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REVIEW

An almanac of European and Anatolian forest and fire beliefs for sustainability teaching

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Abstract

This interdisciplinary article examines forest and fire narratives across European and Anatolian contexts, highlighting recurring motifs, shared beliefs, and cultural attitudes toward fire. By compiling and comparing traditions from Turkey, Italy, Poland, and Latvia, the study demonstrates how culturally embedded stories historically functioned as mechanisms for landscape stewardship and fire management. The main aim of this paper is to provide educators with a resource to teach about fire, the forest and forest fires, and to link folklore with sustainability education. Within the framework of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), these narratives provide engaging and affectively resonant resources that bridge the gap between cognitive knowledge and behavioral change. Rather than prescribing specific behaviors, this "almanac" offers a foundation for creative, narrative-based educational activities that teach respect, awareness, and reflection on human–forest/fire relationships. Highlighting these common cultural beliefs promotes multicultural understanding and a sense of shared values, making such narratives valuable tools for holistic wildfire prevention education among young people.

Keywords

Folklore; Forest; Fire; ESD; Traditions; Story-telling

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Any reports and responses or comments on the article can be found at the end of the article.

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Introduction

The relationship between humanity and fire in Europe and Anatolia is defined by a dual nature: fire is a tool for civilization and an instrument of mythology; at the same time – a force of destruction. Historically, this relationship was not managed solely through physical suppression but through a system of traditional, often ecological, knowledge embedded in folklore and ritual. Modern anthropology and archaeology recognize that fire and forest management is not a recent invention but a practice dating back to the Middle Pleistocene – human history has been directly entwined with fire, it is an ancient phenomenon. The domestication of fire, which dates back approximately 400,000 years, represents a primary stage in the human effort to understand and order the universe (Pausas & Keeley, 2021, p. 387; Roebroeks & Villa, 2011, pp. 5209–5210; Brown & Davis, 1973, p. 3; Razzoli, 2011, p. 83). Gaston Bachelard, as explained by Razzoli (2011), suggests that cultural convictions and personal intuitions regarding fire function as "epistemological obstacles" prevent a purely objective scientific understanding of the element (p. 80). This would explain fire's prominent role in the creation of myths and legends throughout centuries.

European and Anatolian folklores are rich with traditions and practices centered around fire, reflecting its role as a vital tool and a potential threat, for example: the image of hell is a "space overtaken by the element of fire ([Polish: smażyć się w piekle – "to burn in hell", lit. "to fry in hell")" (Masłowska, 2020, p. 64). On the other hand, communities have long developed rituals to harness fire's benefits, for example, by creating bonfires (Frazer, 1922 [1990], p. 609), and mitigate its dangers, especially concerning wildfires. Claude Lévi-Strauss observed that a common element in fire myths is the idea that by possessing fire, humans truly became human (Razzoli, 2011, p. 79). Traditional societies developed rituals and customs that, in poetic ways, achieved practical ends: preventing fires, including forest fires, protecting homes, and teaching respect for flames. The traditional "folk-technologies" were not merely physical practices but were deeply embedded in the communal narrative fabric. In the absence of centralized fire suppression agencies, traditional rural societies developed "folk-technologies" to manage the existential threat of wildfire. Anthropological literature suggests that these communities did not view fire as a purely chaotic element, but as a dualistic force that could be domesticated through ritual (Pyne, 1997, e.g. pp. 95–96).

In recent years, the Mediterranean has faced escalating forest fires, a trend intensified by climate change, as increasing heat and aridity produce larger, hotter, and more dangerous fires (Mathews & Malfatti, 2024, p. 1065). Addressing this "new normal" of extreme aridity and fire risk requires more than just technical suppression; it demands a shift in societal understanding. To meet this challenge, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) builds the necessary capacity to navigate complex global issues by integrating critical themes like climate action, poverty alleviation, and ethical consumption into the curriculum, and managing conflict effectively. ESD helps students understand and act on the world's most pressing problems. By focusing on environmental health, social equity, and economic fairness, it teaches people how to address issues like climate change and poverty while developing the tools to resolve conflicts and live more responsibly (UNESCO, 2020, e.g. p. 8).

Within the framework of ESD, cognitive knowledge alone – such as data on climate change or poverty – is often insufficient to drive behavioral change. To bridge the gap between understanding and action, students must engage in both the affective domain and post-humanist empathy, where learning is rooted in emotions, values, and attitudes that transcend a strictly anthropocentric focus. Utilizing folklore as a storytelling method provides the necessary emotional connotation to make these global challenges personally relevant (Kretchmar, 2021; see also Krasnova, 2025, pp. 16–17). It is within this context that storytelling serves as a sophisticated pedagogical tool that transcends simple entertainment to address diverse dimensions of sustainable development, including human-environmental relationships and collective well-being. "Storytelling is a communication technique that involves creating and narrating stories to entertain, inform, or persuade an audience" (d'Escoffier et al., 2025, p. 428). By integrating various forms such as myths, legends, and life histories, storytelling facilitates a multi-sensory "stickiness" that allows learners to process information factually, visually, and emotionally. This narrative approach performs vital cognitive functions – specifically the concretization of abstract concepts, the assimilation of complex ideas, and the structuring of our worldview. As highlighted by d'Escoffier et al. (2025), citing Egan: "using stories in education can make learning more meaningful and memorable" (p. 428). Beyond its educational utility, storytelling embodies an inquiry function that integrates disparate knowledge systems and fosters a deeper "sense-making" of ecological challenges or even empathy and a post-humanist vision that decenters anthropocentric perspectives: "Stories engage students emotionally, facilitating the comprehension and retention of complex information", while promoting critical thinking and creativity (idem, p. 428). By formatting how we value the planet and its inhabitants, stories become essential for maintaining collective health and developing the insights necessary to construct more sustainable forms of living (Wall et al., 2019, p. 1532).

This research was conducted within the framework of the project Fireproof the Future, an initiative addressing forest fire prevention education through experience and immersive learning-based approaches. Within this context, traditional fire

and forest narratives were explored as potential resources for engaging children and youth (ages 13–18) in discussions on environmental responsibility. This article provides a conceptual and cultural foundation – an almanac – for narrative-based wildfire education that informed the project's educational activities and can be further used as an example of creative, narrative-based teaching. These narratives provide material for teaching respect, awareness, and reflection on human–forest relationships, offering a foundation for creative, narrative-based educational activities. Furthermore, highlighting common cultural beliefs across different ethnicities can promote multicultural understanding and a sense of shared values, making such narratives valuable tools for global education initiatives.

For this article, our consortium has chosen the four partner countries – three European and one Anatolian country, namely, Italy (Southern Europe), Poland (Central Europe), Turkey (Anatolia) and Latvia (The Baltics, Northeastern Europe) – all representing different geographic and cultural regions. First, we explore the relationship between fire and humans and connections among folklore of different Indo-European regions and traditions, as well as delve into the perception of forest and forest fires, which is followed by the sections dedicated to each country, showing that traditions and ideas are shared among nations. The final section includes an overview of modern applications as well as conclusions.

Fire and forest across cultures

Fire occupies a powerful role in Indo-European folklore, alongside air, water, and soil, and is recognized as one of the four essential elements held in sacred regard by numerous global cultures (Öztürk, 2023, p. 286). Across cultures, it appears in myths as a gift from gods or a weapon of demons. Folklore preserves centuries-old techniques and wisdom that explain and can help prevent contemporary fires. For example, in the Mediterranean, fire was historically a tool through which rural communities shaped their landscapes, especially forests, reducing flammability and sustaining agropastoral systems. Yet state prohibitions, industrial agriculture, and gendered marginalization of peasant labor produced official ignorance of when, where, and how people burned. According to Mathews and Malfatti (2024), "States around the world have been hostile to traditional managed burning practices by peasants and indigenous people" (pp. 1965–1966). By recovering folklore, oral histories, and local knowledge, historical ecology shows that fire was not simply a destructive force but a deeply human practice of care, control, and adaptation to the environment (Mathews & Malfatti, 2024, p. 1066; Razzoli, 2011). To understand how these practices are preserved, one must look toward the broader framework of folklore.

We can define folklore as cultural expressions, such as: "narratives, jokes, beliefs, proverbs, legends, myths, music, songs, dances, costumes, food, and festivals, through which individuals and groups shape and disseminate a shared identity" (Magdalenic, 2010, p. 177), however, the definition is not yet uniformly accepted and varies among scholars (p. 177). Citing Pyne (1997): "All over Europe, from very ancient times, people expressed their relationship to fire through rites and ceremonies" (p. 65). Masłowska (2020) further clarifies that these rites and their associated myths fall into three distinct categories (p. 233):

> [1] the cult of earthly fire, the domain of the Indian Agni (the Roman Vulcan and Vesta), [2] atmospheric fire or lightning, an attribute of the Indian Indra and Vayu (the Baltic Perkunas), and [3] heavenly fire – the sun, represented by the Indian Surya (the Baltic Saule) (…) Slavic deities connected with fire included Svarog (most likely a personification of the sun understood as supreme fire) and his son Svarozhich (Swarożyc), the equivalent of Dazhbog (Dadźbog/Dażbog). The latter, God of the hearth and sacrificial fire, was also ascribed the functions belonging to Perun, God of the sky and lightning.

Because these deities represented physical necessities – from the lightning of Perun to the hearth fire of Svarozhich – Indo-Europeans utilized rituals to manifest this profound relationship with fire. Distinct from its general presence in daily life, there existed specific, enduring, and spectacular ceremonies where fire served as the central focus: "From the Isle of Man to the Siberian taiga, from the Shetlands to Malta, from Morocco's Atlas Mountains to the windy steppes, a common core of fire festivals defined a shared culture of fire that persisted until the industrial revolution snuffed it out" (Pyne, 1997, p. 68).

This cultural persistence was possible because the pre-modern European beliefs and worldview were not "pyrophobic" (afraid of fire) but rather "pyrophilic" (fire-loving) within strict boundaries. Within this framework, fire was seen as a living entity, a "subject" with agency rather than a mere object or chemical reaction. As Yilmaz Özkarsli (2015) notes, "Items and issues like water, fire, mountain, soil, sky, tree and ancestors have become cults in the universal level" (p. 149). This is a concept that is often termed "animism". According to Mosia (2015), all societies have myths with their main aspect – symbols, "it is something that represents something else by association, resemblance, or convention, especially a material object used to represent something invisible" (p. 15).

The transition from physical campfires to ceremonial flames shifted the role of fire from a tool to a powerful emblem. By becoming a symbol, it eventually shaped the human psyche through mythology and imagery, moving far beyond its original, practical applications – such as clearing pests from soil, fumigating livestock, or creating ashes for fertilizer (Pyne, 1997, p. 71; Masłowska, 2020, p. 275). For instance, Frazer (1913) documents that in various German-speaking regions (Voigtland, Bavaria, and Tyrol), the mountain arnica – locally known as Johannisblumen – is used as an apotropaic charm against elemental disasters. When placed on roofs, walls, or doors, the flower is believed to protect the homestead from lightning, hail, and fire. However, the folklore emphasizes a strict temporal condition: the plant possesses these protective qualities only if harvested on St. John's Day (or Eve) (p. 58).

