

# THE SUPERNATURAL MILK-STEALER IN LITHUANIAN FOLKLORE AND ITS COUNTERPARTS IN OTHER NATIONAL TRADITIONS OF THE BALTIC SEA REGION

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## Abstract

The article deals with a popular image in traditional peasant culture, that of a supernatural being that is believed to be stealing milk and dairy products, and bringing them to its (usually female) owner, thus enhancing her wealth. In Lithuania, this milk stealer figure is called *aitvaras/kaukas*, in Latvia *pūkis*, in Finland *para*, and in Sweden *bjära*. Despite the different names and some other discrepancies in origin and nature, all these images are shown to be essentially similar. The author considers all of them to be rooted in the traditional peasant culture and mentality, which can be characterised to a considerable degree by the concept of 'limited good' (Foster 1965).

Key words: folk belief, traditional culture, popular magic, 'limited good', milk stealer, *aitvaras*, *para*, *bjära*, *pūkis*.

## Dairy magic in traditional peasant culture: the realm of witchcraft

Traditionally forming an important part of the household economy, milk and dairy products tend to play a significant role in the traditional culture and the folk belief system of peasant communities as well. Moreover, milk production, unlike many other traditional household tasks that used to be mainly dominated by men, was essentially managed by women, and thus acquired numerous symbolic connotations typical of the female culture and mentality. Hence the proximity of various milk production techniques to magic, sorcery and the supernatural sphere in general. In Lithuania, as in many other European countries, it was widely believed to be possible to enhance the amount of milk that cows would produce by employing certain magical means at a particular time and place. Usually, it was believed that this could be accomplished only by harming others. Various social tensions and simple envy between neighbours would, of course, come into play here.

A significant part of the whole layer of popular beliefs and folk narratives associated with magic and the activity of witches, and also with the evil eye and evil wishes, with harming or sabotaging someone else's property or work, is indeed related to various aspects of dairy production. To mention just one of them, although perhaps the most popular one, involves addressing the whole body of beliefs and folk legends describing the activity of witches at Midsummer's Eve/St John's night. Until nowadays in the Lithuanian

countryside, whenever asked about the festivities of St John's night and what was particular about it, people tend to mention the exceptional activity of witches, and the necessity of protecting cattle against the harm that witches might cause. A belief in witches employing various magic means in order to steal milk from other people's cows used to be so strong across all of Lithuania that in many places it has survived in various forms until today. Although people may have discarded all other popular folk beliefs as foolish superstitions, they still try to be cautious driving their livestock out to pasture early on St John's morning, in case witches try to harm them. So, as recently as in the summer of 2009, during a folklore field trip to the Švenčionys district, a female informant who was born in 1939 told the author about her neighbour who would always wait for the informant to drive her own cows out to the pasture first, so that whatever harm there was would be inflicted on them, and not on the neighbour's livestock (LTRF cd 333/03).

Certain popular types of story tend to survive in their entirety, as well. Among the most popular, there is the story of a farmhand accidentally coming to grips with the harmful activity of witches.

### Milk from a Halter

A farmhand was walking along the road once, having driven the horses out to pasture. He saw a woman dragging a shawl across the ground, saying: 'One half for me, one half for me!'

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The young man took out his halter and said: ‘All of it for me, all of it for me.’

And he dragged his halter over the ground.

He went home. Houses used to have porches then, so he hung up the halter on the porch. He hung it, and the farmer’s wife came in. ‘Why,’ she said, ‘who has spilled this milk over here?’ Nobody admitted to it. They took a closer look, and saw milk dripping from the halter. ‘Well,’ she said, ‘it’s a miracle!’ The farmer and his wife then asked the farmhand: ‘What does it mean?’

The farmhand said: ‘I saw a woman dragging a shawl, shouting: “One half for me, one half for me!” So then I dragged my halter, and shouted that I wanted all of it. I was just shouting, it didn’t mean anything.’

Soon the woman came over to borrow some milk. It was the same woman who had been dragging the shawl. She had not got a drop of milk from her cows. So then she came over to borrow some. ‘Please, lend me a little milk,’ she asked.

The farmhand said: ‘I see you can take milk from others, but I took all the milk from you!’

