

NATALIA ERMAKOV DEFENDED A DOCTORAL THESIS ON ERZYA LAMENTATIONS

On October 15, 2014, Natalia Ermakov from the Estonian Institute of Humanities at Tallinn University defended her doctoral thesis titled *Erzianskie prichitanii: traditsii bytovaniia i sovremennoe sostoianie* (Erzya Lamentations: Traditions and Current Status).

This dissertation is the first comprehensive survey of the history and role of the lamentation genre in Erzya traditional culture conducted on the basis of the lore of a concrete region – Ardatovsky district in the Republic of Mordovia. As the author of the thesis has grown up amidst this tradition, she is the right person to collect and interpret the material. She presents interesting observations about the religious taboos concerned with recording lamentations and describes the differences between lamentations in an authentic situation and those used separately from rituals.

Natalia Ermakov's research is based on material interpretation and context analysis, and proceeds from different research methodologies. She has used genre, semantic and thematic analyses of lamentations. This research is especially topical as Mordvinian written culture is still young and oral heritage constitutes an essential part of culture, whereas the lamentation tradition is gradually fading. 49 of her informants are Erzyans and 5 are Mokshans, predominantly older women, but also 5 men. Part of them reside in Estonia. In addition, the researcher has obtained material from periodicals, literary sources, archives and the Internet.

The author gives an overview of the historical research of Mordvinian lamentations, pointing to the features common with the tradition of other Finno-Ugric peoples. Both funerals and weddings are rites of passage; therefore the respective rituals and lamentations of different nations are largely similar.

The author emphasises that each lamentation is unique, and every time each lamenter, by using traditional elements, creates something unique. Lamentations have magic, psychological, social, ritual and artistic functions. Artistic imagery plays an important role in the structure of lamentations. Poetic imagery involves epithets, personification, alliteration, and synonymic repetitions. Part of the formal features of lamentations, such as alliteration and synonymic parallelism, are inherent also in Balto-Finnic lamentations and runo songs. A more general feature of lamentations is the monologue.

The chapter titled *Archaic Components of Erzya Lamentations as a Source of Mordvinian Ritual Culture Research* analyses early historic features that have survived especially in ritual funeral customs. Here the author of the thesis describes interesting funeral customs, which imitate the unrealised weddings of the untimely dead, using a "replacement", as well as the international custom of passing on the bridal chaplet to the next potential bride.

A separate chapter analyses traditional elements and changes in lamentation tradition on the basis of the material obtained from the villages of Ardatovsky district. The author states that today old funeral customs have been replaced by new ones; yet, people still believe that the deceased for whom funeral rituals have not been performed, can turn into the "dangerous dead".

Mourning motifs in lamentations are intertwined with religious motifs, which in turn mix pre-Christian with Christian and old funeral customs with church rituals.

A separate chapter is dedicated to ancestral cult (incl. the 40-day commemoration period), which is based on the belief in afterlife and ancestors' ability to influence the fate of the living. The cult features special prayers and sacrifices.

Ermakov also refers to Mordvins and Mari's peculiar coffin with one or several openings, through which the spirit of the deceased could ascend to the ground. This must be a pre-Christian common feature of Finno-Ugrians, as it can also be observed in Carelians, Setos, etc.

A separate mention is made of wedding rituals and lamentations; the latter were performed, besides the bride, also by her mother, friends and other relatives. In case the bride was not able to lament herself, she was replaced by someone else.

The dissertation describes individual stages of the wedding (proposing, preparations, bridal sauna), and the respective bridal lamentations. The sauna ritual was related to the belief in the cleansing power of water and the magic influence of the sauna. The Mordvinian bride expressed her gratitude to the sauna fairy with her lamentation; she also lamented to next of kin when she had to leave home. In Mordvinian bridal lamentations pagan gods are also thanked for their expected help in future life.