Such ritualization of fire and related rituals within the special calendar reflects a broader evolution in human history. As human society shifted from nomadic lifestyles to settled agriculture and animal husbandry, fire practices underwent a significant transformation. Fire has been a pivotal element in rituals marking the regeneration of the year – specifically the transition between the old and new year, or the arrival of spring, which was once considered a New Year. Ancient pagan rites eventually merged with Christian traditions such as the "Christmas log" or bonfires dedicated to saints like St. Anthony, St. Joseph, and St. John, as explained further, whose ashes were believed to possess protective (apotropaic) and fertilizing properties. What was once a "need-fire" (a ceremonial response to community crises) used for survival became part of an organized agricultural almanac, where fires were lit according to seasonal rhythms and integrated into religious liturgy (Pyne, 1997, pp. 70–71; Cattabiani, 1998, p. 9). "The history of its fire festivals also recapitulates the fire history of Europe" (Pyne, 1997, pp. 70–71). According to Pyne (1997, p. 70):

> Curiously the festivals form pairs, each beginning and closing a cycle. Two – the fires of Beltane (May Day) and Halloween – derive from pastoralism and correspond to the seasons when the herds migrate between winter and summer pastures, when graziers are likely to fire the grasses and heath to stimulate new growth. Two others, those of Midwinter and Midsummer days, belong with a solar cycle, the times of maximum waning and waxing – a cycle of particular interest to agrarian peoples. The last two, the Lenten and Easter fire festivals, despite their Christian gloss, belong also with a pagan agricultural calendar and the use of fire to rouse field and paddock into new life. All trace their pedigree to the originating need-fire.

There is a significant parallel between European fire customs and the Northern Indian festival of Holi, celebrated during the full moon of the month of Phalgun in early spring. During this observance, communities light large bonfires that are believed to prevent crop blight, while the ashes are thought to possess curative properties for disease. A notable variation occurs in Barsana, where the local priest is expected to walk through the bonfire; his perceived immunity to the flames is considered proof of his sanctity, a status that historically granted him the right to hold land rent-free (Frazer, 1913, p. 2). Cattabiani (1998) also notes universal tradition found in both the West (*Occident*e) and the East (*Oriente*). This is exemplified by the custom of burning a tree at the beginning of the year to symbolize cosmic regeneration, a practice documented in Classical Antiquity (*antichità classica*) and which continues to this day in India (p. 9).

Frazer (1922 [1990]) presents two main theories regarding the meaning of fire festivals. The Solar Theory posits that the fires symbolized the sun, their warmth and light ensuring a bountiful harvest. Alternatively, the Purificatory Theory suggests that the fires were meant to burn away evil spirits, witches, and disease, serving as a powerful protective force. Despite their ancient origins, elements of these fire traditions persist in modern customs. The Christian Church assimilated ancient fire rituals into its formal religious framework by rebranding seasonal celebrations to fit a new theological narrative. Traditional midsummer and midwinter bonfires were "baptized" into the feasts of Saint John the Baptist and Christmas, while the fire rituals of spring and autumn were incorporated into Lent, Easter, and All Souls' Eve. During this transition, the Church replaced pagan symbols like the Yule log and the "new fire" with the Christmas log and the Paschal candle, effectively shifting the focus from agricultural utility to sacred liturgy. These enduring practices continue to reflect themes of protection, renewal, and agricultural fertility, highlighting the lasting impact of fire traditions on human society (Frazer, 1922 [1990], pp. 636, 642; Pyne, 1997, p. 71; Lee-Niinioja, 2015, pp. 134, 140–141).

Another important fire tradition was the ancient "need-fire" ritual – known variously as wildfire, Notfeuer, or living fire – was a ceremonial response to community crises that sought to purify and protect through the recreation of a "pure" flame. To begin, all existing hearth fires in a village were extinguished, and a new fire was kindled using primitive friction methods, such as rubbing sticks, often by specific community members like elders or newlyweds". Even the wood had its ritual ordinations; almost always the ceremony required oak, or in places that lacked oak, like the coniferous forests, poplar or pine" (Pyne, 1997, p. 69), demonstrating a strong connection between the symbolism of fire and flora or forest.

This sacred flame was then used to ignite a large bonfire, or "bone-fire", through which livestock and people were passed to ward off disease and misfortune. Sick animals were often driven through their embers in hopes of curing their ailments. The ritual's protective power was extended by carrying torches through fields and pastures, scattering ashes over the

earth, and bringing embers back to reignite domestic hearths. Finally, participants kept charred remnants of the fire as talismans, believing they offered a permanent defense against lightning, wildfires, and witchcraft (Frazer (1922 [1990], e.g. p. 648; Pyne, 1997, p. 68–70, Masłowska, 2020, p. 272).

In contrast with the controlled, human made fires, wildfires have always been a great risk to wildlife, including forests. Citing Brown and Davis (1973): "It is natural that fire should have a basic relationship to forestry and that it should be of vital concern to the forester" (p. 4). In Georgian folklore a forest entity "the Lady of Forests" is scared of fire, symbolising the potential threat that fire is for the forest (Khachapuridze, 2015, p. 119).

In the pre-modern European imagination, the forest was not merely a collection of trees, but a sovereign domain governed by specific entities. Before the advent of state forestry commissions, the boundaries of the forest were policed by myth. Anthropological analysis suggests that rural communities projected their anxiety about forest fires onto specific supernatural figures. These entities were rarely benevolent; they were capricious and dangerous, much like fire itself. By attributing the cause of wildfires to the anger of a "Forest Master", folklore created a system of taboos that strictly limited when, where, and how humans could introduce fire into the deep woods. For example, Afanasyev (1865a) published an ethnographic and mythological treatise "The Poetic Views of the Slavs on Nature". where he in detail describes Leshy as a forest creature (pp. 328–329).

The forest can be considered an "ethnic landscape, an ethno-cultural marker … and as an instrument" (Zoltán, 2015, p. 121). An ethnic landscape, because it can evoke certain emotions, negative or positive. An ethno-cultural marker, because it can be considered a "boundary forming symbol that expresses cultural identity" (p. 121). And an instrument because a forest as an object has the potential to be used in politics or issues concerning identity (p. 121). According to Zoltán, for example, for Siberian ethnic peoples "Forest and taiga have an extremely important role in the ethnic self-definition" (p. 122). Religion, lifestyle and survival therefore are directly connected to the forest. However, it should be noted that the value of a forest keeps diminishing in less traditional societies (p. 122). On the other hand, for Russians forest symbolizes qualities that are opposite to civilization, therefore it has to be "occupied, conquered and made habitable for humans" (p. 122).

While the Lady of Forests represents the vulnerability of the woodland to flame, other traditions celebrate a botanical resilience where the plant remains untouched. In the biblical narrative, as Moses gazes upon the thicket on Mount Horeb, he witnesses a fire that illuminates without destroying – a sacred flame that leaves the branches of the burning bush unconsumed. In this moment, the "unfieriness" of the plant shifts from a botanical curiosity to a divine miracle. This supernatural resistance inspired the Christian symbol of the Immaculate Conception, where Mary is likened to the bush – holding the white-hot presence of the divine within her human frame without being turned to ash (Cattabiani, 1998, p. 678).

Similarly, in Virgil's epic the Aeneid, the hero Aeneas learns from the Cumaean Sibyl that he cannot descend into Tartarus to visit his father, Anchises, unless he first obtains a specific "golden bough" hidden within a dark tree and consecrated to Juno of the Underworld. The "Golden Bough" that Aeneas must pluck to traverse the underworld is fundamentally a manifestation of "celestial fire" (fuoco celeste). Identified as mistletoe, this plant was believed by James Frazer to contain the "seed of fire", acting as a radiant lamp to guide the hero through the subterranean darkness and calm the ferryman of the Styx. This solar nature is visually suggested by the golden-yellow hue the branch assumes after being cut, but its mythological power derives from the belief that it is the "lightning" or life-force of the oak. In the Norse legend of Baldr, the mistletoe represents the lightning flame held safely between the branches; only by severing this "seat of life" could the god – symbolized by the oak – be killed, effectively extinguishing the divine fire that sustained him (Cattabiani, 1998, pp. 310–312).

Similar to the Oak, the Beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) is interpreted as a manifestation of the "Cosmic Tree", a universal axis uniting the celestial, terrestrial, and infernal realms while sustaining the cosmos. The Roman writer Macrobius classified beeches as *arbores felices* ("auspicious trees"), noting that the chalices utilized in sacrificial rites were carved from their wood. In Roman topography, the western summit of the Esquiline Hill – corresponding to the modern site of San Pietro in Vincoli – was designated the Fagutal due to the presence of a sacred beech grove consecrated to *Juppiter Fagutalis.* Pliny the Elder attests to the existence of a temple honoring this deity adjacent to a sacred beech, suggesting that the cult of the beech, originally dedicated to the supreme god, was eventually superseded by that of the oak, which became the definitive tree of Jupiter. This hypothesis is supported by Lucian, who reported that the oracular responses at Dodona were divined from the rustling of both oak and beech leaves. The tree continued to inspire folklore long after the Roman era; in Lorraine and the Luxembourg Ardennes, a belief persisted that the beech was immune to lightning strikes. Notably, the text describes the "monstrous" beeches of the Verzy forest in France, where the trunks and lower branches form confused,

contorted masses reminiscent of "witches' groves". These malformations are attributed to a potential mutation triggered by a radioactive meteorite impact during the early centuries of the Common Era, a phenomenon referenced as early as the 6th century in a cartulary of the Abbey of Saint-Basle (Cattabiani, 1998, pp. 65–66).

The myth of Phaethon is a tragedy of "elemental fire" and plant transformation. Driven by the desire to prove his divine lineage, the youth took command of the solar chariot, but his mortal hands could not steer the sun's furnace. As he veered off course, the celestial flames threatened to incinerate the earth in a global conflagration, forcing Jupiter to strike him down with a lightning bolt into the Eridanos River. His sisters, the Heliades, were consumed by a grief so intense they were transformed into black poplars, their tears hardening in the sun to become amber – a stone often called "solidified sunlight". Yet there is a striking botanical irony to this "fire-born" tree: the poplar is defined by its unfieriness. While the myth centers on a world nearly destroyed by heat, the black poplar (*Populus nigra*) is one of the most naturally fire-resistant trees. Because it is a "water-loving" species with a high moisture content and very little resin, its wood is notoriously difficult to ignite and tends to char slowly rather than burst into flames. This physical "coolness" is even reflected in the text's mention of salicin, the medicinal compound found in its bark that was used to "fight fever". In both its biology and its chemistry, the poplar stands as the natural antidote to the very fire that, according to legend, created it (Cattabiani, 1998, p. 188).

In another story, originating from the Bible, specifically the Book of Judges (Libro dei Giudici), the trees went forth to anoint a king over them, but the noble and productive species – the Olive, the Fig, and the Vine – each refused the crown to avoid abandoning their true purpose. The Olive declined to forsake its oil, which honors gods and men, merely to sway above the others; similarly, the Fig refused to give up its sweetness and exquisite fruit, and the Vine rejected abandoning the wine that gladdens both the divine and the human. Only the Bramble (il rovo) accepted the position, but with a menacing ultimatum: if the trees truly anointed him, they must find refuge in his shadow – an impossible protection from a low bush – warning that otherwise, fire would issue from his thorns to devour the majestic cedars of Lebanon (Cattabiani, 1998, pp. 678–679).

These diverse traditions converge on the same wisdom: while the poplar's lack of flammability is a matter of moisture and biology, the burning bush represents a spiritual "unfieriness", a state where the material world and the eternal fire coexist. Whether through the cooling salicin of the poplar or the miraculous endurance of the bramble, these plants serve as symbols of protection against the destructive power of heat, standing as living monuments that the flame cannot conquer (Cattabiani, 1998, p. 678).

The transition from the physical management of the landscape to the symbolic "unfieriness" of sacred flora reveals a sophisticated cultural framework for mediating human existence with an elemental force. These traditions demonstrate that fire was never merely a chemical hazard to be suppressed, but a "subject" with which humanity maintained a continuous, ritualized dialogue. By reclaiming this folkloric heritage – from the communal heat of the "need-fire" to the protective imagery of the fire-resistant poplar – we do more than preserve ancient myths; we recover a lost literacy of the land. In an era of increasing ecological volatility, reintegrating this historical wisdom may be essential for transforming our modern relationship with fire from one of fear and prohibition back into one of control, meaning, and mutual adaptation.

