
Child-threatening Mythical Creatures in Traditional Lithuanian Culture: Between Real and Constructed Threats of the Mythical World

Vita Džekčioriūtė-Medeišienė

PhD Student (Humanities, Ethnology), Faculty of Philology, Vilnius University
and Junior Scientific Researcher, Department of Folk Narrative,
Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore, Vilnius, Lithuania

Abstract: The article presents child-threatening mythical creatures, their expressions and functions in Lithuanian folklore. Threats of the mythical world can be divided into two groups: *real* and *constructed* threats. The ones of the first group, real threats, are perceived as threats to children by adults. Real threats arise from two types of representations of the mythical world: mythical creatures and mythologised persons. The second group, constructed threats, is the phenomenon in which adults use folklore narratives to evoke fear in children, but adults do not perceive those narratives as real threats. Three types of folklore genres were used to frighten children: fairy tales, folk legends, and short, frightening expressions. This article focuses on the latter. The research analyses Lithuanian customs, beliefs, and narratives from the late 19th century and the first half of the 20th century.

Keywords: Lithuanian folklore, child-threatening mythical creatures, real threats, constructed threats, frightening expressions

INTRODUCTION

This article examines representations of the mythical world that are considered a threat to infants and small children in traditional Lithuanian culture. Data used in this research focus on child-raising practices, beliefs, and short narratives found in rural communities of Lithuania in the late 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. This period in the rural culture of Lithuania is usually referred to as *traditional culture*.

The ethnographic material comes from the following Lithuanian archives: Archives of the Department of Ethnology and Anthropology at the Lithuanian Institute of History (LII ES), Catalogue of Lithuanian Beliefs at the Lithuanian Institute of History (LTA), Lithuanian Folklore Archives at the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore (LTR, LTRF [audio records]), Archives of the Department of Cultural Studies and Ethnology at Vytautas Magnus University (VDU ER). Some material comes from published sources in which child-raising practices, customs, beliefs and narratives about mythical creatures,

or short biographical narratives about child-raising practices are discussed (MAŽIULIS 1936; DULAITIENĖ-GLEMŽAITĖ 1958; JOKIMAITIENĖ – VĖLIUS 1986; MARCINKEVIČIENĖ 1998; MICKEVIČIUS 2009; VAITKEVIČIENĖ 2008; KAŠĖTIENĖ – KUDIRKIENĖ 2016). Important sources of literature for this analysis of child-threatening mythical creatures were also research studies about children in traditional Lithuanian culture, folklore, and mythological worldview (VĖLIUS 1977; 1987; ASTRAMSKAITĖ 1993; PAUKŠTYTĖ 1999; JASIŪNAITĖ 2000; RAČIŪNAITĖ 2002; MACIJAUSKAITĖ-BONDA 2015).

The main theoretical approach to this research lies in the distinction between *real* and *constructed* threats of the mythical world. In this article, real threats are those which are perceived as real by adults. These threats are associated with the representations of the mythical world which may harm either adults or children, considering that children are more vulnerable and suffer from these threats more frequently. Constructed threats are the phenomena which are not perceived as threats by adults but are presented as mythical threats to children in the framework of socially (culturally) constructed norms of behaviour. Accordingly, this distinction determines the structure of the article. The first part introduces child-threatening representatives of the mythical world that, from the point of view of adults, may damage children. Then it discusses representatives of the mythical world used by adults to frighten children. The main criterion that delineates the two parts of the article is the adults' attitude towards and relationship with these representations of the mythical world.

REAL THREATS

According to Lithuanian folklore, real threats of the mythical world can be divided into two groups based on the source of danger: mythical creatures and mythologised persons. This section discusses the protection of children from danger and the implications of harm.

Mythical Creatures

In traditional Lithuanian culture, several types of mythical creatures were believed to be able to harm little children, especially newborn babies. One of these creatures is the *laumė* – a feminine mythical creature living near water, somewhat similar to fairies. It might be devil or witch as well. In this respect, witches function as mythical creatures, but they can also be members of human communities, as discussed below. Also, it was believed that newborn babies could be harmed by evil spirits.

