

Aspects of Devolutionary Time in Lithuanian Folklore

The human race's special interest in time is clearly reflected in various cultural phenomena. Time is usually treated both as fascinating and frightening. This multi-dimensional cultural category can be analyzed in many different ways from various points of view.

In his book *Categories of Medieval Culture*, the famous Russian historian Aaron Gurevich asserts that "time is a chain of human generations." According to this researcher, when talking about time, the main point is generation and its constant shift (Gurevičius 1989: 94). Of course, the Russian historian deals with medieval people's worldviews and perception of time. This epoch could be considered a turning point, when people reoriented themselves from a circular perception of time to a linear one. An optimistic attitude towards an ideal past and a pessimistic one towards the approaching dark future became prevalent. Such pattern of time perception is typical not only of medieval society; it can be traced in many different cultures, in the course of different epochs. This, however, will be discussed later, while at the moment it is to be noted that this book became a source of inspiration for the author of this article to look more closely at this phenomenon. Furthermore, the ideas in the book closely corresponded to certain personal observations. During fieldwork sessions or accidental meetings with people, certain human attitudes towards the present, past and future became visible. Such opinions were quite similar, and are there-

fore likely to have stemmed from the local worldview. People seem likely to maintain that the past was better, while the coming future is unwarranted and even terrible catastrophes might be approaching.

The focus of analysis in this article is time as a permanent gradation of human life, i.e. how people imagine and treat their past, present and future. In order to highlight these attitudes, Lithuanian folklore materials from the beginning and the middle of the 19th century are mainly used, as well as some materials from the second half of the 20th century. Such a choice is intentional, in order to demonstrate cultural changes or some inherited aspects of worldview. The selected period is very important for Lithuanians in many ways. During this time great economic and cultural changes took place, as result of which the country people gradually (or sometimes even drastically) altered their nature-oriented worldviews, adjusting them to the modern and more comfortable but fearsome surroundings. The new generation and totally different customs created an atmosphere of uncertainty.

The theme for analysis selected here is not an entirely new one, but with reference to the classical mode of time perception known in various cultures, an attempt is made to trace an outline of this pattern in the Lithuanian worldview and to distinguish its special local features.

Concepts of Cyclic and Linear Time

One of the oldest images of time was the idea of cyclic time that dominated the Eastern and Antique world. This concept of time, according to researchers, was formed in the archaic culture on the basis of the observation of cyclical processes in nature. At first, people started counting time by the movements of heavenly bodies, and time therefore was imagined as cyclical. Thus, a cyclical character and recurrence were its main features (Artemenko 2004: 59). According to this idea, time has a beginning and an end, but is constantly restored through the rituals of resurrection (the collective repetition of the cosmogonic act). It is here that the concept of "eternal return" (also known as "eternal recurrence") is encountered, maintaining that our world was recurring and is going to keep recurring an unlimited number of times. This can be compared to the lunar phases: appearance, waxing, waning, disappearance and

reappearance after three dark nights. The same processes occur at the cultural level as well: the birth of humankind, its development, aging and disappearance, following which the new generation is born again (Eliade 1996: 84).

Meanwhile, in some cultures, sometimes alongside with the above-mentioned cyclic time, the perception of linear time was also recognized. The image of linear time is distinguished through certain stable traits: time has a beginning and an end, while human life moves from good living conditions towards increasingly worse ones, eventually approaching the end of the world. Such an idea seems to have been well established throughout the ages (Santillana and von Dechend 1977: 146).