And the woman cried and begged on her knees for just a drop of milk. She wasn’t given a single drop, so she spent that year without any milk.

‘Will you do it again?’ he asked. ‘As you do to other people, so I did to you!’ (VLD p.213-214)

As we can see, St John’s night was believed to be so heavily charged with magic that even the practice of it for fun was believed to be possible at that time. This particular account was recorded in 1969 in Samogitia (Seda, in the Mažeikiai district); but the type of story is widespread across all of Lithuania: there are over 100 versions of this legend-type stored in the Lithuanian Folklore Archives (Kerbelytė 2002, p.217), and new versions keep being recalled and told by informants even today.

Generally, in Lithuanian folklore, milk stealing is associated mostly with witches. They can employ various means for it. There are some legend types describing a toad or another animal that sucks out a cow’s milk: usually the reptile is believed to be a witch or her helper.

#### Witch and Her Toad

Whenever a toad sucks at a cow, the toad should be caught and hung in the chimney in the smoke. Then the witch who owns the toad will come running up.

Thus once, when my mother’s cow was sucked by a toad, my mother caught the toad and hung it in

the smoke. Then our neighbour Lachmantavičienė came running up, and said to my mother: ‘Why are you torturing that little bird over there?’

My mother and her neighbour used to live here, in Raitininkai village. Lachmantavičienė was a witch.

(Recorded in 1938 in Dzūkija, in the parish of Merkinė in the Alytus district; LTR 1434/125)

Toads are quite frequently associated with various magic activities; they are believed to be able to harm people in general, to inflict illness, or to take away a person’s fortune (Kerbelytė 2002, pp.193, 195). Thus, they are an almost perfect animal-helper, or an embodiment for a witch whenever she sets out to carry out some evil deed.

#### The milk-stealing *aitvaras* and the concept of ‘limited good’

Another concept that should be mentioned in connection with this dairy magic is that of ‘limited good’, meaning that unnaturally enhancing one’s own wealth could only be achieved by reducing the wealth of others. This concept was used by George M. Foster to analyse the traditional peasant mentality and worldview, and, according to him, it characterises ‘in considerable degree classic peasant societies’, which can to some extent be viewed as closed systems. As Foster puts it, essentially ‘broad areas of peasant behaviour are patterned in such a fashion as to suggest that peasants view their social, economic, and natural universes – their total environment – as one in which all of the desired things in life [...] *exist in finite quantity and are always in short supply*, as far as the peasant is concerned.’ Moreover, ‘it follows that *an individual or a family can improve a position only at the expense of others*’ (Foster 1965, pp.296-297, Foster’s italics). Thus, ‘the individual or family that acquires more than its share of a “good”, and particularly an economic “good”, is [...] viewed as a threat to the community at large’ (Foster 1965, p.302). Hence the ‘mentality of mutual distrust’ (Friedman 1958, p.24) that is so widespread in peasant societies.

This concept forms the basis of one of the most popular images in Lithuanian folklore, namely that of *aitvaras/kaukas*, which is essentially a privately owned spirit (supernatural creature) that carries various kinds of ‘good’ (grain, money or food) to its owner. According to Lithuanian folklore, there are several kinds of these beings, and different activities may be associated with them. Certain regional differences in name, prevailing type of activity and mode of acquisition of such being can also be discerned: for example, in western Lithu-

ania, or Samogitia, it is most frequently called *kaukas*, and is said mostly to bring grain, hay or food to its owner, while in eastern Lithuania it bears numerous fiery traits, is often seen airborne, and preferably carries money or grain (Vėlius 1977, pp.144-198). Still, according to folk beliefs, one variety of such beings used to specialise in bringing milk and various dairy products to their (usually female) owners, who can then enjoy making rich meals for their family, farm labourers, or just occasional guests and visitors.

#### The Milk-Bringing Aitvaras

Two of my cousins once went on a pilgrimage to Kalvarija. They asked to be put up for the night. The housewife put them to sleep in the barn. She bade them goodnight and promised to wake them up in the morning.

But in the night they heard somebody vomiting violently: 'Flop-splash, splash, splash! Flop-splash, splash, splash!'

