Proceedings of the 10th International Conference *Synergies in Communication* (2022), ISSN (online) 2668 – 9375, ISSN–L 2284 – 6654

BUCHAREST UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMIC STUDIES
The Faculty of International Business and Economics
The Department of Modern Languages and Business Communication of ASE
10th International Conference: **Synergies in Communication (SiC)**
Bucharest, Romania, 27-28 October 2022

FROM PALM SUNDAY (*URBEPÄEV*) TO ST. KNUT'S DAY: LIVING BRANCHES

Mare KÕIVA[1]

Abstract

*This paper examines customs relating to Palm Sunday (*palmipuudepüha, urbepäev*) as part of the local identity, and the use of archaic customs in Estonian society. One of the most common practices in the past was the whipping of another person with willow (birch or other tree) twigs, a gesture which represented the transfer of health and strength from the branches to the family members and animals. Early in the morning, sleepers were awakened by being whipped with the willow twigs and family members wishing them health, or repeating phrases such as "Cheer up, brighten up!". It was customary to keep willow branches in a vase until Easter. Along with willow branches, alder, birch, hazel and other budding branches were also kept in the home. In some places, willow branches were taken to graves. In the Orthodox Church, willow branches were consecrated and later used in magical actions. For example, when driving the herd off to pasture, the shepherd used to whip the animals with them, to keep the cattle healthy and strong. The cattle were also whipped immediately after the willow branches were brought home, for the same purpose. Taking willow branches to the field was believed to ensure a good crop, while sticking them into an anthill would ensure the safety of the herd. At the same time, whipping animals and family members with branches, twigs or 'whisks' was also part of annual traditions, such as the autumn and winter masking holidays. The purpose of this article is to provide a first overview of the tradition of ritual calendric visits, on which people used living branches or twigs.*

Keywords: Palm Sunday; mumming and masking; living branches; magical actions; ritual visits.

DOI: 10.24818/SIC/2022/05.02

1. Introduction

Green and evergreen branches have symbolised rebirth since ancient times and have been important symbols at critical times and on major holidays. Bringing evergreen branches home during the winter solstice is a symbol of life in all cultures (Scapini, 2015; Vukanovic, 1964; Dafni, 2007; Minnijakhmetova, 2001). In early November (during ancient yule), green trees were brought home by the Germanic people. Christianity in the Middle Ages associated green trees with the tree of paradise. Apart from spruce branches, branches of juniper and other evergreen conifers bore the same meaning. Willow or birch branches are associated with Palm Sunday, Easter and Holy Week in general.

Many holidays include bringing living branches (or even trees) indoors, as a symbol of vitality and health: willows (and birches) at Easter, birches at Pentecost and Midsummer; green branches for St. Martin's and St. Catherine's Days and important masquerade holidays; Santa Claus had his birch rod with him; but the twigs were also included for people disguised as geese, and the Christmas and New

[1] Leading Researcher, Estonian Literary Museum, Tartu, Estonia, mare.koiva@folklore.ee

Year Bears had the habit of whipping spectators with a rod. During these holidays, whipping with a rod ensured strength.

2. Palm Sunday: Willowing (whipping with willow twigs) and bringing health

Palm Sunday traditions are examined using examples from different communities and denominations in search of parallels where health, success and happiness are given by whipping with living branches. Such customs are widely known in Europe, but this paper focuses primarily on Estonian materials. The feast of the palm trees is an important church holiday that marks the journey of Christ to Jerusalem, where he was greeted on his arrival with palm branches. Palm branches are replaced in different regions by various types of branches and symbolically decorated plant arrangements. In Estonia, palm branches were mainly replaced with willow, although other branches were also brought home. They were left rather simple and not decorated, nor were there any plant arrangements.

