

UDC 398.332.416(474.5)

DOI <https://doi.org/10.17721/fovia.philologica/2025/10/1>**Kristina BLOCKYTĖ-NAUJOKĖ***PhD in Ethnology, Research Fellow in the Department of Philology, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Klaipėda University, Herkaus Manto str., 84, Klaipėda, Lithuania***ORCID:** 0000-0003-2380-0724*kristina.blockyte-naujoke@ku.lt*

To cite this article: Blockytė-Naujokė, K. (2025). Rizdviani zvychai v Malii Lytvi: istorychnyi rozvytok ta perspektyvy suchasnoi rekonstruktsii [Christmas Traditions in Lithuania Minor: Historical Development and Prospects of Modern Reconstruction]. *Folia Philologica*, 10, 4–19, doi: <https://doi.org/10.17721/fovia.philologica/2025/10/1>

CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS IN LITHUANIA MINOR: HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT AND PROSPECTS OF MODERN RECONSTRUCTION

This article examines the Christmas and pre-Christmas traditions of the Lithuanians of Lithuania Minor, analysing their historical development from the archaic models of the 15th–19th centuries to the transitional forms of the 19th–20th centuries and the contemporary reconstructions emerging after 1990. Particular attention is devoted to the interaction of ethnic tradition, confessional identity and modern cultural practices, as well as to regional specificities distinguishing Lithuania Minor within the broader Baltic context. The study employs an interdisciplinary approach combining ethnographic fieldwork conducted by the author in 2007–2015 (245 informants) with additional interviews collected in 2018–2023 in regional ethnoculture centres. Archival materials from Folklore and Manuscript Fund of Klaipėda University (KUTRF), The Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore (LLTI) and The Lithuanian Institute of History (LIH) were analysed alongside historical texts from the 16th–19th centuries. Comparative, interpretive and content-analysis methods were applied. The author also continuously observes and participates in contemporary cultural activities organised by local institutions, thus providing longitudinal insight into the living tradition. This research for the first time provides a systematic reconstruction of three models of the Christmas tradition in Lithuania Minor (archaic, transitional and contemporary), based on an extensive corpus of unique field narratives. The study demonstrates that the region's Lutheran religious background strongly influenced the structure and meaning of Kūčios and Christmas, while contemporary reconstructions often function as "invented traditions", frequently mediated by cultural institutions. A new interpretation of ritual change is proposed through the lens of regional identity formation and cultural memory. The archaic model was marked by a syncretic fusion of pre-Christian beliefs and communal ritual practices. The 19th–20th centuries brought desacralisation, standardisation and fragmentation of customs, shaped by modernisation, urbanisation and political regimes. The contemporary model is characterised by active revival, institutional curation and creative reinterpretation of traditions, which significantly contribute to the strengthening of regional identity. Today, Christmas traditions serve as an important cultural resource and a marker of Lithuania Minor's heritage.

Key words: Christmas traditions, Christmas Eve, Lithuania Minor, calendar festivals, tradition reconstruction, cultural identity.

Крістіна БЛОЦКІТЄ-НАУЙОКЄ*доктор філософії (етнологія), наукова співробітниця кафедри філології факультету соціальних і гуманітарних наук, Клайпедський університет, вул. Геркауса Манто, 84, м. Клайпеда, Литва***ORCID:** 0000-0003-2380-0724*kristina.blockyte-naujoke@ku.lt*

Бібліографічний опис статті: Блоцкітє-Науйокє, К. (2025). Різдяні звичаї в Малій Литві: історичний розвиток та перспективи сучасної реконструкції. *Folia Philologica*, 10, 4–19, doi: <https://doi.org/10.17721/fovia.philologica/2025/10/1>

РІЗДВЯНІ ЗВИЧАЇ В МАЛІЙ ЛИТВІ: ІСТОРИЧНИЙ РОЗВИТОК ТА ПЕРСПЕКТИВИ СУЧАСНОЇ РЕКОНСТРУКЦІЇ

Метою статті є аналіз різдвяних і передріздвяних звичаїв литовців Малої Литви, їх історична динаміка від архаїчних моделей XV–XIX століть до трансформацій XIX–XX століть і сучасних реконструкцій після 1990 року. Особлива увага приділяється взаємодії етнічної традиції, конфесійних впливів та сучасних культурних практик, а також регіональним особливостям, що вирізняють Малу Литву серед інших балтійських регіонів. Методологічно дослідження ґрунтується на міждисциплінарному підході: етнографічних польових матеріалах, зібраних авторкою у 2007–2015 роках (245 інформантів), і додаткових інтерв'ю із працівниками етнокультурних центрів, записаних у 2018–2023 роках. Використано джерела архівів Фонду фольклору та рукописів Клайпедського університету, Інституту литовської літератури та фольклору, Інституту історії Литви. Застосовані порівняльний, інтерпретаційний методи та контент-аналіз для дослідження історичних текстів XVI–XIX століть. Авторка також здійснює довготривале спостереження за сучасними етнокультурними практиками, беручи участь у заходах регіональних культурних центрів. Наукова новизна результатів дослідження полягає в тому, що вперше системно реконструйовано три моделі різдвяної традиції Малої Литви (архаїчну, трансформаційну та сучасну) з опорою на великий масив унікальних польових свідчень. Доведено, що конфесійна специфіка краю (переважання лютеранства) суттєво вплинула на структуру й семантику Святвечора (*Kiškio*) та Різдва (*Kalėdos*), а сучасні реконструкції часто потребують інституційного посередництва (етноцентрів) і набувають рис «винайдених традицій». У роботі запропоновано нову інтерпретацію змін святкового циклу через призму регіональної ідентичності та культурної пам'яті. Архаїчна модель характеризувалася синкретичним поєднанням дохристиянських вірувань, обрядового циклу та громади. У XIX–XX століттях спостерігалися десацралізація та уніфікація звичаїв, зумовлені модернізацією, урбанізацією та зміною політичних режимів. Сучасний етап визначається активним відродженням та інституційним моделюванням обрядів, що сприяє зміцненню локальної ідентичності. Різдвяні практики Малої Литви перетворилися на важливий ресурс культурного спадку та регіональної самоідентифікації.

Ключові слова: різдвяні звичаї, Святвечір, Мала Литва, календарні свята, реконструкція традицій, культурна ідентичність.

The Christmas season – Christmas Eve and Christmas Day – celebrations in Lithuania Minor constitute a distinct segment of Baltic culture in which long-standing religious, social, and symbolic structures are revealed. The customs of this region developed under specific historical and confessional conditions, combining remnants of the local Baltic worldview with the Evangelical Lutheran tradition established during the Reformation. Analysis of historical sources shows that from the 16th century to the early 20th century, the festive cycle of the *Lietuvininkai* was characterized not only by a diversity of rituals but also by a remarkable stability of customs, which, without reservation, may be regarded as a pillar of cultural identity.

Since the late Soviet period, and especially after the restoration of independence in 1990, *Lietuvininkai* holiday traditions have undergone intense change: some customs began to be reconstructed, reformulated, or newly invented, incorporating pan-Lithuanian, Western, or global cultural elements. The turn of the 20th–21st centuries revealed not only the fragmentation of tradition but also active processes of cultural memory revitalization, which are today particularly fostered by ethnic culture centers, museums, and local communities. Researchers also play an important role in these

processes – including the author of this article, who consistently observes activities organized in ethnocultural centers and actively participates in them, thus documenting the transformation of living tradition in real time.

This article examines the development of Christmas Eve and Christmas celebrations in Lithuania Minor, based on written sources from the 15th–20th centuries, ethnographic material, and 21st-century reconstruction practices. Such a comparison of three chronological layers makes it possible to reveal the continuity of customary structures, functional changes, and transformations of symbolic meanings.

