

## CHRISTMAS IN THE FAMILIES OF CONTEMPORARY LITHUANIAN CITY

Rasa Paukštytė-Šaknienė

УДК 398.332.416(474.5)

У статті авторка прагне розкрити зміни, які відбуваються в системі звичаїв на Святий вечір та Різдво, що побутують у сучасному Вільнюсі, а також окреслити їхню роль у структурі річних ритуалів. Полеві записи авторки, здійснені в цьому місті, засвідчують, що молодь сприймає Святий вечір та Різдво як найбільш традиційні свята, успадковані від предків.

**Ключові слова:** Святий вечір, Різдво, традиція, місто, сучасне суспільство, Вільнюс, Литва.

В статье автор стремится раскрыть изменения, которые происходят в системе обычаев на Святой вечер и Рождество, которые бытуют в современном Вильнюсе, а также определить их роль в структуре годовых ритуалов. Полевые записи автора, сделанные в этом городе, свидетельствуют, что молодежь воспринимает Святой вечер и Рождество как наиболее традиционные праздники, унаследованных от предков.

**Ключевые слова:** Святой вечер, Рождество, традиция, город, современное общество, Вильнюс, Литва.

The aim of this article is to reveal the changes in the customs of Christmas Eve and Christmas in contemporary Lithuanian city Vilnius as well as their role in the structure of the ritual year. According to the authors' fieldwork in Vilnius city the youth distinguished Christmas Eve and Christmas as the most traditional feasts taken over from grandparents and parents.

**Keywords:** Christmas Eve, Christmas, tradition, city, contemporary society, Vilnius, Lithuania.

Christmas is the most important holiday in Lithuania. As a day off it is celebrated for a two days (25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> of December). But Christmas Eve (in Lithuanian *Kūčios* – also non-working day) is even more important Day than Christmas. It is family holiday, and especially important to Lithuanian people. As the ethnologist Juozas Kudirka mentioned, Christmas Eve is among those rare manifestations of the Lithuanian national culture, which under the extremely hard occupation conditions of the 19<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> centuries united the scattered nation by intangible threads, helped it to survive. At the forefront of the Christmas Eve tradition of the Nativity of our Lord, the Christian idea of human resurrection, yet here we find interlaced the spiritual values that Lithuania had inherited from millenii and customs, representing different epochs [8, p. 293]. Traditionally all members of family are gathering to Christmas Eve supper and this is especially important in our days, when members of family often live in different localities, even states.

In the Soviet times and today little attention has been bestowed on calendar festivals observed in the family. This article is aimed at disclosing

the changes that the customs of Christmas Eve and Christmas have undergone in present-day Lithuania and analysing their significance in the structure of the ritual year in the largest city of the country – Vilnius.

Most scholars base their analyses of the processes of contemporary culture transmission on Eric Hobsbawm's concept of *invented tradition* which argues the long-term continuity of the tradition in time [7, p. 263–308]. In the Soviet Union the reconsideration of the concept of tradition was pursued earlier. Following the Soviet occupation, that has given the ideological interests of that time, new Socialist traditions were introduced in Lithuania. Scenarios of the newly designed festivals were drafted. Alongside other holidays, such festivals as Winter Farewell, Spring, Summer, Commemoration of the Dead and Harvest, manifesting the elements of Shrove, Easter, Midsummer Day, All Souls' Day and agrarian traditions were introduced. However, no alternative for Christmas Eve and Christmas was offered [21, p. 551–562; 5, p. 332–336]. It was expected that this festival would be replaced by the New Year which adopted the symbolism of passage

rites and was increasingly gaining in popularity all around Lithuania. It was the only day of the previously observed holidays that in the Soviet times had sustained its status as the legal holiday. For example, in 1958 alongside the New Year, other holidays included International Workers' Solidarity Day, October Revolution Anniversary and the USSR Constitution Day. The above listed substitutes of traditional calendar festivals were not assigned to fixed dates and usually moved to Sundays, thus turning them into more or less secondary holidays or imitations of holidays<sup>1</sup>. The majority of Soviet festivals were communal and were adapted for the celebration in the city.

