

# An Ethnologist in Two Historical Epochs: Irena Regina Merkienė

Dedicated to the memory of Irena Regina Merkienė  
(1937–2024)

**Žilvytis Šaknys**

*Senior Researcher at the Department of Ethnology and Anthropology, Lithuanian  
Institute of History, Vilnius, Lithuania*

*E-mail: shaknys@gmail.com*

**Abstract:** In the article, which aims to reveal the scientific life path of ethnologist Irena Regina Merkienė, I set the following tasks: 1. reveal the features of the institutionalisation of ethnology in Lithuania as compared to neighbouring countries; 2. describe ethnologist Merkienė's research during the Soviet period; and 3. analyse Merkienė's ethnological research after Lithuania regained independence. The conclusions obtained are that the period of Lithuanian independence created not only career opportunities and the opportunity to create and administer ethnological institutions for ethnologist Merkienė, but also the freedom to expand the boundaries of ethnological research, looking at the nation's (not only folk) culture from different perspectives of ethnological research.

**Keywords:** Ethnology, Irena Regina Merkienė, period of Soviet occupation, period of Independent Lithuania (from 1990).

## Introduction

*The life-history of the individual is first and foremost an accommodation to the patterns and standards traditionally handed down in his community. From the moment of his birth the custom into which he is born shape his experience and behaviour. By the time he can talk, he is the little creature of his culture, and by the time he is grown and able to take part in its activities, its habits are his habits, its beliefs his beliefs, its impossibilities his impossibilities (Benedict 1959: 2–3).*

In these few sentences, anthropologist Ruth Benedict described the path of a human life. At first glance, these words could also be used to describe the path of a scientist. The humanities, like a baby, are inseparable from the culture that surrounds them. However, if a scientist's life spanned several historical eras, the transition from one to another changed not only the names of that science (ethnography to ethnology), its possibilities and the need to break taboos that had been in place for decades, but also its relations with other scientific disciplines, ideologies, changing opportunities, contacts, and geographic space. As Máiréad Nic Craith has noted, some disciplines, such as history or literature, are easily defined, maintain their conceptual integrity over time and are institutionally privileged. The situation of interdisciplinary sciences (such as ethnology) is much more difficult (Nic Craith 2008: 1). Lithuanian ethnology is no exception, it is a small field of study with major institutionalisation problems (Šaknys 2011: 23). How did an ethnologist who worked during the years of Soviet occupation and in the independent Republic of Lithuania solve these problems?

Irena Regina Merkienė was born on February 14, 1937, in Kaunas. She spent her summers in Klangiai, a small town whose cultural environment fostered a love and respect for folk culture. In 1960, while still studying history at Vilnius University, she began working at the Institute of History (now the Lithuanian Institute of History, hereinafter LIH) in the Department of Archaeology and Ethnography. From 1961 to 1983, she was a junior researcher, from 1983 to 1993 a research fellow, from 1993 to 1995 a senior researcher, and from 1995 to 2002 a chief researcher. From 1992 to 1997, she was the head of the Department of Ethnology. Merkienė contributed significantly to the establishment

of the Department of Ethnology and Folklore at the Faculty of Humanities of Vytautas Magnus University (hereinafter VMU). This laid the foundations for the study of ethnology in Kaunas. From 1991 to 1992, she worked as a lecturer at VMU, from 1992 to 1993 as an associate professor, from 1993 to 1994 as a professor, and in 1995 she was awarded the title of professor. She established a separate school of ethnology. Under her leadership, the doctoral dissertations of Žilvytis Šaknys, Vida Savoniakaitė, Arūnas Vaicekaskas, Irma Šidiškienė, Asta Venskienė, Inga Nėnienė and Dovilė Kulakauskienė were successfully defended. She was also a member of doctoral dissertation committees, an opponent, and a member of the habilitation committees of professor Vacys Milius, professor Romualdas Apanavičius, and professor Alfonsas Motuzas. While teaching at VMU and Vilnius University, she supervised the defence of bachelor's and master's theses. From 1993 to 1996, she was a member of the Doctoral Studies and Habilitation Committee of the LIH and VMU (chair from 1996 to 1997), a member of the LIH and VMU Doctoral Studies and Habilitation Committee, and from 1998 to 2003 chair of the LIH and VMU Habilitation Committee in Ethnology in the Humanities and deputy chair of the Doctoral Studies Committee in Ethnology. She was the editor of numerous monographs and a member of the editorial board of scientific journals. It is worth noting that she was responsible for creating the first series of ethnological monographs in Lithuania, *Lietuvos etnologija* (Lithuanian Ethnology) (nine volumes were published between 1996 and 2002). In 1998, she was awarded the Jonas Basanavičius Prize for promoting ethnic culture. In 2006, she was elected an academician at the Lithuanian Catholic Academy of Sciences, and in 2007 she was awarded the Lithuanian Science Prize for her series of works *Typological Areas of Lithuanian Ethnic Culture and the Expression of Regional Identity (Second Half of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century)*. After retiring in 2002, she continued her important scientific and science popularisation work (for more on Merkienė's scientific activities, see: Šaknys 2007: 7–17; Irena Regina Merkienė 2009).



