

THE PHENOMENON OF CHILDLESSNESS IN LITHUANIA: FROM SOURCES TO SCIENTIFIC STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the article is to analyse the ethnological sources and investigations dealing with the phenomenon of childlessness in Lithuania. The paper analyses the ethnological sources and investigations carried out in Lithuania, which reveal the attitude a traditional village community had concerning childless people belonging to the community, also, the members of rural or urban modern society. The work deals with the problem of change concerning the attitude to childlessness from the 20th century until the beginning of the 21st century. We concentrate upon the studies carried out in the 21st century, which are becoming increasingly interdisciplinary.

Keywords: childlessness phenomenon, sources, research.

INTRODUCTION

Childlessness is often called the phenomenon of (post)modern society. With declining birth-rates in Lithuania and increasing number of childless families, the phenomenon has lately gained greater attention amongst both investigators and society. The historical demography research shows that there have always been people who remained childless because of different reasons – the latter work of historiography is important in terms of tracing the changes concerning childlessness in society. The paper deals with the problem of change concerning the attitude towards childlessness from the 19th century until the beginning of the 21st century, including the underlying factors.

The **aim** of the article is to analyse the ethnological sources and investigations dealing with the phenomenon of childlessness in Lithuania. The **objects** of the paper are, as follows: 1) to survey and analyse the most important Lithuanian ethnological sources revealing the approach adopted by a traditional village community concerning childless people; 2) to analyse the investigations carried out by ethnologists dealing with the phenomenon of childlessness in Lithuania; 3) to discuss the research data presented in the works of sociologists and demographers at the beginning of the 21st century, as well as to disclose the approach of social sciences to the phenomenon of childlessness. The following methods are used in the paper: the analysis of content represented in different sources and studies, the comparative and interpretation methods, which help to reveal the change in attitude to childlessness among society members, also, the interdisciplinary aspect of the studies and relevance of the phenomenon. The author of the current paper analyses the most significant sources of Lithuanian ethnology, which reflect the society's attitude to its childless members. The present paper is founded upon three groups of studies dealing with the phenomenon of childlessness in Lithuania, namely: ethnological rural and urban family studies, and interdisciplinary studies of the 21st century.

LITHUANIAN ETHNOGRAPHIC SOURCES CONCERNING CHILDLESSNESS

Lithuanian ethnographic sources reveal a strictly defined identity of woman-mother, and simultaneously the negative attitude society had toward childless families (women) and their status. One of the most significant sources reflecting the complex of being born and the related customs is the work by Jonas Balys, one of the most famous Lithuanian interwar ethnologists – “Childhood and marriage” (Balys 2004), which presents the ethnological material gathered in the beginning of the 20th century in Lithuanian villages. The paper discusses the following topics: aiming at pregnancy and attempts to avoid it, various guesses and magic to predetermine the baby's sex, assist in birth and caring of the baby. The author presents examples of preventive magic, rituals predetermining fertility intended to help childless people, as well as recipes of popular medicine. Sorceresses, gipsy women are mentioned as special helpers able to address the problem of infertility. People used to follow the advice of wandering beggars, later – doctors or priests. Jonas Balys tells a story of a woman who relied on the help of a saint: “A woman from the village of Viržiai in the district of Leipalingis was childless. She made a promise to visit the church of Seirijai with the altar of St. Anthony during the feast of

the saint for 10 years running if she had a child, a boy. St. Anthony heard her prayer and she gave birth to a boy. She has been keeping her promise for 6 years already.” (Balys 2004, 9). The source acknowledges that there were few cases of consulting doctors, however, some women succeeded in resolving the problem of infertility – people then had a pronounced belief in the positive effect of baths, which were considered important in educating girls and in the lives of women. To sum it up, magic and the fact of its popularity highlight much more than the importance of fertility. It is perhaps the only preventive means from infertility that the members of a traditional village community could resort to. Magic signifies one’s preoccupation with the future and the person relying on it feels he/she has done everything to ensure the birth of descendants. With doctors not available to rural people in the 19th–20th century, the childless families could only blame themselves or other people of ill-will. Magic, relying on gypsy women and sorceresses, various recipes of magic rituals bear witness to people’s determination to try all possible means which might enable them have children.

