

On 'Modern' Christians, Consumption, and the Value of National Identity in Post-Soviet Lithuania

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ABSTRACT *Following the demise of the Soviet Union, Lithuania has opened up to global systems not only as a competitive consumer market but also as a new sphere of influence for various neo-Protestant charismatic churches. As signifiers of 'modernity,' transnational commodities and religious faiths are especially appealing to younger generations of Lithuanians who use them to redefine the meanings of their selfhood at the present moment of the disorienting 'transition to the West'. Focusing on differential drinking practices at Evangelist weddings, this paper examines the ways in which 'modern' goods, such as Coca-Cola, become implicated in reconfigurations of Lithuanian national identity and 'tradition' as its significant support. I argue that transnational imports devalue this identity, undermine practices and dispositions perceived as 'traditional,' and create unprecedented intergenerational disjunctures. Simultaneously, imported goods and religions serve as means for constructing 'modern' selves and their concomitant sociabilities. I suggest that transnational forms engender the experience of rupture and estrangement, and at the same time help alleviate that experience. 'Modern' identities produced through such forms may be seen as a strategy for responding to the destabilizing postsocialist 'transition'.*

KEYWORDS *Modernity, Evangelical Christianity, wedding rituals*

As in other nation-states of the European East, the so-called transition in post-Soviet Lithuania is defined not only by the social discord resulting from the ideological reorientation to 'the West,' but also by encroaching transnationalism – a process that entails a continuous flow of various global forms across national boundaries (Watson 1997). While 'Western' ideas concerning democracy, civil society, and market economy still remain largely elusive, diverse 'modern' consumer goods as well as popular images and institutions from 'the West' have become an integral part of the cultural landscape.

Commodification and the emergence of various foreign religious faiths are among the most salient manifestations of transnationalism and its concomitant 'modernity' in post-Soviet Lithuania.¹ When in the early 1990s this newly independent Baltic republic opened up to various transnational influences, along with Moonists, Jehovah's Witnesses, neo-Protestant Evangelists, to mention a few, there arrived Marlboros, Big Macs, Coca-Cola, and the like. Today, these modernist imports serve as significant modalities through which many Lithuanians conceptualize and (re)define the meanings of their selfhood in the broader context of the destabilizing transition.

In this paper, I am concerned with foreign commodities and churches at the interface with Lithuanian national identity. I show that these imports undermine the value of this identity, while at the same time offering resources for constructing various modern selves and their attendant sociabilities.² Subjects who actively pursue modernity not merely emulate 'a Western image' or attempt to generate 'a vision, a fantasy of the good life' (Watson 1997:5), but they in fact produce new and very real forms of collectivity and belonging. For them the construction of modern and largely non-national selves through appropriating transnational goods and institutions constitutes a significant strategy for anchoring themselves in postsocialism's bewildering milieu (see Berdahl 1999b; Douglas & Isherwood 1996; Friedman 1990; cf. Gillette 2000; Stambach 2000). I also ask what happens to tradition *vis-à-vis* emerging representations of modernity. Sustained primarily in the family during the Soviet years, various practices perceived as traditional served as important vehicles for the maintenance of national identity and unity in resistive opposition to Moscow's regime. Today, such practices are being reassessed or discarded altogether as increasingly irrelevant, thereby fracturing the family and the nation in unprecedented ways.³

In more general terms, the present paper is an ethnographic example of how transnationalism and its modernist influences are received nationally at a specific locale of the contemporary postsocialist world. Resisted by some, embraced by others, those influences, I argue, create the experience of rupture, estrangement, and loss. Simultaneously, and paradoxically, they also provide resources to overcome that experience (Miller 1995:2).

To capture these ongoing transformations, I focus on one particular group of Lithuanians who seek to refashion themselves as modern subjects by embracing an imported religious faith and by becoming consumers of various foreign goods. I am concerned here with a cohort of young people who have recently joined 'The Word of Faith' (*Tikėjimo žodis*), a neo-Protestant Evan-

gelical congregation based in the capital of Vilnius. The religious identity assumed by these persons has distanced them from their families and reshaped their perceptions of the value of national identity. Furthermore, Evangelism has led them to adopt distinctive practices of, and attitudes toward, consumption, such as preoccupation with Western commodities, images, and styles, as well as abstinence from alcohol.

My primary ethnographic setting is Evangelist wedding celebrations. As life-cycle rituals, these familial occasions are especially productive sites for the exploration of ways in which different generations project, debate, and reconfigure their national selves. As a 'revelatory incident' (Fernandez 1986), I use Rasa and Petras's wedding to show how the drinking preference of these Evangelists – their conscious choice of Coca-Cola (*koka-kola*) as a preeminently modernist beverage – is differentially employed as a strategy for the articulation of their novel identity. It conflicts with the expressions of Lithuanian selfhood by their parents through such traditional practice as the consumption of vodka (*degtinė*).⁴

Before focusing on Evangelist weddings, below I offer a brief discussion of opposing intergenerational perceptions of transnational imports at the present moment. I then move on to consider the principal strategies whereby Lithuanian identity and unity were sustained in the family under socialism. Using a broader temporal perspective, in this section I show that Soviet consumer practices often served as important tools for the assertion and consolidation of common membership in the nation.

Modern Churches and New Goods as the Foreign Other

Representing the same 'cultural invasion,' diverse imported commodities and confessional denominations in the post-Soviet context share a number of strikingly similar features. Many consumer goods from abroad are produced by transnational giants which are not easily identifiable with a particular place of origin. Similarly, various foreign religious denominations currently operating in Lithuania are 'deterritorialized,' that is, they freely traverse national boundaries and are not associated with any specific cultural locale (Appadurai 1996; Watson 1997). Also, both global manufacturers and churches use similar techniques to promote themselves, as well as to attract consumers or to recruit believers, respectively. As Katherine Verdery (1999:80) comments, the attitude of various transnational religions and their earnest missionaries resembles 'that of Western firms seeing the former Soviet bloc as awash with potential customers for their goods' (cf. Borenstein 1999:441).

