

THE RITUAL YEAR 11

TRADITIONS AND TRANSFORMATION

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and Nina Vlaskina

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The eleventh volume in the series "The Ritual Year" is entitled "Traditions and Transformation". These keywords define the principal areas explored in the issue—the preservation of archaic rituals and customs and the modifications that they are currently undergoing. The twenty-one articles by scholars from nine countries are based mainly on field research and demonstrate fundamental changes in the attitudes towards local traditions in their preserved, revived, or invented versions.

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Ethnic and Confessional Aspects of a Holiday in the City of Vilnius

Abstract. This article analyzes ethnic and confessional aspects of the New Year festival in Vilnius city. It is based on fieldwork data collected through semistructured interviews, freeform conversations, published sources, and is grounded on the historical-comparative method. The author shows that a celebration of the same festival among different ethnic and confessional groups of people living in one city, viewed historically, can create symbolic boundaries of otherness or, in some instances, reduce such boundaries.

Keywords: ethnicity, Holidays in Vilnius, Karaims, Lithuanians, New Year, religion, Polish, Russians.

Introduction

This article is intended to analyze ethnic and confessional aspects of annual festivals in the city of Vilnius. In order to shed light on the present day situation, I apply historical perspectives, which according to Orvar Löfgren, allow an analytical possibility which is one of the virtues of European Ethnology (Löfgren 2001: 89). The New Year celebration is well suited to this purpose. The New Year is the only festival which maintained its status of a public holiday when Lithuania was part of the Russian Empire, during the inter-war period when it was the independent Republic of Lithuania (in Vilnius district in 1920—1939 as part of Poland), as well as during the years of Soviet and Nazi occupation, and after restoration of the independent State of Lithuania.

The New Year is one of the most universally celebrated events in society, both ancient and modern. Although dates and rituals vary according to culture, country, or religion, the New Year represents a turning point. This turning point is traditionally a time of celebration, renewal, and rebirth (Salamone 2004: 92).

As compared to ethnologists in neighbouring countries, ethnologists in Lithuania addressed the subject of calendar festivals quite late. The first book with some general conclusions was published in 1979 (Dundulienė 1979). During the Soviet occupation, research into customs of traditional festivals was not tolerated (Šaknys 2011: 17—18; Šaknys 2014b: 92—105),¹ and the few publications on such festivals did not, and could not, mention the religion of the people participating in celebrations. Ethnographic studies of calendar customs of the 20th century were focused on the experience of the oldest population in order to reconstruct the past as far back as possible, to discover the origins of the festivals which existed in the late 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, to describe ritual functions of the rites and customs associated with such festivals, including their ties with the pre-Christian culture (Mardosa 2001: 119—144). Despite abundant publications on annual festivals after 1990, no major studies have been devoted to the New Year festival. Only the monograph of the ethnologist Juozas Kudirka can be singled out since it contains a separate chapter discussing the New Year. According to the ethnologist (who described the situation in the late 19th century and early 20th century), the Christmas Eve dinner was repeated on New Year's Eve everywhere, except Suvalkija Region (the south-western part of Lithuania) before the First World War, but there were no well-established customs of welcoming the New Year, except in some areas of Aukštaitija region (the central, northern and north-eastern part of Lithuania) (Kudirka 1993: 243—248).

There were no more detailed publications analysing ethnic and confessional aspects of calendar festivals at that time. The studies of poly-ethnic and poly-confessional eastern and south-eastern Lithuania do not distinguish descriptions of similar customs practiced by the Poles and Lithuanians or in some cases by Russians as well. Ethnic aspects were highlighted to a greater degree only in the research into Lithuanian communities in Latvia, Poland and Belarus. When conducting a study in the localities of Gerviaty (western part of Belarus) in 2011—2012,² the author of this article attempted to analyse peculiar ethnic characteristics of the ritual year. The answer of respondents was quite unambiguous: only the customs of Orthodox Russians are different, and those of Lithuanians and Polish are the same, i.e. Catholic customs. The greatest differences originate from varying

calendars of festivals (Šaknys In press). On 15 October 1582, the Gregorian Calendar was introduced by the papal bull of Pope Gregory XIII, and it was put into use in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania by 1586. In 1795, the greater part of current Lithuania was incorporated in the Russian Empire, and in 1800 it had to go back to the old calendar—the so-called Julian Calendar—which was in effect until 1915 (Vyšniauskaitė 1993: 6). Given the circumstances, the concept of the New Year itself should not have been very stable. It did not become stable after the Gregorian Calendar was introduced in the territory of Lithuania in 1915. Although Russia, after the October Revolution, employed the Gregorian Calendar, the Orthodox Church of Russia has been adhering to the Julian Calendar since the October Revolution to this day. As a result, for the past hundred years, Christmas is celebrated after the New Year (January 7th), and the other New Year referred to as the *Old New Year* is welcomed after another week (January 13th) (Volovikova, Tikhomirova, Borisova 2003: 89).