There were the best opportunities to control the folk. As Catherine Bell mentioned, soviet regime expected new civil rituals be able to inundate the whole of Soviet life and to establish an "organic connection" between the new rites and the rhythm of people's lives securing in this way a systematic synthesis of the logical, emotional, and aesthetic dimensions of experience. The new rituals were expected to replace older religious rites because communist morality and socialist internationalism was expected to overpower bourgeois nationalism [2, p. 226-227]. Still the analysis of the situation in the eighties of the 20th century proves that «the majority of old feasts of the folk, which were considered to be religious and widely spread, are commemorated by the believers only; however Easter and Christmas are celebrated almost everywhere. They are regarded as traditional family feasts» [11, p. 65].

Calendar customs celebrated in a family did not receive a considerable attention of ideologists. Until Soviet occupation, birth, marriage and death events, in the bigger part of Lithuania (civil registration in Western part of Lithuania – Klaipėda district was officially introduced in 1876), had been ritually and legally operated by Christian Church [12, p. 116], so entail soviet family exceptional attention on civil life-cycle rituals (baptism, wedding, funeral) formation was focused.

Little attention was drawn to these issues also by ethnologists. We can find only short information about Christmas in textbooks of Lithuanian

ethnology *Patterns of Lithuanian Ethnology* [21, p. 538] and *Lithuanian Ethnology* [5, p. 271–282], in the book of Pranė Dundulienė *Lithuanian Calendar and Agrarian Festivals* [3, p. 12–35], also to Christmas partly devoted two articles [17, p. 285–297; 3, p. 199–225]. After 1990 alongside numerous ethnologic publications were published. However, the works of ethnologists were focused on the old Christmas Eve and Christmas traditions aspiring to exhibit the expression of the said holidays in traditional culture as well as to analyse the sacral functions of rites, origin of the festival and its social aspects. From these publications, I would highlight the books of ethnologist Juozas Kudirka *Lithuanian Christmas Eve and Christmas* and *Lithuanian Christmas Eve: Historical Comparative Review* [8; 9] and Arūnas Vaicekauskas *Lithuanian Winter Festivals: The Rites of Community Calendar Cycle in the Late 19<sup>th</sup>–Early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries* [20]. Researches of contemporary city calendar customs were started only in recent years. To Christmas festivals in Vilnius dedicated only few articles. As we can see from these publications, Christmas is the most important festival even to young generations of Vilnius [13, p. 303–322; 14, p. 316–327]. However, how are these festivals passed down from generation to generation? Such question I'll try to answer in this article.

**Soviet period: Contesting Christmas and New Year.** In the Soviet times the possibilities to preserve Christmas traditions were much less favourable than, for example, to observe Easter customs as the latter was celebrated on Sunday. Based on the research data of Gintarė Dusevičiūtė, savage propaganda against Christian festivals was conducted during the first years of the occupation. Special attention was focused on the winter festivals in order to give New Year's meaning [6, p. 124–135]. It was not easy to celebrate Christmas on workdays. At Christmas time university students would pass tests and sit for exams, whereas winter holidays for high-school students would start just before the New Year. Some people (for example, teachers) could be subjected to repressions for

