

The Need to Believe in a Secularised World: Practises among the Basketball Fans in Lithuania

Une Kaunaite

If my team is out of luck, I go away and don't watch the game. As, if I am not there, they play better.

Being born in Lithuania, I was brought up in a culture which cannot see itself without basketball. While the rest of the world watches football, Lithuanians cannot miss basketball matches. This game created some of my identity, and thus I have decided to conduct my anthropology project on the fans of "Lietuvos Rytas", which is the main team of the capital of Lithuania, Vilnius. I started by analysing identities, but to my surprise, my encounters shifted my work towards the beliefs that fans hold.

'The holistic, cross-cultural and ethnographic traditions that define anthropology as an endeavour have never been more pronounced than in the field of sport' (Sands in Palmer 2002: 254). While I had never thought about basketball as a way of analysing supernatural beliefs, superstitions or even religiosity, my encounters project has proved Sands' theory. This paper will therefore include reflections upon my fieldwork, ideas of my informants and also theoretical works of different authors. I will firstly argue that people in a secularised world hold beliefs which they are embarrassed of, but from which seek security. I will then propose that anthropological terminology needs a new word to describe modern beliefs, which are especially prominent among sports fans. Finally, I will try to show that a popular phrase in Lithuania, saying that basketball is 'the second religion', is actually far nearer to the truth than most people saying it would ever believe. I will finish with ideas about private/public space, and the importance of studying these beliefs in a modern society.

I Am Not Superstitious. They Are

Initially, I planned to investigate basketball fans' identity and therefore chose an internet forum for "Lietuvos Rytas" fans, as this seemed the best place to speak with them. I logged in and asked questions about fandom, while from my own curiosity I also inquired about superstitions they hold for games. From fans I knew personally I was aware that most of them have some kind of superstitions. Theories also suggest that in a variety of sporting contexts, 'chance and uncertainty

are minimised by appealing to supernatural powers' (Palmer 2002: 254). Therefore I was very surprised when forum members either ignored my question or replied slightly mockingly that they did not believe in 'things like that'. My curiosity was piqued, so I began investigating superstitions that fans hold and whether or not it is commonplace.

I have found several basketball web pages and articles where people either discussed their superstitions anonymously or wrote about superstitions as common practice, and this inspired me to also question fans I knew personally. I therefore ended up using three different internet spaces: a forum, in which a rankings based hierarchical structure exists amongst members and people are only known by nicknames; anonymous comments, written by fans on basketball web pages; and people that I knew personally, at least to a certain extent, that I could individually talk with.

The answers from my friends usually started in a similar manner: 'I am sorry, but I don't really hold superstitions any more. Before I used to...', or, 'Almost the only one I have...' However, most of them were able to tell me at least one belief they hold and many practices that 'some other people do'. It was also common practice to 'rationalise' superstitions and try to explain why they 'make sense'. While all my friends have stated that they are tolerant of others' superstitions and that 'it is very normal to have practices that calm you down', they were much stricter about how other people perceive these beliefs. One my close friends, Juozas, told me that aside from me he would not share his superstitions with anyone else. Armas also agreed that speaking about superstitions is somehow shameful, even childish or too personal, to share with everyone else, especially those who are not huge fans of basketball, because for them it would seem ridiculous. 'I am nearly certain,' he argued, 'that people who have the most interesting and original superstitions never speak about them, so the most interesting things stay hidden'. Some informants also said that if you tell your practices to others they 'somehow lose their power', and this could be another reason why fewer people are willing to speak about them. On the other hand, Vytautas told me that he could share his superstitions with his friends as a joke, because he knew that this is only a 'stupid idea'.

This seemed to at least partially mirror Clark's (1982) study regarding superstitions of fishers. He showed that people ascribe superstitious behaviour to others but not oneself and that despite demonstrating a personal contempt for irrational beliefs, they actually hold superstitious practices themselves. Clark suggested that this might be out of a fear that they will appear irrational or even slightly bizarre to an outsider. So although all my friends were stating their

tolerance towards the superstitions of others, they believed that society judges people who have them. This fits with the picture of the secular society which is rational and pays no attention to mysteries (Cox in Pratt 1970).

