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WINTER CARNIVAL IN SAMOGITIA (LITHUANIA) IN LATE SOVIET ERA

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ABSTRACT

This article is dedicated to analysis of the Shrove Tuesday carnival in Samogitia (Lithuania) during the late 20th century, at the end of the Soviet era, when Lithuanian traditions were suppressed. The aim is to show how this tradition continued, how it was presented to society and authorities, what restrictions were imposed, and the impact it had. By linking the carnival in Samogitia with the structure and themes of the European winter carnival, the author explores how elements of the carnival changed due to political, economic, and other circumstances. The study reveals the adaptation of cultural practices in response to changing historical conditions.

Keywords: Shrove Tuesday, carnival, tradition, masks, ethnic culture.

INTRODUCTION

During the late Soviet period, the spirit of patriotism in Lithuania grew, and various folklore movements influenced the resurrection of traditions. The revival of the Shrove Tuesday – the winter festival and carnival – tradition in Samogitia (Žemaitija), Lithuania was also prominent, despite being conducted with the regime's ideological influences. The tradition of Shrove Tuesday (pre-Lenten carnival) was resolutely preserved in Samogitia in the first half of the 20th century, and a large part of the ethnographic information from the interwar period comes from this region. After the war, Shrove Tuesday was one of the most community-oriented traditions. The Soviets heavily interfered with calendar holidays, but the events were based on local traditions. The aim of the current article is to identify the structure, themes, and key elements of change, as well as the adaptation

to new social circumstances in the Shrove Tuesday carnival of Samogitia in the late 20th century.

The current paper draws upon material gathered during ethnographic research conducted in 2019–2020 and 2024. Seventy informants from Samogitia have been interviewed, semi-structured interviews, in-depth conversations allowed for in-depth research, not superficial statistical. Approximately 40% of the respondents provided data on Shrove Tuesday (or Winter Festivals) in the late Soviet era. The research employs descriptive, content analysis, historiographical, overview, interpretative, visual, and structuralist methods. A total of 248 photographs from the late Soviet era have been collected, and twenty articles describing the Shrove Tuesday celebrations from the late 1960s to the 1989s analysed.

All respondents were informed about the audio or video recordings made during the interview, about their anonymized data. All interviews were conducted with voluntary participation. All interviews were organized only with the consent of the respondents. No personal data is disclosed in the study, their locality and identification are coded.

Based on James Clifford Geertz's method of cultural interpretation, the author of this paper analyses the photographs of the respondents to reveal the structure, characters, and themes. Therefore, this work is based on the structure of the European carnival, as described by British historian Peter Burke.

The revival of the carnival's popularity in the second half of the 20th century across Europe can be seen as a cultural codification (Godet 2020, 6–15). The concept of carnival will not be considered from a linguistic perspective. Instead, the aim is to recognize which characteristics of the carnival as a concept are found in Samogitia, following the idea that it is a "universal category, somehow integrated into the human psyche and culture" (Crichlow, Armstrong 2010, 399–414). Structure of this celebration "shows commonalities with the customs of many Western European nations at a certain macro level" (Laurinavičiūtė-Petrošienė 2015, 150, 238). Shrove Tuesday carnival is like "world turned upside down", "inverted world", "the second life of people" (Bachtin 1984, 11), "upside-down inversion" (Niekrenz 2014, 643), "world upside down" (Testa 2017, 89). To see those universal categories, local studies are necessary, as they reveal common patterns, while also highlighting individual, unique cultural differences.

MASS PARTICIPATION AND UNIVERSAL MERRYMAKING

P. Burke identifies the essential conditions for carnival: mass participation and universal merrymaking. He defines three key structural fragments of the European carnival: the procession, competitions, and the spectacle. At

all three structural levels, he recognizes three main themes: food, sexuality, and violence. Therefore, a carnival must include abundant eating, drinking, dancing and singing people, masks, splashing, throwing, and expression of aggression (destruction) (Burke 1978, 1994 reprint, 182–186).

This discussion of the Shrove Tuesday carnival in Samogitia takes place with a focus on the late Soviet period – approximately the 1960s–1980s. The chosen region of Samogitia is notable because the masqueraders share common features, not only linguistically, but also in terms of character traits and other well-known stereotypes in Lithuania. All informants note that Shrove Tuesday was celebrated on Tuesday, seven weeks before Easter. In the late Soviet period, Winter Festivals or Winter Farewell (it is the similar to Shrove Tuesday / *Užgavėnės*) celebrations were held on the weekend before or after Shrove Tuesday Day. One periodical even mentions a Spring Festival. It is important to note that the masqueraders themselves would go from house to house on the actual Shrove Tuesday.

