

The Recovery of Archaic Lithuanian Thinking: A Mythopoetic Worldview

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This article argues that the recovery of the archaic Lithuanian tradition and the old way of life cannot be approached as the theoretical reconstruction of some artificially structured system; they can be recovered only insofar as they can be directly and naturally experienced. In other words, the very idea that the archaic tradition was a kind of an artificial system that can be reconstructed and preserved in a text today is limited and does not reveal the vitally important nuances of the way of life of our archaic Lithuanian ancestors. Any attempt to reveal the distinctiveness of the archaic Lithuanian tradition transcends the limitations of a merely theoretical reconstruction and can be approached as its recovery and preservation in another living organic whole that can be seen as a kind of a resonator, a certain shared understanding and openness of consciousness able to conceive one or another stratum of ancestral experience. Such an attempt should not be limited by the argument that an old cosmology, agriculture, or way of life is not directly applicable in its primordial form today. Creatively reintegrated into today's world, the tradition can open up in unexpected, newly reborn forms revealing and preserving the distinctiveness of our Lithuanian ancestors' way of life.

Keywords: archaic thinking of Lithuanian ancestors, primordial thinking, mythopoetic worldview, folklore

PREFACE

This article tries to answer these questions: How can we reveal the depths of the living world of our Lithuanian ancestors? How can we recover the archaic Lithuanian way of thinking? What does this recovery effort mean in the present-day world? These questions make us emphasize that the rich cultural heritage of Aistian and Baltic tribes, in different and not always obvious forms, has survived to this day. Its echoes can be heard today in the archaic harmonies of still living folk music and its thoughtful profiles can still be seen carved in wooden wayside shrines. Both traditions, although in decline, are still alive up to today. For example, all wayside shrines in archaic pre-Christian style, which raises human's eyes to the sky, are carved with motifs of trees, flowers, and birds rather than the symbols of a religious system. This style contrasts with that of classical Greece, for example, where mythical symbols dominate the direct experience of the world. There, in other words, the statues of gods, embellished to perfection, take one's perception to the mythical system rather than leaving one with one's

own experience of the world. The same difference can be seen in archaic Lithuanian folk songs. Here, mythical details are employed both as elements of syncretic perception and as a rich treasury that is creatively used each time in order to enrich the song. The mythical element is not dominant here, it comes together with daily life, with a direct call to the nature world. The singer of the song is part of the rich and mellow tone of the whole. Thus, in archaic Lithuanian folk songs we can see an integral worldview that meaningfully intertwines mythopoetic symbols, directly experienced nature, and daily cares and joys. Therefore, it is better to describe the archaic Lithuanian thinking not as mythical, but as mythopoetic.

A MYTHOPOETIC WORLDVIEW

We have already noted that when discussing the archaic Lithuanian world, we should emphasize that it is fundamentally different not only from the modern one and from the Christian Middle Ages but also from the classical mythic world. Donatas Sauka observes that the archaic beliefs that existed before the introduction of Christianity comprise a much more significant part of folk religion than is usually thought. The legends, religious symbols, and rituals that are widespread in villages are full of old content, from which it is possible to recover an almost complete and consistent original vision of the old worldview (Sauka 2007: 15). Sauka maintains that archaic Lithuanian folklore owes little to mythology because the main types of Lithuanian folklore are songs, lyric poetry, fairy tales, and small folklore. Mythological works are not numerous, and they consist only of short prose tales (Sauka 2007: 15). In other words, in many archaic examples of Lithuanian folklore mythical motifs appear only insignificantly or indirectly. Pranė Dundulienė, who has researched the goddesses mentioned in Lithuanian folklore, notes that although folk songs reveal the names of goddesses, they do not do so in the form of direct address, as is usual in classical mythical traditions, but as lyrical embellishments and variations of their poetic names (Dundulienė 2008: 77–110). For example:

Oh Gardens Gardens, Leliumoj ... (Dundulienė 2008: 85).