Just as consumer imports contrast and conflict with locally produced goods, notably diverse foodstuffs and drinks, transnational faiths compete with national religions; for instance, with the Orthodox church in Romania or Russia, with Catholicism – in Poland, Hungary, or Lithuania.

One popular Catholic priest in his forties confided in me that Lithuania's national church found it very hard to compete with the new 'sects,' and especially 'The Word of Faith,' which had much more effective means with which to attract new followers: 'When they landed here, we [the Catholic church] should've right away looked for ways to become more contemporary as well... We never expected that they'd become so successful... Our church is still very traditional, ossified. They managed to attract and keep many young people... It's a loss... We, Lithuanians, should strive for unity, and now... we have all those splits,' the priest lamented. In a highly similar lamentation, a frustrated dairy farmer told a tv reporter that he was going out of business, as he could not compete with 'all those Western yoghurts and cheeses'.

Goods and churches from abroad are analogical in yet another imported way. For most Lithuanians they constitute a category of signifiers which subsume the concepts of novelty and modernity. At the same time, they are powerful representations of foreignness, difference, and otherness. In other words, from the local point of view, they are indexical of everything that is 'not ours'. Precisely because of these meanings younger generations of Lithuanians, those born in the 1970s or 1980s, find these global forms especially appealing. By contrast, their parents, who lived most of their adult lives under the Soviet regime, roughly from 1940 to 1990, typically view diverse transnational imports with unease, suspicion, or mistrust. Many resist them as invasive forms that challenge and undermine everything that is 'ours,' or national.

To illustrate, many of my informants in their fifties and sixties perceived Western foodstuffs as contaminated with preservatives and as such potentially harmful to one's health and well-being. In the words of one middle-aged accountant, such foreign goods were 'full of poison'. Others questioned why such imports as Swiss chocolate or Italian salami were so wastefully packaged in glossy, shiny materials. 'Just to trick you into buying them ... there's no substance inside,' a retired engineer reasoned. Often diverse goods from abroad, such as Nescafé or Johnnie Walker Scotch, were referred to as 'fake' or 'not real' (*netikra*). A few of my interlocutors explained to me that what one saw in the overflowing supermarkets of Vilnius were mere imitations of 'real' Western products which hardly ever reached the Lithuanian consumer. One elderly couple told me that most imported commodities were part of

the Western conspiracy to deceive Lithuanian shoppers and ‘to just pull the money out of our pockets’.⁵ These sceptical consumers typically viewed Lithuanian-made foodstuffs and beverages – dairy or meat products, baked goods, beer, vodka, and the like – as natural, pure, better tasting, and of superior quality. (Usually, but not always, they were more affordable as well.) Local goods were habitually referred to as traditional and ‘ours’. Often various disparaging pronouncements concerning specific imported products provoked broader discussions of the ongoing ‘return’ to the West, in which my informants debated and questioned, for instance, the ‘suitability’ of free-market economy for Lithuania. I heard the qualifier ‘not real’ used to characterize not only particular foreign goods, but also to refer to the more general politico-economic and socio-cultural changes brought about by the transition: ‘All this Westernization (*vesternizacija*) is not real... it’s a mirage,’ one journalist stated, grinning sarcastically.

Similarly to consumer imports, most older Lithuanians viewed various foreign churches as pernicious, greedy ‘sects’ which threatened the socio-moral integrity of the nation. Referring specifically to ‘The Word of Faith,’ one well-known intellectual characterized this neo-Protestant congregation as ‘parasites... that deserved a good whipping’. Echoing sentiments of his generation, he added: ‘We have our own [Catholic] church... we don’t need these sly charismatics (*sukti charizmatikai*)’. Many construed the proliferation of new religions as evidence of ‘too much freedom or democracy’. In sum, both imported commodities and religions were habitually seen by elders as dangerous. Various critical statements in daily discourses, as quoted above, might be understood as resistive strategies whereby foreign consumer goods and churches were ‘de-fetishized’ and ‘de-sanctified,’ respectively, thereby neutralizing the perceived danger inherent in them (Meyer 1998).

While for most representatives of older generations various imports are alienating and potentially destructive, for young people they typically constitute ‘enchanting’ means whereby to construct modern selves and sociabilities. Such opposing intergenerational perceptions of the foreign other are shaping distinctive forms of consciousness. As a result, nationality as a basis for self-identification is losing its value, and Lithuanian tradition as its important support is becoming progressively less compelling. The sense of national *communitas* and solidarity is eroding as well.

Many of my older informants nostalgically reminisced about the strong Lithuanianness (*lietuviybė*) and oneness (*vienybė*) that collectively defined them *vis-à-vis* the Soviet regime. The theme of the erosion of *lietuviybė* and *vienybė*

was central to numerous lamentations that I heard while in the field. Drawing on the recent theorizing on nostalgia, Petra Rethmann (1997:772) argues that such discourses in postsocialist contexts not only enable actors to 'appropriate and assert feelings toward their own history,' but also 'to express their detachment from a disempowering, harsh present'. Nostalgic laments voiced by Lithuanian men and women who lived the better part of their lives under Soviet rule were precisely such expressions. They evoked the recent past and projected 'a vision that desires what cannot be had: stable histories and a stable reality' (Rethmann 1997:772), as well as a more stable sense of the national self, one might add (cf. Berdahl 1999a:135; see also Battaglia 1995).

The Soviet Regime, Consumer Shortages, and Resistive Lithuanianness

Like most colonial regimes, the Soviet system saw consumption as an effective tool of domination (see Lampland 2000, for a perspective on Soviet power as a form of colonialism). Unlike Western colonialism which sought to create new consumer needs among its subjects, the Soviet-style hegemony minimized the needs of the people under its rule (Burke 1996; Verdery 1996). While the regime used consumption as a significant control mechanism, the people mobilized it as an arena for the articulation of their discontent *vis-à-vis* that control. In Soviet Lithuania, consumer practices often were political acts of resistance. Like any other expression of dissent at that time, these acts were informed by the ideology of nationalism.

