# Romuva: Lithuanian Paganism in Lithuania and America

**Michael Strmiska and Vilius Dundzila**

Modern Lithuanian Paganism is found not only in Lithuania, but also in other nations where Lithuanian immigrants settled in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such as the USA and Canada. It is very much an ethnically oriented Paganism, grounded in a profound awareness of the past history and culture of the Lithuanian people. A point of particular pride is the knowledge that Lithuania was the last country in all of Europe to officially abandon its native Pagan traditions and convert to Christianity, in 1387. This watershed event, and its aftermath, are worth exploring in some detail, as they are central issues in the historical understanding of modern Lithuanian Paganism. This article will therefore begin with a brief overview of relevant episodes in Lithuanian history leading to the rise of modern Lithuanian Paganism.

## Lithuania's Transition from Paganism to Christianity

Situated in the center of northeastern Europe, Lithuania has always found itself poised between Eastern and Western Europe. Lithuania's neighbors include Sweden to the north, across the Baltic Sea; Russia to the east; Belarus to the south and east; and Poland and Kaliningrad to the south and west, with Germany and Denmark farther west along the Baltic Sea. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Germanic Christian Crusaders from the west, allied with the Catholic church, and Slavic Christians from the east, allied with the Orthodox church, each pressed the Pagan rulers of Lithuania to adopt their particular forms of Christianity, and thereby bring Lithuania into the folds of either the Catholic West or the Orthodox East.

By the mid-fourteenth century, Lithuania had become a considerable political and military power, with the Grand Duke Gediminas establishing dominion over a vast territory reaching from the eastern shores of the Baltic Sea to the western shores of the Black Sea, including modern-day Belarus, Ukraine, and adjacent portions of Russia. As noted by the historian S.C. Rowell, Lithuania was a thriving "Pagan empire" in eastern Europe (Rowell 1994). As such, Lithuania was coveted by Christian leaders eager to add its wealth and power to their own, as well as to eliminate the last stronghold of Paganism in Europe. Several generations of Lithuanian rulers had skillfully maintained diplomatic

relations with the emissaries of the Catholic and Orthodox churches, while vigorously fighting off the armies of Germanic Christian Crusaders, known as Teutonic Knights, intent on introducing Christianity into Lithuania by conquest, as other crusading knights had previously done in the lands now known as Latvia and Estonia, Lithuania's northern Baltic neighbors (Christiansen 1997; Rowell 1992 & 1994).

The Russian-controlled area to the west of Lithuania known today as Kaliningrad, formerly known as Prussia, had once been inhabited by a people with Baltic language and Pagan religion, the Baltic Prussians. Their society was overrun by Germanic Christian conquest in the thirteenth century, and their distinctive language, culture and religion would eventually disappear completely. This kind of colonial conquest, which might be termed cultural genocide, would motivate Lithuanians to fight with great ferocity against the Teutonic Knights, and would harden the resolve of Lithuanians to preserve Lithuanian land, culture and identity up to the present time. As the journalist Anatol Lieven comments,

> The elimination of the Old Prussians, one of the Baltic peoples, at the hands of the Germans…has often been cited in Baltic literature as an awful warning, an example of the grim, existential danger facing small nations in the region (Lieven 1994, 40).

A Lithuanian folk song first noted in historical record in the sixteenth century, and set into written form in the nineteenth, some 500 years after the close of this long-running conflict, further illustrates how deeply affected Lithuania was by its struggle against its Germanic Christian foes of the Middle Ages.

> Why did you sleep, Duke, for so long, *sudaicio*,
> *Sudaicio, sudaiciutele* (Lithuanian refrain)
> While you were asleep, they slew your soldiers,
> Destroyed your castle.
> Which of them, Duke, do you grieve for more?
> I do not grieve so much for the castle
> As I grieve for the soldiers.
> I will build myself a new castle, in two or three years,
> Yet I can't grow [new] soldiers, even in ten years.
> ( Kiaupa, Kiaupiene and Kuncevicious 2000, 105).

It is a matter of great pride to Lithuanians that they, unlike their Baltic neighbors

in Latvia, Estonia or the aforementioned, ill-starred Prussia, not only resisted Germanic Christian invasion, but in league with Poland, dealt the Teutonic Knights a crushing, conclusive defeat in 1410, as will be explained below. For Lithuanian Pagans, their nation's historical resistance to Christianization is a key aspect of their Pagan identity, and is retold and contemplated with great solemnity as a kind of "foundation myth" for modern Lithuanian Paganism.

Christianity and Judaism were both in fact present in Lithuania by the fourteenth century, with Christian and Jewish religious communities allowed to construct their own houses of worship. The rulers of Lithuania, however, remained resolutely Pagan, dedicated to the sacred groves, sacrificial fires, and other polytheistic traditions of their ancestors. The fair degree of religious pluralism that held sway in Lithuania, in which Christianity was permitted but not privileged above Paganism, was unacceptable to the rulers of Christian Europe, who wished to see Lithuanian Paganism officially denounced and disestablished in favor of the Christian faith.

In 1387, after some 200 years of on-and-off war and artfully indecisive diplomacy between Lithuania, the Teutonic Knights, and the Catholic Church, the Grand Duke Jogaila bowed to what may well have been a political necessity that could no longer be forestalled (Rowell 1994). Jogaila agreed to accept the Catholic faith, thus releasing Lithuania from the relentless pressure applied by European Christian nations. By embracing Christianity, Jogaila was able to form a firm alliance with the Catholic Kingdom of Poland, which was likewise threatened by the aggressive intentions of the Teutonic Knights.

The close relationship with Poland was to have two momentous outcomes for Lithuania, the first indisputably positive, the other far less so. First, a combined Lithuanian-Polish army was able to decisively defeat the Germanic Teutonic Knights once and for all in 1410, at the Battle of Grunwald, a site alternately known as Tannenburg in German, and as Zalgiris in Lithuanian. Second, Lithuania gradually lost its independence to become a progressively junior partner in the Lithuanian-Poland Commonwealth, with the Treaty of Lublin in 1569 marking the beginning of centuries of decline in Lithuanian power and independence, with Polish language and culture

predominating among the ruling elite of the nation. Lithuanian culture language and folklore were mainly preserved among the peasantry, in rural areas far removed from the halls of power and fashion.

After the 1795 division of the Lithuanian-Polish Commonwealth, Tsarist Russia came into possession of Lithuania and the ruling language and culture shifted from Polish to Russian. Native Lithuanian language and culture, once again marginalized by the cultural preferences of the nation's rulers, once again survived beyond the reach of the ruling elite, among the peasantry. Lithuanian rebellion against Russian rule in 1863 resulted in prohibitions on the use of the Lithuanian language in schools and publishing, which further stoked the flames of Lithuanian nationalism and resentment of Russian oppression.

**Folklore and Nationalism: The Crucible of Lithuanian Paganism**

The intellectual and political trends of romanticism and nationalism that swept across Europe in the nineteenth century did not fail to reach Lithuania. A romantic view of the nation's past, such as had been heralded by the German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Herder (1744-1803), in his doctrine of each nation's unique "folk soul," stimulated both popular and scholarly interest in folkloric traditions preserved among the Lithuanian peasantry. The collection and analysis of such folklore led to new pride in the distinctiveness of Lithuanian folk arts and crafts, songs, seasonal customs, and mythology, and thus an enhanced sense of Lithuania as a nation with its own cultural identity. Artists and writers created new artistic and literary works inspired by Pagan myth and rural folklore.

Of special concern to folklorists were the very archaic folk songs known as *dainas*, which contained considerable information about Pagan mythology, beliefs and rituals, expressed in a terse and cryptic style. The folklorist Antanas Juska published thousands of the dainas in his massive collection, *Lietuviskos Dainos,* published in several volumes between 1880-1882, with another set of weddings song dainas, *Lietuviskos svodbines dainos,* published in 1880. Other substantial collections were published by Liudvikas Reza in 1825, Simonas Stanevicius in 1829, and Adolfas Sabaliauskas with the Finnish scholar, Augustas Neimis, in 1911.

From out of this general appreciation of Lithuanian folk culture, there emerged a movement to recreate the pre-Christian, Pagan religious traditions embedded in the folklore. The quest for a uniquely Lithuanian form of religion was inspired in part by the rising tide of Lithuanian nationalism, in which Lithuanian language and culture were championed against the past centuries of Polish and Russian linguistic and cultural dominance. Nationalist Lithuanian intellectuals such as Simonas Daukantas and Jonas Basanavicius looked back in history to the time before Lithuania's conquest by Russia; before the alliance with Poland; before the conversion to Christianity; to the days of Grand Duke Gediminas, when Lithuania was a proud and independent Pagan state, as something of a Golden Age (Suziedelis 1997, 71-72, 102-103; Krapauskas 2000, 20; Snyder 2003, 31-52). Pagan revivalists believed that the recovery of Lithuania's pre-Christian and folkloric religious traditions would aid in the rebuilding of Lithuanian national identity toward the goal of a future Lithuanian state free of foreign domination.

Whereas much of Lithuanian nationalistic discourse sought to highlight the distinctiveness of Lithuanian culture and identity as something separate from that of other peoples, there was one area in which romantic and nationalist scholars and writers strove to link Lithuania to other nations. This was in regards to the Lithuanian language's affinity with other languages of the Indo-European language family. Linguists involved in the study of comparative Indo-European philology had noted that the Lithuanian language displayed striking similarities with one of the oldest Indo-European languages, namely Sanskrit, the language of the ancient Hindu Vedas and Upanishads.

The linguistic parallels are aptly demonstrated in the following example cited by the esteemed archaeologist and comparative Indo-European scholar J.C. Mallory. A Lithuanian proverb that translates as "God gave teeth, God will give bread," is, in the Lithuanian original: "Dievas dave dantis; Dievas duous duounos." Translated into Sanskrit, it is "Devas adadat datas; Devas dat dhanas" (Mallory 1989, 82).

The linguistic linkages between Lithuanian and other Indo-European languages, but most particularly Sanskrit, were held up as proof of the great antiquity of Lithuanian language, culture and religion. Additional parallels in Hindu and Lithuanian mythology and world-view excited further interest in the specifically religious features of the Indo-

European heritage of the two peoples, a topic which continues to be explored by scholars to the present time. One of the most detailed studies on this topic is *Balts and Aryans In Their Indo-European Setting*, authored by Suniti Kumar Chatterji, an Indian professor of philology, who visited Lithuania during the 1960s (Chatterji 1968).

**Into the Twentieth Century**

As the preceding section has made clear, modern Lithuanian Paganism was inspired by broad social and intellectual currents in nineteenth century Lithuania. It was also guided and shaped by a number of leading figures whose lives and works linked the period of nineteenth century nationalism with the achievement of Lithuanian independence in the aftermath of World War I. Vilius Storosta, also known as Vydunas (1868-1953), was instrumental in increasing public interest and participation in seasonal Pagan festivals, such as the winter and summer solstice celebrations. Storosta also delved deeply into Indian religious philosophy and wrote a number of works exploring parallels in the general world-view and religious concepts of Hinduism and Pagan Lithuanian religion. Domas Sidlauskas, also known as Visuomis (1878-1944), founded a modern Lithuanian Pagan organization called *Visuomybe* (Universalism), and established a sanctuary and a fraternal organization both called *Romuva* in the period of Lithuanian independence between World Wars I and II. The name is significant, as Romuva was originally the name of a major Pagan religious center in Prussia, the westernmost Baltic nation whose native language, culture and religion were obliterated by foreign invasion, colonization and Christianization. The name "Romuva" was therefore a poignant reminder of the possibility of total extinction, a tribute to the Baltic Prussians and their religion, and the expression of the hope of breathing new life into the spiritual heritage of the Baltic past.

These early twentieth century Pagan organizations did not survive the tragic events of the invasion and occupation of Lithuania, first by Soviet then Nazi forces in the course of World War II, and the incorporation of Lithuania into the USSR following the end of the war. Modern Paganism in Lithuania was repressed by the Soviet authorities in the 1940s and 1950s, but was eventually able to revive in the late 1960s in the disguised form of a folkloric association, named *Ramuva*, which name was but a variant form of

Romuva. Ramuva was led by the folklorist Jonas Trinkunas (1939- ) in association with other folklorists and intellectuals, and his wife Inija. With chapters in Vilnius and the other major Lithuanian cities, Ramuva was devoted to the folkloric collection, study and performance of songs, dances and other folk arts and traditions from the rural areas, as well as solstice and other seasonal festivals. Despite efforts by Trinkunas and his associates to conceal the religious purpose of their folkloric activities, Ramuva was repressed by Soviet government authorities for political reasons in the early 1970s.

**The Reemergence of Romuva in Post-Soviet Lithuania**

With the waning of Soviet authority and thus also of Soviet political repression in the 1980s, Ramuva, under the leadership of the forementioned Jonas Trinkunas and his wife Inija Trinkuniene, was permitted to resume its activities in 1988. Its celebrations of native Lithuanian folkloric culture perfectly complemented rising public sentiment for Lithuanian independence (York 1995).

Following the euphoric achievement of independence in 1991, the folkloric organization Ramuva was supplemented by the religious organization Romuva, reviving the historic associations with the ancient religious site in Prussia to proclaim the desire of Trinkunas and his associates to not merely recreate Lithuanian folk culture, but to effectively revive the ancient, pre-Christian religious heritage, which they viewed as the spiritual core of Lithuanian national identity. In its new incarnation, Romuva has continued its activities to the present time, with little interference from the post-Soviet, Lithuanian government, but rather a good deal of cooperation and support (Romuva web site).

