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RELATIONS BETWEEN THE LIVING AND THE DEAD IN LITHUANIAN FOLKLORE

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Lithuania is a picturesque country situated in northern Europe on the shore of the Baltic Sea. In 1979 it celebrated 700 years of statehood and the 400th anniversary of the University founded by the Jesuits in its capital Vilnius. Lithuania is known for its archaic language. Western culture and its rich heritage.

Over the centuries, Lithuanians created a colorful folklore that was transmitted orally from generation to generation, and which is alive among the old people even today. This heritage tells us many things about everyday life in a sincere and tender way through mythological sayings; pagan mystical beliefs are reflected through folk songs, lamentations, customs and superstitions. These sources also tell us what Lithuanians of old thought about death, dying, the life of the soul after death, and the relations between the living and the dead.

Lithuanian folklorists have collected and published many works of this type of material: for example, Daukša in "Catechismus," A Juška in his five volumes of "Folk Songs," and Basanavičius in his book "About Devils and Spirits". J. Balys has collected, analyzed, edited and published many books concerning different kinds of Lithuanian folklore. Archeologist Marija Gimbutas has published several books in Lithuanian, German, and English about prehistoric Lithuanian religion, customs and arts. Scholars of other nations have written extensively on the subject as well.

To the ancient Lithuanians nature seemed incomprehensible and mysterious. They personified and idolized the sun — Saulė, the 'moon,—Mėnulis, and thunder—Perkūnas. There were goddesses of destiny — Laima and Dalia; one determined the fate of the child at his birth, the other led him through life. There was the goddess of fire — Gabija, the goddess of earth — Žemyna, and others. The earth not only nourished the living, but also sheltered the dead. There was a belief that a dying person should be laid on the earth to lessen his suffering. Even now, when a person is buried, relatives and loved ones scatter a handful of soil on the coffin, so that the earth would not weigh heavily on the deceased. In the past century, old people showed respect to the earth by kissing it. Personification and idolization of the earth is demonstrated in the following excerpt from a folk song in which an orphan girl is crying and talking to the earth:

Oh earth, earth,
Oh moist earth,
You took away my father
And my dear mother.

You took away my father
And my dear mother,
Then take me also,
For I am very lonely.

The earth answers and scolds the young girl saying:

You are too young to be
A bride of the earth.

First suffer hardships,
Wear out footpaths,
Then you will become
The earth's darling bride.

Death itself was personified as the goddess called Giltinė. The name is derived from the verb "gelti" — to sting. She was imagined to be a monster, a human skeleton wrapped in a white cloak and carrying a scythe. She could kill a person by

stinging with her long, tongue, by strangling, or by slashing with the scythe. She sneaked around the houses where there were sick people. However, the coming of Giltinė was often revealed by various signs: the moaning hoot of an owl at night, the barking of a dog when nobody was around, the creaking of beams, the opening and closing of doors by themselves, or the knocking three times at windows or doors. The very sick could see her sometimes, as in this folk saying:

The very sick man saw Giltinė coming from the graveyard and said to his wife: "There comes Giltinė to take me, open the door." The wife opened the door, but saw no one and wanted to reprimand him, but the man said: "She is coming to my bedside, let her come to me." After taking a few deep breaths, the man died.

However, Giltinė is not the only symbol and bearer of death. There are stories in which "three white maidens" come to claim a person's life; at other times it was the "goddess of the plague". The latter epithet probably arose between 1410 and 1711, because in that period of time there were many wars, famines and some twenty epidemics of the plague in Lithuania. (During the plague of 1710-1711 Lithuania lost one third of its population.)

It has been told that during the plague epidemic only those survived who hid in the forests and inhaled the vapors of various burning herbs. It has been told that in Ožkabaliai the "goddess of the plague" arrived in a coach drawn by six black horses. She was dressed in expensive black clothes and went from house to house.

It was believed that at the time of a person's death his soul abandoned the body with his last breath. However, it remained at home, at the head of the corpse during the three days of mourning. During the funeral, all the windows and doors were left open so that the soul might go more easily into another world.

When a beloved person dies, it is very difficult for the survivors to part from him completely. In Lithuanian folklore there appears an intermediate fragile essence between the body and the soul called "vėlė" — the spirit, the shadow of the deceased.