Turkish folklore

The Altai Mountains and surrounding Siberian regions are traditionally considered the homeland of early Turkic peoples. This shared ancestry links Altaic languages and culture to modern Turkish culture. The Turkic culture family includes Turkish, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and others originating in Central Asia and Siberia. In Neolithic and later Siberian traditions, a fire-related goddess Creatrix played a central role in creation and regeneration (Marler & Haarmann, 2007, p. 65). "In addition to the written sources, the archeological evidence proves that the burning tradition as such comes from the prehistoric periods in Asia Minor" (Taş, 2011, p. 11). Archaeological evidence from Okunevo in Western Siberia depicts snake motifs resembling sun flames, symbolizing the goddess's life-giving and regenerative power; these snakes represent not merely decoration but the dynamic, creative energy of the sun and the cyclical nature of life. This concept continued in Altaic shamanism, where the fire goddess, sometimes called "Ene", was regarded as the source of all life, responsible for both creation and the ongoing renewal of living beings. Among the Tungus, Mongol, and Turkic peoples, female shamans known as udagan performed rituals focused on fire worship, linking the goddess to fertility, pregnancy, and the tree of life, thereby connecting the elemental power of fire to the continuity of life. Across these traditions, fire was both sacred and practical, embodying a divine force that sustains life, protects communities, and channels the universe's creative energy (Marler & Haarmann, 2007, p. 65).

The Turkish culture has heavily depended on the ideas of totemic beliefs, animal and natural cults (Yilmaz Özkarsli, 2015, p. 149), such as: "tree, fire, water and mountain cults, which have an important place among the Turks" (Şengel & Uz,

2025, p. 1697). In the ancient Turkish belief system, fire became a cult through various rituals and beliefs. It was believed to possess a dominant spirit, often referred to as the "cult of fire". Considered a living entity, fire was treated with human-like respect and qualities (Öztürk, 2023, p. 285). According to Yilmaz Özkarsli (2015), fire is deemed sacred and has a soul in Turkish beliefs (p. 149–150) In the Turkish world, traditionally fire cult was generally depicted as feminine and addressed as "Od Ana" (Mother Fire) (Öztürk, 2023, p. 285), however in later periods we can notice its conversion into a male gender. Aesthetically fire is depicted as having thirty feet (Özkarsli, 2015, pp. 149–150), also the Altay people conceptualized fire itself as a thirty-foot-tall female entity (Taş, 2011, p. 18). Beyond its physical properties, fire occupied a divine and intermediary position, leading to the development of specific rules and taboos (Öztürk, 2023, p. 285). For ancient Turks, the most significant features of the fire cult were its representation of cleanliness and its power to expel evil spirits, fire was viewed as a protector and purifier (pp. 286–287, 292). Also, Özkarsli (2015) notes that fire has cleaning and protective abilities from evils and illnesses, its main function is "protecting people against diseases and trouble and ensuring animals' proliferation and abundance in the house" (pp. 149–150). For instance, cremation was widely practiced, reflecting the belief that fire possesses the power to purify. Through this purification, the soul of the deceased would be safeguarded from evil, and malevolent spirits would be driven away. Among the Beltirian Turks, people would gather at the head of a grave, light a fire on its right side, and offer drinks and food. These offerings were intended to guide the soul of the deceased, illuminating its path as it ascended to the heavens. Similarly, the Yakuts regarded fire as a portal through which the gods receive sacrifices (Taş, 2011, p. 18). The practice of "tütsüleme" (incense burning) is still used to protect against the "evil eye" (nazar) and to cleanse the environment after a death. The phrase *"ocağı sönmek"* (one's hearth going out) is still used today to describe a great tragedy or the collapse of a household. In many parts of Turkey, such as Diyarbakır, it is still considered offensive to extinguish fire with water or to show disrespect to the family hearth (Öztürk, 2023, pp. 295, 297).

Turkish culture distinguishes between two types of fire: ordinary fire for daily tasks (cooking, heating) and sacred fire used as a tool for communicating with God or spirits, often lit by a shaman using flint (Öztürk, 2023, p. 287). However, there are several legends about fire creation. One of the myths tells that "For Turks, fire is invented by an ancestor of Turks named "Turk" or it is sent by the God" (Yilmaz Özkarsli, 2015, p. 150). According to another legend, the god Ülgen taught humans how to strike two stones together to create fire, similarly to the shamanic legend, stating, "This fire is the state of my father's power fallen into stone" (Öztürk, 2023, p. 290). Özkarsli (2015) also mentions another myth (p. 150):

> *The origin of the fire is described as follows in another myth from Mersin-Taşeli Plateau in the South Anatolia: Allah orders angels to bring fire from hell to the earth after creating Adam. Angels ask Hell for fire. Hell doesn't give fire to angels saying that his fire will ruin the earth. Allah sends angels again ordering them to bring fire as much as a palm. Hell, declines angels again saying that even that much fire will ruin the earth. When Allah sends angels for the third time, he orders them to bring a bit of fire. Angels bring a bit of fire to the earth from hell. They put this fire which is brought from hell on a mountain. The mountain melts and sparkles. Fire proliferates from these sparkles. According to the variant of this story told nearby Ayvalık, Balıkesir in the West Anatolia, a bit of fire taken from hell is placed on the mountain after washed seventy times at the bottom of seas. Even hell fire washed seventy times melts the mountain down and it is the origin of fire we use today.*

One of the most distinctive locations intertwined with Turkish folklore and the cult of fire is Yanartaş, in the western Taurus Mountains of Turkey, near the ancient Lycian city of Olympos, where the natural "eternal flames" serve as the primary reason for the site's long-standing religious and mythological importance. Natural phenomenon of everlasting flames occurs on Mount Olympos, where weak daylight fires become highly visible at night This phenomenon is caused by biogenic and abiogenic methane gas seeping through carbonate rock fissures reaching the surface and igniting upon contact with the air. Historically, these never-ending fires were tied to the myth of the Chimaera – a fire-breathing creature -, the hero Bellerophon, and the cult of Hephaistos, the god of fire. These beliefs, originating in Lycia, were later absorbed into Greek mythology, illustrating how tangible natural events can shape enduring cultural narratives while linking the landscape to sacred and legendary symbolism. This association was so powerful that the Chimaera was depicted on Lycian coins as early as the 5th century B.C. and appeared on monuments and sarcophagi throughout the region. The presence of these fires made the area a significant focal point of the Olympos region from antiquity to the present. Even as the region transitioned to Christianity, a religious complex was built directly at this site to capitalize on its established sacred status (Öztaşkın, 2012, p. 313; Kazancı & Boyraz-Aslan, 2025, p. 112).

The sacredness of fire continues in modern Turkish culture through various social and religious rituals. Fire is used in wedding rituals to ensure the couple's lasting happiness; it is believed the fire should not be extinguished. In some regions, the groom jumps over a fire before entering the bridal chamber to leave evil spirits behind. The association of fire with the family hearth remains, with the "Mother Fire" (Od Ana) cult protecting women and children (pp. 291, 294). It is believed that a fireplace represents the family and ancestors, and it was believed that every family has a fireplace, while a term "dead fireplace" means the end of a family (Yilmaz Özkarsli, 2015, pp. 151–152). Similarly to Georgian tradition

where fire "in the middle of the house has the same meaning as the sun for the world" (Mosia, 2015, p. 16). "The sun is warm, life-giving, protecting, has loving power but at the same time the sun and the fire can be dangerous and even threatening from which man must protect himself" (p. 16).

Lighting fires and jumping over them is the foundation of Nevruz celebrations, symbolizing purification and the arrival of spring, as well as: "Jumping over the fire in the Hıdırellez ritual is associated with protection from diseases and evil" (Şengel & Uz, 2025, p. 1698). Hıdırellez is a traditional Turkish spring festival observed annually from the night of May 5 to May 6, marking the arrival of spring and the beginning of the pastoral season. "Traces of water, fire and fertility cults that have survived from ancient beliefs to the present day can be seen in the Hıdırellez tradition". (p. 1965). It is widely celebrated with bonfires, not only for jumping over them but around which people gather, sing, dance (p. 1696).

Another significant element is "nature spirits" which have existed in Turkish culture since the pre-Islamic period of Turkish mythology. These spirits also include forest and water (Cobanoğlu, 2015, p. 126). The concept of *İye* (sometimes spelled *Eğe* or *İyelik*) is well-attested in Turkic, including Anatolian folklore. An *İye* is a guardian or protective spirit associated with a specific place or element (forest, river, mountain, etc.). These spirits were believed to protect their domain and could punish those who disrespected it as "In ancient Turkish myth, the tree is seen as sacred" (Şengel & Uz, 2025, p. 1698). Orman İyesi, translated literally, means a Forest guardian spirit. One of the most known examples would be Archura (sometimes spelled Arçura or Arçuri or Arçun) – a figure from Turkic and Central Asian folklore, especially among nomadic forest-dwelling communities. In Chuvash, Turkic, and Anatolian folklore, Arçuri is a complex forest spirit and supernatural entity associated with both nature and the liminal space between life and death. Traditionally considered a forest guardian or protective spirit, Arçun inhabits forests and wild places, punishing disrespectful humans while occasionally aiding those who honor the natural order. Descriptions of Arçun portray it as a long-haired, dark-skinned, and completely feathered or hairy being, sometimes with four eyes, three hands, and three legs. The spirit is gender-fluid, appearing as male or female depending on the narrative, and possesses shapeshifting abilities, taking forms ranging from a bearded man to a whale or even various inanimate objects. While primarily mischievous, Arçun does not typically kill humans but can harm their bodies, play pranks, and inspire fear. Mythology links it to the souls of the recently deceased and to broader demonological motifs in Turkic folklore, including parallels with Tatars' *Şurele*, Bashkirs' *Albastı*, and Hakas spirits like *Huu-lney.* Linguistically, the name reflects its dual nature: *Ar* ("male" or "human") and *çun* ("side" or "aspect"), symbolizing its partial humanity and asymmetric, supernatural form. Though it eventually became associated with malevolence following the spread of Christianity, Arçun's origins lie in pre-Christian animistic beliefs, representing both the protective and threatening dimensions of the forest (Beydili, 2005, pp. 66–67).

Similarly to spirits, the notion of djinn/jinn (Turkish: Cin) as beings created from "smokeless fire" is a classical Islamic belief found in the Quran and widely reflected in Muslim-influenced folk belief throughout Anatolia: "It was created from a smokeless flame of fire" (Surah 55:15; Quran) (The Noble Quran, n.d.). This theological idea is part of popular imagination even outside strictly religious contexts. Jinn in Islam are supernatural beings whose existence is considered a core belief in the faith, deeply rooted in both the Quran and authentic Hadith (sayings and actions of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ). According to the Quran, jinn are created from "smokeless fire", as mentioned explicitly in Surah Al-Rahman (55:15) and Surah Al-Hijr (15:27). They are intelligent, free-willed creatures, distinct from humans and angels, capable of choosing good or evil. The Hadith also document interactions between the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and jinn, including occasions where he gave sermons to them. Furthermore, Islamic teachings highlight certain Quranic chapters (surahs) as protective measures against harmful jinn activity. For example: Ayat al-Kursi (Quran 2:255) – often recited for protection. Al-Mu'awwidhatayn (Surah Al-Falaq and Surah An-Naas) – invoked to seek refuge from evil influences, including from jinn. Scholars study jinn not only through these textual sources but also from social, cultural, and scientific perspectives, exploring their influence on human beliefs, folklore, and practices (Akhter, 2025, p. 1068).