Under socialism, consumption was often closely intertwined with Catholicism and was integral to various enactments of tradition in familial settings, a domain that persistently resisted the penetration of the Soviet state (Johnson 1992; cf. Platz 2000). The interconnection between consumption, religiosity, and practices felt to embody Lithuanian tradition was especially evident at illegal celebrations of Christmas and Easter, as well as at various life-cycle rituals. Such familial occasions as baptisms, weddings, or funerals assembled persons of different generations, and were invariably used as sites for asserting Lithuanianness through consumption of diverse dishes and drinks that were perceived as 'ours' or traditional.

In the Soviet command economy of chronic shortages, which became especially acute in the mid-1970s, the procurement of liquor or even of the most basic foodstuffs for the preparation of festive dishes was typically a formidable challenge. For instance, buying eggs for the Easter table, obtaining yeast for making *šliziškai*, 'uniquely Lithuanian' biscuits served on Christmas Eve,

or purchasing a crate of vodka for a marriage celebration would often entail hours of lining up in stoic endurance, provided those goods were available at all. Line-ups often served as public forums for quiet protests against the profoundly inefficient distributive system administered by Moscow-based functionaries (Humphrey 1995). One would typically buy much larger quantities of food than the immediate needs called for. Whatever was procured was shared with close relatives in anticipation that they would reciprocate with goods that they purchased through their forays into the barren state-owned stores. For essential produce or bootleg alcohol, many urban Lithuanians frequently relied on their rural kin with 'private' plots of land in the collectivized countryside. Shaped by the economy of shortages, such consumer practices constituted loci for experiencing familial connectivity and for imagining the nation as a unified community (Anderson 1983; Holy 1996). Procuring and consuming goods that the regime 'said you didn't need and shouldn't have' (Verdery 1996:29) helped sustain ideological common ground for the reinforcement of national identity and togetherness in defiance of that regime.

Nurtured for decades in the private sphere, in the late 1980s, quietly resistive Lithuanianness became displayed and celebrated in mass rallies, manifestations, and 'human chains'. In perestroika's more liberal environment of 'openness and democratization,' these events drew together tens of thousands of people to protest against the Soviet occupation, as well as to express their collective desire to be 'a free, modern country.' This sense of heightened national *communitas* powered Lithuania's independence movement which, in the early 1990s, sparked the demise of the Soviet Union (Ashbourne 1999). Among the objectives of the Soviet state was the elimination of national sentiment as a potentially subversive political force. The repressive colonial policies, paradoxically, fortified that sentiment and turned it into a counter-ideology directed against the system itself.

During the Soviet years, the national consciousness and unity maintained *vis-à-vis* a despised common enemy constituted the nation's moral capital – 'a capital rooted in defining certain values as correct and upholding them' (Verdery 1996:107). Accumulated primarily in networks of kinship by resisting the Soviet-Russian occupation, today this capital is being lost to consumer capitalism and transnationalism. As Lithuania's significant other is shifting from the 'backward' East to the modern West, and as many individuals and groups strive to identify with that other, rather than resist it, national selfhood is progressively losing its value and binding power. I often heard in

casual daily conversation and in the media that the 'return' to the West was responsible for these transformations. 'Lithuanians don't want to be Lithuanian anymore... Today they just look to the West,' a retired librarian lamented.⁶

I now return to the neo-Protestant Evangelists to examine in greater ethnographic detail the ways in which *they* 'look to the West,' as they seek to constitute themselves as modern subjects. While in some sense 'extreme,' the case of these believers and consumers exposes the ongoing transformations in Lithuanian selfhood at the present post-Soviet moment in especially bold relief. These Evangelists are certainly not alone in their preoccupation with various transnational imports. As another example, Lithuania's new entrepreneurs (*verslininkai*), most of them in their twenties or thirties, conspicuously consume various imported goods (cars, cellular phones, specific brands of French wine, to mention a few) and join such global institutions as 'Lions Clubs'. As for the Evangelists, for these yuppie Lithuanians, engaged in what might be called self-Westernization, national sentiment has little, if any, relevance. To paraphrase Ulf Hannerz (1993:387), these young persons are in the nation but not necessarily of it. The novel identities that they create through appropriating the transnational are representative of coveted foreignness and modernity.

'The Word of Faith' as a Modernist Congregation

The beginnings of charismatic religious communities in Lithuania date back to the final years of perestroika. Largely thanks to a group of American and Scandinavian Evangelists, a neo-Protestant church, known today as 'The Word of Faith,' was established in Vilnius in 1988. Comprised originally of just a handful of born-again Christians, this religious community grew rapidly, and in the early 1990s became one of the largest, most active and visible 'sects' imported to Lithuania from the West. Today, this charismatic church has chapters in over forty cities and towns of Lithuania with a total registered membership of over four thousand believers. This 'sect' continues to attract new members, and its social make-up is becoming increasingly diverse. Students, factory workers, entrepreneurs, actors, teachers, doctors, to mention a few, are among the followers of this church. Significantly, as one of the congregation's newsletters has reported recently, the congregation 'is becoming younger'. According to this publication, approximately two thirds of its members are in their twenties and thirties.⁷ Like themes of novelty, prosperity, and success, representations of youth are highly prominent in various discursive and performative practices of the congregation. In Evange-

list rhetoric, 'youth' is commonly evoked as a liminal social category with a promise of socio-moral revision, renewal, and continuity (Stambach 2000; cf. Varga 1994).

The Vilnius-based congregation holds twice-weekly prayer meetings, which, in the fall and winter, take place in a rented factory auditorium. From April through September, Evangelists convene in an enormous tent furnished with rows of plastic chairs and a barren stage with a few floodlights – a preeminently modernist space of worship that contrasts sharply with the city's Catholic churches of ornate Gothic and Baroque styles. As the main venue during the summer months, every year the tent of 'The Word of Faith' is set up in a picturesque valley framed by Vilnius's 'new' residential neighborhoods and their uniform Soviet-style apartment blocks, as well as by a busy expressway connecting the city's industrial areas and its Brezhnev-era bedroom communities. At the time of my research, a project for the construction of an 'ultra modern' church building as a permanent place of worship in this valley was approved by the municipal government.