Lithuanian scholars provide some explanations concerning old beliefs. According to Dr. Marija Gimbutas, the soul separates from the body after a person's death and does not return to it anymore. It does not die with the body, it only loses its individuality. It incarnates into another form, it lives in another bearer. Further she says: "the vėlė of the deceased continues the life of the deceased. It is only a quasi-likeness of the person — a body without matter, a spirit without life."

Dr. Jonas Balys defines vėlė in a similar manner. It is distinct from the material body, yet it has not completely lost its relationship with the individual. It could be called a diluted, spiritualized body. They (the vėlės) glide like shadows, are transparent like fog and soft like wool. However, they have the appearance of the deceased and can be recognized by their face or clothes.

There are many lamentations (raudos), mythological sayings and folk songs in which the vėlė is mentioned. After a person dies, his vėlė moves to the world of shades or spirits, somewhere very far away on a high hill. The vėlė continues to live a life similar to that which was lived by the person when he was alive, surrounded by the spirits of his close relatives who died before him. Indeed, the vėlė is welcomed into this afterlife just as he would have been welcomed into a home in life. Gates and doors are opened, he is invited in and asked to sit down, then he is advised as to what to expect in this new existence. The relationship between family members is seen as a continuum, unbroken even by death. Yet there may be trouble even in this paradise: one lamentation speaks of unfriendly vėlės who are capable of attacking a new-comer.

The following excerpts from ancient lamentations give some idea of the range of attitudes toward the dead and the afterlife.

"Oh my dear mother, my dearest one! Yesterday you , sighed in bed, and today you are lying on a white plank... oh my dearest mother, my beloved! They are building for you a castle without doors, without windows of glass..."

The world of vėlės in the raudos is described as a residence with gates, doors and benches:

"Oh, lift up the gates to the vėlės world, open the doors, oh let me sit on the vėlės bench. Dear father, we are sending you a helper, take his white hand, take him into your company. Teach him, for he knows nothing."

A child laments his deceased father:

"Oh, my father, oh, my dear old father! you are now a guest of the vėlės. Your life was too short. My dear father, we thank you that you raised us and taught us how to work."

The wife, afraid that her deceased husband could be attacked by some unfriendly vėlės says:

"There were neither strong northern winds, nor torrential rains to bring down my husband, my strong oak tree, my dearest clover blossom. Fall at the feet of my mother who brought me into the world, at the feet of my father who reared me. Oh, take your son-in-law, my husband, by his white hands... you have been there longer, you are wiser... Oh lift up the gates of the vėlės world, open the doors, receive my husband, let him rest on the bench of the vėlės, oh, watch him that the vėlės do not attack him."

The mother in the lament tries to console herself that her dead child will not be alone in the land of the vėlės, for he will meet his grandmother there.

"Oh, my little son, my tender offspring, my beloved little one, were my hands too heavy, were my words too harsh? Bring my mother these words from me: My dear mother, my dearest old mother! I bow down to your feet through my dear son, through my little boy. My beloved mother, please meet and receive warmly my boy. Carry in your tender white arms my little one who did not learn to speak, who did not learn to walk; lead him, teach him, he does not know anything. Will you recognize my little boy, your grandson, who is coming to you?... Dear mother, you have there already a great crowd, a great throng. Perhaps you have no servants there that you have enticed my little son."

A mother who grieves over her deceased daughter lets her out into the world of the vėlės as a bride and hopes that her daughter will grow forth as a plant and bloom as a blossom:

"Oh, if only I had the joy as other mothers to see my daughter grown up and married, adorned with the rūta (rue — a plant in the Lithuanian tradition which symbolizes a girl's virginity) and silken ribbons, to the music of kanklės (a folk instrument, similar to the zither) and of drums, with beautiful songs... my dear daughter, now you are the bride of the vėlės. Oh, I will visit your grave at dawn and at dusk, I will water it with my sorrowful tears. As what plant will you sprout, how will you grow, with what blossoms will you bloom?"

