

## THE CULTURAL COMPONENTS OF ETHNIC IDENTITY RETENTION AMONG BINGHAMTON, NEW YORK LITHUANIANS

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It has often been assumed in the sociological literature on American immigrant groups that ethnic identity dissipates with the passage of time.<sup>1</sup> This "melting pot" concept of American ethnicity continues to be held among the general populace despite the ever growing evidence to the contrary (e.d., Glazer and Moynihan 1970; Greely 1974; Parenti 1967). It is not uncommon to hear among post World War II Lithuanian immigrants, for example, the lament that their predecessors in the United States had lost a substantial portion of their "lietuvybė," or lithuanianness (read ethnicity). One reason why this simplistic view of American ethnicity continues to exist is that there are few actual case studies of changes in ethnic identities, and especially of the cultural content of those identities, among immigrant groups in this country. The purpose of this article is to present such a case study, focusing specifically on cultural retentions or modifications among one such immigrant group, with the intent of identifying the cultural components most resilient to change, and hence presumably most basic to ethnic identity.

The group under study is the Lithuanian community in Binghamton, New York. It was chosen for two primary reasons. First, it is isolated both in a physical and in a social sense from other Lithuanian communities in the United States. Reinforcement of ethnicity through inter-community contact is minimal. Second, the community has never been favored by post World War II immigrants as a place to settle, so that reinforcement of ethnicity through immigration likewise is minimal. Hence, it can be assumed that the major impetus for changes in basic ethnic concepts originated from within the community, and that this community will reflect the basic cultural components of ethnic identity.

The history of the Binghamton community bears close resemblance to other Lithuanian settlements established in great migrations around the turn of the century.<sup>2</sup> The primary impetus for settling in the area was the promise of work and security in the burgeoning shoe industry in Binghamton. As the numbers of immigrants rose, ethnic activities were organized, organizations were formed, and a section of the city readily identifiable as Lithuanian developed. After a bitter conflict involving various factions of the community, a Roman Catholic church was established, and a Lithuanian speaking priest was invited to be its pastor. Although intense ethnic activity continued even after the free flow of immigrants was stopped by the Immigration Act of 1924, already changes in ethnicity were discernible. Second generation Lithuanians, those born and raised in the United States, did not feel the compelling need to participate in the same ethnic institutions as their parents. Social mobility in this generation was beginning to draw individuals away from the core community and into the larger society, while physical mobility, made possible by a general rise in status and wealth allowed individuals to move outside of the perceived "ghetto." This gradual change in ethnic activity was accelerated by the events of World War II. Returning servicemen were not as willing to take on the responsibilities of leadership in ethnic associations. Many of these associations either ceased to function, or were seen as "old timers" groups.

As in other Lithuanian communities, Binghamtonians sponsored many refugees from the homeland after the War. Indeed, this initial influx of refugees was responsible for a substantial, although temporary, rejuvenation of ethnic activity in the community, especially in the political area. However, most of the refugees ultimately opted for the opportunities of the larger cities. Only a handful remained in Binghamton, and of these, only a very small portion continued to contribute to the maintenance of ethnic activity. Hence, the impact of the refugees was minimal in the long run, and the community continued its gradual lessening of ethnic oriented activity.

By the 1960's, most of the associations that had characterized the community in earlier days had ceased to function. A partial list of these would include Lithuanian supplementary schools, theater groups, choirs, political action groups, and literary societies. The Lithuanian National Association, a profit oriented group which controlled a large social hall in the Lithuanian section of the city, sold its facilities to a local opera company. Even fraternal benefit societies, which in earlier days had functioned both as insurance organizations and as social groups, largely ceased to function at the social level.

What is evident, then, in this brief overview of the history of the community, is a peaking of ethnic activity during the late 1920's and the 1930's, with a gradual decline that is still in evidence today. However, it must not be assumed that ethnicity as a social force has been eliminated from the lives of the Binghamton Lithuanians. Even more so, it must not be assumed that ethnic identity among this group has ceased to exist. My research has indicated that in the face of declining ethnic activity, Lithuanians continue to be characterized by a fairly defined concept of ethnic identity, which is supported and maintained by certain basic cultural and social traits. Some of these traits are adaptations to the local environment and have been treated elsewhere (Gedmintas 1979; 1978). Others, however, are retentions in the fullest sense of the word. It is to these characteristics which I now turn.

