

NEWS IN BRIEF

SAGAS AND SOCIETIES. THE SAGA CONFERENCE IN BORGARNES, ICELAND

The conference *Sagas and Societies* was held in Borgarnes in the western part of Iceland, from September 5.–9, 2002. The conference's main sponsor was the Culture 2000 Fund of the European Commission. *Sagas and Societies* was organised by the City Council of Borgarnes and the Borgarnes Culture Centre, the Reykjavík Academy, the Research Centre of Snorri Sturluson, the Nordic Philology Department of the University of Tübingen and the Estonian Literature Museum. The project manager was Ólína Þórvarðardóttir.

The conference mainly focused on the Icelandic sagas, but also covered a wide range of issues from Icelandic archaeology to the presentation of sagas and the Icelandic culture in the 19th and 20th century. Conference materials are accessible on the project website <http://www.borgarnes.is/sagas>, providing conference abstracts as well as a forum for discussions and comments about lectures.

The reason why the conference was held in Borgarnes, even though the town of Borgarnes is relatively small, even inconspicuous, is that the events of several major sagas were set in the vicinity. One of the most famous scalds of Iceland, Egill Skallagrímsson was born and lived near Borgarnes, the main events of the *Egills Saga*, some of the events of the *Grettir Saga*, and the events of several smaller sagas have taken place in the surroundings. Only a dozen miles from Borgarnes lies Reykholt, a temporary home of Snorri Sturluson, probably the best known Icelander and the supposed author of many sagas. Hence it was only logical that the conference should be held in Borgarnes.

The number of presentations was relatively big, introducing a wide variety of topics. The unfocussed arrangement of topics was, perhaps, the only minor drawback of the event. Estonia was represented at the conference by Kristel Zilmer, doctorate of the Nordic Philology Department with the University of Tartu, discussing medieval world view, and Tarmo Kulmar, professor of the Theology Department with the University of Tartu, with a lecture about Rein



Conference organisers. From left: Tõnno Jonuks, Dr. Ólína Þórvarðardóttir, Prof. Dr. Stefanie Würth. Photo from a private collection, 2002.

Sepp. The trip of both participants was financed by the Estonian Culture Foundation.

In the course of the conference other ongoing projects were being introduced; the most prominent of these was perhaps *Handritin Heima*, an Internet project introducing medieval manuscripts of Iceland.

The conference articles are expected to be released both electronically, on the website of the University of Tübingen, and in print, during the year 2003.

Tõnno Jonuks

FOLKLORE SCIENCE IN SLOVAKIA (WITH A DETOUR TO LATVIA) FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF A CONFERENCE PARTICIPANT

At the break of the new century the assessment of recent research methods and results, and a review of theoretic explorations of the previous century is almost obligatory, but definitely a necessity. Usually, conferences are a good source of inspiration for future studies and present a certain tense moment of comparison, inducing us to determine the position and level of national folklore science, possible overlapping with studies into the intellectual culture of various parts of Europe. Considering all this I could not resist the opportunity to participate, together with Andres Kuperjanov, in the conference *Traditional Culture as a Part of Cultural Heritage of Europe. Presence and Perspective of Folklore and Folkloristics*, held in Bratislava, Slovakia, October 23rd–26th, 2002. The conference took place in a newly restored Pálffy Palace, where the restoration work is still continued on the wall ornamentation of the basement. The whole town centre and its surroundings are under reconstruction, renovation and restoration: modern residential buildings are put up right next to the historical Pálffy Palace.

The coffee breaks in between conference sessions created a favourable atmosphere for discussions about how traditional culture should be monitored and analysed, which methods should be used, how the topical social issues of today should be discussed, but also about what happens when traditional approaches are dropped in favour of more fashionable topics, whether it is possible to overcome the past isolation of the Soviet period and the lack of theoretical literature of those years, etc.