Figure 1. Irena Regina Merkienė, winner of the Lithuanian Science Prize. May 3, 2007. Photo by Žilvytis Šaknys.

A few simple calculations suffice to show that Merkienė began her intensive scientific activity at the age of over fifty, an opportunity made possible by the declaration of Lithuania's independence in 1990. Ethnology gained new opportunities at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup>. However, the research had to be carried out by the same people who had received their education during the Soviet occupation. The situation was aggravated by the fact that the methodological assumptions of ethnology were based on history and the humanities (Jasiewicz 1998: 39), which were among the most ideologised fields during the Soviet era. However, according to Zbigniew Jasiewicz, ethnology was sensitive to local conditions: the pressure of national goals, the dependence of national institutions, publishing in national languages (Jasiewicz 1998: 39). As Vytis Čiubrinskas noted, the discipline of Ethnology (Ethnography) in Lithuania during the Soviet period threatened to become a tool for the dominant ideology and a source of scientific argumentation for the assimilation of Lithuanians into the melting pot of the Soviet Russian empire.

At a minimum, it had to follow the methodology of historical materialism while also serving much more as a formative force for anti-Soviet nationalist attitudes and setting out to record typical, specific, authentically Lithuanian traditions in the Sovietised Lithuanian society of the time (Čiubrinskas 2001: 99–117).

The progress of a scientist's work in countries with different ideological attitudes is a problem that has not yet been examined in Lithuanian ethnology. In the article, with its goal of revealing the scientific life path of ethnologist Merkienė, I set the following tasks: 1. reveal the features of the institutionalisation of ethnology in Lithuania as compared to neighbouring countries; 2. describe ethnologist Merkienė's research during the Soviet period; and 3. analyse Merkienė's ethnological research after Lithuania regained independence. The article focuses on analysis of Merkienė's scientific works.

## The Institutionalisation of Ethnology

The history of science is often associated with the institutionalisation of that science at the university level (Kuligowski 2011: 109). The first Department of Ethnology in the territory of contemporary Lithuania was established in 1927 at the University of Stephen Báthory in Vilnius, a city that was then occupied by Poland (Dundulienė 1978: 52). A student, Pranė Dundulienė (Stukėnaitė), played a major role in shaping the science of ethnology during the Soviet occupation and was Merkienė's teacher. The institutionalisation of ethnology in the Republic of Lithuania was delayed. It was not until 1934 that the Department of Ethnicity (Lith. *Etnika*) was established at VMU in Kaunas (after Vilnius was regained, the former Department of Ethnicity, renamed the Department of Volkskunde (Lith. *Tautotyra*), was moved to Vilnius University). It covered both folklore and ethnology, although greater attention was paid to folklore studies (Maciūnas 1939: 261–298).

According to Romualdas Apanavičius, the object of study in ethnology at the SBU was ethnic material culture and the recording and collection of data relating to it, and therefore these studies were also linked to history and archaeology. The object of study at VMU was the oral heritage of ethnic culture, its meaning and imagery. Studies of material culture did not outweigh this object, so there were connections with philology and mythology (Apanavičius 2009: 149). In 1941, after the first Soviet occupation the first ethnology insti-

tution, the Institute of Ethnology, was established. According to Irena Regina Merkienė, the Institute of Ethnology was used in the Soviet Union in the 1950s to conduct research for applied political and ideological purposes in museums that were easily subjugated. In Lithuania, the Šiauliai Aušra Museum became the basis for the institute (Merkienė 2011: 138).

