

VERBA (PALM) IN EASTERN LITHUANIA AND WESTERN BELARUS
IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE 20TH CENTURY – BEGINNING
OF THE 21ST CENTURY

INTRODUCTION

Western Belarus and eastern Lithuania comprise an ethnically diverse territory, which includes border-regions of both neighboring countries. This is a territory with many socio-cultural particularities whose essence consists of cultural similarities and differences formed due to natural, ethnic, religious, political, administrative and other circumstances over the ages of the states' common coexistence. Only after Lithuania and Belarus became independent in the end of the 20th century was a strict state border established separating eastern Lithuania and western Belarus. The Poles and Lithuanians residing in the region are Catholics, and the Belarusians are mostly Orthodox with a small percentage professing Catholicism. Thus any research of this territory inevitably assumes an ethno-cultural and ethno-confessional nature. *Verba* (palm), chosen as the subject of this study, is the liturgical symbol of Palm Sunday and an important sacral symbol of folk culture. This article seeks to reveal the particularities of the raw materials used for the production of *verba* (palm) in eastern Lithuania and western Belarus, link the composition of the symbol with ethnic and confessional factors, and establish the regional particularities of consecrated *verba* (palm), their connection with religious and ethnic identity, as well as the significance of *verba* (palm) in modern folk devotion.

Many Lithuanian and Belarusian ethnologists have studied the *verba* (palm). Yet their studies are unified by a common feature: that Palm Sunday and this symbol are often examined not as a separate subject of research, but as an integral part of the general folk culture, reflecting customs and beliefs. The material for this study was gathered by means of non-structured interviews during ethnographic field research conducted in the above-mentioned territory. The author of the article collected the data on Palm Sundays in various locations of western Belarus. In addition, interviews were conducted during summer field expeditions by students of the Vilnius Pedagogical University in eastern Lithuania from 2004 to 2008. The responses of almost 300 respondents were used in the research. The results of ethnological studies were also used in the article.

CONSECRATION OF WILLOW TWIGS

According to field research data, the celebrations of Palm Sunday in western Belarus and eastern Lithuania reveal the differences and similarities of the folk devotion of Orthodox and Catholics. The similarities can be attributed to the common Christian origin of rituals and customs determining an analogous approach toward the *verba* (palm). During the Easter period, the *verba* (palm) serves as a symbol of life, rebirth and resurrection. Trees reviving after winter most expressively symbolize these con-

cepts. Today this tendency is most clearly seen in Belarus and may be especially noticed when analyzing the choice of the raw materials used for the production of *verba* (palm). Ethnographic research¹⁹⁰ shows that the consecration of willow twigs (fig. 1),



Fig. 1

Bundles of willow twigs to be made into *verba* (palm) (Sapockin, Belarus 2007)

typical of eastern Slavs, has entered the area of eastern Lithuania. This raw material is most prominent in contemporary western Belarus. From the perspective of folk devotion in the Orthodox tradition, only the willow twig is considered genuine and acceptable for protective and other functions.¹⁹¹ In the time period under consideration, only twigs with bursting leaves were recognized in the liturgical practice (although *verba* »palm« made of other material could be consecrated as well). Catholic Belarusians consecrate willow twigs more rarely. However, the usage of willow twigs in *verba* (palm) has ethno-confessional differences. An exclusive feature of Orthodox believers in western Belarus are *verba* (palm) made of willow twigs without buds (pussy).

A different situation may be observed among the Lithuanian Orthodox who, like Catholics,

consecrate various willow twigs, including those, which have already budded. This may not be an indicator of the influence of Lithuanian Catholic customs on the Orthodox, but rather it is the result of the influence of ethnic factors. The majority of Lithuanian Orthodox have come from Russia where the consecration of willow twigs with buds (pussy) is a phenomenon typical to the traditions of the Russian Palm Sunday celebration.¹⁹² Thus in western Belarus, Belarusian Orthodox associate budding willow twigs with Russian customs (fig. 2). The Catholics of eastern Lithuania use twigs of various kinds of willow trees for consecration. It is possible that Lithuanian Poles were influenced by Poland's religious culture in the past. In Poland there was an old tradition of keeping willow twigs in water until they budded.¹⁹³

Nevertheless, it is not common in contemporary practice to consecrate only willow twigs. This is mostly determined by the fluctuating attitude of society towards *verba* (palm) and their future usage. Until the middle of the 20th century, willow twig *verba* (palm) were actively used in various rituals and customs. *Verba* (palm) gradually lost their significance in modern folk devotion, especially in



Fig. 2

Verba (palm) made from pussy willow twigs (Grodno, Belarus 2007)

¹⁹⁰ Kudirka 1992. 5., *Velykų rytą lelija pražydo* 2006. 237.

