

The Concept of Postmortem Retribution: The Surveyor's Soul as *ignis fatuus* (in Lithuanian Material)

Jūratė Šlekonytė, Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore

Ignis fatuus is a ghostly light seen by people who travel when it is dark. According to a wide-spread scientific theory, ghostly lights that appear in moist places may be caused by the spontaneous combustion of gases emitted from rotting organic matter. However, people once lacked such scientific knowledge, and so developed certain beliefs about the phenomenon of these ghostly lights. Thus, in traditional beliefs, these lights were considered otherworldly manifestations, opening them to the formation of a peculiar mythic image discussed here as *ignis fatuus*.

Beliefs about *ignis fatuus* [Latin 'foolish fire'] are found worldwide (motif *Ghost-like lights* E530.1 in Thompson 1955–1958). Distinct terms for this phenomenon are found in many languages, including Latvian (*malduguns* ['misleading fire']), Polish (*ogniki* ['lights.DIM']), *świeczki* ['candlesticks'], *świczki* ['candles.DIM'], *błądne ogniki* ['wandering lights.DIM']), Russian (*блуждающие огни* ['wandering lights'], *болотные огни* ['swamp lights'], *бесовские огни* ['devil's lights']), German (*Irrlicht* ['false light'], *Sumpflicht* ['swamp light']), British English (*will-o'-wisp*, *corpse candle*, *jack-o'-lantern*, *friar's lantern*), American English (*spook-lights*, *ghost-lights*), French (*le feu follet* ['foolish fire']), Italian (*fuoco fatuo* ['foolish fire']), and so on. These are only a few examples of a rich body of traditions surrounding the concept of *ignis fatuus*.

Lithuanian terms for it will be introduced and discussed below. The Lithuanian Folklore Archive contains nearly 500 belief legends about *ignis fatuus* from the 19th century to the mid-20th century. However, ideas about this entity continue to be recorded from inhabitants of rural areas. These sources provide the primary material for the present discussion.

The beliefs about *ignis fatuus* form a very broad topic and many of its aspects require further research. In order to introduce the

Lithuanian material, this paper briefly presents forms of *ignis fatuus*, explanations of its origin, its relationship to the human environment, and its connection to the otherworld as reflected in Lithuanian traditions. Thereafter the analysis narrows its focus to discuss more thoroughly belief legends in which *ignis fatuus* is treated as a surveyor's soul. The analysis raises questions concerning why people of such a profession must suffer as *ignes fatui*, and how this relates to the postmortem image of the soul: the places of souls' presence, and the paths they wander. Although the phenomenon is conventional in the legend tradition, this paper considers how it appears to have developed at the interface of the belief tradition with historical processes and thus may reflect a social tension from an earlier period.

Lithuanian ignis fatuus Traditions in Overview

In Lithuanian folk belief, this ghost-light figure is a being known as *žiburinis*, a noun derived from the Lithuanian word *žiburys* ['a light; lantern'], and thus referring to the entity's radiance. Sometimes it is called *klystžvakė* ['wandering candle'] or simply *žvakutė* ['candle.DIM'] or *liepsnelė* ['flame.DIM'].

The time when *ignis fatuus* appears is usually restricted to periods when it is dark. The lights are most commonly visible at twilight or at night when the source of the illumination is clearly distinguished from dark surroundings. Sometimes it is associated with a mythic time, such as midnight. Observers of this phenomenon sometimes point out that the lights appear in the autumn. It is possible that such belief extends from natural conditions: natural emissions producing these lights are more common during the autumn period than in other seasons. In addition, autumn is a time when days become shorter and a period of darkness begins to prevail. According to isolated accounts, *ignes fatui* are candle-like

souls that wander during the new moon, or appear more often before rain. Sometimes the emergence of an *ignis fatuus* is treated as an ill omen: it appears before war.

These nocturnal creatures, visible from afar, usually walk in frightful places – i.e. spaces that according to folk beliefs belong to the dead. Most often, a traveller sees *ignes fatui* emerging from a cemetery and they follow him, or they may recede when approached. Sometimes it is stressed that the location is a graveyard for victims of a plague or a cemetery where suicides used to be buried. A traveller may also meet a wandering light at a place where someone committed suicide. The *ignis fatuus* may be seen when a traveller leaves a village or he may simply encounter it on the public road. Nevertheless, there are many variants in which the lights are observed when walking around houses, while the majority of variants situate the sighting of the ghostly light over bogs, swamps, and marshes.

