https://doi.org/10.7592/RY14.00

Commerce and Traditions. Introduction.

Aigars Lielbārdis

Since its establishment in 2004 the Ritual Year Working Group of the International Society for Ethnology and Folklore (SIEF)[1] has brought together scholars who have devoted their academic interests and careers to studying traditions, cultural experiences, and codes embedded in the cycle of the year. Almost every year, the conferences take place in different cities around the world, bringing researchers together to discuss thematic issues and values. Often, the ideas presented at the conferences are later published in a series of Yearbooks of Ritual Year.

This publication comprises articles presented at the conference held in Riga, Latvia, on 1–4 June 2022. Due to Covid-19, the conference was postponed from 2020. The pandemic has brought significant changes to our habits and personal lives, affected community traditions, and had a global impact. It has also shifted research agendas, topics, and priorities. The restrictions affected, and even destroyed, some usual channels and forms of communication in society, including annual customs, while also creating opportunities for certain commercial practices and conspiracy theories to flourish. The pandemic was one of the triggers that tested the resilience and durability of traditions, especially those performed for centuries. Although the pandemic has forced us to adapt to new circumstances, Russia's war against Ukraine poses no less of a challenge to European societies and cultures, particularly to the people of Ukraine.

The 2022 conference focused on the role and presence of commercialisation and the commodification of cultural values in everyday life and across a wide range of traditions and festivities. Often, everyday life, as well as our social and cultural environment, leads us to adopt the role of observer, rather than active participant, simply going with the flow. We have all experienced the pre-Christmas gift-buying madness or visited souvenir counters at major historical sites and cultural venues in different countries, each promoting its 'brands'. In marketing terms, traditional cultural values are treated as 'products' to be branded, marketed, and sold, yielding personal benefits and even touching the interests of state or religious institutions.

Historically, annual church fairs, town markets and pilgrimages, along with household goods, provided opportunities to buy, sell, and trade divine and eternal values. These included religious symbols, protective items, and healing substances, similar to some of those found in modern-day souvenir shops. At the time, advertising for such goods was

limited and took place only through specific communication channels. Today, advertising and marketing campaigns are everywhere, especially in social and mass media. Many people protest against what they see as the excessive commercialisation of their secular or religious traditions, festivals, and even memories and feelings.

However, marketing practices attract larger crowds and help preserve and popularise values and traditions that might otherwise be lost. Commercialisation has made selling traditional crafts financially viable, preserving them for future generations. Thus, craftspeople can continue practising their traditional way of life. Not only have traditional artisans benefited, but religious institutions are also interested in increasing their income to maintain facilities and attract growing numbers of visitors and confessional attendants.

New or changed forms, and content, of traditions touched by commercialisation, with the development of new festivals and their transformation into local tourist brands, can be seen worldwide (Mullins and Batra-Wells 2019). Institutional and cultural processes, especially those related to the administration and protection of intangible cultural values by the European Union or UNESCO, are common in many other countries. In these processes, marketing takes an important, even central role in the performance and maintenance of traditions, showing both positive trends and prompting researchers to take a critical view.

Part of the world's and Europe's cultural heritage today exists largely within the framework of UNESCO's interpretations and the application of its regulations. Including various traditions and cultural sites in UNESCO's World Heritage List or national registers generates interest from outsiders in national cultures, while also raising the value of regional culture in the eyes of the local people. On the one hand, international visibility attracts tourists, creating development opportunities for local businesses and fostering cultural tourism. It generates revenue while shaping national identity, fostering local patriotism, and enabling traditions to continue or ensuring the preservation and accessibility of sites. On the other hand, a tradition can become an object of entertainment, often losing its original function, the intimacy of the tradition or ritual, its emotional depth and religious significance. Cultural values, including traditions, become objects of advertising and turn into intangible commodities that can be sold.