¹⁹¹ Mardosa 2007a 45.

¹⁹² Шангина 2003. 84.; Соколова 1979. 97–100.

¹⁹³ Zadrożyńska 1985. 97.

various magical practices. True, they are used for the protection of living spaces by various means and without confessional differences.¹⁹⁴ However, in the past *verba* (palm) were widely used in spring rituals performed on the first day of herding livestock to pasture in the researched territory. These twigs were especially prevalent in the stockbreeding customs of western Belarus. True, the thrashing (whipping) of livestock with *verba* (palm) when herding them was common for all eastern Slavs.¹⁹⁵ Not coincidentally, in the first half of the 20th century such methods of herding were more common in the eastern part of Lithuania, which is situated next to Belarus. Currently, those who herd livestock into pastures with *verba* (palm), use consecrated willow twigs. The Orthodox in Smarhon (Belarus) claim that only consecrated willow twigs are suitable for the herding of livestock. Nevertheless, due to the secularization of society and change in agricultural forms, the scope of such usage of *verba* (palm) decreases, while simultaneously the stressing of the Christian aspect of the symbol increases. Therefore, new tendencies develop in the choice of the raw materials for *verba* (palm) production.

JUNIPER TWIGS IN VERBA (PALM)

In the past, Lithuania was divided into two distinct areas based on the preferred vegetation for the *verba* (palm) that were demarcated by a line toward the eastern border of the country. In the western, southwestern and central parts of Lithuania, the blessing of juniper branches was and remains more prevalent, while in the eastern part of Lithuania willow branches were more prevalent.¹⁹⁶ Ethnographic descriptions dating to the middle of the 20th century state that juniper *verba* (palm) were also consecrated



Fig. 3

Verba (palm) made from juniper twigs
(Vilnius, Lithuania 2005)

in many localities of eastern Lithuania. However, the essential changes in the raw materials of *verba* (palm) in eastern Lithuania appeared only in the second half of the 20th century when *verba* (palm) made from juniper began to be blessed alongside willow twigs. Therefore, especially in the last decades of the 20th century, the situation changed and the juniper started to predominate in contemporary Palm Sunday traditions of eastern Lithuania without any defined confessional and national differences. *Verba* (palm) made only from juniper twigs are

sometimes consecrated (fig. 3). They also may be composed from various herbs and grasses; however, bouquets of willow and juniper twigs were used most often (fig. 4). Since field research shows that the consecration of juniper twigs is more active near

¹⁹⁴ Mardosa 2007a 60–62.

¹⁹⁵ Лозка 2002. 89–90.; Земляробчы каляндар 2003. 319., 330.; Зеленин 1992. 89.

¹⁹⁶ Kudirka 1993. 5.

the border with Belarus in eastern Lithuania, this study will try to ascertain to what degree such *verba* (palm) have spread in western Belarus.

It should be noted that western Belarus is not unique in its usage of juniper in *verba* (palm). In central Belarus Catholics sometimes consecrate *verba* (palm) made solely from juniper twigs (Maladzyechna; Ashmyany; Astraviec district; Valozhyn district; Baranovichi). However, in the region of Grodno, which is situated next to southeastern Lithuania, Belarusians very rarely use junipers even in bouquets. On the other hand, in the Lithuanian districts which neighbor the region of Grodno, *verba* (palm) made only from juniper twigs are very often consecrated. The ethnic particularities of the *verba* (palm's) composition are related to the aims of their future use.

