

# The Tenacity of Tradition in Lithuania

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*Lithuanians belong to the Baltic group of Indo-Europeans who appeared in the Baltic territories about 3,000–2,500 B.C. Tacitus, a Roman historian of the 1st century, made note of farmers and amber collectors in this area, but the name “Lithuania” appeared in a historical source for the first time in 1009 A.D. Lithuanian is the most archaic of the continuously spoken Indo-European languages and is of great interest to comparative linguists.*

*The state of Lithuania came into being with the coronation of its first Christian king in 1253. After his assassination, the country remained pagan until 1387, continuing to fight the Germanic Crusaders. Two hundred years later it had expanded to become one of the largest states in medieval Europe, extending from the Baltic Sea south to the Black Sea and east to Muscovy.*

*Treaties with Poland brought Christianity and, in 1569, unification into a commonwealth of the two nations. Gradually the commonwealth weakened, and in 1795 Lithuania was incorporated into the Russian empire.*

*Failed armed revolts against the Russians resulted in the banning of Lithuanian books and further oppression. Out of the resistance grew a cultural and political awakening that led to the establishment of an independent republic on February 16, 1918.*

*Independence was lost in 1940, when Soviet troops acted on the clandestine Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and invaded the country. German occupation followed from 1941 until 1944, when the Soviets returned and annexed Lithuania. At least 20,000 resistance fighters lost their lives, and more than 350,000 Lithuanians were exiled to Siberia during the Soviet occupation.*

*After a series of mass meetings during the perestroika period, Lithuania was the first of the Soviet republics to declare the reestablishment of its independence on March 11, 1990.*

*In territory, Lithuania encompasses 25,175 square miles, about the size of West Virginia. Its population is 3.7 million, of which approximately 80 percent are Lithuanians. The majority are Roman Catholic. The four main ethnographic regions are Aukštaitija (east), Žemaitija (west), Dzūkija (southeast), and Suvalkija (southwest).*



Visiting the cemetery on  
All Souls' Day. Photo by  
Zenonas Nekrošius



## The Baltic Nations: Lithuania

### The Importance of Tradition to Lithuanians

**T**radition holds a very special meaning for Lithuanians. For centuries they lived under the threat of extinction and learned to resist their occupiers in a passive yet persistent manner, using patience, perseverance, stubbornness, and conservatism. By holding on to their customs, their language, their religion, and by establishing close ties to their land, Lithuanians safeguarded themselves against complete cultural subjugation to those who held political sway over them.