The establishment of Romuva, with its reinterpretation of Ramuva's folkloric activities for the explicit purpose of promoting Lithuanian Paganism as an ethnic, folkloric religion, was highly offensive to some Catholic participants in Ramuva, who felt that they had been deceived by Trinkunas and his associates about the nature and purpose of the organization. Many Catholics had joined Ramuva believing that its folkloric activities were non-religious and thus not in conflict with their Christian affiliation. With the proclamation of Romuva as an explicitly Pagan religious organization, some Catholic members felt they had no choice but to quit Ramuva, as the theologian, journalist and

former Ramuva member Paulius Subacius related with some bitterness in an interview conducted in early 2002 (Interview with Michael Strmiska,Vilnius, March 2002, interpreted by Dangis Verseckas).

However, there were also Lithuanian Catholics who have remained engaged in Ramuva and even joined in Romuva activities, either reconciling Paganism with Catholicism according to their own views, or simply choosing to participate in both religious communities without concern for theological or doctrinal contradiction. A similar situation pertains among Lithuanian immigrants in North America. This kind of "dual faith," involving the simultaneous practice of and belief in two different religious traditions, was first noted by the scholar George Fedotov (1960, 10) in his classic study of Russian religious history. Examples could also be cited from Afro-Caribbean religions which combine the worship of African deities with reverence for Catholic saints and Virgin Mary, or the participation of many Japanese people in both Shinto and Buddhism.

The "dual faith" of Lithuanians simultaneously participating in Pagan and Catholic forms of religion is, however, nothing new. From its earliest days, Catholicism in Lithuania has incorporated symbols, sacred sites and other elements of the same native Pagan religion that it condemned and continues to denounce as a false and wayward faith. This Catholic policy of appropriating native religious sites and practices can be traced back to the instructions given by Pope Gregory I in the early seventh century for converting Heathens in the British Isles by superimposing Christian names and meanings over Pagan gods and practices (Cusack 1998,178-179).

Archaeologists in Lithuania have ascertained that the majestic cathedral in Vilnius was built over an earlier Pagan temple. The history of the cathedral site is quite complex, and in fact encapsulates the stages of the overall religious history of Lithuania. In the first millennium, the area was a swampy wetland, with the specific site of the later Cathedral a small island on which Pagan Lithuanians performed sacrifices. When the Pagan ruler Mindaugas converted to Christianity in 1253, he arranged to have a cathedral, the first of several, built over the site of the earlier Pagan shrine. Mindaugas was slain by Pagan Lithuanians angered at his conversion, and the cathedral was burned and then rebuilt as a Pagan temple, with a stone altar surrounded by zodiac symbols. This is believed to have

been the house of worship of Gediminas and other Pagan Grand Dukes prior to the official conversion of Lithuania in 1387, after which time the Pagan temple was demolished and rebuilt as a Catholic cathedral once more, only to later be burned and rebuilt again, in the tumult of Lithuanian politics over the centuries. Archaeological knowledge of the earlier history of the cathedral site gradually increased over the course of the twentieth century, with the remains of the post-Mindaugas temple and altar uncovered during excavations in the 1970s.

Originally Pagan winter and summer solstice celebrations have been reinterpreted as Christian holidays, the winter celebration as Christmas, the summer festivities as St. John's Day. Christian crosses in Lithuania are often decorated with sun, moon and snake motifs, all drawn from the symbolic repertoire of Lithuanian Paganism.

As these examples illustrate, the Catholic Church has generally been quite happy to allow various aspects of Lithuanian Paganism to continue under Catholic auspices, long as such elements were purged of their original Pagan associations and fully converted to Christian purposes. By the same token, Catholic leaders have been quick to condemn modern attempts by Romuva and other modern Pagans to reclaim the originally Pagan identity of symbols and practices formerly appropriated by the Church. From the historical viewpoint of the church, Lithuania has been a majority Catholic nation for six hundred years, and as such, it is the Church that is the true keeper of Lithuanian culture and identity, not a small group of Pagan revivalist upstarts. There can be little doubt that the Catholic church in Lithuanian would prefer for the pre-Christian, Pagan heritage embedded in Lithuanian folk Catholicism to remain buried under the doctrines of the Church, just as the recently excavated Pagan temple was long buried under the Vilnius Grand Cathedral, but the winds of change blowing through Lithuania do not favor the church being able to maintain or impose a monolithic, church-centered view of the nation's history and culture.

With Lithuania gradually rejoining Europe as a modern, democratic country, an atmosphere of increasing religious diversity and pluralism is taking root. This supports the right of Romuva to assert the originally Pagan nature of certain elements of Lithuanian history and ethnic culture, along with the right of Lithuanian Catholics to

interpret the same history and folk traditions in a de-Paganized and Christianized manner. For example, the period of conflict between the Pagan Grand Dukes of Lithuania and the Christian soldiers of the Teutonic Knights in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries is generally viewed by members of Romuva as a heroic struggle against foreign, Christian oppression, whereas the same events may be viewed by Lithuanian Catholics as a tragic and painful, but ultimately fruitful process of ignorant ancestors slowly moving toward the truth of Christ and full membership in his Church. With the two religions staking these kinds of competing claims to Lithuanian ethnic heritage and cultural identity, it is to be expected that the animosity between the two religious communities will continue, along with the "dual-faith" participation of Lithuanians more comfortable combining these religious traditions than choosing between them.

Such controversies do not appear to have damaged Romuva, but may have actually have increased public awareness of and interest in modern Lithuanian Paganism. Romuva has maintained a robust program of folkloric and ritual activities and continued to attract both dedicated followers and casual participants throughout the 1990s and into the first years of the twenty-first century.

Romuva received official governmental recognition as a "non-traditional religious community" in 1992. Romuva supporters in the Lithuanian National Parliament, the *Seimas*, proposed legislation in the late 1990s to grant Romuva the higher official status of a "traditional religious community," which would have placed Romuva on an equal level of legal status as the Catholic, Orthodox and Lutheran churches, Judaism, Sunni Islam and a number of other religious associations (Glodenis 2001 and online at http://www.religija.lt; interview with Donatas Glodenis by M. Strmiska, February 2002). The legislation failed to win approval, partly because of the opposition of Catholic politicians. Another factor was the stipulation of the 1995 Lithuanian "Law on Religious Communities and Associations" that a religious association could only be recognized as "traditional" after 25 years had passed since its first registration with the government.

With Romuva having only registered with the government in 1992, the law could be interpreted to mean that 2017 would be the earliest date at which Romuva could obtain the full legal status of a "traditional religious community." Supporters of Romuva made

the case that their religion could hardly be more "traditional," as it was the modern continuation of native religious traditions that far predated the arrival of Christianity and the other religions recognized as "traditional." The pro-Romuva camp also advanced the argument that modern Romuva had been active in Lithuania long before 1992, but neither this nor the other argument succeeding in convincing the majority of the Seimas. In 2005, a petition drive is underway to garner public support in Lithuania for granting Romuva the status of "traditional" religious community (interview with Inija Trinkuniene by M. Strmiska, Vilnius, December 2004.)

The mere fact that the status of Romuva came to be discussed at the highest levels of government demonstrates that Romuva has achieved a certain level of recognition in Lithuanian society. On the other hand, the ultimate decision by the Seimas to deny Romuva a higher legal standing illustrates the extent to which the religious movement remains controversial. The legal status of Romuva in the United States will be taken up in a separate section.

**Romuva as a Religion**

If we ask the question, is Romuva a religion, we must first establish a baseline idea of what a religion is. Though views on this subject naturally vary, most definitions of "religion" generally include the following four elements: (1) a system of sacred beliefs articulating a particular view of the world; (2) a set of sacred narratives relating the mythology of deities and supernatural beings and the history of the religion itself ; (3) a body of rituals facilitating the worship of sacred beings and providing an experiential understanding of myths and beliefs; and (4) an organization of individuals with a shared commitment to these beliefs, myths and rituals into a coherent and self-sustaining community. To understand Romuva as a religion, let us then examine something of its beliefs, myths, rituals and community structures.

**Romuva Beliefs: The Ethnic and the Mystical**

As to the beliefs of Romuva, a good starting point is provided in a set of statutes submitted by a Lithuanian Romuva elder, translated into English and then published on Romuva's e-mail discussion group on the Yahoo internet service in 2003. The document begins with a declaration of basic principles.

> The [Romuva] Community continues the traditions of the native ancient Baltic faith. It aims at the unison and the harmony with the God and the Gods, with the ancestors, the nature and the people, exalts the sanctity of nature as the most obvious manifestation of divinity, and nurtures the Baltic traditional moral way of life, their own way towards the divinity, which was created through many centuries (published on the Yahoo Romuva discussion group March 6th, 2003; translated into English by Dangis Verseckas).

This little document very concisely summarizes a number of sacred concerns of Romuva: the worship of divinity and nature; respect for the dead as well as the living; and a quest for harmony between these different aspects of the world. Note, however, that the very first item that is mentioned is "continuing the traditions of the native ancient Baltic faith." There is first and foremost a consciousness of respecting and preserving the ways of the Lithuanians of the past; an *ethnic* consciousness. Reverence for the ancestors further expresses this ethnic concern, as does the final point about "nurturing the Baltic traditional moral way of life." A similar passage in *Of Gods and Holidays,* an anthology of essays concerning Lithuanian and Latvian Paganism compiled by Jonas Trinkunas and colleagues, speaks of Romuva as "the mansion of faith created by our ancestors" (Trinkunas 1999, 152.)

In terms of Romuva's conception of the divine, there are two intriguing types of ambiguity. There is first the statement about God *or* Gods, an ambiguity leaving space for various interpretations and conceptions, both the monistic and the pluralistic. We can perhaps detect the influence of Indian religion and philosophy, which have been widely discussed in Lithuanian Pagan circles since the time of Vydunas, particularly the strand of Hindu speculative thought in texts such as the *Upanishads,* wherein provision is made for how a multitude of Gods existing on one level of experience may be known as a single Godhead at a different level of consciousness. The mention of the Baltic "way" toward the divine evolving over many centuries likewise suggests that the tradition contains multiple forms of worship and thought, continuously evolving and developing, opening the door to further extensions and adaptations. This contrasts strongly with the tendency in Abrahamic or monotheistic forms of religion to emphasize the perfection and enforcement of set laws and doctrines received through a divine revelation transmitted in

the distant past.

The second ambiguity concerns the relationship between nature and the divine. The document speaks of the "sanctity of nature as the most obvious manifestation of divinity." This is an interesting formulation, which identifies nature with the divine, but not in an absolute or exclusive manner. Nature is described as the "most obvious," most accessible form of the divine, but *not* as the only form. The implication is there may indeed be *other* forms or levels of divinity beyond the world of nature. We might compare this with Christian debates about the relationship of the physical body of Jesus to the transcendental nature of the Christian god. Compare also the Hindu creation myth from the *Rig Veda*, which tells us that when the world was created from the body of the primordial man Purusha, only one fourth of his body was used to make up our world of physical existence, i.e. nature; the other three quarters of Purusha exist in a transcendental realm beyond our normal experience (*Rig Veda* Book 10, Hymn 90).

While there may be some ambiguity on certain points, one aspect of the worldview expressed in this document is very clear. There is no *dualism* in the Romuva view of the world. There is no sense of opposition between the divine and the human, the spiritual and the physical, the living and the dead. In this non-dualistic framework, the highest value is placed on "harmony" or "unison" with the different levels and inhabitants of the cosmos. A passage in Trinkunas' book *Of Gods and Holidays* makes the point, "Evil--*blogas*--does not exist of itself; rather, it is the downfall of harmony, the absence of harmony and the inability to restore it. This is manifested most glaringly in man's devastation of nature, his destruction of Her order" (Dundzila and Trinkunas in Trinkunas 1999, 158-159).

The Lithuanian word for harmony is *darna*. Via Indo-European comparative linguistics, this word is etymologically related to the Indian word *dharma*, a key religious term laden with multiple meanings in both Hinduism and Buddhism, ranging from "order" to "law" to "teaching" to "duty." The diversity of meanings in the Indian cognate again opens the door to a certain ambiguity and multiplicity of meaning for *darna*, grounded in the core sense of an underlying sustaining principle in the universe, somewhat akin to the Chinese *Tao*.

The Romuva belief system therefore discloses both an *ethnic* aspect, emphasizing reverence for Lithuanian ancestors and ethnic heritage, and a *mystical* strain in which the world of nature is seen as linking mankind with a numinous world of divinity, partly coterminous with nature, partly transcendent, accessible either to polytheistic worship of multiple deities or a monistic understanding of multiplicity linked in oneness. The concept of darna ties the mystical connection with nature, ancestors and divinity together with a concern for ethical, harmonious living.

**Romuva Narratives: (1) Lithuanian Mythology**

Lithuanian myths were originally part of oral tradition at the folk level, and have never been systematized and harmonized into literary works in the way of Greek or Norse mythology. There was no Lithuanian Homer in ancient times, nor any Lithuanian Snorri Sturluson in medieval times, to give the world a Lithuanian *Iliad* or *Edda*. The myths of the ancient Baltic peoples of Lithuania have been pieced together by such scholars as Marija Gimbutas, Norbertas Velius and Prane Dundeliene from folk songs, folk tales and other folklore, as well as from archaeology and other scattered sources. Much of the work that has been done on Lithuanian myth, religion, folklore and archaeology by native Lithuanian scholars remains to be translated into English or other languages.

A Lithuanian creation myth is discernible in a number of folkloric sources, and is summarized by the Lithuanian scholars Vytautas Straisys and Libertas Klimka as follows.