While folklorists and ethnographers continue to search for authenticity (Benix 1997; Willow 2019), which is still relevant in the context and content of tradition, some of the aforementioned cultural and institutional processes are expanded and discoverable in terms of UNESCOisation (Berliner 2012), festivalisation (Hafstein 2018; Lukic Krstanovic 2011), Ritualesque, Carnivalesque (Santino 2011), and folkloresque (Foster 2016). Attention is also focused on 'consumerism', 'commercialisation', and 'commodification' (Kockel and Craith 2007; Gauthier and Martikainen 2013). Although these terms overlap, they nevertheless centre on traditions that are subject to change depending on external factors – such as changes in lifestyle (rural environment/urban environment; traditional community/multiculturalism), the durability and function of traditions (authenticity/invented traditions), etc., as well as the deep personal needs of society and the individual.

This book largely concerns the economic and cultural sphere of the Western world and the cultural heritage of European nation-states, which is at the centre of attention – and even under the patronage – of the European Union and international organisations, or is striving to be so. This volume presents research and case studies from Bulgaria, Estonia,

Greece, France, Italy, Lithuania, North Macedonia, Romania, and Scotland. The authors highlight current issues in studying traditions and cultural processes at the national level and reveal broader interconnections within contemporary European cultural processes, rooted in a shared past of trade and religion and administratively bounded today.

Researchers in this collection analyse how traditions change and adapt to new circumstances, exploring the historical dimension of research discourse on festivals, religion and annual customs, as the authors engage in dialogue with older, well-known works, such as those by Émile Durkheim (Durkheim [1912] 2007), Bronislaw Malinowski (Malinowski 1922), Marcel Mauss (Mauss 1924), and Peter Burke (Burke 1978), discussing festivals, rites, masks, and gifts, among others. It also considers later publications and contemporary authors addressing the book's topic (Bourdieu 1985; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Santino 2011, 2016; Bronner 2016; Testa 2014, 2019; Rindzevičiūtė 2010; Fournier 2017, 2019), etc. Equally valuable contributions to international discussion provide new research discourses and trends rooted in local particularities but shaped by current global geopolitical events.

The volume opens with an article by Laurent Sébastien Fournier, **Re-Localising Cultural Economy through Heritage Building**, which examines the cultural and socio-economic processes involved in obtaining UNESCO intangible cultural heritage status for local festive rituals in France, Scotland, and Italy. He examines shifts in economic development theories and assesses whether "intangible cultural heritage" status helps current traditions to be practised more widely and actively, and whether it has an economic impact on the local economy, and on practitioners in maintaining tradition. He provides case studies on the Tarasque festival in the Provence region of Mediterranean France, Scottish folk-football games in the city of Jedburgh in the Borders Region, southern Scotland, and a local carnival in the village of Castiglione, Messer Marino, in the Abruzzi region, central Italy.

In the following article, **The Commercialisation of the *Căluș* Tradition,** Cătălin Alexa examines the evolution and commercialisation of the Căluș ritual, a significant element of Romanian folk culture. Recognised by UNESCO, this traditional performance is analysed through a historical lens to understand how its original ritual functions (protective, healing) and mythology have shifted towards spectacle and economic gain. Alexa traces the transition from the communist era to the present, showing how Călușar dancers' motivations and audiences' expectations have altered the tradition and turned it into a stage performance. The study highlights how intangible heritage adapts to contemporary influences and how a living tradition can generate new cultural meanings while balancing authenticity. He also asks whether preservers of these traditions should be blamed for this excess in practising a secular tradition; are they to be blamed for using this tradition for purely economic purposes?

Svetla Kazalarska, in the article **Kyustendil Spring Day: Post-Socialist Re-inventions and Transformations of a Socialist Festival,** presents a case study of Kyustendil Spring Day, exploring the historical evolution of the spring equinox celebration in Bulgaria, which was (re)invented as a socialist festival in the late 1960s. She examines how the event survived the collapse of communism in 1989 and adapted to new economic and political conditions. In the 1990s, the celebration became increasingly commercialised and attracted private sponsorship from local businessmen. More recently, the local municipality has reclaimed

the holiday to focus on town branding and to restore traditional elements, for example, by dressing participants in the beauty contest. Despite the festival's longevity, it faces contemporary challenges regarding its social relevance and future meaning for the community.