In traditional Lithuanian culture, *laumės* are the most frequent mythical creatures considered dangerous to newborn babies. It was believed that they killed children, stole them, and swapped them with their own. The topic of stealing children is recurrent in one third of all legends that mention *laumės* (VĖLIUS 1977:100). The most dangerous period when a *laumė* could harm the child was before the baptism. During that time, the baby was not supposed to be left alone. The same characteristics apply to the devil and to witches; however, they are mentioned much less frequently in Lithuanian beliefs and narratives within the baby-stealing context. Nevertheless, it was believed that all these creatures could replace the baby with one of their own.

Numerous practices were used to protect children from the impact of mythical creatures. Some of them were ritualised and were related to other important rituals associated with “rites of passage”. First of all, the sign of the cross was to be made on newborn babies immediately after birth (PAUKŠTYTĖ 1999:57; MACIJAUSKAITĖ-BONDA 2015:97). Lithuanian legends frequently said that a *laumė* replaced the baby because the sign of the cross had not been made on him or her immediately after birth (MACIJAUSKAITĖ-BONDA 2015:97). In the western part of Lithuania, newborn babies were sprinkled with sanctified water or fumigated with special herbs, or a rosary was put on the baby’s neck immediately after birth (PAUKŠTYTĖ 1999:57). Another very important ritual, performed by midwives, was the first bathing of a newborn baby. It involved practices to protect the child from mythical creatures during this ritual. Certain artefacts were added to the water used for washing, e.g., sanctified herbs (PAUKŠTYTĖ 1999:58), branches of juniper or rowan (RAČIŪNAITĖ 2002:48; MACIJAUSKAITĖ-BONDA 2015:99). These two plants were generally used in traditional Lithuanian culture for protection from various mythical creatures and evil spirits. Additionally, the sign of the cross had to have been made on the water to be used for washing (PAUKŠTYTĖ 1999:58; RAČIŪNAITĖ 2002:48). Some salt (RAČIŪNAITĖ 2002:48) or a silver coin could also be put in the water (PAUKŠTYTĖ 1999:58). After being used for washing, the water had to be poured out in special places, such as under the roof of the house, or places where nobody went (PAUKŠTYTĖ 1999:59). These actions were meant to avoid the harm of mythical creatures. For the same reason, some objects were kept close to a newborn baby’s cradle or at the boundaries of the house; for example, the above-mentioned branches of juniper or rowan were kept near the infant or in the window (MACIJAUSKAITĖ-BONDA 2015:99), the liminal place which can be used by mythical creatures to enter the house. In Western Lithuania, psalm books were kept near babies (PAUKŠTYTĖ 1999:69). To deter *laumės* from coming to the house, a ring of flax was put under the threshold (MACIJAUSKAITĖ-BONDA 2015:99). The foremost means of protecting newborn babies, prevalent in the entire territory of Lithuania, was the requirement of not leaving the baby alone and ensuring that he or she was attended to by someone at all times. In the western part of Lithuania, a midwife or another woman considered as “experienced” looked after the baby throughout the night. In Southern Lithuania, this duty was fulfilled by young girls (MACIJAUSKAITĖ-BONDA 2015:98). According to some narratives, a mythical creature swapped a child with another, or a child disappeared the moment a midwife fell asleep (MACIJAUSKAITĖ-BONDA 2015:98). Another requirement was to keep a source of light on at all times (PAUKŠTYTĖ 1999:68; MACIJAUSKAITĖ-BONDA 2015:98). It is highly significant that, notwithstanding some exceptions, these customs were followed until new-born babies were baptised. Therefore, baptism may be perceived as a means of protection, too, since the danger posed by mythical creatures declined after the baptism. Some beliefs and narratives indicate that mythical creatures were only able to swap children that were not baptised, and it was thus forbidden to take the child away from home before baptism (JOKIMAITIENĖ – VĖLIUS 1986:255). If the child could not be baptised in the church, even baptism at home – when a midwife would name the child – could provide some protection (MACIJAUSKAITĖ-BONDA 2015:98). This points to the fact that the most important time when the child entered human society, was the act of initiation. Newborn babies were generally baptised during the first weeks after their birth (PAUKŠTYTĖ 1999:73). It was at that moment that the child got his or her name and