In this and numerous similar examples of folklore we can see that the garden itself is asked to increase the harvest. Here, the lyric “Leliumoj” (a salutation to the goddess Lela) is a transformed mythical remnant, which in the song is repeated many times and creates a specific harmony typical of the tradition of mantric singing, a sacred dimension, an integration through sound into the totality of the world. In archaic Lithuanian songs, we see a balance between the natural world inhabited by Lithuanians and the sacred whole. Although mythical elements have their own significance, they do not determine everything and do not dominate the songs.

We could say that the ancient Lithuanian interacted with the world not merely creatively but also directly and boldly. Mythical details gave him, as it were, a complementary harmony and a dimension of coherence. This is also evidenced by a passage from a poem written on the cusp of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance by one of the first poets of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Nicolaus Hussovianus (ca. 1475 – after 1553). In *A Song About the Stature, Ferocity, and Hunting of the Bison*, he writes about archaic Lithuanian customs (Hussovianus 2007: 10):

If one should care to learn our northern ways,
The custom followed by our land is thus:
This beast must not be felled by hurling spears,
Nor may it be ensnared with hidden traps.
The strength of men is always nobly used,
For this a certain piety demands.

They say the bison always roam the woods,
Until they are subdued by hunters' hands.

Si tamen arctoe morem cognoscere gentis
Attinet, hunc sequitur patria nostra modum.
Non licet hoc animal procul actis sternere telis,
Non datur occultis illaqueare dolis.
Semper in excelso vis est versata virorum,
Hoc fieri quadam religione ferunt.
Affirmant solitum totis excedere silvis,
Dum non vincuntur congrediente manu.

Thus, only he was considered strong who fought with the beasts of the forest unarmed, with his bare hands. Fighting with a weapon was considered a weakness, as if one were cheating nature. Using a weapon or any other man-made tool can also be understood as a certain spiritual weakness and as cowardice or even a sign of dishonesty. We may assume a similar attitude toward coexistence with the world in general that direct communication was sought with the nature and the cosmos, without identifying oneself with any mythical or other system. Any superficial and unnatural instrument was treated as redundant. These arguments show that the archaic Lithuanian relationship with reality was direct, brave, and dignified. It involved neither groveling nor flattery nor bargaining. It was an open meeting, encounter, conversation, concord. The very essence of the Lithuanian way of life was marked by human openness, which was seen as a life in harmony not only with nature and divine archetypes but also with one's ancestors. This openness could be understood as the fulfillment of man's ultimate goal – a return to wholeness and plenitude. Thus, the mythopoetic self-awareness of Lithuanians is essentially different from what we might call identification with an artificial system.

The ancient Greeks needed a system of mythical gods, medieval Christianity needed an ecclesiastical system, and the modern and postmodern world relies on political, economic and many other systems. The archaic Lithuanian mythopoetic worldview is different from all of these. Here, we can see the obvious fundamentals of independence from any particular system. This difference stems from the independence of a worldview that is based on a direct relationship with reality. In a certain sense, we can speak of an independent, liberated consciousness that experiences phenomena directly. How can we recover this consciousness? We may think that the recovery of an independent consciousness that experiences the phenomena of the surrounding world directly is possible not as a historiographical description but rather as a directly experienced way of life. Archaic Lithuanian songs can be treated as the poetical expression of the horizons of the inhabited world. In other words, recovery of the mentioned, the vessel in which mythopoetic awareness accumulates cannot be some kind of a system of "dead" categories. What is needed here is an awareness that is possible only in a living person.

The effort to recover this mythopoetic dimension is complicated by the fact that the archaic Lithuanian world is covered by many historical layers of culture. But it is important to emphasize that by saying "covered" we do not mean that the mythopoetic worldview has disappeared. We mean that perception itself is "covered", or, we might say, transformed. Therefore, when asking how to recover the archaic Lithuanian thinking, we are putting the question to the perceiver himself. But what does it mean for the perceiver to break free from these superimposed layers?

We will say that the mythopoetic worldview can be apprehended not by being conceptualized, but by being directly experienced. In other words, it is the very thinking that can open itself to a certain environment; it is changed by this environment, and it in turn changes this environment. The best way to name this process is by employing the concept of harmonization – not affirmation, not belonging or obedience, but precisely the attitude of harmony that emerges in mythopoetic Lithuanian folk arts. Incidentally, even the concept of harmony is not enough, for it explains little; thus, in order to take a deeper look and highlight the characteristic stages of presence in the mythopoetic worldview, let us explore the forms of archaic Lithuanian symbolism. It is obvious that the hare, the river, and the falcon open up mythopoetic coherence and draws a person into the integral world of meanings.