The **object** of the study is the Christmas Eve and Christmas customs of the *Lietuvininkai* in Lithuania Minor from the 16th to the 21st century, encompassing historical, ritual, and contemporary reconstruction practices.

The **aim** of the study is to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the historical development, transformations, and modern reconstructions of Christmas Eve–Christmas customs in Lithuania Minor, highlighting the cultural distinctiveness of the region and the processes of identity construction.

Research objectives:

1. To analyze early (16th–19th c.) written sources on Christmas Eve and Christmas customs

in Lithuania Minor and to identify the structure of archaic rituals.

2. To reveal the transformations of Christmas traditions in the late 19th – early 20th centuries related to urbanization, Lutheran religion, processes of Germanization, and the ideas of national revival.

3. To investigate changes in holiday models in the late 20th – early 21st centuries by analyzing the mechanisms of tradition “invention”, reconstruction, and adaptation.

4. To assess the significance of Christmas Eve – Christmas customs for constructing regional identity across different historical periods.

Research Material and Methods. The study underlying this article is based on a comprehensive analysis of historical, archival, and contemporary ethnographic data, aiming to reconstruct the development of Christmas Eve and Christmas customs among the *Lietuvinkai* of Lithuania Minor and to assess current trends in their revival and interpretation. The core empirical material consists of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2007 and 2015, supplemented by archival sources and published materials. The analysis of contemporary reconstructions is further enriched by a survey of employees of Lithuania Minor ethnic culture centers and by observations of center activities carried out in 2018–2023. It should be noted that the author of this article continues to observe and actively participate in activities organized by Lithuania Minor ethnocultural centers, thereby contributing real-time documentation of contemporary practices.

During the 2007–2015 fieldwork in Lithuania Minor, information was systematically collected on calendar festivals and related rituals, with particular attention to the Advent, Christmas Eve, and Christmas period. The research data encompass festive practices that formed in the late 19th–20th centuries and have partially survived to this day. In total, information from 245 informants was recorded – representing the memory of several generations, allowing the tracing not only of individual customs but also of broader patterns of ritual change. The following sources were used: audio recordings and manuscripts from the Folklore and Ethnography Archive of Klaipėda University (KUTRF), material from the Folklore Manuscript Archive (LTR) and Audio Archive (LTRF) of the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore, ethnographic fieldwork collections housed at the Ethnology Department of the Lithuanian

Institute of History, as well as interviews and notes collected by the author during field expeditions in 2007–2015 and 2018–2023.

To reveal as comprehensively as possible the transformation of calendar festivals – particularly those of the Christmas season – research was conducted in 17 locations across Lithuania Minor: *Vėlaičiai, Rusnė, Kintai, Katyčiai, Klaipėda* and its suburbs (*Jakai, Ketvergiai, Dvilai*), *Šilutė, Priekulė, Stankiškiai, Kukorai, Lumpėnai, Viešvilė*, and *Smalininkai*. Such geographical diversity made it possible to compare urban and rural experiences, examine traditions across various parishes, and determine the extent to which Christmas Eve and Christmas customs differed depending on locality, confession, and the social composition of the community.

To understand not only the past but also the contemporary processes involved in reconstructing Christmas traditions, interviews were conducted not only with individual informants but also with employees of cultural centers and museums who directly organize calendar festival events. Data were collected at the *Klaipėda City Municipality Ethnoculture Center*, the *Dvilai Ethnic Culture Center*, the *Šilutė Culture and Entertainment Center*, the *Kintai Vydūnas Culture Center*, the *Pagėgiai Municipality Culture Center*, the *Martynas Jankus Museum in Bitėnai*, and the *Lithuania Minor Cultural Center in Jurbarkas District*. A non-structured interview method was applied, supplemented by the analysis of photographs and video material. This information makes it possible to document how a “public” image of the Christmas season in Lithuania Minor has been constructed from the late 20th to the early 21st century – what traditions are selected, how they are presented, and how they are legitimized in the public sphere.

An important additional source consists of a repeated survey of ethnic culture center employees conducted in 2023, focusing on contemporary reconstructions of Christmas Eve and Christmas customs. The aim of this survey was to assess how, over the past decade, the attitudes of cultural centers toward representing “Lithuanian identity” and “Lithuanian identity in Lithuania Minor” during the Christmas season have changed; to what extent contemporary events rely on historical sources, archival and field data; and to what extent they incorporate newly “invented” traditions responding to the needs of tourism, cultural policy, and

the strengthening of local identity. The 2023 data allow for a comparison of the late 20th – early 21st-century reconstruction phase with the most recent developments, thus highlighting both continuity and ruptures in the revitalization practices of Christmas traditions.

Archival and printed sources were used in two ways: as empirical data and as a theoretical and contextual foundation. Ethnographic information about the Christmas season among the Lithuanians of Lithuania Minor dates back to the 16th–17th centuries, when texts by M. Mažvydas (BRMŠ, Vol. II, 2001: 186), T. Lepneris (Lepneris, 2011: 196), and M. Pretorijus (Prūsijos įdomybės, Vol. III, 2006: 459) mention Christmas and New Year celebrations, describe or criticize associated customs, Christmas Eve divination practices, and greeting formulas. Works by later German and Lithuanian researchers – S. Dembovskis (Dembovski, 1893: 505–510), K. Kapeleris (Lietuvininkai, 1970: 361), J. Balys (Balys, 1948: 17), J. Kudirka (Kudirka, 1993: 230–231), A. Vyšniauskaitė (Vyšniauskaitė, 1990: 12–24), P. Dundulienė (Dundulienė, 1991: 26–58), among others – provide fragmentary yet valuable data on Lithuania Minor’s Christmas Eve and Christmas foods, the religious and domestic context of celebration, and the influence of Pietism and the Lutheran tradition on the Christmas season. Encyclopedic publications, including the Encyclopedia of Lithuania Minor, enable the linkage of Christmas customs with broader processes of regional culture, religion, and history (cf. Blockytė, 2014: 21–22).

Methodologically, the study is grounded in the interplay of several approaches. The totality of rituals, customs, and traditions associated with the calendar festivals of Lithuania Minor – particularly those of the Christmas season – is analyzed using analytical and interpretive methods, which make it possible to uncover the semantics of rituals and symbolic oppositions (festival – everyday life, sacred – profane, “self” – “other”). A comparative method is also employed to juxtapose data from different periods, locations, and confessional groups. In the process of collecting and analyzing empirical material, methods of archival source analysis, scholarly literature review, and media content analysis and synthesis are applied.

Finally, theories of globalization, European integration, and consumer society (J. Tomlinson (Tomlinson, 2002: 11), V. Rubavičius (Rubavičius,

2010: 55), V. Savukynas (Savukynas, 2007: 130), among others) allow for an evaluation of the development of Christmas customs in Lithuania Minor within a broader context of cultural flows, symbolic competition, and the “image-making” of local identity. This is particularly important for understanding why, precisely in the early 21st century – when almost no Lietuvininkai remain in the region – there emerges a marked need to construct “Lithuanian” and “Lithuanian-German” Christmases in public spaces, and how these celebrations differ from Christmas models in other Lithuanian regions.

Lietuvininkai’s Christmas Eve and Christmas Traditions: Historical Development and Cultural Models

The Christmas-season traditions of Lithuania Minor constitute a significant segment of Lithuanian culture, reflecting the region’s distinctive historical, religious, and social development. Written sources and contemporary ethnographic accounts indicate that the *Lietuvininkai*’s Christmas Eve and Christmas rituals formed a culturally stabilized ritual structure shaped over many centuries, in which specific actions, the organization of time and space, and symbolic elements played an essential role in sustaining community identity. Although the festive period experienced both functional and semantic transformations, these did not fundamentally alter its place in the communal consciousness; rather, they revealed the tradition’s capacity to adapt to changing social and religious contexts.

