Tautosakos darbai 66, 2023, p. 170–176
ISSN 1392-2831 | eISSN 2783-6827
DOI: https://doi.org/10.51554/TD.23.66.10

A Polish Sourcebook on the Living Dead

VITA DŽEKČIORIŪTĖ
Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore
vita.dzekcioriute@llti.lt
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8803-4859

Łukasz Kozak, *With Stake and Spade. Vampiric Diversity in Poland. An Introduction and Sourcebook*, translated by Mark Bence, Warsaw: Adam Mickiewicz Institute, Evviva L'arte Foundation, 2020, 179 p., ISBN 978-83-60263-60-0, ISBN 978-83-956895-4-3

From 3 February to 22 May 2023, the M. K. Čiurlionis National Museum of Art in Kaunas, Lithuania, hosted an impressive and exceptional exhibition, 'The Dark Arts: Aleksandra Waliszewska and the Symbolism from the East and North'. Although the exhibition featured more than 200 works by 36 artists from Poland, the Czech Republic and the Baltic States, the focus was on the work of the Polish artist Aleksandra Waliszewska (born in 1976). The exhibition booklet points out:

> Waliszewska's work, like that of her Symbolist predecessors, is full of the metaphorical meanings behind her pictorial narratives, allowing her to analyze the complexity of the human condition. The exhibition's inter-historical dialogue seeks to provide a deeper context for Waliszewska's favourite mythological tropes, apocalyptic scenarios and Baltic-Slavian landscapes.

One of the main aforementioned mythological tropes in Waliszewska's works is the *upiór*, a Slavic figure of the living dead. The *upiór* was also the topic of one of the events accompanying the almost four-month-long exhibition organized by the M.K. Čiurlionis National Museum of Art. On 11 May, the Lithuanian historian

Received: 25/10/2023. **Accepted**: 06/11/2023

Rūta Miškinytė led a discussion with a guest from Poland, Łukasz Kozak, about *upiór*s and various manifestations of vampirism. Kozak's profound knowledge and eloquence on the subject, together with the host's insightful questions, captivated the audience so much that the event lasted longer than expected.

Łukasz Kozak (born in 1981) has wide-ranging interests as a medievalist, a researcher of cultural history, and a popularizer of the cultural heritage [1]. Furthermore, as a technology and media expert, he cooperates with numerous cultural institutions and scientific institutions in the fields of innovation and new technologies [2]. In 2020, Kozak published two extensive studies on vampirism in Poland and the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth: one in Polish, *Upiór. Historia naturalna* (Upiór. A Natural History), and the other in English, *With Stake and Spade. Vampiric Diversity in Poland*.[1] It was this book that was presented to the Lithuanian public on 11 May at the M. K. Čiurlionis National Museum of Art.

The book seeks to rehabilitate the living dead of the Slavic mythology which were the forerunners of vampires that have gained popularity in mass culture around the world since the 19th century. The book presents texts reflecting beliefs in several types of the living dead (*upiór*, *strzyga*, *strzygoń*, *wieszczy*). Their names can be used synonymously, as they reflect terms that are common in different regions of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The author gives preference to the term *upiór*, which is the most common term in the sources presented, as the main concept of the book. He emphasizes the fact that the concept of the *upiór* is so special and different from the modern concept of vampires that even the phenomenon itself, as an analogy of vampirism, could be called 'upiorism' (p. 13). As is stated in the introduction to the book, the *upiór* is: 'A corpse that rose from its grave to attack people and cattle, kill its relatives or drink their blood, spread plague, and upset the order of the world by dint of its very existence' (p. 12). The publication is in the form of an anthology, and presents nearly 80 impressive texts from different sources, spanning a period of almost 500 years. The sources include various historical testimonies from different people, such as clerks, doctors, monks and priests, ethnographic descriptions, and the press materials from the 19th and early 20th centuries. It is important that the book is published in English, making the translated sources accessible to a much wider audience than just Polish speakers. Although the author points out in the foreword that the 'book is not strictly academic and is rather intended to popularise the topic' (p. 9), my first impression on reading

1 Based on the material in the book, Łukasz Kozak collaborated with Kajetan Obarski and Adam Strug, and created two animated short films *Dead Liver* and *The Strzygoń and How to Deal with Him,* which were commissioned by the Adam Mickiewicz Institute as a part of the Upiór Project, aimed at increasing awareness of Polish folk mythology. These two animated films are available on Youtube [3, 4].

it was of both depth of content and an attractive and playful contemporary design, which also emphasises the non-academic character of the publication.