The appearance of *ignis fatuus* can be described in terms of its form, sound and manner of movement. Descriptions of the light's form exhibit certain regular traits that may be grouped into three basic form-types:

1. *Oblong*: a candle or a group of candles (two, three, or five candles), a candle with a human form, a flame or a candle of human height, as tall as a man, a form with a black pole for a body and a flame where the head should be, a green light, a red light, small blue flames, a light like a lantern.
2. *Round*: a ball of fire, a man in a ball of fire, a form like a hat with two stars on it, a light like the circle of a spinning wheel, a form like a bubble with a light burning inside
3. *Anthropomorphic*: a luminous human skeleton, a man with flames coming out from his ribs, a person with a lantern walking around fields

The association of *ignis fatuus* with locations of the dead and its associated anthropomorphic forms correlate the image with a soul. Such an image of the soul expresses the idea of the origin of human life as fire. The close connection of life and fire or light is also found in beliefs about a burning candle that reflects a human lifespan and beliefs about a falling star marking someone's life coming to an end (Racénaitė 2011: 179–181).

Ignis fatuus is identified not only as a flaming figure, but also through its manner of movement. It rolls, goes up and down, or goes bobbing or swinging. While sound is another feature in descriptions of *ignis fatuus*, this element is only found in a rare variant of the narrative tradition, in which it is characterized as cracking, rattling, squeaking, fizzing, or crackling.

According to folk belief, the origin of these blinking lights can be explained in several ways, most of which can be grouped into two broad categories: *a*) scientific interpretation and *b*) identification with the dead. A considerable number of narratives present *ignis fatuus* as the result of swamp gas emission or gas emissions at a cemetery, for instance: *ignis fatuus* is identified as phosphorus emerging from a grave, a ghostly figure is observed as methane gas, or it is said that such flames appear from ore. These explanations appeared at a time when the old tradition and beliefs about the supernatural in the natural environment gradually began to decline under the influence of scientific publications. Armed with rational explanations, some observers have no fear of wandering lights.

Stories about *ignes fatui* as mischievous spirits of the dead make up the other part of narratives. The visible wandering light is treated as a soul that cannot leave this world owing to certain circumstances. Usually these are souls of the unbaptized people who demand to be prayed for or to be baptized. One such category of unbaptized souls is that of spirits of children born out of wedlock that were subsequently killed (usually by way of strangulation). That is why a person who meets an *ignis fatuus* often tries to perform Christian religious actions in order to liberate the wandering soul and to protect himself from its negative influence. Seeing a ghostly light, a man may make the sign of the cross and offer thanks three times, or may say 'Praised be Jesus Christ'. Interestingly, such actions are not fully Christian: when baptizing an *ignis fatuus*, the person cannot say 'Amen'. According to folk beliefs, the souls of unjust individuals, suicides and people who have been murdered also wander through the human environment. It was believed that such souls must perform penance in this way.

There are also some texts where two varieties of *ignes fatui* are distinguished. For example, one informant reports that lights from swamps will do nothing to people, while others are spirits from Hell (LTR 4057/61/).

The *ignis fatuus* is such a frightening entity that confrontation with it sometimes ends unhappily – even when the observer has not done anything disrespectful and simply wanted to see the light. This person usually becomes ill for a long time due to the scare he or she has experienced and he or she may even die.

People who are not afraid of an *ignis fatuus* and shoot at it, beat it or who perform such acts out of fear when accidentally meeting this being are often harshly punished. They may simply be burnt (in the morning people find a body that falls to ashes at the slightest touch), their skin may be badly scorched, they may be blinded or the *ignis fatuus* may burn their home. Thus in such cases the fiery nature of the ghostly light is revealed. However, there are many narratives that describe the *ignis fatuus* as a demonic spirit. Roused to anger, a soul strangles a man, breaks all his bones, squashes him to death, turns a man's legs backwards and he dies, or breaks all his bones and pulls out his tongue.

This brief survey of *ignis fatuus* in Lithuanian traditions shows that this entity was imagined as mysterious and sometimes dangerous. However, there are also some cases where an *ignis fatuus* appears as the souls of someone of a particular profession. It is the much more specific tradition of interpreting an *ignis fatuus* as the soul of a surveyor that will be discussed in the following section.

