

Kupolinis Midsummer Night Festivities

A song for St. John's eve

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The traditions associated with the festivities of St. John's eve are closely related to the phenomenon of nature known as the summer solstice. The songs, games, dances, and rituals all reflect an individual's hope to positively influence the harvest, fertility, and success in life. Men and women equally connect the summer solstice with the fulfillment of hopes and dreams. Light, fortune, happiness – it seems all of these proceed through the portal of life.

The first verse draws a picture: the father's estate, white birch trees, swaying branches – St. John's eve is approaching and fires will be lit. Who will light the bonfire?

The **estate**. This is a simple village homestead, not a wealthy landowner's estate.

The **birch tree**. Birch bark and wood are known as excellent firewood, and were commonly used in bonfires. Birch tree branches were used to decorate homes for the feast of the Holy Trinity (the Sunday after Pentecost). On St. John's eve birch tree branches were piled up to build massive bonfires. It was believed that the light from the bonfires, as it illuminated the surrounding, newly planted fields, would protect them from any harm caused by nature, evil spirits, or witches' incantations. Bonfires would also be lit in pastures to ensure the well-being of grazing cattle.

Fire. The lighting of bonfires was an exceptionally important part of St. John's eve rituals. Fire provided light, warmth, and symbolized vitality and life. In folklore, the sun was called "mother": during the summer solstice, when the sun was at its highest peak, the bonfire took the sun's place on earth. The burning of bonfires was a way to show respect for the sun, without which there would be no life.

The subsequent verses explain how the bonfire activities would proceed. The oldest brother will gather the branches; the youngest sister will light the fire; the young girl will weave a wreath and concern herself with finding a suitable young man. Bonfire rituals were typically entrusted to an important and respected person: the most senior village elder, the most important family member, the oldest person named John, and so on. In this song, preparation of the bonfire is entrusted to the oldest brother, who is responsible for the welfare of his parents, for providing dowries for his sisters, and also finding them suitable marriage partners. He will be assisted by his youngest sister, who in all likelihood will soon be weaving a wreath and searching for a young man. "O blossoming wreath, dear wreath, how can I find myself a young man?"

The **wreath** is a symbol of love and immortality. Young girls would weave wreaths from flowers grown in their own garden, from wildflowers picked in the fields, also sometimes incorporating small tree branches, leaves, and vines. It was believed that greenery

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woven into a wreath gained extraordinary powers. Because a wreath formed a circle, it was a representation of the sun, and had a protective connotation. Wreaths made from oak leaves signified strength. These wreaths would be presented to those named John or Jane, or provided to decorate the front door of their home.

The sun, fire, warmth, water – all indicate life and motherhood. But to become a mother, a young woman needed to find a young man and start a family. St. John's eve was a magical night, because by performing certain rituals, it was believed that one could foretell the future – in particular, which young man would be one's life partner.

"*Kupolia*" or "*Kupolinės*" are ancient names for this feast, which celebrates the growth of all plant life. Variations of this word describe actions taken during this period of time. The verb "*kupoliauti*" refers to the gathering of medicinal grasses and herbs – one of the important rituals of St. John's eve. The noun form of the word, "*kupoliavimas*", additionally refers to the dancing and merrymaking that takes place during the festivities.

"We will dance all night, *kupolia*". There was dancing not only around the fire, but directly over the fire. People of all ages would jump over the fire, hoping to bring youthfulness to their lives and inspire the growth of all vegetation, especially the flax, wheat, and rye fields. One would leap as high as possible, as though trying to reach the sun, and draw on its health and energy.

Adding together all the symbols we have mentioned, St. John's eve and its associated rituals, games, and merrymaking made for a feast not only of meditation and spiritual renewal, but also joyful revelry. It joined together thoughts of both renewal, growth, and the transience of life.

Sources:

Vydūnas, "Collected Works" vol. IV, p. 35-39

Kupole Rože: Folklore and Customs of Pentecost and St. John's Eve, Vilnius 2003