When talking about mass participation and universal merrymaking, we imagine it as a large crowd of people collectively celebrating in one place. Soviet culture, in general, oriented towards mass culture. The phenomenon of mass participation and the large crowds at Winter celebrations organized during the late Soviet period described by some informants as a nostalgic occurrence, although they understood that these were government-supervised events, subject to certain rules: *"[…] there were always 'party members' coming from the district. Those who were supposed to make sure that I didn't say something I shouldn't or whatever."* (V. S., born 1943, Plateliai) (Fig. 1).

Until Lithuania regained independence, various cultural organizations, departments, and councils were established in Lithuania, which were tasked with "creating so-called solemn civil rites in accordance with the prescribed ideology, in order to divert people from church rituals..." (Laurinavičiūtė-Petrošienė 2015, 193–194). Methodological advice and instructions were published in periodicals intended for cultural workers, and events were strictly controlled and monitored. Sometimes, even local newspapers would print instructions on how Winter Festivals should or should not be celebrated.

Typically, during the late Soviet era, mass Shrove Tuesday events, often referred to as Winter Celebrations or Farewell to Winter Celebrations, organized, as informants indicated, by collective farms, local districts, and cultural centres. Celebrations usually started with a procession through the town centre to the celebration site, followed by sports competitions and games, and concluded with lighting of the bonfire. However, by the late Soviet period, most informants claimed that the burning of Morė (a figure of a woman stuffed with straw or rags, which is burned on a bonfire) either did not occur or they did not remember it.

Figure 1. Mass participation in Plateliai (Plunge district), about 1974. Personal archives of Virginija Strakšytė, Plateliai, Plungė district

1. attēls. Masveida dalība Plateļos (Pluņģes rajons) ap 1974. gadu. Virģinijas Strakšītes personīgais arhīvs, Plateļi, Pluņģes rajons

Elsewhere, no public events were organized, or informants did not recall any, but in some villages, locals had to seek permission from the collective farm leaders to hold a costumed procession. For example, in Grūšlaukė (Kretinga district), people tried to avoid drawing attention from the authorities, so they either did not organize public events or tried to bypass official oversight. The organization of public events and initiatives depended on the leniency of the collective farm chairmen and their attitude towards traditions.

FORMS OF THE SHROVE TUESDAY CARNIVAL

Procession – one of the essential elements of the carnival, in which various characters appear (Burke 1978, reprint 1994, 184). The costumed processions would correspond to the procession element, taking place during the visits to households by small groups of costumed participants. Processions in publicly organized Winter celebrations were especially important, with many people participating: the participants in masks and the gathered spectators. Possibly, the large number of participants was constituted by groups from different institutions, which would prepare in advance, following government instructions. The procession would stretch across the town squares and centres. A large crowd of spectators would gather to watch the procession participants (Fig. 2).

Figure 2. Procession in Grūšlaukė, 1978. Personal archives of Burba family, Grūšlaukė, Kretinga district

2. attēls. Gājiens Grūšlaukē, 1978. gads. Burbas ģimenes personīgais arhīvs, Grūšlauke, Kretingas rajons

Competition in Shrove Tuesday carnival events in Samogitia during the late Soviet period was particularly pronounced. The goal was to reconstruct Shrove Tuesday into a Winter Celebration, which had a completely different purpose. Therefore, such events included not only staged performances or dialogues by event hosts about folk achievements, but also sports competitions: ski races, sled-pulling or downhill races, fishing contests, horse races, and the selection of the most beautiful masks. On 8 April 1976, the newspaper *Švyturys* (No. 41) described a Spring celebration held in Kretinga, during which teams appeared in the procession and were judged: "Here was *Pergalė* (Victory), and one of the most beautiful carnival masks, 'Children of Peace'. The Earth spins, with a white dove perched on its pole, waving a red flag, and the bright voices sing about their painted sun, playing "Poppy Seed"". Often, the performances, which had little to do with traditional Shrove Tuesday customs, reflected the current political climate. Preparing for such competitive performances involved a great deal of effort not only in costumes and details but also in transportation: one could see horses pulling sleds or carts, agricultural machinery, and even self-made vehicles. There were also traditional elements such as the battles between

Lašininis (The Fat One) and *Kanapinis* (The Thin One), tug-of-war contests, fights with bags stuffed with straw, wrestling in barrels, races on multi-person skis, and more.

