

THE *VERBA* AND ETHNO-CONFESSIONAL IDENTITY IN EASTERN LITHUANIA AND WESTERN BELARUS

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the *verba* (palm; Palm Sunday flowers), one of the most important religious symbols throughout the second part of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century in eastern Lithuania and western Belarus. The tasks of this study are: to analyze the form and content of *verba* so as to reveal the relationships between regional, ethnic and confessional particularities, and to look at how the symbol becomes an important factor in the formation of the inhabitants' ethnic and religious identity. The main source for this study is material gathered during field expeditions in eastern Lithuania and western Belarus at the beginning of the 21st century.

KEY WORDS: *verba*, folk piety; willow twigs; juniper twigs, decorated *verba* (palm), religious identity, ethnic identity

ANOTACIJA

Straipsnyje nagrinėjamas vienas iš svarbiausių religinių simbolių – verba (palmė) XX a. antrojoje pusėje – XXI a. pradžioje Rytų Lietuvoje ir Vakarų Baltarusijoje. Tyrimo metu siekiama nustatyti regioninius ir etninius verbų žaliavos ir šventinamos puokštės sudėties ypatumus rytų Lietuvoje ir vakarų Baltarusijoje. Remiantis simbolio išvaizda ir turinio analize parodoma, koks yra ryšys tarp regioninių ir etninių verbos ypatybių, kaip simbolis tampa svarbiu gyventojų etninę ir religinę tapatybę formuojančiu veiksniumi. Pagrindinis straipsnio šaltinis yra lauko tyrimų metu Rytų Lietuvoje ir Vakarų Baltarusijoje XXI a. pradžioje surinkta medžiaga.

PAGRINDINIAI ŽODŽIAI: verba, liaudiškasis pamaldumas, gluosnio šakelė, kadagio šakelė, puoštos verbos, religinis tapatumas, etninis tapatumas.

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Introduction

Identity is essentially an assertion of what we are – but likewise, of what we are not¹. National identity, according to Gerald Pocius, should rely on symbols significant to all groups of the nation even though these groups may be distinct². Equally important when defining religious identity are symbols taken from traditional culture, some of which may have religious significance. It is a compound part of cultural symbols the significance of which does not disappear in modern society and especially not among its religious members³. Such symbols and their systems truly belong to the category of religious universals. Therefore the theological and liturgical interpretations of the symbol according to different Christian churches can be quite similar. However, in everyday life, independent of the will of the church, the use of these symbols is marked by a multiplicity of

¹ See: KOCKEL, Ulrich. Ieškant Europos vidaus ribų; ekoetnologiniai pamąstymai apie vietas ir istoriškumo prasmę. *Lietuvos etnologija: Socialinės antropologijos ir etnologijos studijos*, 2007, Nr. 7 (16), p. 65.

² See: POCIUS, L. Gerald. Folkloras ir tautinis tapatumas: Šiaurės Amerikos perspektyva. *Etninė kultūra ir tapatumo išraiška*. Vilnius: Mokslo aidai, 1999, p. 28.

³ See: *The Encyclopaedia of World Religion*. Revised edition // Robert S. Ellwood, Gregory D. Alles. New York: Facts On File, 2007, p. 435.

forms and content depending on geographical and national factors⁴. The folk adaptation of church doctrines according to local conditions forms the base of folk piety. At the same time, folk religion is closely related with one of the expressions of national identity – religious identity.

Various consecrated symbols play an important role in folk piety. Keeping in mind the special significance of symbols in the formation of identity we will discuss the *verba*, which is consecrated on Palm Sunday and which is considered one of the most important symbols of Christianity. Nevertheless, the consecrated object may have different theological interpretations in different Christian denominations. Therefore, national factors and distinct attitudes of different Christian denominations towards these consecrated objects inevitably affect what raw materials are used and how they are arranged, as well as the further usage of *verba* in folk rituals and customs. According to V. Turner “every symbol reflects many themes while each theme is expressed through a number of symbols”⁵ that are in a constant state of flux. Thus the same symbol can have different meanings depending on the context; the understanding and meaning of religious symbols can vary not only locally but even at the family or individual level⁶. The form and content of the *verba* can indicate a person’s ties with a concrete religion, or likewise reveal ones national identity. “Identity is a constant demarcation of boundaries, at once defining what stays within borders and what is kept outside through certain signs, dimensions and symbols of identification”⁷. Therefore *verba* can become an important identity indicator for the inhabitants of east Lithuania and west Belarus. This article will try to determine how important *verba* are for the ethno-confessional identity of the inhabitants of this region.

Lithuanian ethnologists have given attention to the significance of symbols during the period of national awakening and subsequent identity formation⁸. At the end of the 20th century, problems concerning identity became pertinent to the population of southeast Lithuania and especially that of western Belarus. Western Belarus and eastern Lithuania form an ethnically diverse region comprised of the border territories of both neighbouring countries. Only once Lithuania and Belarus became independent nations in the 20th century, did an actual border separate eastern Lithuania from western Belarus. The inhabitants of this area include Poles, Lithuanians, Belarusians and Russians who are spread unevenly throughout different parts of the region. The Belarusians living in this region are either Orthodox or Catholic, the Poles and Lithuanians are Catholic, while the Russians are Orthodox believers. This is a region with clear socio-cultural diversity due to geographic, ethnic, religious, political, administrative and other cultural similarities and differences, which have developed through centuries of shared experiences. Not coincidentally, the identities of people living in this region are rather complex and problematic; for example, a Catholic who speaks Belarusian considers himself to be Polish. We can also clearly see how religious identity interweaves with ethnic identity. The Polish ethnomusicologist G. Juzala also stresses the fact that in Grodno of the Lyda district there are many Catholics because of the Lithuanian substrata that once existed. Although these inhabitants assimilated and spoke the creolized form of the Belarusian language in

⁴ See: RODRIGUEZ-BECERRA, Salvador (ed.). *Antropological Studies of Religion in Spain. Ethnology of Religion: Chapters from the History of a Discipline*. Budapest: Academia of Science, 2004, p. 291.