As an example of archaic Lithuanian cultural integrity, we can state that old traditional sashes, in addition to their practical use, have symbolical and ritual meanings. They preserve the oldest signs and symbols. Algis Mickūnas notes that during a wedding the bride and groom used to join hands, which were tied together with sashes that joined the two of them as a husband and wife who publicly belong to each other. Vytautas Tumėnas writes that the bride gave the sashes she had woven as gifts not only to her new family but also to the most important objects in the house to which she had come – the table, the oven, and the well. This symbolical action expressed a connection with her ancestors, the gods, and the spirits in her new home (Tumėnas 2009: 124–127). Mythopoetic symbolism may seem mysterious, but if we assess it not in the terms of causal logic, but in a broader sense, we can see a certain organic, vibrant, and creative opportunity to open up the coherence of the world, in other words, an active spiritual dimension, a work with symbols.

This example reveals that for the bride, after her arrival at the groom's house, every object becomes part of her new world, and in order to avoid living in an alien environment, she gives sashes as gifts and establishes a positive relationship. We can see that her world is not a collection of random superficial things, that everything is interconnected and has a deeper meaning. What for a postmodern person may seem like only a meaningless object, for mythopoetic thinking, is a meaningful part of the whole. With those sashes she binds together, as it were – creates, we might say – a symbolic cohesiveness. The symbolism of a sash that “binds” the details of daily life with a sacred whole emphasizes the integrity of mythopoetic thinking, which also opens up the idea of sacredness. For the meanings of the inhabited world, sacredness marks their underlying cohesiveness, which is experienced as the presence of each thing in a whole. In the cohesiveness of the whole, nothing remains insignificant.

From the viewpoint of mythopoetic symbolism in the archaic Lithuanian tradition, everything in this world is sacred; thus, one's relationship with it is reverential. Expressions of this relationship have survived to this day in names that indicate sacredness – in toponyms and hydronyms, in the names of hills, hollows, and trees. The sacredness of this connection with the world is especially highlighted during Lithuanian festivals. The historian Vykintas Vaitkevičius notes that ancient sacred places were extremely numerous (Vaitkevičius 1998: 741). Just in Žemaitija he discovered more than a thousand old pre-Christian sacred places that people still knew about in the late 20th century (Vaitkevičius 2006: 6). It is noteworthy that fading Lithuanian folklore rituals have been preserved precisely because pre-Christian festivals were celebrated. For instance, during the Soviet times, it was possible to distinguish between official traditions and the oppositional ones. Underground traditions were associated not so much with staged as with informal activities – the illegal celebration of calendar holidays, ancient wedding ceremonies, ethnographic and hiking expeditions. For Lithuanians, the celebration

of holidays had an enormous significance. During holidays, the entire arsenal of Lithuanian folklore was remembered. It is precisely here that tradition speaks forth with all its voices, that its resistance to the attrition of time is revealed.

We can also speak about Lithuanian folklore as the vocalization of a distinctive relationship with reality because the dimension of sound is extremely important here. We may also draw attention to the valuable conclusions that Algis Mickūnas reaches when researching mythical tales. He shows that sound indirectly opens up a transcendental passive dimension that by exerting an underlying influence on the perceiver not only does not directly appear in mythic narratives but also resists any efforts at deconstruction. This passive dimension defines the manner of perception and opens up the access to the world and the way we live. In discussions of Lithuanian folklore, it is important to highlight this passive dimension, which through archetypes, like the heart of a tradition, like the way of an ethnos, lies in its very depths and resounds in its songs.