was considered human. Before the baptism, he or she was very close to the mythical world and could be considered as belonging to mythical creatures. Thus, baptism and giving a name to the child was the boundary where the child's social status changed (ASTRAMSKAITĖ 1993:128; PAUKŠTYTĖ 1999:75).

Another important aspect in the realm of real threats is the implication of the harm that could be inflicted upon children by mythical creatures, namely, when children were said to be stolen or replaced. So-called changelings were given additional names, depending on the mythical creature that replaced them, such as *laumiukai*, little devils, little witches (VĖLIUS 1987:223–224; MACIJUSKAITĖ-BONDA 2015:129). Lithuanian mythical legends also say that people could retrieve their real children by harming the replaced ones, usually by beating them. *Laumės* cannot stand seeing their children harmed, so they return human babies and take back their own (VĖLIUS 1987:103).

Changelings were said to have special features. Usually, these features distinguished such mythical babies from normal babies, and they were considered anomalies. Changelings were either very beautiful or very ugly (MACIJUSKAITĖ-BONDA 2015:129, and 132, and 138). They could grow unnaturally fast or could stop growing altogether, even if they ate a lot (MACIJUSKAITĖ-BONDA 2015:129, and 135, and 140). Such babies could be very intelligent or, just the opposite, they did not speak or walk during further stages of their life (MACIJUSKAITĖ-BONDA 2015:129, and 139). They had disproportionate body parts, such as huge eyes or a huge head (MACIJUSKAITĖ-BONDA 2015:135, and 136). Some body parts could also be deformed; for example, they could be bow-legged or have a hunched back (MACIJUSKAITĖ-BONDA 2015:136). Additionally, such babies could have extra body parts, they were very hairy, or had teeth at an age when children usually did not have any (MACIJUSKAITĖ-BONDA 2015:129, and 135). Moreover, they cried hard, and had a very unpleasant voice (MACIJUSKAITĖ-BONDA 2015:138). All these features certainly point to the conclusion that newborn babies with health problems and congenital anomalies were perceived as representatives of the mythical world.

Mythologised Persons

Another group of representatives of the mythical world considered as a source of threats to newborn babies and small children were members of the human community, namely, mythologised persons. It was believed that they had supernatural powers and could harm other persons, cattle, plants, or even objects. These mythologised persons included charmers, sorcerers and witches. In this case, witches were perceived not as mythical creatures but as members of a human community. Beggars and foreigners were also perceived as having dangerous supernatural powers. All such persons, as discussed below, were considered as dangerous to all members of the community, but little children were especially vulnerable to their threats. These threats included destructive charms on newborn babies and little children, and the phenomenon known as the “evil eye”. The impact of the “evil eye” was associated with many common diseases in Lithuanian ethnomedicine.

Babies that had been impacted by charms and the “evil eye” were fussy, sleepless, cried hard or incessantly, and could even die (DULAITIENĖ-GLEMŽAITĖ 1958:384; MARCINKEVIČIENĖ 1998:138; MICKEVIČIUS 2009:140). Several means of protection were

used to counter or eliminate the threat of charms and the “evil eye”. The water from the first bathing of a baby was poured under the threshold or a furnace to avoid charms and the “evil eye” (PAUKŠTYTĖ 1999:59). Then, to protect a baby from the influence of witches and the impact of the “evil eye”, his or her shirt had to be put on inside out during his or her first dressing ceremony (PAUKŠTYTĖ 1999:59, and 69; DULAITIENĖ-GLEMŽAITĖ 1958:405). Usually, and especially before the baptism, newborn babies were not shown to persons outside the family (DULAITIENĖ-GLEMŽAITĖ 1958:384). Sometimes the baby was kept in the dark with his or her eyes covered with a tissue (VAITKEVIČIENĖ 2008:519), and the cradle was covered with tissues to avoid the impact of the “evil eye” (VAITKEVIČIENĖ 2008:519).