the observation of the said holiday at home. Such facts could hardly render exceptional atmosphere to the festival. As mentioned Dalia Senvaitytė, absolute ignorance of the past and still truly popular traditional Lithuanian holidays was typical to the discourse of the era and to the official Soviet ideology as well as the presentation only of the new Soviet holidays. The single exception was left entirely to New Year celebration that did not have Christian undertones [16, p. 120]. A special attention was paid to children. For example during Soviet time the custom of gift-giving was introduced. In 1920–1940 it existed in Christmas time [15, p. 475]. On the other hand traditionally New Year was celebrated in a similar way to Christmas Eve. Both meant the start of a new year, we can find similar prediction of weather, the same kind of divinations, also beliefs, that what happens on New Year (or Christmas Eve) will occur all year long [1, p. 292]. As research of Žilvytis Šaknys showed, chronological closeness of the festival to Christmas in the structure of a ritual year as well as an exceptional attention to this celebration in the perspective of history enabled the formation of New Year's festival traditions in a family. The stereotypes of the New Year's festival formed in the Soviet period of time as of an exceptional celebration, which embodies the symbolism of a liminal passage rite, are still alive (especially among the Russian population) in Vilnius. But only 17 % of the Russians indicated that the New Year is the most significant holiday of the year (with 8 % of the Poles and 5 % of the Lithuanians supporting the same opinion) [18, p. 105–117].

However, with the restoration of Lithuania's statehood, Christmas and Christmas Eve became the most significant holiday of the year. In the years of national revival the above discussed holidays were rendered great significance. The easiest way to achieve it was within the family. After 1988 the aspiration to *revive* old traditions was voiced more and more often. In 1990 two days off were allocated for the celebration of Christmas. In 2012, emphasizing the necessity of preparation for Christmas Eve the Lithuanian Parliament approved as a non-working day Christmas Eve too. Hence,

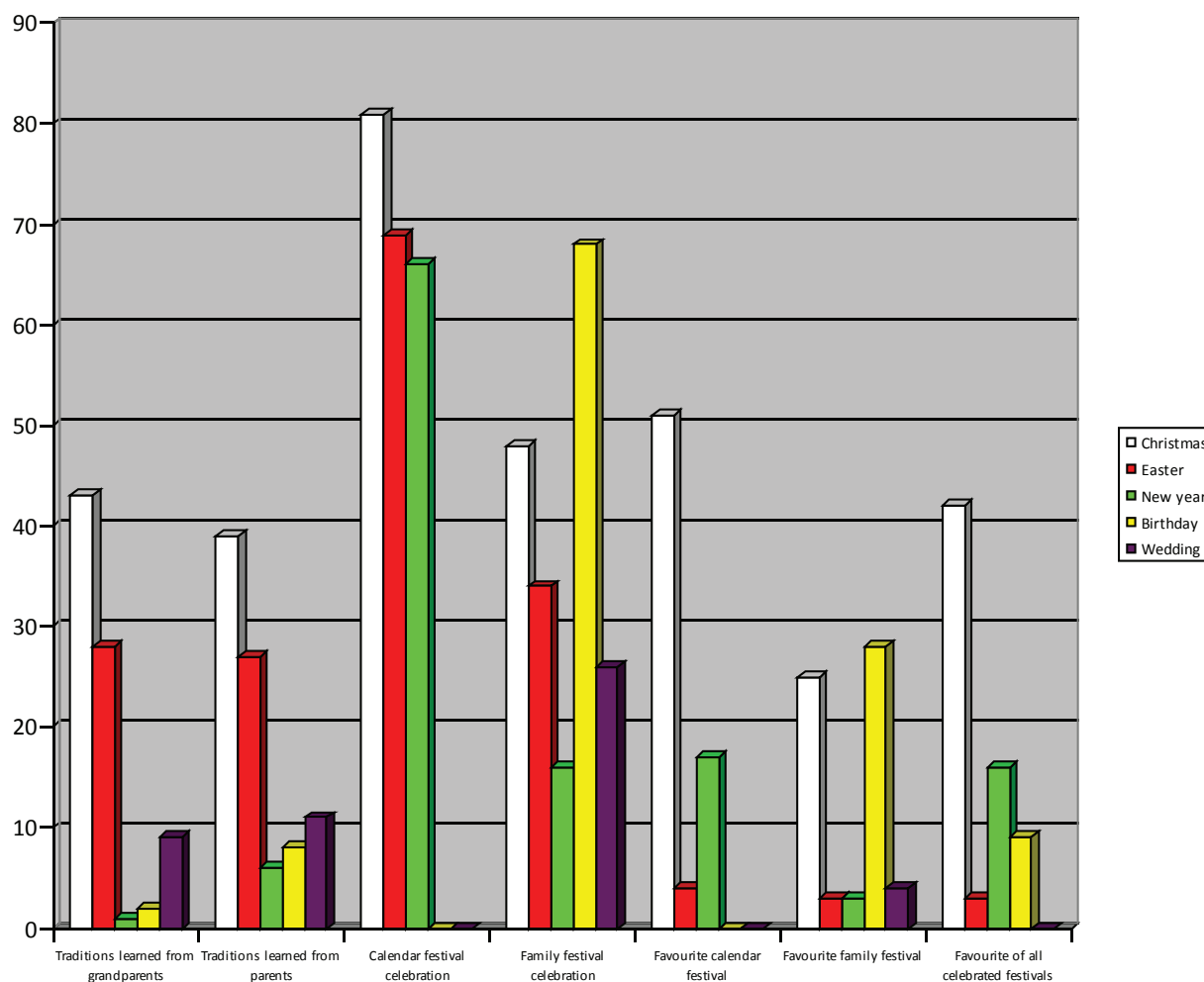
the three-day celebration period that was observed in Lithuania prior to 1940 was re-established.