From the prehistoric fire goddesses of the Altai to the complex spirit-worlds of the Arçuri and the jinn, Turkic folklore demonstrates that fire is never merely a physical tool for survival. It is a living, "feminine" force of regeneration – the Od Ana – that stands at the center of the household and the cosmos. Whether manifested as the eternal flames of Yanartaş or the smoke-cleansing rituals of tütsüleme, fire remains the primary intermediary between the human and the divine. By maintaining the sanctity of the hearth, modern Turkish culture preserves an ancient "pyrophilic" wisdom: that a family's continuity is inextricably linked to the "soul" of the fire, and that to let the hearth go out is to lose the very warmth that sustains the collective identity.

Italian and Mediterranean folklore

The profound connection between the forest and the regenerative power of fire has persisted from ancient solstitial rites through to modern folk traditions across the globe. In Italy, particularly in Tuscany and the Val di Chiana, this union was celebrated through the ceppo (Christmas Log) – typically a massive oak block brought from the woods – which was

ritually burned on Christmas Eve to "warm" the divine and ensure the fertility of crops and livestock for the coming year. It is worth noting that oak in diverse cultures has been considered sacred and of high ritualistic value. While the log represented terrestrial fire, the forest also housed "celestial fire" in the form of mistletoe (*Viscum album*), which the Druids of Gaul and Britain believed was generated by lightning striking the sacred oak. Known as the "lightning broom" (scopa del fulmine), this plant was viewed as a visible emanation of heavenly fire; it was harvested with a golden sickle to preserve its protective energy – a veneration of the "burning" forest spirit that spans from the ancient Celtic priesthood to the Ainu of Japan and the Valo of Senegal (Cattabiani, 1998, pp. 306–309).

Tullia Coppola Raponi's 1955 study, "I Fuochi di Carnevale in Italia" (Carnival fires in Italy) explain an interesting phenomenon – it examines fire as a central element in Italian popular traditions, specifically focusing on the periodic fires lit during carnivals. She classifies collective fires into several categories: Cyclic Fires – Elements of various recurring ceremonies; Calendrical Fires – Lit on specific days according to the calendar; Episode/Joy Fires – Lit for notable events or civil/religious solemnities, often lacking magical significance (Coppola Raponi, 1955, p. 21). For example, the tradition of the Midsummer fires in Italy is presented as a vibrant, rhythmic celebration centered on purification and protection. In the Abruzzi region, the "fires of St. John" are traditionally fueled by straw and dry grass, kindled in open fields or on high ground. A central ritual involves villagers leaping over the flames while shouting for the Saint's protection – specifically for the health of their legs – and carrying the charred brands and ashes back to their homes to bless their households. This practice of jumping over the fire is a widespread communal event, seen from the mountain peaks of Madonie in Sicily to the streets of Orvieto, where these specific bonfires were historically so cherished they were exempted from general fire prohibitions (Frazer, 1913, pp. 208–211).

Beyond the physical spectacle, the fire festivals are deeply intertwined with local folklore and the warding off of supernatural threats. In places like Chiaromonte, the night was considered a time of heightened witchcraft, leading residents to use fire-adjacent charms and brooms as protective barriers. Frazer (1913) illustrates a fascinating duality where fire and water work in tandem for this very purpose: while the fires burn through the night to ward off evil, the morning dew and sea are believed to gain "beneficent properties" at sunrise. Whether it is the shepherds lighting beacons across the Sicilian hills or the villagers of the Abruzzi dancing around the lumes, these fires serve as a spiritual and social anchor, connecting modern peasants to the ancient customs of the Vestini and Marsi (Frazer, 1913, pp. 208–211).

Also in the agricultural world, the use of fire is often treated not only as a technical tool but rather as a ceremony or ritual, revealing the "mystery of plant regeneration" (Razzoli, 2011, pp. 79–80). Focusing agropastoral fires can give us a look to more practical side of folkloric beliefs. Agropastoral fires in Italy are historically classified as cyclic seasonal fires with remote origins in field work intended to cleanse and immunize the land. These fires served a propitiatory function, often utilizing brambles, noxious weeds, and dry agricultural waste to signal the first signs of spring. In certain regions and provinces, such as the Capitanata, these rituals were closely tied to pastoral life, involving the use of herd bells during the ceremonies. Beyond their practical agricultural utility, these bonfires, as seen in any other cultures, were believed to possess a defensive and purifying force that could protect nature and the community (Coppola Raponi, 1955, p. 24). These fires coincided with several significant festivities and calendar events: *S. Antonio* Abate (January 17th). Known as the "Master of Fire", he is often depicted with a flame and a piglet, leading to the nickname "Sant'Antonio del porcello" (Saint Anthony of the piglet). From the Middle Ages to the 19th century, he was invoked to heal painful sores, specifically those known as "Fuoco di Sant'Antonio" (Saint Anthony's Fire). In Southern Italy and places like Itri, the Carnival cycle – and its associated fires – often began on the feast of the patron saint of fire. On final days of Carnival, the "death" of the season was celebrated by burning a straw effigy or lighting large bonfires. In Aviano, the tradition of the *capon* (hut) fire at the vigil of Epiphany served as a transition into the Carnival season. While Carnival fires occurred during a period of "dissipation", they transitioned into a sacred Christian context with the consecration of fire on Holy Saturday. In areas like Val Rendena, the "festa della vecchia" (feast of the old woman) involved burning effigies mid-way through the Lenten period (Coppola Raponi, 1955, p. 28; Gelmetti, 2007; Buttitta, 1999). However, these spectacular ritual fires represent only the most visible layer of a much deeper, everyday relationship between rural communities and their environment. While the Carnival effigy burns to mark a spiritual transition, it rests upon a foundation of "mundane" practices that are equally vital for the survival of the landscape.

Ethnographic research is indispensable for identifying the sustainable agropastoral practices that have been historically marginalized or ignored by official state narratives. By establishing long-term rapport with local communities, ethnographic studies uncover the "mundane practices" of hitherto ignored groups, such as the litter raking traditionally performed by women or the strategic firewood cutting that reduces wildfire fuel. This research is critical for dismantling the "official stigma" and historical hostility toward traditional fire management, which has long favored suppression over more nuanced, culturally embedded prevention strategies. Furthermore, an ethnohistorical approach allows for a deeper "sense-making" of contemporary landscapes, providing the scientific and cultural evidence needed to integrate traditional knowledge into modern fire-risk reduction policies worldwide (Mathews & Malfatti, 2024, p. 1074).

For example, Mathews and Malfatti (2024) have conducted a case study analysis on the Monte Pisano in Italy. The Monte Pisano, a modest mountain range of about 15,000 hectares between Pisa and Lucca in Central Italy, presents a mosaic landscape shaped both by ecology and long human use. Its Mediterranean climate, with dry summers and variable precipitation, creates conditions prone to fire. Agriculture dominates the lower slopes, especially olive groves, while forests of maritime pine, chestnut, oak, and scrub species cover the higher elevations. Many of these vegetation types – pine, macchia scrub, garrigue, and exotic conifer plantations – are highly flammable, meaning that controlled human practices of cultivation, grazing, and limited burning historically played a crucial role in keeping landscapes manageable. Today, with abandonment of traditional land care and its mythological significance, fire risk is intensified, showing how the interplay between humans and vegetation has always determined the flammability of Monte Pisano (p. 1067). Also, Elena Razzoli (2011) highlights that traditionally, summer fires were prevented through the care of fields and forests using techniques to clean "necromass" (dead organic matter). The loss of these traditional techniques due to industrialization has led to approximately 200,000 hectares of Mediterranean forest burning annually (p. 78).

Local informants described the Monte Pisano landscape in the past as "clean" and well maintained, in contrast to what they see today as neglected and overgrown. Previously, forests were regularly cleared of fallen branches, leaf litter, and debris because wood was collected for fuel and the land was actively managed. Property boundaries were clearly marked, and constant human presence in woodland and pasture areas meant the ground remained largely free of combustible material. As a result, fires were rare and, when they did occur, were quickly extinguished. However, with the shift to fossil fuel heating, traditional land management practices were abandoned. Fallen trees and undergrowth were no longer removed, making the forest denser, harder to navigate, and more susceptible to wildfires. The older, tended forests resembled open, park-like landscapes with reduced underbrush, which naturally lowered fire risk (Mathews & Malfatti, 2024, p. 1067), "litter raking had been a universal activity" (p. 1070). This historical diligence in keeping the forest "clean" was not merely a matter of fuel collection; it was rooted in a cultural worldview that viewed the woods as more than a physical resource. As Alfredo Cattabiani (1998) explores in his Florario, the forest was traditionally understood as a "Sacred Grove" – a symbolic dimension where every tree and flame held a specific, cosmic meaning.

Alfredo Cattabiani (1998) created a compilation of existing myths, legends, and symbols associated with plants and flowers, drawn from a wide variety of historical and cultural traditions. He mentions forests and fires on several occasions. Entering a wood (bosco) is described as entering a dimension different from the daily one, evoking symbols of the cosmos (pp. 5–6). He mentions an interesting sighting – Bosco di Bomarzo. The Sacro Bosco di Bomarzo (Sacred Grove or Forest of Bomarzo), often called the Park of Monsters (Parco dei Mostri), is a 16th-century Mannerist monumental complex located in Bomarzo, Italy. It was commissioned by the nobleman Pier Francesco "Vicino" Orsini in 1552. Unlike the symmetrical and orderly Renaissance gardens of the time (like the Villa d'Este), this garden is eccentric, filled with grotesque sculptures, leaning buildings, and mythological creatures carved directly into the bedrock. Orsini was inspired by the "Rose, symbol of the ineffable One" and "hermetic secrets". In the 16th century, many intellectuals were interested in Alchemy and Hermeticism. The garden was likely designed as a philosophical journey or an initiation path where the visitor confronts symbols of the "Divine" hidden within nature. The "Sacred" aspect refers to this hidden, mystical knowledge (sub rosa) (Cattabiani, 1998, p. 17; Sacro Bosco, 2026). While the garden at Bomarzo was intentionally "eccentric" and filled with "grotesque sculptures" to provoke a philosophical journey, the Roman relationship with the forest and plants was defined by a more structured, foundational reverence. For the Romans, certain trees were not just symbols for contemplation, but the literal seat of the gods.

In ancient Rome, the oak was so integral to the sacred landscape that the Caelian Hill was originally known as Mons Querquetulanus ("Mount of the Oaks") due to its dense forest cover, a place where Jupiter was worshipped specifically as the god of the oak. This reverence extended to the Temple of Vesta, which was encircled by a grove of oaks and whose perpetual fire was strictly fueled by oak wood. The tree also featured centrally in the bloody ritual at Nemi described by James Frazer in The Golden Bough. In this sacred wood dedicated to Diana, a priest known as the King of the Wood prowled with a drawn sword, guarding a specific oak from potential challengers. To usurp him, a rival had to first sever the "Golden Bough" – interpreted as the materialization of celestial fire or lightning brought down to consecrate the tree to Jupiter. Breaking this bough was believed to cut the oak's "celestial rooting", thereby rendering the priest vulnerable to the fatal blow that would allow the challenger to succeed him (Cattabiani, 1998, p. 55).

The Italian tradition reveals a historical continuum where the "celestial fire" of the Golden Bough and the "terrestrial fire" of the Christmas log served as the spiritual bookends for a well-managed landscape. From the "perpetual fire" of Vesta to the "mundane" litter raking on Monte Pisano, the forest was never viewed as a wild void, but as a "Sacred Grove" requiring constant human presence and ritual care.

