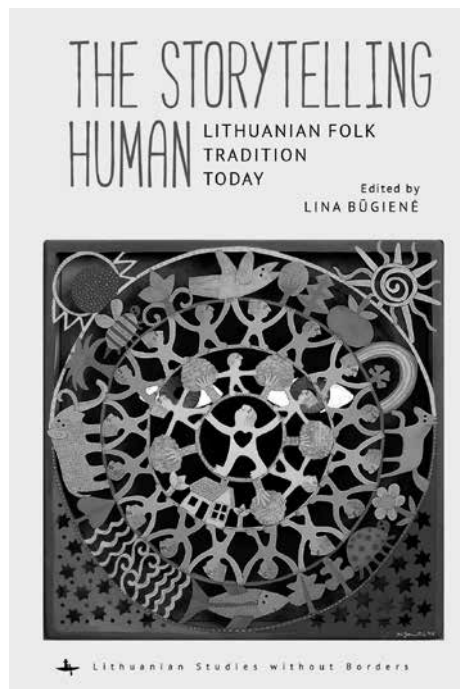


LITHUANIAN FOLKLORE IN  
CHANGING CULTURAL AND  
SOCIAL CONTEXTS

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The Norwegian Nils Lid once described folkloristics as “the most national and the most international of all disciplines”<sup>1</sup>. Despite the roots of the discipline being tied up with national Romanticism and the forming of modern nation states, the field has also been characterised by close international contacts and cross border networks. The anthology *The Storytelling Human. Lithuanian Folk Tradition Today*<sup>2</sup> is a stellar example of how the disciplinary tradition of simultaneously looking inwards and outwards while keeping one’s eye on the protean matter of research, is realised in the present. The search for the ancient lore of the people has since long been replaced by a commitment to the constantly changing and evolving expressions of folklore.

There is much exciting work emerging from Lithuanian folkloristics at the moment, not least within the field of folk narrative as demonstrated by the compre-



hensive anthology *Homo Narrans. Folklorinė atmintis iš arti*<sup>3</sup> from 2012. The volume in Lithuanian contains extensive summaries in English, which serve as a tantalizing indication of a dynamic discipline. Gratefully, *The Storytelling Human* is in many ways a continuation of the vision that informed the *Homo Narrans* project with its investigation into the concept of folkloristic memory. Indeed, several of the authors in *Homo Narrans* have also contributed to *The Storytelling*

1 Nils Lid. *Syn og Segn*, Vol. 47, 1941, p. 405–407, cited in Åmund Norum Resløyken. «Ein lut av det nære levende livet» *Tradisjon, tradisjonslementer og tradisjonsforskere. En studie av spørrelisteserien Ord og Sed 1934–1947*, Oslo: Oslo University, 2017, p. 51.

2 Lina Bügienė (ed.). *Storytelling Human. Lithuanian Folk Tradition Today*, Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2020. – 270 p.

3 Bronė Stundžienė (ed.). *Homo narrans. Folklorinė atmintis iš arti*, Vilnius: Lietuvių literatūros ir tautosakos institutas, 2012.

*Human*, through which a rich scholarship is opened up for an international (English-reading) audience. The disciplinary history of folkloristics in a Lithuanian, and more generally Baltic, context has in itself been the object of study in recent works such as *Mapping the History of Folklore Studies*<sup>4</sup> and *Folklore in Baltic History*<sup>5</sup>.

It should be made clear from the start that *The Storytelling Human* reaches far beyond the typical thrown together anthology with little, if any, inner dialogue and congruence among the contributions. The chapters in the present work complement each other and, although dealing with different subject matters and without much internal referencing, still present a whole that is greater than the sum of the parts. Containing 270 pages, this book is organised into two sections, comprising four chapters each. The first section, “History and Tradition in a Changing World”, deals with different aspects of how folklore is used to bridge the past and the present by providing individuals and communities with a conduit for dealing with both painful memories and complex historical layers. While the first section is mostly focused on oral history, autobiographical narrative and memory, the second section, entitled “Traditional Folklore and Modernity”, discusses diverse genres such as fairy tales, proverbs and jokes. However, an underlying theme running through all articles is folklore as a performance of personal identity and a demonstration of belonging to different collective identities.