As mentioned Anna Lubecka, which analyzed, Polish ritual year, under communism many Poles lived as if a double life and such was their system of values together with rituals which were proper enough to be enacted. At home, traditional Polish values were cherished, and religious and patriotic rituals were celebrated, while in the public sphere new holidays and celebrations enacting the communist ideology were observed [10, p. 92]. In my opinion in the same words Lithuanian situation could be described too. Otherwise it would be difficult to explain the present situation in Vilnius citizens' ritual year.

**Most popular and traditional festival: Opinion of the youth.** Ethnographic fieldwork pursued by myself in 2011 in the city of Vilnius with the aim to disclose the conceptions of tradition framed by young people, revealed that the attitude of young people towards tradition as a value passed down from generation to generation is subject to change. Although today's youth is attached to the absorbed tradition, perceives its value and is apt to continue it, young people reserve the possibility to select holidays as well as change or dismiss their certain elements. Analysis of calendar and life cycle festivals observed by young people in Vilnius revealed that Christmas Eve and Christmas were singled out as the most traditional festival, inherited from parents and grandparents and identified as the favourite calendar and family celebration.

Inquiry into the traditions of calendar festivals that young people learned about from their parents and grandparents resulted in an unambiguous outcome – mostly they learn about Christmas Eve and Christmas customs. Much fewer respondents were informed about Easter and other calendar and life cycle festivals, such as wedding and birthday [13, p. 309].

Lithuanian ethnologists investigating family traditions mostly focused their attention on life cycle customs, to include baptism, wedding, funeral, name day and birthday. When in the framework of the research people were asked to enumerate



2. Five most popular festivals in Vilnius. N-88

calendar and family festivals that they observe, most respondents attributed calendar holidays to family festivals. The majority indicated that mostly observed calendar holiday is Christmas Eve and Christmas, whereas the most popular family occasion is birthday [13, p. 311–312].

Similar situation was observed when young people were asked to indicate their favourite calendar and family festivals and single out one occasion that they fancy the most. Christmas Eve and Christmas appeared to be at the top of the favourite calendar occasions' list and was referred to as the most significant festival overall. The New Year, which in the Soviet times gained in popularity and became the most important holiday of the year, was rendered much less significance. Unexpectedly little attention was bestowed on Easter. From the category of family

occasions birthday, which was given prominence in the Soviet times [13, p. 313].