The topic of festivalisation continues in Žilvytis Šaknys›s article, **A Festival for Locals or for Tourists? The Ritual Year in Three Southeastern Lithuanian Settlements**. Šaknys explores how commercialisation affects traditional and modern festivals across three historic settlements in southeastern Lithuania. By examining the ritual calendars of Trakai, Kernavė, and Medininkai, the author assesses how local residents perceive newly established, tourism-focused events compared with older traditions. The study draws on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2017 and 2019 to evaluate whether these celebrations hold genuine cultural value for the community or merely serve as profit-driven spectacles. It concludes that high production values and heritage branding are insufficient for a holiday's success if the event lacks a meaningful connection to the community's identity or history. Specifically, the article highlights that celebrations such as St. John's Day and State Day remain significant because they carry deep-seated political (resistance against Soviet ideology) and historical importance for locals, whereas some religious celebrations, for example, the Assumption of the Virgin Mary on 15th August, have lost their importance. Ultimately, the source offers a critical examination of the complex relationship between cultural heritage, economic interests, and authentic local engagement.

In the article **Winter Carnival in Vevchani (North Macedonia): Between Commercial Festivity and Folklore Tradition**, Oksana Mykytenko discusses the Vasilitsa winter carnival in Vevchani, North Macedonia, and explores how ancient customs persist alongside modern commercial trends. The event blends traditional wedding parodies with contemporary political commentary, reflecting the community's social relevance. Drawing on fieldwork, the author describes a performance in which masked participants use traditional elements, for example, satire and noise-making, to symbolise fertility and renewal. By balancing folk heritage with the demands of global tourism, the carnival marks local cultural identity and illustrates how inherited rituals can be reinterpreted within consumption and globalisation in the 21st century.

Moving from North Macedonia to neighbouring Bulgaria, the next article, **A Village for a Day: Annual Meetings of Relocated and Flooded Villages in Bulgaria,** by Mariyanka Borisova, examines annual meetings where people forcibly relocated for reservoir construction gather. By studying two flooded villages – Popovo and Zhrebchevo – the author demonstrates how a shared experience (collective trauma and cultural memory) encourages former residents to gather each year, symbolically reviving their lost villages for a single day and thereby forging bonds between generations and former neighbours. The study draws on literature, archival analysis and interviews to understand the rituals that sustain a sense of belonging despite the physical destruction of their homes. The article reveals aspects of local identity and the significance of commemorative gatherings in preserving local history and shared memories.

Aušra Žičkienė, in the article **Songs as Folklore, Popular Culture, and Emotional Resources for Commerce**, examines how traditional music adapts to global cultural and economic processes. By analysing a specific Lithuanian song, the author shows that folk traditions do not disappear with technological progress, but adapt and continue to exist

in new environments. This case study illustrates the 'folklorisation' of a Lithuanian singer-songwriter's work over the last few decades, emphasising how singing enables individuals to find their bearings both within their community's heritage and in the wider commercial world. The author regards folk music as a hybrid cultural phenomenon rooted in a specific cultural identity that also contributes to the commercial success of individual songs. This study offers insight into the commercialisation of local folklore heritage as it encounters global trends, touching on the term 'folkloreque'.

In **The Communicative Aspect of Festival and Pilgrimage in Greece, Modern and Ancient,** Evy Johanne Håland explores the enduring role of reciprocity in Greek religious festivals, drawing parallels between contemporary Orthodox traditions and ancient rituals. The author argues that these spiritual events unfold within a symbolic economy in which people offer gifts to the divine in hopes of receiving blessings or healing. For example, during the festival of Agios Nektarios, a piece of the blessed bread might be used as a healing remedy. At the heart of this study is the concept of 'antidōro' or 'counter-gift', which illustrates how holy bread serves as a physical link between humans and the supernatural world. By comparing contemporary practices with Hesiod's writings, the article highlights an ancient cultural logic in which social and religious bonds are maintained through mutual obligations.