⁵ ТЕРНЕР, Виктор. *Символ и ритуал*. Москва: Наука, 1983, с. 40.

⁶ See: MARDOSA, Jonas. *Religious Ethnology and Trends in Studies of Folk Religion in Lithuania. Ethnology of Religion: Chapters from the History of a Discipline*. Budapest: Academia of Science, 2004, p. 161.

⁷ ČIUBRINSKAS, Vytis. Tautinio identiteto antropologinio tyrinėjimo klausimai. *Lietuviškojo identiteto trajektorijos*. Sudarė Vytis Čiubrinskas, Jolanta Kuznecovienė. Kaunas: Vytauto Didžiojo universitetas, 2008, p. 13.

⁸ See: MERKIENĖ, Regina. Etninė kultūra ir lietuviybės simboliai. *Etninė kultūra ir tautinis atgimimas*. Vilnius: Lietuvos istorijos institutas, 1994, P. 62–64; ČEPAITIENĖ, Auksuolė. Atgaivinant etninį tapatumą: individas, simbolis, vieta. *Lietuvos etnologija: Socialinės antropologijos ir etnologijos studijos*, 2001, Nr. 1 (10), p. 180–188.

every day life called *po prostu*, they did not change their identity and remained Catholics, yet considered themselves Poles⁹. Thus any research of this territory takes on an ethno-cultural and ethno-confessional nature. Because sociologists have noticed that religious and national identities are not strictly linked¹⁰, it is interesting to examine how the *verba* becomes an argument for establishing ethno-confessional identity in eastern Lithuania and western Belarus¹¹. All these factors affected the particular aims of this study.

The tasks of this article are: to reveal the particularities regarding the choice of material for the making and blessing of the *verba* in Eastern Lithuania and Western Belarus; to distinguish regional and ethno-confessional particularities of the contents of the *verba*; and to determine the symbol's relationship to ethnic and religious identity by analyzing the form and content of the *verba*. The methodological foundation of the article is folk piety, which is an expression of an individual or collective relationship with religious rituals, ceremonies and liturgical objects. In folk piety, religious symbols are used in folk rituals to fulfil various needs and are rooted in the national folk culture.

Many Lithuanian and Belarusian ethnologists have studied the *verba*¹². Yet their studies are unified by a common feature: Palm Sunday and this symbol are often examined not as a separate subject of research, but as an integral part of the general folk culture, reflecting customs and beliefs. To accomplish the set tasks above, the study will look at field material gathered in eastern Lithuania and western Belarus, archival material, as well as Lithuanian and Belarusian ethnographic, folkloric, and other academic literature concerning the *verba*. The material for this study was gathered by means of non-structured interviews during ethnographic field research conducted in the above-mentioned territory. The field research used in this study was gathered by the author around the time of Palm Sunday in western Belarus in 2004 and 2007. The material about eastern Lithuania was gathered by students of Vilnius Pedagogical University during ethnographic expeditions. From 2004 to 2008, over 300 people living in various territories, cities and villages of eastern Lithuania were interviewed. The results of ethnological studies were also used in the article.

Willow and Juniper Twigs in *Verba*

Various consecrated symbols play a special role in folk religion. The *verba* in the Christian liturgy is a religious symbol expressing a concrete meaning. Not coincidentally, the Catholic and Orthodox liturgical interpretations of the *verba* are analogous in eastern Lithuania and western Belarus. Differences appear in the context of folk piety, wherein ethno-confessional regional particularities are revealed in the symbolic choice of the plants used for making the *verba*. For this reason, the greenery of the *verba* becomes an identity-forming factor for both Catholics and Orthodox. During the Easter period, the *verba* symbolizes life, renewal, and resurrection. This idea is

⁹ See: Lietuvos lenkiškasis paveldas: žvilgsnis iš šalies. Su etnomuzikologu iš Krokuvos dr. Gustavu Juzala kalbasi Saulė Matulevičienė. *Liaudies kultūra*, 2008, Nr. 2, p. 12.

¹⁰ See: KUZNECOVIENĖ, Jolanta. Šiuolaikinės lietuvių tautinės tapatybės kontūrai. *Sociologija. Mintis ir veiksmai*. 2006, Nr. 2, p. 94.

¹¹ For instance, it has been stated that Poles of south-eastern Lithuania differ in their unique marriage rituals and customs. For example, they make the wedding wreath from myrtle whereas Lithuanians use rue. Thus by using different raw materials than Lithuanians when making their symbols, the Poles stress their ethnic specificity within this region and thereby, through the help of such symbols, construct their ethno-cultural identity (see: TOMAŠEVIČ, Alina & MARDOSA, Jonas. Pietryčių Lietuvos lenkų vestuvės XX a. pabaigoje – XXI a. pradžioje: tarpkultūrinio tyrimo aspektai. *Istorija*, t. 66, 2007, p. 16, 23).

¹² Further: MARDOSA, Jonas. *Rytų Lietuvos ir Vakarų Baltarusijos verbos: Liaudiškojo pamaldumo raiška XX a. antrojoje pusėje – XXI a. pradžioje*. Vilnius: Vilniaus pedagoginio universiteto leidykla, 2009, p. 26–36.

most clearly represented by tree branches coming back to life after winter. *Verba* made from willow branches are most popular in the region being studied, and today, the use of this plant is especially prevalent in Belarus. The vital powers of the *verba* are accentuated when branches with sprouting leaves are blessed. Ethnographic research¹³ shows that the consecration of willow twigs, typical of eastern Slavs, has entered the area of eastern Lithuania. This raw material is most prominent in contemporary western Belarus. From the perspective of folk devotion in the Orthodox tradition, only the willow twig is considered genuine and acceptable for protective and other functions¹⁴. In the time period under consideration, only twigs with bursting leaves were recognized in liturgical practice (although *verba* made of other material could be consecrated as well). Catholic Belarusians consecrate willow twigs more rarely. However, the usage of willow twigs in *verba* has ethno-confessional differences. For example, an exclusive feature of Orthodox believers in western Belarus is *verba* made of willow twigs without buds.