The way an ethnos expresses itself in an audible space creates an opportunity to look at language as a unique form of rhythm that in tales and songs harmonizes with the sounds of the world, as if opening up the harmony between man and the rhythms of the world around him. Thus, the musicality of the Lithuanian language is neither accidental nor excessive. We may reflect that the melodiousness that dissolves boundaries connected man with the vibrations of the natural world. Daiva Vyčienienė notes that in folksongs we can hear the harmonies of warbling birds; therefore, *sutartinės* (polyphonic multipart Lithuanian folksongs) are warbled or piped (*tūtuojamos*) (Vyčienienė 2012: 188). People used to say: 'What nice piping!' or 'They are piping (*tūtuoja*) like swans'. In the archaic Lithuanian world, sound has a special phenomenal meaning; we can speak about it as a certain tangible substance. This fact is indicated by the terminology of folk singing. Vyčienienė writes that the woman who sang the main text or began a *sutartinė* was called the collector (*rinkėja* or *rinkinyčia*). This collector collected or, in other words, created the words of songs. Vyčienienė's research allows us to hypothesize that these singers were once very important participants in rituals, that they were probably even the leaders. We may even suppose that in the past the singers of a *sutartinė* were considered priestesses (*žynės*).

It is noteworthy that the Lithuanian folklore usually reveals a special knowledge that is not connected with magic, it has nothing in common with evil, mysticism, or deception. Lithuanian folklore is filled with a harmonious sound and a melodious rhythm. We may say that it is very sensitive in a feminine, even maternal way. Love – for the hare, the birch, and the sun – shows a rich and open worldview, a relationship given meaning by warm feelings, a sincere and open, all-encompassing ethic. The tradition of ancient Lithuanian incantations stands out in that dangerous forces (such as snakes, diseases, etc.) are often addressed graciously in search of an accommodation with them. The snake is often referred to with the terms of endearment like "beautiful little bird" (*graži paukštytė*). In other words, a peaceful coexistence with hostile forces is sought (Trinkūnas 2007). It is not a weakness, it is the opposite, a strength. We have to note that the Lithuanian tactic of seeking an accommodation with dangerous forces and finding ways to coexist instead of fighting can also be observed in modern history*. Often the unity in which ancient Lithuanians lived was maintained by love (the goddess Laima), which, like the Greek Eros, through fertility, beauty, and art creatively

* As David Reminick noted after Lithuania broke free in 1991 from the USSR: "In the three years it took to win independence, the Balts were never violent, only stubborn. It was that very temperament – Sakharov's calm confidence on a mass scale – that characterized their revolution. None of the other republics organized quite so well or thought with such precision and cool." (David Reminick, "Lenin's Tomb")

combines everything into a whole. As an archaic Lithuanian art form, folklore (especially songs) embodies the attitudes of meaningful harmony, a benevolent coexistence, and a rich whole, which essentially form a unique creative substrate.

Uždavinys stresses that the creative process in the ancient theurgy involves a transition from a hidden state of being to one open to thought and then to senses. He explains that if different ways of experiencing and understanding correspond to different hierarchical levels of being, then there also exist different levels of language that correspond to these different ways of understanding. He shows that in ancient theurgy each lower language is an “interpreter” (*hermeneus*) of a higher language in the sense that it makes it intelligible to the lower level (Uždavinys 2014: 177). Similarly, we may reason that although relationships are constantly polished and nurtured, a certain culmination is reached in songs and tales and then it enriches the human fusion with the world. In other words, as a creative source, this very culmination illuminates the mythopoetic society with understanding and knowledge of how to live, how to raise children, how to behave under difficult circumstances. By combining the invisible world with the visible, mythopoetic folk art seeks a unified whole. Through singing and speaking this whole is harmonized; unsounded halftones are tuned, and harmonious chords are sought in the very act of singing or speaking. Hence, it is important how a sound is sung or pronounced because the voice is understood as what expresses the direct experience of being. The voice itself opens up the harmonious coexistence of the speaker and the world around him. Singing not only creates a mood but also opens up the medium in which one experiences and thinks in a certain way. That is exactly why the archaic Lithuanian singing tradition is so rich in work songs. For the wheelwright, it guides his movements as he makes wheels, for the weaver, it helps him weave smooth sheets, for the hunter, it shows him the right trail in the woods. It grounds the direct experience together with a fundamental and meaningful relationship with the world. It is free of any speculative or synthetic system, it is a natural organic link that binds together different layers of being and provides a presence, stability, and certainty that could not be achieved by any other means.