In the late Middle Ages Palm Sunday was a popular holiday, as proven by the written reports extant today. The clergy blessed the so-called ‘palm branches’, or evergreen branches; the parishioners carried them on the crusades and later brought them back home with them. The current customs in Estonia are fairly uniform as, since the 16th century, most of the areas have had a Protestant background. More colourful are the customs of the Orthodox Church, which have spread since the mid-19th century and have interesting features in common with Slavic customs. The willow twigs were consecrated, which gave them a special meaning and a certain power in small rituals, such as driving the cattle off to pasture, or healing people and animals. In recent years, there have been attempts to restore this custom.

Bringing home branches, especially willow, was a common sign of celebration everywhere in Europe. People also tried to reschedule the blooming of spring flowers, such as daffodils, tulips and hyacinths, as to make them coincide with Easter. It was customary to keep willow, alder, birch, hazel and other branches in a vase until Easter, until their buds developed into leaves. In some places (goat) willow was placed on graves.

The linguistic dimension is interesting in Estonian. The common standard *palmipuudepüha* (Palm Sunday) also has the parallel name *urbepäev* (‘twig day’), although the oldest general term for a twig, *hani* (‘goose’), has opened the way to flattering names with reference to small animals. In addition to *hani* (a name known throughout Estonia), twigs and branches have other colloquial names, for example *pajukass* (‘cat’, ‘willow cat’), *pajuutt*, *urvautt* (‘lamb’, ‘willow lamb’, from Hargla and Rõuge), *utt* (‘lamb’, from Kanepi), *kuik* (‘ament’, from Muhu), *pajukudu* (‘willow spawns’, from Pärnu-Jaagupi), *paotudu* (children’s slang ‘willow chick’, from Juuru), *tudu* (‘chick’, from Juuru and Koeru), *poju* (‘willow’, ‘small creature’, from Juuru, Koeru), *tiss* (‘tit’, i.e. slang for breast, from Põlva) (ETY, 2012; EKSS, 2009).

An important custom was bringing *linnulaastud* (‘bird shavings’, i.e., wood chips from a recently cut tree stump or a wood stack, the more of them there were, the more birds’ nests would be found in the summer), or fire wood indoors. Touching and destroying bird nests on trees was generally prohibited; eggs could only be picked from nests located on the ground. Searching for nests and eggs was an amusement for the local peasant children. It was said that you should not breathe on the eggs, nor show your teeth to them.

Willow tree (goat willow, with red bark) twigs were brought home for Palm Sunday, usually by children. They were brought in the evening of the previous day, or early in the morning before the sun rose. The twigs were placed under the ceiling or on top of a cabinet. Early in the morning, sleepers were woken up by someone hitting them with willow twigs, along with the wishes for good health or phrases such as “Cheer up, brighten up!” This early morning wake-up call was a more common practice in eastern Estonia, although families from other areas were also awaken in the same manner.
Below are a couple examples of this custom:

> The boy was told:
> To the willowing, willowing, willowing!
> To be healthy, bright, fresh!
> What will you give me as a pledge?
> When the boy willowed the girl, at the end he asked: 'Will you give me an egg as a pledge?'
> Unpainted eggs were very rarely given because people were afraid that if receiving them, they would ran out of egg dye. (RKM II 280, 319 Iisaku, 1969)

Interestingly, the following quote talks about visiting different churches and taking part in their services. We see that the tradition was still well-known in the late 1980s, although most of the respondents stated that the tradition began to disappear after the Second World War and remained in active use after that in only a few places. Everywhere Lutheran practices were distinguished from those of the Orthodox, although the customs completely overlapped:

We [Lutherans] also went to the church on the Palms Sunday, then the Russians had everything decorated. We also had our own decorations. […] We brought willow twigs home [from the forest] and decorated them, put beautiful papers on them and took them to church. The boys were ready there, they grabbed the papers and ran away. On the willowing day and at Easter time, they hit people with willow twigs (RKM II 371, 455 (2) Viru-Jaagupi, 1984)

2.1 The actors involved in the ritual

The next important questions are: Who woke up the sleepers with willow branches? Who was woken up with a whip?