On the other hand, Lithuanian Orthodox, like Catholics, consecrate various willow twigs, including those that have already budded. This may not be an indicator of the influence of Lithuanian Catholic customs on the Orthodox, but rather it is the result of the influence of ethnic factors. The majority of Lithuanian Orthodox has come from Russia where the consecration of willow twigs with buds is a phenomenon typical to the traditions of the Russian Palm Sunday celebration¹⁵. Thus in western Belarus, Belarusian Orthodox associate budding willow twigs with Russian customs and Russian religious culture. The Catholics of eastern Lithuania use willow twigs in all forms for consecration. Nevertheless, it is uncommon in contemporary practice to consecrate only willow twigs. This is mostly determined by the fluctuating attitude of society towards *verba* and their future usage. Until the mid 20th century, willow twig *verba* were actively used in various rituals and customs. These symbols gradually lost their significance in modern folk religion, especially in various magical practices. True, they are used for the protection of living spaces by various means and without confessional differences¹⁶. However, in the past, *verba* were widely used in spring rituals performed on the first day of herding livestock to pasture in the researched territory. These twigs were especially prevalent in the stockbreeding customs of western Belarus. The thrashing (whipping) of livestock with *verba* when herding them was common for all eastern Slavs¹⁷. Not coincidentally, in the first half of the 20th century such methods of herding were more common in the eastern part of Lithuania, which is situated next to Belarus. Currently, those who herd livestock into pastures with *verba* use consecrated willow twigs.

In the past, based on the preferred plants used for the *verba*, Lithuania was divided into two distinct areas that were demarcated by a line toward the eastern border of the country. In the western, south-western and central parts of Lithuania, the blessing of juniper twigs was and remains more prevalent, while in the eastern part of Lithuania willow twigs were more popular¹⁸. Ethnographic

¹³ See: KUDIRKA, Juozas. *Velykų šventės*. Vilnius: Mokslas, 1992, P. 5; MARCINKEVIČIENĖ, Nijolė (sud.). *Velykų rytą lelija pražydo*. Verbų sekmadienio, Velykų, Jurginių papročiai ir tautosaka. Vilnius: Lietuvos liaudies kultūros centras, 2006, p. 237.

¹⁴ See: MARDOSA, Jonas. *Sodybos ir pastatų apsauga su verbomis: liaudiškojo pamaldumo raiškos formos XX a. Žmogus ir gyvenamoji aplinka. Konferencijos medžiaga*. Vilnius: Lietuvos liaudies kultūros centras, 2007, p. 45.

¹⁵ See: ШАНГИНА, Изабелла Иосифовна. *Русский народ. Будни и праздники. Энциклопедия*. Санкт-Петербург: Азбука, 2003, С. 84; СОКОЛОВА, Вера Константиновна. *Весенне-летние календарные обряды русских украинцев и белорусов XIX - начало XX в.* Москва: Наука, 1979, с. 97–100.

¹⁶ See: MARDOSA, J. (...) 2007, p. 60–62.

¹⁷ See: ЛОЗКА, Алесь. *Беларускі народны каляндар*. Мінск: Полымя, 2002, с. 89–90; *Земляробчы каляндар*. Абряды і звычаі. Мінск: Беларуская навука, 2003, с. 319, 330; ЗЕЛЕНИН, Дмитрий Константинович. *Восточнославянская этнография*. Москва: Наука, 1992, с. 89.

¹⁸ See: KUDIRKA, Juozas. *Vilniaus verbos*. Vilnius: Mintis, 1993, p. 5.

descriptions dating to the middle of the 20th century state that juniper *verba* were also consecrated in many localities of eastern Lithuania. However, the essential changes in the raw materials of *verba* in eastern Lithuania appeared only in the second half of the 20th century when *verba* made from juniper began to be blessed alongside willow twigs. Therefore, especially in the last decades of the 20th century, the situation changed and juniper started to predominate in contemporary Palm Sunday traditions of eastern Lithuania without any clear confessional or national differences. *Verba* made only from juniper twigs are sometimes consecrated. They also may be composed from various herbs and grasses, however, bouquets of willow and juniper twigs were used most often.

The ethnic particularities of the *verba* composition are related to the aims of their future use. In the first half of the 20th century a custom of blessing livestock with protective smoke during the grazing period pervaded in the researched territory. Due to the mentioned reasons, it may be believed that in the second half of the 20th century the use of juniper spread from Lithuania quite far to the east and is penetrating into Belarus. Thus the origin of using juniper in *verba* can be traced to folk religion and its changes over the 1920s-1940s. However, ethno-confessional differences also influence the usage of the juniper. In eastern Lithuania, during Palm Sunday juniper twigs are used regardless of ethnic and confessional differences, while in western Belarus, Catholics (mostly represented by believers of Polish nationality) choose the juniper. Either willow or juniper twigs are used as the base of the *verba*. In the context of folk piety, the willow that sprouts in early spring after winter and the evergreen juniper best represent the ideas of Christian resurrection and everlasting life.

The provided material shows that in the contemporary religious practice of the researched territory, two essential components of the *verba* interlace: twigs of both willows and junipers are either consecrated separately, or quite often, combined into bouquets. Thus the composition including twigs of both trees links the customs of the past with the realities of the present. Evergreen plants are sometimes added alongside willow twigs of the *verba* by Catholics in eastern Lithuania and regardless of confessional and national differences in western Belarus.