The third essential element of the carnival is the **performance**. It resembles a type of farce in which it is difficult to draw a line between formal playacting and informal play (Burke 1978, reprint 1994, 185). According to all the informants, the carnival participants, who would visit households on the actual day of Shrove Tuesday, would simply agree on which characters to portray but had no script or rehearsals. The distinctiveness of the character alone would set the tone for the performance, in which they would enact short skits or dialogues, interpreting them in different houses. Careful preparation was done in advance when public events were held. The event organizers would write scripts, gather information about the tradition from literature and humorous stories, and often copy from other texts, making sure to insert lines praising the Communist Party (V. S., born 1943, Plateliai). Public events were monitored to ensure that ideas about a free nation, identity, and so on, were not discussed: Criticism of the Soviet system's legitimacy was not allowed, especially regarding national issues like promoting Lithuanian independence or expressing anti-Russian views. Public expression or organizing around such ideas was banned and punished (Putinaitė 2020, 23–24).

However, in some cases, during the Winter Celebrations occurred indirect attempts to mock local authorities through humour, between the lines. People at the time skilfully navigated these requirements, inserting elements from older traditions (Fig. 3).

During the late Soviet period, street performances featured characters from literary works (Palangos Juzė (sometimes with his wife, Domicele), Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, Eglė, the Queen of Serpents, the Roosters who grind flour and carry grain to the mill and grind flour, Vingių Jonis, Raseiniai Magdė, the Musketeers), representatives of various professions (Shoemaker, Midwife, Merchant, Insurance, Agent, Plumber, Cadets, who fight for freedom, Nurse, General (Leader), Priest, Shepherd), fairy-tale characters (Snow White (sometimes with the seven dwarfs), the Fox (sometimes carrying a chicken in a basket), Little Red Riding Hood, the Dwarf, the Princess, Cinderella, Santa Claus (or Grandfather Frost, Senelis Šaltis), characters from different ethnic backgrounds (Indians, Mexicans), by social status (The Wise Man, the Herald, Caller, Drunkard, Thief, Noblemen, Serfs), from cartoons (The Wolf and the Bunny from the animated film *"Well, Just You Wait!"* (*Na, palauk!*), characters from the social environment (The Dandy (fashionable woman), Hippies), characters from nature (Penguins, Spring, the Pig, Birds and Animals). While earlier characters were still present, many new ones were introduced, with improvised performances blending with the old traditions.

Figure 3. Performance in Aleksandrava Winter Carnival, 1989. Aleksandrava Library archive, Plunge district

3. attēls. Performance Aleksandravas Ziemas karnevālā 1989. gadā. Aleksandravas bibliotēkas arhīvs, Pluņģes rajons

Figure 4. In the middle – hippies, Grūšlaukė, 1975. Personal archives of Burba family, Grūšlaukė, Kretinga district

4. attēls. Vidū hipiji Grūšlaukē 1975. gadā. Burbas ģimenes personīgais arhīvs, Grūšlauke, Kretingas rajons

Some characters were chosen to reflect the current events of the time, but they were subtly presented as favourable to the regime, even though in real life their mission was quite different. In Grūšlaukė, the portrayal of hippies mirrored the imagery and style of the hippie subculture as one form of protest at the time. Photographs from the 1970s show the process of meaning-making and the transformation of Winter Carnivals in Samogitia. By the late 20th century, there was an effort to restore the original customs and practices, despite ideological constraints (Fig. 4).

SHROVE TUESDAY CARNIVAL THEMES

Food and Drinks. There is no doubt about the importance of ceremonial meals, abundant and greasy eating before Shrove Tuesday, especially during the carnival itself (Vaicekauskas 2005, 163–171; Blockytė 2015, 36–40), traditionally included in ritualistic practices (Laurinkienė 2012, 15–30). There was an abundance of food and drink consumption during Shrove Tuesday. Every house visited by the masked figures offered food and drink in exchange for their visit. The research found that the guests were treated to pancakes and kvass (Fig. 5).