When analysing the topic of woman’s identity in a traditional village community, the article “Legitimate/illegitimate children and matrimony” by Jonas Baldauskas published in “Gimtasai kraštas” in 1938 (Baldauskas 1938, 286–291) is of utmost importance. The author discusses the prohibition of sexual intercourse before marriage and the status of women with illegitimate children, including that of children emphasizing that the underlying reason for marriage and matrimony was the reproductive function, which “songs and matrimonial rituals of both our own and other nations testify to” (Baldauskas 1938, 271). Albinas Kriaauza, the author of the article published in 1943, presenting the overview of child-raising in the environs of Kupiškis, discusses the differences concerning boys and girls, the superstitions supposedly determining the sex of the child, advice on the ways a pregnant woman should carry herself, also, the customs related to fertility. In great detail the author discusses the problem of society’s attitude towards childless families (women), presents the means used in order to prevent childlessness and indicates the ways the infertility was cured (Kriaauza 1943, 203–235). The analysis of the source attests to the fact that in the beginning of the 20th century a village community used to prepare girls to carry out their function in advance – they were trained as future mothers, which included playing with dolls and taking care of them. Even when weaning their daughters, mothers used to think about their children: “she is breast-fed longer than a year [...] so that she could be strong enough when giving birth [...]. They used to wean their daughters on Sunday – thus, they would have more children” (Kriaauza 1943, 205).

The attitude of a traditional village community to childless families (women) is disclosed in another article by A. Kriaauza who ascertains that

quite often a childless woman was hated both by her husband and relatives, who sometimes even turned her out (Kriauza 1943, 203–235). The author also notes that

Besides being a disgrace and dishonour, childlessness was considered to be God's punishment not only on Earth, but after death, as well.

There was a belief that “a married childless woman would wander in darkness, soak in water as high as her waist and carry the children of the devil” (Kriauza 1943, 203). Thus, the society used to stigmatise a childless woman during all her life and she could not expect to find a relief even after death.

The analysis of the sources reveals that the girls who grew up in a traditional village culture were raised as future mothers, and woman's identity was inseparable from the role of a mother which defined her personality. Community members used to condemn childless women who did not carry out the reproductive function they were born for. Having children was seen as the ontological basis characterising them as females. Being childless was considered “unnatural” and did not correspond to the norms of society. Such a woman, a marginal phenomenon, did not belong either to the world of men, or that of women.

ETHNOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS OF CHILDLESSNESS IN LITHUANIA

The phenomenon of childlessness in the works of Lithuanian ethnologists has not been investigated explicitly until now. However, some information on the topic is provided by the investigations dealing with family customs concerning traditional rural and modern urban culture.

Most investigations of Lithuanian ethnologists dealing with the topic of childlessness discuss family and its customs in the frame of traditional village community. They present community's attitude to childless married women, amplify the most popular ways of curing infertility (Dundulienė 1991), focus on customs starting with the birth of a baby until marriage and death (Dundulienė 2019, Yla 1978). Although the society's attitude to the childlessness is scarcely mentioned/not explicated (Dundulienė 2019, 57), the works are important when forming the conception of a traditional family. Besides, the investigations carried out by ethnologists discuss, although superficially, the community's attitude to childless families and present a brief analysis of customs concerning fertility (Vyšniauskaitė, Kalnius, Paukštytė 1995). When analysing the situation of a woman in a traditional Lithuanian culture, the authors focus on childbirth, the behaviour

of the expectant woman, the status of a woman with an illegitimate child, the society's attitude to childless women or those not willing to have children (Račiūnaitė 2006). Also, the attitude to a woman formed by the Church in a traditional community is analysed (Račiūnaitė 2004). Ethnologists note the traditional attitude to reproductive expression in rural environment of contemporary Northeast Lithuania (Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2004, 89–111; Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2007, 9–30; Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2008, 30–37).

Certain aspects of girl education are presented in the article “The aspects of girl education concerning bathhouse customs” by Stasys Daunys (Daunys 1991, 145–173). Traditional ways of child education are investigated in the articles by Živilė Driskiuvienė (Driskiuvienė 2001, 699–718) and Irena Stonkuvienė (Stonkuvienė 2012, 1062–1097). The attitude to childlessness rooted in a community is reflected in the article “About the native inhabitants of Gervėčiai” by Laima Šilainytė. The author reports the local inhabitants saying: “No good when there are no children”, “It's difficult to live alone”, “By all means, it's better with children, what is to be done if one has no children in old age”; on the other hand, “As long as there are no children, there are no troubles” (Šilainytė 1989, 199).