Nevertheless, a *verba* group, which may be called palm-shaped *verba*, occupies a very important place in the religious life of the region. A tendency to decorate *verba* intensified in the second half of the 20th century when the symbol started to be considered from an aesthetic point of view. Although the need to have nice *verba* has always existed, at the end of the 20th century *verba* makers started to strive toward ornateness. In this way both sacral and aesthetic objectives are harmonized in the symbol. These aspects are especially significant since such *verba* are usually sold in markets or on festival days around churches. It should be noted that the Soviet authorities actively propagated atheism, especially in Belarus where the network of churches was partially destroyed, and that only in the end of the 20th century was religious activity allowed again. Thus the vast scope of the decorated *verba* can be attributed to the evolutions of form and content of this symbol in the post-Soviet period.

Verba decorated with dried plants replaced the multicoloured paper blossoms previously used to decorate the tree twigs. In the region being researched a method of decorating *verba* by tying handmade flowers created from coloured paper to the willow twigs remained in the 20th century. There are very few accounts of such a manner of decorating *verba* in Belarus; however, we cannot ignore the fact that it did exist. According to V. Sokolova, decorating *verba* with paper flowers, ribbons and the like was common in Russia and even reached parts of Siberia¹⁹. This variation of decorating *verba* is well known in the Lithuanian ethnographical region of Dzūkija. N.

¹⁹ See: COKOJIOBA B. K. (...) 1979, c. 97–98.

Marcinkevičienė, having gathered much factual material, proves that paper blossoms were used to decorate *verba* before World War I in the region of Aukštaitija around the cities of Utena, Molėtai and Ukmergė where many women claim to remember the symbol taking such a form²⁰. On the other hand, J. Kudirka has noticed that the Poles of Vilnius considered the *verba* made from paper flowers to be the national version of the symbol²¹. Therefore it is useful to examine paper *verba* in Lithuania within the context of the *Vilnius verba* and connect this custom with Slavic culture. The *verba* made with paper blossoms existed for some time in the 20th century alongside the *Vilnius verba*, and when they were brought for consecration three willow twigs were often added to them. As was noted in Čekoniškės (Vilnius district) around 1960, the main form of hand-made synthetic *verba* consisted of blossoms made from coloured paper. The young would add such paper flowers alongside juniper or willow twigs. Thus decorating *verba* with paper flowers from the beginning of the 20th century took on two new directions. The first was the *Vilnius verba*, and the second, the palm-shaped *verba* made from willow (occasionally juniper) twig bundles decorated with synthetic flowers made of plastic thread or other types of synthetic materials.

Amongst Belarusians, regardless of ethnicity or confession, the symbol of contemporary religious identity has become the *verba* decorated with synthetic decorations (flowers). While such *verba* are becoming popular in Lithuania, they remain more characteristic of urban Catholics, and are made from both willow and juniper twigs. In the beginning of the 21st century three main variants of palm-shaped *verba* may be found²². The first variant is made from willow or juniper twigs decorated with dry flower blossoms (or the twigs of both trees are used together). The second and very popular decoration variant is artificial flowers attached to a willow twig. In the third variant, blossoms made from threads are arranged along the whole length of a willow twig. At the same time, the decorative is becoming more important for contemporary *verba*. Considerable differences may be noticed in the scope and content of the usage of decorative elements in *verba* of Lithuania and Belarus. While decorating the symbol in western Belarus does not reflect greater confessional differences, the tendency of decorating *verba* with only dry or artificial flowers as practiced by Lithuanian Catholics is practically not found amongst the Orthodox of Lithuania. In this way, the paradigmatic Christianity and traditionality of the symbol are stressed, while the synthetic decorations create the basis for regional differences of the *verba*. Thus *verba* reveal the diversity of the Christian tradition, which comprises the exceptional feature of contemporary folk religion in eastern Lithuania and western Belarus.

Vilnius Verba

In the second half of the 20th century a tendency to consider *verba* from an aesthetic point of view emerged. Initially, women seeking the splendour of the symbol began to combine sacral and aesthetic aims. At the end of the 20th century, after the commercialization of *verba* production, the consecration of self-made *verba* has decreased, especially in cities. At the same time decorated symbols are becoming more popular. Therefore, the functionality of decorated *verba* is, in part, a new feature of folk religion. This marks a new stage in the existence of the symbol, defined by a distancing from the Christian essence of the *verba* as emphasis is placed on its symbolism. The *Vilnius verba* of southeast Lithuania that is made from dry blossoms especially satisfies such symbolic aims.

²⁰ See: MARCINKEVIČIENĖ, N. (sud.) (...) 2006, p. 43, 282.

²¹ See: KUDIRKA J. (...) 1993, p. 8.

²² See: MARDOSA J. (...) 2009, p. 106–115.

Researchers identified the *Vilnius verba* as those made from dry plants at the start of the 19th century in the surrounding areas of Vilnius, and have attributed them to the category of folk art²³. Since these types of verba are produced from dry plants, they do not correspond to the liturgical idea of the Resurrection, even though they function as a symbol during Palm Sunday, which was the context of their origin. According to the ethnologist J. Kudirka, only at the beginning of the 1980s were these *verba* permitted to be sold during the Kaziukas fair (March 4)²⁴.

Until the last decades of the 20th century *Vilnius verba* were produced by Polish-speaking residents in a small territory of the Vilnius district. Therefore, the very makers, following the Polish tradition, call these *verba* “Vilnius palms.” In the Polish tradition this name is used for any type of symbol consecrated on Palm Sunday²⁵. Not coincidentally, when translating this title of the *verba* into Polish J. Kudirka called them palms²⁶. Belarusian authors also use this term to describe these *verba*²⁷. Belarusian researchers consider the *Vilnius verba* as an example of folk art from the Lithuanian-Belarusian frontier. References to assess these verbs as an expression of the heritage of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania also are not avoided²⁸. However, no research done by Lithuanian authors attests to the production of *Vilnius verba* in the surroundings near Belarus. There were attempts to define the area of *verba* production as 30–50 km around Vilnius²⁹. J. Kudirka concretizes the origin of the weaving of those symbols and links it with the western surroundings of Vilnius and not with the eastern surroundings that stretch towards Belarus³⁰. The author of this article has noticed that at the end of the 20th century the area wherein these *verba* prevail has extended to include Vilnius, other areas of Lithuania, and even Chicago, where the Polish-produced variant of *Vilnius verba* is popular among Lithuanian-Americans³¹.

