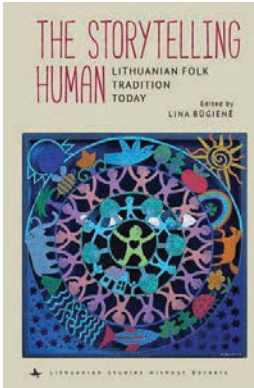


## BOOK REVIEWS

### THE MANY FACES OF LITHUANIAN FOLKLORE



Lina Būgienė (ed.). *The Storytelling Human: Lithuanian Folk Tradition Today*. Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2020. 290 pp.

This collaborative work of eight folklorists opens up the world of Lithuanian vernacular culture to international readers. The foreword describes the challenges that Lithuanian folklore studies faced when Lithuania regained its independence after the collapse of the USSR. At that time Lithuanian folklorists had to redefine the objects of their study as the focus exclusively on rural folklore was no longer relevant; they also turned to new methodologies and interpretative approaches – including the interdisciplinary ones – to broaden the field of their research and explore new angles of vernacular culture. One of

the trends was the focus on cultural memory which combines collective and individual aspects. Thus, many of the chapters of this volume attempt at bringing together the common and the singular by illustrating the general trends with particular examples.

The first part of the volume starts with Aelita Kensminienė's chapter titled "Predominant Modes of Perception and Folk Narrative". The author reflects on the difficulties in collecting oral riddles via fieldwork interviews in contemporary Lithuania. She searches for the possible reasons for it by contrasting the modes of perception and presentation of reality of her two interviewees: one of them remembers some oral riddles and other traditional folk genres while the other recalls only some fragments of them during the interview. Kensminienė argues that the former relies predominantly on the auditory mode of perception while the latter frames her memories mostly in visual terms. The author then further generalizes her observations by pointing out that visual mode of perception becomes more and more dominant due to the spread of education, television, internet, and other environments that provide mostly visual stimuli, and, therefore, less people now remember and can actively reproduce oral folklore. The comparative study of individuals' folklore performances with the subsequent generalization is a fruitful strategy in folklore research (see, for example, Oring 2016: 199–213) and the issue discussed in the chapter is indeed one of the focal points of contemporary folklore use. However, some of the statements in the paper sound a bit too categorical; for instance, the claim that the interviewee with the visual perception "is not a bearer of oral tradition" (p. 19) and might require elaboration in future works.

Radvilė Racėnaitė's chapter discusses the reconstruction of mental landscapes in memoirs. The author provides a broader historical context of urbanization and other drastic changes of Lithuanian landscapes in the second half of the 20th century, and then proceeds with the analysis of famous Lithuanian folklore informants' and writers' autobiographies. She reflects on the dichotomy between the pragmatic and aesthetic attitude towards the landscape, and illustrates that in the traditional rural worldview these attitudes were complimentary rather than contradictory. Racėnaitė also points out that a certain spatial and temporal distance between a person and the landscape

conditions the aestheticization of the latter; it is the mental image of the landscape rather than its physical embodiment that acquires aesthetic value. Moreover, she draws connections between the nostalgic feeling of loss and the poetic representations of landscape in autobiographical writings.

Chapter 3, “The Dead Want to Come Home: Stories about the Repatriation of Siberian Deportee Remains to Lithuania”, by Daiva Vaitkevičienė tells a moving story of Lithuanian people’s efforts to return the remains of their deported relatives to their homeland. The author uses an extensive number of sources ranging from artworks to newspaper articles to interviews with those who participated in the expeditions to Siberia. She describes various aspects of the remains repatriation: the complications of a journey to the distant land, bureaucratic issues, rituals accompanying the reburial, the criteria for choosing the reburial site. Vaitkevičienė also draws parallels with other Lithuanian burial rites as well as rituals with similar semantic implications. The reburial is interpreted not only as an act of symbolic fulfilment of the living’s duty to their dead, but also as a mechanism that re-established the family and community ties and the status of the deceased as an individual (p. 81). The study inspires a deeper investigation of the topic and, in particular, further cross-cultural studies aimed at uncovering if similar rituals were conducted by the deportees’ relatives in other post-Soviet countries.

The issue of subjectivity in personal reflections on historical events transpires in Lina Būgienė’s article titled “Borderland Lives: Historical Reflections in Eastern Lithuanian Life Stories”. The author analyses the idiosyncratic memories of elderly inhabitants of Valkininkai community in south-eastern part of Lithuania and focuses specifically on the period between 1939 and 1944, when the region experienced several transitions of power (Polish, Lithuanian, Soviet, and German). The narratives touch upon the conflicting issues of ethnic identity, the relationships between people of different nationalities, the status of Jewish minority before and during World War II and the ambiguous attitudes towards various groups of partisans. Būgienė underscores that the aim of her work (and folklore studies in general) is not to establish objective historical facts but rather to show how personal aspects intertwine with social reality and create a multifaceted representation of historical processes building on the grassroots experiences. One of the key concepts of the chapter is *borderland lives* that the author defines as “the subtle balancing between opposing or competing political regimes” (p. 111). In conclusion Būgienė argues that this concept can be used to characterize Lithuania as a whole due to its cultural and geographical location between the East and the West.

The second part of the book opens with Jūratė Šlekonytė’s chapter titled “Life in Folktales or Folktales in Life? How Storytellers Influence Folk Traditions”. In some way this work continues the discussion initiated by Aelita Kensminienė’s chapter. It reaffirms the focus on particular performers and their narrations of folktales. The author evokes several important questions: the balance between individual creativity and community demands (p. 117), the impact of storytellers’ personalities on their narrations, the meaning of folktales in contemporary world and the interweaving of the fictional world of folktales with reality (p. 118). Some of these issues are discussed in detail while the author describes the fieldwork encounters with two storytellers, one of whom tends to approach the tales more rationally and use them for didactic purposes while the other adopts a more conventional storytelling approach and tells the folktales for their own sake. Unfortunately, other questions, such as the constraints imposed by community needs, are not reflected upon sufficiently in the chapter, stimulating the reader to seek

their own replies to them. Nevertheless, the chapter provides a decent analysis of the role of storytellers' personalities in the folktale performances in contemporary context.