Moreover, certain customs were followed before leaving for church to baptise the child; for example, some salt could be put in the corner of the baby’s nappy. Also, the baby’s godmother had to put a piece of garlic in her pocket. The baby was sprinkled with sanctified water or could be fumigated with sanctified herbs (MICKEVIČIUS 2009:127). The baby had to be passed through the shirt which the mother she had been wearing during birth (DULAITIENĖ-GLEMŽAITĖ 1958:407). These customs helped to avoid charms against newborn babies. They were very important because the journey from home to the church and back was a dangerous threshold period.

Children that had been harmed could be cured in many different ways, some of which were also used to treat adults or even cattle. The topic of healing practices is so vast that it would merit a separate study; nevertheless, several healing practices used to treat babies are mentioned here to demonstrate their variety. One such practice was fumigation with rye flour or sanctified herbs (MICKEVIČIUS 2009:140). Babies could also be passed through a horse-collar (LTA 2278/232). An adult had to lick a baby’s eyebrows and spit three times after licking (MARCINKEVIČIENĖ 1998:138). Incantations were also frequently used in such situations (VAITKEVIČIENĖ 2008:700). The baby was also taken to the priest, who would say a special prayer (MICKEVIČIUS 2009:140).

CONSTRUCTED THREATS

The other type of threats to small children in traditional Lithuanian culture was the one of the constructed threats of representations of the mythical world that were used by adults to frighten children. In this context, fear is one of the important factors influencing the psychophysical and social development of the child, and functions as a model for culturally regulating a child’s behaviour. These constructed threats might reveal themselves in three forms: narration of fairy tales, narration of legends, and the use of short, frightening expressions. There are some differences among these three groups of folk expressions.

The narration of fairy tales took place during a special time. Usually, tales were told in the evenings. Some of the characters in fairy tales are the above-mentioned mythical creatures typical of Lithuanian folklore. They are *laumės*, the devil, and witches. The main feature in the narration of fairy tales is that fear is not perceived as a direct danger but as the aesthetic experience of fear.

Another type of folk narratives used to evoke fear in children was one of legends. As in the case of fairy tales, there was a special time for legend narration as well. But legends may differ from fairy tales in having more creatures. There are the same

laumės, the devil, and witches, which are typical of fairy tales. But one can also meet other subjects which, according to adults, can harm children. They are mythologised people, such as foreigners, beggars and sorcerers. As these subjects lived among community members, the experience of fear in this case is closer to reality but has still connections with the aesthetic experience of fear (VĖLIUS 1977:27). Another important aspect is that this type of folklore is associated with the above-discussed real threats, since legends appear as a reflection of the adults' worldview. However, in the case of constructed threats, legends function differently from the real threats because adults perceive them as real narratives.

The third type of constructed threats is the practice of frightening children. Such practice generally uses non-ritual expressions, although it may also involve some ritual aspects. These expressions are short, everyday warnings of danger containing a mythical worldview perspective typical in traditional Lithuanian culture in the late 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. This type of folklore is the best at revealing constructed threats. Such short, frightening expressions were more practical because they took less time than telling legends or fairy tales and were just as effective in terms of causing fear, as they were perceived as real threats by children.