Today mostly people of Polish nationality make these *verba* from dried plants. Nevertheless, historically Vilnius was and is the capital of Lithuania. It is natural that the land around the city is Lithuanian in the consciousness of Lithuanians and therefore the *Vilnius verba* has come to be considered by Lithuanians as a national symbol and folk art. Not coincidentally, the making of such *verba* is taught even at schools as an example of folk art in the spring.

As I have mentioned, the *Vilnius verba* is also considered as folk art. Understandably, this influenced their desacralization and further entrenchment of the concept of folk art in society and academic literature³². The folk art aspect of *verba* was emphasised during the Soviet period. Such a perspective helped the tradition of these *verba* to survive, as the authority did not consider them to be a religious symbol³³. The prohibition of selling *verba*, however, shows that in the ideological discourse they were not evaluated as being completely secular examples of culture. The *verba* re-

²³ See: KUDIRKA J. (...) 1992, p. 8; KUDIRKA J. (...) 1993, p. 5.

²⁴ See: KUDIRKA J. (...) 1993, p. 10.

²⁵ Actually, in the village of Čekoniškes of the Vilnius region, only consecrated symbols are called palms. Those that are sold at fairs or on Palm Sunday before being consecrated are called *verba*.

²⁶ See: KUDIRKA J. (...) 1993, p. 19.

²⁷ See: *Этнаграфія Беларусі*. Мінск: Беларуская наука, 1989, с. 107.

²⁸ See: ЛАБАЧЭЎСКАЯ, Вольга. Віленскія пальмы. *Pogranicza języków. Pogranicza kultur*. Studia ofiarowane Elżbieta Smulkowej. Warszawa, 2003, с. 236-237.

²⁹ See: VYŠNIAUSKAITĖ, Angelė. Verbos. *Kultūros barai*, 1967, Nr. 5, p. 69.

³⁰ See: KUDIRKA J. (...) 1993, p. 7.

³¹ See: MARDOSA J. (...) 2009, p. 117.

³² See: KUDIRKA, Juozas. Vilniaus verbos. *Mokslas ir gyvenimas*, 1989, Nr. 3, p. 8 (and others).

³³ See: МАРДОСА, Йонас. Вильнюсские вербы в системе народной религиозности современной юго-восточной Литвы и Западной Беларуси. *Наше наследие: формирование устойчивой модели развития народной художественной культуры в современном мире*. Материалы VI международного научного симпозиума 23–26 июня 2008 г. г. Улан-Удэ – оз. Байкал: Байкальские встречи VI / науч. ред. Н.Б. Дашиева. Улан-Удэ, 2008, с. 124.

mained a ritual symbol through the efforts of the Polish residents of the Vilnius surroundings, who made them. *Verba* began to be displayed at Lithuanian folk art exhibitions from 1985. Contemporary *verba*-makers export the major part of their productions to Poland for Palm Sunday, although already in 1930 approximately 200.000 *Vilnius verba* were exported to France and Poland³⁴. Currently *verba* are becoming popular in Poland not only out of nostalgic sentiment for the artistic symbol of the Vilnius region, but as a religious and folk art symbol on Palm Sunday.

Since western Belarus is in the same geographic space as eastern Lithuania, one would expect that folk religious practices would be similar. Keeping in mind the origins of the *Vilnius verba* it would seem that they would be common amongst the Catholic community of Belarus. Nevertheless, available material shows that Lithuania's religious culture has had little influence on Belarusians, even though Belarusian traditions have penetrated into eastern Lithuania. For this reason field research has not yet linked the production of *Vilnius verba* with Belarusian artistic creations and religious practices. Therefore, it is interesting to compare the choices, traditions and usage of *verba* in Lithuania and Belarus. It is commonly held that *verba* made from dried plants is first and foremost a Catholic tradition in the Vilnius region. The understanding that the *Vilnius verba* are of Catholic origin is also observed in Belarus; however, in the context of Palm Sunday they are not considered the more popular symbol. These *verba* are more widely spread in the Grodno region, which is closer to Poland. There, the *Vilnius verba* are called by the traditional name "palma Wilenska" and are treated as an example of Polish folk and religious culture³⁵. The sellers bring *Vilnius verba* from the makers living in Poland as a symbol of political memory and emphasize the connection with the cultural heritage of Poland's border regions³⁶. At the end of the 20th century makers of *Vilnius verba* appeared in Belarus. Thus, the hand-made *Vilnius verba* highlight not national, but regional identity. On the other hand, during the Soviet times the *Vilnius verba*'s connection to the Christian tradition was minimized due to the atheistic propaganda and even the formal attitude of the Church. Therefore, one rarely sees these types of *verba* in the territory of Orthodox Churches, as the sellers do not expect commercial success.

This symbol is strongly linked to the Catholic Lithuanian and Polish folk cultures of the Vilnius region, but is not common amongst the Poles of Belarus. In eastern Belarus the *Vilnius verba* appear more often in mid-20th century. According to one Catholic resident of Smurgainių village, the *Vilnius verba* appeared around 1950 when some were brought from Vilnius on Palm Sunday. In Ašmena, *verba* made in Vilnius appear around the beginning of the 21st century. During Palm Sunday in Baranovich, Volkovsky and Grodno only a small amount of *Vilnius verba* are brought from Poland and those differ in colour from those made in Lithuania. Polish *Vilnius verba* differ in appearance due to their brighter colours. Equally colourful *verba* are brought from Warsaw to the Kazimierz's fair in Vilnius and are also sold in Chicago. True, traditional *Vilnius verba* made in Lithuania also were quite motley. The more subdued colour schemes became popular only in the

³⁴ See: KUDIRKA J. (...) 1993, p. 19; ČIURLIONIENĖ-KYMANTAITĖ, Sofija. Vilniaus moterų brangusis darbelis. *Šviesos keliai*. Kaunas, 1931, Nr. 3, p. 166. (However, the data given to Čiurlionienė-Kymantaitė by an inhabitant of Vilnius is suspect in terms of the large figures).