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4 Dace Bula & Sandis Laime (eds.). *Mapping the History of Folklore Studies. Centres, Borderlands and Shared Spaces*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017.

5 Sadhana Naithani. *Folklore in Baltic History. Resistance and Resurgence*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2019.

The opening sentence of the foreword by editor Lina Būgienė – “This collection of articles offers an outline of the ways that folklore exists in Lithuania today—how different facets of tradition have developed, have been transformed, and have adapted in a society increasingly dependent on technologies and media”<sup>6</sup> – is a clear statement of the ambition of the volume as a whole. The driving force behind this endeavour is found in the following sentence, expressing the dedication of today’s Lithuanian folklorists to critically examine the potential and limits of their discipline. The emphasis on the word “today”, echoed from the title of the volume, I take as a definite marker of intention: this is not an exercise in nostalgia but a revaluation and readiness to acknowledge changing cultural and societal contexts.

In the first article “Predominant Modes of Perception and Folk Narrative”, Aelita Kensminienė gives a fascinating account of how a folkloristic fieldwork that yielded a meagre result in terms of the sought after riddles, turned out to provide a richly important material of individual repertoires and narrative styles. Based on the performance and content of two talented storytellers’ narratives, Kensminienė discerns two distinct “ideal types” – a *homo audiens* with a dominantly auditory ability and a *homo videns* with a dominantly visual ability. The author convincingly argues that a person’s predominant mode of perception is reflected in his or her narrative style. Moreover, it seems like the visual mode is becoming increasingly prevalent. The ubiquity of visually transmitted information in today’s world, might account for why

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6 “Foreword”, in: *The Storytelling Human. Lithuanian Folk Tradition Today*, Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2020, p. vii.

orally transmitted folklore seems to be in decline, the author concludes. Although not emphasized, this important observation is reflected in several of the subsequent contributions to the volume, not least in the concluding article.

With a long interest in the connection between place and movement, I admittedly found the subject matter of Radvilė Racėnaitė's article "Taking Shelter in Memoir amid the Turmoil of History" especially interesting and thought-provoking. Racėnaitė sets out to analyse depictions of landscape in autobiographical narratives of two folklore informants and two literary writers. The trauma of the Soviet occupation is not only reflected in the individual's relationship to the past, but in their relationship to the landscape on the level of the concrete and personal as well as on a more abstract and collective. Visible landscape, the author points out, "provides a spatial framework for cultural memory". Descriptions of the beauty of the landscape in the narratives are played out within a continuum ranging from more practical rural perceptions to poetic idealisations. However, for a deeper aesthetic relationship to emerge, a certain cognitive distance in time and space is necessary. This kind of distance, the author observes, is often the result of some kind of traumatic loss in the life of the narrator, thus making the narrative intensely personal.

The importance of place, or more specifically, the homeland, is also prominent in Daiva Vaitkevičienė's moving article "The Dead Want to Come Home. Stories about the Repatriation of Siberian Deportee Remains to Lithuania". From 1989, several expeditions from Lithuania to Siberia were undertaken in order to bring home the remains of deported family members. In many cases, these expeditions

involved much research and bureaucracy as well as physical and emotional work. Still, as Vaitkevičienė poignantly demonstrates in her study, finding and returning the loved ones to their homeland was perceived as a duty. Although not mentioned, one cannot help but wonder whether the actions also constitute a process of healing. A threefold ritual seems to emerge from the narratives of repatriating the deportees: making sure the deceased received a proper burial, honouring the traditional obligation of the living to ensure the dead could rest in their homeland – and thirdly, framing the act and experience of the repatriation in narrative form.