Generously supported by its Western sponsors, 'The Word of Faith' runs a few Bible centers, kindergartens, primary schools, and summer camps. The congregation also publishes a number of periodicals, numerous promotional brochures, as well as more substantial volumes dealing with subjects ranging from 'early Christianity' to self-help manuals for living 'a better life.' These publications, along with audio/video cassettes and CDs with recordings of preachings and 'Christian easy rock,' are sold at the newly renovated, hi-tech offices of the congregation. Some of them are available for reading and listening on the community's smartly designed and fully bilingual, i.e. Lithuanian and English, website (www.btz.lt).

On its recently expanded TV network, every Sunday 'The Word of Faith' church broadcasts a show which covers community news and latest developments in Evangelist congregations around the world. This show commonly features sermons delivered by the senior pastors and performances of 'modern Christian music of awakening.' This 'contemporary Christian TV program' now boasts an audience of 30,000 viewers throughout Lithuania.

The annual conference of the Living Gospel, usually convened in August, is the high point in the church's social calendar. Taking place in the tent, this event attracts thousands of Evangelists from all over Lithuania to pray and to listen to special sermons delivered by the local elders of the congregation, as well as by preachers visiting on the occasion from the United States, Britain, Sweden, and other countries. Since these foreign speakers use English, the lan-

guage of transnationalism, sequential translation into Lithuanian is provided for the audience. As a number of my informants pointed out, presentations given by the 'foreigners' were perfect opportunities to improve their English. One young Evangelist who knew English quite well told me that she covered her ears with her hands whenever she heard the Lithuanian translation, for she wanted to understand 'the Lord's word in English as much as possible.'

Various representations of modernity were integral to numerous other practices and discourses of the congregation. For instance, the sermons that I heard at 'The Word of Faith' meetings, combined – often in highly unexpected and creative ways – Evangelist rhetoric, complete with quotations from the New Testament, with explicit references to consumption of diverse foreign goods. A woman pastor in her thirties, dressed in a sweater, blue jeans and Adidas sneakers, was preaching to the congregation incorporating throughout her sermon images of cars and computers which, being imports from abroad, were among the most desired markers of consumer modernity in Lithuania at the time of my research. According to the pastor, one of the many blessings that the Lord showered on those who embraced Evangelical Christianity was leaving your 'confused... and painful past behind... [which] is erased from your new self... like pressing that delete button on the computer keyboard'. In another passage she metaphorically compared the process of becoming a 'believer' to 'a journey toward a new and better place in a comfortable car driven by Jesus'.

I witnessed numerous similar discourses in which images of Evangelical religiosity coexisted in complementary relationships with various representations of specific consumer goods and practices. Typically the latter were invested with meanings of novelty, 'progress,' and instant success. Such religious-consumerist discourses constituted the principal symbolic repertoire of the community. As a number of writers indicate, the fetishization of imported goods and often money, or what is known as 'prosperity gospel,' typically informs various discursive and performative acts of neo-Protestant charismatic communities around the world (see Coleman 1996; Gifford 1994; cf. Englund 1996). 'The Word of Faith' is certainly no exception.

The congregation's 'contemporary Christian' multimedia (the website, CDs, videos, publications), its extensive connections with Evangelical churches around the world, the difference in the style of worship (casual Western attire, pop music, the tent), the use of the English language at the annual conference, and so forth, exemplify settings in which the modern collective identity of this religious group is symbolically produced and consolidated (Cohen 1985).

Additionally, these shared objects, images, and practices serve as devices with which members of 'The Word of Faith' construct their distinctive Evangelical *communitas*. Solidarity and unity are continuously emphasized as some of the defining features of the congregation at its prayer meetings and other gatherings. The ideas concerning the value of sharing and togetherness are further reinforced and consolidated through the members' interaction in smaller groups, or what my informants called 'cells,' defined by profession, age, gender, marital status, disability, and so forth. In sum, 'The Word of Faith' provides its followers with a host of symbolic media which enable them to seek modernity and 'worldliness' (Ferguson 1999). While offering 'a scope of identification far beyond local culture' (Meyer 1998:773), this religious congregation provides its members with a social setting for an alternative kind of communing and for a meaningful way of being together 'at home' in the context of the confounding transition.

Modern Christians, New Consumers: 'Not Our People'

The 'cell' that Rasa and Petras belong to comprises some thirty persons or so, most of them in their twenties, who collectively identify themselves as 'believers' or 'Christians' (*tikintys, krikščionys*). Some of them are students of business administration, law, or foreign languages, others are self-employed or work for various Western companies based in Vilnius. Admired and celebrated by the other members of 'The Word of Faith' as 'the future of our church,' these young believers are media-savvy, money-minded, and consumer-oriented.⁸ Although conspicuous abstainers from alcohol and tobacco, these Evangelists are active and often discriminating consumers of a wide variety of imported commodities. To construct a modernist self-image, these members of the congregation wear blue jeans, sneakers, designer shoes and suits, and so forth. They drive imported cars, watch Hollywood films, soap operas, and read glossy fashion or travel magazines. In addition to getting together at the bi-weekly prayer meetings, these believers convene regularly at their homes for some informal socializing or for more private readings of the Bible, which are sometimes followed by a visit to their favorite downtown pizzeria, or by some shopping at the city's new supermarkets. As Petras explained to me: 'All this is about our desire to get closer to the apostolic church ... the original, simple community of Christians who used to assemble to worship Jesus Christ. Yet, this simplicity entails a great deal of active engagement, like being together, doing many things together, helping each other... Of course, we'd be happy if our parents could be closer to us, if there

were no barriers, but they just can't understand our faith, they're so traditional... They lived their entire lives in the Soviet system... they are Soviet people (*sovietiniai žmonės*), really'.