In conclusion, the author observes that in the course of time changes occurred in wedding rituals, whereas part of them were preserved in their old form, along with respective beliefs, whereas some others lost their original meaning but were preserved as ritual elements, and yet others turned into wedding jokes.

A separate mention is made of draftee and soldier lamentations, which are said to have emerged already before Peter I enacted the conscription law in Russia in 1699. These lamentations are largely similar to death lamentations; they reflect social and political circumstances and feature Russian influences. The tradition of lamentations was revived with each subsequent war, in which Mordvinian young men had to participate.

Side by side with ritual lamentations, non-ritual ones also spread. These reflected people's personal destinies and hardships of life, and integrated pagan customs and beliefs, orthodox influences, reflections of the surrounding reality, language specifics and continuity of generations. Here we could agree with the author's opinion that they only emerged in the cultures in which ritual lamentations occurred.

In the conclusion the author maintains that lamentations constitute an essential part of Mordvinian culture, and, in addition, they also carry ethnic identity and unite the community and the nation. While death lamentations have survived until today, draftee lamentations have re-emerged in critical periods, and wedding lamentations are no longer used. The reason why old traditions fade away lies in the influence of neighbouring peoples and Orthodoxy, social and economic development, as well as increasing urbanisation and overall globalisation.

Natalia Ermakov specifies three tendencies in changing rituals: reverting to old traditions (death lamentations), modernisation (using lamentations in new forms outside rituals, which used to be a taboo), and fading away (wedding lamentations have nearly disappeared even in villages). In order to foster the preservation of folk culture, the mother tongue and folk culture are taught at kindergartens and schools, and old traditions are kept alive by amateur groups as well as in professional culture – theatre, concerts, etc.

The dissertation is highly interesting due to the abundance of authentic empiric material, which is described, interpreted and construed. The author's conclusions are reliable as she is part of the studied community. However, she has also been able to distance herself as a researcher, combined empirical sources with theoretical works, and presented parallels with the cultures of other nations.

The dissertation offers novel, interesting, and valuable information both for folklorists and representatives of neighbouring sciences, especially for researchers of folk belief, rituals and lamentations. It is also an inestimable source of information and valuation of Mordvinian culture for each representative of this nation.

Ingrid Rütel

SEMINAR ON DIGITAL HUMANITIES AT THE ESTONIAN LITERARY MUSEUM: INFOTECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION IN HUMANITIES AND EDUCATION

A seminar titled *Digital Humanities in Estonia: Infotechnological Innovation in Humanities and Education* took place on October 27 and 28, 2014, at the Estonian Literary Museum. A year before, a seminar on digital humanities had taken place for the first time, and now a tradition is about to be created. The two-day event featured both presentations and workshops and aimed to give an opportunity for humanities researchers to share their competence and experience in digital methods and learn from the others.

On the first day, October 27, presentations about various topics were given. The seminar began with the presentation of the webpage and publication based on the papers given a year before. Both of these are available in Estonian and in English at http://www.folklore.ee/dh/en/dhe_2013/. One of the main topics was concerned with various databases and research opportunities created by them. Anu Lepp from the University of Tartu introduced the water mark research and gave an overview of how to use the database of early Estonian prints (<http://paber.ut.ee/EN/vesimargid/>), which is connected with *Bernstein: The Memory of Paper* watermark database that displays watermarks from different regions of Europe. Marin Laak from the Estonian Literary Museum introduced the digitisation project of Estonian literary classics, through which 87 books will become freely available as e-books. The choice of books is determined by the compulsory reading lists of schools as well as copyright issues. Ülo Treikelder from the Tartu Public Library spoke about the database *Tartu in Fiction* (<http://teele.luts.ee>), which contains excerpts of poetry and fiction that describe Tartu. In this database data can be searched by names, locations, time-related or general keywords. Maps and photographs are being added as well. Interest in place-related texts has also spread in other disciplines. Kaisa Kulasalü from the Estonian Literary Museum gave an overview of how folklore texts and multimedia related to places in Estonian national parks have