The concluding article in the first section continues the theme of dealing with painful memories in narratives. In the article "Borderland Lives: Historical Reflections in Eastern Lithuanian Life Stories", Lina Būgienė revisits a fieldwork material of autobiographical narratives collected in the borderland region of Valkininkai between 2010 and 2012. The author, here, adopts an oral history approach while still emphatically maintaining the folkloristic focus on the subjective integrity of the narrator. In Būgienė's words, what is important is not only what the person remembered, but how they reflect upon it. What unfolds is the process of how the narrators continuously negotiate complex historical events in the light of subjective life stories and points of views. The author makes the important observation that in borderland existences (which arguably extend to the whole of Lithuania) personal life stories become central strategies of coping and sense-making.

As mentioned above, the second section of the volume deals with different folkloristic genres. In the article "Life in Folktales or Folktales in Life? How Story-

tellers Influence Folk Traditions”, Jūratė Šlekonytė demonstrates that even a traditional genre such as the folktale may contain subtexts of life story in that they reflect the storyteller’s personality and worldview. In comparing two contemporary storytellers, Šlekonytė found decisive differences in their styles and repertoires. She draws the conclusion that performing folk narratives must always have offered an arena for individual creation.

In her contribution “The Contemporary Consumer and Creator of Proverbs, or Why Do We Need Proverbs Today?”, Dalia Zaikauskienė conducts a thorough investigation into the versatile genre of proverbs. Not only have many traditional proverbs survived into modern use, they have adapted and evolved to new forms and new media. A popular contemporary category, for example, are anti-proverbs that allow individual playfulness and creativity. Proverbs translated from English are also becoming increasingly common. With their succinct format and specific message, proverbs are well suited for Internet communication and social media. However, despite the acknowledged usefulness of proverbs in conveying messages, the author points out that they are still perceived as a “folk-ish” and a relaxed form of expression not suitable for higher registers of communication.

The last two articles both deal with the vast and complex field of humour and joking. Salomėja Bandoriūtė takes on the ambitious task of scrutinising the Lithuanian joke tradition throughout the twentieth century (“Homo ridens: The Joking Human in Lithuania from the Late Nineteenth to the Early Twenty-First Centuries”). Bandoriūtė deftly illustrates the context dependency of jokes, which explains whether a joke is perceived as funny

or not. The political context is looming large in Soviet-era humour, during which jokes can roughly be divided into official (pro-regime) and unofficial (anti-regime). Jokes reflect the society in which they are produced. Nevertheless, throughout the period studied, the three main targets for jokes remain consistent, albeit slightly adapted to the current context: women, foreigners/minorities and people of higher social status. The author points to the psychological release function of joking, but also observes that the rigid “we-they” binary that arises in joking can illustrate a form of thinly disguised bullying.

Rounding off this insightful collection of articles is Povilas Krikščiūnas’ analysis of a contemporary popular phenomenon, namely Lithuanian basketball fan culture (“Between Culture and Subculture. The Case of Lithuania’s Basketball Fans”). The article is simultaneously a fine study of how folklore has made the transition to Internet and digital formats. The chapter is nicely coupled with the previous chapter on Lithuanian joke traditions, and Krikščiūnas confirms Bandoriūtė’s emphasis on the crystallisation of the “we-them” relationship in the joke telling. The author notes that the highly contemporary and often visual digital folklore also demonstrates a continuity with older traditions. The testimony of folklore’s ability to adapt and take on new forms seems an apt conclusion to a volume dedicated to critically investigating Lithuanian folk tradition today.