> ...in the beginning there were darkness and chaos: land was mixed with water. In vast expanses of chaos wandered the God [*Dievas*], who commenced dividing the universe into the separate elements: water, earth, air and fire. Almost all Lithuanian legends feature two divinities, the highest god and, assisting him, the younger god, in some legends called his brother, in others, *velnias* (a devil). Water seems to be the first element which was isolated from chaos and formed lagoons. By orders of the highest god, the younger god dived many times to the bottom of the lagoon and brought to the surface the seeds from which the earth grew (Straisys and Klimka, 2004).

The name *Dievas* is of Indo-European derivation, and is cognate with the names of sky gods in other Indo-European pantheons such as the Sanskrit *Dyaus* and the Greek *Zeus*, with the French word for god, *Dieu* and the English *Divinity/Divine* showing further

reflexes of the same ancient root. The motif of the "Earth Diver" enacted by the god Velnias in this myth is common in many creation accounts found in mythological traditions of Europe, Asia and the Americas.

In their further adventures, Dievas and Velnias create the various features of the world as we know it, including the other deities of the Lithuanian pantheon and human beings. Dievas gradually becomes the sky-god of the upper world, with Velnias taking on the role prefigured in his diving action, the master of the watery depths and the underworld (Norbertas Velius in Trinkunas 1999, 57). In later times, under the influence of Christianity, Velnias became identified with the Christian Devil, but his original character shows affinities with the Indian god Varuna, who is likewise a deity of waters, wisdom, mystery and death.

According to Lithuanian myth, the cosmos is supported by a World Tree. The upper reaches of this great tree touch the heavenly realm of the deities. Birds dwell in the branches, humans and all of the earth's other creatures dwell at the base, and in the underworld touched by the roots, dwell snakes, reptiles, and other creatures, as well as the dead. There, too, flow rivers, streams and springs whose waters give life and wisdom to the worlds above (Straisys and Klimka). The concept of a World Tree, which unites different levels of the cosmos in a vertical order, is shared among many ancient cultures, like the Earth Diver motif mentioned earlier. The World Tree found in Scandinavian myth presents a particularly close parallel (Davidson 1988,170-173).

Inija Trinkuniene, in a lecture delivered in India in 2003 on Lithuanian spirituality and mythology, explained the World Tree as follows. "A tree [as] a significant sign and image of ancient religion explains the world's structure. In Lithuanian harvest time songs, it is sung [citing a *daina*, a traditional Lithuanian folk song]:

> "A poplar stood by the roadside,
> Oh glorious plant of rye.
> From below the roots, the ringing *kankles**,
> In the middle the buzzing bees,
> At the summit the falcon's children,
> A group of brothers rides by,
> Please stop, young brothers,
> Behold the falcon's children,
> Listen to the buzzing bees,

> Listen to the ringing kankles,
> The kankles rings for our dear father
> The bees they buzz for our dear mother
> The falcon's children for our brother."
>
> (*The *kankles* is a harp or zither-like instrument common in the Baltic lands and Northern Europe, known by different names in different countries.)

Trinkuniene furthermore comments on the tree symbolism in the song as follows.

> This is the main hymn of Romuva…It is sung about the mythological world-tree and its three most important parts, which symbolize the three levels of the world. Roots underground, death, the past, water beginning and spring of life. The ringing of kankles at the roots [signifies] the world of the old, the wise, and the dead. The buzzing bees in the middle [indicate] the world of working, toiling people. The falcon's children at the summit [symbolize] the heavens, the world of warriors and heroes. Death and life, an uninterrupted linking of evolution. A tree, even though it drops its leaves in the autumn, goes into sleep in winter, but its life goes on and its soul remains alive. Such is man's path through birth, death and rebirth. The central meaning of this hymn is the equal importance and harmony of these three levels.
> (Inija Trinkuniene, lecture entitled "Lithuanian folklore as a source of Baltic religion: the fire ritual," accessed online 25 May 2004 at http://www.infinityfoundation.com/mandala/h_es/h_es_trink_i_fire.htm ).

The World Tree was given material expression in the form of decorated wooden poles, capped with roof-like, protective structures, that were for many centuries familiar, folkloric features of the Lithuanian landscape. In the words of Marija Gimbutas,

> Right up to the present century, roofed poles as well as crosses with a sun symbol around the cross-arms could be encountered in Lithuania in front of homesteads, in fields, besides sacred springs, or in the forests. They were erected on the occasions of someone's marriage or illness, during epidemics, or for the purpose of ensuring good crops…Their presence in pre-Christian religion is attested by historic documents describing them as relics of the old religion. Christian bishops instructed the clergy to destroy the poles and crosses in front of which the peasants made offerings and observed other pagan rites. The Lithuanian roofed poles and crosses managed to escape destruction because the people affixed some of the Christian symbols to them and gradually they came under the protection of the Catholic Church. (Gimbutas, in Trinkunas 1999, 35-36).

There are a wide variety of male and female deities with diverse functions. Prominent among the goddesses are Zemyna, the earth-goddess, also worshipped in localized form as Zemepati, patroness of the farmstead; Jurate, the sea-goddess; Saule, the sun-goddess; Ausrine, the dawn-goddess; Rasa, the goddess of the morning dew; Austeja the bee-goddess; Medeine, goddess of forests; Gabija, the goddess of fire, and general protectress of the home in her special association with the hearth-fire; Dimste or Dimstipati, another household guardian goddess; Laima the fate-goddess; Gvyate the snake-goddess; Kupuole or Kaupuole, goddess of fertility; Krumine, goddess of the corn; Ragana the goddess of witchcraft; Giltine, the fearsome death-bringing goddess, and Velionas, the goddess of the dead, who is the female counterpart of Velnias. Several other goddesses have male counterparts as well.

The fertility god Kupolinis is the male counterpart to Kupuole. The god Dimstipatis, like the goddess Dimstipati, watches over the household. Zemepatis is the male counterpart to Zemepati. Bubelis is a bee-god, complementary to Austeja. Menulis or Menuo, the moon god, is the husband of Saule, in a reversal of the usual male sun and female moon gendering of deities that is common in many mythologies. Saule the female sun is, however, unfaithful to Menulis the male moon, who therefore flees and hides from her, in an etiological myth explaining the phases and occasional invisibility of the moon. An alternate version of the myth reverses the role of betrayer and betrayed, but the result is the same. The celestial children of this rocky cosmic marriage are the planets and stars.

Perkunas, the Lithuanian god of sky, storm, and justice is a parallel figure to the Norse god Thor or the Greek god Zeus. Like Thor, he is the great protector of mankind, commanding the earth shaking power of the thunderstorm. Perkunas' lightning bolts are not only destructive but also life enhancing, splitting open the earth so that falling or planted seeds may take root and grow, and giving fire and light for the use of mankind. He is also associated with oak trees, which are sometimes split or set aflame by his fiery bolts. Like Zeus, Perkunas represents not only raw physical force, but also justice, wisdom, and social order. He was the major deity of the Lithuanian rulers prior to their conversion to Christianity.

Besides Perkunas, Saule the sun goddess is the other preeminent celestial deity. She drives a chariot across the sky by day, and returns by boat across the far northern sea at night. Both solstice holidays focus on her, with the summer solstice celebrating her full strength and brilliance and the winter solstice her rebirth out of darkness. When the mythical marriage of Saule and the moon god Menulis goes awry, Perkunas, as arbiter of justice, divorces Saule from Menulis. After this separation of sun and moon, Saule watches their daughter, the earth, by day, while Menulis watches her by night.

The earth goddess Zemyna is the mother of all life in our world. Although she does not have an anthropomorphic form, symbolically she is both womb and tomb, not only for humans, but for animals and plants as well. Many rituals and traditions pay her reverence, even today. At the ritual funerary meal called *sermenys*, three bites of bread, three morsels of meat, and three spoons of beer are made libation to the earth, on behalf of the deceased. In traditional Lithuanian belief, one should not strike the earth or spit upon it. Pious farmers would kiss the earth good morning and good night everyday. In Lithuanian, the word for human, *zmogus*, is etymologically derived from the word for earth, *zeme*. Humans are literally "earthlings" in Lithuanian. This furthermore makes humans the grandchildren of the sun and the moon.

The third most important goddess in addition to Zemyna and Saule is Laima, the goddess of fate. July is her sacred month and the linden is her sacred tree. She determines each human destiny at birth, and her decision cannot be changed, not even by Dievas. She does not determine cosmic fate. As the birthing mother, she is called the bear. She protects births and is invoked at name-giving rituals. She is also invoked at weddings to bless the couple. The verb for blessing, laiminti, comes from the name of Laima. The word for luck also comes from the name of the goddess. A popular blessing is the folkloric phrase, "Laima laimink laime," meaning, "Laima, bless (our) luck." Under Christianity, Laima and the Christian mother of God Mary were conflated. In later folklore, Laima and Laume, a female counterpart to Velnias, were confused.

Though Lithuania is a small country in modern terms, only about 25,000 square miles or 65,000 square kilometers in area, it has considerable regional diversity in terms of different customs, folkways and dialects in the different quarters of the country. This

applies to the ancient gods and goddesses as well, who are therefore known by different names in documents from different points in history and from the different regions of Lithuania. This is a matter which goes beyond the scope of this introductory article, but the late, eminent Lithuanian ethnologist Norbertas Velius devoted a fine book to explaining the regional variations of mythology and folklore. The interested reader is referred to this work, *The World-Outlook of the Ancient Balts* (Velius 1989.)

In addition to the beings recognized as gods and goddesses, there are also a variety of demi-gods or nature-spirits, such as the *kaukai* (sgl. kaukas) miniature beings who dwell underground. The kaukai somewhat resemble elves, fairies and other such magical "little people" commonly found in European myth and folklore. Another category of semi-divine beings were the *aitvarai* (sgl., aitvaras), flying creatures associated with meteorites, sometimes thought to live in the sky, and believed able to bring wealth to those who capture and keep them (Velius, 2002).

**Romuva Narratives (2): The History of Lithuanian Paganism**

Apart from myths which detail the functions and adventures of the deities, the other form of narrative that is important, even sacred, for Romuva members and other Lithuanian Pagans involves their understanding of the history of Paganism in Lithuania. This history was explained in the first section of this chapter. Lithuanian Pagans take pride and inspiration from knowing that their country was the last in Europe to officially accept Christianity, and also that their Pagan religion lived on in customs and folklore even after Christianization, until its recent revival from the nineteenth century onwards.

**Romuva Rituals and Festivals**

Romuva has many different types of rituals and sacred days throughout the year, in which the gods, goddesses, ancestors, the powers of nature and the cycles of the seasons are all paid reverence. The following is a brief survey of the annual ritual calendar, with a more detailed description of certain rituals to follow.

To begin with the winter festivals, the time of the winter solstice is celebrated with two holidays, Kucios and Kaledos. Kucios, observed on December 24, is in part a feast for the dead, in part a re-affirmation of life during the coldest and darkest days of winter. It is a solemn occasion centered around a feast shared between the living and the

dead, to be described in more detail below. Kaledos is a more cheerful holiday that marks the rebirth of Saule, the sun goddess, following her symbolic death on the shortest, darkest day of the year. It is celebrated on December 25.

In January, the middle of winter is marked at the time of the New Moon in the holiday of Pusiauziemis. At the end of the month is the day of Kirmiu Diena, when hibernating *zaltys* (snakes) are worshipped, a continuation of a long tradition of snake veneration in Lithuania, which is also noted in medieval records of Christian visitors to the Grand Duchy.

At the end of February comes the festival of Uzgavenies, a jolly time marking the ending of winter. Uzgavenies festivities include sharing candies and treats, the wearing of costumes that have multiple levels of meaning, as in Kaledos festivities, in parades an performances, rides and races using sleighs, wagons or other conveyances, and other forms of merry-making. A straw image of the More, a female figure who personifies the winter is burned, and winter so bidden adieu. Lithuanian Christians commonly combine aspects of Uzgavenies with the Christian festival of Lent.

Of spring holidays, there is first Pasavario Lyge, celebrated at the time of the spring equinox, March 21 or 22, to greet the arrival of spring. In early to mid-April comes Velykos, a festival that both welcomes the spring and commemorates the ancestors, whose main holidays are in the autumn and winter. There is some variability in the date of Velykos because the ethnic Lithuanian spring holidays have, under influence of Christianity, become confused with Christian festivals, and then further confused due to the different calendars employed by the Orthodox and Catholic churches. Originally, Velykos was probably celebrated at the time of the spring equinox, but became conflated with Easter and its movable date. Under Czarist Russian occupation, Lithuania shifted back from the Gregorian to the Julian calendars used by the Orthodox church. Pan-Slavic influences forced the celebration of both Catholic and Orthodox holidays according to the Julian dates. This only served to confuse the Lithuanian folkloric ritual cycle. Romuva now celebrates the spring holidays according to the Catholic Gregorian dates.

At the end of April comes Jore, in which spring is further celebrated, focusing on the new growth in nature now emerging. At the end of May, the festival of Samboriai is

celebrated, in honor of the growing season now fully underway.

Lithuanians celebrate the summer solstice on June 21/22 with the Pagan festival of Rasa or Rasos, meaning "dew," which is also known as Kupolines, named for the special decorated pole called the Kupole, and, in Christianized form as Jonines, a feast day for John the Baptist. This holiday is celebrated in natural settings such as hills and fields that are near bodies of water such as rivers, springs, ponds or lakes. Jonas Stundzia, leader of the Romvua chapter in the Boston area, emphasized the importance of water for Rasa/Kupolines. He noted that he had visited villages in Lithuania where the central site of the summer solstice celebration was the village well, small and humble as it might be, because it was the only body of natural water in the village, and there could be no Rasa without a natural body of water of some sort (telephone interview with Jonas Stundzia by M. Strmiska, February 5, 2005). The emphasis on water also helps explain the association with John the Baptist, who performed ritual baptism on the River Jordan. The celebration of Rasa typically includes bonfires, singing and dancing, and other activities to be described below. The sun herself is understood to dance with her daughters in the sky on the midsummer's night of Rasa.

