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## Jonas Balys. **Lietuvių žemdirbystės papročiai ir tikėjimai.**

(Lithuanian Agrarian Customs and Beliefs: Lithuanian Folk Traditions). Silver Spring, Maryland: Lithuanian Folklore Publishers, 1986. xxx plus 242 plus VIII pp. \$12.

The most prolific author and publisher of folklore among World War II refugees in North America is Dr. Jonas Balys. Now in his late seventies, he can look back on his numerous publications of Lithuanian folklore, archival data, and synthetical analyses and see amassed a record and a memory of a people whose way of life vanished with the post-World War II sovietization of Lithuania.

Dr. Balys studied folklore, ethnology, and history of religion in Lithuania and Austria (where he received his doctorate). He was director of the Lithuanian Folklore Archives from its inception in 1935 and remained there until 1944. During his tenure as director, collection projects were organized throughout Lithuania. By the time he left, more than 400,000 items of oral folklore were housed and classified at the Archives. Not unique to Lithuania, collection of folk materials occurred in other parts of Europe, particularly Eastern Europe. The method was to collect as many regional variants of a type as possible. Analysis would conclude how diverse and numerous a type was over time and space. Comparisons of data could then be made between regions in Lithuania and also with other countries. From these facts conclusions could be reached regarding the spread of folklore beliefs and customs, even their indigenous character. After the Soviet takeover, the Archives became part of the Institute of Lithuanian Language and Literature, itself part of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences in Vilnius.

*Lithuanian Agrarian Customs and Beliefs: Lithuanian Folk Traditions* is the tenth volume (all of them by Dr. Balys) in the series: *A Treasury of Lithuanian Folklore*, issued by Lithuanian Folklore Publishers, Silver Spring, Maryland. Previous volumes have included legends on the dead; folk magic and medicine; wedding customs; narrative folksongs; (two volumes) folksongs in America; calendrical festivals; childhood and marriage; and death and burial traditions. It is presumed that the data source for all of Dr. Balys' books are the same. The materials in *Lithuanian Agrarian Customs and Beliefs* come from the Lithuanian Folklore Archive, (*Lietuvių Tautosakos Archyvas — LTA*) and the Lithuanian Scientific Society, (*Lietuvių Mokslo Draugijas — LMD*).<sup>1</sup> They were copied into four large folders in Vilnius during 1942-43 and brought out by Dr. Balys. With only minor revisions those folders are reproduced as originally copied in Lithuania.

*Lithuanian Agrarian Customs and Beliefs* contains 3,008 items (200 pages) of beliefs and customs collected in all regions inhabited by ethnic Lithuanians. The vast majority are one or two sentence expressions (for example, item no. 2622: "eggs are collected for hatching before the full moon, (that way) the hens will be larger," (from Zarasai), though occasionally longer explanatory passages are quoted also. Each item's place of origin is given, and when the expression is not a summary of a number of similar items from the same location, a unique number is assigned, designating the particular archive where the item is housed and its number in the archival holding (for example, item No. 1177 is archival holding LTA 321/34-30 and describes the belief that in a year when there are many frogs, the potato harvest will be good (from Kovarskas).

Agrarian topics covered in the book include beliefs and customs concerning plowing; the sowing and planting of various grains, vegetables, and fruits; use of manure on the fields; hexing and protection rituals for fields, crops and animals; influence of lunar phases on agricultural as well as domestic work; divinations and charms related to harvest; and the thrashing and storing of agricultural harvest.

Important supplements to the text include Dr. Balys' articles written in 1942-43 for *Žemės Ūkis*. They are monographs on St. Georges's Day (the beginning of spring); driving cattle out to pasture for the first time; making the first furrow; corn spirit and harvest customs; and the veneration of Mother Earth. The articles should be read first as explanatory notes to the mass of variants found in the main body of the book. The final portion of the book includes seven photos of scenes from

the rural life of Lithuania. The Foreword and Introductory Notes are summarized in a separate English section of four pages. An interesting section for linguists is a list of 135 rare Lithuanian words and agrarian terms.

Apart from the four-page English summary, all entries are in Lithuanian. As is often true with languages of mini-nations, Lithuanian is almost exclusively practiced only by its inhabitants. Save for a few linguists, rare are the specialists from other lands and disciplines who find it necessary to learn Lithuanian. Add to this the rarer occurrence of Lithuanian folklorists in exile, and Dr. Balys' tenth volume (as well as his other publications) must be seen as material slated either for specialists in Lithuania, or as entertainment literature for the older generation of immigrants and exiles. In any case, those interested may find it difficult getting a copy since only 300 were printed. With each passing year, as the linguistically competent community dwindles, it is difficult to imagine who will make use of this material in the West. Dr. Balys' book — really, Dr. Balys's work in exile — is a rarity not just for its methodology of geographic distribution but also for the fact that the variants collected so long ago are now presented in Lithuanian. Scholars interested in Eastern European folklore and ethnography are not legion; fewer still can read Lithuanian.

Dr. Balys's publications in the *Lithuanian Folklore Treasury* series must be seen as the dutiful attempts of a scholar to present an era of a pre-sovietized and pre-industrialized folk society now presumed vanished. Dr. Balys sees the sovietization of the noble peasant as a crime, a process which truncated and finally killed a society of folk. The question remains, though, whether that society would not have changed anyway. Industrialization and urbanization are worldwide trends. No doubt it would have, although under circumstances of independence. It would be interesting to hear how he thinks industrialization and urbanization would have affected agrarian practices and especially beliefs in an independent Lithuania.