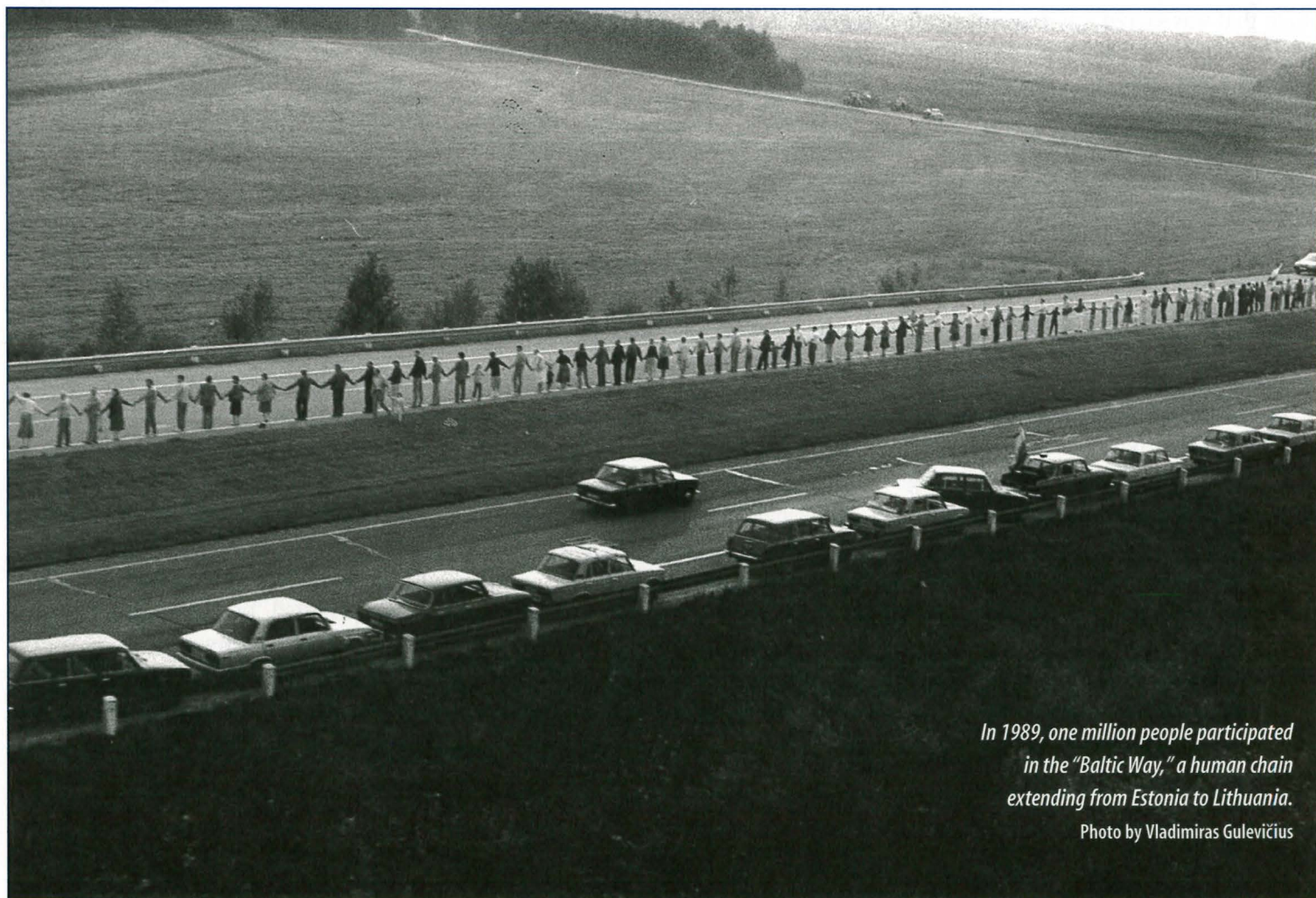
Lithuanians and their ancestors the Balts remained in essentially the same location and did not mix with their neighbors for over 4,000 years. Even when the territory they governed

expanded, they did not move to settle it. Their attachment to their lands and homes can be illustrated by many examples. For one, sacred space remained sacred over time: the cathedral in Vilnius, first built in the mid-13th century, stands on the site of a pagan temple. For another, a settlement that is dated to 1000 B.C. has recently been found in Vilnius on Castle Hill.

Because of their strong attachment to home, the deportations of Lithuanians to Siberia during the first years of Soviet occupation were especially harsh. The stories and reminiscences of the deportees speak not only of the hardships of exile but of the constant longing for home. The same sentiment pervades all the exile songs that were first sung publicly during the mass meetings in 1988–1989 (e.g., “In spring all the birds fly on

home/But we, will we ever return?”). The importance of home and being home was demonstrated again soon after Lithuania declared its independence: huge military aircraft brought back the remains of those who had died in Siberian exile so that they could be reburied in their family cemeteries. Today, if people are not buried in their hometown, usually a handful of dirt from their birthplace is scattered on their coffin.

Together with the concept of home, land itself had profound meaning to Lithuanians. For farmers it was natural to treat it with reverence. One would never spit on the ground. In songs and sayings earth is addressed as if it were a personified being; indeed it once was a pagan deity, Žemyna. Before starting their spring plowing, farmers knelt down to kiss the ground and crossed them-



*In 1989, one million people participated in the “Baltic Way,” a human chain extending from Estonia to Lithuania.*

*Photo by Vladimiras Gulevičius*



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selves. Bread was plowed into the first furrow as a sacrifice to the land.

The collectivization of agriculture under the Soviets forced people off their individual farms onto large collective farms. The liberal use of pesticides and indiscriminate drainage of wetlands wreaked havoc on the environment and the landscape. Bulldozers razed homes, orchards, cemeteries, even entire villages.

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Much that was sacred was desecrated. An important tie was severed — the almost spiritual relationship between a farmer and his land. As more people return to work the newly privatized lands, it remains to be seen what consequences the Soviet experience will have.

