public discourse that reflects the strategies and tactics of newly formed localities as cultural survival, which give rise to hybridity and blur the boundaries between ideologies.

Reflections on the relationships and connections between popular culture and folklore have given rise to another relevant derivative concept: folkloresque (Foster 2016).

> … the folkloresque is popular culture's own (emic) perception and performance of folklore. That is, it refers to creative, often commercial products or texts (e.g., films, graphic novels, video games) that give the impression to the consumer (viewer, reader, listener, player) that they derive directly from existing folkloric traditions. In fact, however, a *folkloresque* product is rarely based on any single vernacular item or tradition; usually it has been consciously cobbled together from a range of folkloric elements, often mixed with newly created elements, to appear as if it emerged organically from a specific source. In some cases the *form* rather than the *contents* provides this veneer of folklore; they can reference folklore in either *langue* or *parole* or both. In addition, the folkloresque concept includes products that, while clearly born through commercial processes, explicitly or self-consciously showcase their relationship with folklore by alluding to folk knowledge or jargon or including characters labeled as folklorists. In short, the folkloresque signals popular culture's recognition that folklore is a valuable brand. (Foster 2016: 5)

> The term *folkloresque* articulates three related meanings: (1) that an item (or element of an item) is in the "style" of folklore; (2) that it is connected to something beyond/before itself, to some tradition or folkloric source existing outside the popular culture context; and (3) that the product itself is potentially of folkloric value, connected in some way with processes of folklore creation and transmission." (Foster 2016: 5–6)

Folklorists generally agree that folklore is a crucial part of each person's identity, regardless of the era or social setting, while economic researchers argue that everyone inevitably and consistently engages in economic processes at different levels.

Assumptions on the interconnectedness of economics and folklore activities within a global context, where every individual engages in economic endeavours, have gained broader consideration. For instance, Willow G. Mullins and Puja Batra-Wells, authors of the 2019 book *The Folklorist in the Marketplace: Conversations at the Crossroads of Vernacular Culture and Economics*, mention in their introductory article that it was the culture and identity shaped by productive paths of folklore and economics that motivated their research (Mullins, Batra-Wells 2019: 3–4). They emphasise one research area, specifically the microeconomic processes occurring in local settings, which contribute to the distinctiveness of local culture. I also categorise the processes observed in my case study under this category, focusing more specifically on the concept of marketing.

As stated by the authors of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* article on the subject, marketing is a tool used in commerce, a complex whole that promotes and facilitates the exchange process between producers and consumers (Grayson et al. 2025). According to them,

> Marketing is not confined to any particular type of economy, because goods must be exchanged and therefore marketed in all economies and societies except perhaps in the most primitive. Furthermore, marketing is not a function that is limited to profit-oriented business; even such public institutions as hospitals, schools, and museums engage in some forms of marketing. (Grayson et al. 2025)

This tool facilitates the exchange of goods and services in both profit-seeking and non-profit initiatives. I consider the authors' observation that marketing can be viewed not only as a management process but also as a management philosophy or even a social process to be highly significant (Grayson et al. 2025). This means that marketing also involves the creation, activation, and use of relationships, ideas, meanings, and significance to promote the exchange of goods, using cultural references that evoke emotional responses.

"Giminės" (Song of the Family): The song as a participant in the hybrid cultural field

Once songs from folklore enter the commercial sphere, they should become part of mass communication and must follow certain rules, acquiring renewed, universal, and reduced meanings. In popular culture, when folklore is used as a brand with potential value, a song can take on a new form, which Foster calls folkloresque. In these instances, such works tend to be brief, follow popular culture trends, are quickly forgotten, and are replaced. However, this is not always the case; the situation can be much more complex.

In 2015, a private party was held to celebrate one woman's 75th birthday. Most of the guests were her peers: friends, neighbours and colleagues. Speaking in dialect, the people at the celebration sang many different songs from their youth. They performed *a cappella*, usually with the traditional second voice. The event was recorded, and a homemade video, under an hour long, was made from the footage using simple tools and shared online (Tolišius 2015). One of the highlights of this story is the song I chose for analysis, while keeping in mind the entire cultural complex surrounding it. All the participants in the celebration sing while standing, attentive, in front of a table laden with food.



Fig. 1. The 75th birthday celebration in 2015. All the guests stand up and sing "Giminės" i (Tolišius 2015, timestamp 43:40, screenshot).

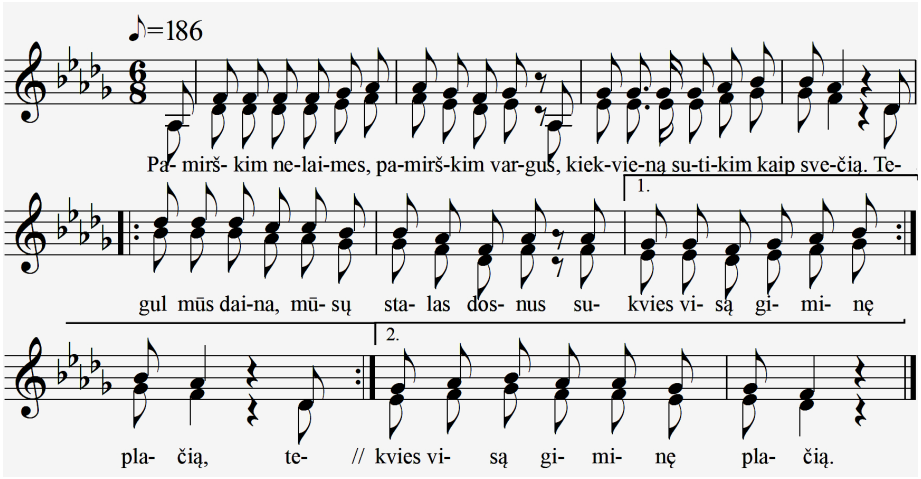


Fig. 2. The song "Giminės", performed at a private 75th birthday celebration in 2015 (Tolišius, 2015, timestamp 43:40).

The simple waltz-like melody resonates with folk-style intonations:

Pamirškim nelaimes, pamirškim vargus,
Kiekvieną sutikim kaip svečią,
Tegul mūs daina, mūsų stalas dosnus,
Sukvies visą giminę plačią. (2x2)

Te saulė tėvynės padangėj melsvoj
Išsklaido nesantaikos rūką.
Užtraukime dainą, kurią Lietuvoj
Dainuos mūs vaikai ir anūkai. (2x2)

Let us forget our misfortunes, let us forget our woes,
Let us welcome everyone as a guest.
Let our song, our table be generous
It shall bring the whole family together. (2x2)

Let the sun shine in the sky of our homeland
Dispel the mists of discord.
Let us sing the song that in Lithuania
Our children and grandchildren will sing. (2x2)[1]

Many versions of this song, which is colloquially known both as "Giminės" (Song of the Family) or "Giminių daina" (Family Song), can be heard sung at similar occasions and in a very similar manner. The participants in the events sing the song themselves, often standing and holding hands, as if it were an anthem. These events include family members' milestone birthdays, community gatherings in now-gone villages, town festivals, and wedding receptions, among others: anywhere the aim is to emphasise the ideas of family, kinship, community cohesion, unity, preservation of memory, and emotions of mutual respect. Drawing on Bronner's insights, we can consider these as folklore practices that help us identify a song as a variant of folklore and as part of a larger body of tradition, as well as observe the moment of transmission, i.e. the spread of the song. Through song, we recognise tradition as a mode of thinking, used to create, strengthen, and maintain social connections (Bronner 2013: 189–191).

However, it is also necessary to pay attention to other areas of cultural interaction reflected in this song. The history of "Giminės" dates back to 1993. The main origin of the impulse to develop this folklore practice is an original piece from popular culture.

The song "Giminės" (Song of the Family). Lyrics by Jonas Strielkūnas, music by Tomas Leiburas, 1993 (Vosylius 2023):

Kur gimėm, kur augom, kur žemė šventa,
Sustokime, sesės ir broliai,
Užtraukime dainą, kurią kažkada
Dainuodavo mūsų senoliai.

Pamirškim nelaimes, pamirškim vargus,
Kiekvieną sutikim kaip svečią.
Tegul mūs daina, mūsų stalas dosnus
Sukvies visą giminę plačią.

Te saulė tėvynės padangėj melsvoj
Išsklaido nesantaikos rūką,
Užtraukime dainą, kurią Lietuvoj
Dainuos mūs vaikai ir anūkai.

Kur sukas vestuvės, kur supas lopšiai,
Kur džiaugsmas ir skausmas praeina,
Po tėviškės medžiais sustokim gražiai,
Užtraukim lietuvišką dainą.

Where we were born, where we grew up, where the land is sacred,
Let us stand, sisters and brothers,
Let's sing a song once upon a time
Sung by our grandparents.

Let us forget our misfortunes, let us forget our woes,
Let us welcome everyone as a guest.
Let our song, our table be generous
It shall bring the whole family together.

Let the sun shine in the sky of our homeland
Dispel the mists of discord.
Let us sing the song that in Lithuania
Our children and grandchildren will sing.

Where weddings are held, where cradles are rocked
Where joy and pain pass away
Let us pause under the beautiful trees of our homeland,
Let us sing a Lithuanian song.

The song was publicly released as the soundtrack for a promotional video clip for the TV series of the same name, Giminės (The Family). In fact, it should be

considered folkloresque. When creating this commissioned commercial product, folkloric imagery (i.e. imagined to be characteristic of folklore) was selected and adapted. Both authors of the song – the poet and the composer –, considered their audience's needs in a highly professional manner. The song was created consciously and masterfully imitating the folk style, although we will not find any recognisable quotations in either the musical or poetic material. Some characteristics typical of folk songs are employed: the form of four-line verses, the theme of family adoration, and fragmentary, declarative rather than narrative content, as well as a simple folk-like waltz rhythm melody and folk romance intonations.

The creation of the song as a promotional product for the series was also linked to a range of marketing measures that contributed to its commercial success. The Lithuanian pop stars Stasys Povilaitis and Aušra Stasiulevičiūtė were the ones to perform the song. The clip was first shown, accompanied by the song, on the TV show Sveikinimų koncertas (Greetings Concert), dedicated to New Year 1994, which was the most-watched programme of its time. The video was intended to congratulate the financial sponsor of the series, a commercial bank, on the occasion of New Year. These measures instantly popularised the video as an advertising product, helped increase the viewership of the series, and undoubtedly contributed to what made the song well known and popular. Other fans of the Greetings Concert programme began to request this song as a greeting for their loved ones, so it was played more and more often in public.

However, this marks the start of another chapter in the song's history. "Giminės" evolved from being merely a popular tune that was initially a folkloresque, commercially driven product that exploited folklore, to becoming an integral part of folklore itself. It transitioned into a living tradition, now considered part of genuine folklore. Over its 30-year existence, the song has largely faded from the pop scene but has gained recognition as a folk classic, embodying the characteristics of true folk music. It is typically learned informally by ear and repetition without direct teaching. The song has diversified, becoming a symbol of modern community rituals such as singing during key moments while standing and holding hands, and has lost its original authorship. It is reworked, parodied, and forms the basis for new compositions, thus cementing its place in contemporary tradition. For example, communities choose to use the reworkings as their anthems, giving it the status of a ritual symbol (school anthem, see VDU ER 2075-116, recorded in 2010; anthem of the community of the restored old Baltic faith, see Satkevičius 2023).

In commerce, another narrative emerges from different assumptions. After the series and the song became popular in the late 90s in agreement with the creators of the series, "Giminių dešrelės" (Family Sausages), "Giminių duona" (Family Bread), and the strong alcoholic beverage "Giminių trauktinė" (Family Liqueur) appeared on the market. These new products used ideas and images from the series in their

advertising. However, even later, after the series ended and the popularity of the pop songs faded away, the meanings conveyed by these products, which were skilfully exploited by marketing, were probably still supported by the fact that the song had become known as something functioning in the folklore sphere. The material form of the sausages, neatly arranged in a package and 'lovingly' huddled together, embodies the idea of close, intimate, and equal communion. A loaf of bread is also naturally associated with family comfort, togetherness, and security. And the liqueur is a direct reference to family gatherings around a table laden with food, where people traditionally raise glasses to the success and health of loved ones. However, although the liqueur and bread disappeared from the market shortly after due to the restructuring of manufacturing companies, Family Sausages became an exceptionally strong brand that still exists today, with a product range that is constantly being updated to suit changing consumer tastes. The core of marketing is to highlight, emphasise, or craft a vivid, memorable, and relevant meaning and significance. It is this meaning, rather than the product's material form, that influences buyers' choices. In this case, this logic worked to its fullest potential. People buy sausages that still play on the idea of bringing together and uniting a close-knit community of loved ones, as transmitted by "Giminės".

By using the symbolic value of a song as a popular piece, additional value is generated for the material consumer products. However, the longevity of a brand is no longer determined by a popular work on the public stage (its popularity has already waned), but by the emotional resources created by localised folklore. It is no longer a TV series or pop stars (since the tastes of popular music consumers change as quickly as those of consumers of mass-produced products), but the idea of family, kinship, and community cohesion that has kept the food brand alive for so long.

However, that is not the full symbolic potential of the song being used as a marketing tool. There are a few more examples of how it can act as a cultural resource. One is in the titles of media articles, events, publications, and advertisements. Here, the song appears as a resource with almost no additional connotations, most often as a quotation or direct reference. It is only slightly modified according to the circumstances (for example, "Where we were born, where we grew up" becomes "Here we were born, here we grew up"). "Giminės" is used particularly often as a means of social communication, with its allusions and quotations constantly appearing in the information environment, including a kindergarten drawing competition in 2017, a 2011 book by a local historian dedicated to his family history, the names of local festivals and family reunions, and a reunion of several generations of high school graduates. The symbolic capital of the song has already been established, forming a foundation for a predictable emotional connection. This connection is

rooted in the native place, scenic surroundings (always in natural surroundings, never in the city), familiar people, cosy interactions, and nostalgia for the past.



Fig. 3. Screenshot of provincial town newspaper website. Article on the "Where we were born, where we grew up" community celebration (Aputytė 2025).

Conclusion

To argue that a TV series, many decades old, continues to influence popular culture with its ideas, images, vivid characters, and relevant events blending with commercial interests would be challenging without mentioning its soundtrack. The soundtrack features a song rooted in local folklore that has gained extraordinary significance in modern rituals. It is "Giminės" that, through its vital force, encourages the flow of meanings in all directions in the sphere of folklore, popular culture, and commerce.

After analysing the case presented, the functions of songs as a hybrid phenomenon become apparent. The song in question belongs to both local tradition and globalised popular culture and is used in various forms for commercial purposes. First, I emphasised its reliance on the realm of popular culture, as it is produced as a commercial, mass-market product. The performers are selected from among the most prominent local pop stars, so their popularity ensures the product's recognition and increases its chances of commercial success. Commerce cleverly capitalises on the popularity of the series and its songs by ingeniously employing marketing tools.

Nevertheless, the creators incorporate folklore elements, such as verse songs, images of harmonious families and extended supportive clans in the text, imitation of folk song intonations, and traditional rhythmic patterns. The work is thus conceived as a folk song, situating it at the intersection of folklore and popular culture. However, the song gradually becomes absorbed into the realm of folklore. People remember it, start repeating it, sing along, and incorporate it into their lives, leading to an increase in these practices. From folkloresque, the song becomes a work of folklore. We recognise its practice as an interactive, dynamic process of creation, communication, and performance, in which experiences are constantly shared.

When the popularity of the series and of the pop stars fades, the song does not disappear; instead, as a piece of folklore, it gains further cultural, symbolic, and emotional capital, which is once again used as a marketing resource. Because the song has become a key element of local cultural traditions, it has developed into a sustainable commercial resource over time.

Notes

[1] Here and below lyrics translated by Gabriella Žičkienė.

Abbreviation

VDU ER – Digital Archive of Ethnology and Folkloristics (Vytautas Magnus University Faculty of Humanities Department of Cultural Studies)

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Bibliographical Note

Aušra Žičkienė, PhD, is an ethnomusicologist and Academy Research Fellow at the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore (Vilnius, Lithuania). Her research interests include Lithuanian folk song traditions, musical practices of folk piety in local communities, and musical behaviour as a vernacular phenomenon in modern society.

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4940-7835

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The Communicative Aspect of Festival and Pilgrimage in Greece, Modern and Ancient

Evy Johanne Håland
Senior *Lecturer at SeniorUni Norge AS*
ejhaland@gmail.com

Abstract: During modern and ancient religious festivals in Greece everyone offers what they wish to receive more of in return, based on a logic very similar to the one Hesiod (ca. 700–650 BCE) expresses in his poem "Work and Days" (349 ff.) when he recommends the giving of a large gift in order to get more in return. Today, the significance of gifts and counter-gifts is obvious within Orthodoxy since in Greek terminology *antidōro* signifies the blessed bread (literally, 'counter-gift'), that is, their bread offerings, or gifts, which have been blessed by the priest during the service: what people are preoccupied with during the liturgy is the blessed bread they will obtain when the liturgy is over. During the festival of Agios Nektarios, a piece of the blessed bread might, for instance, be used as a healing remedy.

In the Mediterranean *clientela* system, people employ strategies based upon gifts and benefits to gain return gifts. The gift makes the recipient morally obliged for return giving, a favour for a gift. All personal and social relations rest on expectations of reciprocity. This principle also pervades the relations between people and their saints. The religion reflects a culture in which reciprocity and feasts are important elements. As the British anthropologist Edmund Leach once stated in his book *Culture and Communication: The Logic by Which Symbols Are Connected. An Introduction to the Use of Structuralist Analysis in Social Anthropology* (1986), the logic of sacrifice illustrates how a religious ritual serves to express a relationship between the human world and the other world. By making a gift to the Gods, the Gods are compelled to give back benefits to man. This logic is also found elsewhere in the Mediterranean, and in the ancient Greek, Roman and Jewish worlds.

This article, therefore, has not dealt with commerce and traditions per se, but rather the economic foundation of modern and ancient Greek religion by discussing some topics related to the communicative aspect of Greek religious festivals.

Keywords: communication, economy, festival, modern and ancient Greece, religion, rituals, values

Introduction: Religious Communication

A prerequisite to understanding the phenomenon of the festival is the concept of religious communication – people's communication with supernatural powers.[1] People must influence the deities and supernatural powers in order to obtain a share in their power, and in the same way as one switches on the cooker to control the heat, one may influence the supernatural powers so that they act in a desired way. Influence, control and manipulation are performed by physical actions, words, signs, or unspoken requests (Blum, Blum 1970: 250; Spradley, McCurdy 1980: 259).

In antiquity, the daily life of human beings was inhabited by a host of holy mediators who stood between the individual person and the more powerful deities in Heaven or Hades. Every household had its own personal cult in which one sought to influence both the living and the spirits of the dead through rituals and offerings or sacrifices. The same is true of the saints and various spirits today. The methods one has available to influence these powers are prayer, offering or sacrifice, and magic.

The magic, or strategies, human beings use to control supernatural power, accessing the supernatural world for benefit, include the carrying of amulets. Using magic is an active process, whether one consults a magician, buys a charm and then chants it regularly, or drinks a magic potion. There are many ancient texts of charms for relief from illness or affliction.

There are two fundamental laws for the operation of magic: the law of similarity and the law of contamination.[2] The first law involves the manipulation of something corresponding to that which one wishes to invoke. This may be done by presenting large fertility symbols as part of a carnival procession. The second law implies that two items which have been in contact with one another retain some influence over each other after being separated. These two laws are known by the common term *sympathetic magic* and are a persistent characteristic of ancient as well as contemporary festivals.

Theoretically magical rituals can be divided into two types. The first has been characterised as 'operative' rituals, where the human beings serve the deities based upon the law of 'gift and counter-gift' ('*do ut des*'). This is the sacrifice. The other type consists of 'redemptive' and apotropaic rites. These are performed out of fear based on the rule, 'do and avoid' ('*do ut abeas*' – 'I give that you may keep away'), and presuppose the threat of fear, malevolence or infection which must be removed or warded off. This is purification or cleansing (cf. Blum, Blum 1965: 33 f. and Harrison 1977: 134 ff., 275 ff.). There is, nonetheless, the problem of theoretically separating sacrifice and purification. The reason for this is that what is identified as purification in practical terms often takes the form of a sacrifice, while the effect of divine wrath can often be washed away when it emerges in the form of an illness.[3] A sacrifice or other operating ritual, such as a festival, cannot take place

before the site or participating individuals have been purified, by means of fasting, sexual abstinence, cleaning, and so on. The two systems involve two kinds of power, the good and the evil.

For the individual, good and evil magic exist, and is employed according to the occasion. In the simplest form, a curse is the hope to do harm, while a blessing has the opposite aim. Direct magic implies that the magic found in the apotropaic function of symbols – such as amulets – is at work. Conversely, we have indirect magic, according to which deities, spirits and the like must be invoked in order to do their work. Both in modern and ancient Greece, magic is crucial in daily life and critical situations.

As regards healing and purification, there is a fundamental phenomenon which involves both apotropaic rites and symbols, not only with regard to the worldview in the Mediterranean region, but also to providing a better understanding of the ancient and modern festivals, namely the *Evil* (envious) *Eye*. The Evil Eye represents the belief that the power of the eye can cause sudden harm to another person or to this person's possessions. The guilty person, who is often an ecclesiastic or a witch, is not always conscious of their power.[4] People carry amulets to be protected against the Evil Eye.

The thinking behind the concept of the Evil Eye is the desire to keep potential powers of change in check, a kind of social control (Maloney 1976b: vi; Esler 1994: Ch. 2). In the Mediterranean world's patriarchal family ideology, women, gossip, and foreign magicians have potential subversive powers; therefore they are feared and must be kept in their place. The sexual division in the society is represented by the terms 'shame' and 'honour'.

The ancient version of the female genitals was described as "what is covered with shame" (Ancient Greek. *aidoion*/*aidoia*, private parts, pudenda; Modern Greek *aidoio*, pudenda, vulva), having the same meaning as the modern dropi, and thereby a label for woman. This is understandable given the background of the many cases of which we have testimony regarding the female sex's connection with important processes that keep society going, such as through 'shameful actions'. Several tales tell us about brave women exposing their private parts to ward off their enemies (Plut. *Mor*. 246a, 248b). Their genitals serve the same purpose as the gilt head of Medusa – the Gorgon – with its fringe of snakes; that is, its apotropaic function along with other genitalised amulets.

The desire to keep potential powers of change in check, however, is not restricted to the relationship between men and women. If someone tried to surpass a deity, they were forced back into their place by the deities using their knowledge of magic, because they were eager to retain their precedence. The Goddess and principal weaver Athena, with the help of her Evil Eye, for instance, took revenge on the weaver Arakhne by transforming the unfortunate girl into the first spider,

doomed to spin and weave forever (Ov. *Met*. 6.1–145). Accordingly, the Evil Eye can be a deity's avenging force, a continuous evil strength like a virus or a plague, which must be broken with the help of amulets.

Offerings or sacrifice as well as prayer, are means of obtaining something material or of purifying oneself for something immaterial. Since all beings are living and self-determined, and have energy and power in varying quantities, an intelligent person can ally her- or himself with friendly powers, and with their help manipulate and control less benevolent powers. The reason for this is that we produce effects on one another through physical actions or by means of symbols and signs. Upwards in the hierarchy, the communication takes place with the help of intermediaries or mediators, who may be minor deities or deceased or living persons.

The deceased mediators are ancestors, demi-Goddesses or demi-Gods, heroes or heroines. In Christian terminology the latter two are called saints. These belong to the death cult, which in Greece and the rest of the Mediterranean region may be considered from the perspective of mentality, as this cult is marked by continuity. This is expressed through the ancient ideological cult of heroes and the practice of sainthood within the Christian ideology, as well as the *marabouts* (holy men) in North Africa.[5] The principle behind the sacrifice is, as already mentioned, the law of 'gifts and counter-gifts'; in connection with the death cult one sees how sacrifice brings the living into contact with the world of the deceased, as Odysseus experienced when he needed help from the dead (*Od*. 11). But how do people obtain answers from the supernatural?

Communication with the Divinity

Since there are supernatural powers, humans must be able to communicate with them, and communication from deities to human beings occurs through divine epiphany or revelation, spirit possession, and prophecies with the help of religious specialists.

Myths constitute a kind of communication because they reveal religious knowledge. Spirit possession is a common and direct form of ritual communication wherein the deity enters into and controls a person's behaviour, as we find in connection with *Agios* (Saint) Kōnstantinos and the *Anastenarides* (those who celebrate the Anastenaria festival) or the ancient cult of Dionysos. A possessing spirit can speak to people, communicate messages, or reveal its presence in other ways. The meaning of the messages needs to be interpreted by a priesthood, religious specialists who act as prophets. So the deities foretell the fate of human beings, and this commonly occurs through other living beings (Spradley, McCurdy 1980: 265–271).

A portent reveals the unknown in the present or future. In the Greek cultural region, the portent is manifested through human beings, snakes, birds, animal

cries, reading the intestines of sacrificed animals, dreams, oracles spoken by people in contact with the supernatural, natural phenomena, and so on. Among the symbolic actions performed by animals, one may mention the ancient sacrificial ox which decided its own destiny by going to the altar and eating of the grain (Paus. 1.24,4).[6] A modern parallel is found in the sheep of the village of Agia Elenē, although the 1992 version of the sacrificial animal did not go as willingly to its death as one might have wished (Håland 2017: Ch. 4, esp. 235 and Fig. 73). In the world of Homer, the divine epiphany is often in the guise of individual persons, such as when the Goddess Athena approaches Telemakhos in the likeness of Mentes (*Od*. 1.102– 112, cf. 17.483–488). The remote Zeus usually portended his decisions through natural phenomena, such as lightning flashes and thunder (*Il.* 17.593–596), birds (*Od.* 2.146–156), the rainbow (*Il.* 17.547–552), or the wind's whistling in the holy oak trees by his oracle in Dodona (*Il.* 16.233239). The meanings of the different portents from the top of the religious hierarchy are interpreted by the institutionalised priesthood, such as the *hiereus* (priest/holy, term for magistrates) of Delphi. They interpreted the meaning of the messages from the earth (Diod. 16.26) and Apollo to the priestess Pythia. There were also itinerant diviners, an Assyrian magician for instance, who played an important role in establishing cultural contact (Burkert 1983: 116). Moreover, a society might have a famous seer in its midst, for exampleTeiresias in Thebes (Soph. *OT*. 297–463). Dreams, prophecies and oracles are also important today, such as the account of *Agia* (Saint) Pelagia's dreaming the *Panagia* (Virgin Mary), which led to the finding of the icon on the island of Tinos.[7] Divine epiphany also occurs through dance, as in the modern Anastenaria or the ancient mystery cults.

Prophecies sent by the deities are commonly interpreted by religious specialists. These include the magician and the medicine man or woman who controls supernatural power on behalf of the people, often in order to cure them or influence the course of nature. Another specialist is the priest or priestess, who is a male or female mediator between the supernatural and human worlds because they have knowledge of the official symbolic system (Blum, Blum 1970: 287; Spradley, McCurdy 1980: 268, 385).

After having presented the way in which people invoke the powers and the latter's replies, the festival will now be considered. Since the festival is a unique means of communication at both the inter-human level and between humans and the stronger powers, it is important to discuss the communication aspect of festivals per se.

What is a Festival, and Why and How do People Celebrate Festivals?

According to Strabo (9.419), people came together to sacrifice and drink as a community, and in this way the *polis* (city-state) was created. Many sources emphasise the importance of citizens' participation in feasts.[8] In this context, the (festal) meal or *dais* (banquet) was also important. Ancient festivals can be considered as religious drinking sessions.[9] The significance of festivals is seen both in the ancient religious festival cycle and in the modern cycle where the church's calendar has been assimilated with seasonal festivals within the agricultural calendar, just as the ancient official ideological Athenian calendar was. The festivals were previously connected to a Goddess, such as Demeter or Athena, a God, such as Dionysos, or a deceased hero or heroine. Today they are connected with a deceased saint; in particular, we encounter the life cycles of the Panagia and Christ.

To be a Greek was and is characterised by a common language and religion (Hdt. 8.144,2). Ancient religion was not a holy text, but action: rituals, festivals, processions, athletic competitions, oracles, gifts and animal sacrifices. Many of these elements are also found in modern cult, where the importance of the everyday symbols of a popular cult recur in the official religion.

The festival therefore functions as a way to establish the connection between the individual and the supernatural on the one hand and between the individual and the greater society on the other. As with the modern festival dedicated to the Panagia on Tinos, the ancient Panathenaia festival served to renew and strengthen individual member's solidarity with wider society.

Festivals should be considered rituals performed at periodic recurring critical periods or at passages in the relationship between nature and human beings, and between people on the inter-human level. On the level of macro-society, rituals are also often performed in order to end crises which arise between members of society. Moreover, ritual ceremonies are performed during passages in the human life cycle. Accordingly, the festival celebrates passages pertaining to everything that exists in nature, both for the human being, society, and the cosmos in general.

It has been claimed that there is a difference between the ritual ceremonies performed during periods of crisis in human life, the "rites de passage" at birth, marriage and death, and the annual festivals as they often are celebrated in modern societies (Abrahams 1984: 167, but cf. 169). The difference has great implications for the ways in which celebration is launched, since in the first of these rituals the power of the celebration has already been activated, but in the annual festivals one must often initiate one's own energies, even when organising the ceremonies for mutual amusement and profit. This especially concerns festivals celebrated in societies that no longer depend unilaterally on agriculture for their economic base, such as

present-day Greece, where a great part of the income is derived from work migration and a constantly growing tourist industry. It also concerns festivals celebrated at some point during the year when nothing especially important occurs in the agricultural cycle – in a quiet period within the production and reproduction cycle of the resources upon which the ongoing condition and continuity characteristics of the society are built – when the festival must literally be activated with a bang.

I cannot say that this statement relates to the modern festivals I have worked on (Håland 2017, 2019, see also 2014, 2023), since all of them are seasonal festivals symbolising important passages in the agricultural year in the same way that all the ancient festivals are. Among the modern festivals we encounter midwinter, late winter, spring, and early and late summer festivals. Indeed, most of these are late winter or spring festivals that symbolise the passage from winter to the fertile part of the agricultural year, when the food will ripen and be harvested. People celebrate festivals before the passage of especially important periods within the agricultural year, and the two most important points in the agrarian cycle are sowing and spring, for both the modern and ancient farmer. Although modern people do not depend unilaterally on agriculture as the economic basis for their sustenance, human beings still make their living from the harvest of the soil, and nature can still be difficult to deal with. If the rains are not sufficient before the time of sowing in autumn, the farmer knows that it is unlikely that the crop will be a good one. Consequently, many festivals were dedicated to the grain mother, Demeter at this crucial time of the year in ancient Greece, just as people today celebrate the Panagia, the protectress of sowing, in Eleusis, for example, where she also has a church inside of the archaeological site where the Eleusinian Mysteries were celebrated in antiquity (Figure 1).



