

# Belief Narratives in Lithuanian Mushroom Picking Practices

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**Abstract:** This article focuses on certain belief narratives related to mushrooms and mushroom picking practices in Lithuania. It compares material from two time periods: the first from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which is commonly referred to as traditional culture in Lithuania; the second reflects materials gathered during 21<sup>st</sup> century expeditions. Three groups of Lithuanian belief narratives related to mushroom picking practices are discussed in the article. The first group focuses on the principle of the ‘mushroom fortune’, which includes successful mushroom picking and the notion of the mushroom as the embodiment of success. The second group is related to ritual and the magical practices of mushroom picking. The third group reveals the perception of mushrooms as mythical beings. Comparison of the study material showed that belief narratives about mushroom picking practices were much more common in the older folklore research material. Nevertheless, some beliefs still exist in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, albeit to a lesser extent. Moreover, new beliefs and mushroom picking practices that are not characteristic of traditional Lithuanian culture are also recorded in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Keywords:** beliefs, ethnomycology, mythical beings, mushroom fortune, mushroom picking, mythological mindset, narratives, success.

## Introduction

This research belongs to the field of ethnomycology, which studies the cultural significance of mushrooms, how they're used and how this affects society. According to Valentina and Gordon Wasson, the pioneers in the field of ethnomycology, all cultures can be divided into mycophilic and mycophobic cultures. Mycophobic attitudes towards mushrooms lead to their avoidance. In such cultures, their perception is that they are dangerous agents of the wild. Mycophobic attitudes towards mushrooms are common in Anglo-Saxon countries. To the east of these countries, the opposite mycophilic approach to mushrooms prevails. Here, mushrooms become economically, socially and culturally important (Wasson & Wasson 1957: 4).<sup>1</sup> According to the Wassons' classification of attitudes towards mushrooms, Lithuanians can definitely be classified as extreme mycophiliacs (Motiejūnaitė et al. 2024).

Much of the contemporary research by ethnomycologists focuses on the economic and ecological importance and taxonomy of fungi in specific regions of the world (Zent et al. 2004; Guissou et al. 2008; Łuczaj & Nieroda 2011; Turtiainen et al. 2012; Kasper-Pakosz et al. 2016; Kang et al. 2016; Kotowski et al. 2019; Kotowski et al. 2021; Belichenko 2022; Torres-Gomez et al. 2023). There are a number of works that explore how the human environment, landscape, social and economic relationships, cultural phenomena and identity are revealed through mushrooms and mushroom picking. The most striking example of this is the research carried out by Sveta Yamin-Pasternak (Yamin-Pasternak 2007, 2008a, 2008b). There are also ongoing studies focusing on the medical use of fungus in different cultures (Gründemann et al. 2020; Prakofjewa et al. 2024). However, with regard to the subject of this article, there are very few ethnomycological works that focus on the mythological mindset. Mention should be made of Eglė Zest's article on the relevance of mushrooms in mythology among the Jot'í indigenous people of the Venezuelan Guayana (Zent 2008). Another researcher with an interest in the relationship between mushrooms and mythological thinking is Frank M. Dugan. His work covers the history of humanity using fungus, ritual practices, folklore and the various beliefs associated with fungus (Dugan 2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2011). Two publications by Lithuanian researchers on this topic are worth mentioning. Mushroom picking as a manifestation of ancient Lithuanian religion has been the subject

of research by religious scholar Eglutė Trinkauskaitė-Johnson (Trinkauskaitė-Johnson 2006). I discussed the mythical notion of mushrooms in the traditional Lithuanian culture in my previous article (Džekčioriūtė-Medeišienė 2016). Accordingly, this article is the continuation of my previous research. It aims to compare the old traditional Lithuanian belief narratives about mushrooms and mushroom picking with the latest materials gathered during 21<sup>st</sup> century expeditions.

## Data sources and research material

This research is based on narratives which confirm certain beliefs related to mushroom picking practices. Two periods are compared in this article: the first covers a time from the end on the 19<sup>th</sup> century until the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century. The data for this period are taken from archival material from the Lithuanian Institute of History (LII BR F73, LTA) and some printed sources (Vėlius 1987; Buračas 1996; Marcinkevičienė 2009; Marcinkevičienė 2014). Although some of these sources were written or printed in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, they represent the old traditional Lithuanian worldview of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The second period is reflected by material from the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Some data are taken from the previous records from the Archives in the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and folklore (LTRF cd 587, 595), although the majority was recorded on six expeditions in 2022 and 2023 (LTRF cd 1784–1884). These expeditions were part of an interdisciplinary project with mycologists funded by the Research Council of Lithuania (Grant No S–LIP–22–58). The expeditions took place in different ethnocultural regions of Lithuania (Žemaitija (Samogitia), Suvalkija, Dzūkija, Aukštaitija), except for Lithuania Minor, where local traditions were largely lost due to major population changes and immigration from other parts of Lithuania after the Second World War (Kraniauskienė et al. 2019). The interviews were conducted in 40 locations, belonging to eleven administrative units: Anykščiai district, Biržai district, Ignalina district, Kazlų Rūda municipality, Kretinga district, Marijampolė municipality, Panevėžys district, Plungė district, Švenčionys district, Utena district and Varėna district. The aim of the project was to find out what species of mushrooms people know, what they collect, for what purposes, and what vernacular names of mushrooms are used in different