As a whole, the volume offers many thought-provoking contributions on oral tradition, especially in the field of personal narratives. The editorial work needs to be particularly singled out – it is excellent. Through rich and informative footnotes, all articles provide a wealth of additional information without interrupting the flow

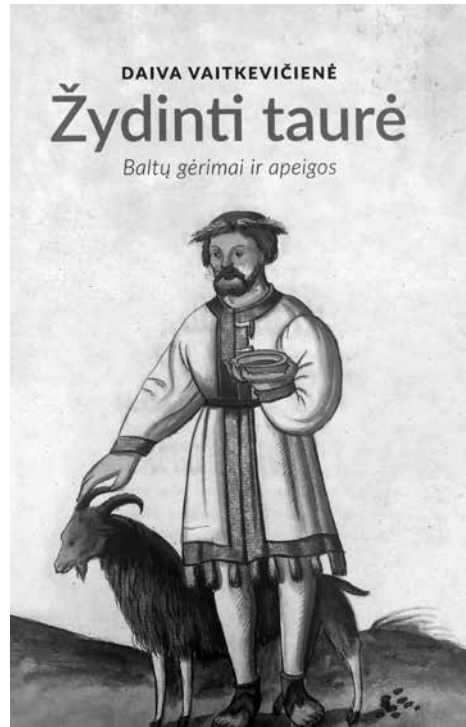
of the texts. The contextual explanations are particularly welcome for readers not familiar with the realities and complexities of local Lithuanian conditions in historically changing political frameworks. At times, I felt there could have been more done in terms of cross referencing, but this is purely a matter of taste in a volume held together by a strong thematic coherence and shared academic ambition. I strongly recommend *The Storytelling Human* to students of oral culture, but also to anyone interested in contemporary folkloristics in general or in the vibrant Lithuanian scholarship in particular.

Susanne Österlund-Pöttsch

#### KNYGA APIE BALTŲ GĖRIMUS IR APEIGAS

Mitinis universumas sudarytas taip, kad netgi atskiro fragmento tyrimas leidžia stebėti, kaip viena sritis persismelkia į kitą, ar atkurtame konkrečiame reiškinyje pamatyti atsispindintį visumos vaizdą. Tą puikiai atskleidžia Daivos Vaitkevičienės atliktas baltų gėrimų ir apeigų tyrimas<sup>1</sup>. Pradėjusi nuo pasirinktų religiniuose ritualuose naudotų gėrimų – alaus ir midaus – priešistorės, autorė išsamiai išnagrinėja jų sudėtį ir gamtinio technologiją, pasitelkusi platų kultūrinį kontekstą, apimančią mitologinius, socialinius ir religinius aspektus, aptaria iš grūdų ir medaus gaminamų gėrimų apeiginę specifiką ir gėrimo tapimą apeiga. Ilgas alaus ir midaus virsmų kelias nuo žaliavos iki kulinarinio gaminio – nuo grūdo iki putojančio alaus

1 Daiva Vaitkevičienė. *Žydinti taurė. Baltų gėrimai ir apeigos*, Vilnius: Lietuvių literatūros ir tautosakos institutas, 2019. – 432 p.



ąsočio, nuo medaus iki midaus – tam tikra prasme tarsi atkartojo augalo gyvenimo ciklą; o tapęs visaverčiu gėrimu alus ir midus lydėjo visus su reikšmingais žmogaus gyvenimo tarpsniais susijusius ritualus.

Monografijoje išsamiai pristatytas alaus ir midaus kulinariųjų virsmų procesas leidžia pamatyti, kaip šioje kūrybinėje virtuvėje, knygos autorės žodžiais tariant, dalyvavo dievai, kokie naudoti augalai, kokį vaidmenį turėjo gyvūnai, kokios ir kaip reiškesi gamtos stichijos. Darant alų ar miešiant midų ypatingą vaidmenį atliko ugnis ir vanduo, aukojimo apeigose – žemė ir oras; be pagrindinių augalinių ingredientų, vartotos įvairios uogos; reikšmingai įsipina ir medžių simbolika. Gėrimų mitologijoje svarbus vaidmuo teko ir lokiui bei bitėms. Skirtinguose gėrimų kulinariųjų virsmo etapuose savas funkcijas turėjo dievybės: Velnias (šaknų apdo-rojimo metu), Raugo motina ir Puškaitis