In the first half of the 20th century a custom of blessing livestock with protective smoke during the grazing period pervaded in the researched territory. Although according to the researcher of Lithuanian stockbreeding customs, R. Merkienė, the ritual action of blessing livestock with smoke was little associated with *verba* (palm) and not very characteristic of western Belarus.¹⁹⁷ However, according to the data of this research, the smoke of *verba* (palm) was used not only in eastern Lithuania, but also in the neighboring districts of western Belarus. Furthermore, these ritual actions are still being performed in stockbreeding customs nowadays. In those places where the smoke of *verba* (palm) is used for the protection of livestock in the spring, juniper *verba* (palm) are more prevalent,



Fig. 4
Orthodox *verba* (palm) made from various twigs
(Vilnius, Lithuania 2008)

seeing as the dried needles of the plant are most suitable for burning (Ashmyany). Moreover, the smoke of junipers is also used to bless buildings and premises.¹⁹⁸ Due to the mentioned reasons, it may be believed that in the second half of the 20th century the use of juniper spread from Lithuania quite far to the east and is penetrating into Belarus. Thus the origin of using juniper in *verba* (palm) can be traced to folk devotion and its changes over the 1920s-1940s. However, ethno-confessional differences also influence the usage of the juniper. In eastern Lithuania, during Palm Sunday juniper twigs are used regardless of ethnic and confessional differences, while in western Belarus, Catholics (mostly represented by believers of Polish nationality) choose the juniper.

The provided material shows that in the contemporary religious practice of the researched territory, two essential components of the *verba* (palm's) raw materials interlace: twigs of both willows and junipers are either consecrated separately, or quite often, combined into bouquets. *Verba* (palm) made from willow and juniper branches have practically no regional, not to mention local, variations but there are many structural possibilities. The uniting feature is the following: several juniper

¹⁹⁷ Merkienė 1981. 102–105.

¹⁹⁸ Mardosa 2007a 61.

twigs surround one or three willow twigs, situated in the centre. The willow twigs in the *verba* (palm) can be thought of as a remnant of the old tradition, while the juniper represents new tendencies concerning the composition of the *verba* (palm). Thus the composition including twigs of both trees links the customs of the past with the realities of the present.

DECORATED VERBA (PALM)

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

In the beginning of the 21st century three main variations of palm-shaped *verba* (palm) may be found. The first variation is made from willow or juniper twigs decorated with dry flower blossoms (or the twigs of both trees are used together) (fig. 5). Belarusian researchers state that *verba* (palm) decorated with dried



Fig. 5
Palm-shaped verba (palm) (Grodno, Belarus 2007)

dried flower blossoms are the imitation of palms and thus they link them with Catholics.¹⁹⁹ Such *verba* (palm) retain their principal decorative aspects, however, as in all folk art, everything is determined by the artistic abilities of the manufacturers, and therefore many variations of decorating *verba* (palm) may be observed. These *verba* (palm) are sold near the churches of Vilnius and, more rarely, of southeastern Lithuania (the districts of Vilnius or Šalčininkai). In south-eastern Lithuania *verba* (palm) decorated with dried flowers are more common among Polish believers. In western Belarus dried flower blossoms are usually added to willow twigs. It is quite interesting that representatives of both confessions in Belarus consecrate these *verba* (palm). In east-

¹⁹⁹ Беларускі фальклор. 2005. 249.; Беларуская міфалогія 2006. 80.

ern Lithuania these *verba* (palm) are consecrated only in the rituals of Catholics and not in the rituals of the Orthodox, and especially not by Russian Old believers. This fact is most evident when the festival days of the Catholics and Orthodox coincide.

The second and very popular decoration variant is artificial flowers attached to a willow twig. Such artificial flowers are popular in all of western Belarus. According to the collected data, Belarusians use artificial flowers with small blossoms, made from plastic to decorate *verba* (palm). Willow twigs are the most suitable for manufacturing such *verba* (palm) because they are straight with small leaves. Even in Lithuania nobody attaches artificial flowers to budding twigs because artificial blossoms seem out of place and their attachment is quite difficult. In general, in eastern Lithuania such *verba* (palm) are found only in cities among Catholics on Palm Sundays. Thus the decoration of live twigs with plastic flowers is a Belarusian variant of *verba* (palm) without more obvious confessional differences.