From this, I turned back to the *bc.lrytas* forum where I had started my research. Although for some people it might seem anonymous, for fans involved it was not. One fan with the nickname *tautietis* even said that, after registering on the forum, he started feeling like a small part of the team, although this feeling was not equally shared by others. Still, belonging to the forum and the opinions of others members seemed to matter. Therefore I started to think that not only are people ashamed of their rituals, if they have any, but the need to belong to the group sharpened this embarrassment. Fan groups have an existing social structure which constrains or promotes certain behaviours (Marsh, Rosser and Harré 1995) and as in any other group, there are changes in member's behaviour due to conformity to group norms (Hogg and Abrams 2004). The fact that the first two fans to answer my question, who both also had high rankings, stated that they have no rituals and that they try not to hold any superstitions in everyday life, may have affected the way other members were answering or ignoring my question. Confirming this, my friend Audrius said that he would never use the word 'superstition' with a person he is trying to make an impression on, because it in itself is somehow contemptuous.

In addition, on the forum I presented myself as a female student conducting research. Although most fans were very keen to 'help' with my research and answered my first thread, after some questions I felt slightly inferior. In fact, I did not notice any women on the forum and many different research studies have shown that women are continued to be marginalised in fan communities (Gosling 2007: 250). This could also be a reason why no one answered my second and third posts except for one person, who I specifically asked about superstitions. *Sagenas*, who is particularly respected in the forum and has a very high ranking, answered in a slightly mocking way that he 'simply does not pay attention to things like that'. After this there were no further comments and I felt unwelcome, especially after both messages that I sent privately were also ignored.

Superstitions? I'd Rather Curse

Another problem I soon faced was definitional. While I was asking people about their superstitions, the answers I heard were much wider. Even in terms of superstition there are various

different definitions; some of them simply refer to 'meaningless survivals' (Asad 2003: 35), while others are more explicit, seeing them as 'descriptions of invisible interrelationships in the world which neither science, authorised religion nor "common sense" could account for' (Eriksen, 2001, 209).

However, the beliefs of my informants could also fit into different categories. For instance, some were similar to rituals, which are defined as 'repeatable patterns of behaviour that carry complex meanings, especially when shared within a group' ('Ritual' 2002). For example, Armas said he always desperately tries to be on time before the match to sing the national anthem with all the fans, because otherwise he feels 'uncertain', as well as if he is not wearing his team's scarf. Others described practices which were more similar to curses or spells, such as people who always have to stand in a position to see both basketball hoops in order to cast a spell on them. This example was more similar to sorcery, which refers to a learned power to cause injury ('Witchcraft' 2002). Finally, some were most similar to standard superstitions, such as being afraid to congratulate the winning team if a match is not yet over or not watching a game in a place which proved to be unsuccessful in the past. For instance, *delakrox*, who was anonymously commenting on the Eurobasket.lt webpage, stated that after his team lost five times in a row while he was watching games in his living room, he started watching them in a different room. Juozas told me that he avoids certain bars where he has watched unsuccessful important matches, and also stopped listening to certain songs before matches that 'proved' to be unsuccessful for his team.

All of these practices only partially suit the proposed definitions. Repetitive practices are rather *individual* rituals, while cases of 'sorcery' were not learned, but taken for granted. Finally, these 'superstitions' are not 'survivals' and are not shared among all, as are superstitions of black cats or ladders. These beliefs are rather novel, individual, created by people themselves, which makes them especially difficult to define in the already existing terms proposed by most anthropological work about religion or witchcraft, which deals with tradition shared among all members of society. Although, in the case of fans, there are also some examples of practices being passed on; for example, Vytautas's beliefs are inherited from his father and shared among all members of his family.