The book consists of a comprehensive introduction and a five-part anthology of sources. The introduction begins with a presentation of the interaction between vampirism and upiorism. It is followed by a more detailed discussion of all the taxonomical varieties of the so-called *upiórs* (*wieszczy*, *strzyga*, *strzygoń*, *upiór*) mentioned in the sources presented in the anthology. As the author states, *wieszczy* is the only word for the living dead which has a Slavic origin (p. 14). However, the introduction focuses on *upiór*. In a separate subsection of the introduction, an exclusive category of living *upiórs* is discussed (p. 21–22). Also, the links between *upiórs* and epidemics of disease are presented, usually with the image of a dead body devouring its shroud (p. 23–24). Moreover, the connection between *upiórs* and the Devil (p. 24–26), and their relationship to the concept of the body, soul and blood in Slavic culture, is discussed (p. 26–29). A separate section is devoted to *upióricide*, special ways and means of killing or exterminating *upiórs*. Piercing a corpse with stakes and cutting off a corpse's head and leaving it at its feet were most common (p. 29). The introduction concludes with a section on the impact of literature on the image of the *upiór* (p. 30–31).

In the introduction to the book, Kozak makes an important observation that many scholars of the old Polish culture and popular beliefs portray *upiórs* as instruments employed by the demonic forces. According to him, in the folk worldview, *upiór* was received differently: it was a person, belonging to the local community (p. 13–14). In my opinion, this is a particularly important remark by the author, which should be understood as an approach that inspires both a critical and an emic relationship with the sources of the book.

The texts in the first three parts of the anthology ('Mentions Prior to 1800', 'In Defence of Upiórs', 'Enlightened Upiór Hunters') are presented with short but informative introductions about the authors of the sources, which help us to understand the historical and cultural context of the times when the material was written down. The fourth part of the book, the largest of the anthology's parts, is devoted to the ethnographic works that mention the living dead. The last part presents testimonies mentioned in the press. All the sources in the anthology are presented, wherever possible, with specific locations and dates indicating where and when the events occurred. Moreover, precise bibliographical references are given to all the sources, which enhances the scholarly quality of the publication.

As was mentioned above, the published sources cover the territory of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which included the present-day Poland, Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania. It is therefore not surprising that Lithuania is also mentioned in some texts in the anthology. For example, one of them says that

upiórs or *upierzycas* (female *upiór*), whose bodies do not decompose for a long time after death and remain flexible and mobile, appear in Poland, Ruthenia, Lithuania and Hungary (p. 59). Another case in the anthology was recorded in Lithuania itself, in the Švenčionys district, in 1892, and was described in the periodical press. It states that a woman who hanged herself was beheaded before being buried, so that she would not haunt after her death (p. 166–169).

The main difference between the Polish material presented in the book and the descriptions of the living dead known in Lithuania is the period of the sources and their nature. According to Kozak, the first testimonies of the living dead in the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth date back to the 16th century. Lithuanians cannot boast of such early sources. The earliest references to the living dead in Lithuania are from the 19th century. This is also due to differences in the nature of the material in question. Kozak's book includes a wide variety of sources, but many of them are what are usually called historical sources. Lithuanian sources mentioning the living dead are exclusively limited to folklore, namely folk belief legends. Considering that folklore in the territory of the present-day Lithuania began to be extensively recorded only in the 19th century, it is not surprising that our sources are so late. However, Lithuanian folklore contains a number of inscriptions reflecting this old worldview regarding the dead, even from the second half of the 20th century. For example, there are ethnographic accounts of the decapitated head of a writhing dead man from the 1970s (LTR 4232/366/, 4551/218/, 4551/306/, 4844/23/). The latest notes presented by Kozak are from the press, and date from the first half of the 20th century (1900–1933; p. 170–178). However, we can find one very late record about *wieszczy* in the part of the book on ethnographic works, written in 1972, from a Kashubian who emigrated to Canada (p. 144–146).

Typically, different mythical beings may perform the same function in the mythologies of different ethnic groups. However, this is not the case for Poland and Lithuania. Except for all the above-mentioned differences, and although in Lithuanian mythology there is no mention of the *strzyga*, *strzygoń* or *wieszczy*, the Lithuanian images of the living dead are very close to the Polish living dead in their features and actions, as well as the means of protection that living people use against them. As the Lithuanian folklorist Jonas Balys wrote:

> It is often believed that the dead are dangerous, that they want to lure the living into the other world as quickly as possible, and that we should beware of them [...] The living need to defend themselves against these dead men by very sharp means: to stab a haunting corpse with a rowan stake, to bind the corpse's legs to prevent it from walking, but they usually dig up the grave and cut off the head of the supposedly haunting corpse, and place the severed head at the end of the corpse's legs, so it cannot reach the head with the hands (BlR 2: 43).