Lithuanians are slow to make changes, and when they do choose something new, they often hold on to the old “just in case it may still be useful.” During fieldwork expeditions folklorists often find tools and work implements that are obsolete but that have not been discarded. Lithuanians probably were exhibiting the same tendency to conservatism when they maintained their pagan traditions in conjunction with Catholic practices. Almost 200 years after the formal baptism of the nation, the first Lithuanian book was published — a catechism. In the introduction were a list of pagan deities and an admonition to the faithful against practicing pagan customs in their honor. Pantheistic religious relics and elements of ancient rituals survive to the present day in songs, proverbs, stories, and customs. And there is no sense

of dissonance; elements from different belief systems and historical periods coexist and combine in a unique way. It is this uniqueness that Lithuanians now celebrate as they — very consciously — reflect on their ethnic heritage.

### The Role of Folk Songs in the Lives of Lithuanians

Ask Lithuanians about their culture, and invariably they will mention songs. Lithuanians love to sing. The most accomplished singers will know hundreds of songs — songs that are passed to other generations and to other villages. The archive at the

Lithuanian Institute of Literature and Folklore in Vilnius has over 600,000 collected songs.

At the end of the 17th century Pastor T. Lepner's *Der Preusche Littauer* (The Prussian Lithuanian) characterized Lithuanian singing thus:

They are all composers, since they create their own melodies, though some of the melodies they learn from the Germans. Most of their voices are strong. . . . Usually women and girls sing until dawn grinding grains, the humming from which gives them a bass line. . . . The content of their songs — themes of love or anything that comes to mind, what they see around them. . . . Men do not exhibit a tendency toward this art.

During a recent recording expedition, comments by singers echo and extend Lepner's observations: “If you sing, you have a life.” “Our life was so hard — had I not sung, I would have gone insane.”

Lithuanian songs often reflect the female perspective on love, longing, chores, and even the horrors of war. Since women were the primary singers

and guardians of the aural tradition, the songs tend to be gentle with generous use of diminutive forms. Mythological and metaphorical references abound. Characters in songs are usually family members, young maidens, suitors, tillers of the soil. The texts interweave monologue and dialogue to move the story along. Nature and human conditions are juxtaposed in lyrics and express a common sentiment. For example,

The morning star bids goodbye to her father-moon, before going to the sun, draped in clouds with hard rain falling.

A young girl says goodbye to her mother before going to her mother-in-law, sighing and wiping tears.

Song is very much alive in Lithuania. Lithuanians do not sing for the benefit of an audience; for them singing is a way of being together. In earlier times Lithuanians sang work songs at various tasks such as cutting wheat and other songs specific to seasons and celebrations. Now they sing traditional and newer songs at family gatherings, weddings and christenings, or any time company sits down together and the mood strikes them. But when recording older singers, we often hear, “Oh, how they once sang! They would make the fields ring. One group would vie with another to see who could sing better.” Nostalgia itself may be a tradition for Lithuanians.

The time, place, and type and style of song may have changed, but the ability of song to create a sense of togetherness, or *communitas*, as anthropologists call it, has persisted. Two social developments illustrate this phenomenon.

The Rasa (Dew) festival, organized on the castle mound of Kernavė on June 23, 1967 (St. John's Day and Midsummer's Eve), marked the arrival of a national cultural movement of youth dissatisfied with Soviet ideology and looking to the pagan past and traditional culture to restore a sense of balance and goodness





*The traditional clothing of each region is woven and worn in a particular way and has a specific pattern, color, and style of tailoring. Photo by Henrikas Sakalauskas*

to modern society. The “Ramuva” movement sought to renew old traditions and to break away from Soviet holidays and state-sanctioned, stylized folklore. Named in reference to sacred pagan groves, the movement was characterized by an interest in authentic, national, ethnic culture — at the forefront of which was song.

Since 1968, the Ramuva Society of Vilnius University has organized 27 summer fieldwork expeditions in 22 regions of Lithuania. Close to 1,500 students and professors have taken part in these expeditions. Their collections have been deposited at the Lithuanian Folklore Institute. The Ramuva movement expanded the bounds of official ethnographic studies and gave a patriotic tinge to the study of folklore. For this reason, although the Soviet government allowed students to collect folklore for academic purposes, it feared the effects of young people gathering together and singing during the expeditions — such as their engagement in perpetuating the traditions and the power of the songs to unite them against the Soviets. So the government prohibited such gatherings.