As I have indicated above, formal social activity in the community has exhibited a sustained decline since its peak in the 1930's. Such activity that remains may be grouped along two distinct lines: those that are church oriented, and those that are not. From the latter, only fraternal benefit societies continue to exhibit periodic and sometimes sporadic activity. Three major benefit societies are still present in the community. Two of these, the Lietuvių Romos Katalikų Susivienijimas Amerikoje (LRKSA), and the Susivienijimas Lietuvių Amerikoje (SLA), exist primarily to maintain the insurance benefits to which members are entitled. During my fieldwork, the LRKSA met on an annual basis while the SLA did not meet as a group at all. The social functions of these organizations, such as parties, picnics, dances, and concerts, which used to be so much a part of their existence, have all but ceased. The third benefit society, Lietuvių Darbininkų Susivienijimas (LDS), still organizes an annual affair, which combines business as well as social activities. At one such affair which I attended, most of the membership was at or near retirement age. The gathering itself seemed to function primarily

as an opportunity for the members to reestablish social ties and to provide a place where information about the membership could be freely exchanged. Yet, with this exception, the LDS, like its counterparts in the area, failed to provide any long term repetitive social activity.

Church related activities have fared better. The Catholic church provides the pre-established structure through which ethnic activity may be manifested. The repetitiveness of church attendance allows for members to reaffirm their ethnic identity through the maintenance of social ties with other Lithuanians. Even though the membership of the parish consists of a substantial proportion of non-Lithuanians, the church is still seen as the Lithuanian church in the area, and therefore the appropriate place to reaffirm one's identity. Various associations within the parish structure likewise serve to maintain some sense of identity. Membership in these associations, although technically open to all members of the parish, is composed primarily of Lithuanian parishioners, and activities sponsored by these associations often exhibit ethnic character. The parish choir, for example, has participated in a number of Lithuanian song festivals, the latest in Toronto in 1978. Thus, as a latent effect, the Lithuanian church in the community continues to provide the opportunity for ethnic activity to be manifested.

Much social contact which exists among the Lithuanians in Binghamton occurs on an informal level, that is, where there are no formal structures to guide interactions. These informal contacts may range from random meetings with fellow Lithuanians on the street, to the somewhat more organized friendship networks that still exist among members of the community. These types of contacts have the function of maintaining not only social ties, but also the social characteristics of the community. A number of examples will serve to illustrate the point. A number of my informants indicated that they had very little contact at that time with the community, except for chance meetings. During these meetings, the informants would exchange ethnic greetings, would ask about common acquaintances, and would inquire about the events in the community. For these informants, chance meetings were significant in that they provided an opportunity for the reaffirmation of their ethnic identity. Other informants indicated that they still maintained friendship networks with fellow Lithuanians., In one such example, a Lithuanian was able to identify three separate spheres of friends: those centering around his employment activities, those centering around his civil activities, and finally those centering around his ethnic background. Again, while not actively participating in structured ethnic activities, this person was able to reaffirm his ethnic identity through his informal social contacts.

Social contacts presume some degree of cultural similarity between interactors (Barth 1969; Keyes 1976), or what Handelman (1977) has called "categorical corporate holdings." This is, in effect, the glue which binds those who claim shared descent. It is only as this glue weakens that ethnic structures, both formal and informal, begin to break apart. Thus it is important to recognize the characteristics of this binding force in order to understand the patterns of changing ethnicity. Among the Binghamton Lithuanians, these similarities may be thought of as cultural retentions. I shall organize the presentation of cultural retentions according to the methods used in collecting the data. The first two areas are quite general and were examined through the use of observational techniques, while the remaining areas deal with specific retentions, data about which were collected via survey.<sup>3</sup>

**Retention of Surnames.** Although not normally presented as such, the retention of ethnic surnames is an important indicator of the cultural "glue" holding a group of people together. This is especially true of ethnic groups characterized by highly identifiable surnames, such as among Lithuanians. In these cases the surname acts as a strong boundary marker, identifying the bearer as a member of the group.

The pressure to change one's surname in the early days of immigration was indeed strong. Informants relate instances in which immigration officers, or shop foremen, or some other agents of the larger society would change the illiterate immigrant's name simply because the agents could not pronounce it. In other cases, Lithuanians voluntarily changed their surnames in order to eliminate what was perceived to be a stigma in the greater American society. Notwithstanding this pressure, however, most of the Binghamton Lithuanians chose to retain their surnames.<sup>4</sup> This is perhaps to be expected, since the possession of such a surname automatically allowed an immigrant to consider himself to be a member of the ethnic community and, for most, the community offered security in an otherwise cold, impersonal, and generally unknown world.