Both studies of customs related to annual festivals of Lithuania in the 20th century and those written in the early 21st century were focused on traditional Lithuanian customs. Ethnological studies of customs of the multi-ethnic cities of Lithuania were undertaken only in the 21st century. One of the few exceptions is the book by Maria Znamierowska-Prüfferowa (Znamierowska-Prüfferowa 2009)³ where calendar customs of Vilnius residents of various confessions, as practiced before 1945, were described, including the New Year celebrations. My previously published article also concerns New Year celebrations and describes how the New Year was welcomed by Vilnius residents of different nationalities in 2012–2013 (Šaknys 2014: 105–117). In addition, in 2015, I did research into the customs of the ethnic-confessional group of Karaimes residing in Vilnius and other cities of Lithuania. One of the subjects covered by my research was the celebration of the Karaimes' New Year, i.e. *Jyl Bašy*, and the official New Year's Day (January 1st) (Šaknys 2015: 99–128). Such studies provide the opportunity of discerning and discussing the ethnic and confessional aspects of the festival of the New Year. The present article is merely the beginning of an extensive work and is not intended to provide a conclusive final picture. It is a work in progress.

Festival in Vilnius in the first half of the 20th century

As noted by Lina Petrošienė, who researched Shrove Tuesday traditions in the city of the early 20th century, urban festivals differed from those celebrated in the country in terms of form, content, and functions (Petrošienė 2013: 21). A similar situation may be discerned in the analysis of the New Year in Vilnius. Customs practiced in Vilnius during the early 20th century (when it was a part of the Russian Empire) were described by Laima Laučkaitė who noted that routs with dances used to be held at the mansion of the Governor-General on the New Year's Eve. All major halls of the city were used for dancing parties, theme fancy-balls, and masquerades. These activities were part of events organised by Polish, Russian, Jewish, Lithuanian, and Belarusian societies (Laučkaitė 2008: 473). This special occasion was celebrated not only in public, but in the close family circle as well. In family celebrations, confessional traits of festival were prior. M. Znamierowska-Prüfferowa attempted to describe the culture of Vilnius in the first half of the 20th century and identified an apparent distribution of festival in terms of a confessional aspect. According to M. Znamierowska-Prüfferowa, the Catholic New Year's Eve, or Saint Sylvester's night, was referred to as the "Fat Christmas Eve." On that day people would break (share) Christmas wafers for the second time, "Some people would again make *kissel*⁴ with honey, fat pancakes, and poppy milk, also fry sausage and eat it with boiled or raw cabbage, pray for God's blessing and welcome the New Year." In the morning people would congratulate one another and forecast the weather. When describing the Orthodox customs, M. Znamierowska-Prüfferowa mentions fortune-telling about marriage and festive meal (the pig's head) on Saint Basil's Day. Members of the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession, "a small group of Germans—dominated by intellectuals—have retained some of the German customs in addition to the German language," would serve a lean dinner on the New Year's Eve; "the Christmas tree would be lit up again, and people would eat donuts *Berlinerpfannkuchen*, and would welcome the New Year at midnight drinking hot *Glühwein*—the red mulled wine" (Znamierowska-Prüfferowa 2009: 145–146, 214, 221–222).

It should be noted that the date of the New Year's Day in Vilnius was not only January 1st. The Jewish New Year *Rosh Hashanah* was

celebrated in September—October as the day of concentration and reflection. On its eve, Jews would not go to bed so as not to miss the beginning of the New Year. The synagogues would be crowded with believers, and at home people would eat sweet dishes, especially grapes and watermelons (which at the time become ripe in Palestine), and honey, hoping that the year would be sweet. They boiled honey with beetroots and radishes, and made special New Year's pies. Jews dressed in their best clothes and wished one another a good year. The festive rituals were performed on the second day of the holiday as well. In March and April, the Karaimes⁵ celebrate *Jyl Bašy*. When the festival coincides with the new moon, the service held at the kenesa is more solemn. It is believed that on that day the storks fly back from the saint places of Jerusalem and bring joy. The Muslim New Year is also marked at a different time of the year by a solemn service at the mosque (Znamierowska-Prüfferowa 2009: 227—229, 237).