The concept of the gradation of human life is very common in numerous cultures. From the historical perspective, human time consists of certain epochs that differ in the quality of life. According to the classical mythology, the stages of human existence on Earth are defined as the “Ages of the World”. Undoubtedly, this idea was not so clearly expressed in folklore, as the task of structuring was performed by the rather more “competent” individuals capable of discerning the basic cultural ideas, summarizing them and unifying in order to produce special stories about the periods of human life. Such work was done by the Greek and Roman authors, maintaining that human life usually begins with a “Golden Age”, after which the “Silver”, “Bronze”, and “Iron Ages” follow, each of them gradually declining in quality of life. E.g., the Greek author Hesiod described a series of the human races going downhill, starting with people from the “golden” age and finishing with ones from the “iron” age (i.e. ourselves) (Ashe 2001: 76).

Very similar ideas can be found in the Christian literature. The Christian historical periodization established by St Augustine around 400 AD consists of the Six Ages of the World. It is based on the Christian religious events, starting with birth of Adam and reaching up to the Revelation. This model of timing was in use throughout the Middle Ages and until the Enlightenment. Quite similar ideas can be found in the religious and philosophical traditions of the Orient.

The Golden Age?

The question mark at the end of this subtitle signifies the author’s doubts or uncertainty regarding this phenomenon. Researchers

invented the concept of the Golden Age in order to emphasize the idea that previous times were better for living and various activities. Actually, the Golden Age is never perceived as such at the moment of its passing; it can only be defined after some time when compared to other periods. It is always alive solely in human memory, and sometimes people attempt to renew it for a very short time. One need think only of the case of the Roman Saturnalia in December, the last month of the Roman year, when people used to commemorate Saturn, the Ruler of the Golden Age, under whose reign there was no war, no slavery, no bloody sacrifices or inequality of classes (Frazer 1994: 583). This initial stage of the human life has many advantages, and this period of life is imagined as some kind of ideal society, calling to mind the idea of paradise.

Thus, the Golden Age is a conditional category, usually formulated to emphasize regret for the lost perfect conditions and to refresh memories about the ideal past. Interestingly enough, this pattern of time perception functions on two levels: that of the individuals (manifesting mostly in personal memories about one's youth or happy periods of life) and that of the society (images of the happy life of the ancestors). In this article, we shall focus on the latter. A similar pattern in the Lithuanian worldview will be traced with regard to the abovementioned aspects of the concept of linear time.

No such concept is very clearly developed in Lithuanian folklore; no special cycles of folk narratives told to illustrate life during different periods of time have been created. However, some evidence of the previous existence of such images in the Lithuanian worldview could be found in various genres of folk narratives, e.g. mostly in the local legends and beliefs, depicting the gradual changes in the course of time.

Semiotician Algirdas Julien Greimas briefly touched upon this theme, admitting that Lithuanians had a particular notion of historical time. According to this researcher, this image comprised three successive human races: from the ancient giants to the present human race and to the very small future folk (Greimas 1990: 218). Here, Greimas referred to the Lithuanian local legends in which this image of a triple humankind is expressed.

In Lithuanian folklore, there is a cycle of local legends describing the first people, who were said to have been of enormous size, i.e. giants. They could cover long distances (100 km) in a short time (LTt 4 No. 630); they passed tools to each other standing five miles apart (KŽA No. 229). The narratives about shaping the local landscape also employed the image of these mythical beings. Giants were believed to have altered the local relief by making huge hills, mounds,

dunes, or building the local churches. The development of the giant's image into a kind of historical character was highly influenced by some realistic details. Numerous local legends about the origins of mounds assert that hills are the burial sites of the giants. In many Lithuanian localities there are mounds called *Milžinkapis* or *Milžino kapas* ("the giant's grave"), clearly reflecting the old beliefs about our huge forefathers (KŽA No. 84).

The notion of giant ancestors existing in the past was likely to have been influenced by accidental findings. Peasants working in the fields as often as not used to find unknown or strange things. According to the local legends, the huge bones thus found were fragments of the skeletons of giants: a giant's bone reached the size of a man (VEMD No. 9), fibula was bigger than a man (GRA No. 57), the size of the shinbones was three metres (LTR 4545/307/), while giants' teeth were as big as kneading-troughs (LTR 2884/196/, 2884/196/).