1. The mother woke the children, especially the shepherd children and the young adults; or she woke up the whole family.
- The whipper was the mother. She whipped the whole family, while they were still in bed.
- The mother whipped the children, to instill good manners and so to prevent them from letting the animals into the grain fields.

2. The father woke up the family.
- The father had to whip all the people and animals.

3. Children, boys and girls woke up other family members.
- Generally, children whipped their parents, who were still in bed.
- Boys whipped girls, girls whipped boys.

4. Visiting neighbours, adults (mainly male) or youngsters woke up the family members.
- Youngsters whipped the members of another family. They did not go to an unknown house.
- Elderly men whipped the family members.

5. The mother of the father whipped the farm animals.
- The old grandmother whipped the animals (animals that were thin were also whipped with rods, and hit three times on the back).

We see men and women of different ages involved in the practice, boys and girls, with no gender preference. One condition was getting up early; another condition was that women did not go to the village, but rather men and young people went. Here, the long-held belief was that at a critical time, a male guest was expected to come to the house. The cattle were visited and hit with whips only by adults. As a reward, eggs were given at Easter; some also gave elder whipping men vodka (E 8° VII, 16 (64) Kodavere, 1931).

2.2 Verbal formulas

The person who received the whipping said "Thank you", and as the whipping got stronger, there was nothing heard but "Thank you, thank you". After that, the willow twigs were put in the cowshed. This kind of behaviour resembles a ritual healing, but could also be the reason for whisking in the sauna. Verbal phrases used during the ritual whipping with willow twigs were short; single-word magic formulas were also used, their function being to ensure health in the form of either short wishes or shorter verses. Some examples of different verbal formulas are:

- The man had to whip all the people and animals with willow twigs. He had to say: "Get as smooth as the willow twig." (RKM II 397, 452 (36) Võnnu, 1986).

- While whipping, the whipper said, "Cheer up, cheer up!" This phrase, and the whipping, were supposed to stimulate and cheer those being whipped (E 8° VII, 16 (64) Kodavere, 1931).

- "Let them be healed. Let all afflictions and diseases disappear; and be beautiful and smooth as willow buds" (E 76170 (4) Otepää, 1931).

- "Let the night dream away, night dream away. Then in the summer they will not be sleepy." (RKM II 226, 163 (6) Sangaste, 1967)

- "Willow buds for you, eggs for me." (RKM II 274, 95 (b) Jõhvi 1970)

- "Ewe lambs, sheep children, cabbage head grow, wide leaves spread wide." (E 8° VII, 5 (7) Urvaste, 1931)

In the last formula we find a reference to the belief that this day (Palm Sunday) was associated with the growth of cabbage. To ensure growth, yarn was symbolically wound into large balls to ensure the growth of large heads of cabbage.

2.3 Swinging and singing

At the beginning of 20th century, a more general custom was to keep willow or other twigs in the house, until the cattle were taken out, at which time the animals were whipped with them to keep them healthy and strong. However, the animals were also willowed immediately after the willow twigs were brought home; this would ensure healthy white sheep, and healthy cattle and horses. Taking willow twigs into the field was supposed to ensure an abundant crop, while sticking them into an anthill ensured the wellbeing of the cattle.

With this custom, spring and the return of vitality were welcomed. Very important was swinging, and people sang the so-called *tsõõtamis* songs, although this custom began to decline in the mid-20th century.

The swinging period usually began with the Palm Sunday holiday in northern and eastern Estonia. The tradition for the Seto (an Orthodox ethnographic group in southeaster Estonia) on that day was to use a longer board or a plank, i.e., *tsõõtamine*, for swinging. This board was placed on a fence, a tree stump or a stone, and people were swinging, sitting at both ends; sometimes there were several people sitting down, while less often people also stood up, while balancing. In northern Estonia, as well as in Ingria, and some parts of southern and southwestern Finland, board jumping (similar to *tsõõtamine*) mainly took place over the Easter holidays (Särg, 2004). There are also notes that mention the custom began on Mary's Lent Day and gave young people free rein to have fun. Feasting was possible until Palm Sunday and continued after Easter. Swinging using ordinary swings started later, generally at Easter.