It is not entirely clear which folklore genre these forms of frightening should be associated with. They are related to folk beliefs in terms of their typical structure and manifestations of the mythical worldview. However, the frightening presents a reaction to certain situations and circumstances, thus being similar to situational sayings. Quite frequently, such occurrences stem from a broader social and mythological background, being therefore capable of evolving into ritual-like imitation practices or folk legends containing elements of legend plots; for example:

“When we were small, we were frightened by *Burlokas*. One said that he was wearing red shoes and was watching the children who lived in the village. If the children behaved well, he did nothing, but if the children behaved badly, if they were fighting or stealing from the neighbours' farms, after having waited for the older one to go away, *Burlokas* would come to the house where small children were, hide behind the furnace, and lie in waiting. As soon as the child approached the furnace, *Burlokas* would suffocate the child and drink its blood. That is why his shoes were red.” (MARCINKEVIČIENĖ 1998:147)

“My sister Jadvyga wanted her brother Juozulis to tell her stories. She was constantly asking him to tell stories, even if he was tired. When he was sleepy or wanted to have a rest, he always told her the story about *Burlokas*.” (MARCINKEVIČIENĖ 1998:254–255)

Based on the subjects of the mythical world, four groups of expressions used to frighten children can be distinguished. The first group is a little different from the others and will not be widely discussed here. Suffice it to say that these expressions do not contain any mythical subjects. They are related to physical demise and mythologise body functions, such as: “Don't shout, you'll lose your lungs”, or “Don't eat so much, your belly will cut your neck” (KAŠĖTIENĖ – KUDIRKIENĖ 2016:82). These expressions can be found in the paremic group of texts, namely, situational sayings.

The three other groups in this classification include frightening subjects, which can be ranked according to the opposition between the *own* and the *alien*. In Lithuanian,

there are about one hundred and thirty names for such frightening subjects (JASIŪNAITĖ 2000:172). Children would be frightened with certain groups of “aliens” crisscrossing the country, such as Jews, Gypsies, or beggars (LII ES 208/126:597, 1073/50:88, 1108/15:47, 508/43:82); for example, “The Gypsies are coming, and I will give you to them, and they will take you. You will have to live with them, to tell fortunes and steal chickens” (MARCINKEVIČIENĖ 1998:147–148); “Children were afraid of beggars. If they saw one coming, they ran to hide behind the furnace or under the table. Their parents threatened them with beggars: they were told not to approach the well or the road, otherwise a beggar would catch them. Children were threatened by the beggars’ appearance, too: they wore ragged clothes, they were lame and tired” (LII ES 341 (21), 65). The main feature of these passers-by was that they would carry a bag, and it was said that the bag was used to carry off disobedient children.

If any extraordinary member – sorcerer or healer – lived in the local community, he or she became the subject of frightening the children, too. It was said that a sorcerer could turn a disobedient child into an animal (LTRF cd 553-01, 594-06). The subject of the frightening expression could even be a neighbour living next door, especially if he or she had strange habits (LTRF cd 621-02).

Another group of expressions used to frighten children involved animals. However, the image of animals was less frequently used than that of humans. It was said that a dog (LKŽe: *ciucius*), a wolf (LII ES 853/2:5), or a bear (LII ES 508/26: 54) could come and take away or devour a disobedient child. Dangerous foxes could be living in the crop fields, so it was forbidden to go near these fields (LII ES 1517/5:5). Some frightening expressions with animals were used to protect children from dangerous places; for example, “To make children stay away from the well, one said that a catfish would catch them. The children were afraid of catfish, and they did not approach the well” (LII ES 508 (46), 88). Frogs lived in the water, and it was said that they were so mighty that they could draw the child into the water.

The last group, namely the one of the mythical creatures, is very diverse. Some creatures also appeared in legends intended for adults, for instance, the devil (LTRF cd 588-05; VDU ER 42/1: 5–6, no. 8) or *laumė* (LTR 2645/66; VDU ER 900:10, no. 53). Some of them were very specific, such as the resident of the dark – *baubas*, a Lithuanian equivalent of a bogeyman. Some could also live in the dark or in the water (LII ES 1519/1: 1; VDU ER 688: 1, no. 1), such as the amorphous creature *maumas* (MAŽIULIS 1936) and others. Here are several examples of frightening children with mythical creatures: “Children were threatened with bogeys or bugaboos because they liked playing peekaboo in the rye fields. Rye was quite high and children destroyed it. That’s why it was said that *baubas* is lurking in the rye field” (LII ES 1519 (1), 1); “We were threatened with *rusauka*, which was strangely covered. We were threatened so that we would stay at home and would not go to the fields or to pick apples or something else” (LII ES 508 (16), 38). The diversity of mythical creatures, in the practice of frightening children was immense because adults used their imagination creatively to generate different creatures depending on specific situations. Nevertheless, some of them, as mentioned above, were stable and widely known in the entire territory of Lithuania.