Skaidrė Urbonienė explores the relationship between humans and saints in her article **Images of Saints at Annual Fairs in Vilnius: Ritual Attributes, Souvenirs, Works of Art.** This research examines the evolution of religious folk art sold at annual fairs in Vilnius, focusing on St. Casimir's Day, Christmas and Palm Sunday. The author draws on fieldwork to document a significant shift in how the public perceives carved figures of saints and angels. Once vital devotional objects, these items are now primarily treated as decorative souvenirs or modern interior design pieces. The study notes that while traditional large-scale sculptures are attracting less interest, small-scale statuettes remain highly marketable in a commercialised environment. Finally, the author suggests that folk artists must adapt their creative techniques to meet contemporary consumers' aesthetic preferences. This analysis offers a deep look at the intersection of heritage, commerce, and faith in Lithuanian culture.

In turn, Lina Gergova discusses annual fairs in Bulgaria in the article **Annual Fairs and Town Holidays in Haskovo and Byala, Bulgaria**. This study traces the historical development of Bulgarian fairs from their origins as livestock markets during the Ottoman Empire to their modern-day role as official town festivals. The author examines how socio-political changes and the centralisation of markets throughout the 20th century stripped these events of their original commercial functions. The study highlights the resilience of these local festivals and how their trade-related heritage adapts to contemporary needs. Focusing on market days in Haskovo and Byala, the author shows how local communities transformed these events into cultural festivals and town holidays, also tied to the Christian calendar and to specific saints.

Two authors, Mare Kõiva and Elena Boganeva, examine the transcultural nature of church saints in the article **St. Nicholas and St. Cornelius, Transcultural Relations**, highlighting the intertwined folk traditions and religious legends surrounding St. Nicholas, St. Cornelius, and other holy figures in Eastern European cultures. The authors explore how

hagiographic narratives merge with folklore and mythological motifs creating a distinctive form of religious syncretism or folk religion. Drawing on historical texts and contemporary fieldwork materials from Estonia and Belarus, the research highlights shared cultural paradigms across Russian, Estonian Seto, and Belarusian communities. The article offers a comparative folkloristic analysis of how historical events and church saints are reimagined through oral history and transcultural relations.

The article by Rasa Paukštytė-Šaknienė, **Gifts to Children and the Ritual Year in Eastern Lithuania and Western Belarus in the Late 19th and First Half of the 20th Century**, explores the tradition of giving gifts to children in rural areas of Lithuania and Belarus from the late 19th century to the mid-20th century. The author reveals that traditional gifts mainly consisted of eggs and food, which were distributed to one's own children, godchildren, and young workers. Gift-giving usually took place in spring, between Easter and Whitsunday. Although the items given were often similar across different social classes, the ways in which they were presented differed – parents often used intermediaries to present gifts to their children, whilst godparents presented gifts themselves. The study highlights the significance and role of these gifts in maintaining family and religious traditions.

The book ends with the article by Mare Kõiva and Andres Kuperjanov, **Transborder Routes and Rituals: Between Global, Local and Niche**, which examines the Setos, a distinct ethnic and cultural group living in Estonia along the Russian border. In the article, the authors discuss Seto identity, which is shaped by shifting political borders and historical memory. The authors highlight the Seto community's cultural resilience, expressed through distinctive Orthodox religious practices, traditional polyphonic singing (*leelo*), and a local dialect. The article focuses on the topography of specific saints and religious figures, such as Paraskeva Pjatnitsa, Pious Onuphrius, and St. George, and the legends associated with them in Malyi/Myla, Värska, and Saatse. The study also analyses the role of tourism in the sustainability of cultural heritage, in preserving local traditions (Seto Kingdom Day and Leelo Day), and in supporting the regional economy.

In preparing and publishing this collective monograph, along with the postponed Riga conference, I would like to thank the authors, who have continued their research despite uncertain geopolitical circumstances. As all the articles have undergone double-blind peer review, I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to the reviewers, who – as always – remain behind the scenes, yet without whose involvement and valuable recommendations the collection would not have achieved its current quality. The cover design by the Latvian artist Krišs Salmanis lends the collection a distinctive atmosphere. Special thanks also go to Mare Kõiva, Head of the Folklore Department at the Estonian Literary Museum and the ELM Scholarly Press for her involvement and efforts to ensure this collection reaches its readers.