One of the cousins woke up and asked the other: 'Do you hear what's going on up there?'

The other one said she could indeed hear.

Both of them started to feel scared of what was going on under this strange roof. But later, the sound stopped, and both of them finally fell asleep.

The housewife came in the morning, and said: 'Wake up, guests, breakfast is ready. Please come to the table!'

Both of them came out on to the porch and saw a big tub heaped with curd! There was so much curd in it! The guests kicked themselves on seeing it, but said nothing. They stepped into the living room, and saw delicious curd cakes and cream waiting for them on the table.

But they could not so much as take one bite of the food, they were so sick!

Afterwards, they told this to other people in the neighbourhood; but the neighbours were not surprised, saying that the family prospered on such things.

(Recorded in 1962 in Samogitia, at Vašilėnai in the Kelmė district; VLD p.42-43)

This story is one of the most popular ones in the stock of Lithuanian folk narratives, and it ties in well with other storylines belonging to this socially engaged side of Lithuanian folklore. It goes almost without saying that dairy products procured by *aitvaras* had to be stolen from someone else; therefore, the disgust experienced by the people witnessing such prosperity

at other people's expense can be interpreted as being caused by the peasant mentality based on the 'limited good' concept. Also, traces of the righteous indignation of good Christians can be discerned here, as *aitvaras* was believed to have been acquired by signing a pact with the devil, and thus damning one's soul; it could occasionally even be identified with the devil (Vėlius 1977, pp.156-157). Anyway, this being was considered as unholy and dangerous, and owning it was regarded as a threat to the community and sinful by its owner.

It is quite curious that this food-enhancing activity of *aitvaras* is again linked with toads. Although generally the Lithuanian *aitvaras* is a fiery being, associated with fire or light (especially when carrying money), as a rule visualised in the form of a black or red cock, a black cat, or simply (when flying across the sky) seen as a burning stick, fiery band, and so on. But, when stealing dairy products or enhancing the quantity of food for its owner, it may appear in the shape of a toad. Bearing in mind that people owning *aitvaras* frequently used to be accused by the rural community of being sorcerers or witches, here we perhaps have a combination of the belief in witches and of the *aitvaras*-related mythology, which is able to produce such narratives as the following example.

#### Rapu Rapu

A boy once worked for a farmer in Latvia. The farmer fed his household very well. He gave them lots of butter.

One evening, the boy was sleeping in his room while the door to the adjacent kitchen was slightly ajar. Waking up, he saw the housewife's mother stirring butter in a bowl. The old woman put the bowl on the floor and said, still stirring: '*Rapu rapu, lielais!*' ['Crawl out, big one!' in Latvian]

At that moment, a huge toad climbed into the bowl. And the old woman, still stirring the butter with the toad in it, said: '*Rapu rapu, vidijais!*' ['Crawl out, middle one!']

At that moment, a medium-sized toad climbed into the bowl. The old woman stirred it more, and said: '*Rapu rapu, pats mazais!*' ['Crawl out, smallest one!']

At that moment, a small toad tumbled into the bowl.

The old woman kept stirring, and the butter kept growing and growing, until the bowl was full.

The farm boy watched the old woman several times, and the same thing happened each time.

Those were *aitvarai* [plural] turned into toads.

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From that time on, the boy never so much as tasted the butter again.

(Recorded in 1970 in northern Lithuania, in the village of Geručiai in the Pakruojis district; VLD p.44)

Still, according to some versions of legends, *aitvaras* can also bring butter while it is in its fiery form as well. It is interesting to compare two stories describing the allegedly supernatural origins of butter, which reflect fairly well the attitude of the peasant community towards unnatural means of self-enrichment.

#### The Aitvaras' Butter

There was once a huge wedding party, and a servant girl started complaining about running out of butter. The housewife said: 'There will be some soon!'

There was a sudden flash of light. The housewife quickly ran out to a small hut in the yard. In her hurry, she forgot to close the door properly, leaving it open just a crack. The servant girl looked in through it, and saw a strange beast vomiting butter into a bowl.