Presumably, the findings depicted in these narratives were remnants of the huge bones of domestic animals, e.g. horses and other animals found in barrows and nearby. According to the ancient Lithuanian customs, these animals used to be buried together with their owners, as it was believed that the deceased needed the same items for their life in the afterworld (Kerbelytė 1970: 63). Researchers also consider the version that remnants of the large extinct vertebrates could inspire legends of giants and monsters (Mayor 2000: 376).

Finding the ancient neck rings also enhanced the beliefs in giants. Until the beginning or even the middle of the 20th century the archaeological findings still contained great mysteries for the Lithuanian peasants, who were ignorant about the real purpose of the discovered things, and thus treated the neck rings as rings of the huge ancestors. People named the discovered neck rings as "giants' rings": e.g. "a ring was found a size of a wheel. Giants are said to have worn such rings on their fingers" (LTR 4815/89/); "once a silver ring a size of a bucket handle was found. It is said to be a giant's ring" (LTR 3665/1134/).

The time when giants lived, as a rule, is distanced very much into the mythical ages and set prior to the Flood (VEMD No. 27; LTt 4 No. 630; DSPSO No. 61). Therefore in some cases the fall of this race is explained as the result of a natural cataclysm. However, sometimes the era of giants expires when the Earth is perceived as no longer being able to sustain these huge creatures and they begin to die out (LTR 2083/112/).

Gradually, the giants acquired the increasingly numerous features of historical personages. Giants are depicted in some local legends

as heroes fighting against the traditional enemies of Lithuania – the Swedish soldiers (Dulaitienė-Glemžaitė 1958: 28–9). Actually, the chief military confrontation of the Lithuanian and Swedish armies occurred in the 17th century, so this example was meant to demonstrate the fabulous bravery of the Lithuanian ancestors. Like lots of other similar ideas, this notion was devised to serve a particular purpose, i.e. to form or support the national consciousness movement, and to keep it from deteriorating during periods of occupation and loss of statehood from 1795 to 1918, when Lithuania was under the rule of the Russian Empire. At this time there were almost no rights to foster the national identity, which at best used to be identified with Polish nationality. Probably because of these circumstances the image of the Lithuanian giant ancestors appeared or was perhaps rediscovered anew.

That is why the texts about the heroic Lithuanian past were so popular, e.g.: “Giants used to live in this world. /.../ They were strong and fast. Therefore Lithuania was a very militant and strong country thousands of years ago /.../” (LTR 855/17/). When arguments about the glorious Lithuanian past seem to be lacking, sometimes it suffices to say: “Long ago people were bigger and stronger” (LTR 4631/35/). This expresses regret for losing certain qualities and nostalgia for the ancient times, so typical of Romanticism. The nostalgic idea of a strong and militant Lithuania also surfaces in some local legends about the sleeping Saint Casimir’s army,¹ which is believed to be waiting for a critical moment in the history of Lithuania in order to come to its aid (KŽA No. 6, 8).

The idea of the giant Lithuanian ancestors was known and popular among various layers of society, and was especially exploited by the people working in the cultural sphere. As early as the beginning of the 19th century the romantic Lithuanian authors maintained that Lithuanians were descendants of giants. The romantic Lithuanian writer and cultural researcher L. A. Jucevičius admitted that Lithuanians considered themselves to be descendants of giants and believed that the human race has been continuously diminishing over the course of time until eventually reaching its present size (Jucevičius 1959: 581).

The image of Lithuanians as male or female giants was so deep-rooted that it also penetrated into national poetry.

1.

Saint Casimir Jagiellon (Lithuanian: Kazimieras; Polish: Kazimierz) – the Patron saint of Poland and Lithuania. He is a real historical person, a prince of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania (1458–84). Casimir possessed great charm and was noted for his justice and chastity. Due to his devout faith and excessive fasting, he developed severe lung problems and died at the age of 25. Several miracles are ascribed to him. Casimir was canonized by the Vatican as Saint Casimir in 1522. There is a chapel of Saint Casimir in Vilnius Cathedral, where his remains rest.