Latvian and Baltic folklore

Across the Baltic and Slavic world, fire was bound to deities of lightning and storm, whose attributes were later transferred to Christian saints such as the prophet Elijah. In Serbia, Elijah inherited the lightning of God, and his feast day was feared for the misfortunes and fires – sometimes even spontaneous combustion – attributed to his anger. This association reflects earlier beliefs in Perun, the Slavic thunder god, who was closely related to Perkūnas in Lithuania and to other Indo-European fire deities. In Latvia, black animals were sacrificed to Pērkons, much like offerings made to the fire god Agni in ancient India, underscoring the universality of fire as a medium of divine power and exchange. Fire was not only celestial but also domestic: while Russian sources describe Svarog as a god of the drying-house fire, in Chernigov people invoked Perun himself when kindling these flames, suggesting that even household fires were understood as manifestations of the thunder god. In this way, fire appears as both a destructive and protective force, feared for its uncontrollable might yet revered as the essential medium connecting humans with divine authority (Gasparini, 2024). This divine authority is not merely an abstract belief but is actively channeled through specific cultural expressions.

The core of Latvia's oral cultural heritage cannot be imagined without dainas – short, poetic songs. They are most strongly associated with Latvia and are one of the oldest and richest folk song traditions in Europe. In dainas, fire is both a physical and symbolic anchor of the ritual: it gathers the community, marks sacred time, and helps transform scattered verses into a coherent ceremonial "story". The song lives through the act – through the burning fire around which it is performed. In the daina tradition, a "song" is not a single quatrain, but the full ritual performance shaped by context, sequence, and action. Fire – especially the lighting of bonfires (ugunskuru kuršana) – is not just a background element but a central ritual episode that structures the event. Like the garlanded animals, visits to neighbors, or circling of fields, fire becomes part of the narrative flow that gives meaning to the sung verses (Konrāde, 2005, p. 74). One of the most common occasions for singing Dainas is the summer solstice celebration, considering that a wealth of Dainas has been dedicated specifically for this event. For example (Dainu Skapis, n.d.):

Jāņa bērni nosaluši, *Jāņa zāles lasidami;* *Salasijši vībotnites,* *Uzkūruši uguntiņu.* *(Original in Latvian)*	*The children of Jānis are frozen cold,* *While gathering the grasses of Jānis;* *Having gathered the mugwort stalks,* *They have kindled the little fire.* *(Translation by Krasnova from Latvian)*

Fire stood at the heart of Midsummer's Eve – Jāņi -celebrations, carrying profound symbolic and ritual meaning for ancient Latvians. The bonfire (*Jāņu ugunskurs*), built with careful preparation, burnt on hills and mounds, and was directly linked to the sun cult, representing its life-giving power at the summer solstice – the longest day and shortest night of the year. According to Rancāne (2025), the grandest of these fires is a tar barrel or a wheel hub raised high atop a pole or in a tree, symbolizing Jānis himself. In different regions, this is known by various names: pūdele, pundele, ragana, mutulis, pekainis, baklaška, pūne, among others. Dancing and games were traditionally performed in circles around the fire, creating a ritual space that echoed the cosmic order and renewal believed to be ensured by the solstice. Leaping over the flames symbolized purification and protection from evil, while at the same time promoting fertility and abundance for the year to come. In some places, young people do this while wearing girdles of mugwort. As far as the flames of the Jāņi fires shine, so far do the fields become fertile. Young men and women make torches from kindling and straw, light them at the Jāņi fire, and run along the fields, frolicking to drive away evil. After midnight, a burning wheel made of tarred straw or two – a symbol of the sun – is rolled down the hill and, if possible, directed into a river or lake. On Jāņi night, a "little sun" (a bonfire built on a raft, also called a fire-raft) is floated in the water, released into a lake. The people of Kurzeme launch a burning barrel into the sea. In some places, small wreaths with candles attached are set afloat in the river. More than any other ritual, the bonfire embodied the connection between human communities and the natural and mythical order, which is why it became one of the most enduring features of Baltic midsummer traditions (Kovzele & Kačāne, 2023, pp. 321–323; Rancāne, 2025).

Another event, a particular festivity, Labrenča diena (also spelled *Labrencis* or *Labrančs* and commonly called *Uguns diena* – Fire Day) is a traditional Latvian folk observance held on 10 August each year. It has deep roots in agrarian and folk belief systems, associated with the element of fire and seasonal transition from high summer toward autumn. It was traditionally seen as a day to honor the fire spirit or fire itself (uguns). People often avoided lighting fires – including stoves and hearth fires – on this day out of respect and also out of concern that careless use of fire could lead to dangerous house fires (AILAB, 2026a).

Fire gives warmth and light, yet one must always remember that it contains a very great and dangerous power, the ability to destroy and burn. Therefore, it must always be kept in a safe place. Safety is extremely important for ensuring a good,

prosperous, and stable life. Several beliefs and traditions can be found that inform on fire safety, such as: "Apdegušu malkas pagali nedrīkst no meža vest mājās, tad ceļoties ugunsgrēks" (AILAB, 2026c). Burnt firewood sticks must not be taken home from the forest, otherwise a fire will break out. Besides spirits, Latvian folklore is based on a strong belief in diverse deities. Latvian mythology places the fire under the realm of the Uguns Māte (Mother fire) and the forest under the care of Meža Māte (Mother Forest).

In Latvian folklore, it is said that one must know how to handle the Mother of Fire (in beliefs usually depicted as a small flame or spark). Otherwise, the Mother of Fire will burn down buildings or draw people themselves into flames. Folk beliefs also state that it is forbidden to speak when the Mother of Fire appears to someone, otherwise a building might immediately catch fire. Similarly, the beliefs prohibit throwing scum from a pot into the fire, spitting into it, pouring water on it, poking it with your foot, throwing hair into it, or disturbing it in any other way. In connection with offerings and sacrifices, folk songs repeatedly mention that a new bride, upon entering her husband's house, must make an offering to the Mother of Fire (folk songs more often simply say "to the fire" or "to the hearth fire"). Most often, a white chicken was sacrificed to the fire, where the white color possibly served to neutralize the fire's anger (Valmieras muzejs, n.d.).

This account of the "Mother Fire" comes from the parish of Naudīte. It was first recorded in 1888 in the newspaper Balss (Balss, 1888):

Ļaudis teiksmo, ka naudižnieku Skaparu mežsarga mežā vietu vietām esot ugunsceļi. Pēc saules norietēšanas varot zināt, kur tāds ceļš atrodoties, jo tad tajā vietā karsta versme nākot pretim. Uguns ceļš arī atrodoties pie Naudižnieku Dēlu ezera. Uz ugunsceļa cilvēks nevarot ne gulēt, nedz ēku celt. Pie Maz-Braņķu rijas arī esot ugunsceļš: tur, nezin, cik gadu atpakaļ cēluši jaunu riju. Vecs ubags, gaŗām iedams, teicis uz strādniekiem: «Velti jūsu pūles! šī vietiņa pieder Uguns māmiņai! » Un tā arī bijis: tikko pirmo seru iesēruši un krāsni aizkūruši, te rija uz reizi viscauri sākusi degt un nodegusi līdz pamatam. Mūsu veči tic vēl tagad, ka ugunsceļā nevarot celt ēkas, jo tur tās nodegot; arī gulēt tur nevarot pieguļā, jo tad cilvēku samocot un samaitājot. *Piezīme. (Pēc Latviešu Avīzēm 1835. g. gāj) Esot mežā daudz tādu koku, ko par ugunskokiem sauc Jāsargās tādus koku par baļķiem ņemt, jo tādiem kokiem esot savs laiks, kad viņi paši no sevis sākot degt un tad varot visu ēku aizdedzināt. Šiem ugunskokiem esot 2 serdes. L. P* *(Original in Latvian)*	*"People tell legends that in the forest of the Naudižnieki-Skapari ranger, there are fire paths (ugunsceļi) here and there. You can tell where such a path lies after sunset, for a blast of heat comes toward you at that spot. A fire path is also said to be located by the Naudižnieki Dēlu Lake. One must neither sleep nor build a building upon a fire path. There is reportedly a fire path at the Maz-Braņķi threshing barn as well. Who knows how many years ago, they built a new barn there. An old beggar, passing by, said to the workers: "Your efforts are in vain! This spot belongs to Mother Fire!" And so it came to pass: no sooner had they loaded the first batch of grain and lit the stove, than the barn suddenly burst into flames throughout and burned down to the ground.* *Our elders still believe to this day that buildings cannot be raised on a fire path, for they will burn down; nor can one sleep there during the night watch (pieguļa), for then one is tormented and physically ruined".* *While the story of the burning barn was recorded in 1888, the text includes a fascinating footnote from 1835. Originally appearing in Latviešu Avīzes (Latvian Newspapers), this earlier note explains the phenomenon of "fire trees" - trees with double cores that were believed to self-combust and ignite entire buildings.* *(Translation by Krasnova from Latvian)*

Mother Forest, on the other hand, unlike the chaotic Leshy in Slavic folklore, is a figure of maternal order, but her wrath is reserved for those who disrespect the stillness of the forest. She still is an important figure to a modern hunter. A legend was recorded by N. Krimbergs in 1893 and originally appeared in the Riga German newspaper *Rigasche Tageblatt* (1893). It was later canonized in Friedrich Bienemann's 1897 collection, *Livländisches Sagenbuch* (Livonian Book of Legends), highlighting the cross-cultural fascination with Latvian mythology in the late 19th century:

Vecos laikos auga uz viena kalna pie Gaujas, starp Cēsim un Valmieru ļoti liela liepa, kur vidzemnieki senāk nesa upurus Mežamātei. Viņa dzīvoja koka dobumā un bija skaista sieviete ar kupliem gaišiem matiem un greznās drēbēs tērpusies. Tikai retis kādam izdevās viņu redzēt, jo cilvēkiem viņa retis rādījās. Katru dienu ap pusnakti visi meža zvēri un putni sapulcējās pie lielās liepas, kur Mežamāte viņiem uzdeva dienas darbu un slinkajiem un nepaklausīgajiem uzlika sodu. Kad mednieks gāja uz medībām, tad viņam vispirms bija jānes upuris Mežamātei un jālūdz, lai labi izdotos.	In olden times, on a certain hill near the Gauja River, between Cēsis and Valmiera, there grew a very large linden tree where the people of Vidzeme used to bring sacrifices to the Mother of the Forest (Meža-māte). She lived in the hollow of the tree and was a beautiful woman with thick, light hair, dressed in magnificent clothes. Only rarely did anyone manage to see her, for she seldom showed herself to people. Every day around midnight, all the beasts and birds of the forest gathered at the great linden, where the Mother of the Forest assigned them their daily work and imposed