The transformation of the *Lietuvininkai*’s calendar traditions highlights the multilayered nature of the region’s culture, shaped by remnants of ancient Baltic religion, the influence of Reformation ideas, centuries-long processes of Germanization, and the impact of the Lithuanian national revival. In Lithuania Minor, Christmas Eve and Christmas functioned as a particularly significant moment of seasonal transition, integrating conceptions of cyclical time, expectations of agricultural success, practices reinforcing communal cohesion, and the revitalization of family bonds.

Based on historical material and testimonies of the living tradition, the development of the calendar festivals of Lithuania Minor may be structured into three analytical models:

– the archaic model (15th century – late 19th century), which reveals the region’s distinctive cultural features;

- the late 19th–20th-century model, characterized by shifts in the functions of traditions, increasing uniformization, and the influence of national revival ideology;

- the contemporary model (from 1990 to the present), marked by the interpretation, revitalization, and conscious “invention” of traditions in the construction of regional and national identity.

The following section focuses on the archaic model of the *Lietuvininkai*'s Christmas Eve and Christmas celebrations, reconstructed on the basis of 15th–19th-century written sources and recent ethnographic data.

1. The Archaic *Lietuvininkai* Model of Christmas Eve and Christmas

The archaic model of Christmas Eve and Christmas celebrations in Lithuania Minor encompasses the period from the earliest written mentions in the 15th–16th centuries to the late 19th century. This period corresponds to what is commonly defined as the era of traditional rural culture. J. Kudirka identifies the “traditional” period of Lithuanian material and spiritual culture as the late 18th–19th centuries, when village life was still governed by self-regulating cycles of customs and rituals (Kudirka 1996: 15–16). Although the fragmentary nature of earlier sources does not allow for a full reconstruction of the festival's structure, it does make it possible to clearly distinguish the main features of the archaic model. Based on both early written sources and *Lietuvininkai* oral testimonies, four interrelated elements characterize the archaic Christmas Eve–Christmas model:

- house-to-house visiting and masked processions;
- ritual festive meals;
- various beliefs, divination practices, and weather forecasting;
- the distinctiveness of sacred time and ritual prohibitions.

Alongside these features, the intersection of Christianity and older belief systems becomes increasingly evident, with ethnic and confessional factors emerging as the primary components shaping the structure of the Christmas period.

1.1. The Earliest Written Evidence

One of the earliest accounts of the Christmas season in Lithuania Minor is a letter by Martynas Mažvydas dated 1550, in which the author, without going into detail, expresses indignation at the “godless behavior” displayed during Christmas,

New Year's, Epiphany, and other festivals (Lietuvos istorijos šaltiniai, 1955: 168). The letter reveals the tension between official Reformed Christianity and the persistent folk customs that clergy perceived as remnants of “pagan” practices.

Christmas Eve as a distinct ritual time is mentioned in the Wolfenbüttel Postil (c. 1573), which notes that Lithuanians practiced divination with *kūčios* – peas, wheat, and honey – to protect themselves from devils and thunder (Gaigalat, 1901: 148). By the mid-16th century, Christmas Eve was thus associated with magical and apotropaic practices.

Seventeenth-century descriptions by M. Pretorijus further emphasize the turning of the year at Christmas. In *Deliciae Prussicae* he notes that the year was reckoned according to holy days, especially Christmas, marking the end of the old year and the beginning of the new one (Prūsijos įdomybės, Vol. III, 2006: 459). Pretorijus also describes Christmas Eve rituals, including the sprinkling of peas and wheat in livestock barns and the serving of nine fasting dishes. Although interpretations of the number nine vary, it is consistently linked to cosmic cycles, such as lunar phases or the solar year (Vyšniauskaitė, 1990: 12; Dundulienė, 1991: 26–58).

The 18th-century dictionary of Gotthard Friedrich Stender also mentions the term *Kūčios*: “*Kūčios* evening, the eve of Christmas (*Kūčios*), when a particular dish – *kūčia* – is eaten” (BRMŠ, Vol. IV, 2005: 219). Thus, Christmas Eve is already understood as a special year-turning supper featuring a specific ritual food.

Taken together, these early accounts show that the archaic *Lietuvininkai* model of Christmas Eve and Christmas was grounded in a logic of cyclical time, agrarian concerns for crop and livestock success, and magical protective actions – elements that only gradually intertwined with the Christian understanding of the feast.

1.2. Ritual Festive Meals and the Christmas Eve Dinner

The ritual meal formed the core of the archaic model, expressing community unity and relations with the dead and natural forces. Early sources mention nine fasting dishes on Christmas Eve (Prūsijos įdomybės, Vol. III, 2006: 459), though detailed descriptions are scarce.

Nineteenth-century accounts reveal a shift in food traditions. K. Kapeleris records that Christmas Eve

involved an illuminated household and anticipation of abundant food on Christmas Day, including meat, sausages, and alcohol (Lietuvininkai, 1970: 364). Ethnographic evidence shows that among Lutheran families in Lithuania Minor, fasting and the custom of twelve dishes were generally unknown, except in Catholic households. Instead, festive abundance prevailed, with cakes, meat dishes, and the symbolic *Bunte Teller* – plates of sweets, nuts, and fruit – shared among family members (LII BR, file 102: 162; Kudirka 1993: 230–231).

Thus, while the ritual *kūčia* dish and fasting declined in Lutheran contexts, the underlying idea of abundance, sharing, and festive unity remained central.

1.3. House-to-House Visiting and Masqueraders' Rounds

House-to-house visiting and masqueraders' rounds constituted another key element of the archaic model, associated with community integration and wishes for prosperity. Nineteenth-century sources describe young people visiting households on Christmas, often riding decorated grey horses and offering blessings for health and harvest (Vyšniauskaitė, 1990: 31–39; Lietuvininkai, 1970: 364). This tradition persisted into the early 20th century, with participants donning masks and animal costumes (KUTRF 532 / KUTR 86).

In Lithuania Minor, masqueraders known as *Šimelis* (*Šyvis*) visited households from Christmas to Epiphany. Central to these rounds was the figure of the grey horse, performed by a man imitating a restless animal and rewarded with food for successful performances. Scholars interpret the horse as an ancient symbol of the returning Sun, ensuring nature's renewal and agricultural success (Wiegmann, Zender, Heifurth, 1977: 144).

Comparable traditions were documented in other regions of Lithuania and parts of Germany, suggesting broader cultural connections (Vyšniauskaitė, 1990: 24; Kerbelytė, Stundžienė, 1996: 35). These rounds involved active participation by both masqueraders and hosts, reinforcing social bonds and reciprocal obligations. By the late 19th century, however, such practices gradually declined, reflecting broader transformations in festive culture.

1.4. Divination, Weather Prognostication, and the Sacredness of Festive Time

Divination and weather prognostication were integral to the archaic Christmas Eve – Christmas

model, reflecting a mythological understanding of sacred time. Early sources describe protective divination with peas, wheat, and honey, as well as rituals to ensure livestock well-being (Gaigalat, 1901: 148; Prūsijos įdomybės, Vol. III, 2006: 459).

Festive time was contrasted with ordinary time: actions performed on Christmas Eve were believed to influence the future. Weather observations served as predictors for the coming year, linking Christmas with other calendrical festivals such as Easter or Midsummer (Vyšniauskaitė, 1990: 23–24; LII BR, file 102: 138). Matrimonial divination was also widespread, though by the 1920^s–1930^s it increasingly lost its existential significance and became a form of entertainment (VDU ER 2482).