In addition to the Ethnography Department with its museum, a Folklore Department with a Folklore Archive was also established (Merkienė 2011: 130–131). Unfortunately, in 1944 (according to other sources, in 1945: Mardosa 2016: 13) the Institute of Ethnology was closed, and ethnologists and folklorists found refuge at the Institute of History, Lithuanian SSR Academy of Sciences. An ethnography section was established. Unfortunately, the separate ethnography department was soon abolished. In 1952, the archaeology and ethnography section was established, and folklorists moved to the Institute of Lithuanian Language and Literature at the Academy of Sciences (Šaknys 2011: 15). In 1962, the ethnography and archaeology sections separated. In 1996, the Ethnography Department was renamed the Ethnology Department (in 2016, the Ethnology and Anthropology Department). Until 2010, it was the only ethnology institution with more than 10 employees.



Figure 2. The Institute of History, Ethnography Department in 1984. In the first row, from the left: Janina Morkūnienė, Irena Regina Merkienė, Angelė Vyšniauskaitė, Vitalis Morkūnas, Vida Kulikauskienė, Vacys Milius. In the second row, from the left: Stasys Gutautas, Rasa Paukštytė, Laura Kazlauskienė, Petras Kalnius, Marija Miliuvienė, Rita Butvilienė, Jonas Mardosa. Photo by Stasys Žumbys.

When discussing the institutionalisation of ethnology in Lithuania, it is also necessary to mention education institutions. In the early post-war years (1944–1947), Vilnius University still had a Department of Ethnography. After 1947, it was reorganised into the Department of Museology, in 1949 into the Department of Archaeology and Ethnography, and later, in 1966, when ideological repression led to a review of the Lithuanian studies departments at Vilnius University, it was reorganised into the Lithuanian SSR's Department of History, where ethnology was represented for most of the time by one person, Pranė Dundulienė (Apanavičius 2009: 153). In 1991, the Department of Baltic Linguistics and Ethnology was established at Klaipėda University. In 1993, replacing the Department of Anthropology established in 1989, the Department of Ethnology and Folklore was established at VMU (Senvaitytė, Anglickienė 2019: 23–36). Merkienė was one of the active founders of this institution.

## **Starting Points in the Soviet Era: Lithuanian Ethnology in the Context of Neighbouring Countries**

How did the situation for Lithuanian scientists differ from that of other former Soviet republics or socialist countries? First of all, because of different institutionalisation. The Soviet republics that had ethnology institutes and departments were in a better position. Even comparing Lithuania with Latvia and Estonia, ethnology during the Soviet period differed in terms of the amount of scientific resources, research and even the tradition of institutionalisation.

The progress of ethnological science in Lithuania was hindered in several ways. The closure of Vilnius University by the Russian administration in 1832 (restored in 1918), which, according to Pranė Dundulienė, played a significant role in the formation and development of ethnographic science (Dundulienė 1978: 51), the ban on printing the Latin script in the years 1864 to 1904, and the occupation of Vilnius by Poland in the 1920–1939 period were not favourable to the development of Lithuanian ethnological science. The situation in neighbouring countries was different. For example, the first record of an ethnography course in Estonia, at Tartu University, admittedly by way of exception, dates from 1807. A department of geography, ethnography and statistics was established in 1865, but an independent department of ethnography began operating only in late 1919 (Luts 1993: 77). According to



Ferdinant Leinbock-Linnus, in 1930 “Ethnology thus became recognised at the University as an independent discipline, a status it has not enjoyed in many countries, including our immediate neighbours Latvia and Lithuania” (cited from Luts 1993: 77). This led to different scientific efforts and starting positions after the USSR occupied the Baltic States in 1940. For example, Lyudmila Terent'yeva, who analysed the possibilities of ethnic cartography, pointed out that in interwar Estonia there was a planned development of areal research on material culture and the publication of solid monographs, and that a considerable amount of ethnographic material had been collected and published in monographs in Latvia, while in Lithuania in the period from 1930 to 1940, “almost no ethnographic research had been conducted” (Terent'yeva 1975: 5–6). Even the academic ethnological publications summarising Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian ethnology (then ethnography), published between 1964 and 1967, differed considerably (Vyšniauskaitė 1964; Moora, Viires 1964; Strods 1967). There were significant differences in these countries when comparing pre-Soviet ethnological fields related to religiosity, especially studies of calendar customs (Šaknys 2010: 94–95). After regaining independence in 1990, it was only possible to rely on the much more modest ethnographic sources and ethnological research accumulated before the Soviet occupation. Thus, the development of ethnology in Lithuania lagged behind both Europe and the Baltic countries, posing additional challenges both during the Soviet era and after Lithuania regained independence (Šaknys 2011: 23). This makes research on these periods particularly relevant.