Other members of the 'youth cell' told me about their parents' efforts to re-establish closer ties with them by attempting to embrace Evangelism. Rita, a woman in her early twenties, recounted to me how she once 'caught' her father reading the notes she had taken at the Bible school and at the congregation meetings of 'The Word of Faith'. On another occasion she discovered some booklets about Evangelical Christianity in his bed under the pillow. Having noticed her father's interest, Rita invited him to attend a few meetings of the congregation. After a few visits, the father gave up, concluding that 'it was not a church but a circus performing, appropriately, in a tent'. Rita's mother, who considered herself a Catholic, could not even touch her daughter's 'sectarian literature'. She refused outright to have anything to do with 'those Evangelists' whom she viewed as a 'sect' on a crusade to destroy 'everything that's ours.' A smile on her face, Rasa quoted her mother as saying: 'Your people [Evangelists] don't care about our traditions, church ... our nation... they are not our people.'

The young Evangelists perceive their membership in the 'The Word of Faith' as constitutive of their modern collective identity, which they juxtapose with the values and conventions of their parents' generation seeking to maintain Lithuanianness and national oneness through tradition. For these believers the latter concept subsumes an array of various practices and dispositions. To embrace Catholicism, to be interested in folk rituals, and/or in the nation's history is to be 'old-fashioned' and hence traditional, as my informants pointed out over pizza and Coke after one Bible reading session.

Many of these modern Christians and new consumers associate Lithuanian tradition not only with some generic detemporalized 'pastness,' but also with recent Soviet history and its familial discourses of unified and resistive nationhood. In other words, they see the traditional as part of the Soviet past – a past that remains firmly entrenched in the post-Soviet present. (Note that Petras referred to his parents as both traditional and Soviet people.) By turning away from representations considered traditional, these believers distance themselves from their parents and, through them, from both the past and the present.

In addition to providing a social domain in which to challenge and discard 'old-fashioned' Lithuanian values and conventions, 'The Word of Faith' also enables the Evangelist youth to shape their novel and largely non-na-

tional selves by engaging in various Evangelist forms of sociability and solidarity which they view as a kind of alternative 'kinship'. A great deal of this sociability is constructed and maintained not only through religious practices but also by sharing the same commodity choices. Coca-Cola is one of them. As I will show in the discussion of Rasa and Petras's wedding below, drinking Coke provides these Christians with a significant basis for the mutual validation of their identity.

Specifically, in the following section I focus on the so-called seeing-off (*išlydėtuvės*) and welcoming ceremonies (*sutiktuovės*) which, conducted by newlyweds' parents and considered as quintessentially Lithuanian and traditional nuptial rites, typically frame civil and church ceremonies and invariably involve the consumption of alcohol, commonly vodka. I also include a description and analysis of the wedding reception.

Although other alcoholic beverages along with some mineral water and juice were served at Rasa and Petras's wedding as well, they seemed largely incidental to the Coke and vodka which were central to the principal rhetorical and performative acts of this ruptured social event. The Coke-vodka opposition provided the main matrix around which the intergenerational tensions and divisions of this wedding were generated and played out. When I inquired of the newlyweds why they had chosen Coke, they, somewhat taken aback by my question, responded: '*Koka-kola* tastes good... We buy it quite often. It's a different, contemporary (*šiuolaikiškas*) drink... We just like it.' 'I find the red label very attractive too,' the bride added. Most of Rasa and Petras's peers in the congregation seemed to be equally 'enchanted' by the modernity and foreign otherness of Coke.⁹

Rupturing the Wedding: Koka-kola vs. Vodka

When Rasa and Petras told their parents that there would be no alcohol at their upcoming wedding and that instead they would serve Coca-Cola and some mineral water at the reception, the parents were shocked and confused. The couple explained to them that at their church drinking alcohol was perceived as 'an elementary sin that a human being commits'. 'Of course, it's hard for them to understand such things,' Petras reasoned. 'But I don't blame them... they are very traditional people. They don't know how to look at the world from a contemporary angle, or how to live their lives differently... Our problem [with the wedding] is typical. Most of our friends from the church who got married recently had similar [wedding] conflicts over alcohol with their parents,' Petras added.

The couple's parents threatened to boycott the wedding by offering no financial support, by not inviting any family members, and by not showing up at the celebration of their marriage, unless alcohol was served. Petras quoted his mother as saying: 'What are you doing? What are you pretending to be? You're reaching for something entirely inappropriate... Why can't you have a wedding like all normal (*normalūs*) people... in a Catholic church, with a good reception.... That won't be a true wedding... without your family, without a few drinks... without our traditions... It won't even be a wedding.'

Barely a week before Rasa and Petras's nuptials, no resolution was reached, and the relationship with the parents was becoming increasingly tense. Just a few days before the wedding, the newlyweds and their parents got together to find a solution to the impasse. A 'black compromise' (*juodas kompromisas*), as Petras put it, was reached.¹⁰ The two parties decided to divide the reception table into two sections. The left side – for the 'drinkers' (*geriantys*), that is, the newlyweds' family members; the right side, alcohol-free – for the newlyweds and their friends.

When on the morning of the wedding day I arrived at Petras's place, a one-room apartment in a standard-issue apartment block on the outskirts of Vilnius, I was greeted at the door by the groom himself. He showed me into the only room where a few of his male friends were awaiting the seeing-off ceremony which Petras's parents insisted on having before the civil registry of his marriage at the city's 'Palace of Matrimony.' On the armchair there lay a well-used copy of the Bible. A few bottles of Coke were lined up on the coffee table. After introducing me to his friends, the groom added, 'You can call them "best men" (*pabroliai*), but they're not... We really don't want those traditional characters at our wedding... They're just my friends believers from our church,' Petras added, while inspecting his designer suit and adjusting his stylishly cropped hair in the hallway mirror. Petras's parents were busy in the kitchen preparing some refreshments and drinks for the seeing-off.

As we were anxiously discussing the busy day ahead of us, Petras's mother rushed in with a tray loaded with sausage sandwiches and a few shot glasses filled to the brim with vodka. After placing the tray beside the Coke bottles, she announced that her son's wedding was about to begin with the parents' seeing-off ceremony. Then she addressed Petras with a toast in which she wished him 'health, happiness, money,' and asked him never to forget, in her words, 'our Lithuanian values and traditions,' Petras's father looked on, a worried expression on his face. 'Let's drink to that,' he exclaimed as his wife paused to wipe off a few tears. As the groom's parents reached for the vodka, one of

his friends reached for the Coke. A few moments later the silence in the room was broken by the hissing sound of the warm, bubbly drink gushing out of the plastic bottle with the trademark red and white label. An almost identical seeing-off followed at Rasa's parents' place.