In conclusion, the archaic Christmas Eve–Christmas model in Lithuania Minor emerged at the intersection of ancient Baltic beliefs, Catholicism, and Lutheranism. Confessional differences shaped ritual emphases: Lutheran communities gradually abandoned fasting and divination, while Catholic ones preserved stricter ritual norms, and Pietistic traditions promoted ascetic devotion (Kudirka 1993: 230–231; Vyšniauskaitė, 1990: 23–24). The resulting model is hybrid, combining agrarian magic, Christian symbolism, and confessional reinterpretations. It serves as a reference point for later transformations, as some elements declined while others were adapted or consciously revived in contemporary cultural reconstructions.

2. Models of Christmas Eve – Christmas Celebrations among the *Lietuvininkai*: Late 19th – First Half of the 20th Century

The model of Christmas Eve – Christmas celebrations among the *Lietuvininkai* in the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century reveals a transitional period during which traditional customs of archaic origin begin to disappear, acquire new meanings, or transform in accordance with the needs of a modernizing society. During this time, two concurrent and sometimes competing tendencies can be observed: (1) attempts to revive ancient traditions, grounded in the ideology of national revival, and (2) accelerating social changes shaped by urbanization, technological progress, and the influences of Western culture.

2.1. Transformations in the Concept of Advent

In the early twentieth century, Christmas in Lithuania Minor was perceived as a farewell to the old year and the welcoming of the new one.

Preparations began during Advent, from the fourth Sunday before Christmas. Although most inhabitants belonged to the Evangelical faith, Advent was regarded as a special period marked by restraint from entertainment, dancing, and singing.

Ethnographic testimonies describe the Advent wreath as an important element of sacred preparation. One informant recalled braiding a large wreath of spruce branches, hanging it from the ceiling, and lighting one candle each Advent Sunday until Christmas: *“We all braided the Advent wreath. It was quite large, about 70–80 centimeters in diameter, and we wrapped it with a red ribbon, leaving four loose ends. These were used to fasten the wreath to the ceiling. We hung it like a chandelier in the middle of the room and placed four candles on it. Each Advent Sunday we gathered around the wreath and the dinner table: on the first Sunday we lit one candle, on the second two, on the third three. By Christmas all the Advent candles had burned down”* (VDU ER 2482, b. 1927, Aukštumala, Šilutė district). Another account notes that Advent wreaths were widespread in the Klaipėda region even before the war, with four red candles symbolically structuring the weeks leading to Christmas (Marcinkevičienė, 2000: 11). The Advent wreath, recorded in Lithuania Minor earlier than in Greater Lithuania, reflects Western, particularly Lutheran, cultural influence.

By the twentieth century, Christmas had become an explicitly Christian celebration. On Christmas morning families attended church services with hymn singing, followed by festive meals at home. The holiday was celebrated for several days, with the first day considered especially sacred: *“On the first day of Christmas, Father Christmas arrives; poems are recited, verses of hymns are sung, and he distributes Christmas gifts. Christmas evening ends at the Christmas table, covered with fragrant hay, a handmade tablecloth, and laden with various delicious Christmas dishes”* (Lietuvinkų žodis, 1995: 703). Beliefs connected Christmas morning behavior with future success in work (MLE Vol. I, 2000: 698).

Ethnographic data show that celebrations often began on Christmas Eve, after returning from church, with candle lighting, hymn singing, and a festive dinner, as fasting was not required for Evangelicals (Petrošienė, 2007: 222). Over the first half of the twentieth century, the duration of Christmas celebrations shortened: from three

days to two, and eventually to one (Kudirka, 1993: 200).

In some regions, particularly on the Curonian Spit, Christmas was also associated with youth dances, games, and communal gatherings, while the third day of Christmas (Ice Day) retained agrarian-protective meanings related to crops (Pietsch, 1982: 299–303).

2.2. Changes in the Structure of Christmas Eve and Christmas Celebrations

Christmas Eve in Lithuania Minor was conceptually linked with other calendar festivals such as Shrovetide, Easter, and Midsummer. Folk belief emphasized ritual parallels: abundance was ensured through symbolic eating practices, and similar masqueraders appeared during different festive cycles. According to O. Vilmantienė, Christmas Eve represented restraint of evil forces, while Midsummer was associated with their heightened activity. Both nights were believed to be dangerous for livestock, and both were surrounded by beliefs in supernatural phenomena (Vilmantienė, 1941: 116–121).

Ritual links between winter and summer solstice festivals are archaic and widespread in Lithuania. Weather observed on Christmas Eve was believed to predict conditions on Midsummer Day (Kudirka, 1993: 284), and proper behavior during Christmas Eve was thought to ensure prosperity in spring (Balys, 1993: 30).

Traditional sources indicate that in Lithuania Minor neither the order nor the number of Christmas Eve dishes was strictly regulated. This constitutes a major difference from Greater Lithuania. Except in Catholic families, fasting and the twelve-dish supper were not customary. Informants emphasized festive abundance: cakes, meat dishes prepared from a slaughtered pig, hymn singing around the Christmas tree, and coffee drinking: *“No, there was no fasting, we did not starve even a little, we did not have the custom of twelve dishes, no. What was Christmas Eve like? They baked cakes; before Christmas a pig was always slaughtered and many different foods were prepared, headcheese, roulades”* (VDU ER 2482, b. 1927, Aukštumala, Šilutė district).

A central element of the Christmas Eve meal was the *Bunte Teller* (“colorful plate”), consisting of sweets, nuts, and apples, often accompanied by spicy biscuits known as *pipirinkai*: *“Each family member received such a large prepared plate, filled to the brim with sweets and nuts and delicious*

apples” (VDU ER 2482, b. 1927, Aukštumala, Šilutė district). The timing of the meal was not considered significant, and Christmas wafers were absent from Evangelical households. Meals began with various dishes, without fixed sequence, and ended with sweets (Kudirka, 1993: 283–285).

Regional dishes, such as mushroom borscht with meat, mottled peas with meat sauce, or small rye loaves, were prepared in the Tilsit and Ragnit areas throughout the festive period (Dundulienė, 1991: 233).

2.3. The Establishment of the Christmas Tree Tradition

Early twentieth-century testimonies indicate that decorating the Christmas tree in Lithuania Minor was perceived primarily as a family ritual rather than mere decoration. The custom was widespread both in Lithuania Minor and Greater Lithuania.

Although the Christmas tree is a relatively recent tradition, its roots can be traced to Western Europe. Written sources mention decorated trees in Riga (1514), Alsace (1605), and German lands in the early modern period (Gerhard, 1998: 80; Dundulienė, 1991: 239). In Lithuania, the Christmas tree is first recorded in 1853 (Baranauskas, 1970: 51), and its spread was promoted by teachers, clergy, German soldiers, and school celebrations (Kudirka, 1993: 54).

In Lithuania Minor and Samogitia, the Christmas tree became established earlier than in other regions. Among *Lietuvinkai* it was known as the Christmas tree (*Kalėdų medis*) and was usually placed away from the table. Its appearance is associated with contacts with German culture and Lutheran hymn traditions.

The Christmas tree should be understood not only as an imported custom but also as resonating with older Lithuanian symbolic meanings of the tree as a sign of life and vitality. The tree was decorated with food and lit candles, which were believed to possess protective power and were often kept burning until midnight (Dundulienė, 1994: 84). Informants recall candle lighting as one of the most impressive moments of Christmas Eve: “*The Christmas tree was not as vividly imagined as now, and the Christmas tree was not in the room. <...> We decorated a large tree, and the most beautiful moment was when the candles on the tree were lit in special holders*” (VDU ER 2482, b. 1912, Vėlaičiai village, Piktupėnai parish).

