

THE LITHUANIAN LEGENDS OF LAUMĖS (FAIRIES) AS A REMNANT FROM A STONE AGE CULTURE

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1. *The Matter to be discussed*

Is it or is it not possible to say something believable about the culture of Laumės and legends concerning them? One would say, that it is altogether impossible, because the legends have been changed and distorted many times. In spite of that, they have many common features found in various narratives, a fact which attests to the long-existing tradition. For example, in many narratives Laumės wash linen, spin, weave, take care of forgotten children in the fields, exchange new born babies and so on.

Thus we have in such legends at least some constant characteristics of the Laumės. Those views did not originate in our times because in the recent centuries such narratives were not created anymore. However, every phenomenon has to have its "raison d'être", real or fictitious. There is no other way to explain the facts in question.

One might say that the legends about the Laumės are nothing more than elaborate dreams which in the course of time formed a few standard narratives. No doubt, many stories about Laumės appearing in nightmares have their origin in dreams. However, the question remains: why do Laumės, rather than other images, occur in nightmares? For instance, in German the word "Alpdrücken" is used for that unpleasant experience. It is evident, that the Laumės did not have their origin in dreams. Their origin is to be found elsewhere. In addition: narratives about spinning, weaving, the care of forgotten children and the bestowal of rich gifts on people could not have originated in dreams. It is possible to dream about such things, but they have to have some explanation in real life.

The Laumės in the narratives are depicted as human beings, usually women. They communicate with people. However, they are a different kind of human beings even if we put aside their transcendental nature. They do work in a different manner; they have relations among themselves; they have different opinions about certain things: they fear fire; they cannot stand the weeping of children and so on. It is easy to detect in the narratives of Laumės the confrontation of two different cultures: the one which creates narratives about Laumės, and the other which inspires them. They even give evidence of racial differences. Laumės are depicted as ladies with very large chests and buttocks.

We find in these narratives evidence of a very remote cultural confrontation, whether direct or indirect we do not know. Consequently we can ask two questions: 1) how did one society interpret the Laumės; and 2) how did the second culture produce this impression on the first culture?

We must keep in mind the double origin of our source of information. From the point of view of a historical researcher, these two aspects are very significant. Remnants of relations between two different cultures constitute a rich source of historical information. **For** instance, even if we possessed written documents about Laumės and knew nothing else about them, we could not conclude how great an influence they have had for the ages.

2. *The Law of Causality in Ethnological Studies*

The Law of causality is extremely valuable in methodology of ethnological studies. Society which composed the legends of Laumės existed later than that society which inspired the thinking on Laumės. One would say, that this is a truism. Notwithstanding this, it is helpful to ethnological studies. It protects us from the temptation of putting the ideas of later cultures or our own ideas into the cultural structure which we intend to study.

The most important requirement for the use of the principle of causality in ethnological studies is that the causality must be firmly established and not just assumed. If somebody gets sick after a good supper, it does not follow, that he got sick as a result of food poisoning. Therefore, in ethnological studies, we must not conclude that, if something had occurred earlier, it is necessarily the cause of what occurred later. The history of humanity is too complicated to assume any mechanical sequence of ideas or events. This sequence must not be taken for granted but proved. To elaborate the causal sequence in ethnological studies is a wearisome job. But, once the causal sequence is established, one may make further conclusions. Therefore, looking for causes is a rewarding endeavor in these studies.

In our case, we should let the Laumés work for themselves. We have only to remove from them what we are sure are later additions. But we cannot attribute to them our views about spiritual beings. Neither can we look at them as personifications of nature, nor can we conclude without reserve that they are deceased ancestors. The safer way is to look at them as they represent themselves, for instance, in their weaving and spinning, in their love for babies, in their foretelling human destiny, in their living in water, and so on.

3. Sources and their Division

Legends of Laumés in Lithuanian folklore have been collected since the middle of the 19th century. Dr. Jonas Basanavičius published some in his six volumes of folk tales. Each volume has a section of narratives on Laumés. Altogether they contain about 150 narratives. Prof. Vincas Krėvė-Mickevičius published the legends of Laumés in *Dzūkija*. Moreover, Dr. Jonas Balys recently collected about 50 versions as told by old people. Thus, we have approximately 220 narratives now available.

The first question is: how can we group and study such diverse material? We believe that ease of comprehension of the legends is the first principle for classification. In the first place, we take all those narratives which may be explained as events of every day life, without looking for deeper explanations. Many narratives are easy to understand as the result of tragic or unusual experiences, such as nightmares.

To this group belong many legends about the Laumés exchanging newborn babies. It is easy to assume that popular opinion may ascribe abnormal births to the Laumés. By the same token, popular opinion could attribute the various sicknesses of animals to the Laumés. But, this is only the first approach to the material. It does not by any means explain everything. However, it is useful in these studies to emphasize one important fact. Even today there exist among Lithuanians some conceptions of the world in which Laumés play important natural and supernatural functions.

After this observation we can go further, namely, to those narratives from which we could gather that the Laumés are representatives of particular moral and religious concepts. In the second category we put the legends from which we could deduce the principles of that particular structure. There are many types of Laumés. Some foretell the destiny of human beings. Others take care of babies. Laumés are said to present women with gifts of endless drapery and to foster the observance of holy days. Sometimes they are referred to as deities and to live in water. And, they are females playing the basic role in this particular system. By studying these subjects, we deduce the moral and religious principles represented by Laumés.