Songs about willowing day were also known in Setomaa where they were called *tsõõtamis* chants. The name came from the refrain *tsõõ*, *tsõõ*, which appeared at the end of the verse line, and as a refrain in the middle of the verse. Taive Särg (2004) points out that this could also be the starting formula only. These songs had a simple melody and few words (some examples are available at www.folklore.ee/Berta). They were somewhat exceptional in their way of performing, as each singer was singing one verse, the lyrics being similar to incantations.

2.4 Palm Sunday prohibitions and ritual food

Eating cabbage or combing your hair were prohibited during Palm Sunday. The first prohibition was to ensure better cabbage growth, while the second was determined by concerns that are difficult to understand today, i.e. it was feared that the lice would otherwise grow to the size of willow buds (cf. Hiiemäe, 1998, 85, 89, 226; Tedre, 2007, 428; Kõiva, 2004, *palmipuudepüha*).

The ritual food was the so-called *urvapuder* ('willow porridge'), or groat porridge, to which non-fasting folk added small pieces of meat. Groats were part of the ritual food for the most important celebrations; they were also served as ritual food during the visits to cemeteries, for example, at *surnuvalvamine* (the collective guarding of the dead) and as memorial food.

3. Holy Week: whipping and 'goose making'

All imminent holidays are characterised by a certain transfer of rituals and traditional activities. The entire week from Palm Sunday to Easter is called the 'Holy Week'. The central holidays of the Holy Week are Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, the customs of which are largely similar. There is a requirement for silence, already reflected in the name, and a ban on making noise or doing noisy work as it can lead to lightning damage.

At the same time, the so-called 'goose-making' has considerable common features with Palm Sunday and with Easter in general, especially in western Estonia and on the islands, where animal and bird masquerades were a special feature. Records from Reval (Tallinn) make references to a masked man who went around at night hitting people in 1460, and carnival mummers emerging in 1522 (Mänd, 2004, 147-159; Tedre, 2005, 411). The folk calendar emphasised the sanctity of the day and the prohibition to work. In the morning people got up early, and in many parts of western Estonia and the islands they went to do the so-called 'goose-making' or whipping those still sleeping with birch rods. In the second half of the 20th century, this became known as the 'goose-day'.

Good Friday was an important holiday, but it was also a suitable day for witchcraft, minor magic and other ways to influence the remaining half of the year. In some places, houses or even fields were marked, using a knife, to prevent the access of evil. It was forbidden to make noise or noisy sounds, such as wood-cutting, building, weaving fabrics, doing laundry, as well as playing instruments, dancing, and singing; visits were also banned. In addition, nothing from the house was allowed to be given away.

On Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, leaving the house in the morning without eating was not allowed. People believed that otherwise a bird would take away the person's health. To protect yourself during these days, you had to grab hold of or bite into a living tree. In southern Estonia, it was forbidden to sweep the floors in order to avoid disturbing fleas.

Food during Lent was prepared from groats, peas and beans, as well as oat film. The diet of the Seto people included fish, turnips, berries, and apples, with fastings and restricted diets followed primarily by Orthodox Christians.

The so-called 'goose-making' was also practiced in western Estonia and on the islands. Here too, nothing was to be given away from the household, in order not to give away the happiness of the household with it.

4. The autumn and the winter period

The important holidays of the autumn and the winter periods related to masquerading, several of which were associated, among other things, with the souls of the returning ancestors. Several versions of these holidays also included hitting with birch rods.

*4.1 St. Martin's Day (*mardipäev*, 9th November)*

St. Martin's Day included special (male) mummers (*mardid*) who adopted a special dancing style, shifting from foot to foot and jumping, which was associated with the quest for fertility. The jumping and lifting of other dancers at particular points in the ritual was a general encouragement to grow bigger and longer.