The other summer festival is that of Rugiu Svente, which takes place at the end of July, just before the annual harvest of rye. This is essentially a festival of thanksgiving for the rye crop. Men and women wear traditional white linen clothes for the ritual and then wear the same clothes for the work of the harvest. Other festivities include the making and displaying of doll-like figurines out of the rye plant, representing the spirit of the harvest, and the adornment of cows and other animals with wreathes and garlands woven from rye (Stundzia telephone interview February 5, 2005.)

Autumn festivals begin with Dagotuves, which celebrates the fall planting of the winter rye. It is observed at the time of the fall equinox, which usually falls on September 21 or 22.

By far the major festival of the autumn season is Velines, typically celebrated November 1 and 2, as a solemn commemoration of the dead. Because the timing of this ritual overlaps with the Catholic holidays of All Souls and All Saints, many Catholic Lithuanians think of Velines as a Christian event, not realizing that it has pre-Christian

roots. For Romuva members, Velines is one of the most important events in the yearly ritual calendar, as the time to commune with ancestors and show caring and concern for them. In a general way, the Lithuanian autumn, with its grey and gloomy skies, misty fogs and first hints of snow and winter, is devoted to the dead, with the next ritual event, the previously mentioned feast of Kucios, bringing the period dedicated to the ancestors to a close, with the merriment of Kaledos turning attention away from death toward new life. Because of its predominantly urban membership, Romuva is more and more focusing on the non-agrarian Lithuanian calendar celebrations.

Having quickly scanned the Lithuanian Pagan ritual calendar, let us now look at several festivals in more detail.

**The Winter Solstice: Kucios and Kaledos**

The winter solstice holidays of Kucious and Kaledos have almost opposite meanings which join together to form a bridge from one state of being to another. Dark and somber Kucios, celebrated on 24$^{th}$ December, is heavy with memories of the dead and an awareness of the hardship of survival in the winter cold of Northern Europe. But one day later, Kucios gives way to the inspiring vision of the sun reborn from darkness and the hope of new life and vitality in the new year.

One of the most interesting features of Kucios are the intricate straw figures displayed in homes at this time. These are hung like mobiles from doorways or ceilings, representing natural phenomena like birds, trees, the sun, and more. The most elaborate are tri-level constructions that symbolize the three levels of existence in the traditional Lithuanian and Indo-European worldview. Humans inhabit the middle realm of human and earthly life, while the higher realm of the ethereal sky is reserved for the gods, and the subterranean realm below human consciousness belongs to the dead. In the dark time of winter's depths, these figures re-assert the totality and vitality of the universe over against the threat of chaos and despair.

The hanging straw figurines of sun, tree and birds mark out a symbolic "grove," a sacred space echoing the ritual groves of the past Pagans of Lithuania and of other European Pagan peoples as well, such as Celts and Scandinavians, who all maintained places of worship in forest areas. In this place of security and solemnity, a large number

of candles are lit to welcome the visiting spirits of the ancestors.

Before joining together for the Kucios meal, participants wash themselves in baths or saunas. They must also settle all disputes and reconcile disagreements, because these will fate the New Year with bad luck, if they are carried over. The table for the Kucios meal is set for both the living and the dead, with a place of honor for the ancestors, who are seen as equal participants in the household community for the duration of Kucios.

Before eating begins, invocations are made to such deities as Dievas, the sky and creator god, Zemyna the earth goddess, and Zemepatis, the brother of Zemyna and protector of the household. The deities are thanked for their bounty and asked for their continued blessing and protection. Participants greet each other with special ritual blessings for health, fortune, and prosperity. Children are instructed in the importance of obedience to their parents, teachers and elders, with wishes for strong growth and good grades. Doors and windows are opened, and the shades of the ancestors are invited into the home to join the living. Bread is raised in offering and then eaten, and beer likewise offered and drunk, with each person allowing some to drip onto the floor as an offering to Zemyna and/or for the dead. When the table is cleared, the plate for the dead is left overnight for the pleasure of the ancestors.

Special meatless and milkless dishes are prepared for Kucios, the most important of which is *Kucia*, a tasty grain, nut, water and honey mixture, which can be served as a cold, moist dish or baked into a loaf. There is also a dairy-free, soy-milk like beverage, made from pulverized poppy seeds, drunk with *kleckai*, hard, cookie-like balls also made from poppy seeds. Jonas Stundzia commented that while the drink is quite tasty, and could conceivably be a popular drink throughout the year, it is drunk only at the time of Kucios, indicating its sacral nature.

Jonas Stundzia and Jonas Trinkunas were questioned by co-author Strmiska in December of 2004 as to whether the serving of vegetarian fare on Kucios was truly a Pagan custom from the distant past or may have resulted from the influence of Catholic dietary customs. Neither Trinkunas nor Stundzia was completely certain one way or the other, but co-author Dundzila believes that the milkless and meatless prescriptions of the holiday reflect old Catholic fasting requirements for Christmas Eve. He postulates that the

dietary requirements probably became part of Kucios as Kucios became associated with Christmas Eve. Academic research indicates Kucios was not originally vegetarian. Contraindications to the vegetarian meal come from the Latvian equivalent of Kucios, Bluka Vakars, which features a roasted pig's head, with the decidedly carnivorous injunction that all the meat must be eaten that same evening. A few Lithuanian locales also share this tradition for Kucios.

Other Kucios foods include *Kisielius*, which is a relish or jelly made from cranberries, beet soup, mushroom dumplings, cabbage, and fish. After the main meal, desserts such as *Slizikai*, cookies made from poppy seeds, apples, and nuts are served, along with a sweet, white milk-like beverage also made from poppy seeds.

In past times, the foods were shared not only with the dead, but also with household animals that were served from the table. This is a graphic illustration of the intimacy of Lithuanian peasants with their farm animals. Food was also offered to bees and to fruit trees, both highly valued in Lithuanian folk culture. The veneration of trees in Kucios is another illustration of the pervasive sacredness of trees in Lithuanian folk tradition. As Kucios is largely centered on the worship of ancestors, the feeding of trees could also be related to the Lithuanian belief that the souls of the dead may transmigrate into trees. The trees honored in Kucious, however, are the domesticated fruit trees of the family growing in the yard or garden near the house, and the trees into which the dead pass are more commonly understood to be forest trees. of transmigration .

After the meal is concluded, a mood of levity is injected into the proceedings with a divination activity that caters to the younger members of the family. Still seated at the table, children and young people pull straws or pieces of hay out from under the tablecloth, with the length of straw understood to predict the length of the life of the person drawing the straw.  Other Lithuanian holidays likewise feature divination games, which seem to be performed as much for fun as for any more solemn purpose.

For the last activities of the night of Kucios, the family moves from the table to the area around the hearth or stove, understood to be symbolically linked with Gabija, the guardian goddess of fire and the hearth, and hence a sacred, protective fire burning for the welfare of all the family. The ancestors are believed to be present in spirit and to

appreciate the warmth of the fire. The family members now wish each other well by throwing grains into the fire, with each grain believed to represent a specific wish for another family member that is hoped to come to fruition in the same way as grain bursts and gives forth new life. Last, a log, stump or wreath from a birch tree is thrown into the fire, representing the ending of the year, and the destruction of the pains and sorrows of that year, looking ahead to the promise of the new year soon to come.

Kaledos, celebrated the day after Kucios, greets the rebirth of Saule, the sun goddess, with a variety of joyful festivities that contrast strongly with the more somber activities of Kucios. Images of the sun are carried through the streets, and even into the forests, fields and farms. Another traditional decoration is a reindeer with nine horns, which also represents the sun. Similar to the custom of Christmas caroling, people stroll their neighborhoods and sing special Kaledos songs, some wearing animal masks and costumes, representing such creaturses as bears, horses and goats. While these animal masks and costumes are enjoyed in good fun and obviously have a humorous function at the surface level, there is also a deeper level of meaning, in which the animals represent the forces of nature that the rites are intended to reawaken and stimulate from the depths of the frozen Baltic winter. The goat, for example, is in Lithuanian mythology the animal that pulls the cart of the mighty, life-giving thunder god Perkunas across the sky. The Norse thunder god Thor likewise depends on goats to draw his chariot, suggesting a broader Indo-European significance to the symbolism of the goat.

One particular character represented by mask and costume is an old man with a white beard, the Elder of Kaleda, somewhat analogous to the figures of Father Christmas or Santa Claus in English-speaking nations. Another enjoyable, yet also meaningful activity of Kaledos is the joint effort of a group of people, which could be a family or some other grouping, to drag a specially selected log around their town or village, or whatever community area is convenient for those involved, for several hours in the daytime, and then to burn it in a festive bonfire in the evening. The log is called *Blukis*, with its bearers called *Blukininkai*. The burning of the Blukis symbolizes the passing of the old year, like the birch items burned in the home fire at the end of Kucios. The two ritual actions are indeed very similar in purpose and function, except that the Kucios

burning is in the home, performed by and for the family, and the Kaledos burning is out in the town or village, for the broader community outside the home.

Kucios and Kaledos are national Lithuanian festivals celebrated by nearly every Lithuanian family. Although Kucios and Kaledos are clearly Pagan in origin, they have been Christianized with the addition of Christian symbolic meanings. Kucios is closely associated with Catholicism, but not with Protestantism. Ironically, the Catholic Church had banned it and persecuted it in centuries past, somewhat like the Soviet government in the second half of the 20th century, when school officials inspected children's teeth for tell-tale poppy seeds on Christmas Day. Overall, the Kucios and Kaledos holidays show a blending of Pagan, Christian, and Lithuanian elements into a singular, unified tradition. Romuva's Pagan celebration strives to remove the Christian elements and restore the Pagan ones.

**Rasa/Kupolines/Jonines, the Summer Solstice**

This lively and joyous holiday, which is celebrated on June 21 or 22, is known by three different names. *Rasa* means "dew," which in the Lithuanian Pagan worldview is understood as possessing magical properties, particularly on the night of the summer solstice, when dew would be collected on cloths to use for medicinal purposes. The name *Kupolines* derives from *kupole*, a term which designates both herbs and a specific decoration used in this festival, a stylized pole topped with three branches pointing upwards, somewhat like a trident. *Jonines* is a Christianized name for the festival, derived from *Jonas*, the Lithuanian version of the name of John the Baptist. The linkage of water with baptism, and the solstice ritual with dew, helps to account for how this particular Biblical figure came to be associated with the summer solstice in Lithuania.

Rasa is celebrated out of doors, in large open spaces like fields and meadows, at a warm and pleasant time of year when all of nature seems to be in blossom. At a Rasa celebration attended by this chapter's authors in 1998, the setting was the historic town of Kernave in southern Lithuania, among hills where Lithuanian chieftains of a thousand years ago were buried, with the river Neris flowing peacefully nearby. Several hundred people were in attendance, both Romuva members and others who came simply to enjoy the traditional festivities.

This Rasa celebration commenced in the early evening and continued throughout the night and into the early morning. The sun set for only a few hours, from about 11 pm until about 3 am, then rose to full strength again. There was therefore light for most of the activities. Arriving to the festival site, people would pass through a specially constructed wooden archway, with cross-pieces creating a rune-like design, and oak leaves woven with the wood. Participants gathered on a broad area on top of a hill, to hear the Trinkunas-led musical ensemble Kulgrinda sing several dainas appropriate to the occasion, and then to dance all in a circle, with each two people linking arms to twirl or spin in smaller circles. This symbolized the dancing of the sun goddess Saule and her daughters, who are believed to likewise celebrate on the evening of Rasa.

During the hours leading to twilight, participants harvest various herbs and flowers. These will be bundled together and eventually dried, to be used for medicinal purposes. Since nature is believed to be at the height of its powers on this night, herbs collected at this time are believed to likewise possess exceptional potency. Some of the herbs and flowers will be used for wreath making and divination in the festival.

In the 1998 celebration, a large bonfire was lit on a broad hilltop, with other fires lit in other locations around the sacred hills of Kernave. People dispersed into different directions to partake of various activities occurring at different sites, strolling on pathways and climbing wooden staircases connecting the hilltops and other spaces. Women sought out herbs and plants to weave into wreaths (*vainikai*), while men did the same with leaves from oak trees.

Rasa wreaths are worn as festive headgear and also figure in certain divinatory activities. Young unmarried women may for example, toss their wreaths at the forementioned kupole in a divinatory competition, throwing the wreaths backwards over their heads hoping to land on the kupole. A Rasa tradition is that the number of attempts used to attach the wreath to the kupole foretell the number of years that will pass until the woman is married. Women may also toss their wreaths onto birch trees in the hopes of catching them on the branches, which represent young unmarried men just as the wreaths represent young unmarried women. The sexual symbolism of the wreath catching on a birch branch or on the kupole is plain enough.

Another wreath activity involves young men and women tossing their wreaths into the waters of a river or other bodies of water. Candles are sometimes attached to the wreaths, a custom also found in Russian Pagan tradition, as illustrated in a famous scene in the Russian film *Andrei Rublev*. Where the wreaths of particular men and women link up in the current and float together as a pair, it is believed that the two are marked for marriage. With the warm air bearing the scent of fragrant blossoms, and the lengthened days providing a mellow light in the midsummer evenings, Rasa is indeed a propitious time for romance.