regions. In addition, efforts were made as much as possible to collect different folkloristic data about mushroom picking. The research material was gathered through unstructured interviews with 119 informants, mainly middle-aged and older people (age range 32–97, the average being 70). The material on beliefs and mushroom picking practices on which I will focus is only a small part of the data collected during these expeditions.

This article discusses three groups of Lithuanian belief narratives related to mushroom picking practices. First, I focus on beliefs related to the principle of the mushroom fortune: this is successful mushrooming and the notion of mushrooms as the embodiment of success. Second, ritual and magical practices of mushroom picking are presented. Third, some beliefs that stem from the perception of mushrooms as mythical beings are discussed.

## **The mushroom fortune and successful mushrooming**

Mushroom picking has connections with the mythical notion of mushrooms. This activity depends on the mythical principle of the mushroom fortune, which manifests in successful picking, or takes mushrooms to be the embodiment of success. This principle defines the number of mushrooms one is able to pick in the forest and the number and kinds of mushroom gathered by each picker.

In ancient times the belief was that each person's mushroom fortune was destined in advance, for example:

Everybody wanted to be the first in the forest, although one used to say that everybody gets his or her own mushrooms. One hundred people can walk in the same place, but only you will find your mushrooms (Marcinkevičienė 2009).

One says that every forest has a specific number of mushrooms for each person. If a person went around all the forests, he or she would find mushrooms in all of them, but he or she would find only so many as are meant for that person. He or she wouldn't see the mushrooms of other people. And if that person doesn't take his or her mushrooms, they will rot because nobody will see them (Vėlius 1987: 79).

However, it was believed that there are people who don't have a mushroom fortune and can't find mushrooms. There are even proverbial sayings in Lithu-

anian that state: “Without luck, one cannot pick mushrooms” or “Fate helps pick mushrooms” (eLPP).

Compared to today’s material, the attitude of mushroom pickers has changed significantly. The vast majority of informants today state that successful mushroom picking is a learned skill and depends on familiarity with the environment and personal qualities of observation (LTRF cd 1800, 1803, 1811, 1825, etc.). One of the most common things mentioned by informants in order to be successful at mushrooming is the need to know the places where mushrooms grow. Lithuanians usually refer to these places as “my places” or “my own places” (LTRF cd 1805, 1812, 1818, 1822, etc.). This indicates a certain special relationship with their environment, which is expressed through the practice of mushroom picking. It is very rare to hear someone say today that success in picking mushrooms is predetermined. However, several such cases have been recorded during expeditions in recent years. For example: “Some succeed, others fail” (LTRF cd 1880); “Some people are good at mushroom picking, while others are not, because they don’t have the fortune” (LTRF cd 1815); “Mushrooms ... You don’t know what’s in here. You have a certain flair. Everyone goes to the same forest, but not everyone brings mushrooms. ... There is something like a feeling” (LTRF cd 1823); “My mother used to tell me when I came home with a full bag: ‘with your fortune, it’s good for mushrooming’. Others go out, bring little, and there are no mushrooms, but I still find them” (LTRF cd 1824); “There is every man’s fortune in the forest: if I were to go and another man were to follow me, he would find his own mushrooms” (LTRF cd 1875).

It is worth noting that three of the five examples are recorded in the Dzūkija region of south-eastern Lithuania, where, according to folklorists, the old world view and the associated folklore are best preserved in Lithuania.

## **Mushroom as the embodiment of success**

In ancient times, mushrooms could be seen as an expression of luck and good fortune. When picking mushrooms, it was important to recognise your own luck, and then you would have good luck picking mushrooms all the time. For example: “If one finds a mushroom in the forest, even a very small one, and does not pick it, people believe that one will find no more mushrooms in the forest” (LTA 1288(173)); “When one finds a mushroom, one has to

pick it, then there will be more mushrooms to find” (LTA 140(400)); “When one finds the first mushroom, one has to pick it with roots, because the first mushroom is the person’s luck” (LTA 1352(23)); “If one does not pick a mushroom when one finds it, another person who will do it will destroy your luck, money, etc.” (LTA 1476(6331)); “When one finds a mushroom, one has to pick it because it will no longer grow, and the person will be unlucky” (LTA 1593(11)).