As we can see, these methods of protection are similar to the Polish material on the living dead, and they are mentioned in many mythological folklore texts.

These and alike references to the living dead in Lithuanian folklore can usually be found in folk belief legends, but sometimes they appear as short beliefs. The motives for dealing with the living dead may appear even in the type of the tale of magic ATU 326 *The Youth who Wanted to Learn what Fear is* (AED: 194–196, No 105).[2]

Furthermore, although they are scarce, several mentions of *upiórs* can also be found in Lithuanian folklore (BlR 4: 45, No 64, 47–48, No 67; LTR 2513/12/, 4061/118/, 4827/43/, 4844/24/). All these legends were recorded either in Samogitia or in places near the current Lithuanian-Polish border.

Also, although not explicitly called *upiórs*, the Lithuanian living dead may have the same characteristics as the Polish ones. For example, they are found with undecomposed bodies and facing downwards (KbLPTK: 98; see Slavic material [p. 60 etc.]). In addition, the corpses may have the colour of a living person (LTR 783/156/; see Slavic material [p. 27, 46, 59, 62 etc.]). It was believed that *upiórs* were born with teeth (LTR 2513/12/; see Slavic material [p. 40, 125, 177 etc].). According to one folklore text,

> If a baby is born with teeth, it was believed to devour its shroud when it died. As long as it was doing this, people would die in the village where he died. That is why they say that such a body should be dug up and the shroud which is eaten should be taken away' (BsJK: 383–384, No 14; see Slavic material [p. 38, 40, 60 etc.]).

Nevertheless, there are several characteristics that distinguish the Lithuanian living dead from the Slavic ones. Firstly, the Polish material mentions a distinct social category of *upiórs* in the human community, mostly known in Ukraine, the living *upiórs*. They could cure people of the plague, warn others of an impending epidemic, identify witches and other living *upiórs*, or overpower the living corpses, so that they could help the community to avoid danger, even from the living dead (p. 21–22). So far, no creatures corresponding to such living *upiórs* have been found in Lithuanian folklore sources. Secondly, the Slavic material sometimes mentions that *upiórs* sucked the blood from the body of a living person or animal, and this became one of the most important qualities of vampires (p. 42, 45–46). The Lithuanian living dead have almost no connection with sucking blood from the living people, except a few very unusual mentions (BlR 4: 49, No 69, 70; BlR 5: 196, No 1123). A third difference of the living dead is related to the *upiórs*' blood.

2 A similar motif, reminiscent of a small retold fragment from the tale of magic ATU 326 about *strygón*, from the end of the 19th century from the province of Lesser Poland, is presented in an ethnographic description in the anthology (p. 129).

As Kozak states: 'Whereas we have no certainty whether or not any upiór ever really existed and drank human blood, we can be absolutely certain that people drank the blood of suspected upiórs.' This could have been done for two reasons: to ward off the harmful effects of *upiórs* on the community, or to protect against disease during epidemics (plague, cholera; p. 28–29). No evidence relating to people consuming the blood of the living dead is recorded in the Lithuanian material.

Speaking of the state of research in Lithuania, although there is a great deal of Lithuanian material on the living dead, it has not yet been sufficiently researched or systematically published. The first article of note was written by Jonas Balys in 1936. The same folklorist published folk belief legends about death, ghosts and the living dead in *Dvasios ir žmonės* (Ghosts and People) in 1951 in America (reprinted 2003 in Lithuania [BlR 4: 15–90]). Some of the beliefs about the living dead can be found in Balys' compilation of beliefs *Mirtis ir laidotuvės* (Death and Funeral), published in America in 1981 (reprinted 2004 in Lithuania [BlR 5: 121–209]). The work by Edita Korzonaitė, who uses structural semantic analysis in her research, is also worth mentioning. One chapter of her thesis is devoted to the living dead (Korzonaitė 2002: 89–100). Several of her articles on the interaction between the humans and the dead also deal with folk belief legends about the living dead (Korzonaitė 2003a, 2003b). The relationship of the living dead to disease is discussed by Asta Skujytė-Razmienė (2020). Despite these valuable publications, the vast folklore heritage about the living dead in the Lithuanian Folklore Archives still awaits the attention of researchers, or professionally minded enthusiasts like Kozak in Poland.