In the 1998 festivities observed at Kernave, families and other groups participants spread blankets and had picnics, freely sharing their food and drink, including traditional Lithuanian mead, a strong drink brewed from honey and fortified with additional alcohol, with others passing by, even itinerant American scholars who could not speak Lithuanian. Singers educated in the traditional lore of Rasa sang dainas at various locations, with others pausing to listen or add their voices. Young people gathered near the bonfire to sing and dance.

Here are the words of one Rasa song, a special daina for the kupole:

> O Kupole, dear Kupole,
> Where did you winter,
> Where are you to be found in summer?
> Are you among the fragrant greenery
> Or underneath a flower?
>
> [The kupole replies:]
> In winter, I am covered in down (snow)
> In summer, I play among the grasses.
> (Rasa from Romuva LT  accessed 5/31/2002).

The mentions of winter and summer illustrate how the Pagan Lithuanian traditions viewed the year as a unity marked by complementary phases. Other Rasa songs are intended to be sung at particular hours, such as dainas for the setting sun, dainas for the moon in the brief dark time when the moon is visible, dainas for stars at the time when they appear, and finally, dainas for the rising sun, when Saule is believed to dance in the sky with her daughters. Here are the words of one such daina, taken from the Romuva web site:

O beloved Saule, Daughter of God [Dievas],
Where were you, all the day long?
[Saule replies:]
Among the hills and seas
I warmed my children,
Many are my gifts,
O Kupole, dear Kupole.

Another striking decoration at Kernave were wagon wheels coated with pitch, positioned on tall poles, and then set on fire. Like the dancing, spinning couples of earlier in the evening, these burning wheels refer to the sun goddess Saule, for which reason they are known as "sun wheels." In the early hours of the morning, when darkness began to give way to dawn, the wheels were taken down from the poles and rolled down hills, still blazing with fire. Jumping over the fiery sun wheels as they hurtled by was another fun activity, believed auspicious for those leaping over the burning wheels.

The dead of night is an important time for the festival. Participants search for the fern blossom, with the notion that whoever finds it will be blessed with luck; not unlike the Irish custom of the four-leafed clover. However, the search is believed to be dangerous, as various supernatural beings are also expected to be out searching for the precious bloom. Rituals include casting a circle of protection and other magical acts to find the elusive blossom.

Rasa or Kupolines is a festive time for Lithuanians of all ages, from small children picnicking with their parents and grandparents to young men and women dancing and laughing, eager for midsummer romance. It is a night of easy camaraderie, with the carefree sharing of song, dance, food and drink. Though the description here draws on particular activities observed in Kernave, the festivities take place simultaneously at sites across Lithuania. For members of Romuva and other Lithuanian Pagans, Rasa/Kupolines is a deeply spiritual and joyous time, while for others it may just be a time of frolicking and merriment. Many Lithuanian Christians attend Rasa celebrations without worrying about whether their participation does or does not contradict their membership in the Catholic Church or other Christian communities. For most Lithuanians, Rasa/Kupolines/Jonines is first and foremost a *Lithuanian* holiday; the question of its Pagan or Christian nature is a strictly secondary matter, if it is considered

at all. The celebration of Rasa in Lithuania is a perfect illustration of how Pagan Lithuanian traditions are both rooted in, and blended together with general Lithuanian society and culture, including Christian traditions, to the point where they can no longer be clearly separated.

**Velines**

The autumn holiday of Velines, which is also called Ilges, is the major Lithuanian festival of the dead. It is officially celebrated on 1 November and, to a lesser extent on 2 November, but may also be observed over a longer period, from the time of the autumn equinox, at about 21/22 September, through all of October into the beginning of November. Velines is another example of a Lithuanian tradition that has a Pagan basis overlaid with Christian elements. In the contemporary situation, Velines can be understood as purely Pagan or as blended with Christianity or even as a non-religious event that is simply part of Lithuanian culture, depending on the viewpoint of a given individual.

Velines is generally observed in two locations; the local graveyard where ancestors are buried, and in the family home. In the days leading up to Velines, family members visit the graves of deceased relatives, where they meticulously clean the graves, removing trash, pulling weeds, raking the plots free of leaves, and so forth. The graves are then ornamented with flowers and special, long-burning candles set in glass jars or lanterns. The hundreds of candles glowing in Lithuanian graveyards makes Velines a festival of lights, as if the Milky Way had come down to earth to nestle among the dead for one night. The modern Lithuanian cemetery may seem a thoroughly a Christian place, adorned as it is with numerous crucifixes and images of saints and madonnas, but many cemeteries in Lithuania may well have been Pagan holy sites in pre-Christian times. The worship of the dead in Velines would seem to be an originally Pagan tradition carried on in a Christian setting. The Lithuanian Pagan tradition still places graveyards in forested and sometimes hilly sites just outside the city or village boundary.

In addition to cleaning and decorating the graves, family members also come to their dead ones' graves simply to sit and commune with or reflect upon their parted loved ones. University students in a class taught by co-author Strmiska in Siauliai, Lithuania in

the autumn of 2004 spoke of their family visits to the graveyard for remembrance of the dead as a solemn and largely silent time of both family solidarity and shared grief. Some bring food and drink to symbolically share their fare with the departed.

The visit to the graveyard is followed by an evening meal in the home, with either a place at the table, or a special table by itself, set to welcome the dead to the feast. Romuva members or others devoted to Lithuanian tradition may also include a special toast to the dead made with a mixture of grains, flour and salt, offered to the dead in a distinctive carved wooden cup known as a *kausas*, which is believed to have been made from a human skull in past times. The kausas is raised in a gesture of respectful offering and then emptied into the hearth fire, with the words, "For all our dear friends." This toast is typically followed by the passing of a drink to be shared among all present, further toasts by those wishing to express their reverence for the dead, and the singing of dainos (Trinkunas 1999, 128-129).

Though a good many Lithuanians may not care overmuch about whether Velines is Pagan or Christian in nature, members of Romuva pay tribute to the Pagan roots of the holiday by observing Velines with visits to ancient grave mounds called *piliakalniai* or *pilkape*. Celebrating Velines in 2004, Jonas Trinkunas, his wife Inija and other members or supporters of the Vilnius chapter of Romuva, a total of 20 people, made a pilgrimage to a number of such grave mounds in a rural area outside of Vilnius, near Birtiskes village, where a number of Romuva members own property and occasionally meet for various activities. One of the mounds that they visited is believed to be the site of a thousand year old Pagan cemetery. At each *pilkapas*, Romuva sang dainas for the dead and lit candles.

Returning to the Trinkunas' cottage in Birtiskes, they washed and purified themselves in a traditional Lithuanian sauna, while also inviting the *veles*, the spirits of the dead for which Velines is named, to join them. They next left the sauna and assembled around a long wooden table in the cottage, where a meal was served and eaten by candle and firelight with no use of electricity. Food and drink were also offered to the dead. They ended the night by singing songs and sharing reminiscences of the dead, with a candle passing around the table to signify whose turn it was to speak, ending at about 2

or 3 in the morning. (Interview with Jonas Trinkunas and Inija Trinkuniene in their Vilnius home, 2 November, 2004).

As with the solstice observances, Velines is both part of contemporary Lithuanian culture and a living vestige of Lithuanian Paganism. As an indisputably Lithuanian tradition, it can be viewed as Pagan or Christian by those participating. Understood as a Pagan tradition of ancestor worship, Velines is a powerful link not only with one's own deceased relatives, but also with the Pagan ancestors of the past. It is to be noted that all of the Pagan holidays and festivals, except Rasa, include ritual actions for the commemoration of ancestors. The sense of caring for and communing with the Lithuanian ancestors of the past is very real and definite, and this underlines the importance of the "ethnic" aspect of Lithuanian Paganism.

**Romuva as an Organization**

Romuva today has chapters or local associations across Lithuania. The chapter of Romuva in Lithuania's beautiful capital city of Vilnius was headed formerly by Jonas Trinkunas and is now led by his wife, the noted folk singer and researcher Inija Trinkunas. There are also Romuva associations in Kaunas, Lithunania's second largest city, which served as capital when Vilnius was claimed as part of Poland during the period of Lithuanian independence between world wars I and II, the smaller cities of Klaipeda and Panevyzas, and the towns of Palanga, Moletai, Plateliai, Seduva, Telsiai, Valkininkai, and Vilkaviskio, as well as chapters either now existing or under development in the United States and Canada, which will be discussed below

Each chapter is headed by a *Seniunas* (elder), a local man or woman with substantial knowledge of Lithuanian folk culture and Pagan traditions who organizes activities in his or her area, performs rituals such as weddings, funerals, and name-giving (Pagan baptism) ceremonies, and teaches religious lore to Romuva members and other interested persons. Romuva has no missionaries, but each Seniunas works to promote public awareness of the religion and to invite others to the faith by organizing events such as lectures, musical performances, and rituals open to the public, as well as through maintaining a presence on the internet.

Romuva's membership in Lithuania has been estimated at between one and three thousand in a population of some 3.5 million, with the official government census giving a figure of 1270 (Donatas Glodenis, Lithuanian Ministry of Justice, e-mail communication to M. Strmiska, July 2004; http://www.religija.lt). This figure is less than one percent of the population, but does not include the many Lithuanians, including those who are nominally Catholic or affiliated with other faiths, who occasionally participate in Romuva activities like solstice celebrations without officially joining the association.

An important annual event for Romuva in Lithuania are summer folklore camps, which take place for one week in August each year in the small village of Svariskiai, located 70 kilometers from Vilnius. The folklore camps are organized jointly by Romuva and its strictly folkloric, non-religious sister organizations Lithuanian Youth Ramuva and Lithuanian Ramuva Union. Mainly intended for young people, the camps are open to other ages as well. Activities in the camp focus on teaching traditional Lithuanian arts, crafts, and music, but also include instruction in Lithuanian mythology and the religious significance of traditional events such as the solstice activities, and introduce participants to Romuva as a religious organization.

The way in which ethnic folk culture provides the entry point into religious activity during the summer camps perfectly illustrates the self-understanding of Romuva as an ethnically and folklorically based religion. These camps may be said to function as recruiting centers for Romuva, but participants with Catholic or other religious affiliations are not pressured to renounce their religious commitments, but are welcome to focus on learning folklore as an exploration of Lithuanian culture apart from religious issues.

The different Romuva chapters in Lithuania function more or less autonomously, with occasional meetings between the Seniunases to share information, develop policies to address common concerns, and coordinate public events. At the national level, the leadership structure of Lithuanian Romuva underwent a transformation in 2002 when Vilnius Seniunas Jonas Trinkunas was elected to the post of *Krivis*, an overall leadership position roughly equivalent to the Pope in Catholicism or the Patriarch in Orthodox Christianity. The office of Krivis is a reconstructed institution, hailing back to

fragmentary records about a religious leader referred to by this name in ancient Pagan Prussia. Therefore, when Jonas Trinkunas was consecrated as Krivis in a formal ceremony on October 19, 2002, it was understood within the Romuva community as one more step in the gradual restoration of Lithuanian Pagan religion to its past power and glory.

Scholars of Lithuanian religious history, notably the eminent British historian S.C. Rowell, have questioned whether the Krivis ever actually existed or was merely a figment of the medieval imagination, a "Pagan Pope" created as a "boogeyman" for the purpose of rallying Germanic Christian crusaders to make war on Pagans in the Baltics (Rowell 1994, 125-128). Owing to the sketchy nature of medieval documents relating to Lithuanian Pagan religion, this question may never be resolved in a completely satisfactory manner. Nevertheless, the decision by modern Lithuanian Pagans to declare Trinkunas their Krivis at the current time strongly expresses their increasing organizational sophistication, as well as their ambition. This is not the strategy of a group wishing to keep a low profile, and is in fact part of a larger project of increasing the stature and influence of Romuva, particularly in Lithuanian society, but outside Lithuania as well.

**Jonas Trinkunas and Inija Trinkuniene**

Any account of the development of Romuva in Lithuania cannot really be separated from the story of Jonas Trinkunas (born 1939.) Though something like Romuva might very well have developed in modern Lithuania without him, the organization as it exists today owes much to the work of Trinkunas and also his wife Inija Trinkuniene (born 1951), over some four decades, from the 1960s to the present time. For both authors of this chapter and many others involved in Romuva, including the Lithuanian-Americans who would establish Romuva in the United States, it was meetings with Jonas and Inija that led them from a keen interest in Lithuanian folklore into a deeper participation with Lithuanian paganism. This section draws on Michael Strmiska's numerous interviews and communications with Jonas Trinkunas and his wife Inija from 1996 through 2005.

Jonas Trinkunas graduated from high school in Kaunas, the second city of Lithuania, before studying at Vilnius University and graduating with a Bachelors Degree

in Lithuanian language and literature in 1965. He continued with these studies in the late 1960s, undertaking a dissertation on ancient Lithuanian religion, publishing articles on Lithuanian folklore, mythology and culture, and participating in ethnographic expeditions to Lithuanian village communities. It was during one such folkloristic excursion that Trinkunas met his future wife Inija, with their common passion for Lithuanian folk culture, especially folk music, bringing them together in marriage, family, and a continuing partnership in activities and organizations related to ethnic culture and Lithuanian Paganism. Trinkunas and his wife now have five daughters, having lost a son who drowned while only a boy.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Trinkunas organized the forementioned Ramuva folklore association, a number of folk music ensembles in Vilnius and other places, a 100th anniversary celebration of the birth of the forementioned Lithuanian religious leader Vydunas (Vilius Storosta), and annual Rasa/Kupolines celebrations in the ancient Lithuanian capital of Kernave. Trinkunas' activities ran afoul of Soviet state authorities, and in 1973 he was expelled from the university and banned from any employment in teaching or research, a prohibition that would not be lifted until 1988, during the liberalizing period of perestroika in the USSR. For some fifteen years, Trinkunas worked at various odd jobs to support himself and his family. During this period of professional exile, Trinkunas remained involved in folkloric and folk music activities, but kept a low profile.