Lithuanian families were always tightly knit, and that is why life is especially hard for orphans. It is even harder for the orphan girl who also loses her brother — her protector. The orphan girl wishes that her deceased brother would fail to find the road to the land of vėlės, so that he might return to her. In her hopelessness she turns to the sun and the earth asking to go to the world of the vėlės. The following is an excerpt of this type of folk song:

My dear brother,
My falcon,
Why did you open
The gates to the vėlės world?
Why did you open
The gates of the vėlės world,
To the vėlės path?

When you come
To the land of vėlės,
To the land of vėlės,
There on the high hill

You will find
Our dear old mother
And our own father.

.....

Oh dear earth,
Mother earth,
Part into two halves
And take me in,
Take me, poor orphan girl.
Open up,
You gates of vėlės,
And show me
The lighted road,
Then I will go,
Then I will fly
Like a white swan,
Like a happily quacking duckling
To the land of vėlės,
To my father and my mother.

.....

Oh, sun, kind sun,
Oh, sun, my mother,
Please hide, dear sun
The brightness of day.
Do not shine,
Do not glow,
Bright stars,
Do not light the road,
Nor brighten
My brother's path
to the land of vėlės
Without his sister.
Then he will return,
Then he will speak

To me, his sister,
The girl in hardship.

There are some songs in which the living speak with the dead. In the following song in the style of a dirge, the daughter goes to her mother's grave on a hill, opens the door leading to the vėlės world and complains to her mother that her stepmother is mistreating her. However, the mother, instead of comforting her daughter, asks her where she lost her wreath of rue (her virginity).

I will go to the hill,
I will open the door of vėlės,
I will wake the vėlės,
I will awaken my mother.

My mother rose,
And began to speak these words:
"Oh, my dear daughter, my lily,
Why did you open the gates of the vėlės?"

"Oh, my mother, my dearest,
It is difficult, it is very hard for me.
My stepmother scolds and beats me,
She scolds, she beats me, she pulls my hair."

"Oh, my dear daughter, my lily,
I do not see the wreath of rūta,
I do not see your wreath of rūta
On your lovely head.

Oh, my dear daughter, my lily,
Where did you lose your wreath?
Did you bum it in a flame,
Did you sink it in the Danube?"

.....

I will walk through the hills and mountains
Searching for my wreath.
Open up, oh, earth
And take me.

For on the mountain there flows Nemunėlis
And below is the Danube.
Below is the Danube;
There my wreath is floating.

The custom to bewail and to speak to the dead is occasionally found in Lithuania even at present. One event left me with an indellible memory. My husband, a professor, came from Lithuania's capital to his birthplace in a small town to visit his old mother and to introduce me, his young bride, to her. It was natural to visit my father-in-law's gravesite. We prayed silently, then the old woman knelt, bowed toward the grave, wept, and as in a true dirge talked to her deceased husband, calling him by his name and presented me to him.

To Lithuanians of antiquity, nature was familiar, yet mysterious. Some trees and forests were considered holy. Folk songs and mythological sayings reflect the old belief that the souls of the deceased are incarnated in birds, animals, water, plants, and especially in trees. The dead return to life in another form and shape. The following song illustrates the belief that a dead girl lives in the plants, in the water of the spring:

Oh, my true father, do not chop down the birch
tree by the roadside,
Oh, my true mother, do not draw water from the
spring,
Oh, my true brother, do not mow the grass near
the marsh,
Oh, my true sister, do not pick the flowers from
the garden.

The birch by the road, I am myself,
The water in the spring — my mournful tears,
The grass by the marsh — my blond hair,
The flowers in the garden are my azure eyes.

Actually, it is rare that a girl is incarnated in a birch tree. Usually girls or women take the form of spruces or linden trees, the men — that of oaks or birches.

Orphans seeking consolation turn to the sun as their mother, to the moon as their father, and in particular, they turn to the plants: for instance, they ask the linden to be their mother, the oak to be their father. In the following song, orphans talk to flowers:

An orphan girl walking on the road
Saw a peony sprouting forth at the roadside.
She approached it, and bowing, she appealed:
"Couldn't you, dear peony, be my father?"
The peony spoke and scolded the orphan:
"How can I possibly be your father, dear orphan?
I neither have feet, nor white hands,
Nor have I tender words, dear orphan girl.
The roots are my feet, the branches — my arms,
And the green leaves — my tender words."
An orphan boy walking on the road
Saw a lily sprouting forth at the roadside.
He approached it and bowing he appealed:
"Couldn't you, dear lily, be my mother?"
The lily spoke and scolded the orphan:
"How can I possibly be your mother, dear orphan?
I neither have feet, nor white hands,
Nor have I tender words, dear orphan boy.
The roots are my feet, the branches— my arms,
And the green leaves — my tender words."