Continued

Labu cilvēku upuri viņa uzņēma žēlīgi, paklausīja viņu lūgumu un piešķīra tiem labas medības ar zaķiem, stirnām un citiem zvēriem. Ļaunu cilvēku upurus viņa nepieņēma; tādi varēja klejot pa mežu, cik gribēja, bet neatrada nekādu zvēru. Ja viņi arī beidzot kādu zvēru ieraudzīja un uz to šāva, tad tas tomēr nekad nekrita. Kamēr ļaudis nesa Mežamātei upurus, medniekiem nekad netrūka medījuma un zvēri nepostīja laužu īpašumu. Vēlāku laudis tomēr nocirta svēto liepu un gribēja tai vietā celt baznīcu. Bet baznīcas celšana vilkās ļoti ilgi, jo zvēri un putni visādi kavēja to darbu. Beidzot darbs tomēr bija pabeigts; tad naktī izcēlās liela šņākšana un rūkšana. Ļaudis nu skrēja uz to kalnu, bet ko viņi tur ieraudzīja? Bija sanākuši lieli bari zvēru un putnu un taisījās baznīcu nopostīt. Ļaudis gan lūkoja zvērus un putnus aizbaidīt, bet viņiem tas neizdevās. Īsā laikā mūri bija pazuduši un baznīcas vietā atradās tikai drupu kaudze. Kad baznīca bija izpostīta, tad Mežamāte ar zvēriem un putniem aizgāja uz citu tālu vietu; bet pie Gaujas ielejas ļaudim nu nāca vilki un lāči, kas tiem padarīja lielu postu. No tā laika Mežamāte vairs nav nevienam rādījusies. *(Original in Latvian)*	punishment on the lazy and disobedient. When a hunter went hunting, he first had to bring a sacrifice to the Mother of the Forest and pray for good success. She accepted the sacrifices of good people graciously, listened to their requests, and granted them a good hunt with hares, roe deer, and other beasts. She did not accept the sacrifices of evil men; such men could wander the forest as much as they liked but found no game. Even if they finally spotted a beast and shot at it, it never fell. As long as the people brought sacrifices to the Mother of the Forest, the hunters never lacked game, and the beasts did not ravage the people's property. Later, however, the people cut down the sacred linden and wanted to build a church in its place. But the building of the church dragged on for a very long time, for the beasts and birds hindered the work in every way possible. Finally, the work was finished; then, in the night, a great hissing and roaring arose. The people ran to the hill, but what did they see there? Great flocks of beasts and birds had gathered and were preparing to destroy the church. The people tried to scare the beasts and birds away, but they could not. In a short time, the walls had vanished, and in the place of the church, there was only a pile of ruins. When the church was destroyed, the Mother of the Forest left with the beasts and birds for another distant place; but now wolves and bears came to the Gauja valley, doing great damage to the people. Since that time, the Mother of the Forest has not shown herself to anyone. *(Translation by Krasnova from Latvian)*

Besides the belief in a forest protector – the Forest Mother, Latvians considered some forests and other natural elements to be sacred, although "Latvians and Lithuanians did not worship forests, fire, grass-snakes (*Natrix natrix*) and stones as such; instead, they viewed them as holy and revered them as abodes of gods, likewise Prussians regarded the oak as sacred because chief gods lived in it" (Nastevičs, 2018, p. 87).

As explained in the materials published by the Latvian National Museum of History of Latvia (2021), sacred groves, forests, and individual trees are frequently mentioned in written Latvian sources and folklore. They were considered untouchable and could only be visited on specific days, usually just a few times a year. It was forbidden to cut trees at will, break branches, pick berries, or hunt in these areas. These protected sites could be seen today as a form of nature reserve, though they were originally preserved for sacred purposes.

A particularly detailed account exists of a sacred forest belonging to the Curonian chieftains, where in the second half of the 16th century, the traveler Reinholds Lubenau participated in ancestral spirit feasts during Christmas. This is the only sacred forest whose exact location is known today (Latvian National Museum of History of Latvia, 2021).

In medieval written sources (13th–15th centuries), sacred forests were often mentioned as territorial markers and boundary indicators. For instance, the 1301 boundary description of the Kuldīga Commandery mentions a sacred grove near Aralde (heiligen holt to Aralden), a sacred forest (hilgen busch) is referenced in 1422 in the description of the Tārgale boundaries, and a 1476 sales contract records that Verner Butler purchased a sacred grove near a Latvian village (hilgen busch to Lettendorpe) in Strazde. In the 1503 boundary description of Dragunu free village, a sacred forest called Elkewalke (hilliges busche genomet Elkewalke) is noted (Latvian National Museum of History of Latvia, 2021).

Later sources unfortunately more often record sacred forests and trees as objects being systematically destroyed. Jesuit reports from the 18th century mention that several dozen sacred trees were cut down in parts of Latgale. In 1836, the priest Pauls Karbloms destroyed around 80 groves near peasant farms in Ērģeme. Preachers of the Christian faith viewed natural objects and other creations as unworthy of honor, which belongs only to God. This position was already expressed in Pope Innocent III's 1199 bull, which stated that the inhabitants of Livonia were giving the honor due to God to dumb animals, leafy trees, flowing waters, green plants, and impure spirits (Latvian National Museum of History of Latvia, 2021).

Written records clearly indicate that the tradition of venerating sacred forests and trees persisted through the centuries into more recent times. Today, evidence of the once-protected sacred groves survives only in a few ancient trees and local legends (Latvian National Museum of History of Latvia, 2021). For instance, the Oak was almost universally dedicated to the God of Thunder across diverse cultures. For the native peoples of Northern and Eastern Europe, the Oak was the sacred dwelling of the Thunder God. In Lithuania and Latvia, the oak was dedicated to Perkunas/Perkun. Believers kept "perpetual fires" burning with oak wood to honor him. Slavs dedicated the oak to Perun. Like the Balts, they maintained a perpetual oak fire. If the fire went out, the person responsible was executed (Cattabiani, 1998, pp. 55–56), similarly to the Vestal tradition. In Latvian folk art and symbols, the ugunskrusts (fire cross) is a solar or fire symbol often used in ornaments on textiles, buildings, or tools. Interestingly, by interpreting its design mythologically, scholars connect it to Pērkons, emphasizing its protective and powerful qualities linked to thunder, storms, and cosmic order (Ūdre-Lielbārde, 2025).

Baltic traditions reveal a worldview where the human relationship with the environment is governed by a strict code of reciprocity and respect. Whether through the communal "sun-barrels" of the Midsummer solstice or the quiet offerings made to the Uguns Māte at the domestic hearth, fire is treated as a sentient guest that must be hosted with care. These myths and "sacred groves" effectively functioned as the region's first environmental protections – early "nature reserves" where the threat of divine wrath ensured ecological preservation.

Polish and Slavic folklore

Just like generally in the Indo-European sphere, in Slavic tradition, fire held an ambivalent role: while in fertility rites it symbolized renewal, sacrifice, and the promise of abundance, in apocalyptic visions such as the apparitions of to the spirits of the dead known as *navii* it became a destructive force, signaling invasion, drought, and a threat to both human life and the fertility of the earth (Álvarez-Pedrosa & Santos Marinas, 2023, p. 78).

Fire occupied a central place in pre-Christian Slavic cosmology, especially in funerary rites such as cremation, which was believed to purify the soul and restore cosmic balance after violent or premature death. Rooted in Indo-European religious belief, cremation allowed fire to consume the mortal body while enabling the soul's passage to the afterlife (Álvarez-Pedrosa & Santos Marinas, 2023, p. 78). Beyond funerary practice, fire symbolized both the cosmic sun and the domestic hearth, functioning as the sacred medium of fertility rituals performed beneath granaries and in drying furnaces. Personified as Svarozhich and invoked alongside deities such as Perun, Mokosh, Sim, R'gl, Rod, and the Rozhanitsy, this agrarian fire embodied the generative heat necessary for harvest and renewal (Álvarez-Pedrosa & Santos Marinas, 2023, pp. 32–33, 106). Forest spaces and household hearths thus became clandestine sanctuaries for the persistence of older rites, even as Christian authorities sought to suppress them (pp. 32–33).

The Christianization of Kievan Rus and Scandinavia disrupted these practices, particularly through the prohibition of cremation, creating theological and cultural tensions reflected in narratives of miraculous fire and restless death. The cult of the martyred princes Boris and Gleb – sons of Prince Vladimir, murdered in 1015 and canonized in 1072 – illustrates this transformation. According to the Narrative, a pillar of fire appeared above Gleb's incorrupt body. In pre-Christian terms, such imagery evoked the unresolved fate of violently killed individuals deprived of cremation; yet within the emerging Christian framework, fire was reinterpreted not as a necessary means of releasing the soul, but as a sign of divine presence, sanctity, and miraculous protection (Álvarez-Pedrosa & Santos Marinas, 2023, pp. 104–106). Thus, the fiery symbolism surrounding Boris and Gleb reveals both the suppression of older cosmological structures and their subtle persistence within Christian hagiography.

Practiced by the East and South Slavs, two annual festivals honoring the dead are well documented, though they also carried strong elements of agrarian fertility rites. Both were celebrated in spring, with a festival *Radunitsa* coinciding with Christian Holy Week and dedicated to *navii.* It was believed that these souls returned to the living world, drawn by the warmth of bonfires lit in their honor. As part of the rituals, they were offered food and drink, along with practices referred to as the "bathing of the dead" (Álvarez-Pedrosa & Santos Marinas, 2023, p. 111).

In Polish folk culture, the sacred nature of fire is defined by a duality between the life-giving "heavenly fire" (ogień niebieski or boży ogień) and the destructive "thunderbolt fire" (ogień piorunowy). "Heavenly fire", often associated with the sun, is conceptualized as the "light filling the sky" (jasność wypełniająca niebo), representing the primordial force that animated the world and the "divine fire" that brings fertility. In contrast, "thunderbolt fire" is viewed as an instrument of God's wrath – a form of "otherworldly fire" (ogień zaświatowy) sent to purify the earth of evil and sinners. Because this fire is of divine origin, it is strictly forbidden to extinguish it; instead, one must try to "calm" the flames using magical barriers, such as marking a circle with blessed chalk or throwing "St. Agatha's salt" into the blaze. This reverence for fire extends to eschatological beliefs found in "songs of wandering beggars" (pieśni dziadowskie), which prophesy that the world will ultimately end in a "rain of fire" (deszcz ognisty) (Masłowska, 2020, pp. 233–245).

Въ Нормандіи птица, называемая réblo, признается священною за то, что принесла съ неба огонь; кто убьетъ ее, или разоритъ ея гнѣздо, того постигнетъ несчастіе. Римляне знали avis incendiaria и принимали дятла (Picus) за птицу, посвященную Марсу, за низводителя небеснаго пламени; и наши, и нѣмецкія преданія приписываютъ дятлу добываніе чудесной разрывъ-травы (springwurzel), подъ которою разумѣлась разящая молнія. (Original in Pre-reform Russian)	In Normandy, a bird called the réblo is recognized as sacred because it brought fire from heaven; whoever kills it or destroys its nest will be overtaken by misfortune. The Romans knew the avis incendiaria and considered the woodpecker (Picus) a bird dedicated to Mars, a bringer of heavenly flame; both our [Slavic] and German traditions attribute to the woodpecker the retrieval of the miraculous razryv-trava (springwurzel), which was understood as the striking lightning. (Translation by Krasnova from Pre-reform Russian)

Fire is personified as a "living creature" (*bo to jest żywe*) and traditionally given the name *Zygmunt*, a moniker reflecting its lively nature and etymologically linked to terms like *zygać* (to make provocative gestures) and *żegi* (long sparks). This anthropomorphization required daily social rituals: the fire was greeted in the morning as a "holy guest" (*święty gościu*) or "God's dear treasure" (*skarbiczku boży*), and "put to sleep" at night with the sign of the cross and invocations to St. Lawrence (*Święty Wawrzeńcze*) or a guardian angel (*Święty Janiołecku*) to keep it contained in the hearth. The sacred status of the element imposed strict taboos, similarly to what was mentioned before about calming the flames, such as the prohibition against extinguishing the home fire with water (ashes were used instead) or putting sharp objects into the flames, which could "hurt" it. Disrespecting the element carried grave consequences; spitting into the flames was likened to spitting on Jesus and was believed to cause blisters on the tongue (*język spryszczy*) or result in the punishment of licking a red-hot stone after death, while playing with the flames was forbidden with the warning that "Fire isn't your brother" (*Ogień nie twój brat*) (Masłowska, 2020, pp. 265–268). Similar beliefs are very prevalent also in the Latvian folklore, for example: "Bērni nedrīkst spļaut ugunī, ja neklausa, tad uz mēles metas tulznas" (Children must not spit into the fire; if they disobey, blisters will form on their tongues) (AILAB, 2026b).