Once the political winds in Lithuania began to shift in the late1980s, and he was off the government blacklist, Trinkunas quickly reclaimed a leading position in folkloric organizations and activities, even taking a prominent position in the same government that had once persecuted him in an ironic, near-total reversal of fortune. In 1988, he formally re-established the folkloric association Ramuva, and in 1992, registered Romuva as an official, government-recognized religious organization in Lithuania. From 1990-1993, he served in the government as head of the Ethnic Culture division of the Ministry of Culture, and in 1997, was awarded the J. Basanavicius Award for his service and achievements in the field of ethnic culture. Since 1994, Trinkunas has been a senior

research associate at the Institute for Social Research in Vilnus, where his wife is also employed.

Trinkunas is co-director, along with Inija, of the Lithuanian folk music ensemble Kulgrinda, which performs in Lithuania as well as other countries, including, in recent years, India, South Korea, Greece, Poland, Canada and the United States. The musical element of Lithuanian Paganism is indeed among its most compelling features. A Lithuanian summer music festival called *Menuo Juodaragis* ("the Moon of the Black Horn"), which has become an annual event of growing popularity, is an interesting example of how the musical aspect of Lithuanian Paganism interacts with modern youth culture. At this out-in-nature, bring-your-own-tent event that is both very modern and very rustic, Kulgrinda and other similarly oriented musical groups perform traditional Lithuanian folk music while heavy metal, industrial and experimental rock bands modern electronic sounds. There is an explicit Pagan theme in the organization and public promotion of the festival, with workshops and lectures providing information on Lithuanian folklore, history and Pagan spirituality (further discussed in Strmiska 2005; for information about Kulgrinda, Menuo Juodaragis and Lithuanian music CDs, see http://www.dangus.net).

**World Romuva, the World Congress of Ethnic Religions and Indo-Romuva**

In 1998, Jonas Trinkunas began advocating for a further evolution of Romuva as a religious organization: the formation of a global Romuva organization, a "World Romuva," to facilitate interaction between Romuva chapters around the world, and to assist in the establishment of new ones. In January of 1999, Trinkunas issued a declaration entitled "Let's Organize a World Romuva," which remains posted on the Romuva web site to the present time. It reads, in part,

> The Lithuanian world community and persons who cherish the historical Baltic traditions are rallied to join in establishing a World Romuva community. Romuva keeps alive the memory of the traditions of our forefathers and ancestors, and the ancient faith of the Baltic peoples…The traditions of our ancestors can help us to live in harmony with the world and all mankind. A World Romuva would serve people of Baltic heritage to find solidarity…

> Romuva is already active in Lithuania, Chicago and Boston in the US, Canada and Australia. These communities are a solid foundation for the establishment of a World Romuva. The flame of a World Romuva would be lit in Vilnius, a city which is sacred to Baltic peoples and Lithuanians. Let Vilnius continue to be the center of the World Romuva. The further growth and development of the community would be determined by the membership itself. The first step for developing a World Romuva will be the formation of an active membership, and accumulation of knowledge regarding the faith of the ancient Baltic peoples (http://www.romuva.lt , accessed December 28, 2004).

The declaration defines Romuva as a Baltic and more specifically Lithuanian religious tradition, primarily for people of Lithuanian ancestry or ethnic heritage, but does not limit participation or membership in Romuva to people of Lithuanian ancestry. "Persons who cherish the historical Baltic traditions" are also welcomed, a clause that leaves the door of Romuva open to people of any race, ethnicity or national origin with sincere interest in Lithuanian cultural and spiritual heritage, even if they do not have Lithuanian ancestry. This makes the idea of a *World* Romuva, a Baltic-Lithuanian religious tradition for people of any region or nation, much more feasible than if it were strictly defined as a Lithuanian religion for ethnic Lithuanians only.

To this point, however, very little has been done with the World Romuva concept. The different Romuva chapters in Lithuania and North America continue to function more or less autonomously, with occasional meetings and discussion to coordinate their ideas and events, but each mainly focusing on local issues and activities. Language remains a limiting factor in reaching out to the larger world of English speaking nations, as most Romuva members in Lithuania, including most of the movement's leaders apart from the Trinkunases, do not speak English, though many do speak Russian, German and other European languages. The most concrete and practical manifestation of the desire for creating a World Romuva has been the development of the bilingual, Lithuanian and English language, http://www.romuva.lt web site, which makes information about Lithuanian Paganism accessible to English speaking people across the world.

Jonas Trinkunas has been active in another international project, which has given Romuva an additional forum for communication with the larger world community. This

is the organization known as World Congress of Ethnic Religions (WCER, with an internet presence at http://www.wcer.org). Trinkunas invited leaders of other Pagan, Indigenous and/or Ethnic religion groups in Europe and North America to a conference in Vilnius in June of 1998 for the purpose of promoting greater understanding of their respective religious traditions and cultural and political situations and developing an organizational network for protecting and promoting Pagan religion against opposition from various quarters. He also invited interested academics, including Michael Strmiska, co-author of this chapter, to speak at the first WCER conference in Vilnius and again at the seventh WCER meeting in Athens in 2004. Strmiska remains a sympathetic supporter of the WCER.

The 1998 "World Pagan Congress" has become an annual event with a functioning organization, retitled the "World Congress of Ethnic Religions." The name change from "Pagan" to "Ethnic" was the result of a day-long, passionate discussion at the first Congress in 1998 in Vilnius, in which the majority of participants expressed the feeling that the Pagan term had too many negative and pejorative connotations, and that the word Ethnic better expressed the roots of many Pagan-type religions in the ethnic and folkloric traditions of particular nations. The "World" Congress remains more of a dream than a reality, as the vast majority of the religious groups represented in the organization are from Europe, representing such nations as Germany, Greece, Poland, Russia, Ukraine, Belgium, Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Latvia and of course Lithuania, with a smaller contingent of participants from North America or elsewhere. That is to say, the World Congress of Ethnic Religions has, to this point, been a mainly Euro-American affair, despite the desire of WCER members to reach out to indigenous peoples and religious traditions in other areas. The main extension of the WCER beyond a strictly Euro-American axis has been to include participation of Indian religious leaders and scholars from the Sikh and Hindu traditions.

The Indian dimension of WCER has been of particular interest to members of Romuva, stimulating their desire to further explore Indian-Baltic parallels at the levels of language, culture, religious beliefs, practices and mythology, just as contact with WCER has inspired Indian scholars and religious leaders to learn more about Romuva and Baltic

religion and culture more generally. In February of 2003, Romuva members were invited to India to attend a indigenous religions symposium entitled "the First International Conference and Gathering of the Elders," held in Mumbai (Bombay.) This led to a series of Indo-Romuva conferences, jointly organized by WCER and the World Council of Elders of the Ancient Traditions and Cultures, the same group that sponsored the Mumbai meeting. The first Indo-Romuva conference was held in the USA in October of 2003, with presentations and discussion of various aspects of Hindu and Baltic religious traditions, as well as musical and dance performances, and the sharing of prayers and rituals.

The following posting from the web site of the Indian-oriented magazine *Hinduism Today*, advertising the Indo-Romuva event, illustrates the positive interest in Romuva taken by Indian and Indian-American Hindus.

> ATLANTIC CITY, NEW JERSEY, June 12, 2003: The World Council of Elders of the Ancient Traditions and Cultures in collaboration with the World Congress of Ethnic Religions, Vilnius, Lithuania, proudly announces the First Conference (in a series of understanding ancient traditions and cultures of the world) on Indo Romuva Cultures. The conference will be October 10-12, 2003, at the Howard Johnson Hotel, Atlantic City, New Jersey, U.S.A. The Romuva people are from the Baltic countries, with a major concentration in Lithuania. They worship Fire as well as many Deities with prayers similar to Sanskrit prayers… (http://www.hinduismtoday.com/hpi/2003/6/12.shtml#5, accessed January 19, 2005)

There seems to be sufficient momentum for the Hindu-Lithuanian, Indo-Romuva exchange to continue to grow and develop, but like the WCER, this activity has more to do with promoting friendly relations between Romuva and kindred Pagan, Ethnic or Indigenous religious movements than an indication of Romuva expanding from its Lithuanian base to become a truly globe spanning, multinational World Religion. At the present time, Romuva is primarily a Lithuanian movement, with extensions in the USA, Canada, and Australia, mainly among people of Lithuanian ancestry. In this way, Romuva is similar to Hinduism, which has mainly, though again not exclusively, expanded outside

India among Indian immigrants and their descendants. It remains to be seen if Romuva will become a religion that can be freely embraced by a large number of people with no ethnic or ancestral link to Lithuania, or if it will remain first and foremost an ethnic Lithuanian religious movement. To put it another way, the question is whether Romuva will over the course of coming decades evolve into a universal, open-to-all religion rooted in, but not limited by, a particular ethnic identity, as has been happening, to some extent, with the Scandinavian-based Pagan religion Ásatrú, or define itself in strictly ethnic terms, as a Lithuanian religion for Lithuanians only.

**Romuva in North America**

Romuva has established chapters in both the United States of America and Canada. In the United States, the two main centers of Romuva activity are Chicago and Boston. As these cities possess large Lithuanian-American communities that continue to receive a steady flow of immigrants from Lithuania, it is not surprising to find that they are places where Romuva has also found a home. In Cleveland, another city with a sizable Lithuanian immigrant population, a Romuva group was under discussion for a number of years, but failed to cohere into a solid organization. Some of those involved have now joined forces with a local Pagan group, Stone Creek Grove (http://www.stonecreed.org/aboutscg.html). Stone Creek is a local chapter of an international Pagan, Celtic and Indo-European oriented Pagan fellowship, Ár nDraíocht Féin, which is a fascinating topic in itself (http://www.adf.org/core/index.html).

The same dynamic of Romuva building on a foundation of past or present Lithuanian immigration pertains in Canada, where the immigrant stronghold of Toronto is the location of the primary chapter of Romuva Canada. A Romuva organization is also under development in Vancouver at the present time.

This section will focus on the development of Romuva organizations in Chicago and Boston. One of the prime movers in Romuva Chicago, Seniunas and professor of Humanities at Truman College in Chicago, Vilius Dundzila (born 1960), formerly known as Audrius Dundzila, is also one of the co-authors of this chapter, and the discussion here draws heavily on his records and recollections.

Interest in Lithuanian Paganism, which would in time give rise to local Romuva

movements, began to develop in North America in the late 1980s. This was the same time as Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev's liberalizing policies of glasnost and perestroika were loosening the reins of Soviet social control in the USSR, inadvertently setting in motion the events that would enable the Baltic states to achieve full independence from the Soviet Union. By the end of the 1980s, a number of Lithuanian Americans with varying degrees of acquaintance with Lithuanian culture, including Vilius Dundzila and Emilijus Hollanderis from Chicago, Lana Vyte from Toronto, J.D. LaBash from Cleveland, and Laima Sruoginaite from New York, had all entered into communication with Jonas Trinkunas, some by mail, others by visiting Trinkunas in Lithuania, to begin discussing the possibility of promoting Lithuanian Paganism in North America.

When Vyte and Dundzila returned home to Canada and the USA from visiting Lithuania in the early 1990s, Romuva Lithuania appointed Vyte to be Seniunas for Romuva in Canada and Dundzila for Romuva USA. These leadership positions changed hands in 2003, with Bernadeta Abromaitis becoming Seniune for Romuva/Canada, and Kaze Kazlauskiene taking on the role of Seniune for Romuva/USA.

Jonas Stundzia, a Lithuanian-American who had been active in Lithuanian ethnic culture in the Boston area and visited Lithuania a number of times in the 1980s and 1990s, established a Boston chapter of Romuva in the mid-1990s. The history of the Boston chapter will be taken up below. Martynas Girchys-Shetty, a 1993 immigrant from Lithuania, joined the Lithuanian folklore group Jore in the Washington DC area in 1998. He has since helped Jore, first established in 1996, to develop a deeper spiritual understanding of the Lithuanian dainas and ritual traditions.

The evolution of Vilius Dundzila's involvement with Romuva is typical of how many of these individuals came to be involved with Romuva. Dundzila's interest in Lithuanian Paganism grew out of his childhood growing up in a Lithuanian-American family environment, in which Lithuanian language and ethnic traditions were a regular part of daily life. He spent autumn 1981 in Lithuania together with his father, a professor who taught in Lithuania in 1981 through the American government funded Fulbright Fellowship Program, as Michael Strmiska, co-author of this chapter, has done in 2004 and 2005. This experience deepened the younger Dundzila's fascination with Lithuanian

ethnic culture, and eventually inspired him to investigate the spirituality of Lithuania's ancient traditions.

Dundzila undertook a second trip to Lithuania in 1988 for the express purpose of meeting modern Lithuanian Pagans. While his former acquaintances admitting having heard of the Pagans, they were unable or unwilling to put him in contact with them. Dundzila found only Lithuanian nationalists promoting Lithuanian culture and identity, as forms of opposition to Soviet rule, through the officially tolerated Lithuanian folklore movement. That was as far as he was able to get at this time, but this was not the end of the road for Dundzila's interest in Paganism.

Looking back on these early days, Dundzila now realizes that his approach to meeting Pagans on that visit to Lithuania was faulty since he was expecting to find Lithuanian Paganism organized and functioning in the same relatively open manner as Western European/North American paradigms of Paganism, whereas Romuva, at this time disguised as folkloric Ramuva, was operating under oppressive social and political conditions that required extreme secrecy and cautioned against unsolicited contacts and unwanted publicity. Another limitation he faced was that many of his clandestine contacts came from the Roman Catholic anti-Soviet resistance movement, and as committed Catholics, moved in different social circles than Pagans.