Dalia Zaikauskienė's chapter "The Contemporary Consumer and Creator of Proverbs, or Why Do We Need Proverbs Today?" focuses on the use of traditional proverbs and anti-proverbs in contemporary communication. The author tries to uncover the reasons why traditional proverbs might lose their popularity, and what conditions their modifications and the creation of entirely new anti-proverbs. She also explains linguistic mechanisms of proverb transformations and indicates the sources from which new proverbs can become a part of the vernacular (for example, literary works, films, other forms of popular culture). The proverbs can also be borrowed from other languages, and Dalia Zaikauskienė analyses the influence of Russian and English paremiological corpus on Lithuanian contemporary folklore. Finally, she describes how proverbs can be used outside of their traditional milieu (i.e., in oral speech) by bringing examples of advertisements, journal and newspaper articles, political rhetoric, and anonymous internet communication. While the work provides a multi-layered overview of contemporary paremiology, some of the author's generalizations of online interactions are debatable, such as, for example, the claims that "on the internet... there is no interaction between sender and receiver" (p. 161) and the idea that "the internet is a tribune from which you can say whatever you want" (ibid.).

Humour is the focal issue of Saloméja Bandoriūtė's chapter titled "Homo ridens: The Joking Human in Lithuania from the Late Nineteenth to the Early Twenty-First Century". The author arranges her analysis in chronological order and describes the most prominent topics of Lithuanian canned jokes during three periods: late 19th and early 20th century, Soviet era, and contemporary epoch. She concludes that three groups of targets continue to be popular throughout all the periods under investigation, namely, women, foreigners, and social groups belonging to higher social classes. As these groups of targets can be found in humorous folklore of many (if not all) countries, it opens up interesting possibilities for cross-cultural research. Bandoriūtė notes that the particular characters within these target groups vary and adapt to the social, political, and economic circumstances. In her quest for the most popular target groups the author mostly discusses the joke texts themselves but does not extensively analyse the context of the spread and collection of these jokes. For example, it would be useful to mention that the popularity of female joke targets might also be connected with the fact that the joke-tellers are predominantly male (Kuipers 2006: 44). Likewise, the relation between joke scripts and stereotypes could have benefited from further problematization (see, e.g., Davies 2011: 9). An interesting follow-up to such a diachronic study would be to see if the popular plots of Lithuanian jokes also continue throughout different historical epochs.

The volume concludes with Povilas Krikščiūnas's chapter "Between Culture and Subculture: The Case of Lithuania's Basketball Fans". The chapter gives a brief overview of the popularity of basketball in Lithuania and discusses various forms of vernacular expression that testify to this popularity. The author uses the examples of internet folklore that Lithuanian basketball fans create and share to promote their favourite sports and particular teams as well as to denigrate their opponents. Krikščiūnas touches upon different aspects of basketball fandom: its strong gendered identity, the various levels of communities that it generates, the interrelations between basketball and other important spheres of life such as religion and patriotism. The chapter abounds in colourful examples (mainly textual jokes and demotivators) but, unfortunately, does not provide a substantial analysis of them. The author has managed to show that the case

of Lithuanian basketball fandom is indeed a noteworthy and multi-layered phenomenon, but the interpretation of it remains a job of the future researchers.

“The Storytelling Human” is not only an eye-catching title for an academic study on folklore, but also a fairly accurate metaphor for the volume itself. The authors do not attempt at creating complex theoretical frameworks or universal interpretative models, but rather tell stories of different genres and practices of Lithuanian folklore in a humane and engaging manner. The volume is not a sophisticated scholarly jigsaw puzzle where pieces stick neatly to each other; it is more of a huge wooden chest with all sorts of curiosities, each of which deserves hours of close examination. Much like the folklore itself, “The Storytelling Human” poses more questions than it gives answers – and, hopefully, these questions would lie at the foundation of further volumes dedicated to Lithuanian vernacular culture.

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## A MULTINATIONAL HISTORY OF CATALAN FOLK STUDIES

**Carme Oriol, Emili Samper (eds.). *A History of Catalan Folk Literature*. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2019. 273 pp.**

This welcome volume provides an overview of the activity of folklorists in Catalan-speaking areas from the onset of Romanticism until today. Catalonia proper is the focus of a third of the book, while the Balearic Islands, together with the Valencian Country and El Carxe take up a further third. The final third of the book covers the Aragonese Strip, Andorra, Northern Catalonia (in France) and L'Alguer (in Sardinia). A useful map on page xv shows these contiguous areas. The work concludes with a valuable twenty-page bibliography and a triple-columned index. Altogether, four modern states are featured in the book:

Spain, Andorra, France, and Italy. Curated by folklorists Oriol and Samper from the University of Rovira i Virgili in Tarragona, this work, with its multinational coverage, is also very much a multi-authored work, with fully 15 people involved in its writing. It represents a fluently translated English version of the Catalan original, *Història de la literatura popular catalana* (2017).

Not so much a history of folk literature (we do not find citations from songs or stories in the work) as a historiography of folk literature, the book introduces us to a series of interesting folklorists. Among some of the most remarkable people are foreign-born students of Catalan folklore, such as Sara Llorens i Carreras (born in Buenos Aires in 1881) and Archduke Ludwig Salvator of Austria (born in Florence in 1847). Alan Lomax, who