Figure 5. Food and drinks in Kurtuvenai Winter Carnival, 1989
5. attēls. Ēdieni un dzērieni Kurtuvēnu Ziemas karnevālā, 1989. gads

Respondents mentioned that in some households' hosts prepared full meals for the masked figures: cabbage, zeppelins (dumplings), potatoes with a thick sauce, meat, and *spirgyne* (a mixture of ground hemp and flax seeds served with potatoes or other dishes). Interviewees particularly emphasized the importance of alcoholic beverages. Homemade vodka was commonly given to the masked figures. However, photographs around the 1980s show that vodka produced state-owned distillery had also been offered. Masked figures were often given sparkling wine, liqueurs, and "coloured" strong drinks, too. When students began participating in the carnival, instead of alcohol, they started to ask for money. At the end of the carnival, the collected food and drink were placed on the final celebratory table. Public events, as noted by the informants, involved baking pancakes, additionally, traders participated, selling hot food (shashliks, peas), drinks (beer), and sweets (bagels), among others.

Sexuality, reproduction. The carnival, according to P. Burke, is defined as a time of intensified sexual activity, folklore, and calendar-based celebrations (Burke 1978, 1994 reprint, 186–187). The elements of eroticism are abundant in Shrove Tuesday. Various marriage divination games and rituals begin on Christmas Eve and end at Shrove Tuesday (Balys 1978, reprinted 2013, 92). All these divination practices focus on the desire to marry, find a partner, or have children. Informants pointed out that masked figures who visited houses often wished not only for a good harvest but also for grandchildren and children. A "doctor" character even offered medicines to improve potency (L. J., born 1965, Grūšlaukė). The importance of eroticism is also reflected in the masks worn by the carnival participants (large noses, associated with phallic symbols (Burke 1978, 1994 reprint, 187), and the exaggerated depiction of female body parts (breasts, hips). The carnival emphasizes the lower parts of the body – earth (belly, reproductive organs, buttocks) (Vidugirytė 2012, 120). There is a significant presence of obscene humour in the tradition of the masked figures. Due to the themes of eroticism and sexuality, the participation of children in Shrove Tuesday was discouraged.

Destruction. P. Burke, in discussing destruction in the carnival, also mentions aggression. Destruction involves "turning the world upside down": oppositions (carnival – Lent, carnival – everyday life), expressed through masquerade, chaos, revelry, and criticism of authorities and rules (Burke 1978, 1994 reprint, 187–191). Respondents saw Shrove Tuesday as a celebration where the goal was to have fun, make as much noise as possible, throw snowballs, roll in the snow, and thus "banish winter". Destruction was evident during contests and competitions, especially in the struggle between *Lašininis* (The Fat One) and *Kanapinis* (The Thin One), where other participants joined in, fighting with bags of straw. Interviewees noted that

the masked figures often chose characters from their close environment (a drunkard, a foreigner, a shoemaker, a soldier, beggars) to experience being someone they were not. This was understood as a critique of vices, authorities, or other social groups. Men dressed as female characters, and women dressed as male characters. A significant moment of destruction was played out in pranks on those who did not allow the masked figures into their homes. Pranks became more elaborate: some people killed geese, stuffed chimneys with rags, or nailed new galoshes to doorsteps (B. M., born 1963, Grūšlaukė). Often, windows were smeared with lipstick or soot, and doors were blocked with trash bins or brooms.

CONCLUSIONS

The research found that during the late Soviet period, the Shrove Tuesday celebrations in Samogitia (known as Winter Festivals) aligned with the structure of the European carnival, maintaining all essential elements, although adapted to the constraints dictated by the Soviet era. Despite efforts to eliminate spiritual and calendar-based holidays, Shrove Tuesday remained a contested tradition. While officially renamed the Winter Festival or Winter Farewell Festival for public celebrations, locals still referred to it as Shrove Tuesday in private.

The research also shows that the characters in Shrove Tuesday celebrations began to include figures from literature, fairy tales, various professions, social classes, and animated films, reflecting Soviet-era cultural regulations. These changes were intended to distance the event from its spiritual roots, yet participants cleverly incorporated contemporary themes.

Had Shrove Tuesday been completely banned, its continuation today might have been uncertain. Although not equated with religious holidays, masked figures were still permitted, with restrictions on public celebrations. Despite ideological constraints, some traditional characters and folklore elements persisted, often reinterpreted to fit the era's rules.

