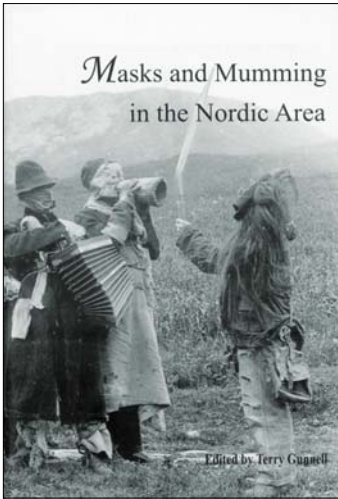


BOOK REVIEW

MASKING AND MUMMING FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE ESTONIAN TRADITION



Gunnell, Terry (ed.) 2007. *Masks and Mumming in the Nordic Area*. Acta Academiae Regiae Gustavi Adolphi XCVIII. Uppsala: Kungl. Gustav Adolfs Akademien för svensk folkkultur. 236 pp.

The collection *Masks and Mumming in the Nordic Area*, which was edited by Terry Gunnell, and published in 2007 at the Gustav Adolf Academy in Sweden, serves as a summary of the results of the research project “Masks and Mumming”, carried out in 1999–2000. The outcome of the project, led by two Nordic scholars Terry Gunnell and Carsten Bregenhøj, is at the same time a brilliantly comprehensive overview of the topic, which has so far been somewhat overlooked, in a specific region. The volume features 25 articles which discuss masking and mumming rituals in Scandinavia, Greenland, Estonia, and present parallels

from the corresponding Scottish and Irish traditions. Since the focus is both on the phenomena of the past, giving an overview of the masking tradition and masks on certain calendar feast days in a specific region (Denmark – Carsten Bregenhøj, Hanne Pico Larsen, Iceland – Terry Gunnell, Finland and Karelia – Urpo Vento, Greenland – Adriëne Heijnen, Sweden – Eva Knuts, Norwegian – Christine Eike and Urpo Vento) and the masking tradition at other central events in a human life cycle [weddings and hen and stag nights (Eva Knuts), the modern manifestations of tradition (Mari Kulmanen, Siv Ekström, Susanne Österlund-Pötzsch, Ane Ohrvik, Nils-Arvid Bringéus), and new phenomena in the masking tradition (Bodil Nildin-Wall, Terry Gunnell, and others)]. The discussion of the Celtic and Newfoundland tradition (Emily Lyle, Séamas Ó Catháin, Paul Smith) is a valuable contribution to broadening the dimensions of the Nordic culture.

Masking with its regional idiosyncrasies has been a widely spread tradition in the folk culture of the Nordic countries. The book offers a chance to get acquainted with the still active masking and mumming tradition and draw parallels with different customs. The articles are complete with distribution charts and illustrative photographs which provide a fine comparative material. The fact that the editors of the volume are expert scholars in the topic guarantees that the volume is also an excellent reference source. The volume with its nearly 900 pages is a true masterpiece and will probably remain the only book of this magnitude on the topic for years to come. As the masking tradition is gradually beginning to disappear, recording the situation at the beginning of the 21st century has been a very timely decision and a fine attempt to observe one of the most remarkable aspects of the Nordic folk dramatics.

The volume, which has been systematized according to topics, opens with comprehensive overviews. Estonian masking and mumming traditions have been represented by a longer monographical article by the Estonian folklorist Ülo Tedre. The article nicely suits into the context of other Northern areas, especially the countries such as Sweden, Norway, and Finland, where the tradition is known to date back to a distant past. While many of the articles published in this volume were highly interesting and informative, I will focus in greater detail to the description of the corresponding Estonian tradition by Ülo Tedre. His article offers a good read not only to foreign readers but also to Estonians themselves, since masking and mumming is little discussed in Estonian literature and the few approaches published on this topic so far, have remained inconclusive. The article opens with a retrospective look at the earliest reports and sources about St Catherine's Day's mummers and the Christmas goats. To my mind, the custom of mumming at St Andrew's Day would surprise most Estonians today. In this respect, this custom is quite different from the mumming at St Lucia's Day in Scandinavia, which is well known even in modern times. The tradition forms a context to the entire Scandinavian tradition. For the Estonians, St Thomas' Day marks the beginning of Christmas time and *tahmatoomas* ('Black Thomas') mummers are known in Estonia also today. A few years ago, the rag doll of *tahmatoomas* was left at the doors of houses that were disordered on unclean. Black Thomas as a symbol of driving dirt and soot out of the house, and burying it, was well known in the Estonian tradition. Less known was the fact that young men, masked as Black Thomases, smeared their faces with soot so that they could go to the tavern and "drink their faces white again".

The Christmas period is discussed from the aspect of animal masks worn at Christmas time and at New Year, also Santa Claus and its Slavonic counterpart "Father Frost". As an ethnographer I wish to elaborate on a specific urban custom associated with Santa Claus in Estonia, as described by Tedre. Several accounts are solid evidence that the same custom was also known in rural areas at the beginning of the 20th century. My mother, who was born in 1928, remembers how Santa Claus, wearing a fur coat with a wide ethnic belt and mittens, always "visited" at the precise moment, when her mother was tending sheep in the barn. Upon her mother's return, she and her brother ran to her and said that why did she have to go to tend sheep at the very moment when Santa arrived, and this, naturally, made her very sad. This definitely happened in the first half of the 1930s and the Audru parish in Southeast Estonia. I consulted with my mother whether this was exceptional in this family, but she assured me that this tradition was known in all the villages in the parish. Before the red coat with white edges became the symbol of Santa Claus' clothes, the Estonian Santas wore mostly fur coats with an ethnic belt tied around the waist and patterned mittens. Less known mummers in Estonia were the Christmas Boys, and St Knut's Day's mummers.

Masks were worn at weddings, so that next to the ritual yearly cycle masking and mumming was also a wedding tradition, with wedding jesters, wedding doctors and other characters mumming and entertaining people. I wish to emphasise that highly elaborate performances were held by Martinmas and St Catherine's Day's mummers, and next to singing and dancing there developed the tradition of amateur folk theatre.

It is somewhat unfortunate that the article does not cover the Estonian wedding tradition.

The article, as many others in this volume, offers the readers a chance to learn about the calendar tradition in the general North-European context. The project leaders, editor and authors of the volume have enriched the fields of ethnology and folklore studies with a groundbreaking overview of a so far less-studied topic.

Piret Õunapuu