In the next song the orphan girl is walking in the forest and hears the cuckoo telling her where her mother is:

"Oh, dear cuckoo,
You speckle-feathered bird,
Tell me, lovely cuckoo,
Where is my beloved mother?"

"Your beloved mother
Is lying in the sandy hill
And grieves very deeply
For her young daughter."

I returned
On the same paths
And I found a letter,
A very long letter.

A long letter
In beautiful handwriting.
And these were my dear mother's
Loving words.

"My sweet mother,
My darling heart,
It is so hard for me
To live in this world,"

"Learn my dear daughter,
Learn my young one,
Learn my dear child
How to live in the world:

Obey the old,
Listen to the young,
Then you will be praised, my dear daughter,
Even though you are an orphan."

The unbreakable ties with the deceased are described in mythological sayings. The vėlės return on some days to do certain chores. Sometimes the mother's vėlė returns at night to take care of her baby or to rock her baby left unattended. But the vėlės can only be seen by persons who are in a special spiritual state — "clairvoyants", and also by some domestic animals and birds.

In Lithuanian folklore there are many sayings about dreams which constitute manifestations of the souls of the deceased. For instance, when a person dreams that his deceased parents call him, he will die shortly. The spirits of the parents inform him through the dream about the coming event.

I would like to mention several more folkloric sayings of "message" dreams:

One woman dreamt that her dead husband was lying in water. When the casket was unearthed, it was found that it was indeed soggy with water.'

One of my relatives, an old farmer, loved his daughter very much. After his death, one night his daughter dreamt that her father gave her some instructions, namely, that it would be necessary to sell two oxen, but first they must be well fattened. One merchant would come to buy them. He would haggle, but he would not give a good price. In a couple of days a red-bearded Jew would come, and he would give the full asking price. To him she must sell the oxen. It happened exactly as she had dreamt.

Centuries later, as Christianity began to be accepted by the people, the ideas of heaven and hell, devils and angels, witches and saints took root in the ancient soil of Lithuanian folklore. The concept of the repentant soul supplemented the idea of the delicate vėlė. The relationship with the dead took on a form that combined thoughts of the vėlės and the ancient afterlife with expectations of meeting God.

Devils, evil spirits also often appear in swear-words, as well as in proverbs and in curses. In Lithuanian folklore there are damnations and magic transformations of persons into plants, animals or objects. In that connection one should mention the beautiful folk tale "Spruce, Queen of Serpents" in which the queen of serpents transforms her children into trees: her sons into an oak and an ash, her daughter into a trembling poplar, and she herself becomes a spruce.

In the following song the mother asks her son why he is transformed into an oak tree, his steed into the northern wind, the saddle into a stone, the horsewhip into a willow. He answers that he was cursed by young girls, and now he will continue his life as a tree, but...

"Oh, my dearest mother,
I will not remain here long.
The northern wind will blow on me,
It will break my top,
It will jolt my trunk,
It will snap my branches,
It will strip away my leaves."

In Lithuanian folklore trees can talk, suffer and shed blood when hewn. In the following sad curse song the mean old woman sent her daughter-in-law into the fields when her son was away at war and told her:

"Don't come back from the fields, my daughter-in-law,
Don't return from there, but turn into a linden tree."
The young woman did not come home;
She changed into a white linden tree.
"Take a sharp axe, my dear son,
Chop down, my dear son, the white linden tree."
At the first stroke the earth quaked,
At the second stroke blood flowed,
At the third stroke these words were spoken:
"My beloved sweetheart, my dear,
You made our little son an orphan.
Go, my dear, into the forest,
Bend down the white birch tree,
Suspend the reed cradle, my dearest,
And lay there our little son.
Let the northern winds sway him,
Let the rough rains wash him,
Let the bright sun warm him,
And let the little birds speak to him."