³⁵ Such an understanding of the Vilnius verba was formed in the mid 1930's during the Kaziukas fair, which, according to I. Zhilienė took on a national character in Poland (Žilienė 1999: 28). Because of the popularity of this holiday, the symbol became important not only in the identity formation of people living in the Vilnius region, but also for those of Poland's religious culture.

³⁶ See: МАРДОСА, Йонас. Символ и вопросы религиозной идентичности в полиэтноконфессиональной среде: вербы в современной Западной Беларуси и Восточной Литве. *Теоретические проблемы этнической и кросс-культурной психологии*. Материалы Международной научной конференции 29-30 мая 2008 г. Смоленск, 2008, с. 390.

1960s-70s. Yet at the end of the 20th century “purple, magenta, dark blue, brown and orange tones replaced the greyish colour scheme”, according to M. Kuodienė³⁷. However, in the beginning of the 21st century, pale hues remain characteristic of *Vilnius verba* made in Lithuania. This natural colour scheme is also characteristic of contemporary *Vilnius verba* made by Belarusians; they too contrast in appearance with the more colourful ones brought from Poland. On the other hand, the colour scheme of the *verba* made in Poland fits the general colour scheme preferred in Belarus. There bright coloured synthetic blossoms are used to decorate willow twigs as well as for other purposes. Thus the Belarusian *verba* makers stress their connection with the Polish environs of Vilnius. This is not coincidental, because according to field research done by D. Daukšas, there is a connection of Lithuania’s Poles identity with this territory³⁸ and in this case the symbol becomes a factor stimulating national and religious identity. In Grodno of the Lyda district *Vilnius verba* are made by local Catholic Poles or in mixed Polish-Belarusian families. However, there is little demand for *Vilnius verba* in Belarus, and according to the makers, the future prospects are slim because it is a religious cultural symbol only for Lithuania’s Poles. Although *Vilnius verba* are accessible regardless of confessional differences in the market of Grodno, they are directly associated with the Catholic tradition, just like in Lithuania. This aspect is further enforced in the eyes of society by the Polish context in which the *verba* are sold (both locally made and brought from elsewhere).

While the Church acknowledges the inadequacy of dry *verba* in light of the liturgical tradition, in the modern situation *Vilnius verba* are admitted in the churches of Vilnius district. This emphasizes their link to Polish religious culture. Wishing to stress this link, believers use these dry *verba* as an example specific to the Vilnius region to decorate the churches on the Palm Sunday. In 2008 the top of the altar of the Church of Sudervė was decorated by four massive *Vilnius verba*, and more were used to decorate the balustrade of the balcony. In this case the understanding of a national tradition emerges since Poles consider the *Vilnius verba* to be an element of Polish folk religious culture. In 2009, during the Kaziukas fair, a number of *Vilnius verba* makers came from the districts near Vilnius, several from the Telšiai district, and one *verba* maker came all the way from Warsaw. Thus it could be stated that, first of all, *Vilnius verba* are used to highlight primarily ethnic identity, and secondly, religious identity. They are considered as Lithuanian folk art by Lithuanians, and the Lithuanians living in Poland also view them this way³⁹. It should be noted that *verba* are bought as decorative items during the Kaziukas fair or on Palm Sunday⁴⁰. Russians buy them as folk art of the Vilnius region but not for consecration in Orthodox churches.

Consecration of *Vilnius verba* in the form of various dry bunches on Palm Sunday in eastern Lithuania is a new turn in folk piety. These *verba* have no connection with greenery, i.e. with the paradigmatic symbolism that traditionally had a continuation in the magical actions and beliefs of the folk. Wishing to use dry *verba* during rituals, a spray of a live willow is added alongside them during consecration. Thus, today *Vilnius verba* function in the Lithuanian and Polish cultural traditions as a regional symbol, construing the identity of two nations, yet not is losing the connection with Palm Sunday. At the same time, *Vilnius verba* are again an expression of religious identity primarily among

³⁷ KUODIENĖ, Marija. Vilniaus verbų spalvos. *Spalva lietuvių liaudies mene*. Vilnius, 1988, p. 96–97.

³⁸ DAUKŠAS, Darius. Pase įrašytoji tapatybė: Lietuvos lenkų etninio/nacionalinio tapatumo trajektorijos. *Lietuvos etnologija: Socialinės antropologijos ir etnologijos studijos*, 2008, Nr. 8 (17), p. 63.

³⁹ See: VAICEKAUSKIENĖ, Aldona. Punskiečių kalendorinės šventės ir papročiai. *Punsko ir Seinų krašto lietuviai: etninio ir kultūrinio tapatumo bruožai*. Straipsnių rinkinys. Punksas: „Aušros“ leidykla, 2006, p. 196.

⁴⁰ It is quite interesting that in 2009, the altar of the Lithuanian Church of Market Park in Chicago was decorated with *Vilnius verba*; true, they were made by Poles. It should be noted that in America *verba* are bought as a decorative item during Kaziukas fair or on Palm Sunday.