**Retention of Language.** Language has often been used as an indicator of acculturation of an ethnic group into a dominant group (Herskovits 1939; Gordon 1964). Schermer-horn (1949:5) defines ethnic minorities as ". . . subgroups within a culture which are distinguishable from the dominant group by reasons of differences in physiognomy, language, customs, or cultural patterns (including any combination of these factors)." Even among immigrants themselves, the use of an ethnic language is considered one of the paramount indicators of group membership (Weidman's 1961; Baskauskas 1971).

Among the Binghamton Lithuanians, there is discernible a distinct ambivalence toward the use of the Lithuanian language. During my period of research, intermittently covering a four year period, it was indeed rare for a community member to initiate a conversation with me in Lithuanian. With one exception, a post World War II refugee, even those who had a fair command of the language would address me in English. While Lithuanian was not the language of choice for interaction, it did play an important role in identifying and distinguishing group members. This was most apparent in events which the community members perceived as ethnic in nature. In parish picnics, parish annual dinners, and in benefit society socials, the use of catchwords or phrases in the Lithuanian language was almost mandatory, at least to initiate an interaction.

Once these perfunctory salutations were exchanged, the conversation generally reverted to English. These social situations also allowed members of the community to engage in lengthier conversations in the native language. At one such social, for example, I was quite surprised to note that a community member was quite fluent in the language, although he had given me no previous indication of being so.

Ambivalence to the native language in the community was also evident in respondents' answers to questions during extended interviews. When non-speakers were quizzed as to their desire to learn the Lithuanian language if the opportunity presented itself, half of those responding indicated in the negative, citing such reasons as "I have no use for it," or "I'm too old to learn it," or "There's no one to talk to anymore." In sum, then, the use of the native language in this community is indeed minimal. Yet it still maintains the function of identifying the individual as a Lithuanian, and of facilitating ethnic interaction, and as such is an important cultural retention.

**Art factual Retentions.** Approximately one third of those participating in the survey indicated that they possessed no Lithuanian artifacts. The responses from the remaining two thirds may be grouped into seven categories. Table I is a simple distribution of those categories.

TABLE I

**Distribution of Types of Artifacts Owned by Respondents (n = 37)**

Type of Artifact	No. of Responses	Percent
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Printed Works	22	59
Amber	17	46
Crafwork (including crosses)	12	32
Ethnic Clothing	9	24
Woven Cloth	7	19
Art Work	5	14
Records	3	8

A number of interesting features may be ascertained from this table. Printed material, both books and newspapers, were mentioned by 59% of the respondents. While this does seem to be a high percentage in a presumably acculturated ethnic group, it should be recalled that many of the respondents belong to at least one fraternal benefit society, and that each of these publishes bilingual periodicals for its members. Although I do not have the hard data, very few of these respondents had printed matter in other forms.

The possession of amber, a semi-precious stone made of petrified sap, by 46% of those responding is slightly more surprising. Amber has always been associated with Lithuanian culture, so that with increasing acculturation it would be expected that immigrants would ultimately lose this association. However, it is apparent that the Binghamton Lithuanians continue to associate amber with Lithuanian identity. When I asked how the amber was obtained, most said that they had inherited it as a family heirloom, brought initially by the original immigrants.

Surprising also is the figure that 24% of the respondents owned a set of the traditional ethnic costume. Ethnic clothing is expensive, difficult to obtain, and bulky to store. It's customary purpose among ethnic groups in America is one of exhibition. In Binghamton, however, because of the relatively low level of ethnic interaction, the opportunities to wear such clothing are few indeed. When asked for the purpose of owning the clothing, most responded that it was simply the costume's distinctiveness which attracted them. Hence, it seems that ethnic costume is a highly visible cultural retention, even when it serves no practical purpose.

**Food Retentions.** Food plays a major role in many social situations. It may be used as the "communion" over which social relationships are strengthened, or it may be used as an entree through which social relationships are initiated. Among ethnic groups, food has often taken on a symbolic nature, representing the group and setting it off from others. It is not surprising, then, that among the Binghamton Lithuanians food is indeed closely associated with ethnic identity. Most Lithuanians could identify a number of such ethnic foods, and even the least "ethnic" Lithuanian could identify some. Table 2 provides a list of the foods identified by respondents in the survey along with the number of times each food was mentioned.