Fig. 1. Women are busy organising their offerings of bread, wine, olive oil and cakes before the start of the liturgy on the eve of the festival dedicated to the Panagia *Meso-sporitissa* (*mesos* middle, half; *sporos*, *spora* seed, sowing, "Panagia Half-Way-Through-the-Sowing") – the "Presentation of the Panagia in the Temple" – Eleusis, 20 November 2011. Photo: E. J. Håland.

If the sprouting of the grain has not reached a certain stage by the time of the first frost in early January, the farmer may lose the entire crop. Thus follows the importance of the Babo festival and carnivals such as the Haloa festival in antiquity. The "White Week" after Easter is also crucial since the whole crop may be lost if it starts to hail, which is why one encounters all the rituals after Easter and around the first of May. This is not only due to the "Resurrection" on Easter Sunday and the subsequent week known as the "White Week" after Easter. This week is indeed "white", but hail is also white, and in June the grain is about to be reaped (Håland 2017: Ch. 4–6). Even if the agricultural population who perform the rituals today have modern technology and new ways to improve the agricultural productivity of their fields (machinery and chemical fertilisers), these improvements have not given them control over the vicissitudes of nature. The survival of the community still depends on natural events beyond the farmer's control. Whether the reason is that the ritual is a compensation for technology or that the people do not really trust the technology, 'homemade' sympathetic magic so important to the fertility cult is still performed. In this way, they attempt to influence fertility directly. Accordingly, the festival rituals represent a worldview belonging to a traditional agricultural society. This is not contradicted by the fact that the summer festivals of August are celebrated in a month of holidays and leisure. The

ancients did the same, since the end of July and the first part of August, which followed the harvest and the threshing of the grain, was a period of leisure as well (Hes. *Op*. 607 f.; Arist. *Eth. Nic*. 8.1160a19–30). We are dealing with cyclical festivals in which belief in transformation is immanent as long as both humans and the natural world of which they are part change (Håland 2005, 2017; Kyriakidou-Nestoros 1986; Hart 1992: 90 ff., 225 ff.), therefore the aforementioned rigid division between annual festivals and passage rites needs to be nuanced. The reason for this is that all of the aforementioned festivals essentially celebrate or praise the earth's capacities to grow.

Festivals are celebrated in order to maintain the cycle of fertility, by acknowledging the respective places of humankind and the powers of nature. The festival accomplishes this by seizing the process and reinforcing it based on the logic of sympathetic magic. In this way the community honours nature while giving humanity its place in the larger scheme of things. Fertility, in such a world, is understood as the capacities of nature enhanced by humans, acting together in serious play. Therefore the most powerful holiday symbols are expressed in a language that reflects the processes of life, marriage, death and regeneration, ripening, harvesting, and lying fallow.

In the festivals we often find that multiple meanings appear in symbols, costumes and masks in an extravagance of size and colour. A playful distortion of nature, the world, or society as well as overeating and a great consumption of alcohol are characteristic, especially for the carnival festivals (Abrahams 1984: 163 ff.). These motifs underscore the wish for growth and are therefore an example of sympathetic magic. This is clearly expressed by the symbols carried in procession through the streets of the town during the carnival season.

At this level, the festival is a ceremony performed between – and involving – people and the divine to renew their mutual contract. In all societies it is essential for life to maintain the food supply. To secure the crop in peasant society, the supernatural forces that govern weather and wind, the deities, must, with the help of sacrifices, be influenced to be kindly disposed. To this end, a festival is held in their honour (Harrison 1977: 138 ff., 275–294, cf. Wolf 1966: 97 ff.).

Both the modern and ancient Greeks live in the same geographical region and under the same climatic conditions. Now as then, Greek society is mainly agricultural, and the mentality of the farmers is still reflected in the festival cycle. Modern farmers perform the same ceremonies at the same time of year as their ancient equivalent: before the sowing they pray to ensure a good crop, and at the harvest they make a thanksgiving offering by celebrating a festival. In that way the ancient farmers secured their future relations with the divinities, as modern farmers do with the saints and other deceased.

The following account gives a good explanation of what a festival might also be, and why and how it takes place: in a bloody and prolonged dispute between two families, the village's representatives try to put matters right. A bull is slaughtered in front of the entire village. Next, people consume a traditional dish collectively as a communal meal. Another way to end a vendetta might be to organise a wedding in which bride and groom symbolise the reconciliation between the two parties involved (Bourdieu 1966: 236 f.).

A festival is therefore a ceremony performed between people in order to renew the rules of society or the social contract in potential periods of crisis. In this way the social order is maintained by purifying the community of disorder, and integrity is restored. The special function of the ceremony is to sanction the social units and the relationship between them.

Festivals are generally connected with eagerly-anticipated participatory cultural events. The critical transitional periods in the human experience are, as mentioned, marked by birth, puberty, marriage and death. As regards work, the planting, sowing and harvesting or gathering of crops are celebrated. The annual seasons and the deceased mediators, or intermediaries between humans and deities, are, for instance, marked by the Christmas celebrations and processions during saints' festivals. Improved social status might be obtained by celebrating *Potlatch festivals*. A potlatch is a feast celebrated with gift-giving and the destruction of articles of value, which demonstrates wealth and status. In this way people can move upwards or downwards within the social hierarchy. Thanksgiving festivals are generally also common within a society. Some of these events are linked to the life cycle of a particular person. Other events are celebrated within the family, the neighbourhood, village or greater community, such as an ancient *polis*, the modern nation-state, or the Orthodox Church. The different rituals, ceremonies or festivals are connected with special kinds of finery, decoration, music, dance, food and drink, performance or presentation, and physical and cultural surrounding. Sometimes masks are included, and the celebrations are usually carried out in connection with a specific altar, saint shrine or sanctuary (Turner 1984b: 12).

The religious ceremony is an official and formal performance of a ritual. Sometimes the participants only comprise the members of an individual family. Through the rituals people celebrate both themselves and the supernatural powers that are the source and origin of all phenomena (Turner, Turner 1984: 201, cf. Turner 1984b: 16).

It has been argued that the social organisation of a meal is also a ritual ceremony (Wuthnow 1986: 112). The united family is equivalent to any society which comes together periodically in order to confirm group affiliation, and the organising of the meal or daily dining customs have their ritual aspects in memorised and restricted codes, such as the organisation of a speech. The communal meal and

particular foods have a special function in all celebrations. Today one encounters the Anastenarides' communal meal of the sacrificial lamb, and in the village of Agia Paraskeuē people boil the traditional dish *kesketsi*, while the festival terminates with a vast communal meal, the Charlamelia. Festival participants 'offer' the food to themselves and the saints by providing for the banquets. The meal is important both in the modern and ancient festivals – the core of the festival is indeed a communal meal which the community members offer to themselves and their deities. Prior to the feast, a fixed period is often marked with sexual abstinence and fasting. Concerning the organisation of the festival, the community may establish a special surplus stock in order to procure the provisions for it. In modern society the villagers most often take charge of the economic organisation of the festival for the local patron saint. The official ideology, represented by the Orthodox Church, often opposes these popular festivals or has an ambivalent relationship to them. This is because many within the Church, such as the local priest in Agia Elenē, think they represent "pagan traditions", despite the fact that they are officially accepted (Håland 2017: Ch. 4).[10]

In the organising of ancient festivals, the wealthy gained prestige by giving rich gifts, that is, by fulfilling various *leitourgiai* (liturgies) or "services for the people", for example as a *chorēgos* ('sponsor', the leader of a dramatic chorus), the person appointed to train and equip one of the choruses in the Dionysos festivals' tragedies. To be appointed a *chorēgos* was considered a burden for those appointed to this duty, but at the same time it was a source of political and social credit, as when for the purpose of propaganda the orator Demosthenes directs his audience's attention towards his patriotism in serving as *chorēgos* for the boys' dithyrambic chorus around 351/350 BCE, even ordering golden crowns for the entire chorus while he wore a gold-embroidered robe (Dem. 21.16 ff.). This organising is a parallel to the arranging of contemporary festivals, such as regards the sacrificial bull in Agia Paraskeuē, which is dedicated by a wealthy emigrant, the money collected during today's festivals in the villages of Koimēsē, Agia Elenē and Agia Paraskeuē, and the auctions in the villages of Olympos and Agia Paraskeuē. The same regards the dishes of food offered at the graves during the ritual on "White Tuesday" following Easter Sunday in Olympos, the food collected as well as the surplus given "to the bags" in Agia Elenē and the village of Melikē, that is, what is collected during "the circuit of the houses" carried out by the "Thracians" or Kōstilides, in a context in which it carries prestige to give as much as possible. Therefore people pay close attention to what different people give, and it is greatly lamented if any household fails to put offerings into the bags of the three women who bring up the rear of the procession of the Anastenarides in Agia Elenē. In former times a poor villager was always chosen to be the Kalogeros (monk) during carnival, thus providing him with food. Therefore the touring of the houses functioned as a kind of social security in which they collected grain, eggs and money.

So the communication between humans and deities has two aspects: material and immaterial. The immaterial aspect is the prayer, and a festival held in honour of the supernatural might generally be seen as a rite accompanying a prayer for collaboration or help. However, I argue that it is the material part of the festival, the sacrifice or offering (cf. Leach 1986: Ch. 18), that is the most important aspect. In the Mediterranean region this is usually labelled as a votive offering (van Straten 1981: 65–151). The central act in the ancient festivals is the blood sacrifice or a bloodless offering, such as corn cakes. Sacrifices and offerings are also common in the modern festivals.

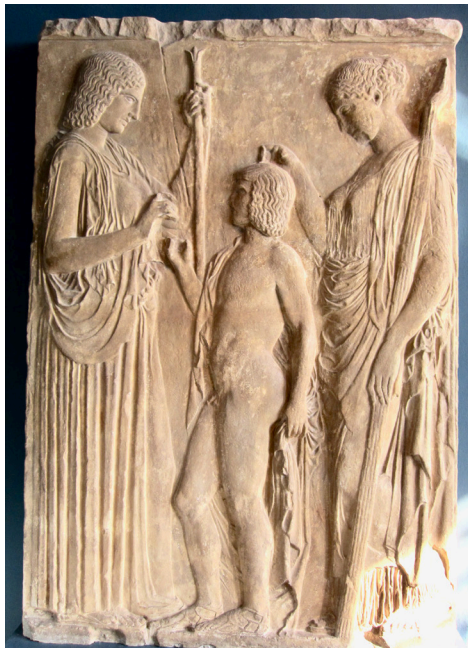


Fig. 2. Copy of the Great Eleusinian votive relief, fifth century BCE, representing the Eleusinian deities blessing and offering ears of wheat to Triptolemos in order for him to bestow the blessing in turn on humankind. Archaeological Museum of Eleusis (Original: National Archaeological Museum Athens). Photo: E. J. Håland.

The Ancient Greek terminology for the festival consists of *panēgyris* (public festival) and *panēgyrisō* (to hold or be present at a festival). In Modern Greek, *panēgyri* signifies a festival on the day of the patron saint, but it also signifies something more, specifically, a fair. The fair was important in antiquity as well, typically the main attraction. In ancient Athens, a fair took place on the first day of the month, which was the holiest.[11] Scholarship has also drawn attention to how the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (*HHD*) describes the initiates' wish to purchase or acquire an afterlife through the Eleusinian Mysteries. A relevant illustration might be an Eleusinian

classical relief dedicated by a wealthy *mystēs* (one initiated) which depicts Demeter and Korē with Triptolemos standing between them when he receives his mission (Figure 2).[12] The fair is also important in relation to the modern festivals, where one encounters numerous booths, both permanent and movable (Håland 2017: Ch. 4; Hart 1992: 228). Concerning the function of the transaction in the context of religion, one can mention the original Greek significance of the Latin term *basilica* (Ancient Greek: *basilikē stoa*, a hall divided into aisles by columns), literally a 'royal stoa', serving as the tribunal chamber of a king. Later, it came to signify a Roman public building where courts were held or town halls usually adjacent to the main *forum*, or marketplace. We are in other words dealing with a commercial building. In contemporary Greek Orthodox and Catholic villages the marketplace is also commonly located next to the church.[13] The commercial connection is likewise indicated in the cleansing of the temple narrative, which tells of Jesus expelling the merchants and money changers from the temple (Matt. 21:12–14). Here we see how a new ideology takes issue with the usual activity taking place in a basilica. But through the religious communication in this as well as in other examples we also see that the economy is religious, and that the offering is the means of communication. This is clearly illustrated by the rituals that commonly take place in the Church of the Annunciation on Tinos, where, for instance, a female pilgrim arrives bringing oil, bread, flowers and 5,000 drachmae (ca. 35 Euros); her name is written into the liturgy book for the performance of a healing liturgy at 7 am the next morning (Figure 3).



Fig. 3. A pilgrim has just arrived at the Church of the Annunciation on Tinos, bringing gifts, and her name is written into the liturgy book for the performance of a healing liturgy.
Photo: E. J. Håland.

The same is experienced in the rituals taking place at the cemetery, which also indicates the important function of gift exchange in communication with the supernatural.

For a sick woman and her family magico-religious healing was a more accessible and less expensive alternative than physicians both earlier and today (Håland 2023, esp. Ch. 4 also for the following). People consider actions to express their piety effectively, and expect some kind of practical this-world benefit such as healing as a reward; the religious actions of one person can facilitate the healing of another, such as when a pilgrimage mother crawls on her knees to the church on Tinos with a sick child on her back in the hope of healing the child. Otherwise mothers may come as pilgrims on behalf of their children, as did the ancient Arata's mother when making her pilgrimage from Lacedaimon to the healing God Asklepios' temple in Epidauros on behalf of her daughter who suffered from dropsy (oedema). She carried out a type of ritual action, known as incubation, at healing sites that is part of a pilgrimage process. People travel to a sacred site, purify themselves, offer sacrifices and prayers, and then sleep there. They hope to have a dream or vision, in which the healing deity will appear and give advice or perform a miracle. In antiquity the dream advice was often a complicated set of actions to be performed, or a prescription to be taken. People most often incubate for their own healing, and there is epigraphic evidence of women incubating at temples and being cured. Inscriptions from the Asklepios shrine record several instances, such as cures of problematically extended periods of pregnancy, infertility, blindness, and tapeworm. People had to offer something to be cured, such as when the God said he would cure a woman, "but she" had "to pay a fee…dedicating a silver pig" (*IG* 4^2, 1, 121, 33–41=LiDonnici 1995: 88–89 (no. A4)). The various parts of the church buildings and furnishings, such as those of the sanctuary on Tinos today, very often consist of gifts such as doors and benches. These are offerings from people who have been healed, and the names of the donors are written on nameplates affixed to the dedications. Among the famous gifts is a marble fountain donated by a Muslim official who was cured of syphilis. Elsewhere, such as in Olympos, the dedicators are often emigrants, and since their names also are written on nameplates, they are remembered.

Another type of ritual action related to religious healing is ex-voto offerings. These objects are and were deposited at temples and shrines. They serve as a potent promissory note, a working spiritual gift in hope of a future benefit, or a thanksgiving offering given in gratitude for a received benefit. A variety of things might serve this function. Many of these objects are realistic renditions of body parts. Some apply to either gender, such as stylised versions of ears or eyes, and in these cases we cannot determine whether a man or woman gave the objects. Other objects are gender-specific: small representations of a uterus or rounded breast demonstrate women's needs and involvement in ex-votos. Still other ex-votos are plaques with inscriptions or illustrations of scenes of offerings, dreams, or miraculous healings.

At times, these objects appear to be stock and mass-produced, while others clearly were commissioned specifically by the donor. A vase painting shows a woman carrying a jug in one hand and an offering plate of fruit, cakes and a lighted candle in the other. She approaches a seated Goddess depicted in larger scale (Figure 4). From above hang two votive legs and a votive hand as well as three wreaths. In the centre of the image there is a convergence of hands as the worshipper holds up the offerings, the Goddess stretches out her right hand to receive them, and the votive hand hangs above almost touching the Goddess's hand, emphasising the aspect of gift exchange in the scene.

A third sort of religious action is an appeal to a holy man or woman for a cure, such as the pilgrims coming to the sanctuaries of Agios Nektarios on the island of Aegina or the Panagia of Tinos to be healed for an illness. These pilgrimage sites are visited by sick people in a similar way to the Asklepios shrines in antiquity. A few examples from the accounts of Jesus' healing ministry provide data on the issue of women's health. The episode of the woman with the flow of blood illustrates the active role of a patient seeking healing. In Mark's Gospel, we learn about a woman who had heard of Jesus and then deliberately sought him out, confident he would heal her. She reached out and touched Jesus's robe and was healed. Jesus commended her initiative, saying, "Your faith has saved you". The account stresses the active role she has played in her healing (Mark 5: 25–34).



Fig. 4. Boeotian red-figured krater, ca. 400 BCE,
National Archaeological Museum Athens, 1393.
Photo: Irini Miari.

Like the ex-votos, at times the charms in the *Magical Papyri* are gender-neutral, relating to fever, headache, or eye and ear problems. A few deals with women's issues, hardening of the breasts, pregnancy and birth, or problematic menstrual flow. Amulets were also used in gynecological contexts. Objects associated with holy people in a Christian context function similarly to amulets in a pagan context. Today, people are healed by touching various saints' relics, such as Agios Gerasimos', and his coffin is coated with ex-votos. Holy water or oil that has been consecrated on Tinos or Aegina is kept in homes and is used to effect cures.

Festivals, Rituals, Gifts and Counter-Gifts

During modern and ancient festivals in Greece everyone offers what they wish to receive more of in return, based on a logic very similar to the one Hesiod (ca. 700–650 BCE) expresses in his poem "Work and Days" (*Op.* 349 ff.) when he recommends the giving of a large gift in order to receive more in return. Today, the significance of gifts and counter-gifts is obvious within Orthodoxy, since in Greek terminology *antidōro* signifies the blessed bread (literally, 'counter-gift'), peoples' bread offerings, or gifts that have been blessed by the priest during the service; what people are preoccupied with during the liturgy is the blessed bread they will obtain when the liturgy is over. During the festival of Agios Nektarios, a piece of blessed bread might, for instance, be used as a healing remedy.

As mentioned above, by means of prayers and sacrifices the human being acquires a share in the benefits of nature administered by the deities. These are gifts that are implemented by mediators. In the *clientela* system found in the Mediterranean world, people employ strategies based upon gifts and favours in order to obtain services or gifts in return. The gift makes the recipient morally obliged to reciprocate: receiving evokes obligations for return giving, a favour for a gift. All personal and social relations rest on expectations of reciprocity. This principle lies behind both the relationships between people and those between them and the saints. The religion therefore reflects a culture in which reciprocity or return gifts and festivals are important factors. It is crucial to understand these key cultural conceptions in order to comprehend the worldview in the region (Di Tota 1981). The logic behind the sacrifice demonstrates how a religious ritual serves to express a connection between the human and divine worlds. By making an offering or giving a gift to the deities, they are, due to the idea of reciprocity, obliged to give the people benefits in return, according to the anthropologist Edmund Leach (1986: Ch. 18). This logic is found all over the Mediterranean. Leach provides an important interpretation of Judeo-Christian sacrifice, in which he indicates that "the principle of reciprocity pervades all social behaviour" (Leach 1986: 6). Therefore, from an ideological perspective, God gave Jesus to humankind and Abraham almost

sacrificed Isaac. In Christianity the sacrifice only emerges as a symbolic substitution 'as a reference to mythology', according to which the 'God-man', Christ, was killed by evil people. But with the help of a complicated transformation, this has become a sacrifice for posterity because it was wanted by God. The sacrifice is now an incessant channel through which the grace of God flows to the believers. Seen ideologically, the donor of the sacrifice is Christ himself, and the priest who offers bread and wine to the believers as the body and blood of Christ repeats the sacrifice by order of the divine donor. The Christian Mass is a transformation of the Jewish exodus from Egypt, and the crucified Christ is the Easter Lamb. The bread and the wine are associated with the sacrificial meat, metaphorically and metonymically.[14]

In modern Greece, many people, especially men, only go to church during the most important festivals, and for many Easter is the most important of these. Eucharist is the central ceremony and is understood as the sacrifice of Christ's blood. This sacrifice traverses the barrier between God and humankind which was created by the Sin of the ancestor, Adam. At Christ's death his blood became a symbol of the connection between God and humanity, traversing the barrier between them; every Easter when the priest proclaims that "Christ is Risen" (resurrected), people know that his redemptive blood saves them from being handed over to the Devil (Campbell 1966: 152 f., 158 f.).

One is reminded of a people's ability to transform a new ideology so that it becomes adjusted to their deeper rules, or mentality, and the various levels of meaning within their worldview. It has been argued that the Greeks took over Jewish sacrificial customs, but this is not necessarily entirely correct.[15] The reason for this is that their pre-existing customs with regard to the mentioned logic behind the sacrifice are the same as they were in Homeric times. The animal or object that is sacrificed can be seen as a symbol for the donor of the sacrifice. When a mediator, the priest, performs the sacrifice, it takes place in a liminal zone (by the altar) which is a taboo area for the common people, but with this act the donor of the sacrifice provides a bridge between the world of the deities and the human world, across which strength flows from the deities to the self-same donor. During initiation the person is divided into two, a pure and an impure part, and the latter part is left behind while the pure becomes the new status. During sacrifices, the sacrificial animal plays the part of the initiated. Likewise, the donor of the sacrifice is purified (Leach 1986: 84).

The festival symbolises the connection between this world and the supernatural. It is a votive gift, because it represents an offering and consequently functions as a gift exchange between the two parties. I consider the festival as a ceremony or ritual, an offering or a gift which the community – and the individual – gives themselves and the deities in order to renew the contract between them.

That the festival matters to everybody is demonstrated by the enormous crowds of pilgrims who arrive on Tinos today, including many youths and young couples,

and 'crawl up to the Panagia', with everyone kissing the icon piously before dedicating their votive gift and fetching holy earth and water in exchange for a cure. The festival is also an occasion to meet people, with emigrants and students returning home to attend the most important festival in their village, just as many probably 'came home', for instance, to the Panathenaia in ancient Athens.

Conclusion

This article dealing with festivals and communication can be summarised by emphasising that in modern society magic is employed by people who are well-educated and financially affluent as well as by people who are marginal within society. The point is that the magic works, and an important magical means of communication is in fact the festival and all the factors of which it consists. So, although this article, therefore, has not dealt with commerce and traditions per se, it has rather focussed on the economic foundation of modern and ancient Greek religion by discussing some topics related to the communicative aspect of Greek religious festivals, thus examining the material at a deeper level.

Scholars working on the ancient period may prefer to argue that the economic aspect was embedded within society (cf. Finley 1975), since economy as well as commerce are modern analytic categories not used by the ancients, although they were very aware of its importance as illustrated by Hesiod's advice concerning gifts. The same regards the economic aspect being embedded within religion (Håland 2017: Ch. 6, see now also, inter alia, Collar and Kristensen eds. 2020) as illustrated by the importance of exchange within practical religion which the ancients were very aware of, as indicated by Hesiod. Plato (*Euthphr*. 14c–15b on), who lived several centuries later, is more straightforward on the topic claiming that piety is a trading skill (*emporike techne*). However, this may also be the reality in the modern Greek world, since one may find a sign on a special offering box inside an Athenian church announcing *louloudia gia ton stolismo* (flowers for decoration). The word money is not mentioned, but the slot in the offering box clearly means that visitors may put money here for flowers for decoration in connection with the upcoming festival (Håland 2023: 93). This is indeed the way religious festivals are financed in Greece, specifically, by gifts – often monetary, but also others, a sacrificial animal, for instance – given by the participants in expectation of a favour in return, or as a thanksgiving offering for a favour already received. Of course, gift exchange with the deities emphasising the reciprocal, obligatory aspect of the gift may also be seen as including a commercial aspect, especially from a modernistic perspective (see Håland 2017: Ch. 2 on the modernist-primitivist debate). After all, Strabo not only claimed that *polis* was a product of festivals. He also stated that

a panegyris, or general festival, is a kind of commercial affair (10.5,4), as we have also seen in this article.

Notes

[1] Spradley/McCurdy 1980: 386 provide a definition of the supernatural. Cf. 252 and, e.g., Thuc. 1.123, 1.128, 1.134 for ancient Greece. Martin 2004, however, argues that the concept of the supernatural did not exist in antiquity, but is of a more recent (18th cent.) date. See, nonetheless, Stewart 1991: e.g., 128; Psychogiou 2008, cf. Håland 2017: Ch. 3. Håland 2019: Ch. 2 provides a more comprehensive argument of the following.

[2] Håland 2017: Ch. 3 discusses Frazer 1987: 11–48.

[3] Parker 1985: 10 and Ch. 7. Cf. Hdt. 6.91; Soph. OC. 466–492; Eur. HF. 922 ff.: for antiquity and Aikaterinidēs 1979; Blum/Blum 1970: 137 modern circumstances. Jim 2014 argues for challenging the "do ut des" perspective, by focusing on notions such as gratitude and thanksgiving. As I have shown in several contexts (for instance, Håland 2017 vol 2: 7), gift exchange does not exclude thanksgiving offerings, rather the opposite.

[4] See Håland 2017: Ch. 3, 2023: Ch. 8 for discussion. Cf., e.g., Maloney 1976b: vi. The eye kills: Ap. Rhod. 4.1669 ff.; HHD. 227: the threatening gaze of witchcraft.

[5] Håland 2014 examines the death cult in Greece. The topic is also discussed in Håland 2017: Ch. 6.

[6] See also Gernet 1981: 328–331; van Straten 1995.

[7] In 2007, one of my informants, an Athenian woman in her fifties, told me that she was healed in her left leg on 7 August 2000, after a dream in which the Panagia had demanded that she go to Tinos and light a candle. Since then, she has gone to Tinos annually during the Dormition festival of the Panagia.

[8] Pl. Leg. The first book highlights the importance of social gatherings in which drinking is included, e.g., 640-641b. See also 771d, Symp. 174a ff. Cf. Arist. Pol. 8.1338a24–31, see Eth. Nic. 8.1160a19-30 i.a. for "religious guilds and dining-clubs, which are unions for sacrifice and social intercourse".

[9] Cf. n.8 supra. On the importance of wine, see also Joh. 15:1 f. The importance of the banquet is also seen, e.g., in Paus. 1.2,5. On the feast/meal, Gernet 1981: Ch. 2; Harrison 1977: 140 ff.

[10] Cf. Di Tota 1981: 318 ff. for the circumstances in southern Italy, where many local priests participate in the organising of the festivals, and in so doing earn money unlawfully. The communists also participate. Consequently, the trading mentality wins against the Catholic ideology.

[11] Cf. Ar. Eq. 43 f., Vesp. 169–172; Plut. Mor. 828a2; Strabo. 10.5,4; Mikalson 1975: 14; Nilsson 1961: 100. Cf. the "Panegyrico" (profuse speech of praise) of the outdoor Mass, which is performed during the contemporary saint's feast in southern Italy.

[12] Cf. HHD. 473-479; Apollod. 1.5,2; Callim. Hymn. 6.19–21. See also Rehm 1994 on HHD. 401–403.

[13] Cf. Wolf 1966: 100 vs. Brown 1982: re the late antique basilica. See also Sahlins 1987: 89 for an interesting comment re the system in Fiji, which in Europe has been split into religion and business.

[14] Leach 1986: 92 f., cf. 14–16 and the Son of man (my emphasis). In the Greek Orthodox Church people still consume the body of Christ through the bread and wine, as opposed to the Catholic Church, in which people only receive the body, Economides 1986: 13.

[15] See Håland 2017: Ch. 3 for discussion of Georgoudi 1979: 271–307 vs. Moss/Cappannari 1976: 5 f. See also Håland 2019: Ch. 3 for an elaboration of the following argument.

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Bibliographical Note

Evy Johanne Håland is a Norwegian Researcher, Dr/PhD, History, and a Government Grant Holder (Norwegian *statsstipendiat*) Emerita from May 2024. In 2025 she took up the position of senior lecturer at SeniorUni Norge AS. Since 1983, she has conducted several periods of fieldwork in the Mediterranean, mainly in Greece and Italy where, since 1987, she has also conducted research on religious festivals and life-cycle rituals. Her publications combine fieldwork results with ancient sources. The most important of Håland's books include *Greek Festivals, Modern and Ancient: A Comparison of Female and Male Values* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing) 2 vols from 2017 (a Norwegian version was published in 2007: Kristiansand: Norwegian Academic Press), *Rituals of Death and Dying in Modern and Ancient Greece: Writing History from a Female Perspective* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing) from 2014, and the edited book *Women, Pain and Death: Rituals and Everyday-Life on the Margins of Europe and Beyond* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing) from 2008. She has published many articles and book chapters on festivals and rituals in modern and ancient Greece. In the 1989–2008 period Håland was affiliated with, inter alia, the University of Bergen, Norway, where she worked as Lecturer and Research Fellow in history. Since 2009 she has lectured at several European Universities, and in the 2011–2013 period worked as a Marie Curie Intra-European Fellow in the Department of Archaeology and History of Art, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece.

Website: https://uoa.academia.edu/EvyJohanneHaland

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Images of Saints at Annual Fairs in Vilnius: Ritual Attributes, Souvenirs, Works of Art

Skaidrė Urbonienė
Lithuanian Culture Research Institute
skaidreu@gmail.com

Abstract: The article examines images of saints made by folk artists and presented for sale at Vilnius religious fairs (St. Casimir's Day, Palm Sunday and Christmas). Based on field research conducted in 2012 and between 2019 and 2022 using interviews and participant observation, the study identifies a functional shift where religious images, once primarily devotional objects, are now largely perceived as souvenirs or decorative art. Findings reveal that while angels and the Pensive Christ remain the most popular motifs, their role has transitioned from essential religious attributes to souvenirs and interior decorations. Despite a declining demand for traditional large-scale folk sculptures, small souvenir statuettes maintain a stable market. The article also considers how commercialisation affects the supply and demand of folk art production. The article concludes that to remain relevant, folk artists need to modernise their creative strategies and interpretations to meet the changing expectations of today's buyers.