**Christmas and Christmas Eve traditions in the life of different generations.** In the process of the ethnographic research an in-depth analysis of townspeople's leisure time and holiday culture was conducted. In 2012–2013 with the help of the ethnographic questionnaires *Leisure time and festivals in the family*, new ethnographic research was pursued, bestowing significant share of attention on the analysis of Christmas Eve-Christmas festival: preparation for the occasion, selection and purchase of presents, laying the table and cooking and other related issues. Respondents representing various age groups were surveyed.

How Christmas Eve and Christmas are celebrated and how are they perceived in present-

day culture by representatives of different generations? Here are a few examples. For a citizen of Vilnius born in 1987 Christmas Eve is the occasion which he spends only at home. He often invites his grandmother, God mother and other relatives to Christmas Eve dinner and helps his mother with the cooking. Christmas Eve is also appreciated by representatives of the older generation. A respondent born in 1934 claimed that he gives prominence to the preparation for the holidays as being a retiree he has the possibility to make preparations in advance. Christmas Eve is the occasion «when the closest people come together because when celebrated only within the couple it is less of a holiday». It is very important that the wife makes a cake and *kūčiukai*<sup>2</sup> and all other dishes which have to be home-made<sup>3</sup>. Another important tradition is the decoration of the Christmas tree<sup>4</sup> and exchange of presents<sup>5</sup>. In most cases women elaborate more on these items of the questionnaire. The respondent born in 1990 maintains «Christmas is my favourite festival as it is a family occasion with exceptional atmosphere enhanced by kindness shared among people, good food, pleasant smell of the Christmas tree and the spirit of Santa Claus. We make preparations for Christmas a week in advance — decorate the house and buy the Christmas tree». On Christmas Eve «from the early morning usually my father and myself decorate the Christmas tree, my mother is cooking food in the kitchen, we wrap Christmas presents, in the evening lay the table and wait for our relatives to come. Then we break *kalėdaičiai* (Christmas wafers), eat, talk and take a look what lies underneath the Christmas tree. The celebration is not over, however, we go to visit my grandmother and spend the rest of the evening at the table repeating the same actions». In the observance of the festival the same rite is repeated several times.

According to a woman born in 1978, Christmas Eve and Christmas «are observed the same way every year» that it why she fancies this holiday the most. Few respondents render significance to Shepherds' Mass that is celebrated in the church following the Christmas Eve dinner. When speaking about Christmas Eve, most respondents propose that it is

a conservative festival that has not undergone much change since «ancient times». However, today Christmas Eve and often Christmas First Day are traditionally celebrated within the family and on Second, and sometimes even the First Christmas Day, friends are visited or invited<sup>6</sup>. A man born in 1986 maintained that he spends «one day with the family and the other with friends» and believes that it is «not only a perfect occasion to meet everyone, but to talk more intimate than normally». On the other hand, the holiday affords grounds for the observance of customs inherited from parents, whereas the celebration of the second part of the festival allows young and older people to introduce their own traditions. For example the female citizen of Vilnius born in 1966 always visits her mother on Christmas Eve, however, celebrates Christmas in a different way each year. In 10 years' period a new tradition to organize Christmas parties with friends was introduced. Each year a different friend hosts the party. Normally theme parties are organized. For example, in this year it was a hat party — each lady had to wear a hat at the celebration. In addition, each friend brings a present. The presents are put together and lots are drawn to decide which present comes to which friend. Each participant brings some food. In the respondent's words, such parties have become «sacred matter». The above described parties as the way of celebration created by a group of friends can be referred to as «created tradition». However, a more detailed analysis can suggest analogies with the New Year festival celebrated in the Soviet times in schools — the established tradition to organize a costume ball, bring presents and participate in a lottery. Still the respondent's peers framed new festive traditions that had no analogues in Lithuania. For example, female respondent born in 1960 already 10 years ago started decorating the front door with a Christmas (Advent) wreath<sup>7</sup>. Traditionally in the period from Christmas to the New Year every evening she starts a fire in her hearth and lights candles. Thus, she creates cosy atmosphere pleasant to each member of the family.