In the beginning of the 20th century the romantic Lithuanian poets used to portray the Lithuanian ancestors as ancient hero-giants, expressively regretting that only their graves were now left to remind people of the glorious past. In the romantic Lithuanian poetry, created to exalt the historical Lithuanian past, the Lithuanian warrior fighting against the crusaders, badly wounded and dying, used to be also depicted as a hero-giant. The most famous romantic Lithuanian poet Maironis, writing about the Lithuanian past, regretted that “the giants’ bones are rotting,” implying that in the past people used to be more patriotic, burning with desire to fight for their homeland.

The entire body of romantic fiction of that time is overflowing with nostalgic feelings for the spiritual and physical grandeur of the ancestors. Thus, the desire to return to the times of the brave and strong people is expressed. Therefore in such cases the word “giant” should be perceived essentially in the metaphorical sense.

Such romantic imagery can also be noted in the patriotically minded press of the first half of the 20th century. People interested in Lithuanian history used to passionately collect various pieces related to the idealized past and publish these things in the special periodicals. Here is an example from such a paper: “In olden times the ancient warrior-giants used to be buried around Želba Lake. Up to now these graves have retained the shape of little hills called the giants’ graves /.../” (LTR 3098/296/).

The materials discussed above clearly demonstrate tendencies towards idealizing the primeval human life. The image of the Lithuanian ancestor-giant served as a symbol of the glorious past and helped foster the national identity.

Expectations of the Future

People always had a general fear of the unknown. It is much more difficult to imagine the coming future than to remember the past events. Therefore narratives touching upon the future of the human race make quite a small number when compared to the legends describing the past. The present situation, as a rule, seems worse than moments from the past, while a distinctly negative attitude towards the unknown future is expressed.

The present human race is believed to consist of people who appeared after the fall of the giants. The process of change is implied to have occurred simultaneously, because some contacts or even conflicts between giants and the present people are also described. Having spotted a man, the giant wants to kill or even drown him

(LTR 3470/154/).

However, giants mostly look at people with a kind of pity, albeit recognizing that the future belongs to this small race. There is a type of folk narrative that is particularly noteworthy in this respect. Internationally, it is known as a tale of magic *The Giant's Toy* (ATU 701), while in Lithuanian folklore it is regarded as a local legend. There are 68 Lithuanian variants recorded, displaying the confrontation between the human and the giant's child. The giant's son finds a farmer ploughing his field, and brings the man together with his plough and oxen home:

Once upon a time, when you and I were not yet in this world, a giant made his way along the road, and saw a common man ploughing a field. The giant put the man, the ox, and the horse into his pocket, carried them home, and, showing them to his household, said:

"Look at the little worms I found tearing up the earth. They must be killed!"

It was perhaps his father who said:

"Don't kill them. These are humans. They will soon spread over the entire earth and inhabit it. Take them back."

The giant took them back and put them in the same place.
(LHL No. 16)

This and other variants of the narratives reflect the traditional attitude towards the future: it is rather pessimistic and negative. The tendency of decline of the human race noted above is expected to become increasingly evident. According to the local legends, which present some information regarding the folk ideas about the future of the human race, the humans in the future are expected to be very small and weak, e.g.: "People used to say that big and strong people once lived. Their arms were the size of my thigh. People of the last several generations have grown weaker and weaker. They are going to be so weak that it will take nine men to kill one chicken /.../" (VEMD No. 29).

There are many different beliefs about the future folk, mostly asserting that our generation is going to be replaced by a very small race: "After us very small people will live, it will take nine men to kill a single chicken /.../" (LTR 4545/207/); "I heard that it will take seven men to kill a single chicken and they would barely even manage [to kill it]. They will be so small!" (LTR 4545/345/).