The collection of multi-variant forms of any kind of folklore is not very popular in academic circles these days. Yet, systematic analysis of artifacts — oral or artifactual — requires sufficient numbers of them from a region to allow statements to be made on tradition trends such as styles, attributes, and patterns. The analytical trend in folk culture studies today is concerned more with micro-analysis and symbolic meanings, not geographic distributions. This, at least, is the situation in the West. Such comparative temporal-geographic studies are rare, these days confined more to Eastern European ethnographic approaches. In the West, the most notable user of such data is Algirdas Greimas, the "French" semiologist. Although his general interest is in narrative structures, he has written long studies in the Lithuanian language discussing possible hierarchies of mythological deities and aspects of structuralism. But even here, Greimas's work on Lithuanian mythology rarely, if ever, appears in Western languages.

Dr. Balys's intentions for printing this volume and the others (basically a reprinting of archival files) seem to be twofold: to establish a printed record of materials not available in the West and to proclaim the existence of such traditions in the face of a sovietized Lithuania where, he believes, agrarian traditions have been changed, if not intentionally destroyed. His scholarly works are really proclamations to those enforcers of sovietization that the cultural heritage they may have hushed has not been forgotten. Although the materials Dr. Balys presents, and more, exist in Soviet Lithuanian archives, the net effect of Dr. Balys's efforts throughout the years has been to create an independent archive of Lithuanian oral culture to rival the Soviet cache. Dr. Balys's printed archival materials outnumber publications produced in Lithuania, or at least, his publications are available more readily than Soviet ones.

Dr. Balys believes that the subject of agrarian customs and beliefs is ignored in today's Lithuania. The customs and beliefs, coming from a "pre-kolhoz era," lasted until about 1920, or before the villages were divided into single farms. According to him, knowledge and memory of those times lasted until 1939, which is the year, presumably, that the Lithuanian Folklore Archives of independent Lithuania stopped collecting field data from informants still old enough to remember, if not practice, "those ancient times." Dr. Balys points to Prane Dundulienė's 1963 ethnography, *Agriculture in Lithuania*, as evidence that Soviet emphasis is on material culture studies and not on beliefs, many of which are denigrated as backward.

In view of the fact that the political situation is such as to make access to Soviet folklore archives difficult, Dr. Balys has been almost alone in creating access to such materials in the West. Any future attempts to analyze North American-based Lithuanian folk culture will have to compare it to what was brought from the homeland. Dr. Balys's contribution at that point will be immeasurable.

With the general paucity of scholarly studies of Lithuanian-Americans emanating from Lithuanian exile communities, it is ironic to see Dr. Balys's latest publication. As important as it is to amass a record of Lithuania's past, the continued emphasis on it only underscores the Lithuanian DP attitude — emotionally self-absorbed with the tragedy of leaving their homeland. Scholarship should reach beyond myopic views of the self. The past should include records of all levels of Lithuanian immigration and societies, especially occurrences of them on this continent. The DPs have yet to accept the fact that they are here to stay, that they are part of this country, that they are not the sole guarantors of both folk and fine culture in Lithuania. The overwhelming majority of literary efforts coming out of the exile communities deals with the lost past, with institutions and notables in the DP community, or with the analysis of historical periods in the Baltic area. Except for a few publications, the record has been remarkably singular in avoiding pre-World War II immigrants and their history, especially their folklore. The attitude has been to dismiss the old immigrants as unsophisticated (and thus historically unworthy) distant cousins of the highly educated DPs.

Dr. Balys's current tome comes at a time when the human resources in all types of Lithuanian communities (including informants and research scholars!), of old immigrants and DPs also, are fast disappearing. Yet there are no efforts being made to collect from them and to write social and ethnographic histories. Unlike Finland, which can send its current-day scholars to analyze their peoples' transition into North American societies, Soviet Lithuania will not allow its scholars to pursue such nationalistic projects; at least, not yet. The tragedy is that among the DPs there is a ready made cadre of scholars and specialists who could have recorded both the oral and the material culture of their North American forbearers. Yet, they are idle in such efforts. Alfred Senn, in his monograph on Jonas Basanavičius,<sup>2</sup> Lithuania's nineteenth century Renaissance Leader and the Patron Saint of Folklore, bemoaned the lack of literature on Basanavičius's life: "... there had been remarkably little done to present his life systematically." Moreover, "The Lithuanians long showed a certain reticence in discussing their contemporary history in print." The children of the old immigrants (now long gone) are quickly disappearing too, and with them a unique culture. Rather, we spend all of our energies lamenting the lost homeland.

In spite of vastly different political conditions between Lithuanian refugees and their brothers and sisters in the homeland, the nineteenth century poet of the national revival, Lithuania's most revered poet, Maironis, captured for all times every Lithuanian's longing for the pristine past of the land which nurtured the forefathers and their language: "and to hear once more but one live word from those ancient times." In the foreword to *Lithuanian Agrarian Customs and Beliefs*, Dr. Balys affirms that "such words are also found in this collection."

Ričardas Vidutis

<sup>1</sup> The collections under Soviet administration are designated as MATR *Mokslų Akademijos tautosakos rankraščiai* — *Academy of Sciences Folklore Manuscripts* and LTR (*Lietuvių tautosakos rankraščiai* — Lithuanian Folklore Manuscripts).

<sup>2</sup> Alfred Erich Senn, *Jonas Basanavičius: The Patriarch of the Lithuanian National Renaissance* (Newtonville, Mass: Oriental Research Partners, 1980) p. 81.