In addition, various combinations of willow or juniper twigs and thuja or forest herbs are also popular in Belarus, even with plastic flowers supplements of various sizes. Multifunctional variations may be found in markets where bouquets made solely from artificial flowers are sold as a decorative element for the interior and also as a *verba* (palm) meant for consecration (fig. 6). Some such *verba* (palm) are brought to Vilnius from Russia, but they are not popular (likewise in Belarus). Thus it should be stated that there is a large variety of *verba* (palm) decorated with artificial flowers and their appearance depends on the abilities and taste of the makers. Thus, different raw materials and different types of decoration can be combined in a single *verba* (palm).



Fig. 6
Verba (palm) made from artificial flowers (Ščiučin, Belarus 2007)



Fig. 7
Vilnius *verba* (palm). (Vilnius, Lithuania 2008)
(Photo by J. Mardosa)

The third variant of decorated *verba* (palm) is more typical of the territory between Minsk and Lithuania. In this variation the blossoms made from threads are arranged along the

whole length of a willow twig. Tying threads of different colors in various patterns results in unique, varicolored and at times symmetrically arranged flowers. In Lithuania similar methods of decoration may be found in the southeastern part of the country.



Thus it may be observed that in the second half of the 20th century a tendency to consider *verba* (palm) from an aesthetic point of view emerged. Initially, women seeking the splendor of the symbol began to combine sacral and aesthetic aims. In the end of the 20th century, after the commercialization of *verba* (palm) production, the consecration of self-made *verba* (palm) has decreased especially in cities. At the same time decorated *verba* (palm) are becoming more popular. Therefore, the functionality of decorated *verba* (palm) is, in part, a new feature of folk devotion. This marks a new stage in the existence of the *verba* (palm), defined by a distancing from the Christian essence of the *verba* (palm) as an emphasis is placed on its symbolism. Especially the *Vilnius verba* (palm), made from dry blossoms satisfy such symbolic aims (fig. 7). These *verba* (palm) are mainly manufactured by Poles residing in the environs of Vilnius. Currently, *Vilnius verba* (palm) are popular among Catholic Poles and Lithuanians, serving as a symbol of the religious and national identities of both nations. These *verba* (palm) are not characteristic of the religious culture of western Belarus. True, *Vilnius verba* (palm), decorated with dry or artificial flowers and woven from dried flowers and grasses, do not correspond with the paradigmatic Christian concept of the *verba* (palm) in that they do not embody the ideas of life and Resurrection. Therefore these *verba* (palm), like *verba* (palm) decorated in other ways, are not used for protective purposes or for other purposes of a magic nature. This is especially important keeping in mind that the need for such functions of the *verba* (palm) has still survived in the exploratory territory.²⁰⁰ Decorated *verba* (palm) are consecrated simply as the symbol of Palm Sunday.

CONCLUSIONS

The research of *verba* (palm) in eastern Lithuania and western Belarus allows us to state that the particularities of the raw materials of *verba* (palm) reveal the correlation of ethno-confessional factors with the theological and folk understanding of the symbol and its usage in practical activity. When the paradigmatic Christianity and vitality-bestowing aspects are emphasized, especially among the Orthodox of Belarus, then *verba* (palm) made from willow twigs with bursting leaves are preferred. In eastern Lithuania, alongside willow twigs, junipers as well as bouquets made from both willow and juniper twigs are consecrated on Palm Sunday. This tendency emerged in the second half of the 20th century when a new tradition of using juniper in the production of *verba* (palm) started to spread from central Lithuania into the areas where only willow twigs were consecrated formerly. Juniper twigs are more significant to the Catholics in Belarus; the Orthodox use them rarely. At the same time, the decorative is becoming more important for contemporary *verba* (palm). Considerable differences may be noticed in the scope and content of the usage of decorative elements in *verba* (palm) of Lithuania and Belarus. While decorating *verba* (palm) in western Belarus does not reflect greater confessional differences, the tendency of decorating *verba* (palm) with only dry or artificial flowers as practiced by Lithuanian Catholics is practically not found amongst the Orthodox of Lithuania. Thus *verba* (palm) reveal

²⁰⁰ Мардоса 2007b 45–50.

the diversity of the Christian tradition, which comprises the exceptional feature of contemporary folk devotion in eastern Lithuania and western Belarus.

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