2.4. Transformations in Masquerading Traditions: The Decline of the Šyvis Ritual

In the late 19th century, masquerading rounds and the so-called *Šyvis* ritual played a prominent role in the structure of Christmas season customs among the *Lietuvinkai* of Lithuania Minor. Ethnographic and written sources indicate that this practice was particularly common in the rural environs of Tilsit, Ragnit, and the surrounding villages. According to informants, groups of young men, having decorated grey-maned horses, would ride from homestead to homestead visiting relatives and neighbours, offering wishes for success, a good harvest, and health in the coming year. The core of this ritual consisted of symbolic wrestling without dismounting, expressing renewal of strength, vitality, and communal order, as well as the performance of the character *Šyvis*, whose embodied “*horse*” energy was believed to magically stimulate the awakening of nature and ensure agricultural prosperity.

Ethnologists note that the figure of the horse in Baltic culture was associated with the return of the sun, the continuity of the life cycle, and cosmological renewal. The *Šyvis* ritual reflects an archaic conception of agrarian sacrality: riding into the house, circling the fields, generous feasting by the hosts – all of these formed part of a practical magical system aimed at strengthening community ties and ensuring harvest. As narratives preserved in the manuscript collections of the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore and the Lithuanian Institute of History show, masquerader figures – the bear, the Jew, the beggar woman, the goat, the crane, the chimney sweep, among others – performed a function of social inversion, temporarily reversing established hierarchies and allowing the release of accumulated social tensions.

However, with the onset of rapid modernisation in the late 19th century, the *Šyvis* ritual gradually lost its primary ritual functions. Increasing Germanisation, the expansion of urban culture, the consolidation of Lutheran moral norms, and youth migration to towns all contributed to the weakening of the traditional rural community model that sustained this practice. Entertainment gradually replaced sacral meaning – masquerader rounds came to be perceived primarily as youthful amusement rather than a ritual of the turning of the year. Some early 20th-century accounts already note that “*young people would walk mainly to*

socialise, rather than to perform the old rites”, and the figure of *Šyvis* became less recognisable and less frequently enacted.

By the 1930s and 1940s, alongside changing social structures and the strengthening of norms associated with the Lutheran family model, the *Šyvis* ritual in Lithuania Minor effectively disappeared. Several additional factors further contributed to its decline:

- the priorities of national revival, which emphasised the creation of shared national symbolism rather than the preservation of regional specificity;

- the institutionalisation of festive culture, replacing communal rural rites with centralised celebrations;

- Soviet cultural policy, which eliminated or redefined religious and ethnocultural festivals into ideologically acceptable forms.

As a result, the *Šyvis* ritual lost the mechanism of intergenerational transmission and ceased to exist as a living practice. In the second half of the 20th century, it appeared only sporadically in the memories of the elderly and had no real continuity. In contemporary reconstructions of Lithuania Minor festivals, this custom is occasionally presented symbolically as part of regional heritage, yet it no longer fulfils its original social or sacral functions.

The transformation of the *Šyvis* ritual thus reflects broader cultural changes in Lithuania Minor: the decline of archaic agrarian rituality, the reconfiguration of traditional customs, and the emergence of transitional forms shaped by modernisation, confessional shifts, and socio-cultural dynamics in the early 20th century. Against this backdrop, new, increasingly personalised figures of the winter festive season began to emerge, filling the cultural space left by diminishing collective rituals.

2.5. The Emergence of Santa Claus as an Individualized Festive Figure

At the beginning of the 20th century, a new festive character emerged in Lithuania Minor – *Kalėdų senelis* (Santa Claus), whose functions largely replicated those of archaic Christmas masqueraders. His attire – a fur coat worn with the fleece on the outside, a long beard, and a cap with a pompom – links him semantically to earlier winter-season masked figures (Vaicekauskas 2005: 112–115).

Across Lithuania, this figure appeared under various names (*Kalėdų senelis*, *Senis Kalėda*, *Kalėdų Dalulis*, *Senis Šaltis*). In Lithuania Minor, *Kalėdų senelis* brought gifts to children and performed short ritualized interactions, such as requiring prayers or songs and evaluating children’s behavior: “*The old man would come, and you had to know a prayer, you had to know how to sing some little song; he would ask whether you obeyed your grandmother or grandfather, or your mother or father. These were the short rituals*” (KUTRF 5/KUTR 3/5 b, born 1924, Žygaičiai village; from 1942 lived in Trūkiškės, Šilutė district). Informants consistently emphasize the distinctive inside-out fur coat and bell, signaling his arrival: “*That Christmas old man would take big fur coats, turn them inside out so the wool would be on the outside, stick on some kind of beard, a cap with a big pompom at the back; he would ring so that people would hear that the old man was already coming*” (KUTRF 404/KUTR 65, born 1920, Kintai).

According to A. Vaicekuskas, *Senis Kalėda* is functionally and semantically equivalent to traditional masquerader rounds: he visits households, offers wishes, is rewarded with food, and symbolically represents “the other side”. The main difference lies in individualization – the collective masquerading troupe is replaced by a single anthropomorphic figure (Vaicekauskas 1995: 9).

Given that *Kalėdų senelis* appears predominantly in the 1930s – 1940s, it can be assumed that this figure emerged through the convergence of masquerading traditions and the increasingly widespread practice of children receiving Christmas gifts at home. Sources also record the celebration of *Senis Šaltis* (St Nicholas) Day in Lithuania Minor, during which children placed letters in their shoes and received gifts: “*Before Christmas, on December seventh, there was still Nicholas’ Day, so we, the children, would write letters and put them in our shoes. In the shoes we found gifts, and then again at Christmas*” (VDU ER 2482, born 1912, Vėlaičiai, Piktupėnai parish). Thus, *Kalėdų senelis* became established as an individualized masquerader who combined gift-giving with a moral and educational function.

2.6. The Decline of Christmas Eve Fortune-Telling and Belief Practices

The reinterpretation of customs through Christian and rational perspectives contributed to

the gradual rejection of archaic belief practices. Authority figures, often elders, prohibited fortune-telling and related activities within the family. Ethnographic material indicates that by the 20th century, Christmas Eve divination in Lithuania Minor was already rare, though some traces remained, such as rituals intended to protect orchards and ensure fertility: *“On Christmas Eve the old ones boiled peas and poured that water onto a bundle of straw. Then they went to the orchard and tied the trees with that straw, so that next year more apples and pears would grow and so that witches would not come and do mischief”* (Lietuvininkai 1970: 386).

Despite this decline, the perception of festive time as distinct from ordinary time persisted. The sacredness of the Christmas period was reinforced by behavioral prohibitions, such as refraining from certain types of work between Christmas and Epiphany: *“From Christmas until Epiphany they prayed, did not spin, and boys were not allowed to chop wood”* (KUTRF 61b/KUTR 22, born 1922, Vanagai village). These restrictions were linked to fears of misfortune affecting household and livestock.

Mythological motifs associated with Christmas Eve midnight remained vivid in narratives describing speaking animals and other supernatural phenomena, although listening to such manifestations was considered dangerous: *“The old people used to say that on Christmas Eve the animals in the barn would speak. They would say: ‘This year there is no trouble, the masters left plenty of oats when threshing, we will get through.’ But one was not allowed to listen to the animals talking, otherwise the masters would thresh thoroughly and in winter the animals would die of hunger”* (VDU ER 2482, born 1938, Vilkyčiai). Ritual practices also preserved symbolic links between Christmas and Midsummer, such as the use of herbs gathered at the summer solstice and fed to livestock at both times of year (Vilmantiene 1941: 116–121).

Weather prognostication remained widespread and was based on observations made on Christmas Eve, predicting conditions for Easter, spring, or Midsummer (Kudirka 1993: 54). Matrimonial divination, once common, gradually lost its existential meaning and by the 1930s – 1940s functioned primarily as entertainment: *“All sorts of foolishness happened: they placed a gold ring, a*

sprig of rue, and some soil on a plate, blindfolded the person and spun them three times. If they picked the ring, there would soon be a wedding; if soil, death. They threw a shoe over the shoulder without looking where it would fall. If it landed on the threshold or in the doorway, marriage would come soon” (KUTRF 100,102/KUTR 32, born 1909, Pažvelsiai village, Klaipėda district).