The conference (under the guidance of chief organiser Zuzana Profantova) was divided into sections, which covered a range of issues from the general theory of folklore science (V. Voigt, G. Kiliánová, S. Profantova, B. Benes) to research opportunities of different folkloric genres and changes in research paradigms (W. Espelund, M. Leščák, R. Ivanova, E. Krekovicová). Topics included the study of folk music and dances, folklore and folkloristics with reference to digitalisation, the introduction of various approaches (semiotics, anthropology) to folkloristics, interdisciplinary research

trends in contemporary folkloristics, the overlapping of science fiction and folklore, etc. Internet related topics gave an overview of urban legends in the English-speaking Internet environment, and political web jokes from the period before and during the elections in Hungary. Analyses of the recent survey results of past but newly topical issues (angels and punishment motifs in the religious worldview of contemporary villagers) were presented; horror tales of children, and, as expected, the topic of urban legends were discussed.

A separate section comprised lectures on the issues of folklore and folkloristics, folklore teaching in higher education schools and on other levels of the educational system, folklore on stage, in politics and media, problems concerning the publishing of folklore texts, etc.

Conference participants received a good overview of the folkloristics of Slovakia and were introduced trends in studying the Slovakian, Czech, Bulgarian, Slovene, Hungarian, Austrian, Estonian and Norwegian folklore.

The cultural program of the conference was truly impressive: an opening ceremony with good classical music, a visit to the opera, and the Slovakian folk music performed by Pezinska Baba in a national style village inn. Milan Leščák, Ivan Murin and other Slovakian folklorists complemented the performance of excellent musicians and singers. Another memorable event was an outing to the Schaubmar mill, which accommodates a Naivist gallery museum rich in the intense message of sculptures and the rich colouring of Slavic-Hungarian paintings ([http://www.sng.sk/sng/docsng.nsf/\(w\)/A01B7AD41D3B4311C1256B5C0006F7F3](http://www.sng.sk/sng/docsng.nsf/(w)/A01B7AD41D3B4311C1256B5C0006F7F3)). At the time of our visit, Ján Štrba, a photograph artist, who has photographed the elderly people in his village for some decades, was setting up his exhibition. The warm and humorous black-and-white images reflect the luminous expression of the elderly, and remind of the humorous street sculptures in the central city of Bratislava – the Peeper, the Magazine Reader, the Leaner, etc.

The conference was followed by a visit to the Institute of Ethnology of the Slovakian Academy of Sciences; we spent valuable hours in the institute library. We also had a chance to meet Viera Gasparikova,

the author of the catalogue of popular prose that participants were presented at the conference. The recently published well-designed book of thief heritage led to thinking about all the old and new thieves and thief heritage, which would provide extensive material for research. We also took a look at the preparatory work on the bibliography of the Slovakian folklore and ethnology.

The Bratislava Institute of Ethnology is a centre of excellence in research promoting various interdisciplinary projects and bringing together scholars working with other institutions of the Slovakian Academy of Sciences. The archive that was evacuated after being flooded in the summer of 2002 contains old manuscripts, fieldwork materials, publications, old maps, pictures and photographs, and also the sound archive.

During the previous decade many of the earlier research paradigms have been dropped. Current research topics of the Institute involve changes in the urban and rural culture of the 20th century, nationality and minorities, identity and oral history, the Slovakian cultural heritage compared to the tradition of Central and Eastern Europe, etc. Collaborators to the institute are from different age groups.

The institute issues several periodic publications: the historical *Slovenský národopis / Slovak Ethnology*, *Etnologické rozpravy*, the Bibliography of Slovakian Folklore, etc.

We also visited the Chair of Ethnology, chaired by Milan Leščák, at the University of Komensk. The chair also holds a study group of popular religion with a special focus on world religions, studying, among other things, the New Age movement. Scholars study a wide variety of topics, incl. the cross-cultural communication of the Slovakian Hungarians.