The masked persons always had birch rods with them, with which they hit the family, wishing them health. They also scolded those who had been lazy, telling them to study or work harder at handicrafts (for example children who could not read or girls who had little to show for their efforts), as well as bossy people. In religious history, Mardi and Kadri's rods were associated with the life-rod, meaning they could not be taken from just any tree, as certain trees made people and animals sick; only the birch tree brought health.

The Mardi's ritual began with dancing and singing of a song while entering the room, followed by an inspection of the family's work and skills with sketches performed by people disguised as animals or clerks. An important activity during this ritual was riddling, which was supposed to ensure the progress of grain and livestock. The Mardi group formed a masked "family with children and animals". They talked with the family and played games for or with them. Apart from the riddling, they described their journey (coming from far away, including from heaven) and asked for gifts, as it was believed that through each gift one symbolically received a blessing from an ancestor (cf. Hiiemäe, 1994, 9-247; Kõiva, 2004). According to a long-lasting belief, still active at the beginning of the 20th century, people used euphemisms; they could not speak explicitly about many things, because it would have attracted wild animals and demonic forces. After symbolically throwing a fruit on the floor, the Mardi-father whipped each member of the visited family and wished them either "Be healthy!", or "Be healthy, be healed!"

Mardi and Kadri songs are among the longest Runo-style calendar songs. Their melody is cyclical, with a specific tune corresponding to each action. The songs begin with a greeting and a description of how the singer comes from a distant land, or from heaven, and has caught a cold on the way back, reason why he or she asks the host to make the room warmer. The recurrent motive of the songs is that the children of masked family are hungry, need food and gifts. Songs of gratitude are followed by wishing happiness to every member of the family: starting with the hostess, continuing with the children, the youths, the bride and bridegroom, and ending with the owner of the horses and of the cattle.

The dreaded songs were those that included short curses or chants, which declared the deprivation of all good things, predicting instead hunger and death. Many evil expressions were exceptionally colourful, such as "May the wolf shit into your soup pot", "May you have mud children", etc.

*4.2 St. Catherine's Day (*kadripäev*, 23rd November)*

Initially, only girls went from family to family in disguise, during this celebration. The noise, along with the singing and the playing of instruments are inseparable from *mardipäev* and *kadripäev*,

although the activities of *kadripäev* were not as noisy as those of *mardipäev* (Tedre, 2007, 440). In the 19th and early 20th centuries the activities of *kadripäev* included the presentation of riddles, masked persons checked the reading skills of children and young people, as well as asked to show crafts. A ritual fertility magic imitation of pissing or splashing the family with water was common, as well as hitting with twigs to ensure health and success.

In western Estonia and Saaremaa, people dressed up as ‘Kadri geese’ moved around, similar in appearance and behaviour to those dressed up as ‘Christmas geese’. The ‘goose’ was disguised in a fur coat, shawl, linen, pillows; in addition, a large beak or bird’s head appeared from under the fur coat. Making sounds like geese, people went to check the children’s reading skills, and again whipping the family with rods, they wished them health. Other animal masks (bear, goat) were also worn on Kadri day, but less than on other anniversaries.

*4.4 St Andrew’s Day (*andrusepäev*, 30th November)*

At the *andrusepäev,* young men dressed in costumes. On the western islands, they were called *andrused* or *andresed* (on the island of Saaremaa), while elsewhere they were called *andrisandid or andresandid*. For the main part, only young men went around the village knocking on windows with a twig. If the family allowed them to, they entered the house and whereupon they play and dance. Beer was offered. They scared the children and asked them to recite something learned by heart. The young men wore furs turned inside out, sea boots, caps turned inside out, plaited straw belts and fish bags on their heads. This custom died out after Second World War, but still has parallels in Norway and Sweden (cf. Tedre, 2007, 375; Kõiva, Särg & Vesik, 2004).

*4.5 St. Nicholas Day (*nigulapäev*, 6th December)*

In the 19th century, although it was already lesser known, St. Nicholas Day had a lot of similarities with the old Mardi customs and the fertility rites. On *Nigula* Day, St. Nicholas brought nuts and cakes to the good children and hit the bad children with rods; in many parts of Estonia, the same was done by St. Martin, or *mardivana*.