An important feature of this table is that fully 26 various foods were identified at least once as being Lithuanian; with 5.5 being the mean number per respondent.<sup>5</sup> While the foods with the higher frequency of response may be assumed to be cultural retentions for the ethnic group, the foods with the lower frequencies of response are more problematic. Foods such as *antis*, *kiauliena*, and *kompotas* do not seem to characterize the ethnic group as a whole. Rather, they seem to be individual recollections of family life which have been imbued with ethnic characteristics.

TABLE 2

**Frequency of Foods Considered to be Lithuanian by Respondents (n = 37)**

Food	Number	Food	Number
Dešra	17	silkė	4
Virtieniai (Kaldūnai)	15	Grybai	3
Kopūstai	14	Kletskai	3
Bulviniai Blynai	13	Bandukės	3
Kugelis	12	Žalibarščiai	3
Ausiukės	10	Košeliena	3
Pyragas	9	Cepelinai	2
Barščiai	9	Kiaušiniénė	1
Kūčios Valgiai	6	Kiauliena	1
Šaltibarščiai	6	Kompotas	1
Vėdaras	6	Sūris	1
Balandėliai	6	Kraujo Sriuba	1
Rūgštus Pienas	5	Antis	1

The first three food items deserve special mention. *Dešra*, or sausage, mentioned 17 times, is not generally considered to be an ethnic food by Lithuanians in other areas. The reason for its high placement among the Binghamton Lithuanians is the fact that a delicious form of it is produced by a Lithuanian market owner in the heart of the Lithuanian district. This market and its sausage has been in existence in the area for decades, and has become an institution for local Lithuanians.

The second two most frequently mentioned foods are typically considered Lithuanian in most areas. However, in Binghamton this has been reinforced by the popularity of similar foods among other ethnic groups in the area. *Virtieniai*, or *kaldūnai*, has its counterpart among Slavic neighbors in the form of pihogii, which is served in virtually every social function which can remotely be labeled as "ethnic."

**Implications and Conclusion.** Two assessments regarding the Binghamton Lithuanians seem to be warranted. First, even though the community has lost much of its social vitality in the form of more formal organizational activity, it has nevertheless retained social contact through informal means. Through this contact some cultural traits seem to be maintained as identification markers. These include certain catchwords and phrases in the Lithuanian language, surnames, ethnic artifacts and clothing, and ethnic foods. The knowledge of these cultural traits allows for smooth articulation of ethnic social contacts.

Second, the cultural traits enumerated above seem to be those most closely associated with family identity. Many times during my period of research the informants would find it difficult to distinguish family traits from ethnic traits. Catchwords and phrases in the Lithuanian language were generally learned in the family environment. Ethnic artifacts in the possession of the community members were generally family heirlooms. Foods are remembered because "grandma made them so well." And certainly surnames are retained as family identification markers. Thus we see that there is an intimate connection between family identity and ethnic identity, with the former in effect fostering the latter. If this is the case, then the strength of ethnic phenomena does not lie in its "primordial" nature, as is suggested by Geertz (1963) and Keyes (1976), but in the solidarity of the family. Hence it would be possible for a family to be completely isolated in the ethnic sense, and still maintain the potential for ethnic behavior, since the identity necessary for such behavior is couched within its structure.

Seen in such light, the ethnic characteristics of the Binghamton Lithuanians makes sense. What remains of ethnic behavior is reinforced through family ties, and is symbolized by the basic cultural retentions. It would seem likely that similar processes are occurring among other ethnic communities in the United States.

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1 The material presented here was collected as part of a larger anthropological study on the process of ethnic identity change among Lithuanians in Binghamton, New York. An original version of it was presented at the meeting of the Association for the Advancement of Baltic Studies, Washington, D.C., 1980.

2 For a detailed presentation of the history of the community, see my earlier works (Gedmintas, 1978; 1980).

3 The data was collected by the use of an open-ended questionnaire administered to a sub-sample of 37 community members. For a more complete description of the methodological techniques employed, see Gedmintas (1979).

4 This was fortuitous for me as the researcher, since this enabled me to locate non-active Lithuanians by the use of lists such as the telephone directory, voting lists, and city directories.

5 Interestingly, while listed in Lithuanian, these foods were generally described to me in English, giving further indication of the demise of language in ethnic identity.