Keywords: St. Casimir, Palm Sunday, Christmas, markets, fairs, folk art, crafts.

Introduction

Several big fairs take place every year on the streets of Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania. Some of them are connected with holidays or religious feasts. Many craftsmen and traders from the countryside and from other towns come to sell their work at these fairs. Among the abundance of goods, there are artefacts of a religious nature, such as images of saints. These images are of various types, from works of art (sculptures, paintings and graphic works) to souvenirs and items for home decoration, and are made of various materials (wood, ceramics, straw and paper).

In this article, I focus on images of saints made by folk artists and presented for sale at fairs during religious holidays: St. Casimir's Day, Palm Sunday and Christmas.

I gathered data on this subject during field research in 2012, and from 2019 to 2022. My first attempt at researching folk art production at the St. Casimir's Day Fair was in 2012, when I collected material on the theme of images of Lithuanian rulers in contemporary folk art. The St. Casimir's Day Fair seemed a very good choice to find images of the Lithuanian Prince Casimir made by many craftsmen in one place. I visited the fair for three days, and interviewed 11 folk artists (woodcarvers). My questions were related to images of Lithuanian rulers from different historical periods, but during our conversations other images were also mentioned, because the craftsmen exhibited many different sculptural themes at this fair. Semi-structured and unstructured interview methods were used to learn the reasons for creating sculptures, the sculptors' iconographic sources and commercial issues (price and demand). I returned to the topic of images of saints at fairs between 2019 and 2022. I carried out research at the St. Casimir's Day Fair in 2020 and 2022, and conducted semi-structured interviews with eight craftsmen. My main informant was a folk artist from the town of Alytus, who participates in the St. Casimir's Day Fair in Vilnius almost every year, and who provided me with various information and expressed his opinions on the organisation of the fair, the influence of mass-produced goods on folk art, consumers' expectations, etc.

I observed images of saints, their supply and demand at the Christmas Fair in 2019 and 2021, at the Palm Sunday markets by the Cathedral and the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul in 2021 and 2022, and I spoke to five sellers of Palm Sunday palms in 2022.

As I conducted the interviews at the fairs, not all of the interviewees were able to speak for long, due to the constant stream of visitors who sought the attention of the woodcarver or vendor. Craftsmen selling their own products were more likely to express their opinions and thoughts. Other sellers limited themselves to short answers. I also used participant observation and photographic documentation methods, spending much of my time at the fairs observing, taking photographs, and writing detailed notes each day I visited.

Most of the data was collected at the St. Casimir's Day Fair by interviewing woodcarvers, the makers of the images. Therefore, the material presented in this article mainly reflects their opinions, their relations with buyers, and their attitude towards supply and demand. Due to the ethical responsibilities of the researcher, all the interviewees are anonymised, indicating only the district of their residence.

In this article, my aim is to review the images of saints presented at the Vilnius fairs, and to highlight which images sell best at the fairs and why. I also try to understand how commercialisation affects the supply and demand of folk art production.

This is the first attempt to discuss this topic. It clearly requires a more thorough examination in the future. Lithuanian researchers have not yet directed their attention to the products presented at annual markets and fairs. In Lithuanian his-

toriography we can find just a few popular articles, and one abundantly illustrated book about the St. Casimir's Day Fair, with a short overview of the history of the fair (Klimka 2009). No one has yet focused on the products or the works of folk artists, except for a study by the ethnologist Jonas Mardosa about palms, one of the main items in the Palm Sunday markets and at Easter (Mardosa 2009). However, the supply and demand of folk art production at fairs and the influence of commercialisation were not examined by these authors. Meanwhile, researchers in other countries discuss more broadly the commercialisation process and its impact on traditional arts and crafts (Cohen 1989; Swanson, Timothy 2012; Sørhaug 2021), and the influence of consumerism on the production of crafts (Svašek, Meyer 2016).

An overview of some annual fairs in Vilnius

The biggest fair in Vilnius is held in early March, celebrating St. Casimir's Day (4 March), and is called Casimir's Fair (Lith. *Kaziuko mugė*). The origins of the St. Casimir's Day Fair go back to the 17th century, and are connected with the name of the Lithuanian Prince Casimir. He was famous for his piety, humility, purity and other virtues, died young in 1484, and was buried in Vilnius Cathedral. According to the evidence of contemporaries, some miracles occurred by Casimir's tomb. The process of his beatification started in 1517. In 1602, Prince Casimir was canonised, and in 1636 St. Casimir was acclaimed the first patron saint of Lithuania. From 1604, on the anniversary of his death on 4 March, celebratory processions began to be organised in Vilnius from the Cathedral to one of the town's gates, the Rūdininkai Gate (Klimka 2009: 21). Since the procession continued for almost the whole day, it was accompanied by traders in food, dainties and religious artefacts. The fair flourished in the 19th century, when merchants from afar began to take part, as did peasants selling their goods, mainly food and household utensils (Antanavičius 2017). Due to the growth of the commercial aspect, the character of the St. Casimir's Day event began to move away from the essence of a Church celebration. During the Soviet period the fair was moved two kilometres away from the city centre to the Kalvarijų Street market, with the intention of forgetting it, as it was connected to the religious holiday and had a national character: according to the Soviet authorities, all rulers of the independent state of Lithuania and their kin had to be forgotten, erased from the nation's memory. As the patron saint of Lithuania, St. Casimir particularly represents the independent state and its religion. The fair returned to its original place in Cathedral Square and the Old Town in 1991, after Lithuania regained its independence from the Soviet Union.

Historically, the St. Casimir's Day Fair specialised primarily in wooden artefacts made during the long winter period. Today too, a lot of handmade wooden articles are sold and are very popular, especially wooden kitchen utensils (chopping

boards, spoons, coasters and trays) and wicker baskets. The fair also has many food products, sweets, etc.

A distinguishing feature of today's fair is the large number of folk artists participating who offer handmade products, textiles, earthenware, wood and straw items, as well as paintings, graphics, sculptures, metalwork and jewellery. Today the St. Casimir's Day Fair in Vilnius is the largest gathering of folk artists and craftsmen from all over Lithuania.

Articles written by the ethnographers Balys Buračas and Marijona Čilvinaitė look at the past of the fair and help us compare the main attributes of the fair in the past with attributes of today's fair. They visited the St. Casimir's Day Fair in Vilnius in March 1940, and noted some of the most important products (Buračas 1940; Čilvinaitė 1998). Heart-shaped gingerbread and baked bread rolls (pretzels) were in great demand. The gingerbread was usually decorated with various inscriptions, mainly good luck wishes or words of love. Pretzels came in different sizes and flavours: with poppy seeds, mustard and honey. People seldom returned from the St. Casimir's Day Fair without a string of pretzels around their neck. These products are still plentiful at today's fair. Gingerbread is still decorated with loving inscriptions ("I love you", "With love"), and wishes ("Good health", "Happy Birthday"), as well as dedications to the fair ("St. Casimir's Day Fair. Vilnius 2022") and to family members ("To my son", "To Grandmother", "To Mum", "To my sister", etc). Today gingerbread and pretzels are also very popular and sell well.

Buračas and Čilvinaitė also noticed a large number of souvenir hearts, made from cloth, cut out of wood, and painted with flowers, at the St. Casimir's Day Fair in 1940 (Buračas 1940: 7; Čilvinaitė 1998: 102). I did not find any such souvenir hearts at the fair today. I spotted only one vendor selling framed porcelain hearts decorated with lilies (a symbol of chastity and purity), an attribute of St. Casimir.

According to Buračas, in 1940 the fair was full of palms, especially so-called Vilnius palms (artistic compositions of dried flowers and herbs attached to a hazelwood stick) (Buračas 1940: 7), which are also very abundantly sold at the St. Casimir's Day Fair today. They appeared for the first time in the religious procession on St. Casimir's Day in 1938 (Klimka 2009: 24). Since then, Vilnius palms have become one of the main symbols and souvenirs of the St. Casimir's Day Fair. They are also a symbol of the preparations for the approaching Easter. Although the palms are widely sold at Palm Sunday markets, today they are also one of the best-selling items at the St. Casimir's Day Fair. Buračas and Čilvinaitė also noted artificial flowers (made of wood, paper, straw and fabric) being sold at the fair (Buračas 1940: 7; Čilvinaitė 1998: 103). Wood and straw flowers are also very popular at today's fair, along with ceramic ones, as a reminder of the approaching spring.

The St. Casimir's Day Fair is the first spring fair, as it takes place in the first days of March, so attributes and souvenirs related to spring are presented there too:

souvenir birds and eggs, and miniature nesting boxes. Moreover, in 2022 a bird was also chosen as the symbol of the St. Casimir's Day Fair, symbolising the return to the streets of the city with the fair after the pandemic lockdown. This apparently led to a lot of handmade birds, both large and small, hanging and standing, being produced from wood, clay and textile.



Fig. 1. Sculptures by wood carver Jonas Bugailiškis. The sculpture of an angel is in blue and yellow. St. Casimir's Fair in Vilnius, 2022. Photo: Skaidrė Urbonienė.

The St. Casimir's Day Fair in 2022 differed from previous fairs in one respect. A highlight of that year's fair was support for Ukraine. The war in Ukraine started on 24 February 2022. Very quickly, in just a week, the fair's organisers, manufacturers, folk artists, craftsmen, other producers and traders responded to the invasion. Ukrainian flags appeared everywhere, the decorations of the fair were repainted in Ukraine's national colours, and people began to use blue and yellow in their clothing. Moreover, next to the colours of the Ukrainian flag there was a significant increase in the number of Lithuanian national attributes, both in the decoration of the stalls and in people's clothing and accessories. In just one week, between the start of the war and the beginning of the fair on 4 March, many participants created a large number of souvenirs in the colours of the Ukrainian flag, and decorated their products (statuettes, ceramics, jewellery, toys), and even food products, in blue and yellow (Fig. 1).

The other two fairs take place at the time of the main calendar and religious feasts, Christmas and Easter. They are much smaller than the St. Casimir's Day Fair.

Christmas is one of the most important calendar feasts in Lithuania, providing three days off work, during which people exchange presents with family members, friends and colleagues. Although the tradition of giving Christmas presents be-

gan to catch on in Lithuania only in the early 20th century, today it is an integral part of the Christmas ritual. Ethnologists note that the custom of giving presents came to Lithuania from Germany through Lithuania Minor and from Russia (Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2016: 55). The practice of giving presents to children began to spread at the beginning of the 20th century, and after the First World War adults began to exchange presents with each other as well (Kudirka 1993: 215). Giving presents was common by the interwar period (Senvaitytė 2013: 119).

Traditional Christmas markets date back to the early 20th century and took place all over Lithuania. In these markets, food products, small household items (wooden or ceramic cups and mugs, wooden cigarette holders, boxes), winter clothes (fur, knitted scarves, gloves, socks, felt or fur hats), and small clothing accessories (headscarves, ribbons and jewellery) were sold (Klimka 2008: 362–363). People were usually looking to buy food for the festive table (honey, cranberries, poppies, dried mushrooms, etc.) and small gifts (Klimka 2008: 363).

A market has been held in today's Vilnius on Cathedral Square, where people can buy Christmas gifts, since 2013. It bears the name Christmas Town and usually runs from the end of November to the first days of January. The market focuses on small gifts, interior decorations for the festive period, and food delicacies. The Christmas market in Vilnius is a new tradition based on European Christmas fairs.

At the Christmas Town market every year, traders sell products that fall into three main groups: miscellaneous gifts suitable for women, men and children (outfit accessories like leather handbags, wallets and jewellery, small items of clothing for the winter season such as gloves, socks, hats and slippers, cosmetics, and toys for children); interior decorations (wax candles, ceramic candlesticks, Christmas decorations and artificial Christmas trees); and food products (sweets, gingerbread, handmade cakes and bread, apple cheese, spices, herbal teas and honey).

The Christmas market in Vilnius has not yet acquired a more original form, perhaps due to the fact that it does not have a long tradition, and perhaps because producers are not interested in presenting more original products during this massive gift buying period, and limit themselves to the most predictable items to be purchased as gifts. According to research by Rasa Paukštytė-Šaknienė, men usually buy cosmetics, jewellery, clothes, sweets, household items and utensils as Christmas gifts for women. Gifts for men are cosmetics, clothes, slippers, household items, alcoholic beverages, tea and coffee. The most popular gifts for children are toys, as well as clothes, sweets, and jewellery for teenage daughters (Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2016: 58–59).

The Easter fairs are the smallest compared with the other two, and take place near churches on Palm Sunday. The main attributes of Palm Sunday fairs were and are palms (traditional juniper branches and decorated Vilnius palms). As the Palm Sunday markets take place a week before Easter, souvenirs related to the oc-

casion (Easter cards) and items of home decoration (bunches of dried plants, table decorations, and candles) are presented, in addition to palms, which are the main attributes. In recent years, items that are suitable for the Easter table and the Easter holiday have also been sold, such as clay bowls and wicker baskets for Easter eggs, ceramic dishes, wooden kitchen utensils, and wooden chutes for the traditional Easter game of rolling eggs. For several years it has been noticeable that items symbolising spring, such as souvenir nesting boxes and birds, wood and ceramic flowers, and fresh tulips and fresh birch sap have also been sold.

Images of saints at fairs and markets: past and present

Historically, images of saints were sold at markets outside churches for parish holidays. Dealers sold pictures of saints, which they acquired from workshops or printing presses, but sculptures of saints were usually sold by the carvers, self-taught sculptors called God carvers or God makers by local people.

According to ethnographic literature, in the early 20th century woodcarvers sold their products at Church fairs in the nearest town. Some travelled further afield to larger towns and more prominent Church holiday fairs. Up to 20 woodcarvers (God makers) would come with their carved sculptures (Buračas 1998: 81). They sold their wares directly from the carts in which they came to the fair, or built stalls and displayed the sculptures. As the ethnographer Buračas pointed out, they used to look like exhibitions of sculptures, which were quite successful as they attracted many curious visitors and buyers (Buračas 1998: 81). In order to increase their sales, the God makers sought recognition as renowned craftsmen. This recognition was based mainly on the opinion of the parish priest (Urbonienė 2017: 101–102). Priests praised realistically carved sculptures and criticised primitive statues, even refusing to consecrate them (Buračas 1939a: 354). Craftsmen who were criticised by the priests were considered less worthy and usually sold their sculptures at a lower price. Craftsmen whose works were favoured by parish priests were considered distinguished and sold their works for a higher price (Urbonienė 2015: 223–224). But villagers also bought cheaper, often unblessed, statuettes. The reason for choosing a cheaper piece was economic: not everyone could afford the more expensive consecrated sculptures. For example, the story of the life of one woodcarver, nicknamed Jūdpauparis, mentions that the priests did not consecrate his work, but people bought them anyway because he sold them cheaply (Buračas 1939b: 3). The low price works, whether approved by a priest or not, were in great demand. One such sculptor, Nikodemas Mockus, who sold his statuettes in large quantities at low prices, was nicknamed "the Father of the Gods" (Buračas 1944: 3).

At larger fairs, where works by other craftsmen were displayed nearby, the God carvers tried to attract buyers by promoting their products in an unusual way. For

example, in order to lure customers, Juozapas Paulauskas emphasised his and his family's piety, and the fact that he had studied woodcarving under a famous craftsman (Petrulis, Žemaitytė 1966: 22). He also liked to point out that he had been commissioned by priests to make sculptures for churches, which meant that his carvings were well regarded by the clergy (Urbonienė 2015: 220). He used to say that several of his sculptures of saints had become famous for working miracles, which impressed villagers in the early 20th century who believed in the magic powers of saints (Urbonienė 2011: 179).

The woodcarvers presented sculptures of saints on a variety of themes at fairs. Each customer could choose a statuette of a certain saint. Lithuanians especially respected the Blessed Virgin Mary (Urbonienė 2002: 109), so craftsmen had many different versions of the her. Crucifixes and images of Jesus, such as the Pensive Christ and Jesus of Nazareth, were also in demand (Urbonienė 2002: 124). It was customary in Lithuania for a domestic monument (a cross or a shrine) to have images of patrons whose names corresponded to the names of family members (Vaižgantas 1903: 79). Therefore, sculptures of patron saints with various names were eagerly purchased. Statuettes of saints with the most popular names prevailed: St. Anthony of Padua, St. John of Nepomuk, St. Joseph, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Casimir, St. Peter, St. Anne, St. Agatha, St. Barbara (Urbonienė 2002: 111–112). People at fairs also looked for images of saints with less common names, so some craftsmen carved figures of saints such as St. Christopher, St. Ignatius, St. Teresa, St. Catherine and St. Elizabeth (Urbonienė 2019: 316–319). In addition, people also happily bought statues of saints who were considered protectors of the family, crops and buildings from various disasters. In the countryside, the patron saints of crops and livestock (St. George, St. Roch and St. Isidore) were very popular, as were guardians against fire (St. Florian and St. Agatha). Therefore, craftsmen always displayed sculptures of these saints at fairs (Petrulis, Žemaitytė 1966: 24).

Thus, in the first half of the 20th century, images of saints were mainly sold at fairs held during Church holidays. It is not known exactly when images of saints began to be sold at the St. Casimir's Day Fair in Vilnius, but they were certainly not for sale at the fair in the mid-20th century. This is evidenced by Buračas' article. When describing the St. Casimir's Day Fair in Vilnius in 1940, he did not mention any images of saints, which he would have noticed as he was very interested in folk art. His attention was attracted only by dolls depicting various farming jobs and rural customs (Buračas 1940: 7). The sale of statuettes of saints at the St. Casimir's Day Fair probably began in the 2000s with the participation of folk artists.

Today, folk artists display their work at the St. Casimir's Day Fair on stalls or stands, creating small exhibitions, just as at traditional Church holiday fairs, as mentioned above. Each craftsman tries to decorate his or her stall in his own way and to select the most beautiful works. This way of displaying products attracts

visitors as they can observe the sculptures or hanging pictures easily. Folk artists' stands at the fair are distinguished by their aesthetic appearance, which makes them easy to notice.



Fig. 2. Sculptures of angels and the Pensive Christ (in the foreground), Jesus Carrying the Cross, Jesus of Nazareth, St. Casimir, Our Lady of Grace. Sculptor Valentas Survila. St. Casimir's Fair in Vilnius, 2022. Photo: Skaidrė Urbonienė.

As mentioned above, woodcarvers sold sculptures of various saints at traditional fairs. Today, the variety of sculptural themes is rather limited. The largest numbers of statues are of angels and the Pensive Christ (Fig. 2). According to the craftsmen themselves, these images are the most sought after, which is why they try to bring enough of them to the St. Casimir's Day Fair. At the 2022 fair, I found only a few sculptures of other themes, such as the Crucified Christ, Jesus Carrying the Cross, Jesus of Nazareth, Our Lady of Sorrows, Our Lady of Grace, St. Casimir, St. John of Nepomuk, and St. Roch. The situation was very similar at the 2020 fair. In addition to the above-mentioned scenes, there were also sculptures of the Virgin and Child, St. Anthony, and St. Peter. Remarkably, some craftsmen also had statuettes of St. Christopher. One of them, a craftsman from the Marijampolė district, said that he was hoping someone would buy a statue of St. Christopher as a souvenir of Vilnius, as St. Christopher is the patron saint of the city.

Comparing the 2012 fair with the 2022 and 2020 fairs shows that sculpture themes were much more diverse at the former. At the 2012 fair, I noticed the following subjects: the Crucified Christ, the Pensive Christ, Jesus of Nazareth, the Virgin and Child, Our Lady of Sorrows, Our Lady of Grace, St. Casimir, St. John of Nepomuk, St. Roch, St. Michael the Archangel, St. Joseph, St. Anthony, St. Peter, St. Christopher, St. Cecilia, St. Agatha, St. Barbara, St. Veronica, and angels. At all the fairs, sculptures of the Pensive Christ and angels were the most numerous.



Fig. 3. Sculptures of angels, St. Casimir and the Pensive Christ. Sculptor Rimantas Paunksnis. St. Casimir's Fair in Vilnius in 2012. Photo: Skaidrė Urbonienė.

Although a huge figure of St. Casimir wandered around the fair each year to greet visitors and traders, it was not easy to find an image of St. Casimir among the works by folk artists. At the fair in 2020, I spotted only five folk artists (four sculptors and one graphic artist) who had images of the saint. In 2022 the situation was similar: three woodcarvers had sculptures of St. Casimir, and one folk artist had a graphic work with an image of St. Casimir. However, at the 2012 fair I had seen more of them: seven craftsmen exhibited sculptures of St. Casimir, and each one had at least three on offer. It is noteworthy that some craftsmen place the figures of St. Casimir at the centre of the stall (Fig. 3) for visibility and as a highlight. In this way, they emphasise the Fair's name, and also commemorate St. Casimir's Day.

According to the folk artists themselves, a sharp drop in the number of buyers has been observed in recent years, even before the pandemic. Although the St. Casimir's Day Fair in Vilnius is the main event at which sculptures of saints made by folk artists can be purchased, demand is declining every year. A folk artist from Alytus said that earlier, a decade ago, people would come to the fair looking for statuettes of saints with particular names, such as St. Anthony, St. Roch, St. Rosalia or St. Veronica. He noted that customers who asked for a statuette of a particular saint wanted a family member to have their own patron saint. Due to the demand, the craftsmen brought various works. Gradually, the demand started to dwindle, and in recent years, according to an artist from Alytus, visitors were no longer looking for sculptures of saints: now they are only interested in buying small items. And indeed, as was shown earlier, a comparison of the data from 2012 and

material I collected in 2020 and 2022 shows that the variety of sculpture themes has decreased significantly. In 2012, not only was the variety of themes much greater, but people were more interested and bought more than now. Although most of the artisans I interviewed in 2012 emphasised that the best-selling pieces were small sculptures, which were inexpensive and suitable as gifts or souvenirs, most were satisfied with their sales at that time.

A craftsman from Pasvalys whom I interviewed in 2020 said that he only brings small figures of the Pensive Christ and angels to the St. Casimir's Day Fair in Vilnius because people only buy small statuettes. Another craftsman from the Vilnius district said he had been exhibiting only small statues of Christ, Mary and the angels for several years because he had noticed that people were looking for small and inexpensive statuettes. In his opinion, customers buy them as souvenirs, and sometimes as works of art. According to a folk artist from Kaunas, customers who are interested in sculptures as a religious attribute are very rare, and they order a specific image of a saint directly from the folk artist rather than looking for one at a fair.

I noticed far fewer folk artists at the fair in 2022 than in previous years. For example, in 2020 there were ten folk artists selling images of saints. In 2022, I found eight folk artists selling images of saints. A decade ago, at the 2012 fair, I counted 14 folk artists selling sculptures, with a few more selling pictures such as graphic works and paintings depicting saints, making a total of about 20 craftsmen selling images of saints. Such a gradual decrease in the number of folk artists participating in the fair was observed even in the pre-pandemic period, with the pandemic further thinning the ranks of the Fair's participants. Why is this happening? Obviously, it is not just the effect of the pandemic.

Craftsmen participating in the fair complained that for several years now fewer people had been buying sculptures, and that it was no longer worth coming to Vilnius from more distant places. A woodcarver from the Kaunas district whom I met at the 2020 fair admitted that he does not participate in the fair because he sees no point in it, as people only look at the sculptures as though they were exhibitions and are not interested in buying them.

According to the folk artist from Alytus, fewer woodcarvers now participate in the St. Casimir's Day Fair in Vilnius, because it is no longer profitable. He did not want to go to the St. Casimir's Day Fair in 2022 because his sculptures are quite large and heavy, require a lot of work and are therefore expensive. He attended the fair only because of his wife, who was selling decorated Easter eggs. Not expecting any interest in images of saints, as several years of experience had shown him, he carved bird sculptures for that Fair, as the bird had been announced as the emblem of the 2022 St. Casimir's Day Fair. In addition, birds symbolised the approaching spring, and, in the context of recent years, the end of the pandemic. The craftsman

hoped that he would be able to sell at least the wooden birds. The birds carved by him are very beautifully painted and adorned with carved decoration and therefore attract much attention. In addition, they are a very suitable interior decoration for the Easter period, and a beautiful decorative feature for the home all year round. His expectations were met. On Sunday, the last day of the fair, this folk artist was in a good mood and informed me that he had sold most of the bird sculptures, and even several figures of angels.

After talking with other craftsmen on the last day of the 2022 fair, it turned out that small statuettes (five to 15 centimetres high) were the main purchase, the majority being angels. According to the artisans interviewed, the second-best-selling item was a small sculpture of the Pensive Christ. According to the woodcarvers, these small sculptures are bought as souvenirs, especially when they cost around ten to 15 euros. A few woodcarvers did not manage to sell larger statuettes of angels (30 to 40 centimetres), although the price they asked was low. This suggests that buyers were looking for small sculptures that would take up little space in the home.

Despite the general trend, there were exceptions. A folk artist from the Anykščiai district carves statues of angels that are 30 centimetres high or more. In 2022, the craftsman was selling them for 30 to 80 euros. He sold almost all of his angels in the first two days of the Fair, not only the ones with an average price (30 to 50 euros), but also the more expensive ones (70 to 80 euros). He had also done well at previous fairs. In his opinion, an angel is associated with goodness and spirituality, so it is natural that people want to have an image of an angel in their home, or give them to loved ones. It is said that each of us has our own guardian angel. According to the craftsman, with the outbreak of the war in Ukraine that year, people began to look more intensely for signs of God's protection, so a sculpture of an angel is a very relevant object, both as an interior decoration and as a symbol of that protection. The angels carved by the folk artist from Anykščiai may also have been in demand because their shapes are abstract and stylised and are in subtle natural wood tones. Such sculptures are suitable for various interiors, including those of modern design.

It is hard to find an image of a saint at the Christmas market. Among the miscellaneous small gifts, interior features and decorations for the Christmas period, the majority of figurines at the Christmas Town Fair are angels. They are the same every year, made of wood, clay or straw, and generally mass-produced. Wood and ceramic statuettes, both large and small, are intended for home decoration. Some small wood and ceramic figurines, together with straw angels, serve as decorations for Christmas trees. There are also candles and ceramic candlesticks made in the shape of angels. Small pictures and Christmas cards with images of angels are also on sale.

Angels have become an integral part of the Advent period as Christmas symbols representing immortality, morality, peace and love. They are mentioned in many

Christmas legends (What Is the Significance …). Angel figurines are often used as Christmas tree or interior decorations to create a sense of peace and security in the home. Small angels are also given to loved ones to symbolise the care of a guardian angel.

During the Christmas season, churches were and still are decorated with Nativity scenes portraying the birth of Jesus. Every year a large Nativity scene is also put up in Cathedral Square in Vilnius that attracts many visitors, especially families with children. Since 1998, competitive exhibitions of Nativity scenes made by folk artists have been held annually at the Rokiškis Regional Museum. Craftsmen prepare for the exhibition all year round, and happily participate. Despite this, it was extremely difficult to find a Nativity scene as a home decoration or as a souvenir at Vilnius' Christmas market in 2022. On one of the stalls, next to the amber jewellery, a small wooden souvenir Nativity scene was displayed. On a ceramics stall, among the figurines of angels, a clay Nativity scene consisting of three figures (the Virgin Mary, St. Joseph and the Baby Jesus lying in a manger), was barely visible. Meanwhile, in Europe, Nativity scenes are very popular as souvenirs and as home decorations at Christmas, but seemingly the Nativity scene as a souvenir or an item of home decoration has not yet been discovered by Lithuanian craftsmen. Demand for such souvenirs was evident at the international exhibition of Nativity scenes in the Lithuanian Church Heritage Museum at the end of 2021 (Jovaišaitė 2022), during which paper Nativity scenes from Germany were on sale and were in great demand. I would guess that small souvenir Nativity scenes could be among the more original Christmas souvenirs.

Images of angels are the most popular at Palm Sunday markets. For several years now, some craftsmen have incorporated ceramic figures of angels and crucifixes into palms or bunches of dry plants. Easter cards with images of angels have also been on sale for several years. In 2022, at the market by the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul, one vendor was selling straw souvenir angels and small crosses made of straw with metal figures of the Crucified Christ, as well as pictures of saints (printed reproductions of paintings by European artists) in straw frames. These were the only images of saints seen at this fair, other than angels.

Concluding remarks

My research shows that the most popular images at Vilnius fairs are images of angels. Their meaning as personal guardians and universal symbols of security and peace is suitable for all calendar and religious feasts, and family occasions and celebrations. Images of angels are purchased as gifts for family members or loved ones, and as souvenirs of the fair, with a wish for peace and love, and as a suitable home decoration for the Christmas and Easter periods.

The second most popular image is the Pensive Christ. At present, a statuette of the Pensive Christ is regarded less as a religious object or an object of faith and has a more secular meaning. In the early 20th century, through the efforts of Lithuanian intellectuals, the image of the worrying and depressed Christ (the Pensive Christ) was associated with the woes of the people, and proclaimed a symbol of the character, destiny and history of the Lithuanian nation (Galaunė 1930: 176; Rūkštelė 1931: 303; Šalkauskis 1989: 17). During the Soviet occupation and among Lithuanian émigrés abroad, and later in the first decades of the newly restored state, the Pensive Christ was considered to be a symbol of the nation's moral and ethnic values, an expression of resistance to russification and the Soviet occupation (Urbonienė 2012: 65; Surdokaitė 2008: 163). This image became very popular, not only in folk art but also in professional art and in literature, a meaning that is alive in society and is probably the main reason to purchase it today.

In the opinions of craftsmen, people generally buy images of saints as souvenirs, works of art, or interior decoration. Their function as a religious attribute was important in the 19th century, and even up until the middle of the 20th century, when images of saints fulfilled people's religious needs. They sought to protect their daily lives and activities with images of the saints; their magic-protective function was also important (Urbonienė 2015: 321). Today the religious function remains significant in only some cases, when an image is purchased as the patron saint of a particular person, or in circumstances of uncertainty or political tension in order to secure the symbolic protection of God.

There is not yet enough data to draw conclusions about the impact of commercialisation on the demand and supply of folk art. The question of how commercialisation affects folk art production awaits future research, bearing in mind that, according to the cultural anthropologist Erik Cohen, commercialisation is neither an isolated nor a uniform process. It is interwoven in a complex way with a broad array of economic, religious, cultural and political factors (Cohen 1989: 161). So far, we can only say that there is a decline in demand for folk art artefacts at fairs. People may admire works of folk art, but only a few people buy them. They settle for inexpensive souvenirs. Demand for small souvenir sculptures remains quite stable and they are bought willingly, especially if they cost about ten to 20 euros.