*4.6 St. Lucy’s Day (*luutsipäev*, 6th December)*

Luutsi were known in some parts of western Estonia. On *Luutsi* (*lutsia-, lutsi-, lutsepäev)* day, especially in Hiiumaa and Saaremaa, *luutsi* visits were paid. *Luutsid* were generally young people (mainly girls) who moved from family to family with an unrecognisable changed appearance (dressed in fine, rich clothes, men dressed in women’s and women dressed in men’s clothing), wore willow twigs or twig bundles on their belts. The *Luutsid* largely did not ask for gifts, but rather controlled the order in the house and the preparation for the holidays. Sometimes, *luutsid* cleaned the floor with birch or juniper twigs (cf. Tedre, 2007, 375; Kõiva, Särg & Vesik, 2004). The rod was a tool for punishment, motivation, as well as healing.

*4.7 St. Thomas’ Day (*toomapäev*, 21st December)*

With the arrival of St. Thomas’ Day, Christmas had firmly begun in Estonia (Hiiemäe, 1998, 247-252). Christmas preparations included cleaning the house (or, as they called it, *musta tooma välja ajamine*, ‘riding out Black Thomas’) and making beer. The participants of the St. Thomas mumming tradition were called *toomased, toomad* or *Jõulu-toomad*, and rarely *must toomas* (‘Black Thomas’). The custom mainly spread in Saaremaa with men or young men the main bearers of the tradition. *Toomad* sang, danced, and checked whether handwork had been completed.

4.8 Christmas (jõulud*, 24th December)*

St. Nicholas, or, since 1860, Santa Claus, is the most important calendar figure of recent centuries. He is the patron of children and brings them gifts, in the Netherlands, on 6th December. He acquired a

modern shape in America, where Protestant migrants from New Amsterdam connected Nicholas with a well-known child punisher from northern folklore. This version of Nicholas is also known as a scourge for bad children, to whom he brings rods, or a bundle of small sticks and in later years a lump of coal, as well as a bringer of nice gifts to good children. However, he quickly lost his episcopal appearance in America and turned into a sweet pipe-smoking old man dressed in a red coat, who rode in a reindeer sleigh and brought toys.

Estonians used several other variations of his name for a long time (*jõuluvana, jõulumees*) before adopting *jõuluvana* (Santa Claus), along with the legend of the arrival with his reindeer, from Lapland. In old pictures, the Estonian Santa Claus does not wear a red coat at all, but wears a fur coat and grey felt boots. With a large greyish bag over his shoulder, he strides through the snowdrifts. In addition to his fur coat, Santa Claus often had a rather ordinary hat with earflaps, and staff, not to mention having a white cotton-wool beard. In the old days (at the beginning of 20th century) English, German, American and Estonian Santa Clauses always had a long rod on his belt and was quite angry with bad and lazy children, meaning that little children did not even dare to get close to him. The initial reading test turned into reading and singing poems in the 19th century, in exchange for the gifts brought by Santa Claus (Kõiva, Särg & Vesik, 2004).

One of the customs that is increasingly popular is to attach a wreath of ivy to the front door or a wreath braided from juniper, heather, or other living branches. Today, artificial flowers also replace them. Often there are bells, or some Christmas decorations attached to the wreath.

Jõulupoisid was a tradition in which 'Christmas Boys', young boys, or young men would go around the village. They carried straw knouts and hit family members, saying: 'Become healthy and smart!'

The Christmas goose usually moves around on Christmas Eve, going to the sauna to check and punish children. The goose primarily frightened bad children. A man or woman disguised themselves as a goose by putting on a fur coat inside-out, sometimes with a separately crafted head and with a beak in hand, protruding from the coat sleeve. Sometimes two fingers became a beak. The goose was also disguised simply by carrying around a white linen. Sometimes the goose had a tail made of a sauna whisk, but most often the goose came with a birch rod (or a juniper branch), with which it hit people in the sauna. This is one of it's main activities, in addition to honking and pinching people to mimic a goose. The goose was offered beer and water was thrown at it. Exceptionally, geese moved around in 'flocks' of several 'birds'. The custom, widespread in the 19th century in western Estonia and Saaremaa, was known until the 1980s.