Acknowledgment

The publication was supported by The Ritual Year WG (SIEF); EKM 8-2/20/3, NGO Estonian Folklore Institute; and the Basic budgeted sub-programme 05.04.00 The Krišjānis Barons Cabinet of Folksongs, from the Republic of Latvia's Ministry of Education and Science.

Notes

[1] https://www.siefhome.org/, accessed 20/12/2025.

References

Bendix, Regina 1997. In search of authenticity: the formation of folklore studies. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Berliner, David 2012. Multiple nostalgias: the fabric of heritage in Luang Prabang (Lao PDR). *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. 18, No. 4, pp. 769–786.

Bourdieu, Pierre 1985. The Forms of Capital. In: Richardson, John G. (ed.). Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education. New York: Greenwood, pp. 241–258.

Bronner, Simon J. 2016. Toward a Definition of Folklore in Practice. In: Buccitelli, Anthony Bak; Schmitt, Casey R. (eds.). Everyday Practice and Tradition: New Directions for Practice Theory in Ethnology and Folkloristics. *Cultural Analysis*, Vol. 15 (1), Special edition. The University of California, pp. 6–27.

Burke, Peter 1978. *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*. New York, Hagerstown, San Francisco, London: Harper & Row.

Durkheim, Émile. [1912] 2007. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. New York: Dover Publications.

Foster, Michael Dylan 2016. Introduction. The Challenge of Folkloresque. In: Foster, Michael Dylan, Tolber, Jeffery A. (eds.). *The Folkloresque: Reframing Folklore in a Popular Culture World*. Boulder: University Press of Colorado, pp. 3–33.

Hafstein, Valdimar Tr. Intangible Heritage as a Festival; or, Folklorization Revisited. *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 131, No. 520, pp. 127–149.

Hobsbawm, Eric; Ranger, Terence 1983. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kockel, Ullrick; Craith, Mairead Nic 2007. Cultural Heritages as Reflexive Traditions. Palgrave Macmillan.

Lukić Krstanović, Miroslava 2011. Political Folklore in Festival Market: Power of Paradigm and Power of Stage. *Český lid*, Vol. 98, No. 3, pp. 261–280.

Malinowski, Bronislaw 1922. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. New York: John Hawkins and Associates Inc.

Gauthier, François; Martikainen, Tuomas 2013. *Religion in Consumer Society: Brands, Consumers and Markets.* Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate.

Mauss, Marcel 2002. *The Gift. The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*. London and New York: Routledge.

Mullins, Willow G.; Batra-Wells, Puja 2019. *The Folklorist in the Marketplace: Conversations at the Crossroads of Vernacular Culture and Economics*. Logan: Utah State University Press.

Mullins, Willow G. 2019. Consuming Authenticities: An Economics of Folklorists. In: Mullins, Willow G.; Batra-Wells, Puja (eds.). *The Folklorist in the Marketplace: Conversations at the Crossroads of Vernacular Culture and Economics*. Logan: Utah State University Press, pp. 271–292.

Rindzevičiūtė, Eglė 2010. Imagining the Grand Duchy of Lithuania: The Politics and Eco-nomics of the Rebuilding of Trakai Castle and the 'Palace of Sovereigns' in Vilnius. Central Europe, vol. 8 (2), pp. 181–203.

Santino, Jack 2011. The Carnivalesque and the Ritualesque. *Journal of American Folklore*, 124 (491): 61–73.

Santino, Jack 2009. The Ritualesque: Festival, Politics, and Popular Culture. *Western Folklore*, 68 (1): 9–26.

Testa, Alessandro 2014. Rethinking the Festival: Power and Politics. *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 26 (1): 44–73.

Testa, Alessandro 2019. Doing research on festivals: Cui Bono? *Journal of Festive Studies*, 1 (1): 5–10.