Sometimes the spirits of the deceased find no peace and return as ghosts to sojourn among the living. They are monstrous and are dangerous to people. Especially dangerous are the ghosts of those who died before their allotted time: those who were murdered, those who killed themselves, or those who have not been buried properly. Their specters appear asking for help: for prayers or for some special task to be performed. When the demands are met, they do not appear anymore. But if the ghost continues to bother the living, then the body must be exhumed, beheaded, and be reinterred.

There are later stories about deceased who try to entice and harm living persons. The only protection against such ghosts is prayer or the possession of a rosary or a prayer book.

I still can't forget one frightening ghost story that I heard in my childhood. It was told in a low muffled voice:

The moonlit night is as bright as day, and the corpse is riding on horseback with his sweetheart.

"Ona, Ona, are you not afraid of me?" — "No" answered Ona. Jonas asked her the same question a second and a third time, and she always answered "No".

On the white horse they rode until they reached the cemetery. There Jonas ordered Ona to descend into an open grave, but she told him to go first. When he started to lower himself into the grave, Ona ran as fast as she could. Not far from there she saw a faint glimmering light in a small hut. Scarcely had she entered the hut and fastened the door with a rosary, that Jonas was knocking at the door. When Ona turned around, she saw a dead man lying on a plank. At his head a consecrated candle was burning and on his chest lay a prayer book.

"Dead man, give me the live one", shouted the voice behind the door.

"I cannot move, the stone presses me too hard" answered the deceased on the plank.

"Stretch your limbs", said the voice behind the door. When he did that, the prayer book fell down, the corpse rose and was approaching Ona.

"I will come out by myself, but first let me tell you a story", said the girl. And she began to tell him the story about the torments of the flax: how the linseeds are sown, how they grow and bloom with soft blue flowers, how small capsules full of linseeds develop. The harsh wind blows and smashes these little seedpods against one another. The corpse kept interrupting Ona and told her to hurry up and finish the story. But she continued, saying that in the autumn the flax is pulled up, dried, pressed and combed, the flax tufts are spun into thread and woven into fine linen cloth, which is made into clothing. After the clothes are worn out, the rags are processed into magnificent white paper on which people write, on which books and newspapers are printed. Later, torn pieces of paper are scattered by the wind. At that time the cock crowed and the corpse lay down on the plank. Three days later, Ona died of fright.

In the following folk song the soul is searching for peace in the trees, plants and elsewhere, but the ancient belief, the worship of forces of nature, is powerless to console it. The soul of the sinner then has to turn to Christian belief for solace:

There is no room anywhere
For the sinful soul.
It threw itself into dry reeds
And stayed there for three years.
After three years
The fierce rains started,
The north wind blew
And the dry reeds were broken.

Then the sinful soul threw itself into an aspen, which also broke, then into deep carriage ruts, where it was trampled by travelers.

After three years came the angels
And said: "Rise, poor soul,
And go to church,
There all your relatives will gather
And the first mass will be celebrated."

The following is an even more pathetic naive folk song about the pitiable situation of the sinner's soul:

The soul wandered lamenting,
Searching for its place.
It came to the gates of the stars.
The gates of the stars were closed
And the sinners' bodies were stacked.
"Bodies, bodies, sinful bodies,
Is my place here?"
"Oh, soul, sinner's soul,
Your place is not here."

Lamenting sorrowfully, the soul went to the gates of the moon, and to the gates of heaven asking the same question, but it could not find its proper place. Finally it came to the gates of hell and asked again:

"Bodies, bodies, sinful bodies,
Is my place here?"
"Oh, soul, great sinner's soul,
Your place is here;
Razors and knives are in the bedding
And tar is boiling in the cauldrons."

Although for many centuries Lithuanians lived under varying conditions, they preserved their customs, traditions, folk songs and language. Quite often one hears foreigners wondering how Lithuania, a small country surrounded by Slavs and Germans, was able to preserve its old beautiful language and customs until the present time. One of the reasons may be that Christianity was supported by a polonized nobility and propagated by priests, most of whom did not speak Lithuanian. However, little by little Christianity started to penetrate into the people's minds and into the folklore. There can be seen in the folklore a struggle between the adoration of nature and the Christian religion. The old faith gradually started to weaken and to lose its mystical force. Still, some of the old beliefs remain, especially those concerning the relationships with the deceased.

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