Upon our return we had time to attend the last lecture of the conference *The Shelf of Barons* of the Latvian Folklore Archives. We saw the famous collection of *dainas*, which had been removed from the folklore archives to the main archives. We briefly exchanged the news with our Finnish, Latvian and Russian colleagues and set off for Tartu. In fact, our trip to Slovakia began with a visit to the Latvian Folklore Archives, where we had a discussion with our dear



Ján Štrba portraits elderly people and their everyday life in his home village. The best known Slovakian photographer setting up his exhibition. Also on the picture, Gabriela Kiliánová and Zuzana Galiová. Photo by Andres Kuperjanov, 2002.

colleagues Māra Viksna, Guntis Pakalns and Aldis Putelis about the future of folklore. The folklore science of the neighbouring Estonia and Latvia has taken quite different paths, but we still have some things in common, e.g. the study of contemporary narratives, not to mention the similarity of our (contemporary) folklore. Latvian folklorists have means to express themselves in media, both in radio and TV, and have established an active cooperation with applied researchers. Unfortunately, no university in Latvia offers higher education in the field of folklore, which is why folklorists have a strong personal vocation, but no consistent education. The only exception is a course in Latvian mythology with a strong bias to semiotics, initiated in the 1990s by academician Jānina Kursīte at the Latvian Academy.

Mare Kõiva

IMPRESSIONS FROM THE 2002 NOVEMBER BAKU CONFERENCE “PRESERVING AND SPREADING THE CULTURAL PROPERTY AT THE AGE OF GLOBALISATION”

After many years, the conference “Preserving and spreading the cultural property at the age of globalisation” was the first to bring together folklorists and musicologists from eastern and western parts of the former Soviet Union: central Russian research institutions as well as Uzbekistan, Kyrgystan, Tajikistan and Estonia. The conference, organised by the Musiqi Dünyasi publishing centre, led by Tariel Mamedov, was held on November 7–9, 2002. Tariel Mamedov is the editor of the journal “Musiqi Dünyasi” (found at <http://musbook.musiqi-dunya.az/index.html>) published in Azerbaijani and English. Being assistant editor of the scientific journal “Folklore”, published in Tartu, Estonia, I was looking forward to comparing experiences in Estonia and eastern regions of the former USSR.

The presentations of the conference concerned a wide range of topics as well as varied unique folklore genres, the process of decoding their meaning and relaying the knowledge (Fattah Khaligzade, Ramiz Zokhrabov), the application of information technology in libraries and musicology, but also electronic publications and the opportunities they offer (Tariel Mamedov, Sevelina Kolarova, Sergei Kondratjev, Faradge Gharayev, Zemfira Safarova). Several presentations touched upon changes that already had and are still taking place in regional ethnomusicology, e.g. the current state of traditional music and the use of traditional music in professional music-making (Raziyya Syrdybayeva, Kamran Imanov, Camola Akilova). Discussion involved also different rites and the process of globalisation. As the representative of the Estonian experience, I introduced different principles followed in digitisation and their application in maintaining cultural values, emphasising the manner in which digitalisation projects help reintroduce cultural values into contemporary society.

By now, several anthologies of classical texts and re-editions in CD-format have been compiled. The design of e-books is a blend of contemporary and traditional colours and images. More and more material is accessible via the Internet.



Azerbaijan used to use Arabic script. These stone slates spent a few hundred years at the bottom of the sea before being fished out. Baku. Photo by Liisa Vesik, 2002.

The conference introduced Azerbaijan digitalisation and conservation projects, e-publications and CDs, most beautifully aesthetic and unique in their design. One of the most difficult problems facing many old cultures is the gap between archaic and contemporary spoken and written languages. The Azerbaijan region developed its own script in the 9–7 century BC. If nothing else, the name and works of Nizam are well known among the humanitarian scientists of today.