Customary law reflecting the situation of childless women in a rural community is a separate field of investigations to be distinguished – it has been described in detail by Venantas Mačiekus (Mačiekus 1995, 389–416; Mačiekus 2004, 568–592; Mačiekus 2006, 93–98; Mačiekus 2010, 545–567) and Vytautas Galvėnas (Galvėnas 1989, 187–195). The right of ownership in a traditional rural community belonged to the male descendant and the farm was usually taken over by the one who guaranteed its continuity. After a spouse died, the situation of his/her childless partner was defined by the time they lived together: customary law used to treat a widow and widower differently. After the death of her spouse, a childless widow could be turned out of the house with the dowry she had brought when getting married. Meanwhile, the husband could lose only a part of his wife's dowry and only on the condition that their marriage was short-lived and there was a possibility for the two to have children. Childless families used to look for an inheritor in advance – they would adopt a relative or a boy from a shelter (Česnauskytė, Venclovaitė 2006, 183). Thus, we may maintain that, if not for the community's attitude, it was the customary law which induced that a family had descendants. After the death of her husband, a childless widow could lose all her rights to the property, i.e., she was not considered its rightful owner.

Childless urban family is another field of investigations Lithuanian ethnologists were engaged in – they were begun in the 1960s. The first studies in the field were focused on the analysis of the material culture comparing it with the rural culture, besides, oriented to the families of

workers (Merkienė 1965; Merkienė 1966, 167–183; Merkienė 1967, 137–156; Daniliauskas 1970, 1978; Dobrovolskas 1961). The investigators analysed the tendencies of family decrease in the Soviet times (Daniliauskas, Kalnius 1983), discussed the factors, which predetermined the demographic change (Daniliauskas, Kalnius 1983, 95). Referring to the sources in sociology and demography, it is possible to identify certain phenomena characterising the lifestyle in Soviet Lithuania: women's engagement into industrial and social activities; the level of material and spiritual needs of the family, the increasing number of divorces, etc. (Daniliauskas, Kalnius 1983, 95). It has been noted that birth-rates depend on historical circumstances, such as war, child death-rate and the like.

In the monograph "Lithuanian family and customs", Petras Kalnius (Kalnius 1995, 168–199) presents the most explicit analysis of urban family structure in the second half of the 20th century, which also provides knowledge on the topic of childlessness. Referring to statistical data of the 19th–20th century, it investigates Lithuania of the period from historical standpoint in the context of Eastern European demography. When analysing the demographic family development in the 1940s–1980s, the author notes that Lithuanian city dwellers practically did not differ from other nationalities: the families of workers had the largest number of children, fewer were raised in the families of technical intelligentsia, and the fewest were recorded in the families of humanitarian intelligentsia. The latter category encompasses a small number of families which raised 3 or 4 children, besides, there were more childless families among them. The author maintains that the average number of children in the families of Lithuanian city dwellers has mainly decreased because of scanty families of intelligentsia, since the comparative part of intelligentsia especially in Lithuanian cities is significant enough (Kalnius 1995, 196–197). The decrease of children is analysed in connection with conditions of daily life, i.e., the living space owned. Referring to the analysed statistical and demographic data, the author draws the conclusion that "the number of children in urban families has decreased not only because of material conditions, but also because of psychological factors and lifestyle: willingness to have more spare time, necessary to develop one's personality to the fullest, to advance professionally, also, the wish to dedicate one's time to social activities, entertainment and so on" (Kalnius 1995, 197).

The change of the urban family and its values is discussed in the monograph "The Lithuanian Family at the Crossroads of Values" by R. Račiūnaitė-Paužuolienė (Račiūnaitė-Paužuolienė 2012), which analyses the changes from the 3rd decade of the 20th century to this day. The author chose values of the Lithuanian family as the object of her research. The change in these values during the interwar period was influenced by the changing attitude

to a woman-mother and social activist, also, the impact of globalisation and modernisation the family experienced at the end of the 20th century – the beginning of the 21st century.

Irma Šidiškienė, the co-author of the collective monograph “Modern Festivals in the Vilnian Family” disclose the prevailing attitude in Soviet society concerning mothers of many children, achievers at work, who used to be highly honoured, awarded medals and certificates of merit on March 8, the International Women’s Day (Šidiškienė 2016, 194).

While attempting to trace back the development of the phenomenon of childlessness, it is essential to single out the monograph written by Dalia Marcinkevičienė: “The community of married individuals: Elopement and divorce in Lithuania from the 19th century to the early 20th century” (Marcinkevičienė 1999a). Both this paper and other works by D. Marcinkevičienė (Marcinkevičienė 1999b, 11–14; Marcinkevičienė 2007; Marcinkevičienė 2008, 31–40) view the family from historical perspective.