It was not until several months after Dundzila had returned to the USA that his efforts to contact Lithuanian Pagans finally bore fruit. Dundzila began a correspondence with Jonas Trinkunas, having received his name and address, without actually meeting Trinkunas, during his forementioned visit to Lithuania. Their exchange of letters rapidly progressed into a strong alliance of shared religious faith and mutual respect between the two men, eventually leading to Dundzila's appointment by Trinkunas as the first American Seniunas in 1992. From this point onward, Dundzila would take a leading role in introducing Romuva in the Upper Midwestern region of the USA, particularly the Chicago metropolitan area.

While enrolled in graduate study at the University of Wisconsin in the state capital of Madison, Dundzila tried to foster support for Romuva through the Madison, Wisconsin Lithuanian community. Madison might have seemed an ideal choice, as it had a sizable

Lithuanian-American population and was America's official sister city to Vilnius. Dundzila was in fact a member of the Vilnius-Madison Sister Cities International Association and had assisted in hosting delegations from Lithuania. Nonetheless, he had little luck in interesting the Madison Lithuanian-American community in Lithuanian Paganism. The Baltic Student Organization at the University of Wisconsin was more receptive, in large part because it included students who were members or supporters of the Latvian Pagan movement Dievturi, who immediately supported Romuva as a kindred Baltic organization. This also reflects the situation at the time in Latvia and Lithuania where Dievturi and Romuva were cooperating to organize winter and summer solstice events, despite the danger of police detection and political suppression. Dundzila began participating in Dievturi events, and gave a presentation on Romuva in 1990 at a Dievturi Conference at its Dievseta Temple in Warrens, WI. He also gave presentations on Romuva to other American Pagan groups, such as the Pagan Spirit Gathering.

In the academic year of 1991-92, Dundzila lived in Lithuania, teaching Humanities courses as a visiting assistant professor at the Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas, and contemplating permanently relocating to Lithuania. Actively participating in Romuva activities in Kaunas, Dundzila was elected Seniunas of Romuva Kaunas. Dundzila assisted with the preparation of documents for the legal recognition of Romuva in both the USA and Lithuania, a process which began in 1991 and concluded in 1992. There was hardly any Romuva movement in the USA to speak of at this time, and the main reason for undertaking this action in the USA was the belief that recognition of Romuva by United States authorities would bolster the efforts of Romuva in Lithuania to register Romuva as an officially recognized religious community with the Lithuanian government. Romuva USA, officially the Lithuanian Ethnic Church Romuva of the USA, Inc., is mainly an umbrella organization, which provides legal sanction to the smaller regional chapters that now exist or are proposed in Chicago, Boston and elsewhere.

The only sustained activity that the early North American Romuva undertook was the publication of newsletters. The first issue of *romuva/usa* , edited by Dundzila, coincided with the fall equinox in 1990. It was published on an approximately quarterly basis until the last issue in spring of 1993. At its peak, the newsletter had 24 subscribers.

When it folded, the newsletter was unsuccessfully attempting to serve an English-speaking North American Baltic audience comprised of Lithuanian-Americans, Lithuanian-Canadians, and Latvian-Americans and Latvian-Canadians. A Lithuanian language counterpart, *romuva/jav*, ran for four issues from winter 1992 to winter of the following year. Lana Vyte edited and published five issues of *Sacred Serpent: Journal of Baltic Tradition* from spring 1994 to spring of the following year. J.D. LaBash translated Marija Gimbutas's article "The Old Lithuanian Religion" and had it published in the Celtic and Indo-European Pagan newsletter *The Druid' s Progress* (Issue 10, 1992, available online at http://www.adf.org/regalia/publications/druids-progress/S_DP_10_index.jpg , accessed January 29, 2005.)

The national leadership of the Canadian and American division of Romvua in North America changed hands in 2003. Bernadeta Abromaitis became Seniune for Romuva/Canada, and Kaze Kazlauskiene became Seniune for Romuva/USA.

**Romuva Chicago**

Romuva Chicago was first organized in the spring of 1993 at the initiative of Vilius Dundzila and Don Grazulis, another Lithuanian American and Chicago native who was the proprietor of a bookstore. The first members assembled from advertisements placed in local Lithuanian stores. Similarly simple advertising has been used on an on-going basis ever since, with the addition of internet postings in recent years, with Romuva Chicago now having its own moderated electronic mailing list accessible through the Yahoo web site. Romuva meetings took place irregularly for many years, and only started to meet on a monthly basis in fall of 2003, with a summer hiatus except for gathering to celebrate the summer solstice. Romuva Chicago was first organized to celebrate Lithuanian holidays and festivals, and continues to celebrate the following on a regular basis: the winter solstice holiday Kucios, the end-of-winter celebration Uzgavenies in February, the summer solstice Rasa/Kupoline, and Velines, the Lithuanian day of the dead. Other meetings are dedicated to education, discussion, and studying and singing dainas, Lithuanian pagan hymns.

In the early days of Romuva Chicago, meetings used to be held at the Grazulis family book store until it closed in 1998. For the next year, Romuva Chicago had no set

location, with members meeting in each other's homes on a rotating basis. The lack of a definite location accompanied a decline in membership. In 1999, the meetings finally settled into a regular location at a local metaphysical book store owned by Kaze and Gintas Kazlauskas, a Lithuanian-American couple.

Romuva Chicago has striven to celebrate Lithuanian holidays in venues that either have direct Lithuanian associations or are felt to in some way recreate the settings in which the festivities would be observed in Lithuania. For example, Velines, the time of shades, has always been celebrated at a local Lithuanian-American cemetery, except for one trip to an allegedly Lithuanian Freethinkers cemetery in rural Central Illinois. The cemetery turned out to be Lithuanian, but mostly Catholic, to the chagrin and bemusement of the members of Romuva Chicago.

The two major holidays Romuva/Chicago celebrates are Rasa/Kupoline and Kucios. Every year, Romuva seeks out a pleasant, out-of-doors location for celebrating Rasa/Kupoline that will allow a joyful experience of the natural world at the peak of midsummer. It has been celebrated at private campgrounds, state park campgrounds, and members' homes with large yards. A natural body of water as well as a campfire are the two physical prerequisites, echoing the rivers and bonfires of celebrations in Lithuania. Kucios takes place at a member's home around a common dining table. It is celebrated as a ritual meal commemorating the ancestors and linking the living with the dead.

The small membership of Romuva Chicago, which at the time of this chapter's writing stands at only five active members with several dozen more subscribed to the electronic mailing list and occasionally participating in events, with about the same number of other people floating in and out of involvement with the organization, has made it difficult to host complex holiday celebrations on an ongoing basis. For example, Romuva hosted a public Uzgavenies holiday in 1998 but the level of preparation required so greatly strained the capacity of the membership that a second attempt has not yet been undertaken. Romuva/Chicago has also tried to participate in other local holiday celebrations, like the local Lithuanian-American community's celebration of the summer solstice holiday in 2001 and again in 2004. The small Romuva contingent was lost in the crowd, which was focused on enjoying a secular celebration rather than participating in a

religious festival.

Romuva Chicago has unsuccessfully tried to find new members from among recent Lithuanian immigrants to Chicago. The differences in language and social culture have prevented effective cooperation. The members of Romuva Chicago come from various immigrant generations, with correspondingly different degrees of familiarity with Lithuanian language and culture, and different attitudes toward assimilation to American culture. All of Romuva Chicago's members speak English, but only some speak Lithuanian. Some are relearning the traditions their ancestors lost in America, others carrying on traditions that have continued in their families.

In contrast, recent Lithuanian immigrants are looking for religious solace in a Lithuanian language setting as they adapt their lives to American society. The Chicago immigrant community has established folkloric daina singing groups that may acknowledge the spiritual nature of the dainas, but do not pursue the implicitly Pagan element that might be seen to conflict with Lithuanian Catholicism. This is obviously attractive to devout Catholic immigrants, but also comfortable for less pious immigrants who rely on the various support services and social network provided by Lithuanian Catholic churches in the Chicago area, and so do not wish to run afoul of the Church. Moreover, there are acknowledged tensions between the "old," i.e., post-World War II, immigrants and their descendents, and the recent, post-Independence era immigrants. In general, the recent immigrants tend not to join the already established Lithuanian organizations, but seek to form their own venues.

Romuva Chicago therefore remains a small, struggling religious organization with a committed core group and dedicated leadership, but continuing difficulty in attracting members. It may be that the future growth of the association will depend on its ability to draw participants from outside the Lithuanian-American community.

**Romuva Boston**

Jonas Stundzia (born 1954), native of Lawrence, Massachusetts, is an entrepreneur, a trader in Baltic cultural heritage items, a member of the Lawrence Historical Commission, and also the founder and Seniunas of the Boston chapter of Romuva. He was deeply immersed in Baltic spirituality and Lithuanian folklore long

before he had ever heard of Romuva. This section is based on interviews done by Michael Strmiska with Stundzia in Boston in January 2004, and supplementary e-mail and telephone communications from November of 2004 through May of 2005.

Growing up in the 1950s and 1960s in a Lithuanian-American family and community in Lawrence, Massachusetts, less than an hour's drive north from the much larger Lithuanian immigrant community in Boston, Stundzia grew up surrounded by Lithuanian language and culture. Unlike his siblings who strove to break away from their immigrant past and assimilate to American society in every way possible, Stundzia was always fascinated by his Lithuanian heritage, and showed an affinity for Lithuanian folk arts and crafts from an early age.

Stundzia's parents were Catholics, and while well-versed in the folkloric traditions that Jonas would come to understand as expressions of Lithuanian Pagan spirituality, they did nothing to encourage their son in developing a non-Christian spiritual identity. Stundzia's view of his father's Catholicism is that it was based less on heartfelt piety than on burning social ambition, arising from a wish to imitate the religious behavior of Irish Catholics, in order to affiliate with an ethnic group that was better connected and more accepted in Massachusetts than Eastern Europeans like Lithuanians. When Stundzia began to question his father about the meaning of Lithuanian folkloric traditions at about the age of ten, his father barked, his father barked, "Don't be a freethinker!" This set the tone for religious discussions inside the family. His father also referred with scorn to *gamtininkai*, (sgl. *gamtininkas*), a Lithuanian term with a literal translation of "nature-people, " used for people in Lithuania who refused to have a Christian funeral or follow other Christian customs, but preferred ancient Lithuanian traditions.

It was therefore not his parents nor anyone else in his immediate family that initiated Stundzia into deeper meanings of Lithuanian folk culture, but an elderly Lithuanian immigrant couple in the nearby town of North Andover, who had come to America before World War I. The Strazdases, who spoke only Lithuanian, took the young Jonas under their wing and became like a second set of parents to him. From the time Stundzia was eight until when he was twelve, they provided him with a substantial

education in Lithuanian folklore and, in effect, Lithuania Pagan religion, without ever calling what they were teaching by any such name. Old man Strazdas, for example, frequently took Jonas out on nature walks around the fields and forests near his North Andover farm to share with him the sacredness of nature, which Stundzia perceives as a fundamental Lithuanian value, while his wife Strazdiene (Mrs. Strazdas) would instruct Stundzia on Lithuanian domestic traditions inside the home. Jonas also enjoyed spending time with other Lithuanian seniors, absorbing from each what they had to share about the folklore, history and ethnic culture of Lithuania. As Stundzia says of his childhood, "For me, the world revolved around Lithuania."

Stundzia recalls a particular moment with old man Strazdas that he considers a "pivot-point" in his development of a Lithuanian Pagan sense of spirituality. They were out walking in a field, and came upon a bee buzzing in the grass. Stundzia, who was about 10 years old at the time, made ready to step on it and crush it with his shoe, but Strazdas held him back, saying, in Lithuanian, "It's alive…nature is alive, and you are part of nature." The bee flew off unharmed, and Stundzia felt a sudden shock of awareness about the value of the natural world. At the age of 12, Jonas built a crude shrine to the earth goddess Zemyna, constructing a stone altar between two trees near his house, and buried bread in the ground as an offering to Zemyna, as is indeed a traditional form of worship to the goddess. He also wove wreaths of oak leaves and observed the summer solstice on the banks of a river near his home. From this point onward, he was constantly learning about and dabbling in new aspects of Lithuanian folk culture. Stundzia learned to carved Lithuanian themes and designs in wood, wove traditional patterns in cloth, carved amber *gamta* (nature) figures, and colored and decorated eggs for spring with pre-Christian, native Lithuanian designs, such as suns, moons, stars, birds, snakes, and water wheel figures. In this period of his life, Stundzia did not yet have a clear conception of what he was doing as a distinctive form of "religion," let alone "Lithuanian Paganism." To him it was simply a matter of carrying on folk traditions that he found personally meaningful.

Stundzia participated in Lithuanian-American community events and holidays throughout his teens and into his 20s, becoming recognized as a young person with

extraordinary skill and knowledge regarding the old traditions, which many younger Lithuanian-Americans seemed more interested in forgetting than preserving. Stundzia began to offer free lectures and classes in Lithuanian folk culture in the late 1970s, and later, to organize public celebrations of Lithuanian holidays, at Lithuanian-American community centers, churches, and other locations. Stundzia has remained devoted to educating both Lithuanian-Americans and the general public about Lithuanian folk culture, with increasing attention to its ancient Pagan roots, up to the present.