Festivals in the city in 1945—1990

Public celebration of traditional calendar festivals was prohibited during the Soviet period; such occasions were only held at church and in the family. The mass media was engaged in promoting celebrations of just the New Year. Feature films, abundantly published New Year greeting cards, festive TV programmes, and the Kremlin chimes were all meant to make people forget about Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, and shaped stereotypes of the New Year as the liminal festival, also bearing symbols of "rite de passage" (Šaknys 2014: 107). The ideology and press of the time particularly strongly advertised the New Year celebration for children (Senvaitytė 2013: 114—115). Children's cartoons, gifts from Grandfather Frost (in Russian *Дед Мороз*), and the New Year (fir) trees were designed to ensure that in the future this festival would become the most popular holiday of the year. To some extent, this goal has been achieved.

In the Soviet period it was promoted to celebrate mass-scale, pre-arranged public festivals (cf. Vyšniauskaitė 1964: 561). Families were invited to celebrate with the work team (coworkers) in public places where the process of the festival could be controlled. Soviet ideologists emphasised that it was not necessary to welcome the New Year

only at home, and offered organised carnivals at culture centres, theatres, concert halls, and in the great outdoors instead (Mišutis 1979: 36). Thousands of people were attracted to the New Year's party in the Town Hall Square of Kaunas, the second largest city of Lithuania, where entertainment included a concert of bells, popping the corks of champagne at midnight, and firing homemade fireworks. According to the ideologist who promoted Soviet festivals, the New Year in Vilnius was to be welcomed similarly but in a chaotic manner (Pečiūra 1980: 39). Even the guide books for tourists emphasised that Gediminas Square⁶ "becomes particularly live on the New Year's Eve when a twenty-metre fir tree decorated with colourful toys is set up there" (Maceika, Gudynas 1960: 87). On the one hand, the historical surroundings, even the Cathedral (then turned into a picture gallery), the tower of the castle of the Grand Duke of Lithuania—though adorned with the flag of Soviet Lithuania—bordering the venue of the festival could hardly evoke feelings close to the Soviet ideology. On the other hand, as noted above, the New Year celebration was being promoted by the television and special programmes for the New Year which became popular in the 1960—1970s (Anglickienė et al. 2014: 20). These programs motivated many people to stay home. It should be pointed out that the New Year has undeniably become the most important festival of the year.

In the years of national revival (1988—1990), the festivals gradually returned to the post-Soviet, partially secular, and highly divergent society in terms of confessions and nationalities in urban areas (Mardosa 2013: 53). The New Year, as the key celebration of the year (by popularity and importance) in the Soviet period, was step by step surpassed by Christmas festivals as it was at the end of the 19th century—early 20th century. Yet some of the rituals of the New Year developed in the Soviet period have remained and continue to be practiced as a tradition with family and friends.

Festival in present-day Vilnius

Based on the data of the census of 2011, residents of Lithuania attributed themselves to 59 religious communities, and only 186,700 people, or 6.1 % of the population, did not attribute themselves to any religious community. The population of Lithuania practiced

9 traditional religions (existing in Lithuania for several hundred years).⁷ Lithuanians constituted 84.2 % (in Vilnius 63.2 %), Poles accounted for 6.6% (in Vilnius 16.5 %), Russians constituted 5.8 % (in Vilnius 12.0 %) of the entire population of the Republic of Lithuania.

The three most numerous ethnic groups were selected for the survey of annual festivals in Vilnius, and in 2012—2014⁸ the author had an opportunity to compare the welcoming of the New Year in the past year as celebrated by Lithuanians, Poles, and Russians.⁹ The analysis of the company in which the New Year was celebrated showed that the Lithuanians had a family celebration more often than the Poles and Russians (67, 65 and 60 % respectively), although the number of Lithuanians among the respondents who had a family or cohabitee was slightly lower (43, 48 and 54% respectively). On the other hand, sometimes the New Year is welcomed together by just a girlfriend and a boyfriend, a married couple, a brother and a sister, and the other family members celebrate separately. Sometimes people manage to welcome the New Year in several venues: for instance, they celebrate with friends until midnight, and much later come back to the family circle.