## **Merkienė's ethnological research during the Soviet era**

Having defended her diploma thesis titled “Samogitian Folk Textiles in the Second Half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and First Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century” at Vilnius University in 1960, Merkienė began systematic scientific research in the Archaeology and Ethnography Department at the Institute of History, Lithuanian Academy of Sciences, and joined the Development of Material Culture long-term research program (1961–1985). She began preparing her dissertation by choosing an ambitious topic. In 1962, she undertook a study of the daily life and culture of workers in the multinational Grigiškės urban-type settlement. This was a new field of research in the USSR and throughout Eastern Europe.



The study testified to the geographical origin, family structure and ethnic characteristics of workers from rural areas and the changes in the forms of material culture (food, residential buildings, interior, clothing) that occurred between 1925 and 1965 in the new cultural environment. In 1966 she defended her dissertation, titled “The Life and Culture of Grigiškės Pilot Paper Mill Workers between 1925 and 1965”, for the degree of Candidate of Historical Sciences (from 1993 nostrified as a dissertation for a Doctor of Humanities) at the Institute of History. In Lithuanian ethnological historiography, this is the first work devoted to working-class culture, the first to cover suburban culture, and the first to cover the culture of residents of different nationalities. The groundwork laid in research into different cultural areas led to further research by Merkienė on many topics. Articles on flax harvesting, beekeeping, and ethnographic questionnaires designed to collect data on draft animals, livestock buildings, animal husbandry, and summer kitchens were published shortly thereafter (Šaknys 2017: 241–242).

However, the main theme selected was livestock studies. The research was published in a series of articles, in the study “Livestock Inventory in Lithuania in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries” (including chapters on feed transportation, feed preparation and feeding inventory) (Merkienė 1979: 6–105) and the monograph *Livestock Farming between the 16<sup>th</sup> century and First Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: The Origins of Ethnic Experience* (covering livestock herds, livestock products, and livestock buildings) (Merkienė 1989a). The research was also related to the Historical-Ethnographic Atlas of Agriculture in the Baltic States project. A map dedicated to draft animals was compiled together with Estonian ethnologist Ants Vyyres, with a commentary (Merkene, Vyyres 1985: 53–55, map 7). Based on these studies, in 1993 Merkienė defended the first habilitation dissertation in ethnology in the humanities in independent Lithuania, titled “Livestock Farming between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries: The Origins of Ethnic Experience” (Merkienė 1993). The work required a great deal of field research. The situation in ethnology at the time is illustrated by the telling fact that between 1967 and 1984 as many as 18 questionnaires and ethnographic questionnaires were used to create the ethnographic material for the habilitation thesis (Merkienė 1993: 23–24). On the other hand, the very broad chronological framework of the work also necessitated extensive archival research, which was a novelty among ethnologists.

However, let us return to the research conducted during the Soviet era. Although ethnography at that time was divided into the fields of material and spiritual culture, Merkienė's research was not confined to these boundaries. For example, a comparative study was conducted titled "Analogies and Areas of Animal Pasture Rituals in Lithuania and Western Belarus (from the Second Half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century to the First Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century)" (Merkienė 1981: 100–112). Another bold step was taken in 1982, when a questionnaire on ethnographic issues entitled *Calendar Customs of the Winter Period* was compiled with the help of postgraduate student Vytis Čiubrinskas (Merkienė, Čiubrinskas 1982). At that time, research into traditional calendar customs was, to put it mildly, not tolerated in the Lithuanian SSR (Šaknys 2014: 92–105). However, artistic expression became important to Merkienė during this period. She researched western Lithuanian bedspreads (Merkienė 1983: 69–73) and zoomorphic ornamentation in textiles (Merkienė 1985: 121–126). In the final years of Soviet occupation, with the beginning of the *Sąjūdis* movement, Merkienė's scientific interests shifted even more towards customs. In 1986, she began researching the customs of Lithuanian rural communities in the 19<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (as part of the *History of Capitalist and Pre-capitalist Socio-economic Formations: The Customs of Lithuanian Rural Communities* (1986–1988) and *The Development of Rural Community Customs in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and First Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (1989–1992) programs). The term 'rural community customs' covered a broad sphere of traditional culture providing an opportunity to examine calendar customs that were still prohibited at the time. The easing of Soviet censorship after 1986 was also a good opportunity to 'clean out the drawers' by publishing works that had been put aside during the Soviet era, making it possible to refer to the works of Lithuanian researchers who had emigrated to the West, works that had previously been unavailable or uncitable due to ideological restrictions.