When summarising the investigations of ethnologists dealing with the phenomenon of childlessness in Lithuania, it is essential to emphasize that they present the model of a woman-mother characteristic to the traditional rural culture and the urban mentality, as well: being a woman is inseparable from being a mother. However, with the change of social values, as early as the interwar period, the cities yield the image of a mother – social activist. With increased engagement in the urban studies, ethnologists more frequently refer to demographic and sociological data, paying attention to different society strata and striving to indicate the reasons of increasing childlessness.

THE INVESTIGATIONS OF THE PHENOMENON OF CHILDLESSNESS IN LITHUANIA IN THE 21ST CENTURY

The phenomenon of childlessness in the 21st century and the studies thereof gain increasing attention of scientists working in different fields of research. Some studies deal with the analysis of childlessness in the demographic context (Mitrikas 2006, 61–75; Statkūnienė, Baublytė 2016, 175–241). The phenomenon of childlessness is the focus of the project “Childlessness in Lithuania: The socio-cultural change and individual experiences of modern society” carried out by the Centre of Social Sciences of Lithuania in 2017–2019 – the data collected during the period of its implementation was published in four articles.

The authors of the article “Childlessness in Lithuania: Tendencies, norms and regional differentiation” analyse the tendencies of the settled childlessness of women born in 1920–1969, also, the peculiarities of territorial

differentiations of childlessness in Lithuania (Gedvilaitė-Kordušienė, Tretjakova, Ubarevičienė 2019, 96–111). The authors of the study analyse the women's reflections concerning their present status of childlessness, reveal how childlessness is viewed on personal, interpersonal and cultural levels (Šumskaitė, Rapolienė, Gedvilaitė-Kordušienė 2019). Two other articles are based on the analysis of publications. One of them reflects upon the image of a childless woman formed by mass media in 1991–1996 and investigates the content of the most popular journals for women. The authors of the investigation conclude that “it was the pronatal discourse which dominated in the journals for women, and a woman used to be forced into the frame of a wife and mother. The authors maintain that the prolonging of the period of childlessness recommended in adolescence and young age was related to more conscious motherhood of quality. The analysis of publications revealed that infertile, lonely childless women, just like lonely mothers, were stigmatized. Voluntary childlessness was treated negatively and considered to be marginal, thus, childless women found themselves on the margins of discourse of motherhood” (Šumskaitė, Rapolienė, Gedvilaitė-Kordušienė 2019a, 151). The analysis of childlessness as seen in Lithuanian press in 2011–2016 shows that the phenomenon is viewed as the changing concept, enabling the new interpretation of both motherhood and fatherhood without being focused on experiences of women excluding men (Rapolienė, Šumskaitė 2019b, 26–28). When analysing the articles, the authors highlight the correlation between the gender and voluntary childlessness, i.e., the way different genders are seen in the context.

When concluding the analysis of modern investigations on childlessness, it is necessary to point out that childlessness falls under two conditional categories: voluntary and involuntary, which is predetermined by various social circumstances and caused by biological infertility. These categories of conditional childlessness can be interrelated, also, the reasons of childlessness and experiences people have because of involuntary childlessness, just like the change of society's attitude, are preconditioned by different factors: personal experiences in one's native family, the support of the close environment, relationship with the partner, not to forget the still-popular sex stereotypes in our societies.

CONCLUSION

Childlessness is often called the phenomenon of (post)modern society and, as a result of decreasing child birth in recent years, it gains increased attention of researchers and society members both in Lithuania and worldwide. The investigations into historical demography show that there have

always been people who remained childless because of different reasons. It is proved by ethnographic sources which attest to the importance of fertility in a traditional rural community, also, motherhood which is considered to be the inherent part of a woman's identity.

Although there are no works of Lithuanian ethnologists directly addressing the phenomenon of childlessness, however, some of them (those by A. Vyšniauskaitė, P. Dundulienė, P. Kalnius, R. Paukštytė-Šaknienė, R. Račiūnaitė-Paužuolienė) reflect the traditional customs of a rural family related to fertility incentives and the community's attitude to childless families. The analysis of the status of childless families (women) in a traditional rural community would be incomplete without investigations dealing with the customary law, which reflect the exceptional situation of childless widows, i. e., the necessity to have children in order to maintain the property. Besides, ethnological research is interested in the change of customs in rural and urban families, also, it deals with the issue of decreasing childbirth in cities.

Investigations into the phenomenon of childlessness in the 21st century are multiple in number (Mitriko, Statkūnienė, Šumskaitė, Rapolienė, Gedvilaitė-Kordušienė) and gradually become interdisciplinary – they encompass demography, statistics, sociology and ethnology. The authors emphasize that the phenomenon of childlessness has different aspects – starting with the changing society's attitude to a family and children, ending with economic, social causes, which predetermine the demographic change in Lithuania. It is the latter, wholistic attitude to childlessness in different periods which nowadays accounts for the importance of ethnographic sources and investigations in the 20th–21st century.