Poles. After consecration, they universally become the symbol of the feast and a decorative focus in homes. Thus, *Vilnius verba* do not function only as a type of folk art. They have a continuation in the traditions of the Palm Sunday in Vilnius and its surroundings, and partially – in Belarus. However, the Catholics of Belarus, emphasizing Polish identity, do not accept the *Vilnius verba* as an element of their culture and apparently consider these *verba* as representative of Lithuanian religious culture instead, despite their national origin. Only in Lithuania we have *Vilnius verba* as an integral part of the regional religious and national identity. *Vilnius verba* are made solely from dried materials and therefore do not represent the theme of resurrection as directly. On the other hand, at the end of the 20th century, these *verba* were the types most frequently blessed in churches, and in the context of folk piety functioned as a sacred symbol of the holiday. This study shows that palm-shaped *verba* as well as the *Vilnius verba* became more popular and widespread at the end of the 20th century as the decorative aspects of the *verba* received a stronger emphasis. Sociologists studying contemporary Lithuanian identity currently state that “as the importance of symbolic meaning of signs, rituals and other symbolic actions diminishes, rational civic activities become more significant”⁴¹. However, when examining the *Vilnius verba*, we notice that they are an important factor influencing ethno-confessional identity and the range of its expression in eastern Lithuania and western Belarus.

Conclusion

The research of *verba* in eastern Lithuania and western Belarus allows us to state that the formation of ethno-confessional identity is based in part on those religious symbols whose traditional meanings have persisted in modern society. In the Christian liturgy, the *verba* is a religious symbol expressing a concrete meaning and the Catholic and Orthodox liturgical interpretations of the *verba* are analogous in eastern Lithuania and western Belarus. Differences appear in the context of folk piety, wherein ethno-confessional regional particularities are revealed in the symbolic choice of the plants used for making the *verba*. For this reason, the greenery of the *verba* becomes an identity-forming factor for Catholics and Orthodox. In western Belarus, the use of various types of willow branches relates to the religious and ethnic identities of the inhabitants. In eastern Lithuania, alongside willow twigs, junipers as well as bouquets made from both willow and juniper twigs are consecrated on Palm Sunday. This tendency emerged in the second half of the 20th century when a new tradition of using juniper in the production of *verba* started to spread from central Lithuania into the areas where only willow twigs were consecrated formerly. Juniper twigs are more significant to the Catholics in Belarus; the Orthodox uses them rarely.

In the second half of the 20th century the decorative becomes more important for contemporary *verba*. While decorating *verba* in western Belarus does not reflect greater confessional differences, the tendency of decorating *verba* with only dry or artificial flowers as practiced by Lithuanian Catholics is practically not found amongst the Orthodox of Lithuania. It can therefore be concluded that although the type of twigs used and the variations in decoration are not necessarily deliberate choices, the decision to either remain within the existing tradition or to form a new one has a direct influence on the religious and national identity for all believers of eastern Lithuania and western Belarus.

⁴¹ ŠUTINIENĖ, Irena. Lietuvių tautinio identiteto raiška globalizacijos kontekstuose: tarp lokalumo ir daugiakultūriškumo. *Lietuviškojo identiteto trajektorijos*. Sudarė Vytis Čiubrinkas, Jolanta Kuznecovienė. Kaunas, Vytauto Didžiojo universitetas, 2008, p. 163.

The differences in the *verba* between eastern Lithuania and western Belarus are most apparent in the attitudes toward the *Vilnius verba*. These types of *verba* are Lithuanian and Polish artistic expressions reflecting the Catholic traditions of *verba*-making in the Vilnius region. Thus in the case of the *Vilnius verba*, the emphasis falls on ethnic and on regional identity. *Vilnius verba* are strongly linked to the Catholic Lithuanian and Polish folk and religious cultures of the Vilnius region, but have not yet caught on amongst the Poles of Belarus and are associated with the Polish culture of southeast Lithuania. Thus, through the link between the *verba* and the ethnic and confessional communities, the symbol becomes an important identity-forming factor for the inhabitants.

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VERBOS IR ETNOKONFESINIS TAPATUMAS RYTŲ LIETUVOJE IR VAKARŲ BALTARUSIJOJE

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Santrauka

Verbos yra vienas svarbiausių simbolių, kuriuos liturgijoje naudoja įvairios krikščionių Bažnyčios. Tačiau teologinis ir liturginis simbolio traktavimas nepriklausomai nuo Bažnyčių valios liaudies religijoje turi geografinių ir tautinių skirtumų. Todėl verbos gali tapti tautinį identitetą formuojančiu veiksnium, o kartu ir viena iš religinio tapatumo išraiškų. Straipsnyje siekiama atskleisti verbų žaliavos, iš kurios jos gaminamos ir šventinamos ypatybes Rytų Lietuvoje bei Vakarų Baltarusijoje XX a. pabaigoje – XXI a. pradžioje. Remiantis simbolio išvaizdos ir turinio analize parodoma, kokia yra verbų regioninė įvairovė ir kaip simbolis tampa gyventojų etninę ir religinę tapatybę formuojančiu veiksnium. Rytų Lietuva ir Vakarų Baltarusija tyrimui pasirinkta kaip specifinis istorinis, etninis ir kultūrinis regionas. Ši teritorija tautiniu atžvilgiu yra mišri ir apgyvendinta įvairių tautybių gyventojų, kurių religinė priklausomybė susipynusi su etniniu požymiu: lenkai ir lietuviai yra katalikai, baltarusiai katalikai ir stačiatikiai, o rusai stačiatikiai. Pagrindinis straipsnio šaltinis yra Rytų Lietuvoje ir Vakarų Baltarusijoje XXI a. pradžioje lauko tyrimų metu surinkta medžiaga.

