

Ritual meals in the ancient Baltic religious community “Romuva”: an analysis of perspectives on community religion and meals

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The Baltic tradition comprehends the worldview, ancient beliefs, customs, folklore, etc., and Romuva claims to represent the unity and continuity of this tradition (Trinkūnas 2000, 8). It is a religious community, a contemporary pagan movement that expresses its spirituality through a respectful relationship with nature and all living things.

The links between religion and food give meaning and significance to the Romuvian lives. Eating in a sacred space and at sacred times is one of the main ritual activities that bring Romuvians closer to their gods or ancestors. The article reveals Romuvian perspectives to ritual food and shows how the connection between food and religion is reflected in everyday life and on different occasions.

The ritual aspect of food

Ritual food can be defined as specific food that is specially prepared and offered during religious ceremonies, rituals, and practices. Religious rites of the Romuva community are performed in home alcoves, in specially designated sacred places, or in nature. During the ceremonies, believers address their ancestors and various ancient Baltic gods, to whom they offer symbolic sacrifices. Religious ceremonies are performed to celebrate the calendar, family, and other festivals¹ (VLK 2023).

The traditions of Romuva gatherings, singing, and eating together are important because food preparation and eating ritual is perhaps the greatest part of the expression of spiritual moods. Food is both what is drunk and what is eaten. According to the Romuvians, the ancestors and the gods are invited to the eating ritual, so eating takes place with them.

The food can vary greatly in terms of its ingredients, methods of preparation, and purpose: it may be offered to divine beings as a sign of respect and devotion, it can also be eaten by participants to receive the blessing of the ritual, or shared by the community to reinforce a sense of unity and communal bonding.

According to Romuvians, the difference between Romuvians and non-Romuvians is that the Baltic pagans are more interested and more in-depth about the meaning of ritual food, why this food is eaten on festivals, etc. There is a particular emphasis on knowing and understanding ritual food as a symbol.

It is difficult to say whether being a Romuva representative creates a special relationship with food. The interlocutors claim that even if Lithuanians do not identify with Baltic culture and beliefs, they may not be aware that they follow Baltic customs and traditions.

Meals during festivals and ceremonies

Ethnographic descriptions of Lithuanian festivals reveal the variety of dishes prepared for various occasions, distinguishing their adaptation to each celebration (Greimas 2005, 41-42). Sharing their experience of celebrating calendar holidays, the Romuvians mentioned the archaic celebration of Christmas Eve and the dish made for it - *kūčias*², which reflects simplicity and naturalness.

¹ Lithuanian rites, calendar festivals <https://www.vle.lt/straipsnis/apeigos/> [viewed at: 08-09-2023].

² Kūčias - a boiled cereal dish with dried fruit or poppy seeds, nuts and honey.

It is also important to mention *kūčiukai*³, poppy seed milk; *kamukai* in Midwinter; eggs, dumplings with cottage cheese at spring festivals (e.g. Jorė, Easter, Sambariai); cheese, honey at Midsummer Night; apples, bread, kvass, etc. at *Žolinės*⁴. The drinks are home made. During the *Ilgės*⁵ period, dark-coloured dishes, such as beetroot soup with porcini mushrooms, predominate. Hot soup is served, and its steam is like the smoke of a fire rising upwards. It is believed to communicate with the ancestors.

While bread is commonly bought in everyday life, for festivals and ceremonies it is baked with a distinctive appearance, marked with symbols (e.g. horses, sun, and fire signs), and decorated with rye bells. For example, for wedding ceremonies, home-baked bread and honey are required.

One of the main moments during *Žolinės* is that a black bread, baked from the new harvest, is broken in half by a man and a woman and sent out along the sun to be shared among the people in the ceremony. The table, decorated with wildflowers and covered with woven tablecloths, is laid with garden, forest, and kitchen garden produce, as well as homemade or bought non-meat dishes.

