

The Mythical Beauty of *Sodai*

by Vida Sniečkuvienė

God created a world of unparalleled beauty, which man attempts to embellish with his own creations. Lithuania occupies a small patch of this earth, but can be justifiably proud of its great wealth of beautiful folk art such as wooden sculptures, multi-colored woven sashes and textiles. The iconic carved wooden crosses and wayside chapel posts have even been recognized by UNESCO as masterpieces of World Heritage. In 2018, another Lithuanian folk art genre – *sodai*, delicate 3-dimensional geometric figures made of straw, were added to this distinguished list.

The first time I saw a *sodas* I was still a young woman. I was totally enchanted and spellbound by its beauty. So many questions arose in my mind – what is this creation, how did come to be? At the time, no

one could give me the answers that I sought. And so began a long and gradual process of learning about *sodai* and the symbolic worlds they embodied. We have come a long way together and today *sodai* float and turn above the heads of visitors to the Antanas and Jonas Juška Museum of Ethnic Culture that I founded with my husband Arūnas.

From the beginning, I realized that I had to learn to create these miracles in straw myself. I interviewed people who, as children, had seen how *sodai* were being made, knew when they should be displayed and where they were usually hung. Fondly sharing memories about the *sodai* created by their mothers or grandmothers, it seemed like everyone remembered being charmed by their beauty. They would recall watching these wonders in straw as they gleamed in the light, turning and turning, and being filled with a sense of calm and quiet.

The *sodas* is full of mythologic symbolism. It is created by man's hands and heart, but within its perfectly ordered space, it contains an entire world passed down in myths and symbols from ancient times. Its shape and structure symbolically describe both the primeval and biblical – the Tree of the World, which contains the heavens above, the underworld below, and the earth between, and the Garden of Eden from which the world began. If you know how to look properly at a *sodas*, you will see the universe – God the gardener, Mother Sun,



Components of *sodas* decorating a Christmas tree.

Father Moon, spirit birds, stars, heavens, and the underworld. They are all housed in the neat geometric lines and forms of the *sodas*, a characteristic that distinguishes this creation from other folk art expressions.

Many years ago, the mythologic role of the *sodas* was served by other pyramidal objects hung from the ceilings – usually the tip of a fir tree. So, who first imagined these hand-crafted, geometric alternatives and when did people begin to create *sodai* from rye straw? We will probably never know the answer. We do know that in 19th century Lithuania there was a tradition in *Aukštaitija* (the Lithuanian highlands) to hang a straw *sodas* in the newlyweds' home during their wedding.



A *sodas* representing the world.



A sodas by Aldona Tamulonytė – Dorrity, exhibited at the Juška Ethnic Culture Museum.

A *sodas* was one of the most important symbols in Lithuanian weddings and as such, it would be made by exceptional women of the village – midwives and herbalists. The future bride and groom would pass the straws to the “stringers” (those assembling the *sodas* by passing string through the straws), thus playing an important role in the creation of their world-to-be. Emphasizing the solemnity of the work, the *sodas* would be strung together in silence.

The most common design consists of two joined pyramids. The upper pyramid symbolizes the heavens while the lower pyramid represents the underworld. Between these is depicted the world that humans inhabit. In this space, one can find, floating, the newlywed couple, surrounded by gliding birds, romping horses and streaming stars. Often a little figure was hung in the center of the *sodas*. He was named *dievulis* (diminutive word for god), *sodininkas* (tender of the orchard), or *sergėtojas* (protector or guardian) and his role was to watch over this entire world. Little birds were hung in each of four corners of the *sodas* and were especially symbolic: our ancestors believed that straw birds were houses or vessels

for souls and they would provide departed loved ones with a place to stay while visiting.

At the turn of the century, it was common for *sodai* to be decorated and embellished according to the artist’s individual sense of esthetics. Sometimes ears of wheat were added as symbols of fertility. Other artisans would tie on bits of colorful textiles or ribbons. Still others might add decorative beads or buttons. The *sodai* would become multicolored pastiches. Today *sodai* artisans have returned to the simplicity of using delicate natural materials such as fragile straw, bent-grass or even reeds.

Through *sodai*, ordinary village women would create extraordinary visions of God’s world – the tree of Life, an orchard, an entire cosmos...all expressed in straw. These symbolism-laden structures would hang in what were considered sacred parts of the house: next to pictures of saints, above a table, above a newborn’s crib or at the head of the table, which was the most honored seat in the home. After the birth of a child, a miniature *sodas* was often given as a christening gift, as protection from calamities and evil charms.

During the creation of the *sodas*, the progress of the work was watched very carefully, since it augured the fate of the family-to-be. Tangling and knotting of the string and splitting straws were cautionary portents. A large and beautiful *sodas* was the ultimate goal, foretelling an easy and rich life, many fine and smart children and other joys. If a wedding took place without a *sodas*, people would begin to talk, raising doubts about a harmonious future for the new couple. In an attempt to circumvent this poor prognosis, couples unable to make one and too poor to purchase a *sodas* for their wedding, would rent one!

My friend and maker of *sodai*, Marytė Lingienė, once remarked: “I wish that there was a *sodas* in every home... Perhaps, someday, her hope will become reality. Interest in this unique folk art form is undergoing a rebirth, information is being shared at teaching sessions, conferences and festivals, and it is thought that today there are more than 150 expert *sodai* artisans in Lithuania.

Every *sodas* has a life. It has its own language, it sings its own song.



A *sodas* hanging in the sun, showing the projections of light passing through it.

One only has to learn to listen to its quiet voice. It is the embodiment of the world – small and fragile, requiring patience and diligence to create, and containing everything we wish to cherish and protect on earth.

Sodai have been the subject of Lithuanian folk songs. The following song describes a tradition of paying a ransom not only for the head table at a wedding, but also for the wedding *sodas*: (Song title: *Svotai kieman suskambėjo*, from the book: *Aukštaičių melodijos*, published by Vaga, 1990, page 272, song no. 245).

*Svotai kieman suskambėjo,
Tartum saulė užtekėjo.
Jūs sušoly netrepsėkit,
Iš mum sodų jūs derėkit.
Prašom, sveči, čia nuo durų,
Jūsų svotba ori šulq.*

*Mūsų sodas žibuliuotas,
Mės jo pigiai neparduosma.
Viduj sodo obuoliai,
Aplink sodų žibuliai.*

*Mūsų sodas yr nedykas,
Saugo sodų agradnykas.
Agradnykas labai slaunas,
Žilu barzdu, nebejaunas.*

*Aikin šalin, trinyčiuoti,
Atais kupčiai baronuoti.
Par kiemelį skumbuliuoja –
Rygos kupčiai atvažiuoja.*

*Žinom, žinom, pajaunėliai,
Kad daug turit pinigėlių.*

The matchmakers streamed ringing into the yard
Like the newly risen sun.
Stop stomping about in the cold,
You need to barter for our *sodas* !
Please, dear guests, do step inside
Stop letting in the cold night air.

As you can see, our *sodas* gleams all over,
We'll not part with it cheaply.
It has apples in its center,
And glitter all around.

This *sodas* is not for free,
And it's well-guarded by its tender.
A tender who is right honorable,
A greybeard he is, and no youngster.

Step away, you who came dressed in muslin!
We await fine merchants robed in shearling.
Listen! We can hear their bells a-ringing –
The merchants of Riga are arriving.

So, you in the bridal party, stop pretending –
You've got money, and lots of it !



Antanas and Jonas Juška Museum of Ethnic Culture in Vilkija, Lithuania.

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