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BĒRNU NEESAMĪBAS FENOMENS LIETUVĀ: NO PIRMAVOTIEM LĪDZ ZINĀTNISKIEM PĒTĪJUMIEM

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ANOTĀCIJA

Raksta mērķis ir analizēt etnoloģiskos avotus un pētījumus, kuros apskatīts bērnu neesamības fenomens Lietuvā. Rakstā analizēti etnoloģiskie avoti un Lietuvā veiktie pētījumi, kas atklāj tradicionālās ciema kopienas attieksmi pret kopienas locekļiem, kuriem nebija bērnu, kā arī attieksmi pret mūsdienu lauku vai pilsētu sabiedrības pārstāvjiem šādā situācijā. Darbā aplūkota problēma, kas saistīta ar attieksmes maiņu pret bērnu neesamību no 20. gs. līdz 21. gs. sākumam. Īpaša uzmanība pievērsta 21. gs. veiktajiem pētījumiem, kas kļūst arvien starpdisciplinārāki.

Atslēgvārdi: bērnu neesamības fenomens, avoti, pētījumi.

KOPSAVILKUMS

Samazinoties dzimstībai Lietuvā un pieaugot bezbērnu ģimeņu skaitam, pēdējo gadu laikā Lietuvas zinātnieku aprindās un sabiedrībā novērojams šīs tēmas popularitātes pieaugums. Rakstā aplūkota problēma, kas saistīta ar attieksmes maiņu pret bērnu neesamību no 20. gs. līdz 21. gs. sākumam, tai skaitā šo attieksmi noteicošie faktori.

Raksta mērķis ir analizēt etnoloģiskos avotus un pētījumus, kuri skar bērnu neesamības fenomenu Lietuvā. Darba uzdevumi: 1) analizēt Lietuvas etnoloģiskos avotus, kas atklāj tradicionālās Lietuvas lauku sabiedrības skatījumu uz tās locekļiem, kuriem nav bērnu; 2) aplūkot ar bērnu neesamības fenomenu saistītos etnoloģiskos pētījumus Lietuvā; 3) analizēt 21. gs. sākuma socioloģisko un demogrāfisko pētījumu datus kontekstā ar to, kā sociālās zinātnes uztver bērnu neesamības fenomenu.

Darbā izmantotās metodes: dažādu avotu un pētījumu satura analīze, salīdzinošā un interpretācijas metode, kas ļauj atklāt ne tikai avotu un pētījumu specifiku, bet arī izmaiņas sabiedrības skatījumā uz neauglību, starpdisciplināritāti un augošo attiecīgās tēmas izpētes aktualitāti.

Tomēr demogrāfijas vēstures izpēte rāda, ka vienmēr ir bijis ievērojams skaits cilvēku, kuriem dažādu iemeslu dēļ nevarēja būt bērnu. To pierāda etnogrāfiskie avoti, kas apliecina auglības nozīmi tradicionālajā lauku sabiedrībā, kā arī ataino mātes lomu, kas tika uzskatīta par neatņemamu sievietes identitātes sastāvdaļu. Lai gan nav atrodami Lietuvas etnologu darbi, kuri būtu tieši veltīti bērnu neesamības fenomenam, tomēr daži pētījumi un avoti atspoguļo tradicionālās lauku ģimenes tradīcijas, kas saistītas ar auglības veicināšanu un sabiedrības attieksmi pret bezbērnu ģimenēm. Turklāt etnoloģiskie pētījumi ir saistīti ar tradīciju maiņu lauku un pilsētu ģimenēs.

Bērnu neesamības fenomena pētījumi 21. gs. ir daudzskaitlīgi un pakāpeniski kļūst starpdisciplināri – tie aptver demogrāfiju, statistiku, socioloģiju un etnoloģiju. Autori uzsver, ka bērnu neesamības fenomenam piemīt dažādi aspekti – sākot ar pārmaiņām pakļauto sabiedrības attieksmi pret ģimeni un bērniem, beidzot ar ekonomiskiem, sociāliem cēloņiem, kas nosaka demogrāfiskās izmaiņas Lietuvā. Tieši šī pēdējā, holistiskā attieksme pret bērnu neesamību dažādos laika posmos mūsdienās nosaka 20.–21. gs. etnogrāfisko avotu un pētījumu nozīmi.