The younger generation was also taken into consideration. Albinas Rekašius, Žilvytis Šaknys, and Arūnas Vaicekauskas were accepted for research on rural communities. The youngest generation of ethnologists was also being trained. In 1988, the School for Young Ethnographers was established at the LIH, and the Young Tourists' Station for senior students in Lithuanian schools. A collection of ethnographic questions was prepared for them. In 1989, a published collection covered community work, neighbourly relations, maintaining good manners, ethics, and etiquette (Merkienė 1989), while a second covered cal-

endar customs, food, hygiene, laundry care, etc. (Merkienė 1991). The goals of this School of Young Ethnographers were not only to spark interest in the field of ethnology, but also to train qualified collectors of ethnographic material. Special attention was paid to ethnographic field research, which Merkienė herself conducted together with students.

In summary, we can say that during the Soviet era Merkienė researched several topics, but after defending her dissertation she focused most of her attention on the study of animal husbandry, a topic that was less restricted by Soviet ideological control. However, we can see that the last years of Soviet occupation were marked by intense scientific activity in preparation for research during the years of independence.

## **Merkienė's ethnological research during the period of Lithuanian independence**

An article by Merkienė, written in the last months of the Soviet occupation and published in the independent Lithuanian publication *Ethnographic Research* in 1988 and 1989, titled “The Structure of the Nation's Culture”, which aimed to reveal the general patterns of cultural development in society, started a new stage in the science of ethnology (Merkienė 1990: 3–13). In independent Lithuania, opportunities arose to conduct not only thematic, but also problem-based research. Independent Lithuania provided new opportunities for the science of ethnology. From 1992 to 1995, Merkienė was the head of the Department of Ethnography (renamed the Department of Ethnology in 1993), and the fate of ethnology as a science depended largely on her. And so it is thanks to Merkienė that ethnology (unlike archaeology) became a science that was separate from history in legal terms. Despite her work in establishing the Department of Ethnology and Folklore at VMU and working with doctoral students, Merkienė developed and led a number of programs at the LIH, for example Ethnic Culture and National Revival (1992–1994), the Atlas of Lithuanian Customs: From the Late 19<sup>th</sup> Century to the First Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (1994–1997), Ethnic Cultural Areas and Their Dynamics (1995–1997), the Atlas of Lithuanian Customs: The Second Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (1998–2002).

She also led projects for the Lithuanian State Science and Studies Foundation, which enabled her to conduct more extensive research. One of these