In the early 1980s, he had developed a circle of five male Lithuanian-American friends, who all shared with Stundzia the same name of Jonas as well as a common interest in Lithuanian folk traditions. They gathered together to celebrate Rasa/Kupolines together in an informal manner, preferring the Christian name of Jonines for the holiday, as it seemed the proper name for this meeting of the five Jonases. However, Stundzia felt dissatisfied with their efforts. One of his friends wanted to add American volleyball games to the Lithuanian solstice festivities, which Stundzia strongly resisted. Stundzia knew he needed further instruction in how to celebrate the holiday with greater authority and authenticity.

Stundzia visited family relations in Lithuania a number of times in the 1980s, when the country was still under Soviet domination, and explained his interest in learning more about Lithuanian folk holidays. In 1983, his cousins brought him to a secret Rasa/Kupolines/Jonines celebration in an undisclosed location on a hill in a rural area. Because of the risk of Soviet interference and persecution, Stundzia was driven to the site disguised in local clothes and told not to speak if they were stopped by the police. Jonas was also not told where they were going, in case he might be questioned by authorities at a later point. Stundzia was amazed to see a thousand or more people gathered on a hilltop and the surrounding area, camping out in tents, gathered around huge bonfires with flames leaping twenty meters high, singing folk songs, dancing traditional dances, playfully weaving oak wreaths, and practicing other folk traditions. Stundzia' sense of joyful surprise was all the greater because he had feared that under Soviet oppression, the ancient Lithuanian ways had been forgotten, and only preserved among immigrant communities in the USA and elsewhere. Here was proof that the old traditions were

vibrantly, triumphantly alive in Lithuania.

Stundzia returned to the USA with increasing understanding of the Rasa holiday, in terms of both practical details and spiritual aspects, and was now able to organize summer solstice events in a more cohesive and compelling manner, publicizing the events throughout the network of Lithuanian-American businesses, churches and community centers in the greater Boston area. He has since taught classes and delivered lectures on Lithuanian folk culture and organized celebrations of holidays such as Velines and Kucios/Kaledos in such locations as the St. Francis Church and the Masonic Temple in Lawrence, the New England Folk Arts Center in Lowell, the Arlington Street Church in downtown Boston, the Boston International Institute, and various other venues. As a recognized authority on Lithuanian ethnic traditions, Stundzia has also been interviewed by the Massachusetts State Folklorist. However, even as Stundzia's range of Lithuanian folk cultural activities expanded in the early to middle 1980s, he still did not consciously conceive of what he was doing with Lithuanian ethnic traditions as "religion" or as "Paganism."

Coming to know Vilius Dundzila, Seniunas of the Chicago Romuva chapter, through various Lithuanian-American events in the early 1990s, Stundzia found a new conceptual framework for his many years of teaching, practicing and contemplating Lithuanian folk cultural traditions. He now realized it was possible to look on these traditions not merely as Lithuanian folk culture, but as religion; as Lithuanian Paganism. He proposed to his fellow Lithuanian folklore enthusiasts in 1993 that they formally organize a Romuva chapter for the Boston area. They embraced this proposal and selected Stundzia to be their Seniunas, with respect to his deep knowledge of Lithuanian folk culture, his longstanding service to the Lithuanian-American community, and his teaching activities.

At the current time, Romuva Boston has a dedicated membership of twenty five drawn not only from the Boston area but also from across southern New England, with about double that number of transient or occasional participants in solstice celebrations and other activities. Stundzia notes that there are many Lithuanian-American Catholics that participate in Romuva Boston holiday events and ritual celebrations without ever

formally joining the organization. This phenomenon illustrates the important point that the Lithuanian folklore that provides the cultural basis of Romuva is highly meaningful to Lithuanian-American Catholics as well as Lithuanian-American Pagans, and to some extent transcends their differing religious and spiritual conceptions.

Stundzia, like his Chicago counterpart Dundzila, frequently travels to Lithuania. During a visit in January of 1999, Stundzia met with his fellow Seniunas Jonas Trinkunas to discuss Trinkunas' proposal to develop a World Romuva organization. Stundzia endorsed the idea, and signed his name to a compact of support, as did several other Seniunases. Like Trinkunas and Dundzila, Stundzia is fascinated by the parallels between Lithuanian language and religion and ancient linguistic and ritual traditions of India. In 2002, Stundzia and Romuva Boston organized and hosted a conference on Indic-Baltic connections at Suffolk University. This was followed by an invitation to conduct a seminar on Baltic beliefs and traditions at a Hindu retreat at Saraswati Mandiram, a Hindu temple in Epping, New Hampshire. This religious institution unfortunately burned down in January of 2004.

Another notable event in the early 2000s was Stundzia's appearance on a Boston public television, religious affairs program called *Spirit Talk*, on March 22, 2004. Stundzia spoke with some eloquence about Lithuanian folk traditions as expressions of an earth-based spirituality in which the divinity of nature was paramount. Jeff Ferrannini, the host of the program, responded by asking what Romuva had to do with Jesus and the Bible, which left Stundzia at rather a loss for words. The incident illustrates a problem that not only Romuva, but all Pagan religions face in the United States: the problem of how to explain a non-Christian, non-Biblical religion to a predominantly Christian public that tends to have little knowledge of, and little interest in, religions that are not based upon the Bible.

The year 2003 was the 750th anniversary of the coronation of the Lithuanian King Mindaugas in 1253. This occasion was observed by Romuva Boston in a quite interesting manner, which requires some explanation to appreciate. Mindaugas is seen as a great hero in Lithuania for his success in welding the various Lithuanian tribes into a unified state capable of vigorous self-defense in a time when the entire Baltic region was under attack

from Christian crusaders (Suziedelis 1997, 195-197). For Lithuanian Pagans, he is a more ambiguous figure, because of his complex involvement with both Paganism and Christianity. Mindaugas accepted baptism in 1251, thus gaining the right to be crowned a legitimate, church-acknowledged "king" in the European Christian sense two years later. This seeming conversion to Christianity on the part of the Lithuanian leader bought his nation some breathing space from crusader attack for a number of years, but it also cost Mindaugas his life when disgruntled Pagan followers assassinated him in 1263 as a punishment for what they saw as his betrayal and apostasy (Rowell 1994, 65.) A brick cathedral constructed by Mindaugas in Vilnius was burned following his murder and replaced by a Pagan temple, which would itself later be destroyed and replaced by a series of Christian edifices, leading to the present magnificent cathedral (Rowell 1994, 134-136.)

Modern scholars tend to think that Mindaugas underwent baptism for political rather than religious reasons, as sources suggest that he continued to practice Pagan rituals for many years after his baptism and coronation. Mindaugas would not be the last Lithuanian leader to approach Christian conversion as a political tool. Grand Duke Gediminas, who ruled from 1316-1341, corresponded with Vatican officials in a discussion of possible Lithuanian conversion that lasted for years, artfully stretching out the exchange of letters in a calculation, correct as it turned out, that the Papacy would restrain the forces of the crusaders as long as Lithuania was willing to discuss conversion (Rowell 1994, 189-226.) When Grand Duke Jogaila formally accepted Christianity for Lithuania in 1387, it was part of the agreement establishing the military alliance with Poland that would crush the Teutonic Knights in 1410.

There is thus an interesting history of religious conversion in Lithuania that may have neither been religious, nor even a conversion, but only the semblance of a conversion to Christianity that was performed for other purposes. The Lithuanian royalty were not the only ones to engage in this; we find the same kind of mock conversion occurring among the common folk as well. A famous historical tradition, contained in the Polish historian Maciej Stryjkowski's 1582 chronicle of Lithuanian history, *Kronika Polska, Litewska, Zmodzka i wszystkiej Rusi*, tells of Christian monks who came to

Lithuania hoping to win conversions to Christianity by offering a tangible incentive to potential converts. They provided free white wool shirts of good quality to each Lithuanian who underwent baptism, not unlike modern day fast food restaurants that dispense plastic toys as an inducement to families with young children to come eat in their restaurants. At first, the tactic seemed to be working quite well, bringing in a fine crop of apparently enthusiastic converts, but it was then discovered to be working a bit too well. Some of the Lithuanian Pagans were coming in for repeat baptisms in order to receive multiple wool shirts, with greater enthusiasm for the free clothing than for the solemn Christian sacrament. And so ended this particular effort at the mass baptism of the medieval Lithuanians.

It is this historical tradition that Romuva Boston re-enacted during their 2003 Rasa/Kupolines festival as a ritual commemoration of Mindaugas' 1253 coronation as a "Christian" monarch. Romuva members gathered bearing white shirts that they first tied with linen cords. They then decorated the white garments with Pagan symbols of suns, moons, stars, snakes, and other aspects of nature typically represented in Lithuanian folk art. The shirts were then buried under a large pile of stones that was part of a rock wall from the 1600s, which Seniunas Stundzia consecrated as a permanent Pagan altar.

The ritual was performed with the primary motivation of worshipping ancestors and the earth goddess Zemyna. It was also an artful inversion of the sequence of events in the historical tradition mentioned above. Instead of medieval Lithuanians receiving white clothes that signified Christian conversion, twenty-first century Lithuanian-American Pagans effected a reverse "conversion" to Paganism by decorating similar white garments with symbols of nature and then dedicating them to the sacred earth that is, in Lithuanian Pagan tradition, the Goddess Zemyna.

Romuva Boston has to this point in time been able to attract larger numbers both of dedicated members and occasional participants than Romuva Chicago. Part of the reason for this greater relative success is that Stundzia had been actively involved in promoting Lithuanian ethnic culture in the Boston metropolitan area for more than ten years before the establishment of Boston Romuva. A substantial groundwork had therefore been set in place for the religious organization, as well as an already committed

following, when the Boston chapter of Romuva finally was established in 1993. In this way, Romuva Boston developed in a similar manner to Romuva in Lithuania, which began in the 1960s as the folkloric organization Ramuva, later metamorphosing into the religious organization Romuva after the fall of the Soviet Union.

Another factor worth noting is that Romuva Boston appears to have been more successful than its Chicago sister organization in attracting recent Lithuanian immigrants members. Jonas Stundzia stresses that this has been very important for the particular spiritual quality of Boston Romuva gatherings, explaining that "newly arrived Lithuanians….due to their upbringing, find nature worship more of a natural experience" than do second or third-Lithuanian-Americans (e-mail communication, May 26, 2005). Seniunas Stundzia views Boston Romuva as a "safe haven of Lithuanianism" in which the mixture of recent Lithuanian immigrants with more assimilated Lithuanian-Americans creates multiple levels of spiritual expression and experience rooted in Lithuanian cultural and spiritual heritage.

**Reflections on Romuva Lithuania and Romuva USA**

Reflecting on the process of development of their respective Romuva groups in America, Stundzia and Dundzila both note a dilemma they face in America that is much less of an issue for Romuva in Lithuania. Romuva is a religious movement that draws on, and is defined by, the spirituality embedded in the folk traditions of Lithuanian ethnic culture. But as a Lithuanian ethnic religion, should Romuva only be a religion for Lithuanian people, that is, for ethnic Lithuanians? This is the prickly dilemma that Romuva faces.

Romuva in Lithuania clearly caters to ethnic Lithuanians intrigued by the religious dimension of their cultural heritage. People of other ethnic or national origins are not excluded from participation or membership, but the overwhelmingly Lithuanian-ness of Romuva Lithuania's events, especially the language in which they are conducted, effectively ensures that very few non-Lithuanians will ever become deeply committed members. It is therefore essentially true that Romuva in Lithuania is a Lithuanian ethnic religion for Lithuanian people, period.

In America, Romuva has developed primarily as a Lithuanian ethnic religion for

Lithuanian-Americans, which has greatly restricted the pool of people from which it can draw members and participants. There have however also been non-Lithuanian-Americans who have participated in Romuva events. This raises the question of whether Romuva in the USA should take further steps to embrace non-Lithuanian-Americans into its fold. This might seem advisable to allow for growth of the very small Romuva groups established to this point, but what might the consequences be? One likely impact would be at the level of language, with an increasing use of English and a decreasing use of Lithuanian, perhaps even requiring the translation of the much-loved daina folk songs into English to accommodate a greater number of participants and members who lack knowledge of the Lithuanian language.

Both Dundzila and Stundzia fear that this linguistic shift within Romuva, from emphasizing Lithuanian language to accepting the use of English, might mean a progressive lessening of the sense of connectedness with Lithuanian ethnic culture, and an increasing homogenization and universalization of the particular type of spirituality expressed and preserved through that culture and its language. On the other hand, allowing a greater use of English in Romuva might enhance the possibility of the general public in America and beyond being introduced to Lithuanian folk traditions and Pagan spirituality, even if in a more universalized and homogenized form, and in this way realizing Jonas Trinkunas' dream of a "World Romuva " movement.

All ethnically-based, reconstructionist forms of Paganism face a similar struggle between the drive to preserve the cultural and linguistic traditions that form their basis, and the need to adapt to social and cultural situations outside their original ethnic context, such as by using English or other languages to supplement, translate or replace the original language or languages of the tradition.

To return to the question posed earlier in this chapter, it can be shown that Romuva is a "religion" in the sense that it does demonstrate the four elements commonly understood to constitute a religion. Romuva has a system of sacred beliefs and a particular world-view, emphasizing the divinity of nature; its own mythology and sacred history; its own rituals and festivals; and is developing, with varying degrees of success,

organizations in both Lithuania and North America dedicated to the preservation and continuation of Lithuanian Pagan religion. Romuva is certainly stronger in Lithuania than in the United States or Canada, where it is clearly struggling to establish sustainable communities. This underlines the basic fact that Lithuania is, indeed, the "Holy Land" of this particular form of modern Paganism. However Romuva may fare in the United States, Canada or elsewhere, there seems little doubt that the spiritual center of Romuva will remain in Lithuania, just as Lithuanian ethnic folk culture will remain the essential foundation of the religion.