A few hours later, after the routine civil ceremony at the Vilnius 'Palace of Matrimony,' and a brief outing to the picturesque environs of the city for some wedding photographs, we pulled into the parking lot of the hotel where the reception was to take place. Surrounded by a dozen or so family mem-



Two generations: After the civil ceremony at the Palace of Matrimony. Photo: Gediminas Lankauskas.

bers, Rasa's and Petras's parents were lined up at the main door for the welcoming rite. In front of them, Rasa's uncle was marching back and forth, playing a cheerful polka on an accordion. 'Oh, God,' said Petras getting out of the white BMW, 'I hoped they would forget at least about the welcoming.'

When we approached the hotel entrance, Rasa's mother stepped forward and addressed the newlyweds: 'Now we want to welcome you as husband and wife.' In her hands she was holding a plate with a slice of rye bread, a pinch of salt, and two small glasses of vodka. (The tradition requires that the bride and groom split the slice of bread into two pieces, rub them in salt, and wash them down with vodka). Petras and Rasa stared at the plate momentarily, mumbled a hesitant 'thank you' and walked into the hotel without touching anything on the plate.

In the reception room, the table was arranged in the shape of a rectangle, in keeping with 'the old tradition of real Lithuanian weddings,' as Rasa's mother explained to me. On one side of the Π-shaped table, amidst the standard wedding fare of cold-cuts, herring, potato salad, and so forth, there stood a few bottles of 'Lithuanian vodka' (*Lietuviska degtinė*) and 'Soviet champagne' (*Tarybinis šampanas*).¹¹ On the other side, there were a couple of bottles of mineral water and a jug with some juice. As we were milling around waiting for the reception to begin, one of Petras's friends walked into the room carrying a crate with plastic bottles of *koka-kola*. A few moments later he was carefully arranging them in various patterns on the believers' section of the table.

Before we sat down for the wedding meal, Jolanta, one of the members of the bride and groom's entourage, stood Rasa and Petras beside the alcohol-free section of the table, instructed them to face each other while holding their hands, then turned toward the guests and announced solemnly: 'Rasa and Petras will now exchange their marriage vows in a Christian way (*krikščioniskai*).' As she read out the vows, the bride and groom repeated after her. Following the ceremony, Jolanta asked the guests to refrain from toasting throughout the reception and urged everyone instead to sign their wishes for the bride and groom on a poster-size sheet of paper attached to the wall. At the top of the blank sheet there ran a hand-written phrase: 'God is not that high' (*Dievas ne taip jau aukštai*).

As the supply of vodka and champagne steadily dwindled, the talk, laughter, and wedding songs coming from the drinkers' side of the table were becoming increasingly louder. The believers, sitting across from the drinkers, played word games to entertain themselves, took pictures of each other, or helped themselves to the food and Coke.

Displeased by the absence of any interaction between the two parties, Rasa's father staggered toward the believers' side of the table and intoned: 'Come on, you young Christian people ... join us, have some of our good stuff... put aside that American lemonade. What kind of wedding is this?' An awkward silence followed. The dessert was served early. The reception was over well before midnight.

Rasa's father used the word 'lemonade' (*limonadas*) as a disparaging epithet to mock the sweetness, bubblyness, and 'softness' of Coke, which he implicitly opposed to the 'bitterness and hardness' of Lithuanian vodka as an essential wedding drink. Incidentally, one of the most popular traditional wedding songs is about 'bitter vodka' (*Karti degtinė*). Typically sung by all the guests, shot-glasses in hand, this song is followed by the groom kissing the bride. *Karti degtinė* was not performed at the celebration of Rasa and Petras's marriage or at any other Evangelist weddings that I witnessed.

Two days later, on a Sunday afternoon, Petras in his trendy suit and Rasa in her white wedding dress stood on the brightly-lit stage of the congregation's tent. To the sound of 'Christian easy rock,' their matrimony was blessed by the church's most popular pastor, a reformed alcoholic in his forties. When at the end of the ceremony the bride and groom sealed their marital commitment with a long kiss, the tent filled to capacity by a rapt crowd of fellow believers, resounded with vigorous applause and fervent hallelujahs. No one from Rasa's or Petras's family was present at the ceremony. Although invited, the parents refused to attend the religious service, as they saw the ritual entirely inappropriate, or 'done in a way that is not ours' (*ne mūsų šikiai*), as Petras's mother put it. Instead the elders attended a Catholic mass at the city's Cathedral, where they prayed for the happiness of their children.

The seeing-off, welcoming and reception of this Evangelist wedding constitute skillfully devised 'definitional ceremonies,' to borrow Barbara Myerhoff's (1986:66) term, wherein the drinking preferences of the newlyweds and their friends are consciously employed as a means of self-recognition and self-definition *vis-à-vis* the traditional. The ostentatious consumption of Coke at the seeing-off at Petras's place, the rejection of the vodka shot as part of the welcoming rite, the displaying of Coke bottles on the believers' side of the table before the reception for everyone to see, and Jolanta's attempt to control toasting by insisting on hand-written wishes for the bride and groom, are illustrative of the 'rhetorics' employed by these new Christians in the making of their modern collective selves (Battaglia 1995; Paparoufali 1992).

According to Myerhoff (1986:272), definitional ceremonies constitute 'strategies that provide opportunities for being seen.' These 'counter-performances' at the center of which are the believers' abstinence from alcohol and their conspicuous consumption of Coke, enable them to show themselves to themselves and to others, as well as to dramatize their demand for the acknowledgment of the difference of their group identity. At this wedding, Coke becomes what Arjun Appadurai (1988:6) would call a 'thoroughly socialized' beverage whose sociality consists in the construction and projection of collective selfhood.