Folk artists trying to sell images of saints at fairs have to reconsider their strategy, instead of complaining about the reduced demand. They should find new themes, interpretations of traditional religious scenes, and modern shapes and forms, corresponding to the rapidly changing circumstances, new types of customer, and changing demand. Or, to paraphrase the scholar Christian Sørhaug, they have to develop strategies to entice potential buyers at markets in order to get the best possible price (Sørhaug 2021: 373). From a few of the examples given in this article,

it is evident that some craftsmen have already found a way to satisfy demand with their production in new circumstances.

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Skaidrė Urbonienė PhD is a senior researcher at the Department of Sacral Art Heritage, Lithuanian Culture Research Institute. Her main research interests are cross-crafting heritage and traditions; social, cultural, artistic and identity issues in folk art; and signs of national identity in migration. She has published over 70 articles and reviews in these fields, compiled three catalogues, curated several exhibitions and is the author of two books.

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Annual Fairs and Town Holidays in Haskovo and Byala, Bulgaria

Lina Gergova

The Department of Comparative Folklore Studies at the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia

lina.gergova@gmail.com

Abstract: Markets held annually were once part of Ottoman heritage in the Balkans. However, after the empire's collapse between the 1890s and 1910s, they eventually lost their importance due to border changes and development of a new market system. The presence of annual and weekly markets in numerous towns in Bulgaria is relatively recent. Some of these markets were inherited from livestock or craft seasonal markets while some emerged as side event for traditional festivals. At the start of the 20th century, annual and weekly markets in Bulgaria were regulated at a national level to avoid clashing because many merchants and even customers travel from place to place buying livestock and household products or just for enjoyment.

Following the centralisation of the products market in the years after 1944, and especially after 1950, the local markets were no longer able to carry out their role as trading venues and instead mainly became entertainment events that attracted people to return to their hometowns. Consequently, these trading activities were transformed into local cultural events and town holidays. Despite being suspended or even banned during the 1970s and 1980s, in the 1990s they were recognised as official holidays in many towns.

This research is made up of a few examples, but two of them will be the focus of the presentation: the city of Haskovo and the town of Byala. Haskovo, a main provincial city, a former open-air market day – now celebrated as a holiday despite the disappearance of the market itself – illustrates the transformations that traditional fairs have undergone over time. Byala is a smaller town where the fair was transformed into a humorous parade staged along with a funfair.

Keywords: fairs, livestock markets, town holiday, church patron saint

Fairs and town holidays in Bulgaria

The roots of fairs can be traced back to antiquity, with their peak prosperity in Europe during the Middle Ages. Functioning as marketplaces, fairs fulfilled a variety of roles: economic, social, religious, and entertainment-related. In the Balkans under Ottoman rule, many fairs were established and maintained, acquiring great significance for the Empire's economy in the 17th and 18th centuries. Within the Ottoman context, fairs served two main purposes: commercial and social. The commercial aim was primary and dominant, while the social aspect, often initiated by religious groups in Ottoman lands, centred on rites and festivities. With the onset of the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century, however, traditional fairs gradually began to decline (Çalişkan et al. 2018: 237–240).

Traditional town fairs[1] – that is, those originating before the 19th century and regulated by Ottoman authorities (cf. Gramatikov 2014; Markov 2010; Nedkov 1997; Silyanova 2013) –differed considerably in form from the fairs introduced in numerous Bulgarian towns and villages during the interwar period. Nonetheless, both types fulfilled comparable functions, whether on the macroeconomic level or within the household as an economic unit. They acted as catalysts for the transition away from a subsistence economy, providing rare opportunities to acquire cash (Braudel 1992: 58). At the same time, they served as central spaces for interaction among diverse ethnic, religious, and economic groups, as well as for the exchange of cultural practices and influences (Ruzhdavichka 2006: 125–126).

Equally important, fairs offered a distinct time and place for entertainment. They were forms of amusement radically different from everyday life and unavailable at any other point in the year. As Peter Burke observes, town holidays were "places for young people to meet away from family supervision, and places for everyone to watch travelling entertainers or dance or hear the latest news" (Burke 1978: 112).

The town fair itself is a celebration due to the exclusivity of what becomes accessible, i.e. goods, entertainment, fashion, adventure, art (Braudel 1992). Popular forms of entertainment offered by town fairs in Bulgaria from the Revival to the present day include pre-arranged fights, travelling minstrels, sale of delicacies such as the once-popular damson cheese[2], spun sugar, candied apples, ice cream and pudding, lemonade, etc., organised wagering games, games of chance, and others such as mock rifle target hitting, raffles, or the semi-legal or illegal games such as the cup and ball conjuring trick, dice games, and gambling. In 1667, Evliya Çelebi was exuberant in his description of the Dolyan town fair, elaborating on the volume of the commercial exchange, the myriad of goods offered ("bird's milk, lion's milk, and man's milk"), and the spectacles that could be enjoyed:

> Whatever street entertainers there are on the face of the earth, playing in town squares or tents, be they conjurors, fakirs, jugglers, gamblers, mimics, players with glasses; dwarfs, keepers of betting shops, strongmen, tumblers, firebreathers, puppeteers; copulating with apparitions, sword swallowers, tricksters; trainers of dancing bears, monkeys, goats, donkeys; wrestlers, lassoers, snake charmers, bird fanciers; tightrope walkers, card players, jugglers with mirrors or plates, grimacers…. They come from all corners of the world – wandering lute-players, dancers, and singers; clowns and comics; reciters of epic or lyrical poems; muscular wrestlers and archers; daredevils, fascinating beauties of the age, singers of love songs, righteous story tellers and even daughters of Eve – all of that is available in all the tents and the bazaars.… I have seen much more than just a thing or two. I would not dare say that, but even the nights at that tall gathering place are like the days of the lucky Khwarazm-shah's New Year's Day (Evliya Çelebi 1972: 279–280).

In 1914 Yordan Yovkov depicted another town fair:

> The Dobrich fair is not one of those weak-blooded gatherings which only tradition and curiosity keep alive. Indeed, this is a big market, a major exhibition, and a kind of a symbolic everyday-life celebration…. When fairs take place in Dobrich, they are attended by many thousands. The entire vicinity is transformed into quite a camp!… The clamour and bustle remain intense for almost a whole month. But, apart from entertainment, work is in full swing at that very place. Every day is a market day; entire herds of sheep, cattle, and horses are passed from one pair of hands into another…. Going back and forth without stopping, oxen in line haul new harvesting machines, heavy locomobiles, and threshing machines with enormous red bodies. Numerous organised groups of workers flock here from far away.… As if a colossal army is being summoned, preparing for an important crusade[3].

The market – that is, the economic exchange itself – was not simply an element accompanying the celebration; it was the celebration in its very essence. The regular need for commercial exchange and economic relations fostered a festive atmosphere, generating subsequent socio-cultural encounters, experiences, and interactions. In Bulgaria, a number of town fairs evolved out of weekly markets, often continuing to exist alongside them (for example, the Eski Cuma[4], Uzundzhovo[5], Hacıoğlu Pazarcık, and Byala fairs). The fair calendar was planned in a manner

organised from the top down and remained under control both during the Ottoman period and after Liberation. Its purpose was to ensure that traders – livestock and agricultural producers, itinerant salesmen (cf. Lesichkov 1939), merchants of manufactured and imported goods as well as organisers of entertainment – could attend all markets in turn.

However, not all of the fairs were commensurate in size; some of them, such as the Targovishte (Eski Cuma), Uzundzhov(o), Dobrich (Hacıoğlu Pazarcık), and the Dolyan market which ceased to exist around the 19th century, were colossal and extended over the course of weeks, even a month. From a macroeconomic perspective, they were key marketplaces which realised high-volume bargains with cattle and other goods. Most town fairs, including the one in Haskovo up until the middle of the 20th century, were of local significance as they drew together customers from the vicinity and mainly attracted travelling salesmen. The importance of these town fairs as forms of celebration was revealed in the availability of rare household goods, hygiene items, and entertainment organised for all ages and social strata.

The origin of the word '*panair*' (fair) connects Byzantine and Ottoman heritage with local traditions in the Balkans and in Bulgaria particularly. It comes from the Greek word 'πανήγυρις' (*panēgyris*) meaning general assembly. In the 19th and 20th centuries both words remained but with different meanings. While fairs (*panair*, from Ottoman Turkish) historically served as nodes of regional commerce and craft exchange, panagyrs (*panagir, panagyur*) function as loci of cultural memory and religious celebrations. Their non-commercial ethos is evident in the absence of merchant stalls and the emphasis on ritual participation (for example, shared meals, processions) in contrast to the monetised transactions of fairs. Similar to many European regions, however, the fairs in Bulgaria were organised in temporal proximity to holidays of significance to the local community (Burke 1997: 178). While this relationship may be inconspicuous right at the start, for instance, a town holiday could follow the calendar by being matched to a non-existent religious object, or conversely, one such object could be constructed with reference to the town fair to relate the traditional holiday to a religious one[6].

During the Ottoman period lists of licensed markets were issued annually (Silyanova 2013). In the first decades of the 20th century, the Bulgarian Ministry of Trade and Industry published an annual list of licensed town fairs, markets, and daily and seasonal trading grounds in Bulgaria with both normative and informative functions[7]. In Bulgarian legislation of the period, the terms 'fair' (*panair*) and 'market' (*pazar*) were used to distinguish between annual and weekly events.[8] The assumption that fairs necessarily lasted more than one day is not confirmed: they could extend over one, three, or several days, sometimes even up to seventeen. The state determined the exact dates of fairs in relation to others; for example, the fair in Kazanlak always began one week after that in Stara Zagora, which was the

main fair in the region. In contrast, for markets the state regulated the specific weekday on which they were to be held. It is assumed that the scale was different in each respect, and in most cases the venues did not coincide. Due to their different periodicity, fairs certainly attracted more entertainment business than the weekly markets.

According to Vakarelski, some calendar holidays that were traditionally related to town holidays are the days of St. George and St. Panteleimon, and the Assumption and Nativity of the Virgin Mary (Rozhen) (Vakarelski 1943: 64, 91, 95, 98). Initially, a number of town holidays were related to a particular calendar holiday, but over time the exact dates shifted due to organisational constraints. There are also the occasional fairs organised by religious institutions rather than the local authorities, the most prominent of these being the Troyan town holiday held around the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which has been transformed into a crafts fair. It is important to note that these are different from traditional fairs which are often spontaneously organised by religious institutions on the eve and on the day of their patron saint's holiday (for instance, fairs held around the Klisurski, Kuklenski, and Petropavlovski Monasteries, among others).

During the decades of socialism, centralisation of trade in goods and the gradual denouncement of the religious calendar caused town fairs to turn into peripheral events for purely entertainment purposes. Today, the word 'fair' (*panair*) means, on the one hand, large-scale organised international trade exhibitions (such as the Plovdiv Fair, see also Çalişkan et al. 2018: 238–239), and on the other, amusement rides such as Ferris wheels as well as shooting games, stalls with treats, etc. Local authorities have attempted to transform the traditional fair in several ways, i.e. by spatially separating the commercial from the entertainment zone, by banning trade in meat and live animals, by transforming the fair into a town holiday by replacing commercial and entertainment activities with representative and traditional activities.

The concepts of town holiday (*praznik na grada*)[9] and village holiday (*sabor*)[10] were not originally linked to fairs. Over the course of the 20th century, however, they gradually became synonymous, as fairs lost their commercial role and increasingly came to be defined by their entertainment and social functions. The town holiday is not a Bulgarian phenomenon, but in Bulgaria it has become particularly widespread (there is only one town that does not celebrate a holiday). This developed mainly between the 1990s and first decade of the 21st century. Today, the town holiday and the town fair fulfil identical functions, resulting in the elimination of the root necessity for a town holiday or a large annual town market. This article[11] examines how the traditional fairs in Haskovo and Byala evolved over the 20th and 21st centuries under the influence of economic, political, and social transformation, eventually taking on the form of town holidays. These cases were selected for their potential

to illuminate different trajectories leading to the same outcome: the decline of the traditional fair and rise of the town holiday as a modern celebration, marked by ceremonial rituals and recreational activities open to all.

This study was inspired by two works: Seán Moraghan's history of the Irish Puck Fair (2013) and Chris Rasmussen's essay on the transformation of Iowa's county fairs (1999). Like these examples, fairs and markets in Bulgaria illustrate the intersection of social dynamics, political debates, economic developments, and cultural practices. In the two towns examined here, the town holiday and the traditional fair have long been intertwined through complex historical interactions involving culture, economy, symbols, and politics. The research draws on archive records, newspapers and other media, as well as conversations with experts and cultural administrators in Haskovo and Byala, conducted between 2020 and 2022. Methodologically, it applies a historical approach, situating the development of fairs, markets, and holidays in the wider context of change.

Haskovo case study

Haskovo is a middle-sized Bulgarian town, a regional centre in the south of the country with a population of around 70,000. The town's history dates back to antiquity, undergoing a more marked development in the period after the Middle Ages. It is interesting to note that during the 18th and 19th centuries the town was known as Haskyoy by Uzandzha, with one of the largest Ottoman Empire fairs previously held in today's village of Uzundzhovo. The population of Haskovo increased dramatically following World War I and the acceptance of over 10,000 refugees from East Thrace; yet, its greatest growth was during socialism when the town was industrialised and a large military establishment was built there.

Perhaps between the 18th century and World War II a town holiday was organised in the Kara Mahmutli locality 7 km northwest of Haskovo to mark the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. It was held at the beginning of September, not strictly observing the exact date of the holiday. The event also had commercial functions, involving the sale of agricultural produce, but it predominantly served the purpose of entertainment through picnics and horo dances. There is neither photographic material nor visitor accounts of this town holiday, but the event is believed to be the forerunner to the town's cult of St. Mary, as the Mother of God church was built in 1837. Haskovo's calendar reveals systematic conflation of the Assumption of the Virgin and the Nativity of the Virgin, also known as Big Virgin Mary and Little Virgin Mary (*Golyama Bogoroditsa* and *Malka Bogoroditsa*). Despite the church being named after the more significant holiday, the city's calendar focuses on the less prominent one.

The town fair did not take place during World War II and the ensuing two to three years, and later it was permanently moved away from the location of Kara Mahmutli and into the city. Initially, it was held in the centre of Haskovo, and later in various neighbourhoods on the outskirts of town, for instance to the east of by the river, south in the Ovcharski neighbourhood, in Kenana park, etc. Its commercial functions were completely overtaken by entertainment; today's town residents remember it with the circus, Ferris wheels, barbecue, and spun sugar.

In the 1980s, the second weekend of October was declared the Days of Haskovo, with the change of date being an approach typical of socialist calendar management, setting apart the town holiday from the calendar date so as to destroy the connection to the Christian calendar. Even though the town holiday remains linked with the urban festivity, the connection to the cult of the Virgin Mary has been interrupted. The 11th October 1985 is an interesting choice of date as it marks the start of the Music Days under the aegis of violinist Nedyalka Simeonova, which have been held continuously since 1971. It seems likely that this move aimed to re-think the holiday's patron by moving it away from the religious figure of the Virgin to the artistic personality of the world-famous musician. In the mid-1980s, the establishment of a town holiday in Haskovo was part of the grand celebrations marking the town's millennium (Uzunova, Uzunova 2023: 434–435).



Fig. 1. Fashion show during the town holiday, Haskovo, 1987.
Photo: DA – Haskovo, f. 591, op. 4, a.e. 9823, l. 38.[12]

During socialism, and the 1970s and 1980s in particular, an organised programme was added to the entertainment activities offered during the town holiday with a view to ritualising it and filling it with different content. Events included exhibitions of drawings, children's contests, and fashion shows by Bulgarian clothing

manufacturers. The official opening of the celebration was attended by members of the local party elite. The formal events took place in the central part of town, while the entertainment fair was moved to the outskirts, causing it to be marginalised by other socialist and more contemporary events. Photos dating back to 1987 show mass attendance and numerous diverse events, even though local researchers claim that due to the feeble interest in this town holiday, it was not retained in local memory (Uzunova 2021). The holiday has not been systematically documented, so our merely fragmentary accounts lead us to assume only isolated instances of excess lavishness.

Changing a town holiday's date, symbolic essence, venue and rituals during socialism was typical of a number of holidays from the local and national calendars. Equally typical, albeit of the post-socialist period, is the decisive restoration of the holiday and its unambiguous positioning in the calendar. It was on 8th September 1993 that the Nativity of the Virgin was proclaimed the Day of Haskovo. The town's mayor, together with the vicar of Haskovo, the municipal administration and historians from the local museum initiated the process, which was affirmed by a decision of the Municipal Council. In order to strengthen the ties between Haskovo and the cult of the Virgin Mary, the following 10 years saw fundraising efforts and preparation for a project to erect the world's tallest monument of Mother Mary holding her son Jesus. It was inaugurated on one of the town's hills in 2003, and has featured in the Guinness Book of Records since 2005. Interestingly, the monument to the Virgin was erected on a pre-existing memorial structure originally dedicated to the Heart of Danko. After the fall of socialism, this earlier monument became ideologically inconvenient, yet its pedestal – designed as a small enclosed space – was retained and repurposed. Today, it functions as a chapel, where a stained-glass depiction of a flaming heart, the Heart of Danko, remains visible in its upper section.



Fig. 2. Handicrafts fair in the town square.
Photo: L. Gergova, Haskovo, 7 September 2020.

In recent years, including 2020 and 2021, which were affected by the coronavirus pandemic, the holiday took place alongside a craft fair that was held over several days in the town square. The activities organised included children's performances on an open stage at the square as well as concerts for adult audience at the large sports centre. As to 8th September, the day begins with a solemn mass at the Assumption of the Virgin Mary church, attended by officials such as the district governor, the mayor, the chairperson of the Municipal Council, etc. Over the years additional events such as exhibitions at the museum, sports tournaments and a vintage car parade have been held. A compulsory part of the holiday is a ceremonial meeting of the Municipal Council to select an honorary citizen for the town; prior to lockdown restrictions, the award ceremony was held in public on the same day. Again prior to the pandemic, the entertainment fair with various rides, a Ferris wheel, and spun sugar would be held in Yamacha neighbourhood, at or around the stadium there. This fair was the first element to be dropped from the town holiday programme.

Byala case study

Byala is a relatively small city with a population of around 8,000. When thinking about its history, economy and geography it can be split into two distinct sections, Byala and Gara Byala. Byala is the historical core, while Gara Byala is the settlement that was established close to the town's railway station (*gara*), at a distance of 7 km from the original town. Prior to the 19th century, a few small settlements had been established in the area, but were ultimately abandoned due to plague epidemics. The Russian Tsar Alexander III had his headquarters in the town, demonstrating the significance of its strategic positioning, being situated at the centrally between Svishtov, Targovishte, Veliko Tarnovo, Pleven and Ruse.

Moreover, the area is highly favourable for animal husbandry due to its proximity to the Yantra river, which provides excellent grazing grounds for sheep and cows. Thus, the fair at Byala, which was probably established at the end of the 19th century, became very successful in facilitating cattle trade over the years. Despite attempts, the fair was unable to become a noteworthy event at either a regional or national level. The primary cause was the proximity of the well-known Eski Cuma Fair (see e.g. Tsareva 1990)[13], which generally occurs in mid-May and is devoted to livestock. To illustrate the importance of the fair over the years, May 14th in 2015 was declared Targovishte's holiday[14]. This is a customary practice for many places in Bulgaria, such as Pleven, Kula, Silistra, Sevlievo, and Lyubimets demonstrating the ongoing significance of the fair in the local calendar, regardless of the changes in scope and magnitude that have occurred over time.

In 1914, the Municipal Council revealed that the fair was not a draw for livestock dealers, but instead was "attended only by dealers in manufacture, haberdashery, etc."[15] Prior to World War II, the words 'fair' and 'gathering' (*sabor*) were frequently used interchangeably. "Because in the town of Byala, every year on April 23 – St. George's Day – a fair gathering takes place, various merchants, photographers, shopkeepers, etc., visit the town."[16]

Due to the uncertain socio-political situation and reduced economic activity interest in the market decreased and almost no livestock traders appeared during World War I [17].We have no information about what happened before the end of the war, since there are no minutes of Municipal Council meetings until the beginning of 1920, when the fair was mentioned as if it had not stopped[18].

During the 1920s, the livestock trading area of the fair had become stagnant and the *intizap*[19] auctions had failed, although there were still people attempting to acquire stall rights, which serves as evidence that the fair was ongoing. Byala fair then started running into issues in the early 1930s due to the overall economic downturn. An in-depth account of the fair in the *Belensky Podem* newspaper displays a vivid image of people enjoying themselves, even if their commercial gains were rather small:

> This year in Byala, the fair festival (on St. George's Day) is too big and noisy. Early on, traders came and opened a cinema, a circus and a beer hall …, which, with its distinguished orchestra, attracts the public, as well as many stallholders with various goods. Large groups of guests from the villages and neighbouring towns have arrived and continue to arrive. The city has a festive look, an almost unprecedented bustle, but trade is weak due to the acute financial crisis[20].

To combat the crisis, the Bulgarian state railways offered discounts for those who attended the fair in Byala. A local newspaper advertised these benefits, including free grazing for livestock, a 1 % *intizap*, and a 50 % reduction in sergeant fees. Additionally, travellers could transport their belongings from the station to the city free of charge. This demonstrated the amount of effort that went into organising a fair, as was evidenced in the Ottoman Empire when guards were posted to keep robbers away and facilities were built to accommodate merchants and customers (*kadia*, *serdar*,[21] etc.).

Apart from the persistent economic downturn that was the result of the Great Depression of the late 1920s in the United States and Western Europe, another reason for the decline of the Byala fair is its location in time and space. Fairs are also held in May in the nearby towns of Ruse, Dve Mogili and Trastenik (now the municipality of Ivanovo), as well as in Targovishte which is a bit further away. Merchants take part in all the fairs, but customers tend to go to the nearer ones or

the largest and most famous. This crisis was also reported in 1936, when for the first time we find information about the combination of the local and state holiday St. George's Day as "the town holiday, holiday of the order of bravery and victories, and it was celebrated in our city with the proper solemnity"[22]. Apart from the fair, a church service and a speech before a crowd consisting of officials, students, citizens and representatives of organisations stand out as elements of the celebration. The fair is not mentioned, which can be interpreted as the beginning of the market element of the fair dying out and its transformation into an entertainment event accompanying the celebration.

The church in Byala has a well-studied history, described in various local history works and in a separate book. It is believed that until 1841 services were held in homes and in 1843 a small building was built near the cemetery, which does not outwardly resemble a church. It is not typical for people to name their old churches after a patron saint, so we cannot be sure that the church in Byala was dedicated to St. George. Many 20th century writers, however, assumed that it was the same name as the new church, which was constructed in 1910 after the old church was destroyed. It was finished in 1924, with the town going without a church for over a decade. This history is essential for determining if St. George's Day was a church holiday to start with, or if the fair chose St. George as the patron of the new church. Unfortunately, without concrete evidence of the name of the old church, the best that can be done is to think it was the same, but I will refrain from drawing any conclusions about the fair due to the uncertainty.



Fig. 3. The May Rain of Laughter Donkey race, Byala, 1976. Photo: Lybomir Spiridonov, FB group "The town of Byala in the recent and far past" Facebook group.

When the need for fairs is no longer present – because of centralised state production, the end of subsistence farming, an increase of offered goods or constant availability in smaller settlements – they become purely recreational activities, keeping their form but lacking any of their original economic objectives. Since they do not support the state-sanctioned models of leisure adopted by socialist (and post-socialist) governments, they are slowly pushed aside and become a subsidiary of the major event, which is now cultural days. In Byala in the 1970s and 1980s an attempt was made to develop the fair into a cultural event. In this period, an amateur theatre group in the town, led by humorous writers and playwrights, started activities aimed at attracting a wider audience to the plays, even inviting famous Bulgarian theatrical groups. In unison with the socialist concept of involving the democratic masses in high culture, they joined forces with the local authorities to turn the fair into a theatrical procession and a festival of the arts and commerce. During this time, every establishment, factory and enterprise in the town was asked to showcase a brief humorous act in the parade. Initially, the procession took place in the town centre, later it was moved to the stadium. The fair, which included a miniature market for toys and confectionery, has never ceased. The event was called the May Rain of Laughter and was part of the trend of spring cultural celebrations honouring May 1st and 9th, as well as the Day of the Bulgarian Alphabet and Culture on the 24th. This custom, which began during the socialist era, is still practiced and celebrated in many cities and towns across the country today.

After the political transformation in 1989, activities that had been held in the lead-up to St. George's Day on May 6 were reduced to the single holiday itself. Today, generally only children's and folk music performances are held in the town square, and a church service has been included in the festivities. As in every town in Bulgaria, an official ritual is also performed by the town mayor. The only remnant of past celebration models is the fair.

Conclusions

Comparative analysis of the fairs in Haskovo and Byala reveals a shared trajectory of transformation, yet one marked by distinct local inflections, ultimately leading to the modern phenomenon of the town holiday (*praznik na grada*). This evolution, spanning the 20th and early 21st centuries, was not a linear process but a complex negotiation driven by profound economic, political, and social forces.

Fundamentally, the traditional fair, with its Ottoman-era roots as a node of regional commerce and a unique socio-cultural space, was rendered economically obsolete. The centralisation of trade and production during socialism, coupled with the end of subsistence farming and the constant availability of goods in shops, stripped the fair of its primary economic purpose. The vibrant, multiday market-

place described by Evliya Çelebi and Yordan Yovkov, which served as a critical catalyst in the transition from a subsistence economy, gradually lost its commercial vitality. As the article demonstrates through analysis of both cases, the livestock trade in Byala stagnated as early as the 1920s, and in Haskovo, the fair's commercial functions had been entirely overtaken by entertainment by the mid-20th century.

In response, both the socialist and post-socialist states, along with local cultural managers, actively repurposed these events. The strategy was two-fold: first, sever the event's connection with the religious calendar and its historical identity, and second, fill the resulting void with new, state-sanctioned, content. This process of filling with meaning, as noted, reflects the changing attitudes of local authorities toward urban festivity. In Haskovo, this meant a deliberate shift from the Nativity of the Virgin Mary to the secular Day of Haskovo on October 11th, linked to a cultural event (the Music Days), and later a post-socialist reclamation of the religious date paired with the construction of a monumental, record-breaking statue to reforge a new, touristic, identity. In Byala, the socialist era saw the fair's transformation into the theatrical and humorous May Rain of Laughter, aligning it with the secular spring holidays of the state calendar (May 1st and 9th).

The outcome of this decades-long process is the contemporary town holiday. This new form represents a clear break from the past. The integrated experience of the traditional fair – where economic transaction, religious observance, and popular entertainment were inextricably linked in a single time and space – has been disaggregated. Today, these elements exist separately: a solemn church service, official municipal ceremonies bestowing honorary citizenship, curated 'high culture' performances on a central stage, and a marginalised traditional fairground attractions with Ferris wheels and candy floss, often physically distanced from the town centre, as in Haskovo's Yamacha neighbourhood.

The commercial element persists only in its most sanitised and symbolic form: the craft fair selling souvenirs, which serves as a mere echo of the once-vital market, materialising a connection to the past without its original economic function. The research confirms that the measures to disconnect the religious elements and conceal the original economic objectives have largely been successful. The traditional beliefs that once intrinsically linked the folk calendar to economic activity have faded, replaced by a calendar of representative rituals.

In conclusion, the cases of Haskovo and Byala illustrate a broader Balkan and European pattern where traditional fairs have succumbed to modern economic and political structures. However, the Bulgarian manifestation of this change is particularly distinct in its comprehensive erasure and subsequent reinvention. The town holiday has not merely evolved from the fair; it has systematically replaced it, becoming a ubiquitous but homogenised feature of the Bulgarian urban landscape, where the memory of the fair's chaotic, vibrant, and commercially vital past lives on only in fragments and symbols.

Notes

[1] For contemporary fairs in Bulgaria, refer to Neuburger 2017.

[2] Damson cheese (pestil) is a preserve made of damson plums peeled, stoned, and cooked with sugar to the consistency of soft cheese.

[3] Yordan Yovkov. Dobrich. – In: They won. Sofia: Bulgarian History, 2018, 115–118.

[4] Cf. Dzhafer, Salim 2018; Dzhafer, Salim 2021 for further details about the Eski Cuma fair.

[5] About the Uzundzhov fair, cf. Gramatikov 2014.

[6] Cf. for example the case of the Puck Fair in Ireland, which turns out to coincide temporally with St. Lawrence's Day, even though the namesake church in the town of Killorglin, where the fair was held, had been destroyed before the fair was inaugurated in the 17th century (Moraghan 2013: 16). Dolyan fair was organised at the beginning of May, which linked it with St. George's Day.

[7] Cf. for example List of the town fairs and markets in Tsarstvo Balgariya in 1914. Sofia: Ministry of Trade, Industry and Labour, 1914; List of the town fairs and markets licensed in the Bulgarian tsarstvo until 1 July 1923. Sofia: Ministry of Trade, Industry and Labour, 1923.

[8] See the lists of fairs and markets in Bulgaria for specific years, published in the State Newspaper each March after 1901.

[9] For town holiday in Bulgaria, refer to Gergova, Gergova 2020.

[10] For village holidays, refer to Hristov 2004.

[11] The fieldwork was done and the publication is a part of the author's work on the project titled "The Civil Festive Calendar: National and Local Dimensions" funded by the National Science Fund at the Bulgarian Ministry of Education and Science (Contract No KP-06-N40/3).

[12] Here and hereafter: DA Archive State Agency (Darzhaven arhiv), Haskovo branch, fund (fond) No. 591, inventory (opis) 4, archival unit (archivna edinitsa) 9823, sheet (list) 38.

[13] In Turkish, eski cuma means 'old market'. Since 1934, the name of the town has been Targovishte. The new name was also derived from 'market' and 'trade' through the Slavic word targ.

[14] See https://targovishte.tv/targovishte/obshtestvo-targovishte/item/1495-14-mai-ofitzialen-praznik-na-targovishte-sabitiyata-na-tozi-den (accessed 08/05/2021).