This effect is also noted by Mickūnas, who states that in the very mythical sounds events and people's actions together with feelings are considered resonant, harmonious, and expressive (Mickūnas 2016). Affirmations of myth lead phenomenology to a direct manifestation of *psychē* – to the spoken word. In myth, *psychē* is embodied as poetic vocalization, as images (Mickūnas 2016). The same is claimed in other way by Heidegger, who states that the ancient Greek words are not accidental and that they express fundamental Greek experience, a direct experience of existence (*Anwesenheit*). Mistakes were made and never corrected when Greek words were “literally” translated into Latin and Roman thinking without their accompanying primordial experience (Heidegger 2003: 15). In other words, the experience behind the words themselves was lost. Thus, what is extremely important to emphasize is precisely the primordial dimension of alive experience, and an artificial speculative system laying behind the words is only the secondary, it means that they can be implemented in multiple ways. By revealing, strengthening and preserving this primordial dimension that we can still hear in archaic Lithuanian *sutartinės*, we also open the way to the distinctive tradition of our Lithuanian ancestors.

CONCLUSIONS

Neither the mythical nor the Christian nor the modern or postmodern world can manage without one or another system. But all systems, by masking the direct experience of existence, compel one, in a certain sense, to reject direct experience of the world. By doing so, these sys-

tems provoke distrust of one's own perceptions. We see that today these tendencies have grown incredibly stronger. Man has greater faith not in his own senses, but in various technical measurements, theories, and computers. Precisely this attitude weakens man's direct experience of the world. The archaic Lithuanian thinking is presystemic. It does not defend any system or artificially organized model of the world, and it does not praise any authorities or impose any preconceptions. Not hiding behind any artificial constructs, it experiences reality directly. Precisely for this reason, the mythopoetic Lithuanian folklore echoes the evidence and presence of existence itself, which requires neither justification nor proof. Therefore, recovery of the archaic mythopoetic Lithuanian tradition cannot be regarded as the reconstruction of a system of dead categories. It can be restored insofar as it can be experienced. Mythopoetic Lithuanian folklore reveals an intense, deep and colourful harmony between man and the rhythms of the world. In speech, songs, hymns, and stories Lithuanians emphasize states of harmonious presence in the world. Vocalized archaic Lithuanian tradition through the openness and sound of a living voice poetically emphasizes and supports the harmony of the human presence in the world.

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Archajinio lietuvių mąstymo atkūrimas: mitopoetinė pasaulėvoka

Santrauka

Atskleidžiama, kad archajinės mitopoetinės lietuvių tradicijos atkūrimas negali būti traktuojamas kaip „negyvos“ kategorijų sistemos rekonstravimas, ją galime atkurti tiek, kiek ši įstengia būti iškalbėta, išdainuota, išjausta. Manymas, kad senąją tradiciją galima atkurti kaip kokią dirbtinai sukurtą sistemą, neatveria gyvybiškai reikšmingų jos klotų. Čia reikalingas kitoks suvokimas, jautrus žvilgsnis, pastebintis ne tik niuansuotas gyvenimo būdo detales, bet ir prasminius, tarsi gyvo organizmo pagrindus, kuriuos galima „atkurti“ ir „išsaugoti“ tik kitame gyvame organizme. Pastarasis gali būti suvokiamas kaip tam tikras „rezonatorius“, tam tikras susikalbėjimo ir suvokimo būdas, gebantis vieną ar kitą protėvių patirtį patikrinti „savimi“. Svarbu pabrėžti, kad nebūtina senąją kosmologiją, žemdirbystę arba maisto gamtinimo papročius suvokti tiesmukai ar bandyti jų pirmąją pavidalą šiandien pritaikyti tiesiogiai. Reikalingas apmąstymas ir kūrybiškas senojo gyvenimo būdo integravimas į šiandieninį pasaulį. Būtent taip paveldas gali atsiverti netikėtomis, naujai atgimusiomis, bet protėvių mąstymo savitumą išsaugojusiomis formomis, kurios niekaip kitaip atsirasti negalėtų.

Raktažodžiai: archajinis lietuvių protėvių mąstymas, pirmąsias mąstymas, mitopoetinė pasaulėvoka, tautosaka