In summary, while magical practices related to Christmas Eve persisted into the early 20th century, their sacred significance diminished rapidly. Informants increasingly regarded fortune-telling and related beliefs as incompatible with Christian faith, marking a broader shift from ritualized sacrality toward moralized and rationalized interpretations of the Christmas period.

2.7. Transformations in the Duration of the Celebration and in Forms of Community

In the first half of the 20th century, the structure of the Christmas season in Lithuania Minor underwent significant changes shaped by internal sociocultural processes as well as external ideological and economic conditions. Traditionally, Christmas in the region was a three-day celebration with a clearly defined sacred hierarchy: the first day was regarded as strictly holy and dedicated to church practices and the family circle; the second day focused on social interaction and kinship visits; the third was reserved for leisure and communal entertainment. By the mid-20th century, influenced by modernization, increasingly intensive work rhythms, and the ideological standardization implemented by the totalitarian regime, the length of the holiday gradually shortened and eventually evolved into a one-day celebration model. This shift reflects not only the transformation of ritual time but also a broader reorganization of cultural memory, as the celebration lost part of its traditional functions and acquired a more modern, privately oriented character.

Regional evidence indicates that the pace of cultural change was not uniform. In the Curonian Spit, as accounts of informants show, Christmas in the first half of the 20th century retained remarkable vitality and a strong communal character. Young people danced until dawn in village halls where violinists and accordionists played; various festive games were held, including the popular *“Roasting the Crane (genelis)”* in which participants had to kiss one another, and those who performed the task poorly were lightly hit with a rolled-up towel (LII

BR, file 102, p. 240). Such practices demonstrate that even as agrarian rituality weakened, the need for youth socialization and community cohesion remained particularly strong.

These data suggest that, in the first half of the 20th century, Christmas celebrations in Lithuania Minor experienced a dual transformation. On the one hand, the reduction of the holiday duration and the disappearance of ritual structure reflect the weakening of traditional festive behavior. On the other hand, intensive youth gatherings and entertainment-focused elements reveal the emergence of new forms of community, in which social interaction began to replace ritual, and collective participation became the central feature of the celebration.

Therefore, transformations in the duration of the celebration reflect broader cultural and social changes: the shift from a ritual and collective holiday oriented toward sacred time and agricultural success to an entertainment and socially oriented celebration more aligned with the values and lifestyle of a modern society. These changes indicate that, in the context of modernization, community does not disappear but takes on new forms emphasizing the recreational content of the celebration.

In summary, the model of the late 19th and early 20th century reveals several distinctive features:

- archaic rituals weakened but did not disappear; they were transformed (for example, the masquerader tradition evolved into the figure of the Christmas Old Man);
- Western influences strengthened, especially through the Christmas tree, gift-giving, and the Advent wreath;
- the structure of the celebration changed, fasting traditions diminished, and meat dishes increased;
- magical practices lost their sacred meaning and became a form of entertainment;
- the celebration became individualized, shifting from communal house-to-house

This model forms the basis for contemporary reconstructions in which the customs of the late 19th and early 20th century *Lietuvinkai* are actively revived and reinterpreted in the 21st century.

3. The Contemporary *Lietuvinkai* Model of the Christmas Eve and Christmas Celebration (late 20th and 21st centuries)

The contemporary *Lietuvinkai* model of Christmas Eve and Christmas celebrations formed

after the restoration of Lithuania's independence in the late 20th century. This period is marked by the simultaneous revival of regional identity and the homogenizing influence of globalized festive culture. As a result, the contemporary model combines reconstructed elements of tradition with newly "invented" practices.

Today, Christmas is one of the most significant calendar holidays in Lithuania, officially celebrated over three public holidays. Since the 1990s, festive customs have become increasingly standardized nationwide, with emphasis placed on preparation: gift-giving, home decoration, festive meals, and table setting. Although the tradition of Christmas gifts is historically late in Lithuania, it has become a central element of contemporary celebration (Kudirka 1993: 215).

Public Christmas tree lighting ceremonies in town squares, accompanied by concerts, fairs, and markets, have become one of the most widespread contemporary festive forms. The figure of Santa Claus is firmly established and increasingly collectivized: whereas earlier he appeared as a single character, contemporary celebrations often feature multiple Santa figures in staged performances, reflecting global festive trends and local reinterpretations. For example, since 2000 the Pagėgiai Municipality Cultural Centre has organized annual Santa performances: "*each year one more Santa 'joins' – in 2012 there were twelve Santas, in 2013 – thirteen, and so on*" (VDU ER 2482, Pagėgiai Municipality Cultural Centre).

Educational and cultural institutions play a central role in shaping the contemporary model. Ethnocultural centres in the Lithuania Minor region organize Advent evenings, workshops, lectures, and creative activities aimed at transmitting traditional knowledge. These practices promote cultural continuity while adapting tradition to contemporary educational and social needs. Although institutionalized formats may reduce local specificity, they contribute to the strengthening of broader ethnic and regional identity.

In the 21st century, Christmas in Lithuania Minor – particularly in the regions of *Šilutė*, *Pagėgiai*, and *Klaipėda* – retains its character as a celebration that unites family and community. Narratives from the *Šilutė* area record clear markers of continuity, including the decoration of the Christmas tree, the distribution of *Bunte Teller* ("*colourful plates*") to children, visits by

the Christmas gift-giver, the singing of carols, and Advent evening gatherings. A significant number of informants note that Christmas preparations still begin with the lighting of the Advent wreath, which remains one of the most meaningful symbols of the pre-Christmas period. Introduced in the late 19th century, the Advent wreath remains one of the most meaningful and enduring symbols of the pre-Christmas period in the region.

The Christmas gift-giver figure has undergone significant transformation: from a ritualized winter visitor associated with masquerading traditions to a largely commercialized, yet emotionally central, festive symbol. New collective performances featuring multiple Santas exemplify the invention of staged traditions, which serve representational and identity-building functions rather than ritual ones.

Since the 1990s, ethnocultural centres, museums, and municipal institutions have become key agents in the reconstruction of regional Christmas traditions. Activities include candle casting, paper cuttings, gingerbread making, traditional games, storytelling, and the performance of Lithuania Minor hymns and carols. In this context, tradition is no longer transmitted solely through family inheritance but through teaching, performance, and public presentation, with performativity itself acquiring symbolic significance.

Contemporary Christmas celebrations in Lithuania Minor frequently take the form of public events – tree lighting ceremonies, markets, concerts, and folklore performances – which foster community cohesion and highlight regional distinctiveness. Folklore ensembles and museums often combine archaic elements with modern artistic forms, creating interpretive reconstructions adapted to contemporary audiences.

In the 21st century, Christmas celebrations in Lithuania Minor often take the form of public events, including the lighting of Christmas trees in town squares, markets, concerts and live folklore performances. These have become an important means of fostering community cohesion and highlighting the distinctiveness of the region.

The role of folklore ensembles is particularly significant. For example, the *Martynas Jankus Museum in Šilutė* seeks to combine archaic practices with contemporary artistic forms, incorporating elements of theatre, music and dance. Such events are often regarded as extended reconstruc-

tions in which traditional narratives are reinterpreted to correspond to the cultural expectations of contemporary audiences.

To summarise, the main characteristics of the contemporary Lithuanian Minor Christmas Eve and Christmas celebration model can be identified as follows:

1. National homogenisation, influenced by television, social media and popular culture.
2. A strong educational dimension, maintained by ethnocultural centres and schools.
3. A reconstructive character, involving attempts to revive lost elements, often through creative interpretation.
4. A symbolic function, whereby the celebration serves as a marker of regional identity.
5. Commercialisation, including gifts, public events, fairs and municipal festivals.
6. Collective experiences, such as Christmas tree lighting ceremonies, parades of Santa Claus figures and concerts.