Often New Year is celebrated not only with family members but also with friends. Nearly two thirds of the respondents celebrate this holiday with their friends (61 % of the Lithuanians, 71% of the Poles and 70 % of the Russians). If the data about young people of different nationalities are quite similar, they are rather divergent in the case of pupils. Approximately half of the pupils at a school with Russian as the language of education welcome the New Year with their families, whereas the custom to celebrate this holiday with friends is clearly dominant among the Polish and Lithuanian pupils. Analysing responses of the slightly senior youth has revealed differences among ethnic groups in terms of the number of those who celebrate the New Year with relatives. According to the Lithuanians, relatives rarely attended their party (12 %), whereas according to the Poles and Russians, relatives welcomed the New Year together much more frequently (25 % and 30 % respectively). Similar discrepancies can be observed with regards to the neighbourhood. Neighbours would celebrate together only in 10 % of Lithuanian families, but the percentage in the case

of Poles and Russians was 17 % and 25 % respectively. Poles would often (14 %) invite their colleagues as well, but only 5 % of Lithuanians and 0% of Russians would do that.

The venue of celebration is also significant for analysis of the festival. Russians mostly tend to welcome the New Year at home (56 %, also 45 % of the Lithuanians and 42 % of the Poles), whereas the Lithuanians and Poles tend to celebrate at their friends' (38 % and 41 %, and 38 % of the Russians), or in public spaces: at a cafe, a (rented) homestead, in the city centre (notably the New Year's celebration in Gediminas Square), in other cities and villages, or in a forest or abroad (17 % of the Lithuanians and Poles, and only 5 % of the Russians). In considering the venue for welcoming the New Year, it may be observed that Russians most often greet midnight on the premises (35 %, and only 15 % of the Lithuanians and Poles). In most cases, Lithuanians and Poles would be outside at midnight, e.g., in the yard, on a balcony, or even on the roof—cracking fireworks, popping the cork of champagne, and greeting one another outside (82 % and 85 %, whereas only 57 % of the Russians). When celebrating in the great outdoors, a bonfire is usually lit up. Representatives of all ethnic groups rarely went to church on New Year's Eve.

Special aspects typical of ethnic groups cannot be distinguished in the analysis of celebrations of the first day of the New Year. Representatives of all ethnic groups who celebrated the festival in their home town usually spent the New Year's Day at home, watching festive television programmes, and, more rarely, at a friend's home. Food preparation is a female area of expertise in traditional culture. However, according to our study, in modern society, men often contribute to preparing and setting the table for the festival. There are also negligible differences depending on nationality. If representatives of both sexes would more often prepare the table for the festival among the Lithuanians, the responses of the Russian and Polish (56 % and 52 % respectively, Lithuanians only 32 %) indicate that the table for the festival was mainly the duty of women, be it a wife, a girlfriend, the mother, a grandmother with a granddaughter, women or girls in general, the respondent herself. Yet no remarkable differences can be pointed out in terms of the dishes of the festival depending on these ethnic groups.

Most of the families maintained the traditions that are characteristic just for them, and usually served favourite dishes of the family members. The Polish respondents gave more prominence to meat dishes, whereas the Russians used relatively more fruit and sweets. Although many of the Russians are Orthodox and Old Believers, and January 1st is during Lent, some of the Russians (as well as the Poles and Lithuanians) indicated the meat dishes as being most important (43 %, with 51 % of the Lithuanians, and 69 % of the Poles).

Ethnic groups do not differ in the abundance of fortune telling and beliefs. However, the traditions of giving gifts for the New Year differ distinctly. Poles mostly exchange gifts on Christmas Eve; Lithuanians do the same on Christmas; and Russians usually give gifts at the New Year. The significance attributed to the festival also varies: when asked 'which festival in the year is most significant,' 17 % of Russians indicated that it was the New Year (with 8 % of Poles and 5 % of Lithuanians supporting the same view). Russians also celebrate the *Old New Year*. Already the survey of pupils showed that 40 % of Vilnius residents taught in Russian and 10 % of Vilnius residents taught in Polish¹⁰ celebrate the New Year both on January 1st and January 14th, whereas 5% of the pupils in the school with the language of education being Russian mentioned only the "Russian" New Year (the night from 13th to 14th of January).¹¹ Russian people who are older than 20—40 years of age mostly celebrated the New Year based on both calendars. Despite the fact that January 1st is the Lent period for both Orthodox and Old Believers, the Old New Year is marked more modestly, because usually it is a working day. The New Year is also welcomed on January 1st a few times according to the local time of Lithuania, Warsaw, and Moscow. However, people do not attribute much significance to the ethnic aspects of the festival or its rituals and customs.