In Polish folkloric language, the expression "czerwony kur" or "czerwona kura" (the red rooster/hen) functions as a vivid metaphor for a destructive fire. The phrase "to let out the red rooster" (puścić czerwonego kura) is a historical idiom in Poland and other Slavic regions. It refers specifically to arson or a fire spreading rapidly. A rooster is red/orange, "flies" onto roofs, and has a flickering comb that looks like a flame. It was rarely used for accidental fires; it almost always implied a deliberate act of vengeance or malice (Korolyova & Belomestnova, 2018, p. 200). For example, as reported by Józef Słowik in Dziennik Polski – Podhale, the "red hen" engulfed the farm buildings of two neighboring households, completely destroying machinery, agricultural equipment, animal feed, and livestock, including chickens, rabbits, two pigs, a horse, and a dog In the same report, it is noted that Krzysztof Marek noticed the blaze in time, preventing the "red hen" from spreading to a second barn and shed nearby. Historically, the related phrase "puścić czerwonego kura" ("to let loose the red rooster") meant to set something on fire, particularly during times of war, raids, or social unrest. The rooster in this metaphor symbolizes the red color of flames, the dramatic announcement of catastrophe (echoing the rooster's crow), and the rapid spread of chaos and destruction through a village. The image was commonly used in references to peasant uprisings, wartime arson, and revolutionary violence. In this sense, "The Red Rooster" signifies fire unleashed and devastation set in motion (WSJP, 2009). Afanasyev (1865b), mentions another "birdly" observation that had a sacred role in the realm of fire (p. 495):

In contrast with uncontrolled fire, Polish culture was not an exception when it comes to bonfire celebrations. Sobótka bonfires in Polish folk tradition were central to midsummer celebrations at the summer solstice (Noc Świętojańska), symbolizing purification, protection, and the taming of elements through fire. Communities gathered around large ritual bonfires, often lighting them in open fields or forest clearings (Ogrodowska, 2006). These bonfires were believed to have protective and purifying power, driving away witches and bad spirits and ensuring prosperity or good weather conditions for crops. A folk proverb notes that "where Sobótki are lit, hail does not hinder [the harvest]", tying fire ritual to protection against destructive forces like storms or lightning (Grosiak, 2023; Radziewicz, 2020).

In Polish folk tradition, people brought home *gromnice* (blessed candles) and used their flame to make the sign of the cross on window and door frames. Folk beliefs held that a blessed gromnica had the power to ward off thunderstorms, lightning, and fire when lit in the home or used to mark crosses on ceiling joists and stables; this practice was widely associated with safeguarding lives and property (Szczęśniak, 2019; Kupisiński, 2015, p. 191). The feast day of the Presentation of the Lord (February 2nd) is known in Poland as Matka Boska Gromniczna (*Mother of God of the Thunder Candle*). It is believed that Mary protects the faithful from lightning and wild animals, particularly wolves, and other forestal threats.

Slavic folklore is permeated by beliefs directed toward the inherent peculiarity and mystery of the forest. The considerations of Ivanov and Toporov, as well as Zbigniew Gołąb, revealed the myth-making value of the opposition between the home and the wilderness – between that which is "one's own" and inhabited, and that which is "foreign" and

empty. The forest remains an untamed domain, ruled by other forces. Slavs follow the same myth-making path here as many other Indo-European peoples (Gieysztor, 2006, pp. 263–264).

In Kashubian folklore (an ethnic group primarily residing in the northern area of Poland), the forest serves as a transitional space where the natural and supernatural collide, particularly through the phenomenon of the "wild hunt" (*dzëkô jachta*). This demonic gale, which sweeps over the forest canopy, provides lexical evidence for the traditional belief that the wind acts as a vessel for souls performing penance. According to these accounts, the hunt consists of a host of poachers' souls led through the woods by a "wild master hunter". Beyond its role as a haunt for the restless dead, the "desolate forest" is historically conceptualized in Polish folk rituals as a spiritual wasteland. It functions as a designated destination for destructive elements, where mediators invoke divine power to redirect lightning, hail, and storms away from human settlements and into the wilderness where they can cause no harm (Masłowska, 2020, pp. 200, 204). For example (p. 2008):

> "to appease the wind, the man of the house should stand upon an axe; the woman of the house, having crossed herself, should pronounce the formula of the spell "O wind dear, go to the woods, go to the forests, where the sun doesn't reach, where nothing gets born, where winds don't blow, where birds don't sing" (Wiatreczku drogi, idź na bory, idź na lasy, gdzie słońce nie dochodzi, gdzie nic się nie rodzi, gdzie wiatry nie dowiewają, gdzie ptaszki nie śpiewają), and then say Hail Mary"

At the head of the forces manifesting in the wilderness stands the demonic personification of the forest spirit, the Master of Animals. This is the Russian leshy (Old East Slavic *leshij*, *lesovik*) and the Belarusian *lesavik*, extensively highlighted by ethnography; their Polish counterparts are: *leszy*, *borowy*, *boruta*, *laskowiec*, and *leśny duch* (forest spirit); the Serbo-Croatian *vúčji pastir* ("wolf shepherd") and the female variants *gorska majka*, *šumina mati* ("mountain mother", "forest mother") live on as a fainter memory. He is a commanding spirit, the forest tsar of Russian peasants, unfriendly toward people, misleading them astray. He takes the form of a wolf, an eagle-owl, and also a whirlwind. In Hutsul representations, he herds flocks of deer, roe deer, and hares, while bears form his guard. Appropriate offerings made in the forest, incantations, and magical rituals allow the hunter and shepherd peace from the forest spirit (Gieysztor, 2006, p. 263–264).

The forest is the domain of Leshy. While often depicted as a trickster, early ethnographic accounts frame him as the protector of the forest's integrity and a punisher of those who do not respect the forest. Afanasyev in 1865 published an ethnographic and mythological treatise "Poeticheskie vozzreniya slavyan na prirodu (in Pre-reform Russian Orthography: Поэтическія воззрѣнія славянъ на природу)" or "The Poetic Views of the Slavs on Nature", where he in detail describes Leshy as a forest creature (Afanasyev, 1865a, p. 328–329):

(...) Покидая землю, лѣшіе подымаютъ вѣтры, ломаютъ деревья и разносятъ ихъ пожелтѣвшіе листья: въ этихъ обычныхъ явленіяхъ бурной осени поэтическій взглядъ народа усматриваетъ ихъ досаду, чувство недовольства и тоски по умирающей природѣ (...)	"(...) Upon leaving the earth, the leshies stir up the winds, break the trees, and scatter their yellowed leaves: in these common phenomena of a stormy autumn, the poetic outlook of the people perceives their vexation, a feeling of discontent and longing for dying nature (...)
Стремительные вихри, по мнѣнію крестьянъ, есть дѣло лѣшаго. Такъ поломанныя бурею въ лѣсахъ деревья обыкновенно причисляются къ его проказамъ... лѣшій никогда не ходитъ просто, а спереди и сзади его всегда сопровождаетъ сильный вѣтеръ, и по направленію вѣтра можно заключать, куда именно держитъ онъ путь (...)	Rapid whirlwinds, in the opinion of the peasants, are the work of the leshy. Thus, trees broken by a storm in the forests are usually attributed to his mischief... the leshy never travels simply, but is always accompanied in front and behind by a strong wind, and by the direction of the wind, one can conclude exactly where he is heading (...)
Увѣряютъ также, что лѣшій боится головёшки. Такъ какъ свистомъ можно накликать бурю, то крестьяне не только не рѣшаются свистать на водѣ, но не дѣлаютъ этого и ночью въ лѣсу, опасаясь разбудить лѣшаго, который, проснувшись, спѣшитъ откликнуться. *(Original in Pre-reform Russian)*	It is also asserted that the leshy is afraid of a firebrand. Since one can summon a storm by whistling, peasants not only refrain from whistling on the water, but do not do so at night in the forest either, fearing to wake the leshy, who, upon waking, hastens to respond". It explicitly states that "rapid whirlwinds... are the work of the leshy" and that a "strong wind" always accompanies his movements. (Translated by Krasnova from Pre-reform Russian)

Afanasyev mentions that Leshy "is afraid of a firebrand" (головёшка), which connects the spirit's behavior directly to the presence of smoldering wood or embers. The text explains that the Leshy "hastens to respond" to human disturbances (like whistling or noise) by summoning storms, which provides the ethnographic basis for the belief that he punishes those who disrespect the forests and animals' safety.

The forest is symbolically represented by green branches decorating the traditional wedding bread (*kołacz* or *korowaj*), which links the bread to the "tree of life" and evokes associations with fertile soil, fecundity, and divine blessings bestowed upon the newlyweds (Masłowska, 2020, p. 299). Regarding plants in Polish folklore, it was believed that a linden tree planted in front of a house protected the family from evil spirits and lightning, and that cutting down a linden would bring bad luck to the owner and his family. The tree is a symbol of peace, good luck, belief, family, and happy life, and in some regions small roadside chapels sheltered by linden trees can still be seen (Țenche-Constantinescu et al., 2015, p. 239).

These varied traditions, from the "red rooster" of the village to the Leshy's whirlwinds in the deep woods, illustrate a Slavic worldview defined by a constant negotiation with the elemental forces of fire and the forest. The transition from the fear of a "thunderbolt fire" to the protective light of the gromnica reveals a culture that sought to harness the sacred power of the flame to safeguard its crops, its cattle, and the integrity of the family home.

Modern application of traditional knowledge

The narrative traditions explored in this almanac reveal that fire was rarely understood as an uncontrolled natural force. Across Anatolia, the Mediterranean, and the Baltic region, it was embedded within systems of ritual timing, taboo, agricultural rhythm, and communal oversight. Fire was personified, moralized, and seasonally regulated through cosmological frameworks that defined when and how it could be used. These symbolic structures should not be interpreted merely as mythological imagination; rather, they functioned as cultural mechanisms governing the interaction between human communities and flammable landscapes.

Historical research on Mediterranean land-use systems supports this interpretation. As Stephen Pyne notes in his history of European fire regimes, "agropastoral fire" was historically a disciplined tool of survival rather than an act of destruction (Pyne, 1997, pp. 95–97). Shepherds did not burn landscapes arbitrarily; instead, fire was applied rhythmically and in conjunction with grazing cycles. The ecological outcome depended on the frequency, intensity, and seasonal timing of burns, as well as the number of livestock that grazed the landscape afterward. In this system, fire worked in synergy with pastoralism to maintain open pasture, limit shrub encroachment, and sustain agricultural viability. The landscape was therefore shaped not by fire alone, but by the integration of flame within socially regulated land-use practices. As Pyne suggests, the destructive potential of fire emerged not from the practice of burning itself but from the breakdown of the social systems that once governed its application (Pyne, 1997, pp. 95–97).

Recent ethnohistorical research further complicates contemporary assumptions about fire as purely catastrophic. Fieldwork conducted in Monte Pisano in Central Italy demonstrates that traditional practices such as controlled burning, firewood collection, and forest litter raking significantly reduced landscape flammability (Mathews & Malfatti, 2024, p. 1065). These practices formed part of intricate agro-silvo-pastoral systems that historically structured Mediterranean landscapes. Importantly, many of these activities were gendered. Litter raking, which removed highly combustible forest debris, was frequently performed by women, whose contributions to landscape management have often been overlooked in both policy and scientific literature (Mathews & Malfatti, 2024, p. 1065).

The decline of these practices during the twentieth century has contributed to the increasing vulnerability of Mediterranean environments to large-scale wildfires. Rural depopulation, agricultural abandonment, and state prohibitions against traditional burning have transformed landscapes once maintained through cyclical human intervention into fuel-dense ecosystems. As Andrew Mathews argues, contemporary fires must be understood not only in relation to present climatic conditions but also in relation to longer histories of land management, plant disease, and rural abandonment. In his words, "contemporary fires emerge in the wake of histories of plant disease and agricultural abandonment, of longer-term histories of human fire use, and of deep time histories of plant evolution" (Mathews, 2021).