[15] Minutes No. 16 from March 23, 1914 from a meeting of the City Municipal Administration – Byala (DA – Ruse, f. 167K, op. 1, a.e. 11, l. 16). Almost the same text is repeated in Protocol No. 11 from March 19, 1915 (DA – Ruse, f. 167K, op. 1, a.e. 14, l. 33).

[16] Minutes No. 10 of April 18, 1904 from a meeting of the City Municipal Administration – Byala (DA – Ruse, f. 167K, op. 1, a.e. 5, l. 100). An almost identical text with the same motivation and statement can also be found in Minutes No. 8 from April 17, 1901 from a meeting of the City Municipal Administration – Byala (167K, op. 1, a.e. 3, l. 49 back – 50).

[17] Minutes No. 14 of March 18, 1916 from a meeting of the Municipal Council – Byala (DA – Ruse, f. 167K, op. 1, a.e. 15, l. 24).

[18] Minutes No. 10 of April 5, 1916 from a meeting of the Municipal Council – Byala (DA – Ruse, f. 167K, op. 1, a.e. 17, l. 26 c.).

[19] The Cattle and Livestock Transactions Levy in the Ottoman Empire. In Bulgaria, the same word was in use until the mid-1940s.

[20] Belenski Podem newspaper, Byala, May 7, 1930, no. 36, p. 2.

[21] Kadia, kadı 'judge' in Turkish. Serdar, a military rank in the Ottoman Empire, within the fair guards' commander.

[22] Niva newspaper, Byala, no. 80, May 15, 1936, p. 2.

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Bibliographical Note

Lina Gergova has a BA in ethnology, an MA in intercultural communications, and a PhD in folklore studies. She is assistant professor at the Department of Comparative Folklore Studies at the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. Her research interests are in the field of ethnic stereotypes, migration and cultural heritage, the urban calendar, festivity and ritual, and national commemorative traditions.

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St. Nicholas and St. Cornelius, transcultural relations

Mare Kõiva
Estonian Literary Museum, Department of Folkloristics, Tartu, Estonia
mare@folklore.ee

Elena Boganeva
Research Centre on Culture, Language and Literature (BAS),the Ethnolinguistics and Folklore sector, Minsk, Byelorusia
elboganeva@gmail.com

Abstract: The aim of this article is to examine a selection of folk customs, beliefs and legends associated with St Nicholas the Wonderworker, focusing on their diverse typological features and the problems arising from their mutual intertwining. The first section discusses the ritual complex connected with St Nicholas (4th century); the second section analyses narratives about St Nicholas and John Cassian the Roman (Cassian, 3rd century) as confirmation of the hagiographic canon and as explanatory models; the third section explores the convergence between giant folklore and saintly traditions, historical sources and oral history, drawing on texts concerning Hegumen Cornelius of Pechory (16th century).

The analysis demonstrates the importance of St Nicholas and shared motifs with giant-like saints such as St Christopher (3rd century), as well as parallels with Christian and Islamic holy figures, gods and heroes. Particular attention is given to biblical motifs, historical reinterpretations, and narrative entanglements surrounding the death of Hegumen Cornelius, as well as the positioning of St Nicholas as a restorer of justice.

The analysis uses a comparative folkloristic approach drawing on early 20th century texts recorded among Russians and Setos in southeastern Estonia, as well as contemporary fieldwork materials from Belarus. Both the Seto and Belarusian belief traditions reveal a rich repertoire of motifs and suggest that these regions shared, to a significant extent, a common cultural-historical paradigm.

Keywords: St Nicholas the Wonderworker; John Cassian the Roman; Hegumen Cornelius of Pechory; giant folklore; religious syncretism

Introduction: Setomaa and Shifting Borders

Borders can be natural, cultural, psychological, economic or geographical dividing lines, and at the same time are unusual political constructions (Houtum 1998). This applies equally to Setomaa, the boundaries of which have changed repeatedly, especially during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In this article we examine one critical period, the era beginning with the Treaty of Tartu (2 February 1920) through which the Pskov–Pechory territories (the ancestral homeland of the Seto) were incorporated into the Republic of Estonia. On 15 August 1944, 75% of the Petseri district previously belonging to Estonia was transferred to the Russian SFSR, and on 23 August 1944 the approximate area of the former Pskov Governorate was separated from the Leningrad Oblast and reorganised into Pskov Oblast, Russian SSR.

For centuries the Seto region belonged to the Russian Empire and was separated from Livonia and Estonia by administrative and economic boundaries. Setomaa formed part of the Eastern Orthodox cultural area. Livonia, in contrast, came under Catholic domination in the aftermath of the crusades from the twelfth century onward, and from the early sixteenth century under the Protestant Lutheran Church. Contacts between people of Setomaa and Estonians living in the administrative regions of Livonia and Estonia were limited (Lõuna 2024).

Major social changes occurred during the 1920s, including the abolition of the *hingemaa* ('soul land', a communal strip-farming system in Petserimaa), which enabled the development of independent agriculture. Communal landholding was replaced by individual farms. Important reforms also accompanied the establishment of schools and the introduction of unified education standards, resulting in increasing literacy and the spread of schooling in the region. Religious developments were equally significant: Orthodox Church reform began in 1919 at the same time as the implementation of the separation of church and state throughout Estonia. In 1924 the Diocese of Narva of the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church was created, and all ethnically Russian parishes in Petserimaa (Lisja, Irboska, Jumalaema, Senno, Petški, and Šmšeritsa) were placed under its jurisdiction. The remaining parishes – including the Pskov-Pechory Monastery – remained under the Bishopric of Tallinn and the authority of Metropolitan Aleksander of Tallinn and Estonia. In 1934 a new law on churches and religious associations was passed (Riigi Teataja 1934, 107: 1821–1826) stipulating the creation of national congregations. Through this reform, the previous three Estonian and ten mixed congregations were reorganised into six Estonian and eight Russian congregations (Raag 1938). These reforms led to change and uncertainty, and continuity between clergy and congregations was no longer guaranteed. At the same time, identity-related initiatives also began in the 1930s (the Seto Congress, the Assembly of Seto Elders).

The central sacred institution of the period was the Pskov-Pechory Cave Monastery, founded in 1473 by monk Joann from Tartu. Hermit monks are known to have lived in the caves from the fourteenth century, but in the sixteenth century, under Hegumen Cornelius, the monastery was expanded and became an important center and contact zone among Orthodox communities from various regions. Earlier religious connections extended from northeastern Estonia to the northern coast and further into northern Russia; historical ties also linked the region to clerical centres in Belarus, Ukraine and Latvia (Panchenko 1998). After 1945 eastward movement was interrupted by the new border.

The most frequent figures in Seto narratives and belief texts are saints associated with the Eastern Orthodox tradition: St Nicholas Myra (known in the Eastern Church as Nicholas the Wonderworker, *Čudotvorec*, and Nicholas the Helper, *Ugodnik*); the Great Martyr St George the Victory Bearer (Jegorij in the Russian and Seto tradition); the Old Testament prophet Elijah; and St John Cassian of Rome. Locally revered saints and holy figures include: John, Archbishop of Novgorod (12th century); Makarii Roman of Novgorod (turn of the 16th century); Cornelius (Kornilii) the martyr of Pskov-Pechory; St Nikander of Pskov (16th century); and Matvei the Outcast of Izborsk (early 20th century). Other recurring figures in the texts are the Archangel Michael, King Solomon, John the Baptist, the Apostle Andrew the First Called, St Sergius of Radonezh, the Great Martyr and healer Panteleimon, the Great Martyr Paraskeva Pyatnitsa, the martyrs Cyricus and Julitta, the wonder workers Cosmas and Damian, the martyrs Florus and Laurus, the Great Martyr Anastasia the Deliverer from Bonds, the monks Savvatiy and Zosima, the martyr Antipas of Pergamon, and many others.

This article examines the folklore and religious practices associated with St Nicholas the Wonderworker from several angles and considers the folk discourse surrounding St John Cassian of Rome and his connections with St Nicholas. In addition, it will look at the folklore related to Hegumen Cornelius of Pechory and its points of intersection with the cult of St Nicholas in light of previous scholarship that has characterised the legends of St Cassian (Loorits 1954a), St George (Loorits 1955) and St Christopher (Loorits 1954b; Lielbārdis 2015).

The saint-related texts in the Folklore Archives in Tartu; Estonia at the Estonian Literary Museum constitute a heterogeneous collection in terms of genre and type, making it impossible to classify them within a single folk narrative genre. One of the aims of the article is to examine how saints and their actions are reflected in evaluative beliefs and narrative traditions. For this reason, we describe them on the basis of traditional genre divisions, type and thematic content. Folkloristic data and case analyses are essential to understand developments in a geographic region and to examine how religious, intangible and material factors interact.

Material

We selected for analysis a period marked by profound disruption during which customary routes of movement and communication became obstructed, for example, the closure of borders between Russia and Belarus. A distinctive feature of our region is that the collection of Seto folklore (an ethnic subgroup in southeastern Estonia) began approximately 30 years later than in other parts of Estonia, that is, in the early 1900s, and large-scale fieldwork campaigns started almost 60 years later, in the 1920s. The systematic documentation of Russian tradition in Estonia began only in 1927, with the establishment of the Estonian Folklore Archive (Eesti Rahvaluule Arhiiv, ERA).

A shared characteristic of this late period of collecting was the practice of sending stipend-supported students from the University of Tartu – many of whom were born and raised in Seto villages – back to their home region for fieldwork. As a special requirement, they were encouraged to record religious folklore (Kõiva et al. 2022; 2024; Vesik 2019). Alongside folklore manuscripts, valuable insights into regional mentalities and material culture are provided by the collectors' field diaries, which, at that time, each collector was obliged to submit. These diaries offer an excellent window into the culture of the Peipsi lakeshore region and Petseri area immediately before the outbreak of the Second World War and before the Soviet occupation of Estonia.

At that time the student fieldworkers often spent several consecutive months in the field, as documented extensively in their diaries (Antropov 2021, 2022 for a detailed account; Murnikova 1970; Ponomareva 2003; Ponomareva & Shor 2008). From 1927 onwards, archivists themselves conducted thematic field expeditions in Setomaa (for example women's feast days, prohibited dances). In addition, foreign collectors also travelled to the region; some had emigrated from Russia during political upheavals and had served in White Army units (Benfoughal 2021).

St Nicholas (15 March 270 – 6 December 343)

This highly important Eastern Church saint is well known and venerated not only throughout Orthodox Christianity but also among all eastern Finno-Ugric peoples and the Indigenous peoples of Siberia (Vinokurova 2015; Konakov 2015 [1999]; Panchenko 1996; etc.), where he occupies a central place in the pantheon of holy figures. The Orthodox Church commemorates his death on 6/19[1] December. His relics were transferred to Bari, Italy, in 1087, where they remain to this day, an event that is commemorated on 9/22 May.

Older sources indicate that Nicholas the Wonderworker was among the most revered saints of both Vepsians and Russians. In Russia, both the winter and

spring Nicholas days were national holidays until 1919. Among the Vepsians, two or even three Nicholas feast days were observed. His popularity is confirmed by the abundance of altars dedicated to him in the Vepsian area between the 15th and 18th centuries (Žukov 2011: 164 via Vinokurova 2015). His earlier prominence in Catholic times is reflected in Estonia in the large number of churches named Nigul in historically Protestant regions (Vahtre 1991; Pekko 2024).

Since the Seto territories were incorporated into the Republic of Estonia only in 1920, it is no surprise that the most frequently mentioned saint across different text types and genres is St Nicholas, followed by St George the Victory Bearer and the prophet Elijah. According to Hagu (2022: 53), there are more than fifty feasts associated with saints, twelve of which are particularly important; to these we must add the dedication feasts of churches and chapels (see also Loorits 1949; Valk 2011). Among the Setos, Nicholas (folk variants Mikul, Migul) was the patron saint of nine villages, celebrated with special feast days (Hagu 2022), and he received thanksgiving offerings. Offerings were brought to Nicholas in church, although work was permitted on his feast day.

In Seto narratives, saints appear in etiological legends. One tale explains how the Devil distilled vodka in the forest, offering the new drink first to God's messengers, i.e. various saints, including St Nicholas (Mikul). They became drunk, danced and sang, and did not return. Finally, God himself came to see what had happened, tasted the drink, and gave it a name. The narrator generalises the tale as "The Devil made the vodka and God consecrated it." (ERA II 194, 246/7 (7) < Setomaa, 1938, Origin of vodka explained, A1312).

As noted earlier, St Nicholas appears in all genres of folk prose. It is particularly interesting to observe how narratives ascribe to him the building and protection of monasteries, as well as other historical events. Past events are mythologised within religious storytelling:

> Mikul built the monastery together with the congregation, but a pagan emperor attacked it with his army. Naturally, Mikul had fortified the monastery, and the troops could not get inside. The army besieged the monastery for nine nights and nine days. As many servants as Mikul had, they defended the walls with hot water. On the ninth night, crows flew out of the monastery – there must have been many of them inside the walls – and they attacked the army, pecking out the soldiers' eyes. The crows were so fierce that the soldiers could no longer walk and were forced to press their faces to the ground. Terrified, the army broke and the emperor had to surrender.
> (ERA II 286, 259/60 (243) < Seto, 1940).[2]

Several narratives connected with St Nicholas are extremely widespread and internationally known. Although not all early motifs are attested in Setomaa (for example the miraculous birth legends; see Badalanova Geller 2017), well-known tales do appear: Nicholas resurrects a sailor who has fallen to his death, saves innocent men from hanging, or becomes the servant of a poor soldier and helps him with daily work in gratitude for rescuing his icon from the mud, cleaning it and placing it in the holy corner. In this story Nicholas is a benevolent and grateful Saint who rewards the soldier's good deed and assists him until he achieves a better life.[3]

The popular tale of St Nicholas "wearing out his boots" because he travels daily to help people was frequently recorded between 1920 and 1940 (and Setomaa also has similar tales about Cornelius of Pskov-Pechory). This belongs to the canonical repertoire of legends about helpful saints. Some versions are connected specifically with an icon from Pechory church: the saint is said to no longer travel because "bad boots" were made for him, which is visible in the icon (a concept connected with Seto religious concretism; see Loorits 1959, the motif of worn-out shoes as proof of a long journey is popular among Setos and Russians, F101.3):

> Mikul had walked all over the land, and the summers had been good. But his heavy wearing-out of boots was considered excessive. Boots made of leather scraps were put on his feet, and from that time onward Mikul no longer travelled. That is how he stands in the Pechory church: with a golden cap, patched boots, and a scythe in his hand. (ERA II 286, 129 (97) < Setomaa, 1940).

> Nicholas received new boots every day. He wore out one pair per day, so new ones had to be given. 'Well,' they said, 'we cannot afford this; let us make him tar-coated boots.' Then he gave up walking and now remains in Pechory. (ERA, Vene 14, 481 (8) Tartu, 1940).

In tales dealing with church-building, one key motif is the vow to build a church, as well as the theme of a construction offering. In one Seto tale a wealthy man is chased by robbers:

> „[…] Karp came from Pskov with a cart through the Taeluva valley, and robbers met him as well, wanting to kill him and take his horse. Karp prayed fervently that if he survived, he would build a church for Saint Migul. Suddenly the robbers heard horses and men approaching from behind and ran. Karp returned home and built the Taelova church. (ERA II 286, 204/5 (183) < Setomaa, 1940, motif Vow to build shrine).

Because the saint helps people, God in turn protects the saint from enemies and unbelievers. For example, the saint prays to be saved from pursuing robbers:

> […] Mikul had prayed to God that lightning would strike the robbers. The lightning hindered them in pursuit, and Mikul escaped. I do not know whether the robbers burned or whether the fire only confused them (ERA II 286, 229 (205) < Setomaa 1940).[4]

In the legends, Nicholas is invariably on the side of the poor and helps people in distress. In international tradition, Nicholas gives money to prevent three daughters from being cast out of their home[5]. In another story he rewards generosity. While travelling, he asks a ploughman for food. The man has only a poor and modest meal, but shares it willingly. Mikul tells him: "We have no money to pay you, God will reward you." The man resumes ploughing and the ploughshare uncovers a barrel filled with money. The ploughman runs after the holy men: "I found money, come and share it!" They reply, "It is yours; that is your reward."[6] (ERA II 286, 226 (201) < Setomaa, 1940)

This corresponds closely to tales in which Jesus travels with his disciples and provides unexpected, paradoxical solutions that require explanation.

In many texts offerings are brought to St Nicholas, and people attend church on his feast day. It is said that offerings were so numerous that they stood as high as the saint's nose in the icon, and that the gifts were afterward divided among church staff:

> Offerings are brought to Mikul as well. In Pskov there is the Church of Saint Nicholas. In earlier times people did not have so much wheat flour, so they brought barley breads. When I was a child, mother took me to church on Nicholas day. These barley breads were placed before Mikul's icon so that the pile reached his nose. Afterwards the priest and the sexton came, divided the pile in half, and then one half again. The priest received three parts, the sexton one. (ERA II 209, 246/7 (16) < Setomaa, 1939)

In many texts, help is requested from St Nicholas and from other saints known as 'gods'. The word *jumal* in Finnic languages (Seto, Karelian, Vepsian) means simultaneously god, icon, and saint (ETY 2012; Vinokurova 2015). In Russian too, saints are often referred to as gods and the icon shelf in the red corner is called *božnica* (the place of the gods). Even in Belarus, in eastern Polesia (Gomel region), the term gods appears in 21st century recorded folklore. This creates a broad and intriguing religious impression. When questioned directly, contemporary Belarusian informants can clarify the difference between saints and God and understand canonical hierarchy (Boganeva & Kõiva 2022: 73).

A saint (most often St Nicholas or St George) can also be 'integrated' into the system of nature spirits and household beings, whose mythological representations were familiar among Russian communities in Estonia between the 1920s and 1940s. The Russian collection at the Estonian Literary Museum contains over a thousand texts about nature spirits, revenants, hostile beings, werewolves, flying serpents, fire-breathers, and more. Before turning to these, we will briefly characterise the legends.

Informants describe Nicholas as a saint who helps with all manner of everyday tasks, and who governs the weather:

> Nicholas the Wonderworker of Myra is the Creator. He performs many miracles, saves people on the waters, and travels across the land. When there is drought, he is asked for rain.
> (ERA, Vene 4, 286/7 < Setomaa, 1933).

> Nicholas of Myra, the Wonderworker. Fifty years ago people prayed: 'Son of God, Almighty God, Nicholas the Wonderworker.
> (ERA, Vene 16, 589 (7) < Tallinn < Setomaa, 1941).

> Mikola is the manifest tsar of the land, the god of the fields. After Mikola has passed by, one looks to see how the grain grows.
> (ERA, Vene 16, 596 (3) < Setomaa, 1941).

> Mikalai Ukhodnik, the quick helper, the warm protector — he is asked to bring the spring; he is like the Lord of the Fields.
> (ERA, Vene 16, 686 (2) < Tallinn < Setomaa, 1941).

> Mikola is the master of the waters.
> (ERA, Vene 16, 589 (6) < Tallinn < Setomaa, 1941).

Nicholas assists in agriculture and animal husbandry (together with George), fishing, maritime dangers, storms and bad weather at sea and on land, matters of wealth and healing of illness.

> George the VictoryBearer is the god of livestock. He sees to it that snakes do not bite and is asked for help when going into the forest. Snakes obey him. He saves animals and people." (ERA, Vene 4, 286/7 < Setomaa, 1933).

> And Yegorij is the god of livestock. As the Lord is merciful, everyone greets Yegorij. Yegorij is the healer of our lives when illness strikes (among livestock)." (ERA, Vene 16, 598 (8) < Tallinn < Setomaa, 1941).

Similar patterns occur in Vepsian texts. Vepsians in Kapšina have tried to ward off snake attacks with charms addressed to St George the Victory Bearer or St Nicholas: *Jegorii milostivyi, azota!* (Merciful George, strike!), *Gad – kut! Stoi tut! Nikolas toporom, Jegorii* kosarem! (Snake – halt! Stand here! Nicholas with the axe, George with the scythe!) (Vinokurova 2015)

Irina Vinokurova (1994: 78) illustrates, drawing on other Vepsian researchers, the link between St Nicholas and agriculture, for example the spring Nicholas feast (9/22 May) was a recognised sowing marker. Sowing took place the week before Nicholas' day and only exceptionally the week after.

As a nature-related saint with a wide range of functions, Nicholas is asked to stop excessive rain, although in the Seto village of Pankjavitsa he is said to help *stop* rain rather than bring it:

> Mikul is our great helper. My great-aunt Kosselka always said: Do not pray to God, pray to Mikul – Mikul will surely help. We were threshing in the autumn. The machine had been brought into the yard, all the sheaves gathered. Then it began to rain. I saw everything would be ruined. My sister went behind the threshing shed and bowed repeatedly toward the Pankjavitsa church, praying to Mikul. Soon the weather cleared. Later the sun even came out. (ERA II 209, 213/4 (19) < Setomaa, 1939).

There was a widespread belief that one could go to the fields only after Nicholas had inspected them:

> On Nicholas day he walks over the fields the whole day, checking whether everything has been sown and whether everything is in order. On that day he wears out two pairs of new boots, because he walks around the whole world. (ERA, Vene 16, 720 (3) < Setomaa, 1941).
>
> Let Mikola come first and look over the field, then we will go. Previously no one went before Mikola had looked. (ERA, Vene 16, 597 (5) < Setomaa, 1941).

The system also includes commandments and prohibitions according to which Nicholas can show leniency toward farmers:

> Mikul said that whoever harrows the rye field before him, he will never heal that person again; do not plough or harrow anything before I have walked over the field with my white boots. Mikul is the boys' saint, the guardian lord of the fields. (ERA II 194, 413 (20) < Setomaa, 1938)

Such conceptions of Nicholas walking across the fields are also known in Belarus; this belief circle generally characterizes the Belarus–Russia border region. For example, a Belarusian spring song for calling the spring contains the line:

> *Мікола па межах ходзіць, межы аглядаіць, жыта раўнуіць. /* (Mikola walks along the borders, looks over the boundaries, smooths the rye.) (Shlyubskiy 1927: 91)

In the Mogilev–Smolensk border region people believed that after sowing, St Nicholas inspects the fields, while the Mother of God cuts the first rye of the harvest. An informant describes how one can recognise her footprints in the field. The belief also incorporates the idea that if humans do the first cutting, it harms the harvest:

> M.R.: "The Most Holy Mother of God heals people and cuts grain. I would not have believed it if I had not seen it myself. I went to the field with my mother and saw that a narrow path, as wide as a goat's track, had been cut with a sickle. And if she [the Mother of God] had not cut, but humans had been the first to do so, the harvest would have been bad. Their hands would start to ache and swell; they should rest from sickle-cutting for a day."
> E.B.: "And how can one see this?"
> M.R.: "Simply a narrow strip of cut rye — a path through the field. So narrow only one can pass. And before the three old women — who are pure, no longer sleep beside men, bathe, wear good clothing — go to cut, they call upon the Most Holy Mother of God and set bread out for her, so that God will send her to help. After those elderly women, everyone else goes and harvests."
> (BFELA, Belarus, Pochapy village, Krasnopolye district, Mogilev region — recorded by E. Boganeva and T. Volodina from Maria Rumyantseva, b. 1931, 2015)

The image of St Nicholas the Wonderworker also appears in fairy tales, both magic and legendary, in which he plays the role of helper and advisor to the tale's hero. Among the plot types in the Russian section of the ELM archive in which St Nicholas appears as an active character are ATU 307 "The Princess in the Coffin" (previously "The Princess in the Shroud)"; ATU 752A "Wonderful Threshing" (in plot type ATU 752A, St Peter is named as a character); ATU 753 "Christ and the Smith" (in this plot type as well, St Peter is named); ATU 778* "To Sacrifice a Giant Candle"; ATU 849* "The Cross as Security."

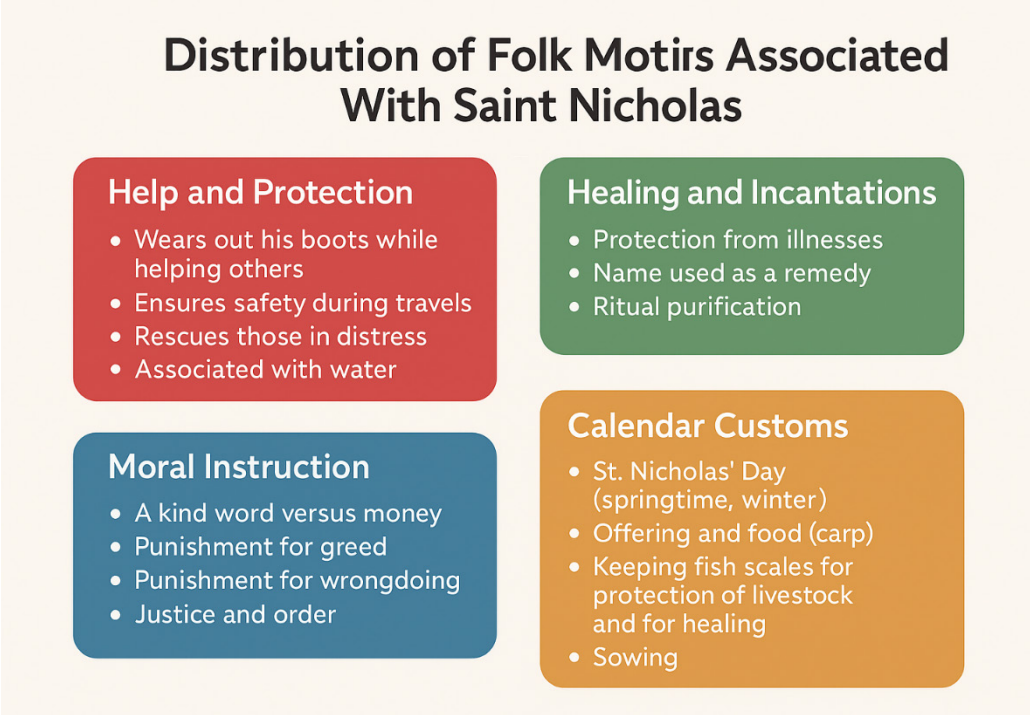


Fig. 1. The folklore motifs connected to Saint Nicholas.

Saint Kassian (Cassianus) and Saint Nicholas

TAccording to Tatiana Agapkina, in the figure of St Kassian, as he appears in East Slavic legends and folktales, one can clearly discern demonological features: he has unnaturally large eyelids, a deadly gaze ("whatever Kassian looks upon withers"), and crossed or narrowed eyes ("Kassian squints"); he is dangerous to others ("Kassian destroys everything"), ill-tempered, evil, and associated with the devil and demons. As a child he was abducted ("Kassian is the guardian of hell") and is described as jealous, quarrelsome and of small stature (in Bulgarian material). Because of his ability to harm and his malice and envy, the Lord punishes him and therefore his feast day is observed only once every four years (Agapkina 2002: 41).

The narrative about St Nicholas and St Kassian appears in the comparative Slavic catalogue (SUS – 790**)[7]. The tale belongs to the cycle of religious legends and includes aetiological motifs. According to the SUS catalogue, the text is known in Russian and Belarusian areas, with the Seto material alone including more than eight versions. The tale type is not listed in the international ATU index[8]. The text from the Russian Collection at the Estonian Literary Museum (ELM), together with Seto versions, helps to clarify the geographical spread of the plot (cf. Loorits 1954).

All of this belongs to the patterns of lived religion, a worldview in which elements of canonical Christianity, apocryphal texts, and folk tradition interweave, creating an unofficial tradition and a distinct interpretation of biblical and hagiographical characters (see Ammerman 2007; Brytsina 2008: 45; Bujs'kikh 2018: 58–76; Trubina, Lubna 2020: 185–188).

Texts associated with Kassian vividly demonstrate how far folk conceptions of a saint can diverge from the canonical prototype. The folk St Kassian – nicknamed 'the Merciless' – bears no resemblance to his canonical model, St John Cassian of Rome (360–435) whose liturgical feast day is 29 February, and since 2022 in the calendar of the American Episcopal Church, 23 July. St John Cassian was a Christian monk, theologian, founder of monastic communities in Gaul and an important theoretician of monastic life.

Folkloric texts follow the typical patterns of belief narratives: Kassian exerts a destructive influence on the surrounding nature and crops. Under the gaze of Kassian the Merciless, the forest dries up; when he looks at a person, that person withers (ERA, Vene 14, 452 (10), Setomaa 1940). Another version says that Kassian the Merciless looks down upon the earth only once every three years, and when he does, there will be no harvest, no bread, and nothing else (ERA, Vene 16, 579 (65), Setomaa 1941).

A separate cycle consists of narratives explaining the origins of feast days, in which saints Nicholas and Kassian (or, in variant forms, St Nicholas, Kassian and St George) travel to visit God. Nicholas always goes to help people in distress; or Nicholas and St George both offer help but Kassian refuses so as not to soil his clean clothes before meeting God. As a result, Nicholas – or Nicholas and St George – receive two feast days a year (a spring and an autumn/winter feast), while Kassian is granted only one feast day every fourth year:

> Mikul went to church with Kassian. A peasant was spreading manure by the roadside; his load overturned, and he called Mikul and Kassian for help. Mikul said: 'Let us go and help the man in his trouble.' Kassian replied: 'I will not go; I am wearing clean church clothes. How could I then go to church?' Mikul went and helped the man lift the load. Afterwards both went on to church. Therefore it has been ordained that Mikul has two feast days a year, while Kassian has one every three years, on the fourth year (ERA II 286, 186 (165), Setomaa, 1940).

In Seto narratives, Kassian is also referred to by the older name Vyssokos ('Leap Year'):

> Mikul, Jüri, and a third wicked man [Vyssokos] went travelling. Mikul lifted the sods for a man ploughing the land; Jüri also did good deeds, but Vyssokos trampled the grain. A man's load overturned. Mikul and Jüri

> helped him lift it, but Vyssokos mocked him: 'Let it stay lying in the mud!' Therefore God granted Mikul and Jüri two feast days each year, while Vyssokos received one every three years. On that day everything is brought before him — people, animals, and even snow. Whatever he looks upon is destroyed. It is an ill-omened day, and all other feasts are postponed. (ERA II 194, 629 (9), Setomaa).

Among Belarusians there is a narrative about St Kassian in which he appears together with St John Chrysostom (SUS – 790***).[9] The epithet of St John Chrysostom ('Golden-Mouthed'), was given to him for his eloquence. In the Belarusian legend he is called Zlatovus ('Golden Moustache'), and the tale provides an original interpretation of this epithet in a vivid example of folk etymology.

