

## HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF FOLKLORE STUDIES IN THREE BALTIC COUNTRIES

**Sadhana Naithani.** *Folklore in Baltic History: Resistance and Resurgence.* Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2019. 115 pp.

This is a book by Indian scholar Sadhana Naithani from the Jawaharlal Nehru University, which is long overdue. While usually European scholars tend to write academic books about Asia, this is a book from an Asian scholar dealing with the history of folkloristics in the periphery of Europe. This gives another dimension and an additional scope. To my knowledge, academic relations between India and Estonia have strengthened in recent decades, or there might be other reasons why an Indian scholar became interested in the academic traditions of small countries far away from her homeland. The author states in the opening sentence that this book “should be seen as a nuanced representation of the relationship between folklore studies and a socialist-totalitarian state” (p. vii). The state in question is the Soviet Union, and folklore studies are represented by the Baltic countries. The focus is on the years 1944–1991, when Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were part of the Soviet Union. Naithani says that exploring Baltic folkloristics of this era contributes to a better understanding of the diversity of folklore studies across the globe (p. vii). This book is a result of a study in which the author has leaned on several written sources in German and English and has conducted interviews with 25 Baltic folklorists. Unfortunately, due to a lack of language resources, literature sources in Russian, Latvian, Lithuanian, and Estonian were inaccessible to the author. Sadly, the solid Soviet-era literature about methodology and the theoretical basis for Soviet folkloristics in general, and folklore studies in the three Baltic states in particular, did not find their way into the book. Sadly, because at the beginning of the book Naithani emphasizes the deep connection between folkloristics and national ideologies in three Baltic states, adding, “Therefore, it is a significant location to study the relations of folkloristics with nationalism, socialism, and postsocialism” (p. viii). Indeed, the shift in official ideologies – from a Western democracy to Soviet socialism, and later back to a Western-style worldview – has been radical. Moreover, ideologies also changed in the Soviet period, starting with Stalinist-era totalitarianism, to the Khrushchev-era ‘thaw’ and Brezhnev’s stagnation, to Gorbachev’s perestroika. Throughout all these periods, folkloristics was ordered to use different concepts of identity and culture, and partially had to change its research methods.



This book has a clear focus on the Socialist period, with the emphasis of ‘resistance’ and ‘dramatic changes’ being central to the analysis. It is hard to say whether this emphasis was provided by the interlocutors or was the interpretation of the author. Nevertheless, in interviews with Baltic scholars and the few biographies that were accessible to the author via English translation, the narrative of drama and resistance plays a central role throughout the book. From my own side, I would say that the view of the Soviet period, as a period of grim rupture in which most people were, in one way or another, engaged with resistance to the oppressive and foreign system they were incorporated into, is a dominant historic narrative in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. As the author argues, “the period from 1944 to 1991 is dramatic because it was full of not one but several sudden and striking changes” (p. 4): loss of independence, brutal Sovietization and later the restoration of statehood. This interpretation is in unison with how the majority of scholars of folklore studies or ethnography view the history of their discipline in the Baltic countries. What of course is missing in that picture is how the Baltic scholars’ community adapted to Soviet science and became part of it. Baltic scholars of the Soviet era followed the methodological and theoretical trends of Soviet science, and their published works did not differ radically from what was published elsewhere in the Soviet Union.

Since Naithani knows none of the three regional languages, nor Russian, her sources were somewhat limited. Besides familiarizing herself with some relevant research and historical overviews accessible in English and German, she visited the three countries and recorded conversations with 25 Baltic folklorists. Already in the first chapters we see that the book is biased toward Estonia, either because the author spent more time there, or because of more written sources she could access. Therefore, the Estonian case becomes a kind of template, or skeleton, of the history of folkloristics in the Baltic states, and Lithuania and Latvia contribute additional material.

What is interesting in Naithani’s approach, and what is novel in the historiography of the Soviet and Socialist science, is the anti-colonial perspective she uses throughout the book. The author sees Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian folklore and folkloristics as resistance to a colonial Baltic-German and Soviet hegemony (p. 7). She writes that ‘folklore’ is conformist as well as rebellious (p. 100). It is for this reason that it has been used by both right-wing and left-wing forces, and has been criticized by some feminists for propagating patriarchal values, seen as liberatory by other feminist scholars, and presented as evidence of the backwardness of the colonized by colonizers, and as evidence of cultural identity by anticolonial freedom fighters (including the Baltic folklorists throughout the twentieth century) (p. 100). This approach was probably picked up during her interviews with the Baltic colleagues, because the concept of Soviet-era folklore as a form of vernacular resistance is relatively popular in the current interpretation of the history of folklore in the Baltic countries. This is an interesting approach, because

the comparison of postcolonialism and post-Socialism has captured attention in many academic publications already since 2000.

Unfortunately, the book contains some misinformation, for instance, the argument that “Tartu University was established in 1632, and German continued to remain its official language of instruction until World War II” (p. 16) The first part is true, but Estonian was the language of instruction at the university already beginning in 1919.

This is a book that delivers a good chronological overview of the history of folklore studies in three Baltic states from the 19th century until the post-Soviet period. When it comes to a detailed analysis of a certain period, institution, or a person, the reader is highly recommended to explore additional literature.

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