There are several important aspects related to the practice of frightening children, whose main function is to form appropriate social behaviour through fear. Such practice also aims to protect children from dangerous places.

Another essential characteristic of frightening is a two-sided mechanism of action. There are two dimensions: sensory and mythological. The first one is related to reality as it is experienced through the sense organs, mostly visually and acoustically; for example, “We were threatened that *Sidas*, a kind of devil, was in the water. When you looked into the water, you saw something there” (LII ES 508 (88), 171). This example shows that the form of the devil is not clear but the child sees rippling water and identifies this sight with the devil. Another example is *baubas*, which does not have a clear form and is associated with the dark. So the child knows about the presence of this creature from the dark; for example, “Mothers scared their crying or screaming children of one to six years old by pointing to the dark and saying, “Shut up, *bubis* will catch you!” (BASANAČIUS 2004:298)

The other important aspect of frightening is its mythological dimension created by the unknown, by a failure of the senses, or just by a limitation of experience. For instance, darkness, in which visual perception is limited, does nothing to help create an image of the above-mentioned mythological creature *baubas*, therefore it is amorphous. The unknown is associated with the concept of an alien. In children’s frightening expressions, there are usually various aliens – from mythical creatures to representatives of certain social groups. The importance of the concept of an alien can be illustrated with the following example related to a well-known legend from the Middle Ages telling that Jews used Christian children’s blood for making bread. It was said, “Don’t run around before Easter because Jews are slaughtering children for their *matza*. They take their blood and mix it with the *matza* dough”. We seemed to be scared, but if we met *Mauškė* or *Medelis*, the Jews we knew, even in the middle of the night, we wouldn’t be scared of them. We were scared of some other Jews that lived somewhere else and didn’t look like the ones we knew” (MARCINKAČIENĖ 1998:147–148).

The mythical dimension alluded in the scaring practice is attractive for children, and its impact is less destructive than a confrontation with a real threat. So besides forming appropriate social behaviour through fear, the practice of scaring also develops a mythical worldview in children.

CONCLUSIONS

1. The analysed data reveal that in traditional Lithuanian culture, adults were convinced that mythical creatures and persons with supernatural powers could really harm children, and this harm were manifested in different pathologies. Therefore, various means of protection were used to avoid such damage resulting from real threats.
2. Real threats to children were the most dangerous until baptism. It is therefore implied that until this ritual was performed, the child was not considered human but rather a creature existing in-between two worlds – the mythical and the human. The representatives of the mythical world tried to take back the infant into their own world. The child joined the human world through baptism, and from the moment he or she was given a name, mythical creatures posed less danger to the child.
3. Constructed threats, or the practice of frightening, were used by adults to shape children’s social behaviour and functioned as a means of protecting children. From the mythical perspective, the use of expressions to frighten children can be interpreted as separating the children from the mythical world.

4. Representations of the mythical world, perceived as real threats to little children, are transferred into constructed threats and appear as the subjects of expressions meant to frighten children. However, they fulfil a different function in this framework: they move away from being a real danger and become means of traditional pedagogy.

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Vita Džekčioriūtė-Medeišienė is a Junior Scientific Researcher in the Department of Folk Narrative at the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore, Vilnius, Lithuania. She is working on the serial fundamental paremiological publication, *Lithuanian Proverbs and Proverbial Phrases*. Her main research interests are children's mythical fears, children's folklore, the functions and manifestations of mythical images in culture, ethnomedicine, the functions of proverbs in culture. She has published 7 articles in her research field, and she is currently writing her doctoral thesis, *Children's Mythical Fears in Traditional Lithuanian Culture*. E-mail: vita.dzekciorute@gmail.com