Kassian and Ivan Zlatovus serve the liturgy together in church. Kassian deliberately singes Ivan's moustache with fire from the censer (the vessel used for burning incense), and Ivan, in turn, sets Kassian's beard on fire with a candle. God acknowledges that it was Kassian who started the quarrel and assigns his feast day to be celebrated only once every four years. To John he grants golden moustaches, and therefore he is called Zlatovus (Romanov 1891: 16–17).



Fig. 2. Photo Monument to the martyr Cornelius, hegumen of the Pskovo-Pechersky Monastery. Photo: Pavel Parmenov, 2019.



Fig. 3. Giant Suur Tõll and Crusaders; author Jüri Arrak 1982.

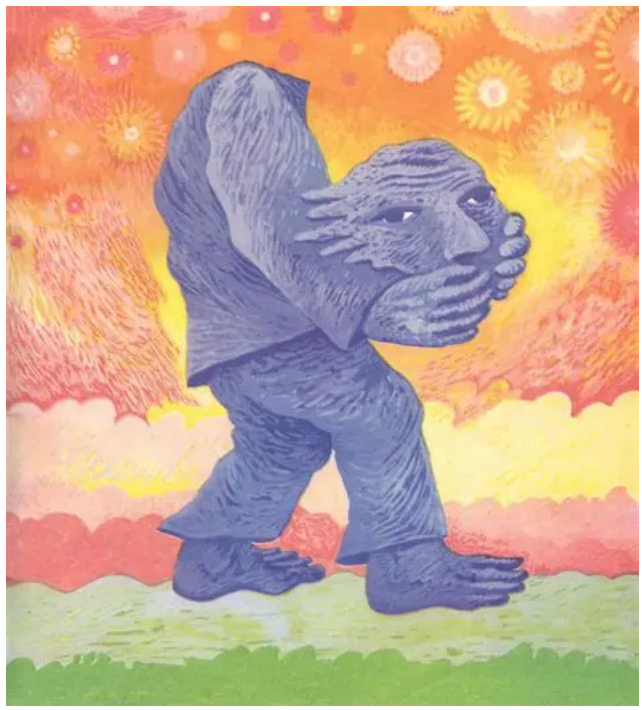


Fig. 4. Gigant Suur Tõll decapitated, author Jüri Arrak 1982

3. St Cornelius (1501–20 February 1570): His Associations with Giants and Saints

Historical sources contain numerous references to the Pskov Pechory Cave Monastery and to its high theological standards, as well as reports of the monastery's miraculous preservation during times of war. In this section we address only those folkloric motifs that are directly connected with the first Hegumen Cornelius.

Cornelius headed the Pskov-Pechory Monastery from 1529 to 1570 expanding it in every respect. He promoted the spread of Orthodoxy among the local population, winning many converts who later helped to defeat the forces of the Livonian Order during the Russo-Livonian War. Cornelius supported the establishment of churches, hospitals and orphanages, enriched the monastery library and was the author of multiple chronicles. His death was unexpected: in 1570 the violence-prone Ivan IV visited the monastery and killed Cornelius during his stay, decapitating him because he suspected him of treason.

Folklore, however, reveals a fascinating complex of motifs in which universal and local, along with hagiographic, elements are interwoven. Unexpectedly, some narratives reflect the archaic worldview according to which gods, saints and heroes

of various peoples were giants. Folk narratives emphasise the unusual qualities of the religious leader: he is described as being of giant size, as are his brothers, with whom he cooperates in building monasteries in the region.

The giant builder motif is well known in Estonian tradition, where giants erect large buildings. This is an international folktale motif: a giant builds a town, church or monastery but lacks sufficient tools, and therefore several giants share a single tool, throwing it to one another over great distances. In Seto and Russian narratives Cornelius builds a monastery or church together with his brothers, throwing a hammer across long distances as they work. Similar motifs appear in Estonian stories about Kalevipoeg, Vanapagan and other giants, as well as in the stories of the Slovenes and other Slavic peoples (Kropej 2012: 62 ff.; Oinas 1979). There are also stories about the Slavic giants of Pomorje, Western Ukraine, and the Smolensk region of Russia (Belova 1995: 301–302), and stories about giants in the United Kingdom (Fionn mac Cumhaill/Giant's Causeway) (Simpson & Roud 2000) and Scandinavia (Klintberg 2011, Kvideland & Sehmsdorf 1988).

Cornelius is also connected, through several motifs, with the well-known western Estonian giant Tõll. Although building churches is the central theme, another characteristic motif is walking across a large body of water without getting wet feet, or only barely.

One of the best-known examples of walking on water is described in the Bible in the Gospel of Matthew (Matt. 14:22–31), the Gospel of Mark (Mark 6:45–53), and the Gospel of John (John 6:15–21). Christ went up on a mountain to pray alone, and then walked across the surface of the water toward the boat in which His disciples were sailing. In the Gospel of Matthew, Peter wished to go to Jesus on the water; Jesus permitted him, but after walking some distance Peter became frightened by the wind and began to sink. Jesus reached out His hand to him and reproached him for his lack of faith.

In both ATU and SUS there is tale-type ATU 827 "A Pious Innocent Man Knows Nothing of God (previously A Shepherd Knows Nothing of God)". A pious man (a farmer) worships God in his own manner and never goes to church. A travelling preacher teaches him how to pray properly and then continues on his journey. When the pious man forgets the prayer, he follows the preacher's ship by walking on the water. Through this miracle, the preacher recognises the man's holiness and understands that pious innocence is pleasing to God (Uther 2011: 465).

St Cornelius crosses water without wetting his feet, a motif that parallels both the Estonian giant Kalevipoeg and St Christopher (Latin *Christophorus*), who bears the Christ child across a river (as narrated in the *Legenda Aurea* by Jacobus de Voragine 1993/1995). The visualisation of the motif is widely represented in medieval church art. In Estonian tradition, Kalevipoeg also ferries the divine across water (on his palm), paralleling Cornelius's water-crossing without wetting

his feet. Christopher is widely known in the Baltic region and across the western Slavic world, and was also previously venerated as a saint in Britain and elsewhere. The motif appears in 14th century Slovenian church paintings, where the saint walks in water that reaches over his feet. A similar image is found on a cliff-side shrine painting in Slovenia (Kropej 2012). The cult of Christopher spread widely in the eastern Baltic by the 14th century (see Loorits 1954; for Latvian Catholics Lielbārdis 2015). On the Vilnius coat of arms (1330) he is depicted wading through water carrying the Christ child on his shoulders. A large monument to him stands in front of the oldest Church of St Nicholas in Vilnius, recalling the legendary event. The motif of carrying God or Jesus across deep waters is one of the core features of saintly legends (cf. Tolstaja, Belova 2009: 594).

Similar features – gigantic stature and associations with sacred sites and bodies of water – also appear in the imagery of several Islamic holy men. One of Bulgaria's oldest Alevi sanctuaries, the Demir Baba türbe, was built upon a 3000-year-old Thracian sacred site. In the sixteenth century a mausoleum was constructed there in honour of the sage Demir Baba, a figure associated with miracles and giant-like qualities (Teodorova, Gergova 2006; Kõiva, Kuperjanov, Vesik 2015: 56–58).

Folk narratives portray Cornelius in multiple ways. They tell how the *bogatyr* ('giant') Cornelius built a wall around the monastery without the tsar's permission, how he built several churches instead of one, or how, when ordered to build a horse stable, he built a new church instead. He was granted permission to erect a fence around the monastery grounds, which were supposed to be the size of an ox hide, but the clever hegumen cut the hide into thin strips (another widely distributed motif),[10] outlined a much larger territory and built a stone wall around it.

Let us set aside these shared legendary motifs, fascinating though they are – particularly the miracle-working and protective icons and other monastery-related material – and turn to Cornelius's death. Here too the narratives contain varying details, especially regarding place: sometimes Ivan IV meets Cornelius at the monastery gates, sometimes in front of the monastery, sometimes at a considerable distance from the sacred site. Ivan IV receives Cornelius, and the tsar decapitates him, allegedly because someone had whispered that the wall around the monastery had been built to detach the monastery from the Russian state.

The dramatic scene that follows describes how Cornelius walks back to the monastery carrying his severed head under his arm, in his hands, or on a plate. This motif also appears in the Estonian legend of the Saaremaa giant Suur Tõll, who leaves his place of death with his head under his arm (Laugaste et al. 1963). In other variants, Ivan IV repents, taking Cornelius's bloody corpse in his arms and carrying it into the monastery. As punishment for his deed he becomes blind. After making numerous donations and performing good deeds for the monastery, the tsar's crime is absolved and he regains his sight.[11]

The motif of beheaded heroes or saints is present in Bible (John the Baptist Matt. 14:1–12, Holofernes Judith 13:4–10, Goliath 1 Sam. 17:49–51) and popular in Christian art. A cephalophore (from the Greek meaning 'head-carrier') is a saint who is typically depicted carrying his or her severed head. Thus, the original and perhaps most famous cephalophore is Denis, patron saint of Paris, who, according to the *Golden Legend*, miraculously preached with his head in his hands while travelling the seven miles from Montmartre to his burial place. Although St Denis is the best known of the saintly head-carriers, there were many others: the folklorist Émile Nourry (1929: 158–231) counted 134 examples of cephalophory in French hagiographic literature alone.

An unusual motif relating to the dead Cornelius comes when he rises from his grave to extinguish a fire. Afterwards he sleeps, or 'dies', promising to come to help the people in times of great distress. In one version a curious woman tests whether he will indeed come to their aid and awakens him without cause. Angered by the deception, the saint declares that he will return only in times of true catastrophe. A similar motif appears in the western Estonian tradition of Suur Tõll in which young men repeatedly awaken the hero without good reason, and Tõll vows to return only when severe calamities strike.

Eduard Laugaste describes Tõll as follows:

> Although Tõll appears in the eyes of the people as a kind of natural giant whose actions determine the placement or transformation of natural objects (fingerprints on rocks, traces on hills, etc.), he is also known as a military leader who fought in several battles against enemies. Thus Tõll appears both as a giant and as a hero. The young Tõll has fewer giant-like qualities – he is a labourer and, in part, a musician. (Laugaste, Liiv 1970).

Again this parallels storylines in which we find the 'king/hero sleeps in a mountain' motif (Thompson 1955–1958). Cornelius rising from the grave to save people in dire times resonates with many European stories such as, to name a few, Frederick Barbarossa (Kyffhäuser), Charlemagne (Untersberg), King Wenceslas (Blaník), King Arthur (Avalon) (Simpson & Roud 2000), the Slovenian Kralj Matjaž (the sleeping ruler under Mt Peca) (Kropej 2012). In the Estonian area, Suur Tõll promises to return when there is a catastrophe, a close formal analogue to Cornelius's posthumous guardianship.

In summary, Tõll carries out activities characteristic of giants such as shaping the landscape, building churches and fighting enemies. The ancient enemies of the Saaremaa giant Tõll are the Devil and the German crusaders. In contrast, the narrative cycle of Cornelius is predominantly religious, although he too builds

churches in a giant-like manner. Both cycles share the motif of promising to come to the aid of the people and the land in times of hardship.

We have already seen that St Nicholas is attributed more traits and motifs than most other saints. Nicholas and Cornelius share several motifs. According to a widespread motif, Cornelius travels to help people and his boots wear out quickly. St Nicholas, however, wears out a pair of boots every day, and from this arises the explanation for why he no longer travels (cf. ERA, Vene 14, 481 (8) Tartu, 1940; ERA, Vene 16, 576/7 (56) Setomaa, 1941 et al.). Analogous walking until the boots wear out motifs appear in Western tales of mendicant or itinerant saints (Nicholas among them) (Voragine 1993).

In folk legends, a blending of chronology frequently occurs, where events and characters from different eras are combined. Thus, in narratives recorded in Setomaa, St Nicholas is often linked by storytellers with Ivan IV (the Terrible).

Within the monastery-related cycle, Nicholas repeatedly shows Ivan IV the righteous path. Although the saint's life seems to be in the tsar's hands, the dangerous situation is – according to the rules of folk narrative – less harmful to the saint. When Ivan IV becomes blind after killing the holy man, he understands personally and directly the impermissibility of his action.[12] In the legend, his instruction is conveyed through visions, images in the mind, and also through physical experience that reveals the nature of Ivan the Terrible's behaviour.

In one tale St Nicholas throws away vodka, claiming that he used it to extinguish a fire in Jerusalem. Special messengers are sent to verify the claim. With fairy-tale swiftness they travel there and back, confirming the truth of the event. In another tale Nicholas admonishes Ivan the Terrible and pierces his foot with a sword in the same manner that the tsar himself punished soldiers when in a foul mood:

> Then Mikul rebuked the wicked king and made him understand what kind of man he was, that he tormented the people in such a way. 'Look', he said, 'when you came to the town, everything seemed as if it were deserted – they fled from you. And just as you pierced his foot with a sword, now see yourself whether you can stand'. The king stood without uttering a sound. He feared Mikul but was very angry at the people. After Mikul's instruction he is said to have become somewhat better. They said he was a king with a jealous heart. (ERA II 209, 18/20 (10), Setomaa, 1939).

The tale ends with the narrator's summary, essentially a moral much like those appended to medieval narratives, or a device by which the storyteller balances the narrative and its ethical dimension: "After Mikul's instruction he is said to have become somewhat better."

St Cornelius – whose figure combines historical elements with older hagiographic representations, including associations with St Christopher, St Spyridon of Trimythous, St Athanasius of Constantinople/Kharkiv, St Nicholas, older rulers and even Islamic holy men – embodies a particularly interesting strand of folkloric tradition.

Conclusions

Durkheim emphasised that the religious rituals of a community are fundamental to shaping "collective life" (Durkheim [1912] 2007: 27). Examining the traditions of St Nicholas in Estonia – particularly in the Seto and Russian folk-Christian environment – we find a complex blend of hagiographic elements, apocryphal traditions and folklore. This includes various etiological (including cosmological) and eschatological conceptions as well as ethno-confessional understandings. Although the motifs are strongly connected with older layers of saint's traditions, para-biblical motifs display numerous widely distributed international parallels. The narratives recorded between the 1920s and 1940s, together with ritual practices, omens and beliefs, have been adapted to local conditions and the surrounding landscape.

The stories are shaped by an ethical framework whose key components include ideas of good and evil, sin and miracles, harmony and balance in the world, the relationship between Creator and creation and norms for human coexistence. These notions are deeply embedded in the entire folklore system and expressed through its genres and subgenres.

Texts about saints form a distinct corpus that reflects a characteristic peasant worldview in which feast days and saintly cycles constituted a shared social experience uniting the poor and the less poor. Narratives about saints appear in genres of folk prose (fairy tales, legends, myths, miracle stories), in belief accounts, in conceptions of saintly functions and customary practice, in prayers addressed to saints and in ritual action. As we have seen, St Nicholas is attributed more benevolent qualities and motifs than other saints.

It becomes clear from the above that the motifs associated with religious characters, who share partly overlapping sets of genealogical features, are remarkably close. In the Pechory region, social and political conditions changed rapidly between 1920 and 1940. Religious culture, however, remained stable for decades, as evidenced by local recordings, the spiritual folklore collected by research fellows, and materials preserved in the French museum fellowship collections (Benfougal et al. 2021; Belobrovtseva 2020; Kirss 1922; Katajeva-Valk 2019; Zassedskaja, Kalinina 2021: 537; Belousov et al. 1976). At the same time, the broader world was clearly changing. Belarusian parallels cited in this article derive from the BFELA

database and related publications. It is evident that Belarusians, Setos and local Russians shared, to a large extent, the same cultural-historical paradigm.

It is worth noting how many international giant and saint-related features are interwoven in the recorded narratives: the giant may acquire traits of a cultural hero or saint, while the saint may adopt motifs typical of giants. Religious tales engage with the landscape, local history and local culture. Folk traditions connected with saints can lose their link to the canonical prototype, or, conversely, can expand and reinforce it. Changing and migrating motifs connect local traditions with universal saintly cycles. At the same time, it is moving to find fragments of narrators' personal attitudes and other individual elements.

St Cornelius – whose narrative cycle contains a blend of historical motifs and older hagiographic representations including associations with Christian Saintsand, and even Islamic holy men – represents a particularly intriguing strand of folk tradition that merits deeper study.

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Notes

[1] The first date follows the New (Gregorian) Calendar, while the second corresponds to the Old (Julian) Calendar.

[2] Nicholas defending monastery: there is also number magic (nine) and crows attacking the enemy.

[3] The popular narrative motif. Nicholas rewards soldier for icon rescued, several variants from Seto and Russians. ATU 755 – "Help from Heaven for a Kindly Act", belongs to the group of legends about St Nikolaus as grateful helper: F823.3 (Grateful Saint assists benefactor), F871 (Saint serves human being in disguise), Q431.3 (Good deed to a sacred object rewarded), V361 (Icon rescued from profanation brings blessing).

[4] ATU 960 B – Miraculous Rescue by Lightning; Motif D 2121.2 – Lightning strikes pursuers; D 2190 – God sends lightning to protect the righteous.

[5] ATU 779: "Three Maidens and Their Dowries"; "Miracle of the Three Maidens" is the central motif in the Vita Sancti Nicolaus traditsioonis, cf "Vita sancti Nicholai" from The Early South English Legendary or Lives of Saints, Dr. Carl Horstmann, editor. First published for The Early English Text Society by Trubner & Co., London, 1887.

[6] There is no exact equivalent in ATU (~ ATU 755 "Help from Heaven for a Kindly Act" (closest match), in Motif Index: H551 (Reward for hospitality), F823.3 (Saint rewards benefactor),

N815 (Treasure found as reward), N815.1 (Treasure uncovered by plough). In hagiopraphy subtype: "Nicholas rewards generosity" / "Гостеприимство вознаграждено Николаем"

[7] A dash before the tale type number in SUS (the East Slavic tale-type index) indicates that this plot type is known only among the East Slavs.

[8] Although the tale of Saint Nicholaus and Saint Cassianus does not appear as an independent type in the international ATU index, it corresponds thematically to several groups of religious and etiological legends: ATU 756A ("The Feast Days of Saints"), ATU 758 ("The Punishment of the Saint"), ATU 804 ("Why the Saint Has This Feast Day"), ATU 921C ("The Saint Refuses to Help"), and to the broader category of moral contrast tales (ATU 960–970). These parallels help position the East Slavic and Seto versions within the wider European tradition of hagiographic–folkloric narrative patterns.

[9] This type is absent from the ATU index; the SUS notes that it is found only among Belarusians (SUS 1979, 199).

[10] Cornelius's trick of cutting an ox hide into strips to encircle a larger monastery precinct belongs to a classical and medieval legend stratum known from Queen Dido's founding of Carthage (Byrsa) and was recycled widely in European monastic foundation legends. The tale is a durable migration motif that marks clever sacral appropriation of space (Thompson 1955–1958 (motif "enclosing land with hide thongs"); Oxford Classical Dictionary; Simpson & Roud 2000.

[11] Cornelius returning to the monastery with his severed head echoes the pan European hagiographic theme of cephalophoric saints. Notable parallels include Saint Denis of Paris, who carries his head after decapitation, and Saint Edmund the Martyr, whose severed head is miraculously retrieved and borne. The image recurs in heroic land Giant legend as well (e.g., the Estonian giant Suur Tõll). (More details cf. Voragine 19931995, Legenda Aurea; Laugaste et al. 1963; Simpson & Roud 2000).

[12] The pattern in which a ruler is supernaturally punished (blindness) and then restored after penance is a hagiographic schema: saints admonish kings, who undergo a visible affliction before reconciliation. The famous motifs include confrontations of Ambrose and Theodosius (penitential model), while Eastern hagiography frequently stages eyesight loss/restoration as a sign of divine judgment and mercy (Delehaye 1905/1998; Tolstaja & Belova 2009).

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ERA, Russian – Russian collections of the Estonian Folklore Archives, 1920–1945

BFELA – Belarusian Folklore, Research Centre for Belarusian Culture, Language and Literature, National Academy of Sciences of Belarus

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Bibliographical Note

Mare Kõiva is the Head and Lead Researcher at the Estonian Literary Museum's Department of Folkloristics. Currently, her main research is concerned with spells, mediums, mythological characters and relationships between humans and animals.

Elena Boganeva is Director of the Ethnolinguistics and Folklore Department, Byelorussian Research Centre on Culture, Language and Literature (Byelorussian Academy of Sciences). Her main research topics are connected with folk-Christianity, mythology and aetiologies.

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Gifts to Children and the Ritual Year in Eastern Lithuania and Western Belarus in the late 19th and first half of the 20th centuries

Rasa Paukštytė-Šaknienė

Department of Ethnology and Anthropology, Lithuanian Institute of History, Vilnius, Lithuania

rasa.sakniene@gmail.com

Abstract: In this paper, I chose to analyse the gifts given to children in Lithuanian villages in eastern Lithuania and western Belarus in the late 19th and first half of the 20th centuries on the occasion of various calendar celebrations. I tried to reveal what types of gift were given to children from different social groups: one's own children, one's godchildren, children who worked as hired hands (herders), and neighbours' children. I also analyse the dominant ways that gifts were given to individual children or groups of children at these times. After conducting this analysis of the gifts and gift-giving traditions, we can conclude that during the research period gifts were given only within limited periods, usually from Easter to Pentecost. In most cases, the gift was an egg or another edible product. When analysing occasions for giving gifts, little difference was found in the types of gift given to one's own children, godchildren, herders, the neighbours' children or even those from other villages. However, the way these gifts were given did differ. When giving a gift to one's own child a mediator would usually be called for, while gifts to godchildren, herders and village children generally were given directly. In all cases, a gift to a child carried a sacred value. However, of all the gifts it was those received from one's godparents that were cherished the most by children. These children held a number of social statuses: that of child, godchild, herder, neighbour's child, and in different situations they would receive gifts from their parents, neighbours or masters. In most cases (except one's own child), gifts served the function of balancing or ensuring an equal exchange, which is typical in a community.

Keywords: gift, eastern Lithuania, western Belarus, children, herder, godchildren, community

In the Lithuanian ethnographic encyclopaedic dictionary, Birutė Kulnytė and Elvyda Lazauskaitė define the concept of a gift as an object given as a sign of love, respect or prosperity (Kulnytė, Lazauskaitė 2015: 67). Research by Lithuania's ethnologists shows that from the earliest times, rural people have given incomparably greater symbolic value to gifts than their monetary worth. The symbolic value gifts are charged with also reflects a particular community's values. A gift is the goodwill giving of an object to another person with the purpose of conferring a pleasant feeling or repaying an earlier good deed, or it is an act of charity or aims to obtain someone's favour (Vyšniauskaitė 1995: 273–285). When researching Lithuanian village community customs, a link between gifts and food and/or drink treats was found to exist. In the traditional village community, cakes, sweets, drinks and hand-woven textiles were given as gifts for hundreds of years, being considered women's currency (Savoniakaitė 2006: 60). Arnold Van Gennep (1960 [1909]: 29) wrote about such treats as an act of social solidarity. Therefore, I will attribute treats (food products) and gifts to the same category of exchange.

French anthropologist Marcel Mauss emphasised the reciprocity of the act of giving. He pointed out that donation is never a one-sided act, it is an implementation of the principle of mutual exchange. Reciprocity, according to anthropology, reveals the profound social fabric of society and is universal in archaic communities (Maus 2002 [1950]). Marshall Sahlins distinguished several types of reciprocal exchange: 1) Generalised reciprocity, i.e. an indefinite exchange without expecting to receive anything in return; 2) Balanced reciprocity or equivalent exchange; 3) Negative reciprocity, where you expect to get more than you give. The first type takes place within the family, the second within the community, and the third relates to relationships outside the community (Sahlins 1972: 193–196). In the today's perception, speaking about gifts for children we must use generalised reciprocity to means transactions that are putatively altruistic, transactions along the lines of assistance given and, if possible and necessary, assistance returned (Sahlins 1972: 193). In his summary of gifts and gift-giving experiences, American anthropologist Yan Yunxiag states:

> While revealing that the highly diversified patterns of gift exchange derive from different perceptions of the relationship between culturally constructed notions of personhood and material objects in the larger social setting, the anthropology of the gift also unpacks the nuances of social life by examining patterns of gift-giving behavior all over the world, the spirit of the gift and the principle of reciprocity (Yunxiang 2020:1).

The question is then what type of reciprocal exchange dominated in village communities that ran extensive farms in eastern Lithuania and western Belarus in the

late 19th and early 20th centuries? In the traditional Lithuanian village of this period, gifts were largely given on occasions such as house warming, christening, name days and weddings. Gifts were given to adults and young people, while children only received gifts from their godparents and then only during the major calendar celebrations (Kulnytė, Lazauskaitė 2015: 67). Gifts given to children have received almost no attention in ethnologists' research, which is why I have chosen to analyse this particular field.

In contemporary society, the giving of expensive gifts to children on their birthdays, for Christmas or the New Year is hardly surprising. Gifts for children these days make up one of the most important aspects of the commercialisation of celebrations. However, as little as fifty-seventy years ago, the situation was very different in certain Lithuanian and Belarusian villages. In the majority of agrarian societies, social prestige was closely tied to ageing. The experience accumulated throughout one's life was held to be the main value, which therefore determined the relatively low prestige of a child. The types of gift given to children also reflected how their value was perceived.

In the first half of the 20th century, in villages inhabited by Lithuanians in eastern Lithuania and western Belarus engaged in farming, children's name days or birthdays (here, childhood is taken to mean below the age of youth) would be remembered very rarely. During various celebrations, children were more likely to receive sweets or another food product as gifts, rather than a toy, item of clothing or other material object.

In this paper, I will analyse the gifts given to children in Lithuanian villages located in Eastern Lithuania and Western Belarus in the late 19th – first half of the 20th centuries on the occasion of various calendar celebrations (for Christmas, New Years', the Epiphany, Mid-Lent, for Easter, Children's Easter (the Sunday after Easter Sunday), on Storks' Day (March 25 – the Feast of the Annunciation), St George's Day, Pentecost, and on parish and personal celebrations (birthdays and name days)[1]. This is why I shall try to analyse what types of gift were given to children from different social positions: 1. one's own children; 2. one's godchildren; 3. children who worked as hired hands (herders); 4. neighbours' children. I shall also analyse the dominant ways that gifts were given to individual children or groups of children in this period.

As Olga Nieuwenhuys, a researcher from the Netherlands, has mentioned, gift exchange between adults and children is a surprisingly neglected area of childhood studies (Nieuwenhuys 2006: 147). A similar situation exists in Lithuania where the topic of gifts and gift-giving to children as part of calendar celebration customs remains poorly researched to this day. The author of this paper also looked at the gifts given by godparents to their godchildren on the occasion of calendar celebrations in the article "The Ritual Year of Godparents and Godchildren in Contemporary

Lithuanian Society" (Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2015: 471–478). The most comprehensive ethnologists' studies of gifts given for calendar celebrations are dedicated to the Christmas period. These are by ethnologist Juozas Kudirka in his book *Lithuanian Christmas Eve and Christmas* (Kudirka 1993: 53–57, 210–215) and "Preparation for Christmas Festivals in the families of Vilnius Citizens: Is it a Stress or a Pleasure?", an article by the present author (Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2013: 316–327). Another article by ethnologist Rūta Latinytė, "Christmas Gifts Exchange between Parents and Children as a Means of Communicating Care", is dedicated to the exchange of Christmas gifts (Latinytė 2021: 68–85). Ethnologist Irena Regina Merkienė wrote more extensively on Easter gifts in her article "Easter Signs of Spring: The Culture of the Baltic Region in the 20th Century" (Merkienė 1999: 187–207).

Gifts to one's own children

As I already mentioned, children did not receive special attention in agrarian societies. They would become accustomed to the heavy labour expected of a farmer from an early age. According to Laima Šilainytė, who described the world view of people from Gervyaty County (western Belarus), it was believed that the more hardship a child had experienced, the better the child (Šilainytė 1989: 200). A similar view applied in Lithuania, where in the late 19th and first half of the 20th centuries, a child in a peasant family would be educated through labour (Vasiliauskas 2006: 131). When we are talking about gifts and gift-giving, as the ethno-pedagogue Romanas Vasiliauskas noted when studying customs in Dubičiai County in Varėna District (southeastern Lithuania), peasants would generally use verbal rather than material means to get their children used to hard work. Verbal praise dominated, while encouragement through the giving of gifts was mainly practiced in wealthier families (Vasiliauskas 1989: 185). According to ethnologist Nijolė Pliuraitė-Andrejevienė, who researched children's toys, in a Lithuanian peasant family in the interwar years, only a little more than a quarter of peasants' children up to the age of three, a little more than half of three-to-six-year-olds and less than a third of children aged seven to 14 had toys that were bought (Pliuraitė-Andrejevienė 2012: 26). Meanwhile, according to ethnographic field research data collected by ethnologist Angelė Vyšniauskaitė in Dubingiai County (Molėtai District), children had practically no bought toys. Only rarely would a peasant bring back a horse- or ram-shaped clay whistle from a Vilnius market for their child without any special occasion. Children usually played with toys they had made themselves (Vyšniauskaitė 1971: 205).

Even in the economically wealthier localities of northern Lithuania, children were not spoiled with gifts. In old age, many would recall the first gifts they had received as children, such as a linen dress, a handkerchief or a pair of shoes handmade for a 14-year-old (Sabaliauskaitė 1980: 62). One rare example recalled by a

man born in northeast Lithuania in 1934 was his delight, as a herding-aged boy, at receiving a matchbox when his father had returned from the market one time. It was a gift he remembered for the rest of his life. The poor children of small Lithuanian and Belarusian towns and villages also referred to food products as gifts. It should be noted that even on various other occasions unrelated to the calendar celebrations, parents would often give their children sweets or another food product rather than a toy, item of clothing or material object.

Gifts would be given to children during calendar celebrations, of which Easter truly stood out when children would receive decorated eggs called *margučiai*. We should note that during this period, parents would not give them to their children directly, but via a mediator. In eastern Lithuania, it was commonly said that *Velykų Bobutė* (the Old Lady of Easter) had given the children gifts. Adults would explain to children that she would bring *margučiai* at night and leave them for the children to find in the morning (Marcinkevičienė 1998: 107–108). A similar account comes from western Belarus. According to Merkienė, in Lida District, a mother would bring her children *margučiai* and leave them on the windowsill, saying that *Vėlykis* (a man) had brought them (Merkienė 2002: 339). Thus, only the sex of the alleged gift-giver differed.

