

Lightning, hail and thunderstorms in Austrian farming communities: Blessing *Salix* sp. and *Buxus sempervirens* (Poster)

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Introduction

Local customs related to catholic beliefs are an integral part of peoples lives in rural areas of Austria. One of these customs is the blessing of the so called palm fronds (bundles of *Salix* sp. and *Buxus sempervirens*) on the catholic holiday Palm Sunday. This study focuses on the ritual use of palm fronds to hold off heavy thunderstorms and hail; and to ensure good yields through fertile soils.

Objectives

To present 1) the preparing and blessing of palm fronds; 2) the most frequent uses of palm fronds in farmer households; 3) selected ritual use of palm fronds 4) the actual cultural meanings of this ritual use for farmers of different generations in Austria.

Methods

In Tyrol, Styria and Vorarlberg (all Austria) different aspects of local knowledge including knowledge about use of plant species have been studied with semistructured and structured interviews, and with participant and non participant observation in several research projects between 1996 and 2006.

Results

Bunches of *Salix* sp., *Buxus sempervirens* (and other herbs; not presented here) are blessed on Palm Sunday in many parts of Austria. To keep away approaching thunderstorms and hail, branches of palm fronds are burned either in the stove or in a bowl. The smoke of the blessed branches is said to protect farmers and farm animals as well as houses, stables and land from danger through and damage caused by lightning, thunderstorms and hail. The storage of palm fronds in the roof timbering as well as eating of *Salix* sp. was furthermore believed to prevent from damages through lightning but it is not practiced any more. The blessed bunches are also carried around fields, and digged into the soils as a sacrifice and to ensure high soil fertility and good yields

Conclusion

The study shows that the blessing of palm fronds is still a lively part of rural village life in the many areas of Austria, but the spiritual beliefs in the protective function of keeping thunderstorms away and the related frequent use of *Salix* sp. and *Buxis sempervirens* is diminishing.

Keywords: Ethnometeorology, ethnoclimatology, ethnobotany

Selected References

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