The design of the publication *With Stake and Spade. Vampiric Diversity in Poland* deserves a special mention. The cover and illustrations were created by the Polish artist Julia Mirny. The entire design of the book is by Full Metal Jacket, a graphic studio based in Warsaw. The color range of the book's cover, the illustrations and the text captions, is limited to four colors (white, black, orange and purple). This visually appealing choice frames the folklore material presented in a subtle and contemporary way. The book's design creates a special mood that is appropriate to the material it presents. And this is undoubtedly important for the author's stated aim of popularizing the mythical concept of the old worldview about the living dead.

Finally, I would like to note that this exceptional publication is an excellent example of how folklore material can be presented in a way that is both scientifically professional and attractive to the general public. Moreover, this collection of sources is an invaluable comparative research tool for folklorists, ethnologists, anthropologists and cultural historians studying the phenomenon of the living dead both in Lithuania and in neighboring countries. Even more, the book could be useful to art and media creators looking for inspiration in old beliefs and ancient mythical worldviews.

SOURCES

AED – *Atbėga elnias devyniaragis. Rožės Sabaliauskienės tautosakos ir etnografijos rinktinė*, sudarė ir parengė Pranė Jokimaitienė ir Norbertas Vėlius, Vilnius: Vaga, 1986.

ATU – Hans-Jörg Uther. *The Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography* 1: *Animal Tales, Tales of Magic, Religious Tales and Realistic Tales, with an Introduction*; 2: *Tales of the Stupid Ogre, Anecdotes and Jokes, and Formula Tales*; 3: *Appendices*, (*FF Communications* 284–286), Helsinki: Academia Scientarum Fennica, 2004.

BlR 2 – Jonas Balys. *Raštai* 2, parengė Rita Repšienė, Vilnius: Lietuvių literatūros ir tautosakos institutas, 2000.

BlR 4 – Jonas Balys. *Raštai* 4, parengė Rita Repšienė, Vilnius: Lietuvių literatūros ir tautosakos institutas, 2003.

BlR 5 – Jonas Balys. *Raštai* 5, parengė Rita Repšienė, Vilnius: Lietuvių literatūros ir tautosakos institutas, 2004.

BsJK – *Juodoji knyga*, surinko Jonas Basanavičius, parengė Kostas Aleksynas, Leonardas Sauka, (*Jono Basanavičiaus tautosakos biblioteka* 12), Vilnius: Lietuvių literatūros ir tautosakos institutas, 2004.

KbLPTK – Bronislava Kerbelytė. *Lietuvių pasakojamosios tautosakos katalogas* 3: *Etiologinės sakmės. Mitologinės sakmės. Padavimai. Legendos*, Vilnius: Lietuvių literatūros ir tautosakos institutas, 2002.

LTR – The Lithuanian Folklore Archives in the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore.

ONLINE SOURCES

[1] "Łukasz Kozak", Wikipedia (https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C5%81ukasz_Kozak).

[2] "Łukasz Kozak in discussion with Rūta Miškinytė on 'With Stake and Spade' vampiric diversity in Poland", Nacionalinis M. K. Čiurlionio dailės muziejus (https://ciurlionis.lt/activity/branches/m-k-ciurlionis-national-museum-of-art/lukasz-kozak-in-discussion-with-ruta-miskinyte-on-with-stake-and-spade-vampiric-diversity-in-poland/).

[3] "The Strzygoń & How to Deal with Him", YouTube, 2019-10-31 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PjbVrBCUybg&ab_channel=Culture.pl).

[4] "'Dead Liver'. A Short Film by Kajetan Obarski", YouTube, 2020-10-31 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y1UiUhTfPHE&ab_channel=Culture.pl).

LITERATURE

Balys Jonas 1936. „Gyvi numirėliai", *Vairas* 6, p. 611–625.

Korzonaitė Edita 2002. *Žmogaus elgesio su mirusiais ir vėlėmis raida sakmėse ir papročiuose*: daktaro disertacija, Kaunas: Vytauto Didžiojo universitetas.

Korzonaitė Edita 2003a. „Žmogaus ir numirėlio bendravimas: išmonės ir realybės santykis folklore", *Tautosakos darbai* 18 (25), p. 167–176.

Korzonaitė Edita 2003b. „Sakmių, tikėjimų ir papročių sąveikos", *Tautosakos darbai* 19 (26), p. 84–94.

Skujytė-Razmienė Asta 2020. „Ligų ir mirusiųjų ryšiai lietuvių folklore", *Būdas* 5, p. 40–47.

Edited by Joseph A. Everatt