Children would receive gifts from a mediator during other calendar celebrations as well. One such celebration in eastern Lithuania was March 25, also known as Gandro diena (Storks' Day). According to ethnologist Nijolė Marcinkevičienė, in the village of Grabijolai (near Vilnius) women would bake special buns from various grains, which they would place on fence posts, saying to children that a stork had brought them. That morning, children would rush to grab the *gandro pyragai* (stork's cakes). It was just a coincidence that the stork had made its nest at the midwife's farmstead, and thus all the children thought that the stork had brought them as well (Marcinkevičienė 2005: 29). In addition to stork's cakes baked from various grains, sometimes parents would secretly dye eggs and say that the stork had brought them as well, while near Kietaviškes (Elektrėnai Eldership, southeast Lithuania), boys would receive a few red eggs and a bun tied in a handkerchief, while girls received the same parcel tied in a new scarf (Marcinkevičienė 2009: 23). In Dūkštai County (Vilnius District), back in the early 20th century, similar treats would be decorated with gooseberry branches and were placed on the corner of the fence, the children would think they had been left for them by the stork (Dundulienė 1991: 88–89). In Eastern Lithuania the stork was meant to give a child a pair of shoes.

> [O]n that morning, when the children woke up, they'd be told that a heron had flown back – 'run outside, you'll find some shoes on the *žardas*' [a drying rack for hay, flax, etc]. When the children ran outside, their feet would get cold and they'd return inside with red feet,

> as if they had red shoes. People would say: 'so, you found the shoes then' (Švenčionys District) (Galinytė 1979: 36).

A similar situation also existed in western Belarus. In Gervyaty County (western Belarus), at Mid-Lent (Laetare Sunday), a child might be told to collect the red shoes left for him or her by a bear in the courtyard. Once the child came back inside, the parents would point at their child's chilled, red feet[2], saying that this was the bear's gift. (Šaknys, *Gervėčių krašto kalendoriniai papročiai*, manuscript). One respondent recalled how on one occasion she asked her parents, "where are the shoes then?" Her parents replied, "look at your feet, they're as red as a stork's, so there you have your red shoes". The woman said she cried for a long time after this kind of joke. Later, some parents would buy their children real shoes on this occasion (Šaknys, *Gervėčių krašto kalendoriniai papročiai*, manuscript).

Christmas gifts for children in Lithuanian and western Belarusian villages became widespread in the early to middle of the 20th century. According to Kudirka, this custom was linked to the spreading popularity of the Christmas tree. As in the case of *Velykų Bobutė*, children would not see the gift-bringer, i.e., *Kalėdų Senelis* (Father Christmas). The custom that gifts would be handed out by a man dressed as *Kalėdų Senelis* became known only in the interwar years (1920s–1930s) (Kudirka 1993: 214–215). According to Kudirka: "In the beginning, *Kalėdų Senelis*, as we know him today, would rarely appear. Little was said about him, just like *Velykų Bobutė*. Children would fall asleep on Christmas Eve without even having waited for him, and in the morning it would be too late – only gifts, sometimes a letter would be left as well..." (Kudirka 1993: 214). Between 1920 and 1939, in the Poland-occupied Vilnius Region, attempts were made to introduce the tradition[3], popular in various parts of Poland, of hiding a gift from St Nicholas in various nooks on December 6 (Znamierowska-Prüfferowa 2009: 140; Kudirka 1993: 215). However, this tradition, unknown up to 1920, did not become established in eastern Lithuania.

The gifts we are today used to receiving and giving for New Year have their own history. During the Soviet years, attempts were made to shift the celebration of Christmas, which embodied the symbolism of transition rituals, to New Year's Eve, and for many *Senis* Šaltis (Old Man Winter) handing out gifts at New Year became an inseparable part of this celebration (Gutautas 1991: 33). According to ethnologist Dalia Senvaitytė, in these years great ideological and press attention (according to data from 1953–1964) was focused on the popularisation of New Year's celebrations for children at school, in companies, in collective farm clubs and elsewhere. Not only was the fun of the celebration accentuated, but also the giving of gifts and the decoration of Christmas trees. In this period, children's school holidays would begin just before New Year's Eve, with no days off over Christmas. The government's measures were meant to divert people's attention from the Christian Christmas and

towards secular New Year celebrations (Senvaitytė 2013: 116–117). However, even at these mass events, gifts pre-arranged by parents would be given to children via the mediator *Senis Šaltis*. Christmas gifts did exist in some areas too, even during the Soviet era. Marcinkevičienė recorded a very detailed account from a respondent born in the village of Kibyšiai (Varėna District, souteast Lithuania) in 1944:

> The *Kalėdų dziedukas* [Christmas Old Man] would come to our house on Christmas Eve. My grandma and mother would say that the *Kalėdų dziedukas*' place was under the table. He would crouch there, but he was invisible and no one could see him. No one would see or hear how he came or how he left – the door would open for him by itself. He saw and knew everything (Marcinkevičienė 2008: 149).

According to the respondent, there were no toys at the time, but the *Kalėdų dziedukas* would leave a gift on the chair where the child would sit, and it would be a sweet, bun or little Christmas Eve sweet buns (*šližikai*). But if the child had not been good, some coal pieces is all that would be put on the chair (Marcinkevičienė 2008: 149).

To summarise all the celebrations mentioned above, we see that parents would not actually give gifts to their children themselves. The function of giving gifts was in the hands of a mediator. Traditionally, this would be done by the *Velykų Bobutė*, *Velykis*, a bear, stork, or later *Kalėdų Senelis*, St. Nicholas and *Senis* Šaltis. In this way, with the help of the mediator the gift would be imparted with a sacred character. We shall see a different situation when analysing the gifts given by godparents and on what occasions they usually gave them to godchildren.

Gifts to godchildren

The institution of godparents was very important to the functioning of village communities in both eastern Lithuania and western Belarus. For example, during weddings in eastern Lithuania back in the early 20th century there was a custom of giving gifts to the groom's godchildren (Jokimaitienė, Vėlius 1986: 336–337). The role of the godparents when children received first communion, got married or upon the death of a godchild is often mentioned in ethnographic sources from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. However, ethnologists make only fragmentary references to these gifts during annual calendar and lifecycle celebrations. Nonetheless, how did the tradition of gift-giving to children function during calendar celebrations?

Significantly from the perspective of gift-giving, of all the calendar celebrations marked in Lithuania's villages, Easter again stood out. On this occasion, decorated Easter eggs would be handed out not only by the imaginary *Velykų Bobutė* or the male being *Vėlykis*, but also by godparents. Communication between godparents and godchildren would traditionally be given greater significance during this

celebration (Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2015: 473). The egg, i.e., *margutis*, was identified as a special Easter gift. When analysing the egg as a gift, Merkienė noted that a decorated egg was considered an attractive gift for children, godchildren, neighbours, friends and loved ones (Merkienė 1999: 199–201). At the end of the 19th and in the first half of the 20th century, eggs would be given to children not just for Easter. Even though analysis of ethnographic sources shows a great number of occasions, for the purposes of this article our attention will focus only on Easter eggs given to godchildren. The custom of giving Easter eggs was equally widespread in all ethnographic regions of Lithuania in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Paukštytė 1999: 124). Kudirka states that a godmother's Easter duty was to give her godchild an Easter egg. In some places, the godfather would also give Easter eggs. Godparents would visit younger children, while older children (especially boys) would pay a visit to their godparents themselves (Kudirka 1992: 64). The tradition of giving Easter eggs to godchildren during Easter was alive in western Belarus as well. According to Merkienė's research data, in the Lida District (western Belarus) in the 1940s godparents and godmothers would visit children aged one to seven and give them Easter eggs, and sometimes another object as well, for example a scarf for a girl, or sweets. Sometimes, in the hope of receiving gifts, godchildren would visit their godparents (Merkienė 2002: 339). Meanwhile, based on memories from the interwar years, Kudirka noted that in the village of Plikiai (western Belarus), godparents would give their godchildren only Easter eggs and nothing else (Kudirka 1998: 28). This is confirmed by Malvina Miškinienė from the village of Giry (western Belarus), however according to her recollections, she would go looking for eggs not only at her godmother's house, but also her aunts' and grandmother's, i.e., her female relatives. The respondent claimed to have collected as many as 30 eggs (Miškinienė 2008: 56). Sometimes the Easter visits of godparents to their godchildren would go on until the second Sunday of Easter (Divine Mercy Sunday) (Kudirka 1992: 92). In southeast Lithuania there was also a custom to give godchild a bun and an egg for Easter, and for St. George's Day (Marcinkevičienė 2008: 134–135)[4]. The final date for 'paying-off' one's godchildren would be Pentecost (Marcinkevičienė, Mukaitė, Vakarinienė 2006: 185).

There are some mentions in ethnographic sources of gifts received from godparents for name days, although according to Šaknys, in Aukštaitija between 1920 and 1940 neither name days nor birthdays were celebrated on a wide scale (Šaknys 2008: 23). A similar situation existed in southeast Lithuania. For example, as Vyšniauskaitė has stated, in Dieveniškės County (southeast Lithuania), godparents would buy a gift for their godchild for their name day only if the name day was marked with a corresponding saint's day in the parish (Vyšniauskaitė 1995: 370).

When the custom of Christmas gifts started to become widespread in the first half of the 20th century, in some places in Lithuania godparents would go to wish

their godchildren happy Christmas on December 26 (the second day of Christmas), while older children would pay a visit to their godparents themselves (Kudirka 1993: 202). During the Soviet years, when religious traditions came under fire in Lithuania, godparents would visit their godchildren and bid them well on the occasions of New Year and birthdays. In the early 21st century, a tradition had formed where the godchildren would contact their godparents for Mother's Day, Father's Day, International Women's Day, Christmas, Easter, name days and birthdays, giving them a bought object or a drawing or something they had made themselves (Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2015: 476–477).

This research revealed some differences in gift-giving traditions. Godparents would give gifts directly, not via mediators, as parents did to their own children. Godchildren would value gifts they had received from their godparents very highly, as these were held to be sacred gifts. Both in eastern Lithuania and western Belarus, gifts would be given to one's own children and godchildren in spring, most often during Easter. Winter gifts were a phenomenon that developed at a later period.

Gifts for herders

In the late 19th and first half of the 20th centuries, herders would also receive gifts on various occasions in eastern Lithuania and western Belarus, either individually or as a group with other herders when visiting neighbours. On what occasions were gifts usually given, and by whom?

One such occasion was Easter, when herders, along with the other children in a village, would receive *margučiai* (decorated Easter eggs). However, based on ethnographic sources, it can be said that among herders Easter was not as important as *Jurginės* (St. George's day), when herders were generously rewarded by farmers for taking livestock outside into the meadows for the first time after the winter. A record was made of *Jurginės* customs where one egg would be given to a herder, another would be taken to church or a herder would be given two eggs so that the sheep would give birth to a pair of lambs (Dundulienė 1979: 85). In Tverečius County (northeast Lithuania), they would be given a bread bun with an egg cooked inside (Kudirka 1997a: 19). Even though it was associated with receiving gifts, for a herder, taking livestock out into the meadow again was often not a pleasant experience. The farmers' wives would pour water over their herders, believing this act would make the cows produce more milk. However, afterwards the herders would be treated to home-made cheese, butter and eggs (Balys 2013: 175–176). As the egg-gifting custom was gradually phased out (in around 1945), the tradition remained of gifting eggs only to first-time herders (Mikštaitė-Čičiurkienė 2007: 43). This custom is mentioned less commonly in western Belarus. For example, in Lida District, eggs would only be gifted over *Jurginės* to beggars, while children were told it was forbid-

den to touch *Jurginės* eggs. The belief was that if girls ate such eggs, they would not marry (Merkienė 2002: 341–342). Kudirka meanwhile mentions a custom alive in the village of Plikiai (western Belarus) in which one would go out to the sown rye field and eat one or two eggs, then bury the egg shells and roll around in the soil; this would be done by both children (herders) and adults (Kudirka 1998: 30–31). In the village of Kupchely (western Belarus), herders would be given eggs and the livestock would be driven out into the meadows with a *verba* (decorated branch) "so that the herd would be fat and sturdy" (Kudirka 1997b: 44). This shows that in the period under discussion, in both western Belarus and eastern Lithuania, giving gifts to herder(s) was associated with successful animal husbandry. The herder could also be perceived as a beggar, whose prayers could guarantee success.

Nonetheless, the most important herders' celebration, according to numerous ethnographic sources, was Pentecost (*Sekminės* in Lithuanian). A herder could be given a gift individually or gifts could be given to a whole group of herders from one village. In both cases, this was related to Pentecost being considered the professional celebration of herders, during which common feasting or sharing of food and drinks was traditionally arranged. According to the folklorist Jonas Balys, on the eve of Pentecost herders would drive the cows home decorated in all sorts of foliage: wreaths woven from birch branches or other grasses were placed on their horns and neck, or tall birch branches were tied to or wound around the horns. The next day herders had the day off and would organise *melstuvės*, i.e., food and drinks, while the maids would herd in their place. Herders would try to gather gifts of food from their employers' wives (whose cows they herded), and thus celebrate their feast; the most important dish was scrambled eggs (Balys 1948: 132). In economically wealthier regions, such as Kaišiadorys District (central Lithuania), herders would sometimes be given clothing. They were bought shirts, trousers and other clothes (Daunoraitė 2011: 35). Even though the herders' feast was held during Pentecost, according to different ethnologists' studies the feast could have had later origins than that of adult hired hands. According to ethnologist Vitalis Morkūnas, by the 1940s when this festival was gradually being phased out celebrations for herders began to be organised. During these celebrations herders would place wreaths on the livestock and collect food products, i.e. gifts, and hold a big feast (Morkūnas 1977: 177). As similar celebrations for adult hired hands became less popular, farm owners focused their attention on their herders instead, giving them better food, gifts, and if the herder's parents lived nearby, they would be allowed to go home (Morkūnas 1977: 180).

Pentecost was celebrated in a similar way in Western Belarus. In this region, the farmer's wives would also show their thanks for dressing up the cows with wreaths by giving gifts. Gifts for such decorative efforts consisted of bread, cheese, eggs, cured pork fat, sausage, sometimes even money (Merkienė 2002: 343). Kudirka

mentions that the herders used this gathered food-gifts for their feast. They probably did not receive many eggs, as it is written that wild duck eggs would also be added to the large, common scrambled eggs (Kudirka 1998: 31). In Gervyaty (Western Belarus), money would sometimes be given during other celebrations as well, such as Jurginės and the Feast of the Holy Trinity (Merkienė 1989: 99).

Thus, gifts would be given to herders, and godchildren, directly, yet this was perceived more as payment for labour, not as the godparents' duty to give gifts to their godchildren during certain calendar celebrations. By giving gifts to a herder the villagers expected success in rearing their livestock. Another belief was that by equalling a herder to a beggar, the former's prayers could bring about that success.

Gifts to neighbours' children

Werner Rösener, who researched European peasant culture, noted that the peasant way of life in villages formed a special kind of community awareness, which could be described as "good neighbourly relations" (Rösener 2000: 179). This was also reflected in celebration customs. As ethnologist Arūnas Vaicekauskas noticed, "in sources reflecting the state of calendar customs in the 1920s–1930s, children are mentioned increasingly often as the performers of these customs. In the post-war decades, the vitality of some community customs was kept alive by children exclusively" (Vaicekauskas 2005: 52).

In Lithuania's territory in the period under discussion, neighbours would also often gift eggs to children during Easter. Village children were often the recipients of eggs when, following the example of adolescents and adults, they would visit other farmsteads over Easter. Between 1920 and 1940 in eastern Lithuania, 75.7 % of herders would be hired after *Jurginės*, with their term of hire ending at Christmas (46 %) or on All Saints' Day (November 1–50 %) (Morkūnas 1977: 46). Therefore, in this period herders were still 'free' and could join in with any village children's processions that were going round visiting neighbours.

According to Merkienė, in western Belarus, in Lida District, after breakfast on Easter Monday children aged eight or nine (older children were usually too embarrassed) would form groups of six to eight and go around their village to collect eggs as gifts. Sometimes their parents would scold them for going out too early, saying it was impolite, so they would go to farmsteads further away on the second day of Easter. Children would say "glory be to Jesus Christ", or say a prayer if the farmer's wife asked them to, sing a song or answer questions, and then stand quietly, somewhat meekly, waiting to be given gifts; when they received something, they'd be too overjoyed to remember to say thank you. In earlier times, children would be given one or two decorated Easter eggs, sometimes some sweets or cake, later they started to receive more, while today in Dubiniai children can get

up to 10 eggs each. In the village of Stanišiai, it was said that a *kapa* of eggs (60) needed to be boiled in advance for the children. It was thought that if no children visited your farmstead over Easter, that year would be an unlucky one in that house (Merkienė 2002: 339–340). In Gervyaty County meanwhile (western Belarus), whoever had little land or few animals would not hire herders, and on those days when herding was needed, the farmer would ask a neighbour's child to help, promising to give them eggs or something else over Easter in return for their labour (Merkienė 1989: 99). Therefore it can be said that in most cases, decorated Easter eggs were perceived as payment for or a means of securing farming success, and not simply a gift with no strings attached.

In eastern Lithuania, there would be an analogous procession of children during Easter, and according to Marcinkevičienė, the village of Levūnai (Varėna District, southeast Lithuania) would be visited by children from two other villages. Sometimes, children from several villages would gather and go around together, as one big group. For example, children from Levūnai would wait for the children from Sarkajiedai to arrive, and then all go 'egging'. This was an opportunity to receive gifted eggs from another, unrelated, village. Sometimes children would receive money, even as little as 10 cents was considered a great gift (Marcinkevičienė 2008: 128–130). However, in certain villages, the time available for 'egging' was limited to only the first day of Easter (Sunday) until sunset (Ulčinskas 1995: 94). Mid-Lent was another time when this custom was performed in the village of Pavarėnis (Varėna District). Children would go around the whole village, visiting one another to feast on the special festive dish made from oats called *šustamilcis* (Marcinkevičienė 1998: 94).

Based on photographs taken in the early 20th century by ethnologist M. Znamierowska-Prüfferowa, in the 1930s children in Vilnius would form separate processions from the adults, such as processions for the Epiphany at which they would dress up receive gifts from the farmers (Lapėnaitė 2020: 278–283). However, no processions of this type were found to occur in either eastern Lithuania or western Belarus. We can say that due to the conditions in villages (snow-covered roads, colder weather in general), similar processions of young children in villages would have been too difficult.

In summarising calendar festivals from the perspective of gifts given to children, it becomes clear that giving gifts to one's own children, godchildren and the neighbours' children mainly happened around Easter time. For young herders meanwhile, the feasts of St. George (*Jurginės*) and Pentecost were their special days.

Conclusions

After conducting this analysis of the gifts given to children and gift-giving traditions in eastern Lithuania and western Belarus in the late 19th and first half of the 20th

centuries, we may conclude that gifts were given only within limited periods, usually from Easter to Pentecost. In most cases, the gift was an egg or another edible product. Later, such celebrations increased with gift-giving becoming popular for Easter, St. Nicholas' Day, New Year, name days and birthdays. When analysing occasions for giving gifts, little difference was found in the types of gift given to one's own children, godchildren, herders, the neighbours' children or even those from other villages. However, the way these gifts was given did differ. When giving a gift to one's own child a mediator would usually be called for, while gifts to godchildren, herders and village children were generally given directly.

The analysis of gift-giving to children during the course of the calendar year showed that in most cases gifts served the function of balancing or ensuring an equal exchange, which according to Marshall Sahlins is typical in a community. Within the family, gifts embody specifically undefined forms of exchange, i.e. giving without expecting anything in return. The gift is veiled in a cloak of secrecy, using a mediator such as a bird, wild animal or mythological being as the gift giver. I believe this mutual exchange expressed both actual and symbolic obligation to the community. In all cases, a gift to a child carried a special, sacred, value. However, of all the gifts, children cherished most those received from their godparents. On the other hand, the same child held a number of social statuses: that of child, godchild, herder, neighbour's child, and so according to the situation they would receive gifts from their parents, neighbours or masters.

The gifts themselves were most commonly food products. Even a small gift provided an opportunity to experience the festive mood and at the same time feel the rhythm of the ritual year. As my research showed, in many cases the most important holiday of the year for rural children in eastern Lithuania and western Belarus at the end of the 19th century and first half of the 20th century was Easter.

Notes

[1] In this article, gift-giving during other celebrations in the lifecycle is excluded, except for birthdays and name days.

[2] At the time it was common for children to run outside for a short time barefoot, even in winter.

[3] The custom of gift-giving is not exclusive to Slavs alone. On the occasion of St. Nicholas' Day, gifts are given in some West European countries as well, such as the Netherlands for example (cf. Helsloot 2011: 143–158).

[4] Perhaps St. George was associated with the first herding of livestock outside after winter, although the godchild would receive the gift, not the herder.

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Rasa Paukštytė-Šaknienė, PhD, is senior researcher at the Department of Ethnology and Anthropology, Lithuanian Institute of History, Vilnius, Lithuania. She is a member of the Lithuanian Committee of Ethnic Culture. She is a member of editorial board for the Journal *The Yearbook of Balkan and Baltic Studies*, *Etnografija* (published by the National Museum of Lithuania), the periodical publication *Cultural Heritage of Northern Lithuania* and *The Yearbook of Vilnius History*. She has conducted fieldwork in Lithuania, Byelorussia, Poland, Latvia and Bulgaria. She is a member of SIEF (the Ritual Year working group). Her research interests are in the fields of traditional and modern culture, family, neighbourhood, ethnic minorities, ethnology of the city, the history of ethnology, and festivity.

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Transborder Routes and Rituals: Between Global, Local and Niche

Mare Kõiva
The Estonian Literary Museum, Department of Folkloristics, Tartu, Estonia
mare@folklore.ee

Andres Kuperjanov
The Estonian Literary Museum, Department of Folkloristics, Tartu, Estonia
cps@obs.ee

Abstract: Setomaa is a region where borders, identity, and place intersect in complex and dynamic ways. Historical shifts in political borders have deeply influenced cultural practices, social memory, and everyday life. At the same time, the Seto community has demonstrated remarkable resilience, maintaining and reinterpreting its identity through language, religion, and cultural expression.

In the contemporary context, tourism – especially in its slow form – offers both opportunities and challenges for different niche experiences. It provides a means of sustaining local economies and promoting cultural visibility, while also requiring careful balance to avoid commodification. When approached thoughtfully, slow tourism can support the preservation of Seto identity by fostering meaningful encounters between visitors and local culture.

The article describes legends, rituals (Malyi/Myla, Värska, Saatse) and newly invented events that exemplify how peripheral regions can become central in understanding the relationship between place, memory, and identity.

Keywords: boarder area, cultural turism, identity, legend, Pious Onuphrius, ritual, St Paraskeva Piatnitsa, St George

Local history, Cultural Values in Border Area

The Setos are a distinct ethnic and cultural group inhabiting south-eastern Estonia along the present-day border with Russia. Their population has been subject to notable fluctuation depending on criteria of identification: while approximately 12,000 Setos were recorded in 2011 (Kommel 2013), the 2021 census showed that 25,800 people identified as Seto (Population Census 2022). This increase reflects not only a demographic change but also a growing willingness to self-identify with local heritage and cultural distinctiveness, and to find out more about one's ancestral roots.

From a cultural theory perspective, Seto identity can be understood through the lens of collective memory and place. As Maurice Halbwachs (1980: 43) and Pierre Nora (1996: 5–23; cf. Lowenthal 1998: 121) have emphasised, collective identity is reconstructed through shared symbols, narratives, and memory practices, while individual identity also operates within this framework. At the same time, place understood in the sense developed by Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) and Christopher Tilley (2006: 21–22) – is not static but relational, combining spatial and temporal dimensions. Setos in Setomaa exemplifies this dynamic: it is a region deeply rooted in historical experiences yet continuously redefined through changing political contexts and cultural reinterpretation.

Historically, the question of belonging and administrative affiliation emerged in the early 20th century. Efforts to integrate Setomaa administratively into Estonia culminated in the Tartu Peace Treaty of 1920, which defined the borders of the newly independent Estonian state. However, subsequent geopolitical developments reconfigured these borders, leaving parts of historical Setomaa outside Estonia (Lõuna 2003, 2024). This has had lasting consequences for identity formation, as the perception of 'one's own' and 'foreign' territory remains deeply embedded in cultural consciousness.

Language has been one of the central markers of Seto identity. Although the number of local language (dialect) speakers has increased overall in Estonia (17% of the population in 2021), the proportion of Seto dialect speakers remains relatively small (1.8% in 2011, 3% in 2021 (Kommel 2013: 69; Population census 2022). At the same time, the symbolic value of the language has increased. Local dialect movements, education initiatives, and media representation have contributed to a renewed appreciation of linguistic diversity (Pajusalu 2024). Nevertheless, migration trends – especially since the mid-20th century – have shifted everyday language use toward standard Estonian, particularly in urban contexts.

Cultural resilience among the Seto has been supported by community practices such as choral singing, gatherings, and the establishment of new cultural institutions (for example a centre built by pop singers such as Lenna Kuurma from Vanilla Ninja, or Jalmar Vabarna from Trad. Attack!). The traditional polyphonic singing

style known as *leelo* has become a key emblem of identity and is recognised internationally. In recent decades, local cultural production – including poetry, literature, and festivals – has further strengthened the visibility of Seto culture (Jääts 1998; Velsker 2021; Kõiva 2025).

Religious affiliation provides another important dimension. Orthodoxy has historically played a central role in Setomaa, reflected in both material culture (church buildings, icons) and ritual practices. The 2021 census confirmed that about 20% of Estonia's population is affiliated with a religious denomination, with Orthodoxy representing a significant proportion. For the Seto, however, religion is not only a matter of belief but also an integral component of cultural landscape and identity. Restricted access to churches and sacred sites across the border has therefore had profound cultural implications.

A distinctive feature is formed by Seto *tsässon*, village chapels, which have been restored over the past decades, with new ones also built. Since this is a unique phenomenon in Estonia, it has given Setomaa a characteristic and attractive appearance for nearly a century. The local Orthodox church – where general Orthodox saints and rules intertwine – has over time been one of the region's markers and sights of interest (Loorits 1934; 1949; Kuusing 2009; Benfoughal *et al.* 2021), as have local feasts (Hagu 2022; Valk et al. 2021; Valk 2011, 2019; Loorits 1959). The census confirmed that 20% of residents aged 15 and over in Estonia are affiliated with a religious denomination (Population Census 2020). Based on all of the above, we see a distinct environment in which global and local opportunities for tourism development are interwoven. Setomaa is suitable for nature, cultural, and religious tourism. There are also favourable conditions for the development of so-called slow tourism.

In recent decades, tourism has become a significant economic and cultural factor in Setomaa. Estonia as a whole receives several million visits annually (including both international and domestic tourism), with rural and nature-based tourism gaining increasing prominence. Setomaa forms part of this broader trend, attracting visitors interested in heritage, music festivals, handicrafts, and local cuisine.

However, the tourism model in Setomaa aligns particularly well with the principles of slow tourism (Robinson et al. 2011). Slow tourism emphasises: deeper engagement with local culture, longer stays and reduced mobility, authenticity and sustainability, respect for local traditions and environments.

Setomaa offers a unique setting for this approach. Instead of mass tourism, the region provides small-scale accommodation (guesthouses, farm tourism), local cultural festivals such as Seto Kingdom Day[1] and Leelo Day[2] , and tradition-based experiences including crafts, singing, and Orthodox calendar rituals.

At the same time, tourism dependency creates vulnerability. As noted by local leaders, visitor numbers can fluctuate significantly (for example, reduced attendance

at festival events), reflecting both external conditions and broader changes in travel behaviour. This makes it necessary to rethink tourism strategies in a sustainable and resilient way.

Jalmar Vabarna, elected chief in 2025, comments: "But in Setomaa, we still rely very heavily on tourism. In the old days, a thousand people used to come on Leelo Day, but this year there were 300. So you do start to worry, what's going on. But the weather was poor too…" (Väärtnõu 2025).

Tourism statistics indicate that visitors to Setomaa are predominantly domestic tourists, but that their numbers have declined, especially in Võru County and Setomaa (Population Census 2024). Because several important religious centres are located in Setomaa (on both sides of the border), and the saintly narratives and related celebrations connected to them are still known today, we present an overview of three centres along with selected practices and legends associated with them: Saint Paraskeva Piatnitsa, Saint George, Pious Onuphrius. We also present some distinctive local events that take place in the surrounding area. Stories of saints and traditions connect these sites to global Orthodox practices, yet they also display unique features. How these are manifested in Setomaa is examined.



Fig. 1. Map of Setomaa. Yellow: contemporary Setomaa in the territory of the Estonian Republic 1945 onward; yellow and pink: territory of the Estonian Republic 1920–1945. Map: Andres Kuperjanov 2023.

Mõla (Malyi) and Pious Onuphrius

The Mõla (Malyi) Valley, about 20 kilometres from the Estonian border, and the cemetery on its slope, are a symbol of the history of Petserimaa. Mõla Church has two altars, the older of which was used to conduct services in Estonian for the Seto congregation between 1920 and 1951 (Raudoja 2020–2022). Pious Onuphrius (? – June 12 1492) from Mõla is an Orthodox martyr about whose life is little known. The church and monastery are located on the bank of Lake Mõla near Izborsk and were founded by Onuphrius in the 15th century.[3] We know that this was an important sacred place, destroyed by Bathory's forces in the 16th century and subsequently rebuilt despite being located in an area covered by forest and of little economic value. What is special about this church is that it has been operating almost continuously with only some short interruptions. The Seto and Estonian populations became sparse after the Second World War, but it was customary to visit the church and graves on Mõla Day (the Sunday after *Piitrepäiv*, St. Peter's Day, 12th July). In this way Mõla Day maintains strong family bonds and bonds between people and locations.

Between 1920 and 1944 several churches received support for reconstruction or the establishment of Estonian congregations, as the Estonian and Russian congregations were separated by a border law passed in 1934 (Piho 2012) and people had to start attending the church in their own language. Mõla Church also received money for reconstruction, and news about the church building process was reported in local newspapers as well as in general Estonian newspapers (Päevaleht 1936). *Päevaleht* describes the construction and the laws behind it:

> The inauguration of the Church of the Nativity of Christ took place in Mõla Village near Izborsk on Friday. The Church was built in the 16th century and in recent years was dilapidated and abandoned. A new Estonian congregation was founded in Mõla during the congregation reform carried out in Petserimaa. The new congregation needed a place of worship, for which the old historical church was repaired and arranged for religious services. *Postimees*, June 1, 1936.