The fieldwork expeditions and the Ramuva movement inspired the formation of many folk ensembles in villages and cities throughout Lithuania. From 1980 to 1989, close to 900 folk ensembles appeared on the scene. The example of city ensembles as well as ethnographic expeditions, folk music gatherings, invitations to rural artists to give concerts in cities, and increased radio and television program time dedicated to folklore encouraged village artists to form ensembles. During this period, ensemble terminology was defined. Village groups that draw on continuous traditions and perform their own area’s folklore are now called ethnographic ensembles. Groups that indirectly adopt or re-create traditions are called folklore ensembles. Today there are hundreds of ensembles, and their continued existence proves the vitality of song in modern Lithuania.

The second dramatic demonstration of the power of song occurred during the days of the mass meetings organized by Sajūdis, the grassroots movement for independence in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Folk ensembles would come

together and begin to sing. When three or four ensembles would start a song together, the audience would join, and soon the entire crowd in the stadium or park would be singing together. Eventually older people became emboldened to sing partisan songs and exile songs — songs which not so long before they had sung only in private and with great caution. The repertoire of those songs spread throughout the country in no time. They helped unite people in sentiment and cause. The experience of singing as a group in communal harmony was nothing new for Lithuanians; what was unique was that song had become a weapon of resistance.

That same power of song was evident on January 13, 1991, when thousands of Lithuanians gathered around the Parliament building, radio and television headquarters, and the television tower to protect their newly declared freedom from Soviet tanks and troops. While they waited through the night, they sang. The song and music stopped when tanks started to roll and gunshots were fired. I was standing next to an older woman



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when it became clear that something ominous was happening. She turned to me and said, "I don't know what would be better: to pray or to sing?" Both were perceived to be equally sacred.

At present, the interest in folk songs and traditional culture that existed in the 1980s has waned somewhat. Although many people long for that

spiritual atmosphere which prevailed while people were standing hand in hand in the Baltic Way or protecting the Parliament or television tower on the night of January 13th, the authenticity of that powerful emotional experience cannot be re-created.

### Family: The Safeguard of Lithuanian Traditions

The attachment to group singing illustrates Lithuanians' gregarious side. It was that sense of collective, experienced through song and its open public affirmation, that helped sustain them as a group, both in Lithuania and as exiles and refugees abroad. Family traditions,

on the other hand, do not lend themselves easily to public display, and yet they are the key to understanding a cultural group's attitudes, values, and morals. During all the years of the Soviet occupation, only the family was not penetrated by the all-regulating and all-sanctioning Communist Party. The family nurtured religion and national sentiment and safeguarded traditions; tradi-

*The Hill of Crosses is located in central Lithuania. It is customary for people to leave a cross and pray when visiting the site.*

Photo by Virgilijus Usinavičius



## Land of Crosses

A unique illustration of the interplay between tradition and history is the Hill of Crosses in Šiauliai. The mound was once a fortress. For more than a century, people erected crosses on the hill for all sorts of reasons and occasions, such as supplications for health and wealth and commemorations of births, deaths, or weddings. The Soviet government could not tolerate such an expression of spiritual belief, and the hill was totally annihilated in 1961, 1973, and again in 1975. But the crosses reappeared, almost overnight. The destruction stopped in 1980, and now the hill is again covered with thousands of crosses. They stand witness to the strength of tradition among Lithuanians.

Before the Soviet occupation, crosses and chapel poles had been an integral part of

Lithuania's landscape for hundreds of years. They were constructed near homesteads, at crossroads, by waysides, and when old ones deteriorated, new ones were placed in their stead. Sometimes chapels were nailed directly to trees. It is quite likely that these manifestations of Christian belief actually originated in some earlier totems used by the pagans to mark sacred space around them. The sun, moon, and snake motifs that decorate the crosses clearly harken back to pre-Christian nature worship, though now these symbols are appreciated purely for their aesthetic appeal. It is important to note that this form of decoration has held its appeal for a very long time, thus illustrating the conservatism of both Lithuanian craftsmen and the people who patronized them.

tions, in turn, strengthened familial ties.

Lithuanians have always honored the memory of their dead. It is very important to Lithuanians to carry out the will of a deceased loved one. To this day, in almost all regions of Lithuania the departed is mourned all night with funeral hymns. (It is a wonder how well these hymns and other funeral traditions have been preserved given the strength of the atheistic sovietization.) Graveyards are considered sacred places whose tranquility is not to be disturbed. Periodic visitations and upkeep of graves are obligations taken very seriously. Lighting of vigil candles at cemeteries on Vėlinės, the eve of All Souls' Day, is so important that both November 1 (All Saints' Day)



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and November 2 (All Souls' Day) are designated holidays. This allows people to return to their family graves, even if they are at some distance.