**Short conclusions.** Analysis of the observance of Christmas Eve and Christmas by present-day youth



and their parents may result in contradictory answers. It can be perceived as a celebration of a holiday transferred from generation to generation, on other hand considered as modified tradition. However, it is undeniable that the holiday in question appeals to Vilnius citizens of various ages more than the New Year or other festive days. Even though losing the religious character in many cases, it still embodies

the symbolism «rites de passage» and frames the appearance of a traditional festival. So as mentioned Catherine Bell, most rituals appeal to tradition or custom in some way, and many are concerned to repeat historical precedents very closely. A ritual that evokes no connections with any tradition is apt to be found anomalous, inauthentic, or unsatisfying by most people [2, p. 145].

<sup>1</sup> In 1940 the Christmas Eve, first and second day of Christmas, New Year's Day, Epiphany (6 January), Lithuanian Independence Day (16 February), St Casimir's Day (4 March), St. Joseph's Day (19 March), Good Friday, Holy Saturday, the first and second day of Easter, Ascension, Pentecost, Corpus Christi, Saints Peter and Paul Day (29 June), Assumption (15 August), Nation Day (8 September), All Saints' Day (1 November), and the Immaculate Conception (8 December) as non-working days were celebrated.

<sup>2</sup> *Kūčiukai* – tiny rolls from wheaten flour the size of bean [8, p. 295].

<sup>3</sup> Traditionally, Christmas Eve meals were prepared from legumes (peas, beans, bread beans) and corn (oats, wheat, barley), poppy and hemp seeds, linseeds, vegetables (potatoes, beet-roots, cabbages, carrots), forest and orchard goods (mushrooms, nuts, cranberries, apples, cherries, honey). Indispensable the Christmas Eve table were herring and fish, normally caught in the local water reservoirs on the day before Christmas Eve. It is said that 12 dishes are served on the Christmas Eve table. All of them are

cooked without fat or only with oil [8, p. 295]. The same meals among Roman Catholics prevailed also in Vilnius city in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century [22, p. 142–144].

<sup>4</sup> The Christmas tree came to be decorated in Lithuania in the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century, the custom spread into the peasants' home only in the 3<sup>rd</sup> - 4<sup>th</sup> decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century [8, p. 295].

<sup>5</sup> Tradition of exchanging of Christmas presents in Lithuania spread only after First World War [8, p. 215].

<sup>6</sup> Even in 1920–1940 the majority of Lithuanian people thought the first day of Christmas to be too sacred to be disturbed by any merry-making. Youth usually held parties on the second day of Christmas. In North and Central Lithuania the merry-making covered also the third day of the holiday. It extended even fourth day of Christmas in South-east and North-east Lithuania [18, p. 134].

<sup>7</sup> In Lithuania with the exception of Lithuania Minor (Westernpart of Lithuania where Lutherans dominated), Advent wreath is recently spread tradition.

1. *Balys J.* Lietuvių kalendorinės šventės. Tautosakinė medžiaga ir aiškinimai. – Vilnius : Mintis, 1993. – 310 p.

2. *Bell C.* Ritual. Perspectives and Dimensions. – New York ; Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1997. – 351 p.

3. *Dundulienė P.* Lietuvių saulės sugrįžimo švenčių apeigos // Istorija. – 1970. – T. 11. – P. 199–225.

4. *Dundulienė P.* Lietuvių kalendoriniai ir agrariniai papročiai. – Vilnius : LTSR aukštojo ir specialiojo vidurinio mokslo ministerija, Vilniaus Darbo Raudonosios Vėliavos ir Draugystės ordinų V. Kapsuko universitetas, 1979. – 154 p.

5. *Dundulienė P.* Lietuvių etnografija. – Vilnius : Mokslas, 1982. – 451 p.