In 1938, a religious service in the church was reported, from where a procession led by a cross went to the proposed location of the new vicarage (*Postimees,* 03 May, 1938). The following are reports on the progress of the construction of a vicarage that would have room for both the priest and the sacristan on a beautiful hillside opposite the churches of Mõla (*Postimees,* 14 June, 1938); the opening took place in August 1938.[4] According to the article, the separation

of the congregations had both good and bad aspects, with one problem being that people could no longer invite their parson to funerals.

The sacred topography and Mõla Church rituals are typical to orthodox feasts: There is a procession, and later some food at the graveside, and after that *kirmas* (*Kirchmesse*), a type of village party with songs, music and dance. In 1990 contemporary explanations demonstrated the integration of secular and sacred views. Orthodox people divided the sacral landscape as with the church environment, while others divided it into the secular (the natural environment, lakes, springs, hillsides, the cemetery) and the religious (man-made sacred buildings) (interviews, Mõla 1990).

The Mõla Church was built on a holy spring, and from the back wall of the basement under the altar, its water flows through a pipe to Lake Mõla. The spring is believed to have miraculous powers. There is a cemetery near the Church, which is located on the hillside. The Optjoki River flows through the lake, which receives water from lake Linnjärvi below Izborsk fortress and flows into Lake Pskov.

Living folk customs and manifestations of vernacular religion in Mõla are recorded several times over more than a century. Mare Kõiva remembers the Mõla feast in 1990 as an exceptionally crowded and emotional holiday. The central events were the procession around the Church led by icons, and the religious service in the Church. Anyone interested could pass under the icon to ensure health or donate to the icon. During and after the service, families sat at the graves of relatives, where food and bottles of vodka were placed. Everyone sat close together on the narrow burial plots because the cemetery was located on a hillside. The feast starts after the service and visiting the graves of relatives. Seto singers from Värska and Tartu were in national costume and performed old style folk songs (cf Valk 2019a)

About 15 years later, ethnographer Anu Ansu's diary from 2013 confirms the same:

> There are already many cars, very many with Estonian number plates. We pack food and then we hike to the church… There are a lot of people in the church, … In the interim, we sit at the grave, then we move around. Since there are a lot of people, we can only observe the procession led by a cross from a distance. At almost all graves, there is eating in memory of relatives. ERM, field diaries 2013.

Mõla cemetery has also an old stone cross, a symbol of its long history.



Fig. 2. Food on a grave in Obinitsa in 2009. Photo: Merlin Lõiv.

There are some recordings of legends that speak mainly about the lives of St Onuphrius and Peter:

> Anuhvri (Onuphrius) and Peter fasted in Mõla, one on one side of the stream, the other on the opposite side. One was upstream, the other downstream, neither knew the other. To the one who was on the side of the mountain, a turnip came in the river every day. When the turnip arrived, it whirled in the water until it was caught. This fasting person ate the turnip and threw the peel into the water, which went to the other fasting person. He who ate the peel became even more blessed. No one knew anything about these two until one day they were both found dead, with an inscription on their chest saying that a monastery must be made in that place. One man had a beard to his toes, the other had hair to his heels. ERA II 209, 24 (13) < Setomaa, Risova, 1939.



Fig. 3. Food on a grave, Mõla 2013. Photo: Anu Ansu.

The second legend discusses general questions of sin, trust and obligation, although there are also some opinions about the merits, and even humorous aspects, of these. The teaching is conveyed through symbols: indiscriminate blessing grants deliverance to a drunkard while leaving the righteous person empty-handed, and without divine care. The righteous person also put the angel in an awkward situation.

> One fasted for thirty years in the forest of Mõla valley. A brook runs there through the valley. He fasted and fasted on one side of the brook, then began to want to go to the other side. He went along the edge of the brook and found a place where a walkway had been laid across the stream. He said, "If the one who built this bridge is dead, let his soul go to a good place. If alive, God help him!"
>
> An Angel brought him food all the time, but when he went across the brook, the Angel brought no more food. The fasting man wept greatly not knowing where he had sinned or if God had forgotten him. Then he fell asleep on a stone. Thus, three days passed. On the fourth day, his Angel came with food, his clothes torn and ragged, his

> hair burned. "Where were you these three days, why didn't you stay in one place? The one who built the bridge was dead through vodka and is on his back in the fire at the bottom of Hell. I was driven there for him." The storyteller continues, giving an evaluation. "See how lucky the drunkard was – the Saint remembered him, but the angel punished the saint immediately. 'Look now', said the Angel to the saint, 'now fast for another thirty years because of the drunkard!'" ERA II 209, 11/2 (2) Setomaa, 1939

This 1939 legend shares several common motifs with other religious and hagiographic legends. In the Setomaa version, the ascetic fasts for thirty years, and the 'merit' gained through his fast is used for the benefit of a sinful (drunkard's) soul. The narrative has four key points: (1) solitary asceticism and spatial isolation; (2) regular support from an angel as a supernatural helper; (3) a liminal crossing (over the stream) as a sign of a shift in the sacred regime, and the blessing uttered at that moment for the bridge-builder; (4) a three-day interruption in the arrival of the supernatural helper, which opens the narrative's climax: the salvation of the soul from hell and the transfer of merits from the drunkard to the bridge-builder.

The closest motif match in Stith Thompson's index (Thompson 1955–1958) is Q (Punishment and reward: The transfer of a good deed to another soul). In a minority of East Slavic religious legends, an angel or saint frequently brings food to a hermit (sometimes the angel is replaced by a bird; parallels can be found primarily in the lives of Elijah or the hermits), while in the majority the transfer takes place through prayer, or in later texts even through the liturgy rather than a brief prayer of thanksgiving, as in the Seto tale. The pattern of the sufferer in hell and the intercessor is similar in folk narratives: the sufferings of the sinful soul are visually marked by being 'in the fire': hell is eternity in the fire, boiling in a cauldron, etc., which is interrupted by the intervention of the saint or an intercessor. What distinguishes this story is the precise number: for three days the angel works to save the drunkard (hagiographic 'three' cycles of fasting, silence and trial, or three as a symbolic counterpart to the Resurrection and other significant events) and 'thirty years were spent on that drunkard'. Such a direct and quantitatively formulated rendering is absent elsewhere, but it makes the structure and function of the Seto text transparent. The moral message of the story is twofold: holiness serves others, yet salvation also requires ongoing, personal, effort.

Saatse (Saatserinna) and Paraskeva Piatnitsa

The patron saint of Saatse Great Martyr Paraskeva Church, Paraskeva of Iconium (Greek Παρασκευή; Russian Параскева Пятница, Парасковия, Параскева

Нареченная Пятница (Duhavin 2025), also known as Paraskeva-Piatnitsa or Holy Friday), lived in Asia Minor (Türkiye), in the city of Iconium. The young girl, who lived in the 3rd century and was orphaned early, was devoted to helping others, and the torments she endured before her beheading were horrific: her body was torn apart and she was burned with fire. Her relics were known for their healing power. St. Paraskeva is regarded as the protector of fields and livestock, the healer of spiritual and physical ailments, and the guardian of family happiness and well-being. In iconography she is often depicted as a tall ascetic figure with a radiant crown on her head.

In commemoration of the Great Martyr Paraskeva, her namesake church in Saatse observes two feast days. Paraskeva Day (*päätnits*), celebrated on the last Friday of July – the eve of St. Elijah's Day (Iljapäev, Old Style 20 July), so-called Elijah Friday or Päätnits – is a living tradition to this day. Relatives and friends who live elsewhere customarily return home for the occasion. The feast is open to visitors to Setomaa as well as to guests from farther afield. The second feast day is the memorial day, known as rämmanipäiv, observed on 10 November (Old Style 28 October).

The Day of Rämman is connected with the Russian word *remen*, *remenie*, which allows us to consider the possibility that this tradition was introduced by Russian believers who called themselves, in Russian, *khlyst* ('self-flagellators'). In the folk tradition of the region of Pskov, St. Paraskeva is also called *Remyanki*. There is a widely spread tradition that she is honoured on that day together with the martyr Neonilla. The name of the martyr Neonilla refers to flax in folk tradition; the memorial day of both saints falls in the period of the flax harvest, which includes beating and cleaning the flax with a swingle. The icons of St. Paraskeva depicts scenes of flagellations. It is possible that these scenes have influenced the traditional folk name of St. Paraskeva.

Saatse is today a church village on the Estonian–Russian border, with a mixed Estonian and Russian congregation. The earliest wooden church in Saatserinna was built in 1673. In the same year, a wooden church was erected in Saatse, and about 10 metres north, near a sacred tree, a small eukterion/chapel (*tsässon*) stood (Plaat 2011; Plaat & Maasik 2011; Raudoja, Mäkeläinen & Külvik 2011). From the first church, a bell cast in 1679 has survived. The site of the old wooden church is now marked by a stone column in the Saatse cemetery. A new stone church was built in 1801, and the present church dates from the same year.

A distinctive feature of the Saatse church is its association with two recently canonised saints: the parish elder Stefanus and Father Vassili, who were executed by the Bolshevik authorities in 1919 and canonised in 2004. Father Vassili is regarded as a saint who protects Estonian children and youth (Kuusing 2009).

In the Orthodox tradition, healing springs associated with saints are widely known; chapels (*tsässonad*) or churches are often built at these sites (as we have already seen at Mõla church), as well as other sacred natural objects such as stones and trees. The icon of Paraskeva appeared both near water and atop a tree (a spruce, pine, or birch have been mentioned), which was understood as a sign that a *tsässon* or church should be erected there. Wooden figures of Paraskeva-Piatnitsa spread across north-western Russia in the mid and late 16th century and were often located near sacred stones, springs, and trees, acquiring in the view of some researchers the status of a local *genius loci* (Panchenko 1998: 170–171).

According to Aleksandr Panchenko, stones bearing traces associated with the saint are numerous in northern and north-western Russia (Panchenko 1998: 169–171), including, for example, at the sacred site of Il'loša (Holy Elijah) in the Vod region (see Västrik 2007: 141).



Fig. 4. St Vassili. Photo: Andres Kuperjanov 2018.

The veneration of Paraskeva was already well known in the areas around medieval Novgorod and Pskov, where she was one of the earliest saints whose cult reached the region together with the adoption of Christianity (Kuusing 2005, 2009; Panchenko 1998). Her cult later spread to the centres of Moscow and the Volga region, to mention only part of the vast area in which she was revered.

In north-western Russia, her feast has remained relatively rare. For instance, among the Old Believers of Karelia she is known as the Holy Martyr Paraskeva (Paraskovija Piatnitsa), whose day (Old Style 28 October) was celebrated in only a few villages (Zabelino, Korgorka), which is why she has remained among the so-called "minor saints" (Fišman 2003: 157). At the same time, in contemporary Votic-Russian (formerly Ingrian Finnish-Russian) mixed-settlement areas there is a rich body of traditions and legends related to Paraskeva and her veneration.

Estonian-Seto legends and accounts provide an opportunity to examine the information about the saint that circulated in the late 19th century, and later during the 20th century. We see here a form of folklore that is interestingly syncretic and contains multiple universal motifs, for example, the famous motif of the nightly destruction of daytime work, which in the narrative is linked to an icon placed in a tree.

Truusman reports how the processions led by a cross around the Church start on Thursday and last until late on Friday. "Everyone attempts to touch the cross for a moment, especially those suffering with some malady. The elderly, the sick, mothers with babies, boys and girls crowd around it. Money, small crosses, items of clothing, ribbons are placed on the cross. On the north side of the Church, there is a person designated by the priest who collects these donations." (Truusman 2002 [1890]). Texts, one from 1938, reports the wider notoriety of the Day, talking about the rituals: "On this last day a fair number of people will gather in Saatse. Not only from the southern corners of Estonia, but also from Latvia. To honor, there is a stone cross, which is worn on the shoulders around the church on this day, dipped in water and this water collected in bottles." (ERA II 208, 34 (5) < Setomaa, 1938).

Most of the surviving legends about Paraskeva Piatnitsa concern the discovery of the site where the church should be built. When the icon is found in a tree, the story usually ends with a note about a healing stone cross located near the local church. Narratives about the building of the church have been recorded both from local Setos and Russians: the cross is found either in a body of water, in a tree or even inside a tree, and the discovery is understood as a sign that a church must be erected on that spot (Soolind 2013: 16; Kuperjanov 2019: 85). The same motifs are known in the traditions of Catholic saints as well as in Estonian folklore (Kõiva 1996; Valk 2011).

Another legend speaks of a stone cross that travels from its location to Saatse in order to indicate the precise place where the church is to be built. However, the

stone cross must travel three times for the discoverer to understand its message. This version was recorded from her parents in 1939 by the well-known folklorist and researcher of Seto folklore, Veera Pino:

> In this way it disappeared three or four times and was always found in the village of Saatserinna. Then the person who found the cross thought that the village of Saatserinna was the most suitable place for building the chapel. And so a church was built in the village of Saatserinna, not a tsässon but a church. ERA II 248, 53/4 (7) Usenitsa, 1939.

The great Estonian folklore collector Jakob Hurt refers to the Saatse Paraskeva Day (päätnitsapäev) in his description "Setokõstõ pühi' ja tähtpäävä"" ("Seto Feasts and Holy Days"). Here he highlights the sacred object – the wooden image of Paraskeva (Paraskeva puuslik) – as well as the stone cross, which is carried around the church, bringing healing to those who bear it, or to those who pass under or touch it (Piho 1990: 70–71; see also Loorits 1959: 27; Saarlo 1996: 119–120).

Leonid Zurov, drawing on his 1926 fieldwork and comparing his findings to earlier data from 1673, notes that "votive wax animal figures, candles and threads twisted into a figure-of-eight knot, threads with wax seals, wool, butter, cheese, and milk are brought to the sacred pine of Saatse as vows" (Benfoughal et al. 2021: 70–71). Ethnographer Mare Piho (2021: 534) also associates these wax figures – partly following earlier researchers – with survivals of Catholic practice. At the same time, it is known that wax votives were widespread in 17th century Livonia (Kõpp 1959: 223) and in Estonia more broadly (The Chronicle of Russow). This reflects a broader domain, a phenomenon crossing ethnic and confessional boundaries, with parallels found in Orthodox contexts as well, for example in Bulgaria, whose archives preserve numerous wax and metal figures of animals, humans, and specific body parts, but also Greek and Roman (cf. Hughes 2017).

A similar thanksgiving offering for healing, made to a saint, appears in a legend recorded by Ello Kirss:

> In Pskov there was a man with a diseased leg. "If my leg were to heal, I would give Saint Paraskeva a silver leg." The leg healed. – Later I myself saw that this silver leg had been fastened to Paraskeva's belt with chains. ERA II 286, 242 (221) < Setomaa, 1939.

Some legends focus on the icon, the stone cross, or the chapel/church, while others recount episodes from the life of Paraskeva. The Estonian scholar of religion Oskar Loorits (1934) noted that Seto religious narratives contain linkages to cultural texts beyond folklore, resulting in contemporary syncretic stories. One such connection is illustrated in the following life story, where a biblical motif (a father

and daughter set adrift at sea in a boat without oars) is skilfully combined by the narrator with Daniel Defoe popular literary figure Robinson Crusoe. Living alone on an island, Crusoe rescues the girl cast ashore by the sea and even finds some tools. The girl becomes Robinson's helper, and he gives her the name Friday after the day Paraskeva was discovered:

> Piatnitsa (Päätnitsa) appeared like this: there were religious people, a daughter and a father. The daughter's name was Paraskeva. They were both tied up, put into a boat and pushed out to sea. The boat was wrecked at sea. Paraskeva dragged herself onto one piece of the boat and reached the other shore across the sea. Robinson lived there. He rescued Paraskeva from the sea and also got some tools found in the boat. But he didn't know what the girl's name was. He called her Friday because it was Friday. That's how it was. ERA II 286, 241 (219) Setomaa, 1938.

In the next legend, particular emphasis is placed on extraordinary piety: Paraskeva is chosen as the Bride of Christ, meaning an especially devout person. Even as an infant she refuses breastmilk on Wednesdays and Fridays – the holy days and suffers for her faith. The legend also includes the motif of discovering an icon in the branches of a tree:

> [P]araskeva is the bride of Christ. Christ thought about life and sought a bride for himself, even though he knew that he had to go another way. Paraskeva was so devout that she was said to refuse to take her mother's breast on Wednesday and Friday. These were fasting days in the old times. The priest wanted to kill Paraskeva. Why does she stick to Christianity? In Saatse, there was an icon of Paraskeva found at the tip of a birch. It was taken from there but came back at night, so a church was built in that place. After *remnepäätnitsa*, winter holidays already come, then New Year, then water baptism and again candle day. ERA II 209, 247/8 (18) Setomaa, Lõkova, 1939.

The third example explains the miraculous healing performed by Paraskeva in Saatse and the healing power of the stone.[5]

> Mother and daughter were alone. The daughter was very sick. Mother prayed vigorously to God. The daughter was immediately so sick that she smelled all over. Couldn't move in the bed. Her name was Paraskeva. The mother bowed and prayed before the image of God, and that very day she saw her daughter healed. And for the daughter, in Saatse, such a great church was made, where all the people go to pray

to God in her footsteps. There is one large stone cross that is carried around the church. Many sick people have been cured in her footsteps. ERA II 194, 346/51 (5.12) Setomaa, Palo, 1938

Värska, St. George

Värska settlement originated from the auxiliary Pskov-Pechory monastery, which was located near Värska Bay. The monks who started here supplied the monastery with goods that arrived by ship, and with berries and mushrooms, which were found in abundance in the local forests. From 1759, a congregation was founded for local Seto and in place of the auxiliary monastery, the first wooden church was built and an Estonian priest appointed. For centuries, Värska celebrated the memorial day of the local saint, St. Jüri (Georgius the Great Sufferer) on May 6, according to the old calendar. From 1922, the bishop regularly visited the parish on this day. The new church was built using the people's own money between 1900 and 1907.

St. George's Day marked the beginning of spring and spring work in the Estonian folk calendar. The Day came to Estonia through both the Western and Eastern Churches and contains common features with the tradition of nearby areas. St. George Day functions as a performative cultural system in which ritual practices, symbolic acts, and collective memory converge to articulate a philosophy of renewal and balance. The cyclical transition from winter to spring is not merely an ecological and natural phenomenon but is conceptualised as a preparation for rebirth in which harmony between human beings and nature is restored.

In older tradition visiting people, borrowing food and items, field work and bringing trees or branches home were forbidden otherwise snakes might come home with them. It was forbidden to look at or use household objects that were elongated in shape and resembled the body of a snake (spindles, rolling pins, needles, distaffs, ropes): "If on St. George's Day you see a spindle at home, you will see many reptiles in the summer" (Vinokurova 2006: 172). In some places, sewing and weaving were prohibited to prevent pests from attacking the plants. Making noises near the home, breaking trees, as well as washing clothes were also forbidden in order to avoid lightning (Kõiva 2004, Jüripäev).

St. George's Day as a horse holiday probably spread to Estonia from the Slavs and was quite usual in Orthodox areas; it was still an important holiday as late as the 1930s. In Värska, there was also a consecration of water in the church, with which the animals were later sprinkled (this custom was also known among Russians in nearby areas (Panchenko 1996; Vinokurova 2015, Egorinpäiv)). In the Northern Vepsian tradition, the custom of bathing horses on St. George's Day (when the spring was warm) was preserved (Vinokurova 1988: 8; 1996: 94). For

the Seto people, blessing horses at church was central and was one of the customs that could not be ignored. This important custom has disappeared today because people no longer keep horses, they have been replaced by cars.

George is the protector of horses. He also had a horse. A white horse, and St. George sat on its back as if he were born on it. There is also St. George's church on the beach. St. George's day is still considered a holiday. The horses are brought to the church yard. The priest brings out the icon of St. George and moves around the horses with the icon.

> George is also the guardian of the herd. If someone had a St. George icon or a wooden statue at home, they went to the barn with it. Before St. George's day, do not go through the herd, do not stand on a stone. The first grass will become fodder for the animals starting from George's Day. ERA II 209, 242/3 (5) Setomaa, Jankino, 1939.

It was customary to put a candle in front of the icon for the success of the herd and ask for a blessing for the herd. Easter eggs were carried around the herd. Where possible, a priest was invited to consecrate the herd when it was released into the pasture. And the image of St. George was carried around the herd by the priest or by the farmer.

> When we began to let out the herd at home, the shepherd and the master worshiped before God. Then they took a bowl, put an egg in a bowl, one icon and a candle also, lit in advance. Dad stood on the threshold of the barn, let the animals go out for the first time under the icon. Then the priest went around the herd three times with the incense pan in his hand. Dad went out of the gate in front of everyone, with the herd behind. The shepherd threw an egg over his head. It was observed that if the egg remained intact, then there was no need to be afraid of wolves. On the morning of St. George's day, the same protective ritual was held again. Mum put two more eggs in a bowl. One was given to the shepherd, but the other was taken to George. We always went to Pohomolova. They have George's *tsässon* there, the priest comes to them from Pangavitsa. ERA II 286, 93 (74) Setomaa, Mokra, 1940.

St. George Day absorbed the customs and beliefs of nearby anniversaries (ploughing and cattle release to pastureland). St. George's Day was the most important day for warding off wolves. Most often the ritual took place by a bonfire, and these visually striking rites included symbolically 'locking' the wolf's mouth, or driving wolves away with burning torches. The custom was known more widely in eastern Estonia and also, for example, among the Vepsians and the Komi peoples (Vinokurova 2006: 118; Konakov 2015).

According to belief and legend, the patron saint of wolves tied up the wolf's mouth on St. George's Day and thus they could not attack domestic animals (Mencej 2001; Kõiva 2019). The ruler or master of wolves is not only believed to fasten the wolves' mouths but, according to legends, also to feed them during times of food scarcity. This is reflected in tales in which a farmer, wandering in the forest, accidentally witnesses food being given to wolves. The twist in the story is that there is not enough food left for a wolf who arrives late, and the patron advises the wolf to eat the farmer hiding behind the bushes instead. A related motif appears in a longer Seto fairy tale, in which the son of a poor man undergoes many adventures and eventually becomes the fiancé of the Sun's daughter. He later takes revenge on all who have wronged him or caused him sorrow. One of his long-standing conflicts is with St. George, who repeatedly tells the wolves to eat the youth's only inheritance, a young foal. The young man paints the foal in different colours several times to trick the wolves, but finally St. George instructs them to devour both the foal and its owner. After becoming the Sun's son-in-law, the young man also takes revenge on St. George, among others (Kõiva, Kuperjanov 2022).

Back in the 19th century, St. George's Day was the end of service contracts with the manor, or the day of moving to a new rented household. Among these customs that have largely lost their original meaning, the longest survival has been enjoyed by local, gender specific festivals. Of these, *naistepüha* ('the women's festival') has been revived in south-eastern Estonia (or, according to some accounts, has been celebrated almost continuously (cf. Hagu 2022; Sarv 2000).

Women and men celebrated holidays on St. George's Day in many Orthodox areas, with holidays also widely known among Baltic Finnic peoples (for example the Izhorians and Vepsians (Panchenko 1995)). Among the Orthodox believers of north-east Estonia, a special women's holiday was preserved until the early decades of the 20th century at which time married village women gathered either in a tavern or elsewhere to celebrate by themselves, men were forbidden from approaching the partygoers. The women's party was connected with milk magic. The same custom was known among the Vepsaians and in north-western Russia. In north-eastern Estonia, St. George's Day used to be a men's holiday in some villages and a celebration of the ordination of shepherds, where, in turn, women were forbidden.

It has in addition to its status-related aspects, an important initiatory function in that only married women, usually younger women who had married during the previous year, were allowed to participate. Through participation, the young brides were raised to the status of full members of the married women's clan. A central axis of the Peko cult is the veneration of Peko as a fertility deity, a topic already discussed in scholarly literature in the early 20th Century (Eisen 1906, 1908, 1936; Ränk 1934; Loorits 1938), later by Paul Hagu (Hagu 1975; 1997) and Heikki Valk (Valk 2019b).

St. George's Day was a day to visit the cemetery and a village holiday celebrated throughout the 20th century despite different political situations. If the custom related to the herd has completely changed due to the change in the economy, visiting the church and graves and the party (kirmas) are still important today. Moreover, as the settlement area and places of residence of the local group have expanded into northern Estonia, larger cities, and even abroad, St. George's Day ('jüripäev') has taken on an important role in affirming kinship and tribal ties. For a dispersed community, this function has become even more significant, giving the occasion a special status.



Fig. 5, 6, 7. Food on a grave, Värska, 2021. Photos: Andres Kuperjanov.

Branding Seto culture

Newly introduced and successfully established cultural 'brands' aim to engage different parts of Setomaa (the event is held in a different village each year), and with their open, humorous structure they have become distinctive and prestigious summer festivities.

Because the state border at Petseri was closed, Värska emerged as a significant spiritual and cultural centre, as well as an economically important local hub. Värska was and remains a place with a strong museum and folk song ensembles. The locality has always featured developed economic activity: mineral water production, a sanatorium, a high school, meaning that the custom spread among different generations with people arriving from other areas to observe it.

If the custom related to the herd has completely changed due to the change in the economy, visiting the church and graves and the party (kirmas) are still important today.

A new and successful part of the brand is Seto Kingdom Day, one of the most important events in today's Setomaa, the largest gathering of Setos (Seto Kuningriik, 'Seto Kingdom') and a huge attraction for visitors. Modelled partly on the forest Finns' traditions in Sweden, a national event symbolically reenacting the closing of the border with Estonia has been held since 1994. The epic by the Seto singer Anna Vabarna, created in the 1930s and first published in 1995 (Hagu & Suhonen 1995), is the inspiration for the celebration. This is an occasion on which the Seto anthem and the use of Seto money play an important role. At the same time, the so-called Seto army is a theatrical and light hearted performance rather than a military institution. The competitions held during the event are likewise colourful and engaging: there are competitions for the title of master of wine, beer, Hansa (home-made vodka), doughnuts, bread and pies, in addition to which there are needleworkers, musicians, dancers and singers. As in any proper Kingdom, the Setos have their own king, Peko, the titular hero of the Seto epic (Honko 1984; Hagu 2022; Vesik 2019). According to legend, Peko rests in Petseri monastery, in the sand cave, and cannot rule the kingdom himself, so the Seto are ruled in his name by an *ülembsootska* (Chief Herald), who is elected during the Kingdom Day. In 2025 this was the internationally known musician Jalmar Vabarna. Particular scholarly and popular fascination has been directed toward material representations of Peko (Hagu 1997). It was precisely these material figures of Peko that sculptors redesigned for Seto museums and sacred sites, since when they have become one of the models of modern culture (including new spiritualities).

Local competitions include the Seto lace days in May (held at the Värska's Reegi House visitor centre) promoting Seto coloured lace. Local food is also presented as part of the Seto brand by museums such as the Farm Museum in Värska, the

Reegi House in Värska, Saatse Museum, Obinitsa Museum and the Seto Tsäimaja (Seto Tee House) National Restaurant.

From June to August there are folklore festivals in various villages. The festivals cater to every type of music from folk to rock, with young people from Setomaa taking to the stage alongside top Estonian artists. Guests have the opportunity to listen to good music in archaic local styles or to new music, taste local delicacies in temporary home cafes, look around the beautiful countryside or stay in one of the local campsites.

Sõirapäiv (11 June) introduces the traditions of Setomaa's signature food, sõir (a homemade cheese). On the day of the feast, Setos teach the preparation of sõir, and with the participation of visitors masters are selected. The event is combined with the Open Farms movement in which a number of farms are opened to visitors. Setomaa also celebrates Kosti Days when villages open their own cafes for one day, allowing visitors to experience a taste of local food.

Within the framework of this annual festival, a new singing stage will also be opened in Saatse, where the New Obinitsa Theatre will perform, as well as the band from Nedsaja Village.



Fig. 8. Kirmas, Värska 2001. Photo: Andres Kuperjanov.

Conclusions

Setomaa is a region where borders, identity, and place intersect in complex and dynamic ways. Historical shifts in political borders have deeply influenced cultural practices, social memory, and everyday life. At the same time, the Seto community has demonstrated remarkable resilience, maintaining and reinterpreting its identity through language, religion, and cultural expression.

The most recent research concludes that heritage tourism in Estonia is a field with significantly underutilised potential. This could become an important source of income at the levels of the state, region and municipality, as well as for entrepreneurs and local communities. The research pointed out that there are numerous untapped opportunities for developing heritage tourism in Estonia, and that it could play a very important role in regional development and in sustaining life in Estonia's rural areas (Valk et al. 2021). At the same time, foreign tourists were highlighted (with the largest groups coming from Finland, Latvia, and Russia) although they are currently excluded from consideration.

Our analysis indicates that there is potential to increase domestic tourism further. The share of legends and rituals that remain relevant to this day, along with new attractive cultural forms and the rapid rise in the importance of Seto identity can play a part in the future of Setomaa.

In the contemporary context, tourism – especially in its slow form – can offer both opportunities and challenges for different niche experiences. There is ongoing potential in the interweaving of distinct Orthodox forms and local specificity.

This type of tourism could provide a means of sustaining local economies and promoting cultural visibility, while also requiring careful balance to avoid commodification. When approached thoughtfully, slow tourism can support the preservation of Seto identity by fostering meaningful encounters between visitors and local culture.

Ultimately, Setomaa exemplifies how peripheral regions can become central in understanding the relationship between place, memory, and identity.

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Data availability

The original data are archived in Estonian at the Estonian Literary Museum. Access is electronically restricted, with use only on an authorised archive computer that requires permission from the project manager.

Notes

1 Seto Kingdom Day – https://kogukond.setomaa.ee/seto-kingdom

[2] Leelo day – https://kogukond.setomaa.ee/leelo-and-unesco-status

[3] Mõla monastery has been mentioned as early as the 14th century (KNR 2017).

[4] In 1960 Mõla church received support from the Russian SFSR and from the Russian church authorities.

[5] Miraculous healing is one of the most popular motifs in the local folklore.

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ERA – Estonian Folklore Archive, 1920–1944, manuscripts ERA, RKM.

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Bibliographical Note

Mare Kõiva is a leading research fellow at the Estonian Literary Museum and head of the department of folkloristics.

Andres Kuperjanov is a research fellow at the Estonian Literary Museum.