Social consumption of alcohol implies commensal relations which are anchored in the categories of commonality, solidarity, and sharing. Convivial drinking at a particular place and time is, or should be, 'positive' and 'constructive' (Douglas 1987; Gefou-Medianou 1992). Drinking, and drinking of vodka in particular, as a socially constructive practice, is pivotal to the traditional Lithuanian wedding, as well as to other familial and social gatherings. At the typical wedding, alcohol consumption is one of the most significant tools for integrating its various constituent rhetorical and performative acts. Indeed it is one of the principal defining media making this life-cycle ritual 'true.' Deeply embedded in tradition, the consumption of vodka on such celebratory occasions is, or is supposed to be, a facilitator of commensal unity and sociability, of familial as well as national togetherness. At the celebration of Rasa and Petras's marriage, the differential drinking preferences of the two groups of wedding guests – manifest in their respective choices of Coke and vodka – undermine the idea of 'a true wedding' as a site for collective connection and for the transmission of tradition.

I was often told that consuming alcohol, vodka in particular, being inebriated, and even displaying one's drunkenness to others were quintessential markers of Lithuanianness. Many of my informants construed social use of liquor as an indication of gregariousness, generosity, and camaraderie. Importantly, many viewed it as part of 'our tradition,' as one middle-aged teacher put it. Hence, to drink is to continuously reinvent and perpetuate that tradition, and thereby to imagine the nation, as well as to reproduce some of the fundamental features of Lithuanianness. Alcohol consumption might also be understood as a significant medium of meaning making – a vehicle for connecting to others and, through them, to the nation, as well as to broader cosmological concerns.¹²

At Rasa and Petras's wedding, Coke and vodka not only structurally split the seeing-off and welcoming ceremonies, but also spatially divide the re-

ception table into two sections, thereby mapping the opposing camps of believers and drinkers. Coke as a modernist beverage challenges tradition not only as it is perceived to be embodied in the consumption of vodka, but also as it is captured in the rectangular arrangement of the reception table – a shape meant to create a social space conducive to the display of the ranks and hierarchies of wedding participants, as well as to the celebration of familial concordance and unity.¹³

Yet this space, which the newlyweds' parents intended to reproduce, is intruded upon and rearranged by the believers' beverage of choice. The two drinks and their consumers transform this nuptial celebration into a spatially demarcated arena of symbolic struggle between two conflicting sociabilities and solidarities (Argyrou 1996). The two opposing consumer choices become implicated in an intergenerational debate in which the Evangelists and their parents seek to assert their respective moral stances concerning the appropriate relationship with the traditional and the modern, or the national and the transnational (Gewertz & Errington 1996).

At another Evangelist wedding, which I watched on video, the bride and groom, both of them members of the youth 'cell,' firmly insisted on eliminating 'all those funny Lithuanian traditions,' as they put it, and especially the seeing-off and welcoming. The newlyweds' parents, who considered themselves Catholic, reluctantly agreed to forgo these rites, but served plenty of alcohol at the reception to make it 'a true wedding.' At this particular event, bottles of beer and vodka were displayed on a separate, much smaller table placed at the entrance to the reception room. The table was covered with a white linen cloth and green twigs of rue – considered to be quintessentially traditional wedding symbols. Ignoring this improvised arrangement, the Evangelist newlyweds and their believer friends sat at the main reception table where they drank Coke, Sprite, and mineral water. Throughout the reception, their parents and other senior family members would stand up and head toward the smaller table to refill their empty glasses with vodka or beer. As at Rasa and Petras's wedding, the differential beverage choices divided the space of this familial event both literally and metaphorically (the table with the rue and white cloth at the door), and created two conflicting intergenerational sociabilities.

Like the space, the time of Rasa and Petras's wedding – conceived multiply as personal, familial, and national time – was meant by the parents to be constructed and shared in the spirit of communion by all the participants but was instead fractured and desynchronized by their distinctive consumer pref-

erences. The spatio-temporal unity of this familial occasion was further undermined by the absence of the newlyweds' parents at the Evangelist ceremony in the congregation's tent, which took place the following Sunday, two days after the reception.

The failure of this wedding to generate a sense of togetherness is poignantly expressed in Rasa's father's plea addressed to the believers at the end of the reception: 'Have some of our good stuff,' rather than 'some American lemonade,' as he put it with contempt. Coke is implicitly singled out as responsible for rupturing this celebratory event. In many respects, this wedding is an idiom that speaks to the nostalgic longing for an imagined community which is firmly rooted in cohesive Lithuanianness and national oneness. The parents of Rasa and Petras envisioned this family gathering, along with its traditions and some 'good stuff' to drink, as a perfect social occasion for capturing and reinforcing these increasingly elusive values.

Conclusion

This Evangelist wedding affords a productive ethnographic locus through which to gain a better understanding of the effects of transnational modernity on Lithuanian national identity at the present post-Soviet juncture of transitioning to the West. It points to the ways in which specific transnational commodities and institutions – Coca-Cola and neo-Protestant Evangelism, respectively – create significant intergenerational disjunctures, thereby undermining the integrity of the family which historically has served as the principal site for the maintenance of Lithuanian selfhood and national unity. With the fragmentation of the family, nationality as a basis of self-identification is diminishing in value, and practices considered traditional are losing their relevance. Accumulated and sustained under state socialism, the nation's moral capital, along with its core categories of familial and national oneness, are eroding.

Modernist transnational influences progressively divide Lithuanians and differentiate them against each other, rather than unite them against a dominant alien other, as was the case under Soviet rule. In doing so, these influences contribute to the experience of the post-Soviet transition as rupture, estrangement, as well as loss of dispositions and values perceived as 'ours'. At the same time, by becoming closely implicated in the identity of persons, specific transnational forms are mobilized by actors as resources which help alleviate that experience.

As signifiers of difference and foreign otherness, imported consumer goods and images are especially appealing to the younger generations of Lithua-

nians who appropriate them as tools whereby to construct modern and largely non-national forms of self-definition, identification, and belonging. New sociabilities produced by engaging with imported commodities and institutions serve as frameworks in which to construct more meaningful and coherent social existences *vis-à-vis* the systemic changes of the post-Soviet transition. The modern identity of the young Evangelist consumers can be seen as a strategy for responding to the destabilizing effects brought about by Lithuania's reorientation to the West.