(Recorded in 1964 in eastern Lithuania, in the village of Ginučiai in the Ignalina district; VLD p.45)

#### The Bloodstained Butter

My father once went to Vydžiai to the market. A man there had some butter for sale. Another man approached him, apparently wishing to buy the butter, and said: 'This butter you're selling, it's not yours!'

'What do you mean?' asked the seller.

'Well, half of it is yours, but the other half is not!' insisted the other man.

So they started quarrelling. A crowd of people gathered round them, listening. Then the man who seemingly wanted to buy addressed them all, asking: 'Does anybody have a knife?'

He was given a knife. He cut the lump of butter in half, saying to the seller: 'Look, this part is yours: it's nice and clean. But the other part is not yours, it's bloodstained.'

And everyone saw that the butter really was bloodstained.

(Recorded in 1959 in eastern Lithuania, in the village of Jakiškiai in the Zarasai district; VLD p.221)

## Milk-stealing beings in other national traditions of the Baltic Sea region

The Lithuanian *aitvaras* is not the only one of its kind in different folk belief traditions prospering around the Baltic Sea. For example, this supernatural milk-stealer of Lithuanian folklore has an especially close counterpart in the Finnish *para*, of which similar stories have been recorded. As far as can be gathered from *The Type and Motif Index of Finnish Belief Legends and Memorates*, the supernatural milk-stealer (*para*) has developed into a separate supernatural being of Finnish folk narratives and popular beliefs, and judging from the number of recorded versions, even became more popular than other supernatural beings increasing human wealth in Finnish folklore, such as the gnome, the house spirit and the devil, and also the money demon *pirityts*, about which there are much fewer legend types and versions recorded than about *para* (Jauhiainen 1998, pp.245-248). While in Lithuanian and Latvian folklore traditions both *aitvaras* and *pūkis* mostly engage in bringing money and grain to their owners, expecting food and good treatment in return for their services, and only occasionally involving carrying milk and other dairy products (Adamovičs 1940; Greimas 1990, pp.72-109; Vėlius 1977, pp.160-165), the Finnish *para* is a real 'full-time' milk stealer. Nevertheless, its origins and nature have numerous similarities with the Lithuanian *aitvaras*. Thus, *para* and *aitvaras* both are/can be man-made, created artificially, and both can be seen as birds, cats, strange beings, or in a fiery form; *para* also carries milk or cream, and vomits it into a churn, being observed doing so by an outsider, such as a serving maid. Just like the Lithuanian *aitvaras* (particularly in its animal form), *para* is closely related to its owner: whatever happens to the *para*, the same happens to its maker, for example, if *para* is beaten, the farm mistress also suffers. Also, just like the Lithuanian *aitvaras*, *para* can bring grain, beer, money and other goods; only in the case of *para* these are just minor activities, and there are comparatively few accounts of them. A curious group of Finnish legend texts (40 versions have been recorded), belonging to the H 161 type, tell about the way of defining whether the butter in question was procured through *para*: if one makes a cross on the butter, blood appears (Jauhiainen 1998, p.246). *Para* and *aitvaras* both have to be fed in return for their services, and if the feeding stops or the being is in some way insulted, it takes its revenge: it burns down the farm, kills its master, or at least disappears, leaving the farm to suffer from poverty. The means of protection against *para* and *aitvaras* are also the same: the most popular is making the sign of the cross over the goods, so that these beings cannot touch

them. *Para* in the form of a frog, a rat or some other animal can also suckle or milk cows.