The decision to use certain foods and objects in Romuvian rituals is based on tradition, as well as ethnographic and written historical sources, leaving room for possible improvisation and feeling, rather than blind repetition. The most important thing is that the meaning is relevant today. The foodstuffs used in the ceremonies observed were salt, cereals, bread, and mead (honey wine). Other foods may also be present in different ceremonies, e.g. beer, mead, honey, white curd cheese, etc. Food made with leaven is important. There is also a gradation of beverages used in the ceremony: kvass, beer, mead.

Salt is one of the main food additives used in ceremonies. It is a particularly important product with a very strong role in the tradition – as it is the food for the primordial fire goddess *Gabija*.

Ritual meals as a basis for communion

Eating together is very bonding, it helps Romuvians to get to know each other, and fosters community. Ritual eating can be defined as tasting everything, often from the same bowl or scoop. Grounding takes place during the ritual of sharing food at the altar or from a single cup – bonding or strengthening Romuvians even more. Grounding is expressed as getting back from the sacred place to the present, to today's life. It can be stressed that sending ceremonial food in a circle, sharing, and donating as particularly important, uniting members of the community. The union of food and drink with the ritual is emphasised as if there is no food or drink, there is no ritual.

Romuvians do not perform special rituals before eating at home outside of festive times or in public spaces. They prepare the food as it is usually favoured by family members, taking into account healthy, organic, or acceptable diets for each person. Before the meal, they wish each other a good meal, harmony, and health.

The importance of food and drink in ritual

According to N. Laurinkienė, the libation of a drink, especially beer, sometimes mead, water, or milk, and the throwing of solid food such as meat and bread on the ground have been popular in the Baltic countries since ancient times. In her description of the Earth-bearing (lt.: *Žemynėliavimas*⁶), she notes that of the Baltic deities, the one most closely associated with the offering of food or drink to the ground was the goddess of the earth and its fertility, *Žemyna* (Laurinkienė 2020, 14; 16).

In Romuva rituals, spouted vessels, bowls, cups, and horns of various shapes could be used for both pouring liquids and for drinking.

³ *Kūčiukai* - sweet nuggets made from leavened dough, can be served with poppy seed milk.

⁴ *Žolinė* – a celebration of fruition, abundance, and harvest, 15th of August.

⁵ *Ilgės* - the time for honoring the dead was the end of October and the beginning of November. In ancient writings, this ritual is called " *Ilgės*", pangs of love or longings. The name comes from the fact that this ritual went on for a long time, long ritual. <<http://www.lnkc.lt/eknygos/eka/customs/velines.html>> [viewed at: 25-09-2023].

⁶ *Žemynėliavimas* - is a specific term used in Lithuania Minor. A ceremonial drink (e.g. beer) is poured into a clean and dry wooden scoop, poured on the ground, a prayer to *Žemyna* is said, and then drunk from the wooden scoop.

A gathering of friends and the tradition of drinking beer together perfectly reflects the moment of casting. When the Romuvians sit down at the table and clink their beer mugs and then bang them on the table, that bang has the same role as the beer being poured on the ground, a kind of ritual for themselves.

Preparing and sharing a meal is an integral part of Romuvian rituals and celebrations. Food is offered to symbolically connect the spiritual and physical spheres, to create a sense of unity among the people in the community, and to bring them closer to the divine forces that are important in the everyday life of Romuva members.

Through food, the Romuvians demonstrate both the individual and collective experiences of freely interpreted old Baltic traditions. Careful selection of specific foods and the preparation of dishes for various rituals and ceremonies underline the deep thought and symbolism inherent in Romuvian culinary practice. These culinary traditions are not only historical artefacts, but also a living expression of a spiritual worldview that continues to flourish in the community. According to Romuvians, a meal becomes an accumulation of all that has gone into making it – with or without intention, both physically and *energetically*, as food provides the energy for the body to move and act.

One of the central ideas in the Romuvian worldview is the understanding that food is not only a physical necessity, but also a way of paying homage to the deities and connecting with ancestral traditions.

References

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