*4.9 Saint Stephen's Day (*tabanipäev, *26th December)*

In the 19th century, *tabani* day, or 'the horse feast', was known only on the northern coast of Estonia and was quite similar to the corresponding day among the Finns. Writing about 17th-century Estonian customs, Johann Forselius mentions: "On the day of *Tehvanus*, they usually ride their horses and let their blood out; then, it is said they become [more] agile and run well." (Tedre, 2007, 426).

On the northern coast, *tabani* beggars, like the Christmas beggars of the western islands, went from family to family to drink beer. These were men in furry coats and their faces smeared in soot or hidden altogether. *Tabanis* arrived on horseback or on foot, carrying juniper branches to whip families with.

*4.10 New Year's Eve (*näärivana, *31st December)*

On this day, many families welcome Santa Claus, who walks around with a large bag of gifts and is dressed mainly in a red coat and a tufted hat. There is much similarity in the appearance of *jõuluvana* and *näärivana*, because after the Second World War, Christmas parties and Father Frost were known and expected in homes, clubs, and workplaces, where he brought sweets and gifts. He also had a

bundle of rods made of birch branches hanging at the back of his belt to punish bad children, although the punishment itself was only verbal.

In western Estonia, and especially in Saaremaa, from the first hours of the New Year, the Christmas bock, the Christmas bear, and the Christmas goose moved around the villages; once again, whipping the family with a rod was a common custom alongside dancing, joking and beer drinking. At night, masked men moved around the villages (Kõiva, 2004; 2014).

Another Christmas custom is that of the so-called 'Christmas geese', custom associated with willow whipping. This action consists in the fact that someone brings willow twigs into the room or sauna and people whisk (hit) each other's naked thighs, while shouting: "Goose! Goose!" (E 67732 (2) Keila, 1930; same RKM II 179, 58 (110) Setumaa, 1964)

*4.11 Saint Knut's Day (*nuudipäe*v, 7th January)*

The annual cycle is completed by *nuutid* walking from family to family. Saint Knut's Day (*nuudipäev*) – 13th January, or according to the Gregorian calendar, 7th January – is known in the calendar as the day of the assassination of King Knut of Denmark. In the narrow area of the islands and the west coast, this day marked the end of Christmas (Hiiemäe 1998: 307; Tedre 2007: 407). No work was done on *nuudipäev* day; instead, men went from family to family 'beating out the holidays' - they beat the host and house with *nuuts* (knouts) made out of straw or with willow twists. It was a sign that the holidays were over.

5. Conclusions

From the above-mentioned customs, we can conclude that Estonian ritual visits were initially closely connected to the folk calendar and had the functions of bringing good luck to households and entertaining their inhabitants. In the case of St. Martin and St. Catherine traditions, the ritual visits became a real group performance, with a fixed structure, although with improvisation in terms of the dialogue and performance. It might be noted that there were both male and female (girls') mumming days in Estonia. Nonetheless, the function of birching or beating with twigs was an important custom that promoted the healing and blessing of the host family. Visitors inquired about the spinning of yarn and checked the children's reading skills.

In older forms of the ritual, we find many symbols, for example, living trees (birches in particular) which were important gifts for young girls who were to be betrothed (a Pentecost custom). In the wedding traditions, the usage of gates made of trees was common, and rooms were decorated with trees. Spruce trees were important in funeral customs as symbols of eternity – spruce branches marked the deceased's journey from home to the burial place, i.e., the cemetery; spruce branches were also used to cover a fresh grave. Branches, flowers, trees, and wreaths were also part of the decoration of the ceremonial space.