6. *Dusevičiūtė G.* Metinių švenčių diskursas Lietuvos periodikoje 1940–1941 pirmos sovietinės okupacijos laikotarpiu // Res Humanitariae. – 2013. – T. 13. – P. 124–135.

7. *Hobsbawm E.* Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe, 1870–1914 // The Invention of Tradition / E. Hobsbawm & T. Ranger (eds). – Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1983. – P. 263–308.

8. *Kudirka J.* Lietuviškos Kūčios ir Kalėdos. – Vilnius : Vaga, 1993. – 317 p.

9. *Kudirka J.* Lietuviškos Kūčios. Istorinė lyginamoji apžvalga. – Vilnius : Lietuvos liaudies kultūros centras, 1994. – 64 p.

10. *Lubecka A.* Polish Ritual Year – a Reflection of Polish Cultural Policy // Estonia and Poland: Creativity and Tradition Cultural Communication. – Tartu :

ELM Scholarly Press, 2013. – Vol. 2. Perspectives on national and regional identity. – P. 83–98.

11. *Mardosa J.* Socialistinio Lietuvos kaimo gyventojų dvasinė kultūra. – Vilnius : Mokslas, 1988. – 94 p.

12. *Paukštytė-Šaknienė R.* Ritual, Power and Historical perspectives: Baptism and Name-giving in Lithuania and Latvia // *Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristic.* – 2007. – Vol. 1 (1). – P. 115–129.

13. *Paukštytė-Šaknienė R.* Tradicija šiuolaikinių kalendorinių ir gyvenimo ciklo švenčių kontekste // *Res humanitariae.* – 2013. – T. 14. – P. 303–322.

14. *Paukštytė-Šaknienė R.* Pasiruošimas Kalėdų šventėms vilniečių šeimose: stresas ar malonumas? // *Lituanistica.* – 2013. – N 4 (94). – P. 316–327.

15. *Paukštytė-Šaknienė R.* Ritual Year of Godparents and Godchildren in Contemporary Society in Lithuania // *The Ritual Year 10. – Magic in Rituals and Rituals in Magic. The Yearbook of the SIEF (Société Internationale d’Ethnologie et de Folklore) Working Group on the Ritual Year / T. Minniyakhmetova and K. Velkoborská (eds.). – Innsbruck ; Tartu : ELM Scholarly Press, 2015. – P. 471–478.*

16. *Senvaitytė D.* Kalendorinių švenčių diskursas sovietinėje Lietuvos periodikoje. I dalis: 1945–1964 metai // *Lituanistica.* – 2013. – N 2 (92). – P. 101–121.

17. *Skrodenis S.* Liaudies dramos užuomazgos lietuvių kalendorinėse apeigose, Lietuvos TSR MA darbai. A serija. – 1966. – T. 2. – P. 285–297.

18. *Šaknys Ž. B.* Kalendoriniai ir darbo papročiai Lietuvoje XIX a. pabaigoje – XX a. pirmoje pusėje. Jaunimo vakarėliai. Lietuvos etnologija. – Vilnius : Diemedis, 2001. – T. 7. – 156 p.

19. *Šaknys Ž.* Šventė Vilniuje: Naujieji metai lietuvių, lenkų ir rusų šeimose // *Lituanistica.* – 2014. – N 2 (96). – P. 105–117.

20. *Vaicekauskas A.* Lietuvių žiemos šventės. Bendruomenės kalendorinio ciklo apeigos XIX a. pab. – XX a. pr. – Kaunas : VDU leidykla, 2005. – 192 p.

21. *Vyšniauskaitė A.* (sud.). Lietuvių etnografijos bruožai. – Vilnius : Valstybinė politinės ir mokslinės literatūros leidykla, 1964. – 684 p.

22. *Znamierowska-Prüfferowa M.* Vilnius, miestas arčiausia širdies. – Vilnius : Alma litera, 2009. – 312 p.