The functional counterpart of these supernatural beings (and in the case of *para*, perhaps also an etymologically related one) in Swedish folk belief tradition is a milk-stealing creature called *bjära* (or *bära*, *bara*, *bärare*, 'bearer'). Curiously enough, this being is chiefly regarded as being artificially made and brought to life by means of magic: according to Bengt af Klintberg, the author of *The Types of the Swedish Folk Legend*, 'witches could manufacture and give life to a milk-stealing creature' (Klintberg 2010, p.289). Therefore, in the index, narratives about *bjära* are classified in the chapter entitled 'Tools of Witches and Sorcerers' along with the Black Book and other magic devices (Klintberg 2010, pp.289-298). This milk-stealer of Swedish folklore could appear in a different form: for example, in northern Sweden it could be seen as a ball of yarn, while in southern and western provinces of the country it was perceived as having the shape of a hare, and occasionally a cat. The ball of yarn was 'said to be made from threads in nine different colours. It comes to life when the witch drips her blood on to it and reads the formula: 'I give you blood, the Devil gives you courage. You shall run for me on earth, I shall burn for you in hell' (Klintberg 2010, p.289). It should be noted that the Lithuanian *aitvaras* is also said to be procured by pronouncing a very similar formula, such as: 'As long as I live, you serve me. When I die, you take me' (LTR 782/4, 2277/66). The Swedish milk-stealing creature is believed to be sent by the witch to suckle the cows of her neighbours, just like the animal helper in the form of the toad in Lithuanian folklore (see the example above). There are numerous other similarities in narratives about these beings in different national traditions, including various misunderstandings or humorous occurrences in trying to own and master them (for example, when the creature is ordered by mistake to carry manure instead of goods, it fills all the available space with the smelly substance [Klintberg 2010, p.291; Vėlius 1977, p.164]). Usually, in Swedish legends, the true origins of the household's wealth are revealed by an outsider, a serving maid, a hired farm boy, or some occasional visitor, and so on, exactly as in the Lithuanian example cited above. The closeness of these beings in different national traditions is also illustrated by the fact that in the Swedish provinces of Jämtland and Härjedalen, the creature is called *puke* (Klintberg 2010, p.289), while in Latvia and northern Lithuania its name is *pūkis*, interpreted by Jonas Balys as being related to the German *Puck* (Balys 1934; Vėlius 1977, p.140).

These striking parallels and similarities between Lithuanian, Latvian, Finnish and Swedish supernatural

milk-stealer figures, corresponding in even their small details and secondary motifs, lead us to conclude that, although they reflect a sufficiently late stage of development, the image embodies a rather important aspect of popular belief and mentality. Evidently, sorcery and magic harm practised by individuals and households on each other can be understood in part as a response to the scarcity of resources, and thus as being based on the concept of 'limited good'. Still, the similarities in beliefs in sorcery and magic 'stealing' of luck and wealth have a deeper origin. According to the Finnish scholar Laura Stark, the author of a book entitled *The Magical Self: Body, Society and the Supernatural in Early Modern Rural Finland*, 'there is also evidence that certain types of magic narrated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were already practised three to four centuries before this. Some elements of Finnish-Karelian magic beliefs and practices were pre-Christian in origin and the legacy of a shamanistic past' (Stark 2006, p.46). Indeed, as has already been noted by a number of scholars, the Lithuanian *aitvaras* also bears traits of the pre-Christian Baltic or even Indo-European past. For example, there have been attempts to derive it from the image of the Indo-European heavenly twins (Vėlius 1977, pp.178-182). Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to conclude that in the case of the folklore and belief traditions of rural communities of the late 19th and the early 20th centuries when these legends circulated, there is more sense in stressing certain 'pan-agricultural' notions and concepts of peasant societies, rather than pre-Christian relics, be they of Baltic, German or Finno-Ugric origin.

#### Abbreviations

- LTR – Lithuanian Folklore Archives of the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore  
 LTRF – Sound Recordings of the Lithuanian Folklore Archives of the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore  
 VLD – N. VĖLIUS, ed. *Laumių dovanos: Lietuvių mitologinės sakmės*. Vilnius: Vaga, 1979.

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## ANTGAMTINIS PIENO VAGIS LIETUVIŲ FOLKLORE IR JO ATITIKMENYS KITŲ BALTIJOS JŪROS REGIONO TAUTŲ TRADICIJOSE

