

The Disappearing Ethnography of Villages

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This essay-type article will talk about the ethnographic flaneur or the disappearing ethnography of Lithuanian villages. So the aim of this essay-type article is to disclose the extent of the decadence of Lithuanian villages altogether with the disappearing ethnography of villages.

Unfortunately, in recent decades, we have been very clearly facing with the decadence or disappearance of countryside's ethnography. It starts with the deaths of the villagers along with the loss of memory, along with the artifacts of their unique daily lifestyle, with the disappearance of the unique artifacts of the countryside's houses, the interior and exterior of the houses. There is nothing more sad when there is no light left in the houses, only closed windows and doors where a little life could be seen before. Unfortunately, birds are also disappearing, people are disappearing in villages as well...

Keywords: artifact, flaneur, flaneuring, disappearing ethnography, field research, phenomenology, facing memory, sacrum and profanum, heritage, axis mundi, homestead, field research, folk artist.

Introduction

My concern is the study of the ethnographic landscape of Lithuanian villages or the disappearing ethnography, basically – in my native village of Pakrovai, Prienai District, Lithuania.

According to Mircea Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*: "Do what you will, he is an inheritor. He cannot utterly abolish his past, since he is himself the product of his past. He forms himself by a series of denials and refusals, but he continues to be haunted by the realities that he has refused and denied. To acquire a world of his own, he has desacralized

the world in which his ancestors lived; but to do so he has been obliged to adopt the opposite of an earlier type of behavior, and that behavior is still emotionally present to him, in one form or another, ready to be reactualized in his deepest being."¹ I want to cite French historian Pierre Nora's *Les Lieux de Memoire* (Places of Memory) who stated, that "Memory is constantly on our lips because it is gone."

The aim of the research. In this case, the researcher's gaze, efforts to investigate and to preserve the disappearing ethnographic heritage of the villages – to

¹ Mircea Eliade. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. New York, Sheed, Ward, 1958.

perpetuate, at least in words, the disappearing homesteads, gardens, landscape, which are being destroyed by bulldozers and excavators, when the predatory nature of farmers causes obvious damage. Maybe a bird's eye view/perspective would help as well (as we suppose, that the birds, who are the mediators between the earth and the sky, between this and another worlds, can see and face that extinction of ethnographic villages and their habitats better).

The methods of research. Investigation methods of this article are based on the comparative analysis, phenomenological approach based on the emphasis of individual unique experience, as well as field research or the notes of an ethnographic traveler (*flaneur, flaneuring*).

As far as we know, *Flaneur* (from French) is the person / person who observes the society. Ethnographers increasingly use *the flaneur* to show how ethnographic and mobile practice complicates our view of power and relations in the city, but it is often used to study rural / countryside's culture.

Flaneuring in general, in the prism of phenomenological approach, this is research while walking around the fields, meadows, forests of your village, visiting homesteads, houses. In my research I also use dialogues with local residents as well.

Theoretical conceptualization: symbolism and microcosm of the homestead

Sacrum and profanum. When talking about the decline of rural / countryside's ethnography, I have to use the terms of

Mircea Eliade – *Sacrum and profanum*, the concepts of sacred and profaned spaces.

Therefore, the effort of storage and preservation is important, museums work in a similar way. My attempts to preserve the sacred space of natural nature, where homesteads are part of the cycle of nature. Although representatives of *the profane* sphere (farmers, hunters, poachers–killers) are destroyers of nature.

Homestead microcosm. What is the vision of the homestead microcosm, how can it be defined? It is like an ascending vertical, *Axis mundi*: from look from the lowest part, the earth, the grass, the appearance of the house, then rising (as with the wings of the birds) towards the trees that surround the house with the birds that are mediators between the earth and the sky. I believe that trees are part of the cosmic universe of ethnic villages.

As for the birds in the traditional homestead, it should be noted that the stork, the stork's nest, is *the axis mundi* of a harmonious homestead and a harmonious worldview, the so-called center of the world.