Further, we notice some important changes in the course of time in relation to Laumés. Or better yet, the human being changes his attitude toward the Laumés. In the beginning man was very modest in his relation to them; later, he even became aggressive towards them. Sometimes he even beat them up when they did not help him. In addition to their religious aspect, Laumés have a definite human aspect as well. There are numerous characteristics in legends representing their specific human culture. The legends with those particular characteristics belong to the third part of our study.

There is very pronounced linen culture among the Laumés. Laumés do not ride horses as do the German deities nor do they ride vehicles like Celtic or classical deities. Laumés do not even use ships for their journeys. We shall try to connect the Laumés to a specific level of human cultural history on the basis of the overt information of the legends. We may also make some deductions on basis of silence on the part of the legends.

We very often read in legends about Laumés forecasting the future. In doing this however, they do not use the constellations of stars. This means that the Laumés' culture is to be placed prior to the great religious cultures, which introduced the stars as a means of forecasting human fate. Even the moon plays no role in this system. This and other elements allow us to place the origin of the Laumés culture at a period no earlier than the stone ages. The figures of the Laumés is often depicted in narratives with large chests and buttocks. It calls to mind the Aurignacian statuettes in Europe and those recently excavated in Asia Minor. These also have well developed chests and buttocks, and the intentional omission of facial features. Laumés do not like to show their faces either.

4. The Structure of the Laumés' Religion

Having examined various characteristics of the Laumés' culture, we will try now to get some general overview of their religion.

In our reconstruction of the Laumés' religion, we must take into account the omission of certain traits which would have been characteristic of a religion of later origin. Such omissions are very important for the determination of the prehistoric period in which the religion of Laumés originated.

We may conclude that the omnipotent personal God is not represented in the religion of the Laumés. In the Laumés legends we find an active and distinctive factor called Likimas (Fate), which is a general limitation on human life. Fate is omnipotent and unchangeable, but it is not a person.

We must now point out that Fate is neither a willful God-trickster, nor a beggarly old man without influence on human life. Neither is he a fearful monster, arousing an awful shudder in men. Since Likimas is not a person, it is rather an expression of a higher law which is noticeable in all human life.

What is the Laumé herself? She is, first of all, the supernatural being that lives in water. By this feature alone, she shows herself to be older than many supernatural beings known in the history of religion. Therefore, she can not be originally later than the Stone Age. However, in the course of time she developed a few new characteristics, such as living in the trees.

The Laumé, as the being from transcendental waters, is far from being the ruler of the world. Neither is she the creator of the world, as we read in some sagas in which the world is drawn out from water. The Laumé also is not the water-dragon which demands bloody human offerings and which is defeated by legendary heroes in many European folktales.

Although the Laumé lives in the water, she is very much a human being. She is the neighbor of all humans, always ready to help them. On the other hand, as a transcendental being, she possesses some traits of an absolute being. First of all she is omniscient. She knows where the child is forgotten, intentionally or not. She knows where the child is to be born. Knowledge which reaches so broadly and so deeply is a trait of an absolute being. The same can be said about her goodness. Besides this or perhaps because of this, she is the judge of human beings. Further, she can give gifts without limitations. Such gifts are to be understood also as characteristic of an absolute being.

How is the human being understood in this system? First of all we must keep in mind the fact, that in this system human life is highly valued. We should remember that new born babies, healthy or cripple, have to be kept and cared for. The adult is limited in his relations with transcendental beings. He does not penetrate the realm of the Laumés and does not violate the holiness of night, which belongs to them. On the other hand, he willingly makes use of the services of the Laumés and of their gifts.

Such is the man of the first Laumés. However, when the Laumés become *Laimés* (i.e. good fortune), there is another kind of man dealing with them. He seeks his Laimé and does not feel embarrassed to ask the Laimé to serve him. It is to be noted, that this particular aggressiveness does not destroy his relationship with his Laimé. She willingly helps the man to go into a handicraft or a trade. Therefore if we could call the man of the Laumés modest and pious, the man of Laimés is to be called a kind of superman. The legends of Laimés attest to a particular period in the history of human culture.

What are the more noticeable virtues in the system of Laumés? We can distinguish them from vices, which are punished by Laumés. Laumés punish the deceivers most severely. Everybody who claims to have forgotten the child in the fields expecting gifts from the Laumés, receives a severe punishment from them. It follows, that sincerity is the virtue most cherished by Laumés. The next most highly valued virtue in the Laumés' system is industry on the part of woman. This is widely attested and one may conclude that the Laumés foster the work of weaving.

Concern about clothing in this system was not only a secular task. It was to a great extent a religious task. This can be concluded from the fact that the Laumés were capable of donating endless quantities of clothes. What does this symbolism mean? We should not take it as simple foolishness. We would do better to try to imagine a situation which existed when human beings started to use clothes. It is very probable that the first clothes were understood somehow as divine donations. At least the Laumés testify to that fact very explicitly.

Even in the book of Genesis we have a familiar episode, in which Adam does not dare to appear before God "I was afraid because I was naked" (4,10) —he said. And later we read: "For the man and his wife the Lord God made leather garments, with which he clothed them." (3.21). It makes easier for us to accept the fact, that among Laumés clothes have explicit religious value.

These are a few opinions which have occurred to me in my studies on Laumés. My work is not yet finished. I did not yet elaborate on material which probably would enable me to locate Laumés more specifically in human prehistory.