This material shows that the mushroom hides a person’s happiness, and if people do not recognise this, they lose it; or, in other words, it becomes inoperative in their lives. Quite many similar beliefs have been written down in Lithuania dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Today, people no longer believe in this at all. In all of our six expeditions in 2022 and 2023, we have recorded only one reference to such a belief from all of our 119 informants: “It’s better to take a small mushroom as well, otherwise your fortune will be left in the forest” (LTRF cd 1874).

## Ritual and magical mushroom picking practices

Despite the fact that the mushroom fortune can be predetermined, ritual and magical practices have long been known to increase the success of mushroom picking. The oldest such practice, which is known from just one printed source, is that if you are going to pick mushrooms, someone should throw a shoe at you, then you will have good luck picking (Buračas 1996: 78, 80–81). Probably related to this custom are the beliefs that a barefoot mushroom hunter does not find any mushrooms (Buračas 1996: 84) or finds only old ones (LTA 291(321)). It would be difficult to have an explanation for the origins of these beliefs. However, today we no longer find equivalents of such practices. One more magical practice that increases the success of mushroom picking is spitting on the first mushroom found. This practice was very common in old times (LTA 447(62)); Buračas 1996: 80), and even today is quite well known in southern and eastern Lithuania (LTRF cd 1803, 1825, 1853, 1854, 1856). Spitting on the first mushroom to ensure the success of mushroom picking can be explained by the fact that mushrooms have always been regarded as nature’s goods and wealth. This idea is supported by the long-held belief that when you trade something and make your first money, you have to spit on it to ensure the success of the trade (LTA 1284(627), 1289(649), 1333(67)). A variation on the practice of spitting

on the first mushroom is the belief that it should be kissed, which has been documented as a way of increasing the success of mushroom gathering today. Several such beliefs are recorded in northern Lithuania (LTRF cd 1844, 1847) and in the south-eastern (LTRF cd 1814, 1815, 1819, 1821, 1823, 1824) and eastern (LTRF cd 1864, 1865) parts of the country. These beliefs are more typically held by older informants.

When picking mushrooms, a prayer can be a magical tool for success. The prayers ask not only for mushrooms, but also for protection from being lost or bitten by a snake. They can be completely individual:

I would get lost when mushroom picking but then I created a short prayer. I would say it while entering the forest and I would not get lost and I never came back empty-handed. (Marcinkevičienė 2014: 87)

Mushrooms mushrooms, boletes,  
Colonel of all mushrooms,  
Look at me,  
Run to me. (LII BR F73 1096(12): 34)

We are waiting for mushrooms and they do not come, so when we see the young moon, we make a cross sign and say this prayer: “Young moon, the prince of the sky, sow mushrooms for us.” (Marcinkevičienė 2014: 87)

It is interesting to note that even today, prayers are sometimes written down. However, the informants are reluctant to share them. Here are just three examples of prayers recorded during the expeditions: “When you enter the forest, you say ‘God, help me find mushrooms’” (LTRF cd 1814); She looks at the moon and says: “Moon, heavenly father, give me mushrooms this year” (LTRF cd 1816); On the way to mushroom picking, she crosses her fingers and says: “May I have a bright road, a happy road so that I have seen nothing, heard nothing, and so that the Devil will bring me home happily” (LTRF cd 1820).

These examples were recorded in Dzūkija, a region in south-eastern Lithuanian. On the other hand, in Aukštaitija, in the eastern part of Lithuania, we managed to record the single case of a 51 year old woman hoping to find more mushrooms and starting to sing. This is a practice she learned from her mother:

If they couldn't find porcini boletes, for example, ... my mother ... she would say, ... “You have to sing”, but I have the feeling that it was a ‘belly

song' – whatever you sang. ... This is what I remember, and if I don't find any boletes, I start humming too. (LTRF cd 1853)

This example clearly shows how some of the ritual practices involved in picking mushrooms can be adopted in a quite intuitive way within a tradition. In this eastern region of Lithuania, close to the border with Belarus, folklorists often record archaic material.

## Mushrooms as mythical beings

Another group of belief narratives is related to the perception of mushrooms as mythical beings. The first belief is that just like humans or animals, mushrooms allegedly suffer from the evil eye. According to a popular belief, well known across Lithuania from the ancient times, when it has been seen, a mushroom stops growing. For example:

If the person saw a mushroom with his eyes, the mushroom will no longer grow. (LTA 1315(207))

If one finds a mushroom, even if it is small, one [has to] pick it because it will no longer grow and will dry up and stay the same size. When a person sees a mushroom, the mushroom dries up. One can remember the place where one found a small mushroom and leave it there. If one comes to the same place after a few days, one will find a dry mushroom and it will not have grown. (LTA 1306(21))

In south-eastern Lithuania, known as the land of mushrooms, people believe that only the 'real' mushroom, boletes, does not grow when seen by human eyes:

- How can you see that a bolete doesn't grow?
- Boletes don't grow. And chanterelles, look at them, how they grow. And when no-one is looking, a bolete grows.
- Why doesn't it grow?
- How should I know, it gets surprised, it is afraid of being seen. A bolete only gets surprised. This is what people say: "Got surprised as this bolete..." (LTRF cd 587-18(29)).