So the model of the world, the cosmos, is tripartite: “Traditionally this all consisted of three levels – the below of the earth, the middle of the moon, the above of stars and sun. The below is solid, the middle is fluid, the above is fiery. It was generally held that the middle, the moon held both extremes together, provided the connecting link. In almost all mythologies the sphere of the moon was assigned almost exclusively to the feminine”². L. Klages states as well, that

² Alksnis, Gunar. *Chtonian Gnosis. Ludwig Klages and his Wuest for the Pandaemonic All.* Theion Publishing, 2015, p. 107

‘elementary’ symbols include: the moon, water, the tree, each of which demonstrates in its own way a fundamental bi-polarity – a bi-polarity of life and death, growth and decay, coming and disappearing³.

According to Algis Uždaviny’s monograph *The Problem of Interpretation of Symbols and Images in Ancient Civilizations*, by talking about space and time as qualitative rather than quantitative categories, critics of modernism rely on traditional ontology, which raises the ranks of heterogeneous levels of being, which are crowned by the existential principle identical to Goodness [...] ⁴

When the lost harmony between man and nature/cosmos disappears, not only the trees disappear, but also the homesteads...

Trees are part of the universe of the cosmic ethno-homestead, together with birds, sometimes only surviving trees mark the homestead. The saddest thing is when the site of the homestead is compared to the land... Unfortunately, in most cases, greedy farmers (sometimes you want to call them land grabbers) and their tractors, excavators are responsible for this hell.

It is also extremely sad when these days trees are cut down indiscriminately all over Lithuania, the authorities cover themselves with ostensibly sanitary loggings... and this is how Lithuanian forests are transported across the Baltic Sea to the shores of Finland (maybe Sweden)... It is really very sad and very disappointing...

By the way, Gaston Bachelard in „The Poetics of Space“, mentioning Rilke, wrote: „These trees are magnificent, but even more

magnificent is the sublime and moving space between them, as though with their growth it too increased. [...] We comfort ourselves by reviving memories of protection. Something closed must preserve our memories, but leave them with their original value as images. The memories of the outer world will never have the same tone as the memories of home, and by remembering this we add to our store of dreams; we are never true historians, but we are always close to poets, and our emotions are perhaps nothing more than the expression of a lost poetry.”⁵ [4]

Research results: decay and extinction of homes and villages

I (as a villager and as a researcher) have been walking through the fields, forests and meadows of my native Pakrovai village, located in Dzūkija, Prienai district, for already 44 years. Unfortunately, the village is slowly disappearing... in 60 years, six of the 30 homesteads were destroyed, two were completely wiped off the ground, plowed up. Over the past 70 years, 17 villages or settlements have belonged to my parish of Stakliškės. Currently (data of 2022–2023 years) there are still 25 houses with 19 residents. What is the main cause? Maybe the movement of young people to the biggest cities of Lithuania (Vilnius, Kaunas etc.)?..

But comparing with the date of 1905 years, we can tell, that the village of Pakrovai is disappearing, as in 1905 this village had 198 inhabitants, in 1979, the year I was born, Pakrovai had 112 residents, while

3 Klages, L. *Der Geist als Widersacher der Seele*, p. 1315.

4 Uždaviny’s, Algis. *Simbolių ir atvaizdų interpretacijos problema senovės civilizacijose*, 2006.

5 Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*, 1964.

now – only 19 residents. So the amount of residents decreased catastrophically, more than 10 percent.

It is appropriate to mention the names of the villages, which disappeared with their names, in the Stakliškės parish / eldership, to which Pakrovai belongs: *Briediškės – Butrimiškės – Gerviškės – Gineikonys – Giraitės – Guostelė – Juozapava – Kalnai – Laibutiškės – Paulinava – Salomenka – Stakliškės II – Tervydai – Ustronė – Šlynės – Žiupa*. While looking at these names of extinct villages, we can see, that some of them were etymologically associated even with the names of the birds (*Gerviškės* – with the Common cranes) and of the forests (*Giraitės*).

While talking about my native village of Pakrovai, it is worth to mention, that in 44 years 6 houses were demolished (two of them completely), they practically disappeared from the earth's surface. Instead of those houses – ploughed fields.

The disappearance of village, houses, homes in Lithuania's villages is of course associated with the disappearance of ethnic heritage, folklore, folk art as well. My mother, Ona Augustavičiūtė-Gaidamavičienė RIP, was very upset, telling me 25–30 years ago⁶ that she no longer heard Lithuanian folk songs in the village of Pakrovai. I am lucky that I still remember my grandmother Ona, who used to sing in the mornings while building the fire and cooking. I am glad that some of my grandmother's songs were recorded and preserved⁷.