The contemporary model maintains a connection with archaic and late 19th–20th-century practices; however, its primary function is no longer ritual but social: to bring the community together, sustain cultural memory and transmit regional identity to younger generations. The model is characterised by a clear interaction between traditional and modern practices.

Traditional elements that have been preserved and modified:

- The making of the Advent wreath (now often more decorative and supplemented with modern attributes);
- Decorating the Christmas tree (with store-bought ornaments predominating, though handmade decorations reconstructed according to historical forms are becoming increasingly popular);
- Singing of hymns (frequently performed in community concerts);
- Family gatherings, festive meal preparation and the tradition of the shared Christmas Eve dinner.

Elements that have acquired new functions or forms:

- Gift-giving has become a dominant feature of the contemporary celebration, although in the early 20th century in Lithuania Minor this custom was primarily child-oriented and did not yet involve adults;

– Commercial events – Christmas tree lighting ceremonies, festive markets and concerts – have become integral components of the celebration;

– The transformation of the Santa Claus figure: from a religious winter gift-bearer to a universal festive symbol, sometimes losing its regional distinctiveness.

In contemporary Lithuania Minor, a new stage in the creation of living tradition can be observed, in which local communities, youth groups and cultural enthusiasts play a significant role.

The contemporary model also reveals features of identity politics: local communities present tradition as a cultural asset that serves both tourism and regional pride.

When examining the contemporary model of Christmas Eve and Christmas celebrations, three essential tendencies can be identified:

1. Revival and reconstruction of traditions, in which historical customs are re-created based on ethnographic sources and adapted to contemporary cultural contexts.

2. Institutionalization of traditions, where schools, museums, cultural centers and municipalities become the primary organizers of tradition, and the practice itself acquires a formalized character.

3. Performativity of traditions, whereby the celebration becomes a stage for cultural display and identity representation, with increased emphasis on form, performative expression and collective experience.

The contemporary festive model, therefore, is not a continuous version of the archaic custom but an interpretive reconstruction in which tradition is continuously re-created, integrating historical heritage, the expectations of contemporary society and cultural mobility.

The Erosion of Local Distinctiveness and the Consolidation of a National Model

Although Lithuania Minor historically stood out for its distinctive Christmas Eve – Christmas celebration structure – such as the absence of fasting and the twelve-dish tradition, the *Šyvis* riding custom, and extensive masquerader processions – the living continuity of these practices has largely disappeared in the twenty-first century. Ethnographic field data indicate that contemporary informants recall only isolated childhood experiences that are no longer transmitted, while younger generations primarily adopt nationally standardized festive practices.

In contemporary public celebrations, a uniform national model of Christmas Eve and Christmas predominates throughout Lithuania. This suggests that present-day festive culture in Lithuania Minor is oriented less toward the continuation of local ritual practice and more toward visually appealing, publicly staged celebrations adapted to urban and institutional contexts.

Despite the disappearance of many traditional practices, contemporary society increasingly seeks symbolic connections with the past. These are expressed through reconstructed festive settings (such as the Christmas Eve table with hay under the tablecloth or the production of traditional gingerbread), narrative presentations of archaic customs that are no longer enacted (including *Šyvis* riding or house-to-house visiting), and an intensified use of symbolic aesthetics – light, candles, spruce branches, and sacral imagery – interpreted as markers of cultural identity.

In this context, historical material functions primarily as narrative and representation rather than as lived practice. This corresponds with ethnological interpretations of modern tradition as a performance of memory rather than a continuous inherited model of action.

Today, Christmas celebrations fulfil multiple overlapping functions: they foster community cohesion, serve as instruments of municipal cultural policy, operate as tourist attractions, function as educational practices in schools and ethnocultural centres, and retain significance as family celebrations increasingly shaped by commercial elements. Field research shows that organizers consciously construct an “aura of regionalism”, even when actual ritual continuity is fragmented, indicating a process of reflexive reconstruction rather than direct transmission of tradition.

Ethnographic material from the late 20th and early 21st centuries reveals several dominant tendencies in the contemporary reconstruction of Christmas Eve and Christmas practices. These include a strong educational orientation (crafts, hymn singing, and creative workshops), heightened visibility in public space (light installations, decorated squares, and Christmas villages), increasing personification of tradition through multiple Santa Claus figures performing representational rather than ritual roles, the strategic use of historical narratives in public communication, and the growing

influence of digital culture in shaping local identity representations on social media.

In this way, the contemporary model of Christmas Eve and Christmas celebrations in Lithuania Minor emerges as complex, multilayered, and functionally diverse, integrating symbolic, educational, commercial, and identity-forming elements within a broadly homogenized national festive framework.

Conclusions

1. **The Christmas Eve and Christmas traditions of Lithuania Minor demonstrate a multilayered historical evolution**, within which three distinct models of celebration can be identified: the archaic model (15th–19th centuries), the modern transformation period (late 19th–20th century), and the contemporary reconstruction stage (late 20th–21st century). Each of these models emerged at the intersection of different religious, social and political forces; therefore, the system of customs changed not only structurally but also semantically.

2. **The archaic model is characterized by a pronounced legacy of Baltic religion and local magical practices**, clearly reflecting a cyclical perception of nature and time. The rites of the Christmas Eve – Christmas period reveal a complex system of beliefs: house-to-house visiting, masqueraders' processions, *Šyvis* (ritual horse) performances, ritual meals, meteorological, agrarian and matrimonial divinations. The foundation of this model is communal cohesion, an active relationship with the world of the dead, and alignment with natural cycles, representing the deepest cultural layer of the identity of the inhabitants of Lithuania Minor.

3. **The transformations of the late 19th–20th century reflect the impact of modernization, urbanization, and political regimes**, during which traditional customs lost their primary ritual function and were increasingly interpreted as community entertainment or cultural symbols. Masquerading, the *Šyvis* ritual, and certain forms of food-related or magical practices disappeared or were significantly transformed. The Evangelical Lutheran context shaped a distinct experience of Christmas Eve – without fasting and with greater emphasis on gifts and pastries. In the first half of the 20th century,

agrarian magical foundations weakened, the worldview shifted, and rational thinking intensified.

4. **During the Soviet period, traditions were filtered through ideology**, and certain festive elements were reinterpreted or turned into ideological celebrations. This led to further decline of customs, functional transformation, and detachment from local history and sacred roots.

5. **The contemporary model (after 1990) is based on revitalization, reconstruction, and the "invention" of new forms of celebration**, relying on historical sources, folkloric interpretations, and cultural tourism needs. Ethnocultural centers, museums, schools, and local communities have become the main actors in these processes. Elements that disappeared in the late 19th century are restored on new semantic grounds, not as magical rites, but as tools for identity formation, education, and community cohesion.

6. **Contemporary reconstructions (particularly 2020–2023) demonstrate the resilience and adaptability of traditions**, as they are oriented toward communal participation, visibility, and experiential engagement. Educational workshops (candle making, Advent wreath weaving, traditional cooking, game reconstruction), public Christmas tree lightings, gatherings of Santa Clauses, and folklore concerts form a new perception of the festive season in which tradition is created reflectively and consciously.

7. **Research on the Christmas period in Lithuania Minor is significant for the history of Lithuanian ethnic culture** because it reveals unique regional dynamics where the heritage of Baltic religion, Lutheran devotional practices, Prussian cultural influences, the ruptures of 19th–20th-century modernization, and contemporary heritage-actualization strategies intersect.