A Social-Historical Context

Legends identifying the *ignis fatuus* as a surveyor's soul mostly reflect memories from the era of the independent Lithuanian state (1918–1940), a period when a land reform was implemented. Consequently, a short introduction to the profession of surveyor in Lithuania at that time is relevant as a context and incitement for the rise or development of such an image of the surveyor's soul within the long history of mythic discourse surrounding *ignis fatuus*.

With the declaration of the independence of Lithuania in 1918, a land reform was

implemented with the goals of a) providing landless people with land, and b) parcelling out villages into grange farms in order to improve conditions for farming. Thus efforts were made to conclusively eliminate the heritage of the Wallach reform (16th century) when peasants' land was divided into three fields (used for crop rotation).

The state organized specialists with the goal of implementing the reforms of independent Lithuania. By 1937, more than 300 surveyors worked in Lithuanian territories, enough to support the publication of a magazine where surveyors shared their professional experiences. The work of surveyors was directly connected to the regulation and management of the land's affairs, such as the resolution of technical and juridical questions. This situation demanded a great deal of professional knowledge because when parcelling out villages into grange farms, the plot of a peasant had to be projected onto one lot instead of having several pieces of land that varied in fertility, and a peasant did not want worse than what he or she had owned before. Surveyors' working conditions were difficult: separated from their families, they worked on fields from early spring until late autumn, all the while enduring constant tension with those whose lives their work affected. Land-surveying projects were discussed extensively at village meetings and people were very critical and concerned about mistakes. After all, a family's prosperity depended on the land that was measured. As a result, the work of a successful surveyor not only demanded specialized technical skills but it also required a level of moral authority while demanding that an individual act as a peculiar sort of sociologist, capable of managing the interests of a community.

Ignis fatuus as a Surveyor's Soul

With this social frame of reference, we can turn to the belief legends that interpret the *ignis fatuus* as a surveyor's soul. Folklore in which an *ignis fatuus* is treated as a surveyor's soul constitutes a small number of the total texts about wandering lights. Indeed, there are only twelve examples of this type, mostly from Western Lithuania.

Usually these accounts describe an *ignis fatuus* that is visible when it is dark. They explain the surveyor's appearance as an *ignis fatuus* to be a punishment for incorrect land measurement:

One woman said:

– I have never seen an *ignis fatuus*, I would like to see one.

An *ignis fatuus* came by the window at midnight.

– Well, get up! You wanted to see me, you'll see now.

The woman, scared, looks: a human body – a skeleton and a candle is burning inside it in the place where a heart should be. The woman caught a fright and died.

It is said that if surveyors measure land wrong, then after their deaths they have to perform penance by being the *ignes fatui*. (LTt 4 451.)

According to other explanations *ignes fatui* are souls of surveyors that did not measure land according to law, for example:

People used to say that surveyors who measured land wrong, not according to the law, those souls used to walk after the death... (LTR 3578/207/.)

Or they might say that these were the souls of unjust surveyors, specialists who were bribed:

Surveyors who measured land wrong, were bribed, these are *ignes fatui*. (LTR 4638/285/.)

That is why the appearance of an *ignis fatuus* is sometimes treated as an attempt by a soul to correct his measuring mistakes:

Ignes fatui are the souls of dead surveyors. At night they measure incorrect borders anew. (LTR 1167/547^a/.)

Wandering lights are the souls of those surveyors who, when they were alive, measured lands wrong; therefore they now measure them anew. (LTR 2633/155/.)

Even after death, the surveyor retains the equipment of his profession:

When a surveyor measures land wrong, he has to measure it anew after his death. He measures with all his instruments and goes with a candle in hand. (LTR 1418/873^a/.)

The presence of *ignes fatui* is tied to weather conditions:

People used to say that *ignes fatui* appeared because surveyors measured land wrong: these candles are a punishment. When the weather grows cold, the candles disappear because the surveyors don't measure any more. (LTR 1196/221/.)

In some cases, the souls of surveyors may wander as if presenting a message about unjust land measurement:

I said: 'Mother, *ignes fatui* are wandering here in pastures.' Mother said: 'They may be surveyors.' It was true, surveyors came a few years later. A dead surveyor wanders until living surveyors come. (LTR 3561/12/.)

The profession of surveyor was characterized by the reciprocal distrust of the peasant and of surveyor. This distrust was not without reason – not all surveyors were fair and just. Perhaps a lack of faith in the surveyor's integrity resulted in conditions that produced the image of a dishonest surveyor's soul forced to wander the world after his death. The establishment and circulation of this image may reflect social concerns and tensions surrounding surveyors and their work.