projects resulted in a monograph on gloves from Lithuania Minor. The studies revealed that Lietuvininkai (Lithuanians of Lithuania Minor) glove patterns replicate the most ancient ornament of ceramics and metal wear decorations found by archaeologists in Lithuania and its coastal area. Prehistoric, Gothic and Renaissance patterns of Western, Eastern and Central Europe had undergone a revival period in Lithuania Minor (Merkienė, Pautieniūtė-Banionienė 1998). Another monograph also marked the end of a project she led for Lithuanians in south-eastern Latvia (Merkienė, Paukštytė-Šaknienė, Savoniakaitė, Šaknys 2005). In separate chapters of the monograph, the professor discusses the circumstances surrounding the formation of the Lithuanian community in Latvia, cultural traditions in the family and community (religious life, holidays, relics and national symbols, glove making, patterns and related customs). Another chapter is devoted to beliefs about the afterlife and funeral customs. Funeral customs, which have been little researched by Lithuanian ethnologists, became one of the most important topics studied by Merkienė. However, customs cannot be studied in isolation from human social life. A major work on this topic was the first volume of the Cultural Heritage of Northern Lithuania monograph series. Her study, "Taking Care of People in Old Age and at Their Funerals" combines two themes: internal relations within rural communities and funeral customs. It seeks to determine how family and community relations with dying members who have lost their ability to work and their health changed in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The conclusion is that death still unites the community. In the worldview of the inhabitants of northern Lithuania, the human body and soul are still traditionally considered valuable. The death of a person obliges the living to take care of them, to provide any necessary service as dictated by tradition, ideology and the fashions of the period (Merkienė 2007d: 137–159). Merkienė found the greatest diversity of topics in a large-scale study of her native region (Veliuona, western Lithuania) (Merkienė 2001a: 589–702). The study examined forms of social, spiritual, and material culture that are revealed in an environment defined by nature and historical events. Unlike most of her works, this one was based on field research conducted many years ago (in 1958, 1963–1965, and 1975–1976). The conclusions reached were that the social tensions between age groups, individuals, and rural communities that arose at the intersection of agrarian and industrial globalised cultures did not prevent the formation of a cultural identity group that eventually took on the new meaning of majority identity.

Ethnic territorial local identity consisted of many components that were not part of the whole local community's conscious or unconscious expression of cultural identity. Cultural identity in terms of the use of traditional and innovative cultural forms remained only a partial and constantly changing feature of society in any particular case (Merkienė 2001a: 696).

Merkienė also wrote shorter publications. Among them, I would highlight the more theoretical articles devoted to local culture (Merkienė 2007c: 39–56), and migration and its influence on ethnic culture (Merkienė 2007b: 75–100). These works placed particular emphasis on the ethnic culture of Lithuanians living in neighbouring countries. In addition to the aforementioned studies on south-eastern Latvia, Merkienė published articles on south-western Latvia (Merkienė 2001b: 117–143), eastern Belarus (Merkienė 2002b: 333–353), and north-eastern Poland (Merkienė 1997: 26–35; Merkienė 2006: 169–190). An important publication is also devoted to the history of ethnology (Merkienė 2011: 125–142). Much has been done in analysing calendar and community customs and knowledge, for example articles on Easter in the Baltic region (Merkienė 1999a: 187–207), St Andrew's customs (Merkienė 2001c: 99–121), community customs (Merkienė 2002c: 104–109), death ethics (Merkienė 2005: 15–37), and atmosphere control (Merkienė 1999b: 208–222). Merkienė was also interested in the ethics of ethnographic research. Her article “Between Copyright and Privacy: The Experience of Ethnographical Research Ethics in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Lithuania” was the first publication by a Lithuanian ethnologist on this issue (Merkienė 2002a: 103–114). Her concern for the methodology of collecting ethnographic material culminated in the publication of another book for experienced collectors of ethnographic material (Merkienė 2007a).

I also belonged to Merkienė's ethnographic school. When I began analysing the customs of rural communities, I chose to study the traditions of young people. At that time, this was not common in Lithuania. Merkienė supported me. In her words, it was necessary to break stereotypes, expand the boundaries of science, and look for what no one else had yet looked for. This led me to view customs as a social phenomenon, seeking to understand not only their mythological and magical, but also their social, aspects.

In summary, we can say that the period of Lithuanian independence provided ethnologist Merkienė not only with career opportunities and the chance to establish and administer ethnological institutions, but also with the freedom to expand the boundaries of ethnological research by looking at the culture of the

nation (not just the people) from different ethnological research perspectives, drawing on the experience of other humanities and social sciences.

Continuing Benedict's words quoted at the beginning of this article about human dependence on the surrounding cultural environment, I will repeat Merkienė's favourite observation by George Peter Murdock, that, despite its conservative nature, culture changes over time and space (Murdock 1965: 61). During the years of Soviet occupation, Merkienė did a great deal to understand the dynamics of cultural change; when Lithuania regained its independence, she had the opportunity not only to observe and study, but also to change that cultural environment by shaping the science of Lithuanian ethnology and educating the people who create it.



Figure 3. In commemoration of her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, Irena Regina Merkienė gives a special lecture entitled "The Everyday Life of the Ethnographic Fieldworker: The Case of the Lithuanian Institute of History in the Second Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century". Vilnius. 22 February 2017. Photo by Žilvytis Šaknys.