Admittedly, for the storytellers the distance separating the people of the past and present is so huge not only because of their differing

size. The difference is also in the quality of life, and sometimes it seems to be a little bit ironical:

The ancient people were very strong: people say that bullets could not get through their hair! And now young people are already bald. Ancient people had no use for tractors or cars; they dug ground and built such buildings that have been standing for hundreds of years now. /.../ And they lived for so long. Well, how long do people live now?! (LTR 3905/374/)

Great changes are expected to be awaiting not only the human race, but also the whole world. Therefore beliefs about the very small future generation are sometimes mixed with fearful images of the end of the world: "Right before the end of the world the people will be very small, the trees will not grow, there will be no harvest. The earth will get cold" (LTR 2572/93/).

This pessimism is enhanced by observations of nature that according to the storytellers seems to be increasingly different and strange. The ideal past is conjured up as a stark contrast to the present situation, and the future is depicted in even darker colours. Here are some common ideas regarding the past, present and future, recorded from peasants living in the middle of the 19th century:

You see, all things are getting weaker and frailer. Trees do not stand for such a long time as before. Sometimes you can find an oak or another tree uncorrupted beneath the ground, while now, if you wish to dig in and erect an oaken pole, it would rot off and fall down in a few years. But if you dig an old oak in, it will stand for a long time.

The people today are not as strong as the past generation. People say that before the Judgment Day the folk will be so small that it will take nine men to kill a single chicken. (SlŠLSA No. 332)

Here, we encounter ideas of the approaching end of the world. Such an attitude is termed an eschatological mentality (Mazour-Matusevich 2005: 129).

Eschatological Moods

Beliefs about the world not being eternal and stable are known in many cultures. The concept of fatalism is especially characteristic of the medieval worldview. There are several basic convictions concerning the eschatological mentality.

First of all, it is believed that the world moves from creation towards the end. The flow of history is directed from the act of heavenly creation towards the Judgment Day. This perception of time is based on three points: the beginning of the world, its culmination and the end of the human race. Time is linear and irreversible; and the attitude towards it is pessimistic. Time, as well as the world, is constantly decaying, it does not lead people to progress. The best and the happiest human years have been left far in the past and an atmosphere of moral decline is setting in. There are evident signs predicting the coming end of the world, e.g., the constant diminution and attenuation of the surroundings. The earlier people are considered to have been healthy and strapping, while the present ones are described as puny and slim. All things are worsening; the constant aging of this world occurs. Every innovation that has not been verified by time is viewed with suspicion and a conviction that all change inevitably leads to decline (Gurevičius 1989: 111).

Yet the roots of the human consciousness reach far deeper than the Middle Ages, therefore analogous ideas about a worsening situation were known prior to the Middle Ages as well. However, some similar notions can also survive for centuries or even survive today. Thus numerous traits of the eschatological imagination are distinctly reflected in the traditional Lithuanian worldview.

Folk narratives describing the coming end of the world were first recorded in the beginning of the 19th century, and they usually reflected fear of the unknown and a reluctance to adjust to the new living conditions. Premonitions of the coming future were mixed with fear of technological innovations that gravely disrupted the simplicity of life, and violence against nature:

All the things spoken of by the elderly people have come true now. It was said that at first there would be stone roads, and afterwards, iron roads; people would talk with each other across long distances, fly in the air, travel without horses; and what do we see now? (SiŠLSA No. 332)

The technical progress made a huge impression on the country people; their first encounters with the hitherto unseen objects might seem very funny for a modern person. We can only imagine what people felt about seeing huge machines driving without horses harnessed and puffing out black smoke. Here is an example which describes the reaction of a man first spotting a car on a country road:

A man was working when he saw a car approaching. He immediately left his work and ran across the fields waving his hands and shouting: "The Devil! The Devil!" However, other people said: "It isn't driven by the devil; the horse is hidden inside the car and drives it, we just can't see it". (LTt 4 No. 810)

The appearance of trains elicited very similar emotions. The country people believed trains to be the devil's machine (SIŠLSA No. 520). The expected appearance of aircraft also aroused fear: "Before the end of the world people will fly using iron engines" (LTR 4480/150/). Going by tram was seriously treated as selling one's soul to the devil (LTR 3905/959/).