The rich tradition of mummers was always related to holidays, but the rich Estonian tradition suffered during and after the Second World War, as many young people left the villages because of the Soviet system (collectivisation, deportations), and urbanisation. Today, however, we can see the revival of traditions in many areas.

Acknowledgment

This paper is part of the Narrative and Belief Aspects of Folklore Studies research project at the Department of Folkloristics, Estonian Literary Museum (EKM 8-2/20/3), with additional funding from the European Union through the European Regional Development Fund (Centre of Excellence in Estonian Studies, TK-145).

References and bibliography

Dafni, A. (2007). Rituals, ceremonies and customs related to sacred trees with a special reference to the Middle East. *Journal Ethnobiology Ethnomedicine* 3, 28. https://doi.org/10.1186/1746-4269-3-28
Hiiemäe, M. (1981-1998*). Eesti rahvakalender* I-VII [Estonian Folk Calendar]. Tallinn. Eesti Raamat.
EKSS 2009. Karelson, R. et al. (2009). *Eesti keele seletav sõnaraamat* [Explanatory Dictionary of Estonian]. 2nd ed. Tallinn: Eesti Keele Sihtasutus.
ETY 2012. Metsmägi. I., et al. (2012*). Eesti etümoloogiasõnastik* [Etymology Dictionary of Estonian]. Tallinn: EKI.
Kõiva, M., Särg, T. & Vesik, L. (2004). *Berta: Eesti rahvakalendri tähtpäevade andmebaas* [Berta: The Database of Folk Calendar Holidays]. Tartu: Tiigrihüpe; Estonian Literary Museum. https://www.folklore.ee/Berta/index.php
Kõiva, M. (2004). Eesti rahvakalender. In: Kõiva, M., Särg, T. & Vesik, L. (2004). *Berta: Eesti rahvakalendri tähtpäevade andmebaas* [Berta: The Database of Folk Calendar Holidays]. Tartu: Tiigrihüpe; Estonian Literary Museum.
Kõiva, M. (2014). Calendar Feasts: Politics of Adoption and Reinstatement. In: *Through the Ages. Time, Space and Eternity*. Sator 13. Tartu: ELM Scholarly Press (pp. 7−40).
Mänd, A. (2004). *Pidustused keskaegse Liivimaa linnades 1350–1550* [Celebrations in medieval Livonian cities 1350–1550]. Tallinn: Eesti Keele Sihtasutus.
Minnikhmetova T. (2001). Sacrificial rites of the Udmurts on the eastern bank of the river Kama. *Folklore: EJF*. 17, 107-119.
Scapini, (2015). Whipping in ritual and magic practice: A case of convergence. In: Suárez de la Torre, E.; Blanco, M.; Chronopoulou, E. (Eds). *Los papiros mágicos griegos: entre lo sublime y lo cotidiano. Dykinson* (pp. 93-113).
Särg, T. (2004). Kalendrilaulude viisid. Kõiva, M., Särg, T. & Vesik, L. 2004. *Berta: Eesti rahvakalendri tähtpäevade andmebaas* [Berta: The Database of Folk Calendar Holidays]. Tartu: Tiigrihüpe; Estonian Literary Museum.
Tedre, Ü. (2007). Masks and Mumming Traditions in Estonia. In: Gunnell, T (ed.) *Masks and Mumming in Nordic Area.* Uppsala: Kungl. Gustav Adolfs Akademien för svensk folkkultur. Acta academiae regiae Gustavi Adolphi no. 98 (pp. 367-448).
Vukanovic, J.P. (1964). Ritual Communion Among Gypsies In *Serbia. Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society*, 43, 22.

Sources

Estonian Literary Museum: Estonian Folklore Archives – manuscripts H, E, ERA, RKM, EKS
Skriptoorium – Digital Archives and tool, Department of Folkloristics, ELM

The authors

Mare Kõiva is a leading researcher at the Estonian Literary Museum in the field of folkloristics and religious studies. She has conducted and developed academic research in Estonia and abroad on new forms of religion and mythology. Currently she is working on charms and charmers.