Climate change has intensified these structural vulnerabilities. Mediterranean climates are naturally conducive to fire due to prolonged summer droughts, elevated temperatures, and low humidity (European Environment Agency, 2025). Increasing heat and aridity are expected to produce larger and more intense wildfire events in the coming decades (European Environment Agency, 2025). At the same time, the spread of scrub vegetation over abandoned agricultural land has created highly flammable landscapes where traditional agro-silvo-pastoral systems once moderated fire behavior (Kalapodis & Sakkas, 2025, p. 3). These transformations demonstrate that contemporary wildfire risk results from the interaction of climatic pressures with historical changes in land use and social organization.

From this perspective, the cosmologies examined in earlier chapters acquire additional significance. Figures such as Od Ana in Anatolia, Uguns Māte in Baltic traditions, Leshy in Poland and the sacred guardians of Mediterranean groves encode cultural norms surrounding the appropriate use of fire and the moral boundaries of landscape intervention. Ritual

calendars regulating seasonal burning, festivals centered on controlled flames, and taboos surrounding forests collectively structured the relationship between communities and combustible environments. Such belief systems functioned alongside practical land management strategies, forming a broader cultural framework through which fire was integrated into everyday life.

Within Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), this historical perspective offers valuable pedagogical opportunities. Wildfire education often prioritizes scientific knowledge about climate change, ignition sources, and risk mitigation strategies. While essential, such approaches can remain abstract if detached from cultural context. Integrating narrative traditions into sustainability education allows learners to explore how earlier societies conceptualized responsibility toward fire and forest ecosystems.

Educational practices might include comparative analysis of fire-related folklore across regions, encouraging students to identify shared symbolic motifs and reflect on their ecological implications. Ritual traditions such as Hıdırellez in Anatolia or Jāņi in Latvia, which include ceremonial bonfires marking seasonal transitions, can be examined alongside historical land-use practices to illustrate how cultural symbolism intersected with ecological management. Similarly, discussions of gendered labor in forest maintenance – such as litter raking – can broaden students' understanding of how everyday practices historically contributed to landscape resilience.

Importantly, integrating folklore into wildfire education does not imply the revival of pre-modern burning practices without critical evaluation. Rather, it highlights that environmental governance has always been culturally mediated. By situating wildfire risk within longer histories of land care, abandonment, and regulation, educators can foster a more nuanced understanding of sustainability – one that incorporates ecological processes, historical transformation, and cultural memory.

In this sense, the cultural archive assembled in this almanac functions not only as documentation of past beliefs but also as a pedagogical resource. It demonstrates that the human relationship with fire has long been shaped by narratives, rituals, and social norms that structured its use. Recognizing these historical frameworks may contribute to more holistic approaches to wildfire education, bridging scientific knowledge with cultural and historical awareness.

Conclusions

This study has examined forest and fire beliefs across selected European and Anatolian contexts in order to reassess their application within contemporary sustainability education. The comparative analysis of traditions from Turkey, Italy, Poland, and Latvia demonstrates that fire historically functioned not merely as a natural hazard or technological resource, but as a culturally mediated relationship governed through ritual, narrative, and communal regulation. Within these societies, fire was simultaneously sacred and dangerous, embedded within moral systems that structured responsible interaction with forested landscapes.

Across regions, recurring symbolic patterns reveal that forests were conceptualized as inhabited and ethically bounded environments, while fire was frequently personified and endowed with agency. These cosmologies should therefore be understood not as symbolic remnants of pre-scientific thinking, but as cultural frameworks through which ecological knowledge and landscape management were transmitted across generations. Ritual calendars, taboos, and seasonal practices operated alongside agropastoral land-use systems, integrating burning, grazing, and maintenance into socially regulated ecological cycles.

The disruption of these systems during the twentieth century fundamentally reshaped human–fire relationships. Rural depopulation, agricultural abandonment, and prohibitions on traditional burning practices contributed to the accumulation of combustible biomass, while climate change has intensified fire-prone conditions across Mediterranean environments. Contemporary wildfire crises thus emerge not solely from climatic pressures but from the erosion of historically embedded systems of land stewardship and ecological memory.

The principal contribution of this almanac lies in demonstrating that cultural narratives represent an underrecognized pedagogical resource for Education for Sustainable Development. Folklore encodes ethical boundaries, environmental perception, and intergenerational knowledge in forms capable of complementing scientific instruction. When integrated into wildfire education, narrative traditions enable learners to situate environmental risk within historical and cultural contexts, transforming abstract climate knowledge into socially meaningful understanding.

Importantly, revisiting these traditions does not advocate a return to pre-industrial land-use systems. Rather, it reframes sustainability as a cultural as well as technological challenge. Long-term coexistence with fire depends not only on

suppression technologies and policy interventions, but on rebuilding social relationships with landscapes through shared meaning, responsibility, and ethical engagement.

Beyond ecological education, narrative-based approaches foster multicultural awareness by revealing shared symbolic structures across geographically distant societies. In addressing a central limitation of sustainability education – the gap between knowledge and behavioral change – storytelling activates the affective dimension of learning, providing the motivational and emotional grounding necessary for environmental responsibility. In this sense, folklore functions not as heritage alone, but as a bridge between memory, imagination, and future-oriented environmental action.

As wildfire risk continues to intensify globally, integrating cultural memory with environmental science offers a pathway toward more holistic models of environmental learning and landscape stewardship. Recognizing fire as both an ecological process and a historically mediated human relationship allows sustainability education to move beyond risk management toward cultivating resilient and culturally informed futures.

Ethics and consent

Ethical approval and consent were not required.

Data and software availability

No data are associated with this article.

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- Istituto Tecnico Statale “G. Garibaldi” (Marsala, Italy) – Project Coordinator
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- Zespol Szkol Ekonomii i Uslug (Poland)

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?

George C Nche
University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria

This article presents an interdisciplinary exploration of forest and fire beliefs across European and Anatolian cultures with the objective of demonstrating how folklore can contribute to Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). The author argues that the folklores concerning fire and forests historically functioned as mechanisms for ecological awareness and wildfire management. The author further proposes that these traditions can serve as tools for modern sustainability education, particularly for young people.
The article is promising and has great potential to contribute important perspectives to ESD debates. However, I have a few concerns that I think the author should address.

1. The biggest weakness of the article is the absence of a methodology section. Although the work presents itself as interdisciplinary research, the author does not clearly explain: how sources were selected; why certain traditions were prioritized; what criteria guided comparison; and whether the work is ethnographic, or desk-based.
2. The article occasionally idealizes premodern societies and traditional fire practices. It tends to portray indigenous and rural traditions as inherently ecological and sustainable without adequately acknowledging their complexities or limitations. For instance, the article states that traditional societies maintained a sophisticated “pyrophilic” relationship with fire that modern industrial societies have lost. While this argument is attractive, it risks romanticizing the past. Not all traditional burning practices were environmentally sustainable. Some historical land-clearing fires contributed to deforestation and ecological degradation. The article does not sufficiently address this tension.
3. Another major limitation is the tendency to generalize widely across highly diverse cultures. The article frequently refers to “European and Anatolian folklore” as though these traditions constitute a unified worldview. However, the cultures discussed differ enormously in religion, ecology, history, and cosmology. For example: Turkish Islamic beliefs about jinn are treated alongside pre-Christian Baltic paganism, Roman mythology is discussed together with Siberian shamanism, and Christian symbolism is merged with Indo-European pagan traditions. I suggest that the author more explicitly acknowledges the diversities among these cultures.
4. Addressing these issues will significantly improve the quality and scholarly rigor of the

article. Thank you and best wishes.

Does the review offer a comprehensive analysis of the research literature?
Yes

Are all statements factually correct and adequately supported by citations?
Yes

Is the review written in clear language?
Yes

Are the conclusions drawn appropriate in the context of the current literature, books and book chapters?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Religion and Ecology, Environmental Humanities

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Reviewer Report 28 May 2026

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?

Reet Hiiemäe
Estonian Literary Museum, Tartu, Estonia

This interdisciplinary article addresses an important and timely topic by bringing together folklore studies, environmental humanities, and education for sustainable development. The comparative approach—drawing on traditions from Turkey, Italy, Poland, and Latvia—is valuable, as it highlights shared motifs and cross-cultural patterns in narratives about forests and fire while also demonstrating regional specificity. The central pedagogical aim—to provide educators with narrative-based tools for teaching about wildfire and human–environment relationships—is clear and relevant.
One of the strengths of the article lies in its emphasis on the affective narrative-cultural dimension of environmental education. By framing narratives as mediators between cognitive knowledge and behavioral change, the article convincingly argues for the continued relevance of folklore and belief systems in contemporary sustainability discourse. The idea of an “almanac” of narratives and beliefs to provide a flexible educational resource that allows for creative engagement is

justified. My own research has also shown that prescriptive instruction alone is often not effective as it is devoid of options for meaningful agentic engagement (cf., for instance Hiiemäe 2025). This approach also aligns with current approaches in education for sustainable development that favor participatory, reflective learning.

That said, there are some conceptual and theoretical aspects that would benefit from further refinement. In particular, the reliance on classical mythological-comparative scholarship—especially references to Frazer, or Afanasyev—feels somewhat dated in the current scholarly context. While such works are historically foundational, their evolutionary and often universalizing assumptions about myth and belief have been extensively critiqued in more recent folklore and anthropology research. Therefore, the author might consider engaging more explicitly with contemporary approaches in folklore studies and narrative theory, such as vernacular belief studies, or eco-critical approaches to folklore and narratives in a broader sense (for instance, Heise 2008 or Taylor 2010). Importantly, this critique does not diminish the core idea of the article. The emphasis on the cultural significance of narratives, beliefs, and storytelling practices remains relevant in the context of environmental communication and education. The article aligns with my own observation of narratives as active tools for shaping perception, values, and potentially behavior in relation to landscapes and natural hazards such as fire or environmental pollution.

Additionally, the article could benefit from some clarification regarding methodology. While the comparative examples are quite numerous, they leave the impression that they are selected rather randomly. It would be helpful to more explicitly outline how the narratives and beliefs were selected and categorized. As the article stresses the importance of narratives, there could be more sources cited where such narratives can be actually found, for instance the resources of the rich Latvian Folklore Archives are not mentioned at all. For equal representations, the Italian and Mediterranean part would also benefit from some proper narrative examples.

It also leaps to the eye that the article tends to reiterate the central argument—namely, the value of traditional narratives and knowledge systems for contemporary sustainability education—multiple times without substantially advancing it. This results in a degree of redundancy that could be streamlined for greater analytical precision. In addition, the discussion occasionally risks presenting a somewhat polarized contrast between past and present, where pre-industrial practices appear implicitly more balanced or sustainable, while modern systems are framed primarily in terms of loss and disruption. I suggest avoiding leaving the impression of one-sidedly ideal “traditional” ecological relations as folklore also contains internal variability, for instance, there are also narratives about the ones who break fire taboos that could also serve as basis for educational discussions. As for linguistic structures, the author makes too much use of repetitive sentence constructions like “not merely…but” or “not… but” (which are also so much favored by modern AI-tools). I bring here just some examples: “not merely as a natural hazard or technological resource, but as a culturally mediated relationship”; “not only as documentation of past beliefs but also as a pedagogical resource”, “not as symbolic remnants of pre-scientific thinking, but as cultural frameworks” but there are many more. These structures should be diversified.

In conclusion, this article has the potential to make a meaningful contribution to interdisciplinary discussions on fire folklore and sustainability education. With some revisions described above it could offer a compelling resource for both scholars and educators.

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Does the review offer a comprehensive analysis of the research literature?
Partly

Are all statements factually correct and adequately supported by citations?
Partly

Is the review written in clear language?
Yes

Are the conclusions drawn appropriate in the context of the current literature, books and book chapters?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Folklore, vernacular environmental beliefs and behavior in past behavior.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.