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### Santrauka

Pieno ir jo produktų gamyba nuo seno buvo svarbi namų ūkio dalis, tad ir tradicinėje kultūroje bei valstietiškuose liaudies tikėjimuose jai linkstama suteikti reikšmingą vaidmenį. Negana to, pieno gamyba, skirtingai nei daugelis kitų tradicinio valstietiško ūkio sričių, kuriose dažniausiai dominuodavo vyrai, iš esmės buvo moterų žinioje, todėl įgijo nemažai simbolinių konotacijų, būdingų moteriškajai kultūrai ir pasaulėvokai. Užtat įvairūs pieno gausos užtikrinimo ir jo apdorojimo būdai tradicinėje kultūroje yra glaudžiai susiję su magija, kerėjimais ir apskritai su antgamtinėmis sferomis. Lietuvoje, kaip ir daugelyje kitų Europos šalių, buvo plačiai paplitęs tikėjimas, kad savų karvių duodamą pieną esą galima pagausinti, tam tikru laiku ir tam tikrose vietose griebiantis specialių maginių priemonių – ir dažniausiai šitaip kenkiant kitam. Žinoma, čia nesunku įžiūrėti visokių įtampų bendruomenės viduje ir paprasčiausio kaimynų tarpusavio pavydo atspindžių. Dar vienas dalykas, kurį būtina paminėti, yra vadinamoji „riboto gėrio“ samprata, besiremianti įsitikinimu, kad neįprastas vieno asmens turtėjimas tegali būti kito žmogaus

nuskurdimo pasekmė. Ši koncepcija, paaiškinanti daugelį valstietiško mentaliteto ir valstiečių kultūros bruožų apskritai, dar 1965 m. buvo pasiūlyta George'o M. Fosterio. „Riboto gėrio“ samprata laikytina ir vieno iš populiariausių lietuvių folkloro personažų – aitvaro / kauko vaizdinio pamatu. Iš esmės tai yra privačiam savininkui tarnaujanti antgamtinės prigimties būtybė, nešanti jam turtus: javus, pinigus, maistą. Kaip liudija lietuvių sakmės, viena šių būtybių rūšis nešdavo pieną ir įvairius jo produktus savo šeimininkėms (dažniausiai moterims), kad šios galėtų skaniais patiekalais lepinti savo šeimą, samdinius ar užsukusius svečius. Vienoje iš tokių sakmių pasakojama, kaip atsitiktinis liudininkas (paprastai – vėlyvas nakvynės pasiprašęs pakeleivis) vidurnaktį išgirsta neįprastus, žiaukčiojimą primenančius garsus. Atsikėlęs jis / ji pamato, kaip kažkokia keista būtybė (kartais – net keletas jų) vemia sviestą, grietinę ar varškę į specialiai tuo tikslu šeiminkės paliktą indą. Kitą rytą pakeleiviui patiekiami gausūs pusryčiai iš pieno produktų, tačiau šis bjaurėdamasis atsisako jų ragauti. Toks siužetas yra vienas iš populiariausių lietuvių pasakojamojoje tautosakoje; jis glaudžiai susijęs su kitais panašiai socialiai angažuotais folkloro pasakojimais. Galima neabejoti, kad tie aitvaro atnešti pieno produktai neišvengiamai įsivaizduojami esą pavogti iš kažkieno kito, todėl ir netyčia jų atsiradimą mačiusio liudininko reakcija sakmėse rodo ne vien pasišlykštėjimą jų atsiradimo aplinkybėmis ar teisėtą dorą krikščionio pasipiktinimą tuo, kad aitvaro savininkas susidėjęs su „nedora dvasia“, bet ir apskritai tokiais grėsmę bendruomenės stabilumui keliančiais turtėjimo svetima sąskaita būdais.

Šis antgamtinis pieno vagis lietuvių tautosakoje turi gana tikslų atitikmenų kitų tautų tradicijose: tai – suomių *para*, švedų *bjära*, estų *puuk*, latvių *pūkis* ir kitų tautų folkloro personažai. Sutampa netgi daugelis apie šias antgamtinės būtybes pasakojamų naratyvų siužetų, taip pat – nemažai jų įvaizdžio, kilmės, elgesio su jais ir kt. detalių. Todėl galima manyti, kad nors savo galutiniu folkloriniu pavidalu ir būdamas gana vėlyvo pobūdžio, šis vaizdinys atskleidžia gana reikšmingą populiarųjų tikėjimų bei pasaulėjautos dalį ir ne tikrai turi sąsajų su senaisiais ikikrikščioniškaisiais įvairių tautų tikėjimais, bet – ir kur kas labiau – yra įsišaknijęs bendroje valstietiškoje agrarinės visuomenės kultūroje bei mąstysenoje.