8. Today, **the Christmas Eve and Christmas customs of Lithuania Minor function as a practice** of cultural memory that promotes regional distinctiveness, strengthens ethnic identity, and unites communities. The current revitalization of traditions is not an act of nostalgia but a sustainable model of cultural education and community engagement that opens new possibilities for interpreting winter festivities.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

1. *Baltų religijos ir mitologijos šaltiniai: XVI a.* (T. II) [Sources of Baltic religion and mythology: 16th century] (Vol. 2). (2001). Vilnius, Lithuania [in Lithuanian].

2. *Baltų religijos ir mitologijos šaltiniai: XVIII a.* (T. IV) [Sources of Baltic religion and mythology: 18th century] (Vol. 4). (2005). Vilnius, Lithuania [in Lithuanian].
3. Balys, J. (1948). *Metinės šventės* [Annual festivals]. In *Lietuvių tautosakos skaitymai* (T. I–II). Tübingen, Germany [in Lithuanian].
4. Balys, J. (1993). *Lietuvių kalendorinės šventės: tautosakinė medžiaga ir aiškinimai* [Lithuanian calendar festivals: Folkloric material and interpretations]. Vilnius, Lithuania [in Lithuanian].
5. Baranauskas, A. (1970). *Raštai* (T. II) [Writings (Vol. 2)]. Vilnius, Lithuania [in Lithuanian].
6. Blockytė, K. (2014). *Kalendorinės šventės Mažojoje Lietuvoje: tradicijų rekonstrukcija* [Calendar festivals in Minor Lithuania: reconstruction of traditions]. *Gimtasai kraštas*, 21–37 [in Lithuanian].
7. Buračas, B. (1993). *Lietuvos kaimo papročiai* [Lithuanian rural customs]. Vilnius, Lithuania [in Lithuanian].
8. Buračas, B. (1993). *Lietuvos kaimo papročiai* [Lithuanian rural customs]. Vilnius, Lithuania [in Lithuanian].
9. Cappeller, C. (1970). *Kaip senieji lietuvininkai gyveno* [How the old *Lietuvaininkai* lived]. In *Lietuvaininkai: apie Vakarų Lietuvą ir jos gyventojus devynioliktajame amžiuje*. Vilnius, Lithuania [in Lithuanian].
10. Dembovski, S. (1893). *Litauische Festgebräuche* [Lithuanian festive customs]. *Mitteilungen der Litauischen Literaturarischen Gesellschaft* [in German].
11. Dundulienė, P. (1991). *Lietuvių šventės: tradicijos, papročiai, apeigos* [Lithuanian festivals: traditions, customs, rites]. Vilnius, Lithuania [in Lithuanian].
12. Dundulienė, P. (1994). *Gyvybės medis lietuvių mene ir tautosakoje* [The tree of life in Lithuanian art and folklore]. Kaunas, Lithuania [in Lithuanian].
13. Gaigalat, W. (1901). *Die Wolfenbütteler litauischen Postillen: Handschrift aus dem Jahre 1573* [The Wolfenbüttel Lithuanian postils: Manuscript from the year 1573]. Heidelberg, Germany [in German].
14. Gerhard, F. (1998). *Es weihnachtet sehr* [It is very Christmas-like]. Künzelsau, Germany [in German].
15. Kerbelytė, B., & Stundžienė, B. (1996). *Lietuvių folkloro chrestomatija* [Lithuanian folklore chrestomathy]. Vilnius, Lithuania [in Lithuanian].
16. Kudirka, J. (1993). *Lietuviškos Kūčios ir Kalėdos* [Lithuanian Christmas Eve and Christmas]. Vilnius, Lithuania [in Lithuanian].
17. Kudirka, J. (1996). *Papročiai ir kaimo kultūra* [Customs and rural culture]. Kaunas, Lithuania: Lietuvos Respublikos žemės ūkio rūmai [in Lithuanian].
18. Lepneris, T. (2011). *Prūsų lietuvis* [The Prussian Lithuanian]. Vilnius, Lithuania [in Lithuanian].
19. *Lietuvaininkai: apie Vakarų Lietuvą ir jos gyventojus devynioliktajame amžiuje* [Lithuanians: About Western Lithuania and its inhabitants in the 19th century]. (1970). Vilnius, Lithuania [in Lithuanian].
20. *Lietuvaininkų žodis* [The word of the *Lietuvaininkai*]. (1995). Kaunas, Lithuania [in Lithuanian].
21. *Lietuvos istorijos šaltiniai* (T. 1) [Sources of Lithuanian history] (Vol. 1). (1955). Vilnius, Lithuania [in Lithuanian].
22. Marcinkevičienė, N. (2000). *Atvažiuoja Kalėdos* [Christmas is coming]. Vilnius, Lithuania [in Lithuanian].
23. *Mažosios Lietuvos enciklopedija* (T. I) [Encyclopedia of Minor Lithuania (Vol. 1)]. (2000). Vilnius, Lithuania [in Lithuanian].
24. Petrošienė, L. (2007). *Lietuvaininkų etninė muzika: tapatumo problemos* [Ethnic music of the *Lietuvaininkai*: issues of identity]. Klaipėda, Lithuania [in Lithuanian].
25. Pietsch, R. (1982). *Fischerleben auf der Kurischen Nehrung* [Fishing life on the Curonian Spit]. Berlin, Germany [in German].
26. Pretorijus, M. (2006). *Prūsijos įdomybės, arba Prūsijos regykla* (T. III) [Curiosities of Prussia, or the panorama of Prussia] (Vol. 3). Vilnius, Lithuania [in Lithuanian].
27. Pretorijus, M. (2006). *Prūsijos įdomybės, arba Prūsijos regykla* (T. III) [Curiosities of Prussia, or the panorama of Prussia] (Vol. 3). Vilnius, Lithuania [in Lithuanian].
28. Rubavičius, V. (2010). *Postmodernusis kapitalizmas* [Postmodern capitalism]. Kaunas, Lithuania [in Lithuanian].
29. Savukynas, V. (2007). “*Maištininko*” figūros susiformavimo prielaidos postkomunistinėje erdvėje: Lietuvos atvejis [Prerequisites for the formation of the “rebel” figure in the post-communist space: The case of Lithuania]. In *Dabartinės Lietuvos kultūros raidos tendencijos. Vertybiniai virsmai*. Vilnius, Lithuania [in Lithuanian].
30. Tomlinson, J. (2002). *Globalizacija ir kultūra* [Globalization and culture]. Vilnius, Lithuania [in Lithuanian, translation from English].
31. Vaicekuskas, A. (1995, December 23). *Kalėdų senelis, Senis Šaltis ir kiti...* [Santa Claus, Grandfather Frost and others...]. *Šiaurės Atėnai*, 50 (294), 9 [in Lithuanian].
32. Vilmantienė, O. (1941). *Joninių papročiai prūsų lietuviuose* [Midsummer customs among Prussian Lithuanians]. *Gimtasai kraštas*, 1–2, 116–121 [in Lithuanian].

33. Vilyis, G. (1993). *Šyvio šokdinimas Vakarių Suvalkijoje* [The dancing of the stallion in Western Suvalkija]. *Liaudies kultūra*, (6), 8–9 [in Lithuanian].
34. Vyšniauskaitė, A. (1990). *Kalėdos ir kalėdinio laikotarpio papročiai* [Christmas and Christmas season customs]. In *Lietuvių kalendorinės šventės*. Vilnius, Lithuania [in Lithuanian].
35. Vyšniauskaitė, A. (1993). *Mūsų metai ir šventės* [Our years and festivals]. Kaunas, Lithuania [in Lithuanian].
36. Wiegelmann, W., Zender, M., & Heifurth, G. (1977). *Volkskunde: Eine Einführung* [Folklore studies: An introduction]. Berlin, Germany [in German].

Дата першого надходження статті до видання: 11.11.2025
Дата прийняття статті до друку після рецензування: 15.12.2025
Дата публікації (оприлюднення) статті: 30.12.2025