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Notes

1. Throughout this paper I use the concept of 'modernity' (*modernybė, modernumas, šiuolaikiškumas*) not just as an analytical construct borrowed from the vast social theory on the 'modern,' but as a significant point of reference and preoccupation of my informants themselves (see Englund & Leach 2000; Miller 1994; cf. Gillette 2000; Rofel 1999; Taylor 2001). Centered around visions of material and moral parity with 'the West,' symbols, meanings, and imaginings of 'modernity' figure prominently in daily discourses and practices of many Lithuanians. In the context of the ongoing systemic change, the expansion of transnational 'modernity' is debated *vis-à-vis* the nation's Soviet past as a failed 'modern' era (see Ray 1997; Reid & Crowley 2000), as well as in relation to Lithuania's 'traditionalism' and 'Eastern backwardness.' While some Lithuanians embrace 'modernity,' others question, contest, and reject it. The concepts of 'modernity' and 'the West,' as well as their multiple cognate categories, such as 'foreign,' 'imported,' 'from abroad,' among others, are used as interpretive and situationally contingent. Similarly, the notion of 'tradition' is employed here as a symbolic construct of specific local conceptualization and (re)invention. Having clarified this, I see no point in further using these words and their various derivatives in quotation marks (cf. Gewertz & Errington 1996).
2. Although there exist a number of ethnographic studies exploring transnationalism in postsocialist contexts, the spread of 'deterritorialized' charismatic religions and the manners in which they articulate with changing patterns of consumption and/or with issues of identity, more broadly, remain largely unexamined (but see Szemere 2000; Varga 1994).

3. For a discussion of 'the family revolution' in East Asia *vis-à-vis* transnational influences, see Watson 1997:14–20. The ways in which Western goods have transformed 'societal and familial structures' in Ghana have been recently examined by Meyer 1998:755–765. For more general commentaries on how the family and kinship are reconstituted 'around increasingly global images,' see Miller 1995:13; cf. Appadurai 1996:43.
4. This paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork in Vilnius between July 1998 and September 1999. In addition to participating at Evangelical weddings as a photographer, I conducted numerous semi-structured interviews with the members of the cohort and with their parents. Despite their busy lives – many juggled a few jobs, took university courses, ran small businesses, etc. – my Evangelist informants were exceptionally generous with their time. We met at the church after the prayer sessions, went out for some fast food, and, on a few occasions, shopped together at the city's modern supermarkets. I spent many evenings at my informants' homes, typically one- or two-room rented apartments, where we talked about weddings, nationalism, and the multiple meanings of tradition. We discussed the Holy Spirit, the 'advantages' of Evangelism *vis-à-vis* Catholicism, Hollywood films, the 'abnormality' of daily life in Lithuania, and so forth.
5. For similar perceptions of Western goods and images in post-Soviet Russia, see Humphrey 1995:57–58; in today's Hungary – James 1995:298. For a discussion of more 'positive' local interpretations of transnational consumer imports in Westernizing Estonia, see Rausing 1998.
6. Such statements regarding the diminishing value of national identity and tradition in the face of encroaching transnational modernity are certainly not unique to Lithuania or postsocialism. See, for instance, Sutton 1994, for an ethnographic account of similar processes in contemporary Greece; in Cyprus – Argyrou 1996; in today's Papua New Guinea – Gewertz & Errington 1996.
7. See *Ganytojas (Shepherd)* No. 15 (64), August 1999.
8. Cf. Maris Gillette's compelling ethnography examining the ways in which Chinese Muslims mobilize differing transnational commodities and, to some extent, the Qur'an to pursue modernity, as well as to 'make sense of themselves and the world around them' (Gillette 2000:17).
9. At the time of my research, the Coca-Cola corporation was one of the most successfully established, or 'localized,' transnationals in Lithuania (Watson 1997). Coke advertisements were among the most dominant markers of consumer modernity in Vilnius, as well as in other urban areas. (The proverbial Golden Arches of McDonald's and larger-than-life billboard images of the 'cool' Marlboro man seemed to be Coke's only significant rivals in this regard.) I saw the trademark red and white sign, urging consumers to 'Drink Coca-Cola,' on stickers, watches, coasters, ashtrays, café umbrellas, trolley-buses, delivery trucks, and so forth. On one occasion, while waiting for a bus, I heard a group of teenagers sing in unison a tune from a Coke commercial repeatedly broadcast at the time on one of the local tv channels. In early December of 1998, a giant Christmas tree decorated with frisbee-size Coke signs was erected at a downtown square. Coca-Cola Inc. appeared to be firmly entrenched, both literally and metaphorically, in Lithuania's post-Soviet landscape. The 'coca-colonization' of the nation seemed to be un-

- mistakably under way (on Coke as a symbol of 'American cultural imperialism' in post-war France, see Chapter 3 in Kuisei 1993).
10. By 'black compromise' Petras means an agreement that potentially undermines his and Rasa's identity and integrity as Evangelist believers.
 11. 'Lithuanian vodka' and 'Soviet champagne' were among the most popular brands of liquor served at typical weddings and other celebrations or social gatherings. On a number of occasions I was told that these drinks were 'the best in quality' and in many ways superior to any foreign imports. Both vodka and champagne of these particular brands were perceived as 'our' drinks; commonly the bottles containing these beverages were displayed on reception tables side by side.
 12. For an interpretation of alcohol consumption as a 'soulful' Russian practice during and after the Soviet period, see Chapter 8 in Pesman 2000.
 13. At a typical Lithuanian wedding, the bride and groom sit at the end of the table shaped like the Greek Π. They are flanked by the senior bridesmaid and bestman and other members of the entourage, as well as by the 'matchmakers' (*pirsliai*) – preeminently traditional characters, who, incidentally, were conspicuously absent from all the Evangelist weddings that I attended or watched recorded on video. The newlyweds' parents, siblings, and other immediate family are habitually seated on the opposing sides of the table, next to the matchmakers and facing each other. Those guests who are not in any way related to the newlyweds sit farthest from them, sharing the other end of the table.

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