These conditions allowed Shrove Tuesday to survive, even as it was reshaped into a new cultural form. This study contributes to a broader understanding of Shrove Tuesday traditions in Samogitia, analysing songs, Soviet-era periodicals, and local research. It offers a deeper insight into how the tradition endured and evolved, shedding light on the "universals" and transformations of the celebration across time.

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ZIEMAS KARNEVĀLS ŽEMAITIJĀ (LIETUVĀ) PADOMJU PERIODA NOSLĒGUMĀ

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ANOTĀCIJA

Rakstā analizēts Treknās otrdienas karnevāls Žemaitijā (Lietuvā) 20. gadsimta beigās, konkrētāk – padomju perioda noslēgumā, kad lietuviešu tradīcijas tika apspiestas. Mērķis ir atspoguļot, kā šī tradīcija turpinājās, kā tā tika pasniegta sabiedrībai un varas iestādēm, kādi ierobežojumi tika noteikti un kāda bija tradīcijas ietekme. Kontekstā ar ziemas karnevālu struktūru un tematiku Eiropā rakstā tiek pētīts, kā karnevāla elementi mainījās politisko, ekonomisko un citu apstākļu ietekmē. Pētījums atklāj kultūras prakšu pielāgošanos, reaģējot uz mainīgajiem vēsturiskajiem apstākļiem.

Atslēgvārdi: Treknā otrdiena, karnevāls, tradīcija, maskas, etniskā kultūra.

KOPSAVILKUMS

Rakstā aplūkotas Lietuvā pastāvošo tradīciju ilgtermiņa pārmaiņas, kuras veicinājusi modernizācija, politika, kā arī sabiedrības normas un vērtības. Padomju periodā lietuviešu tradīcijas bieži tika apspiestas vai pārveidotas, iekļaujot ideoloģisku saturu, bet reliģiskie aspekti tika noraidīti. Tomēr patriotisma un dažādu folkloras kustību pieaugums Lietuvas teritorijā vēlīnā padomju laikā veicināja atsevišķu tradīciju, tostarp Treknās otrdienas tradīcijas, atdzimšanu.

Treknā otrdiena, nozīmīga uz kopienu orientēta tradīcija Žemaitijā, spēcīgi saglabājās 20. gadsimta pirmajā pusē. Neskatoties uz kalendāro brīvdienu ierobežojumiem padomju periodā, vietējās paražas kopienās turpināja pastāvēt. Pētījuma mērķis ir analizēt, kā Treknās otrdienas tradīcija saglabājās izmaiņu rezultātā un kā tā tika pasniegta varas iestādēm, kā arī, kāda bija ideoloģisko ierobežojumu ietekme uz tās struktūru.

Pētījumā izmantots etnogrāfiskais materiāls, kas iegūts intervijās ar 70 informantiem, un analizētas vairāk nekā 240 fotogrāfijas no Žemaitijas. Izmantota vairāku metožu kombinācija, tostarp aprakstošā metode, satura analīze, historiogrāfiska, interpretējoša un strukturālisma pieeja, lai saprastu, kā karnevāls mainījās tālaika politiskajā klimatā.

Pētījuma rezultāti atklāj, ka, neskatoties uz padomju ideoloģisko ietekmi, Treknās otrdienas karnevāla elementi Žemaitijā saskanēja ar Eiropas karnevālu struktūru. Nosaukums "Ziemas festivāls" publiskajā telpā aizstāja "Trekno otrdienu", bet pati tradīcija dalībniekiem palika plaši atpazīstama kā Treknā otrdiena. Karnevāla varoņi un tēmas attīstījās, iekļaujot tajos elementus no literatūras, pasakām, profesijām un animācijas filmām, kā to prasīja tālaika ideoloģiskie norādījumi.

Pētījumā secināts, ka šie pielāgojumi ļāva izdzīvot un pat attīstīties Treknās otrdienas tradīcijai, neskatoties uz garīgo un reliģisko elementu apspiešanu padomju režīmā. Tas parāda, ka vietējie iedzīvotāji prasmīgi orientējās ideoloģiskos ierobežojumos, transformētajā karnevālā iekļaujot senāku tradīciju elementus. Šis pētījums veicina plašāku izpratni par Trekno otrdienu Žemaitijā vēlīnā padomju periodā un sniedz ieskatu, kāpēc tradīcija turpinās līdz mūsdienām. Tas arī paver iespēju turpmākām diskusijām par Treknās otrdienas karnevāla universālajām iezīmēm un tā transformāciju laika gaitā.