Some locations where surveyors worked correspond to places where *ignes fatui* might be seen, but that in itself does not account for precisely why unjust surveyors have to wander as *ignes fatui* after death rather than a wider range of souls that have committed injustices.

Boundaries and Souls

Perhaps this association has a deeper cultural basis, particularly in light of beliefs regarding borders (boundaries) of land and their relation to the world of souls. The Lithuanian term *ežia* refers to a strip of land that forms a border or boundary between peasant plots. These were places where, according to folk belief, souls habitually resided. This is clearly reflected in texts of belief legend texts about people who want to sleep on such a boundary at night and are chased away by someone who warns them (or even strikes them). Usually this happens to people who herd at night:

You should never lie on the boundary between two fields. Once several boys rode off to herd horses at night. They hobbled the horses, left one boy to watch over the animals

and prepared to sleep. They all lied down near the boundary that separated the fields, but one boy lied down across the boundary and fell asleep. In his sleep he heard somebody shouting:

– Get up and go away!

He woke up, looked around but seeing nobody and thinking that a watchman called, he fell asleep again. [This happened three times.] When he fell asleep again, somebody hit him on his back and he retreated from the path of souls. There was a small devil. He walks along the borders and if he finds someone then he drives him away. (LTR 452/112/.)

There are many beliefs about paths of souls that usually coincide with land boundaries, places where no one can enter or do certain things. For instance, people could not build their houses on boundaries because of haunting:

A man built a house on a hill by a swamp. Every night was frightful: somebody ran, rumbled with horses around the house. A brave man asked: ‘Will you stop running around?’ Somebody said: ‘Leave this place.’ They had to remove the house. A devils’ path was there. (LTR 5278/64/.)

Such soul paths developed over a long period with human activities, with the changes in the landscape, and thus, the abrupt alteration of borders can disturb the souls. People usually knew about these places and tried to avoid disturbing the souls’ peace. The paths of souls naturally develop between neighbouring cemeteries. It was also believed that souls communicate with one another:

In Panevėžys volost, near Kabeliai, a strip of land, where nothing grows, runs along Priedžiai field from the chapel to Šlikai cemetery. Old people called this place a path of souls. People used to say that souls of the chapel visited souls in the cemetery. (LTR 1204/68/.)

Therefore souls exist in places that in many cases coincide with the boundaries of the land. This seems to be related to archaic burial customs. According to ethnographic data from the 16th century, Lithuanians from rural areas did not have parochial cemeteries and the dead were buried on the land edges of particular villages (Balsys 2006: 237).

The relationship between the souls of the dead and boundary areas has the consequence that changes in land borders affects the places where souls existed and the paths where they walked. Changing borders may have, according to folk beliefs, belonged to the sphere of ‘higher’ powers. For instance, it was believed that “if when ploughing one breaks a boundary, he will be struck by thunder” (BsTB 11: 429, Nr. 3). Surveyor’s work not only consisted of the measurement of the lands of the living but also involved intervening in the sphere of souls. As this aspect of their duties implicitly engaged the supernatural sphere, it was therefore unsurprising that supernatural consequences could follow. From this emic perspective, becoming trapped in a liminal state of wandering between worlds may have seemed a natural consequence of an action that created a serious or permanent disruption to land boundaries. Perhaps that is why the surveyor is so severely punished.

Conclusion

In Lithuanian folklore, the *ignes fatui* appear as souls of the individuals who have unresolved affairs in the worldly sphere, such as the souls of unbaptized children and the souls of people whose lives met a premature end. Perhaps surprisingly, the souls of surveyors also fall into this category, doomed to wander until the mistakes they made before death are corrected.

The identification of *ignes fatui* as surveyors appears to be a development in the tradition that is historically rooted in social concerns and tensions linked to the land reforms of the independent Lithuanian state in the first half of the 20th century. Although one might speculate that the identification of *ignes fatui* with surveyors could have emerged from empirical observations of distant surveyors moving about with lanterns, this does not account for why a broader range of occupations (e.g. watchmen) have not been correspondingly linked to the tradition. The present article proposes that the traditional identification of border areas with the dead and supernatural beings may have potentially been a crucial factor in this innovation. If this view is correct, then the punishment of a surveyor’s soul – to wander as an *ignis fatuus* for mismeasuring land – is linked to the impact of

this work on spaces belonging to supernatural beings. The supernatural consequences may then have initially linked to violations in the supernatural sphere that echo and validate the social concerns and frustrations experienced among living communities.

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