Tyrimo Rytų Lietuvoje ir Vakarų Baltarusijoje metu nustatyta, kad liaudiškojo religingumo dis-kurse verbų funkcionavimas ir semantika turi regioninių ypatumų. Juose atsiskleidžia žaliavos parin-kimo verbų gamybai ir šventinimui Verbų sekmadienį įvairovė, kuri tiesiogiai susijusi su etnokonfe-siniais tikinčiųjų požymiais. Pagal tradicinę XX a. pirmosios pusės kultūrą, Rytų Lietuvos ir Vakarų Baltarusijos teritorija žaliavos atžvilgiu buvo vieninga, joje vyravo iš gluosnio šakelių pagamintos verbos. Gluosnio šakelių šventinimo požiūriu Rytų Lietuva patenka į platesnę nei Vakarų Baltarusija slavų kultūrai būdingą šio medžio verbų gamybai parinkimo zoną. Toks gluosnio verbų šventinimas buvo tiesiogiai susijęs su tolesniu simbolio naudojimu pavasarinėse gyvulių išgynimo apeigose. Tuo tarpu XX a. antrojoje pusėje padėtis keičiasi. Šio amžiaus pirmosios pusės viduryje iš vakarinės

Lietuvos teritorijos, kur švenčiamos iš kadagio pagamintos verbos, į rytinę jos dalį plinta ir pamažu į Vakarų Baltarusiją ima skverbtis kadagio šakelių naudojimo verbų gamybai tradicija. Kadagio šakelės švenčiamos vienos, taip pat iš gluosnio ir kadagio šakelių sudarytose puokštėse. Atsirandanti nauja simbolio sudarymo tendencija pasižymi etnokonfesinio pobūdžio skirtumais, taip pat teritoriniais savitumais. Vakarų Baltarusijoje kadagys labiau yra siejamas su katalikų ir mažiau su stačiatikių religine praktika. Tuo tarpu Rytų Lietuvoje kadagio šakelių panaudojimas verboms gaminti neturi ryškesnių skirtumų tarp įvairių konfesijų ir tautybių tikinčiųjų.

Skirtingas žaliavos verboms parinkimas atsiranda dėl nevienodo vegetaciją pradedančių arba amžinai žaliuojančių medžių šakelių vertinimo katalikų ir stačiatikių liaudies religijoje. Gluosnio šakelės šiuolaikinėje religinėje praktikoje yra baltarusių ir rusų stačiatikių, o iš kadagio pagamintos verbos – baltarusių ir lenkų katalikų tapatumo išraiška. Lietuvoje ši konfesinė ir tautinė takoskyra nėra tapatumą formuojanti sąlyga. Ženklaus yra skirtumai tarp Lietuvoje ir Baltarusijoje naudojamų dekoratyvinių verbų elementų turinio ir masto. Prie medžio šakelių dedama įvairios žalumos, jos puošiamos džiovintais natūraliais arba dirbtiniais gėlių žiedais. Baltarusijoje katalikų ir stačiatikių religinio tapatumo simboliu, be didesnių tautinių skirtumų, pasireiškia dirbtinėmis puošmenomis pagražintos lapelius skleidžiančios gluosnio šakelių verbos, suteikiančios jų puokštelėms palmės pavidalą. Išskiriami trys šių verbų variantai, kurių atsiradimas siejamas su XX a. pabaiga. Rytų Lietuvoje sausomis gėlėmis puoštos gluosnio ar kadagio šakelių verbos, kaip ir įvairia žaluma papildytos puokštelės, yra lietuvių ir lenkų katalikiškos kultūros simbolis, kuris nėra būdingas stačiatikiams.

Didžiausias skirtumas tarp Rytų Lietuvos ir Vakarų Baltarusijos gyventojų religinio ir tautinio tapatumo nustatytas nagrinėjant Vilniaus verbų paplitimo tendencijas. Šiuolaikinėje traktuotėje iš sausų augalų gaminamos Vilniaus verbos išlaiko stabilias sąsajas su katalikiška Pietryčių Lietuvos tradicija. Ši verbų rūšis atsirado kaip Lietuvos lenkų liaudies kūrybos forma ir atskleidžia Vilniaus krašto katalikų religinės-meninės raiškos tradicijas. Tačiau šiuolaikinėje pasaulietinėje ir religinėje praktikoje Vilniaus verbas su tautine menine ir religine kultūra tapatina ir lietuviai. Tyrimo metu pastebėta, kad nors simbolis išlieka gaminamas lenkišką identitetą turinčių Vilniaus apylinkių gyventojų, Verbų sekmadienio religinėje praktikoje nepaisoma tautinių skirtumų ir Vilniaus verbos yra vienodai glaudžiai susijusios su katalikų religiniu gyvenimu. Simbolis neturi paklausos stačiatikių religinėje kultūroje ir tik nedideliu mastu tarp jų plinta kaip Vilniaus krašto gyventojų meninės kūrybos pavyzdžiai. Baltarusijos katalikai simbolį sieja su katalikiška Lietuvos lenkų tradicija. Todėl netgi tarp Vakarų Baltarusijos lenkų Vilniaus verbų poreikis yra nedidelis. Lenkijoje platinamos Vilniaus verbos yra politinės atminties simbolis, išryškinantis jų sąsajas su praeities Lenkijos ir jos pakraščių kultūriniu paveldu. Todėl straipsnyje daroma prielaida, kad tarp Lietuvos katalikų Vilniaus verbos yra įgavusios politizuotą regioninio simbolio pavidalą ir pirmiausia atskleidžia regioninį katalikų tapatumą. Teritorinė simbolio priklausomybė nulemia jo vaidmenį tautiniam lietuvių ir lenkų tapatumui. Taigi Vilniaus verbos funkcionuoja kaip dviejų tautų identitetą konstruojantis regioninis religinis ir meninis simbolis. Pasaulietiniame diskurse Vilniaus verbos įgauna regioninės liaudies kultūros pavidalą ir tampa dekoratyviniu interjerų elementu. Tikintiems gyventojams šios verbos išlieka Verbų šventės simboliu. Toks supratimas šiuolaikinėje religinėje praktikoje, nykstant apeiginiam ir maginiam verbų traktavimui, taip pat yra būdingas iš įvairios žaliavos pagamintoms verboms. Taigi nustatyta, kad religiniai simboliai, kaip sudėtinė kultūros simbolių dalis, reikšmės nepraranda šiuolaikinėje visuomenėje ir pirmiausia tarp tikinčiųjų, todėl verbos išlaiko ryšį su etnine aplinka ir konfesine jos gyventojų įvairove.