Another problem is to understand whether or not people actually believe that they make a difference. Malinowski (1974) argues that people immerse into magical means when they are subject to anxiety of the unknown, and believe that their cathartic activity is directly linked with

the desired outcome. Although a basketball match is a situation of unknown outcome, most of my informants spoke about superstitions in a mocking way. For instance, Vytautas said that he has these beliefs even though they are 'total nonsense'.

These inconsistencies of my informants are supported by Campbell's (1996) work. He argues that the fundamental drawback with theories of superstitions is that they attempt to explain a phenomenon as a uniform transcultural act, although contemporary forms of superstition are significantly different from traditional counterparts. In addition, the practitioners often deny that they believe in the effectiveness of their act, which is different from pre-modern societies. The situation is actually puzzling: individuals are reluctant to admit that they *do* believe in superstitions, even if they are sometimes also reluctant to say that they *do not*. He calls this 'half-believe', using the term proposed by Peter McKellar. Campbell states that this is not simply a lie about their 'real beliefs', but actual half-belief in these superstitions. He adds that the need to believe is not only due to uncertainty, but also due to a value of 'being active'. In important events which they cannot control, modern people of the secularised society feel particular discomfort and still want to act. Thus, their practises re-affirm the general belief of active orientation, rather than actual belief in the possibility to change outcomes. In this case, unlike belief in magic, these modern performers pay little attention to the outcome.

However, basketball fans seem to be a more difficult case. They do not usually believe in their actions, or at least say so, but they care about the outcome and even change their beliefs accordingly. For instance, Juozas said that he used to listen to one particular song before important matches, which seemed very successful for one season, but when its luck 'depleted' he no longer listened to that song. Thus, after looking over most of the literature for this topic, I argue that anthropological terminology needs a new term to define these personally created, ritualistic, half-magic beliefs. Especially because they extend far from sports. For example, Audrius said that he always takes a personal item as a charm to exams or interviews, as this allows him to 'feel comfortable and makes an unknown place more natural'.

Taking into account the embarrassment of holding beliefs discussed previously, it seems that there is a much greater distinction between public and private spheres, especially among sport fans, and their practices are situated in-between. Basketball matches become a liminal space – both private and public – in which fans are not afraid to express their superstitions. Therefore, I suggest that 'liminal-beliefs' could be a definitional substitute for modern practices, which are

somewhere in-between and integrate both secular and magical aspects. The concept of liminality is chosen not accidentally: van Gennep, who invented the concept, used it in the context of rituals in small-scale communities (van Gennep 1960 [1909]). As I'll argue in the next part of the paper, basketball matches are also a form of modern rituals.

The Second Religion?

The prominence of these 'liminal-beliefs' requires an analysis regarding religiosity among Lithuanians, to understand the general significance of super-natural beliefs. Statistically, Lithuanians are religious: 79% of the population identify themselves as Christians ('2001m. Surašymas', 2002). After an important match, *BRolis* wrote on the forum: 'The team for which it is prayed cannot loose. Yesterday, I saw many doing this in the most intense moments'. However, there seems to be an interesting interplay between non-religious beliefs and religion. When asked about superstitions, Armas spoke about a ritual to always thank God after winning, while *Phoenix32*, an anonymous commentator on Eurobasket.lt, was crossing himself while betting on his team. This apparent mix of religious practises, and what used to be called 'devil-worship', has now become 'superstition' (Asad 2003: 35).

Interestingly, Juozas noticed the spread of Christianity just after Lithuania regained independence from the USSR in 1990, but this might not be the only trend. There is also an increasing movement of Baltic Religion in Lithuania, which includes, but is not constrained by, Paganism (Trinkūnas 2011). Many Lithuanians proudly claim that they were 'the last pagans in Europe', and there are a growing number of youth organisations and celebrations connected to the old Gods and Goddesses. Although the newest statistics are not yet known, before the most recent census in 2011 there was a media promoted movement to register "Old Baltic Belief" as religion, in order to announce it as a traditional religion in Lithuania. This increase of religiosity brought me back to the private-public discussion; while religious beliefs were generally suppressed under USSR regime, they might have actually been taken underground and passed to new generations in privacy (Johnston 1992). In this case, sports might have been the best place to express this religiosity, becoming the liminal space in-between private and public.

As Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington (2007) argue, religion is usually approached with emotional, rather than rational, means, a fact which is hardly grasped in our secularised society. As fans 'tend to engage with world not in a rationally detached but in an emotionally involved way'

(ibid: 10), they can become a core group in which to investigate religiosity in the modern era. In addition, Eriksen (2001) states that 'the most important rituals in the contemporary world are arguably those to do with sports' (ibid: 225). A basketball match can be compared to 'traditional' rituals, especially in terms of players, who disengage from profane activities, such as sexual intercourse, or have certain food prohibitions (Arens 2011). All this holds to fans as well; Juozas, for instance, told me of certain food prohibitions that he and his family have for important matches. Thus, basketball can be viewed 'as a public ritual ... in some respects as a sacred activity' (ibid: 80). Moreover, because 'ritual has been defined as the social aspect of religion' (Eriksen 2001: 215), this implies similarities between sports and religion. Not surprisingly, Auge states that the focus of sport studies 'should be shifted from social history to religious anthropology' (Auge in Eriksen 2001: 225).

While speaking about basketball, Armas stressed the incredible unity that cannot be felt anywhere else but basketball matches. He argued that when the Lithuanian team is playing, for a short time, all Lithuania becomes united. It is a 'symbolic reference to war' (Arens 2011: 79) and the historical perspective mirrors this; as Juozas said, after Lithuania regained independence, each match with Russia, especially during the 1990s, was seen as a fight for freedom. This was especially prominent for Independent Lithuania in a legendary match during the first Summer Olympics in 1992, where, symbolically, Lithuanians played a match for the bronze against Russia and won the game. In this respect, basketball mimics some of the functions of religion: it creates solidarity through rituals (Durkheim 1975) and establishes powerful and long-lasting moods and motivations (Geertz 1973). Thus, I will return to Lithuanians' saying that 'basketball is the second religion'. I believe it is far nearer to the truth than Lithuanians themselves believe, at least from a theoretical perspective.

Conclusion: Shared Meanings

Although I previously stressed that 'liminal-beliefs' are individual and created by people themselves, it is hard to overlook their shared reasoning. While some have original beliefs, most fans have similar superstitions, such as clothing, food prohibition, music or place rituals. This shared background does not only apply to fans; as Audrius brings his 'lucky' pen to exams, I always take my 'lucky' pendant, while other people wear their 'lucky' shoes. Thus, studies of these 'individualistic' acts in our 'individualistic' society also show our shared symbolic system, which is

embedded in our culture even in the most personal acts.

Leseth (1996) describes the use of witchcraft to affect the outcome of a soccer game in Tanzania, and argues that this practice 'for many Europeans probably appears as highly "exotic"' (*ibid*: 159). In contrast, this paper tried to show that, at least for sport fans, and quite possibly for others as well, witchcraft, spells, rituals and superstitions might be familiar practices, although most of them would never accept this kind of label because it intervenes with their secularised world-view.

Looking back at my project, I have come up with more questions than I had in the beginning. However, they have shifted from small-scale to much broader ones about society in general, and the need for non-believers to believe in something. I am well aware that, although anonymous comments and my friends were open with me in their beliefs, the social norms of secularised society were affecting both my informants' and my ways of expression. This project made me realise how much people today fear to look irrational to others. It also helped me to confront the idea that secular man 'does not occupy himself much with mysteries' (Cox in Pratt 1970: 2). At least in terms of sports fans, this sentence should be finished with: '...in public'. I believe this extends to all society as well. In the words of Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington (2007), most people are either fans of something, or are bound to someone who is. Thus, through fandom, it is possible to 'capture fundamental insights into modern life' (*ibid*: 9). Fans no longer represent a counterforce to existing social order, but rather reflect the same cultural systems that exist in populations. That is why 'liminal-beliefs' show the emotional bonds that are formed with ourselves and others in a modern world and are important to grasp.

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