Quite a different picture emerged in the analysis of the Karaimes ethnic and confessional group. The Karaimes' New Year called *Jyl bašy* was celebrated during the Soviet period as well. The whole family, including adult offspring, would gather at home, A cake decorated with a little rose would be baked, and all the dishes of that day would be centered on believing that the new year will be happy. This festival has remained significant for the Karaites until now, and some

of the older Karaimes celebrate just *Jyl bašy*. Some of the Karaimes mark both *Jyl bašy*, and the Christian New Year. Lithuanian and Polish acquaintances greeted by the Karaimes on January 1st, would return the favour and wish the Karaites a happy new year in spring, when *Jyl bašy* is celebrated. Some older Karaimes spend the New Year's Eve babysitting their grandchildren so as to give their children an opportunity to welcome the New Year with their friends. Through the celebration of *Jyl bašy*, Karaimes are expressing feelings of ethnic and confessional identity, including in present times. Drawing together the observations on which this article was based, we can cite the words of sociologist Stanislovas Juknevičius: "In Lithuania, inert religiousness is dominant, but religious traditions still play an important role in the lives of part of the population" (Juknevičius 2000: 44).

Conclusions

As we can see even among Christians, celebration of the same festival in historical perspective can acquire ethnic character, creating symbolic boundaries of otherness. We can find these delineations not only in various traditions to greet the New Year among the members of ethnic-oriented societies, but also by analysing the phenomenon of "Old New Year" or "Russian New Year," which originated from the various calendars (Gregorian and Julian) of festivals. On the other hand, we can see an opposing process. During Soviet rule, politics of atheisation had reduced such boundaries, through the creation, and standardisation, of uniform festive food and forming new Soviet symbols of festival, which were common to representatives of all ethnic groups. The comparison of the contemporary traditions of Lithuanians, Poles, and Russians shows that the New Year's festival appears to be more important to the people of Russian nationality. However, despite the difference in the dates—the festival of Old New Year celebrated by the Russians, we can see more similarities than dissimilarities in celebrating New Year. The Christian culture functioning in Lithuania, Poland, and Russia and a similar structure of a ritual year on the one hand and processes of secularization (especially in relation to the loss in prohibitions of Lent) on the other hand, prevent certain essential ethnic differences from being revealed, and a confluence of similar New Year food, beliefs, and traditions.

We find another situation when analyzing ethno-confessional ethnic groups, whose festival of New Year is celebrated at completely different times. As we can see analyzing Karaim New year festival *Jyl bašy*, ethnic and confessional identity is more clearly expressed in that instance. Ongoing research is warranted.

Notes

1. The above-mentioned study of P. Dundulienė was published when a favourable opportunity presented itself, i.e. for the 400th anniversary of Vilnius University (Šaknys 2014b: 99).
2. National Research Programme "The State and the Nation: Heritage and Identity". Vilnius University interdisciplinary project "Gervėčiai: Historical Memory and Cultural Identity" (VAT 17/2010).
3. First edition was published in 1997 in Polish.
4. Kissel is a viscous drink made from fruit and berry juices and thickened with starch, known in some places of East and North Europe.
5. The Karaites of Lithuania came from the old tribes of Turkomans, who were part of the powerful Khazarian State in the 8th—10th centuries and converted to the Karaim, i.e., the Karaite faith (Kobeckaitė 1997: 14). The Karaim community in Lithuania dates to 1397 when the Lithuanian Grand Duke Vytautas settled 383 families in Trakai.
6. Gediminas, the Grand Duke of Lithuania, who mentioned Vilnius for the first time in his letters in 1323.
7. Roman Catholic—77.2 % (2,350,478), Orthodox—4.1 % (125,189), Old Believers—0.8 % (23,330), Evangelical Lutherans—0.6 % (18,376), Evangelical Reformed Church—0.2 % (6,731), Sunni Muslim—0.1 % (2,727), Judaic—0.04 % (1,229), Greek Catholics (Unites)—0.02 % (706), Karaites—0.01 % (310).
8. The research project *Contemporary Family Festivals of Vilnius Citizens* is supported by the Research Council of Lithuania (LIT-5-6).
9. The Poles and the majority of Lithuanians were Catholics, the Russians were Orthodox and Old Believers and some of Russians were Catholic (may be from ethnically mixed families). Only a part of Ukrainians Greek (not Roman) Catholics, mostly in Vilnius and Lithuania they are Orthodox. But numerous parts of Russians said that they are Roman Catholics. It was difficult to believe even to me. But in a mixed families (Byelorussian, Polish, Ukrainian and Russian, part of child are becoming Russians Roman Catholics. I had few respondents Ukrainians, all of them were Orthodox.
10. Apparently from mixed families.
11. "Russian" New year is called the celebration the night of the 13th of January (Julian style).

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