Christmas Eve is the day for family reunions, of both the living and the deceased. At the traditional Christmas Eve dinner, *Kūčias*, an extra place setting is set and food is left on the table all night for the souls of the deceased. The meatless dishes, some special to this night only, are shared in reverence. Reconciliation and the forgiving and settling of debts must be done by Christmas Eve. It is believed that one's disposition on the holiday will remain with the person for the year. This Christmas Eve gathering has always been celebrated quietly and in private, but its effect is powerful and deep. Regardless of whether they are believed or simply articulated, such traditions help strengthen the ties between the living and the dead, the past and the present, and are a means of keeping a balance between material reality and a person's spiritual life.

The fact that the shadow of our ancestors seems to be real and close at hand strengthens the sense of obligation that many Lithuanians feel toward their cultural heritage. Perhaps this is what makes many of us so passionate about our commitment to our traditions. Others may criticize us, saying we are overly conscious in the way we interact with our songs, dress, music, and our historical past. We reply that we must be conscious; otherwise there is the danger that our children will only hear someone else's song, story, and belief. Now that freedom has come and we are masters in our own home, we are still not out of danger. Marcelius Martinaitis, a much-loved and respected poet, writes:

When land is taken away, everybody is a witness. When speech becomes silent, the conscience speaks up. When ethnic traditions are taken away, a people sleep the eternal sleep of dead nations. Land remains in its place, a language can be protected by the written form, but the livelihood of the traditions is lost forever and never resurrected. Like life for a person, traditions are given only once. Ethnic catastrophes are almost unfelt — like radiation.

We can't afford the risk.

### Suggested Reading

- Ambrasėvičius, Rytis, comp. *Lithuanian Roots, An Overview of Lithuanian Traditional Culture*. Vilnius: Lithuanian Folk Culture Center, 1994.
- Balys, Jonas. *Lithuanian Folksongs in America: Narrative Songs and Ballads*. Boston: Lithuanian Encyclopedia Publishers, 1958.
- Bukšaitienė, Laima, and Danutė Krištopaitė. *Aukštaičių melodijos* (Melodies from Aukštaitija). Vilnius: Vaga, 1990. (with Russian and English summaries)
- Četkauskaitė, Genovaitė. *Dzūkų melodijos* (Melodies from Dzūkija). Vilnius: Vaga, 1981. (with Russian and English summaries)
- Encyclopedia Lituanica*, vols. 1–6. Boston: Juozas Kapocius, 1971–1976.
- Vėlius, Norbertas. *The World Outlook of the Ancient Balts*. Vilnius: Vaga, 1989.

### Suggested Listening

- Balys, Jonas. *Lithuanian Folk Songs in the United States*. Folkways 4009.
- Lithuanian Folk Music*. Authentic folklore, compiled by Genovaitė Četkauskaitė. 33 Records ADD 33 CD004. Available through Bomba Records, Žygimantų 6, Vilnius 2600, Lithuania, tel. (3702) 223358, fax (3702) 225715, or Vilnius Plokštelių Studija, Barboros Radvilaitės 8, Vilnius 2600, Lithuania, tel. (3702) 610419, fax (3702) 610491.
- Lithuanian folk music KANKLĖS, prepared by Vida Palubinskienė and produced by Egidijus Virbašius, 1996; and Lithuanian folk music WIND INSTRUMENTS, original recordings from 1935–1939, prepared by Rūta Žarskienė, produced by Egidijus Virbašius, 1997. Both recordings are from the collections of the Folklore Archive of the Lithuanian Institute of Literature and Folklore, Antakalnio 6, Vilnius 2055, Lithuania, fax (3702) 226573.
- Sutaras. *Protėvių Šauksmas* (Call of the ancestors). CD Lituanus/Jade JACD 065. Available from Antanas (Sutaras) Fokas, P.O. Box 94, Vilnius 2000, Lithuania, fax (3702) 261474.
- Ūla Folk Ensemble. *Lithuanian Traditional Music*. BIEM ncb AECD-5. Available from Čiurlionio 1–35, Vilnius 600, Lithuania, tel. (3702) 222755, fax (3702) 359633.

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