It is very interesting that this belief persists to this day. The vast majority of the informants from the expeditions of 2022 and 2023, from all the ethnocultural regions of Lithuania, still believe this.

Despite the fact that mushrooms, like humans, can suffer from the evil eye, mushrooms are perceived as some kind of alien representatives of the natural world, spirits of the forest, or living beings. People used to believe that mushrooms can hear. In addition, they hide from mushroom pickers: “It was not usual to be loud – you will scare the mushrooms away. We used to go to the forest as early as possible while mushrooms were still asleep, not yet hidden away” (Marcinkevičienė 2009). This is a very ancient view of the mushroom as a mythical being.

Nevertheless, although it is rare, this animistic relationship with mushrooms is still witnessed today. One 65 year old woman from our expedition to the south-eastern part of Lithuania remembered that as a child she was constantly told that if you shouted in the forest the mushrooms would hide. Another 56 year old woman from the Western part of Lithuania says: “My head must be empty because I need to hear where the mushrooms grow. If I put something on my head, I can’t hear anything” (LTRF cd 1790).

There is also an interesting practice related to mushrooms as mythical creatures, unknown in the past and recorded only in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There are three examples:

When mushroom picking, if you take out a bag or knife too early, mushrooms will not appear, they will not come out. (LTRF cd 595-01/1/)

I have a superstition: never take your knife out of your pocket until you find the first mushroom. ... It is ... Don’t frighten the mushrooms. ... Here’s one I made up. (LTRF cd 1836)

Once you’ve told yourself that there won’t be any mushrooms, that there won’t be any mushrooms, and you’ve folded the knife and you’ve already put it down, then, well, you’ve usually found boletes then. ... And you find yourself discovering those mushrooms. ... Then you fold the knife, you put it down, but in your head it’s a different story. I fold the knife, not because I don’t want to pick any more, but because I want to pick mushrooms. Because that’s what happens. (PA)

These mushroom picking practices, which have only been recorded in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and have no equivalents in the ancient tradition, seem to be an intuitive expression of the mushroom pickers' relationship with the environment and mushrooms as mythical beings. Moreover, the second informant quoted emphasises that he invented this 'superstition'. It is also clear from the third story quoted that the submitter reacted naturally to the situation, as he felt he should when picking mushrooms having not acquired this knowledge from someone else. It seems that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century some beliefs related to mushrooms and mushroom picking practices function as intuitively derived individual knowledge that exists without any of the transmission that is inherent in the traditional culture.

## Conclusions

Belief narratives in Lithuanian mushroom picking practices reveal themselves in three ways: through the conception of the mushroom fortune, through the rituals and magical practices of mushroom picking, and through the notion of mushrooms as mythical beings.

The older mindset is characterised by a much more intense mythological perception of the world, which is why belief narratives about mushroom picking practices are much more common in the older folkloristic research material.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, while some beliefs still exist, albeit on a smaller scale, and we can observe them as relicts of the old mythological mindset, new beliefs and mushroom picking practices that are not characteristic of traditional Lithuanian culture can also be recorded. These reveal themselves to be intuitive, individual knowledge that exists without any form of traditional transmission.

Today the number and extent of belief narratives in mushroom picking practices differ between different ethnocultural regions of Lithuania. Most of the relicts of the old mythological way of thinking can be found in eastern (Aukštaitija) and south-eastern (Dzūkija) Lithuania, which are considered by folklorists to be the most conservative ethnocultural regions.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that such a strict distinction between mycophilic and mycophobic cultures does not fully reflect the reality of the situation. Ethnomycological research in recent decades has shown that mycophilic communities still exist in different parts of the world (Zent et al. 2004; Guissou et al. 2008; Garibay-Oriel et al. 2012; Braday et al. 2015; Kang et al. 2016) and that the tendency to collect mushrooms is often linked to the preservation and transmission of old lifestyles and traditions. On the other hand, there are ethnic groups that have always been mycophobic. These include some of the inhabitants of the Chukchi Peninsula in remote Siberia, who did not start collecting mushrooms for food until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when mushroom-loving Russians moved into their land (Yamin-Pasternak 2007). The indigenous people of western Alaska have also long been mycophobic (Yamin-Pasternak 2008b).

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LTA – Catalogue of Lithuanian Beliefs at the Lithuanian Institute of History.  
LTRF – Audio records of Lithuanian Folklore Archives at the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore.  
PA – Recordings of interviews with informants from the author's personal archive.

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