6 Around 1995.

7 The internet source: <http://www.tautosakos-rankrastynas.lt/lt/irasas/15589?asmuo=Augustavi%C4%8Dien%C4%97&vieta=Pakrovai>

Disappearing sounds are also important for the research... Sounds are also disappearing in villages, many sounds can no longer be heard... No one will wake them up anymore... namely, in many homesteads, the roosters crowing in the morning... like the creaking levers of the wells... like the happy clucking of storks... like the sweet chirping of barn swallows... These natural sounds are more and more drowned out and destroyed by the noises of the cars, tractors, the rumble of bulldozers.

Other studies

My neighbor in Pakrovai village, called Onutė, who is over 80 years old and has lived in the village of Pakrovai all her life, sadly testifies that she is really upset that the farmers drained the wonderful lake in the fields 8 years ago. The lake was a real haven for rare birds as well as various fish.

The story of the extinct lake

Eight years ago, a rich, greedy farmer “destroyed”, drained the lake near my village house – made it disappear, made it drain... The local farmer wanted to cultivate more lands, to get as much profit as possible, but apparently nothing good grows in this area. And that place is still wet.

In recent years, farmer S. Š. tried to grow corn in the place of the lake, it is true that it grew, but still those places are wet, in places even springs are appearing.

Therefore, many birds found refuge in this lake, especially rare ones: Great white egrets, gray herons, Common cranes, plovers, waders...

Many years after the draining of the lake, it is possible to see some lonely individual Great white egrets flying like the restless ghosts of our ancestors, but without finding a place for themselves – neither for food nor for rest.

Positive notes

No matter how many villages are disappearing, no matter to what extent the ethnography of villages is disappearing, in the last three decades some people from the cities have returned to the villages to the houses of their parents or grandparents, trying to restore them, to repair them, or simply as new inhabitants.

Some folk artists are trying to revive old decorating traditions, especially decorating old (or new) furniture, such as dowry chests. Just can mention very picturesque dowry chests made by folk artists Vytautas Rautkys, Algirdas Verseckas. They look like true dowry chests. Algirdas Verseckas in the movie SEME was mentioning,

I think that everything should be made just the way those masters made it, then you enter those vibrations and you can present the product to a person as it was, and it acquires some kind of continuity, value. That person will hand over this piece of furniture, product with the same spirit as our grandmothers and great-grandmothers. That energy will also shine through, and I realized that a lot of handwork needs to be put in. Planning to paint a tail of wagtail, you need to know, that drawings even paint, acrylic dries the fastest, but does not match, then oil paint.⁸

⁸ From the documentary movie SEMME, 2014, Lithuania.

What about the folk artists in Stakliškės surroundings? I can mention few artists – new settlers – who are making decorations for homes; for example – hammersmith Martynas Breikštas (*Poškučio kalvė*, Prienai region) is creating home decorations from wood and metal. I want to mention ceramic artists Nerijus and Dalia Kisieliai, living near Stakliškės and creating authentic ceramic artworks (one of the main motif is sheeps, which the artists are growing).

Some of folk artists only paint windows, or rather shutters.

It is obvious that the trial to revive old traditions of the making and painting for example pieces of furniture, as dowry chests etc. are giving an ability to transmit the spirit of our ancestors creative tradition.

Concluding remarks

It is obvious that disappearing ethnography of the Lithuanian villages starts with the deaths of the villagers along with the loss of memory, along with the artifacts of their unique daily lifestyle, with the disappearance of the unique artifacts of the houses, the interior and exterior of the houses.

In 60 years, six of the 30 homesteads were destroyed in the village of Pakrovai, Stakliškės eldership, Prienai region, two were completely wiped off the ground, plowed up. Over the past 70 years, 17 villages or settlements have belonged to my parish of Stakliškės completely disappeared.

One would like to be more optimistic about Lithuanian ethnographic villages, but the fact is that they are disappearing together with the artifacts of a unique

daily lifestyle, unique ancient houses, and artifacts of the interior and exterior of the houses are also disappearing.

In the words of Mircea Eliade, “Life cannot be recycled, it can only be recreated by symbolically repeating the cosmogony.”

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