Other technological innovations, for instance radio, produced similar reactions. In Lithuania, radio sets have been used among the country population since 1924. At that time it was an invention which elicited major interest and surprise. Incapable of understanding the principle of its functioning, the country people treated the radio like something close to a miracle or regarded it as strange and dangerous equipment:

The first radio set was a crystal set. After my father died I turned it on. /.../ When my aunt came to visit, I put the headphones onto her head. She was devout. After listening to the broadcast, she said: "My son, it looks very nice and good, but this equipment isn't for good, it's for the devil". (LTR 4793/221/)

The appearance of technological innovations was considered to be among many signs predicting the coming dark and catastrophic future. There were many other future prognostications shaded with religious feelings. The end of the world used to be related to the coming religious figure - the Antichrist: "The time will come, the devil will arrive in an engine. Those that go with him will have to eat white bread, and whoever refuses will have to eat black bread. This devil is the Antichrist" (LTR 4480/109/).

The most terrifying thing for the people, of course, was war - the time when all dreams and possibilities of ordinary people were shattered. It is quite understandable why a premonition of the approaching war is reflected in the following folk narrative: it was recorded in 1938, when disastrous historical events were already evolving in Europe:

Earlier folk said that the time would come, the Antichrist would arrive by an engine, and the end of the world would be near. /.../

After the wars were over, only two kingdoms would be left. There would be plenty of bread, but nobody to eat it, because the remaining population would be too scarce. (LTR 1948/298/)

In some cases the memorable historical events made such a great influence on the worldview of the local people that an eschatological myth was born (Ots 1996: 286–308).

All of these prophecies, so naïve at first sight, were recorded at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century or even later. Most of them seem likely to have been influenced by church sermons or ecclesiastical literature. Still, the most notable influence was exercised by a single written source, namely, the *13th Book of Sybil* (the so-called *Prophecy of the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon*). Its first Lithuanian edition appeared in New York in 1880 (at the end of the 19th century Lithuania was still part of the Russian Empire and printing in the Latin Lithuanian alphabet was prohibited). The book was translated from Polish. A second edition followed in 1888. But only a new edition, published in 1924, turned this book into a bestseller across the Lithuanian countryside. It certainly made a big influence on the local people's worldviews and is still quite popular even in contemporary Lithuania.

Nevertheless, some researchers maintain that assertion of all the folk prophecies regarding the coming dark future having originated from the ecclesiastical books hardly holds true; such connections only illustrate a wish of the country people to verify the reliability of the given facts. Books and the printed word in general were greatly respected in the peasant society; therefore such pseudo-academic citations are likely to appear in eschatological folk narratives (Panchenko 2007). Such opinion could be confirmed by data from non-Christian peoples who also entertained beliefs in the future world cataclysm and the approaching end of the world (Eliade 2006: 135).

In the course of analysis, a general scheme regarding notions of human existence in Lithuanian folklore was obtained. During different periods of existence, human thought retained quite similar categories of value. Human life was imagined to be deteriorating from a good condition to a worse one. The notions about dark perspectives of the future, connected with ideas about the gradual degradation of the human race, make up part of the local worldview comprising visions of the prospective future life.

However, in order to avoid finishing on such a pessimistic note, one philosophically-minded and optimistic storyteller could be quoted: "It's written in the books that it will take nine men to kill a single chicken. But who knows whether people will be so small or chickens so big?" (LTR 3470/154/).

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Abbreviations

ATU = Uther, Hans-Jörg

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LTR

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