## Conclusions

The slower development and institutionalisation of Lithuanian ethnology in the second half of the 19th century and first half of the 20<sup>th</sup>, in the context of Eastern and Central European countries, resulted in a number of challenges for Lithuanian ethnologists during the Soviet period. In previous periods, relatively less ethnographic data was accumulated in Lithuania and relatively less ethnological research was published, which led to ethnographic field research being quite an intense field during the Soviet period. Ethnologist Irena Regina Merkienė paid special attention to both ethnographic data and fieldwork during the Soviet period as well as after Lithuania regained independence.

After defending her doctoral dissertation, in which she analysed the daily life of workers in the multinational city of Grigiškės (now part of Vilnius city), Merkienė focused most of her attention on peasant culture, for example animal husbandry, a topic that suffered less from Soviet ideological control. Her in-depth study of animal husbandry, which corresponded to the interests of Lithuanian ethnology at that time, led to intense ethnographic field research and the abundance of ethnographic questionnaires that she prepared.

When analysing Merkienė's scientific activity, one can distinguish not only the Soviet and independent Lithuania periods, but also the transitional period of 1987–1989 in her scientific career, which was characterised by intense scientific activity in preparation for research during the years of independence.

The period of Lithuanian independence created for Merkienė not only better opportunities for a scientific career and the opportunity to create and administer ethnological institutions, but also the freedom to expand the boundaries of ethnological research, looking at the nation's (not only folk) culture from different ethnological perspectives. Merkienė focused on the people's economic and social lives, as well as their local, ethnic and confessional lives, combining the opportunities provided by ethnology and folklore, archaeology, history, geography, art history.

When examining the scientific life of Irena Regina Merkienė, we can state that the institutionalisation of science, the abundance of previously conducted research, and ideological control largely shaped her abilities and scientific activities, while at the same time Merkienė also had an influence by expand-



ing the boundaries of science and creating new opportunities for herself and other scientists.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In the 1990s, the Institute of the Lithuanian Language and Literature at the Academy of Sciences became the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore, where three of the seven departments are dedicated to folklore (Folk Narrative, Folk Song, the Folklore Archive).

<sup>2</sup> Later, the number of people in the Ethnology Department declined, and it has only begun to increase again in recent years, reaching 10 people in 2025.

<sup>3</sup> On September 1, 2012, the name of the Department of Ethnology and Folklore Studies was changed to the Department of Cultural Studies and Ethnology, and in 2016 to the Department of Cultural Studies (Senvaitytė, Anglickienė 2019: 23–36).

<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, as mentioned by Marleen Nõmmela in her description of the Estonian situation: “It may be said that looking into the grass-roots level of ‘science in the making’ reveals that the general understanding of what constituted ethnology at that time was not as clear for contemporary researchers in the 1920s” (Nõmmela 2011: 105).

<sup>5</sup> In Lithuania, interest in calendar customs developed later than in Latvia and Estonia (Seljamaa 2023: 275–294). There was also a big difference between Lithuania and other small countries. For example, in Hungary the first cartographic map of summer festivals was published in 1902 (Paládi-Kovács 1996: 202). Maps for festivals in Lithuania appeared almost a century later.

<sup>6</sup> Data on scientific programs from Irena Regina Merkienė 2009.

<sup>7</sup> *Gloves of Lithuania Minor*. Individual project. Lithuanian State Science and Studies Foundation, 1994.

<sup>8</sup> *Ethnic and Cultural Orientation of Lithuanians in South-eastern Latvia after 1991*. Lithuanian State Science and Studies Foundation, 1998. Pilot fieldwork took place in 1996 and 1997. The monograph was prepared earlier but was not published for financial reasons.

<sup>9</sup> The work was prepared several years before its publication.

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**Žilvytis Šaknys**, PhD, is a Senior Researcher at the Department of Ethnology and Anthropology, Lithuanian Institute of History. He has conducted fieldwork in Lithuania, Belorussia, Poland, Latvia and Bulgaria. His research interests are in the field of traditional and modern culture; ethnology of youth; ethnology of the city; ethnology of friendship; ethnology of tourism; the history of ethnology; ethnicity; ethnic and confessional tolerance; the ritual year.

E-mail: shaknys@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0002-2594-2155