The conference left the impression that Azerbaijani folklorists are working on epics from the 20th century, as well as Kitabi Dədə Gorgōd and Kōroglu, collecting, systematising and researching epic stories and mythology, while the musicologists are active in various fields of research. In the past decade, a number of monographs and article collections have been published in Azerbaijani.

The consistency of cultural heritage was disrupted when the alphabet and writings were changed after incorporation into the Soviet Union. Up to 1923, Arabic script was used. In 1923–1939, Latin script was used. Since 1939, Cyrillic came into use. Today, the Azerbaijani are back to using Latin script.

The political situation that forced the Azerbaijani to adopt a different alphabet has made it very hard for them to relate to the written heritage of the nation. It has also created a situation where cultural documents need not only be maintained in their physical format, but people need to be taught how to read them, or, the text must be transcribed into a different alphabet. Older cultural texts need to be re-published in Latin script – either in printed format or electronically, to be accessible to the wider audience. This requires political support from the state and consistent long-term cultural policies.

The atmosphere of the conference was busy yet friendly, the breaks and evenings filled with discussions, exchange of ideas and re-establishing contacts that had become severed in the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, a potent problem exposed itself in the form of the language skills of researchers: English is not yet the standard for many researchers while Russian is no longer the standard for others.

Let me add here some recommended Azerbaijan pages:

1. Electronic version of the printed journal “Musigi Dunyasi”:
<http://musigi-dunya.az>
2. “Vagif Mustafazadeh.” Web page about outstanding Azerbaijan jazz pianist and composer: <http://vagif.musigi-dunya.az>
3. On-line catalogue of composers and musicologists of Azerbaijan:
<http://composers.musigi-dunya.az>
4. “Qara Qaraev.” Memorial site, devoted to great Azerbaijan composer: <http://qara-qaraev.musigi-dunya.az>
5. Azerbaijan Discography (1900–1940). On-line catalogue. The site is devoted to first gramophone records in Azerbaijan:
<http://diskografiya.musigi-dunya.az>
6. Baku Musical Academy: <http://musakademiya.musigi-dunya.az>
7. Uzeir Hajibeyov. “Principles of Azerbaijan Folk Music”:
<http://musbook.musigi-dunya.az>

8. Electronic version of the applied scientific journal “Intellectual Property”: <http://intellect.musigi-dunya.az>

9. Electronic version of the journal “Harmony”:
<http://harmony.musigi-dunya.az>

Liisa Vesik

DEFENDING OF DOCTORAL THESIS

On August 29, 2002 **Marju Torp-Kõivupuu** was granted her Doctor of Philosophy degree in front of the doctorate council of the Department of Language and Literature at the Tallinn Pedagogical University. Her thesis entitled *The Changes of Death Tradition in Time: On the Example of Funeral Customs in the Historical Võrumaa Region* (“*Surmakultuuri muutumine ajas: ajaloolise Võrumaa matusekombestiku näitel,*”) was supervised by H. Elmet, A. Murutar, T. Kulmar, opponent M. Kõiva.

The study of ageing and death tradition has been one of the fashionable topics in international cultural anthropology, ethnology and folkloristics of the last decades, to some extent also in Estonia. The topic has been covered, with high ratings, in Estonian media.

Any random treatment of death and the possibility of afterlife draws in a flow of hundreds, even thousands of comments on the Internet portals, which is a clear sign of issues that itch on our minds, of the need to argue, to share experience and to philosophise on this topic. It is possible that one reason for that may be the sensing of the unique fragility of human existence, instilled into us by the media, especially with its detailed visual images in global news we see on daily basis. Also, we are gradually alienating from old age, this special status, but also from other fundamental states of human existence, positions and rituals connected to these. Eventually, we alienate from notions like death, mortality, dying, and nursing of the dying. Without any intention to overestimate the balancing role of scientists and their interpretation in mitigating social issues and problems, there still is a link between them. Arguments of prominent scholars do shape the contemporary worldview and models of explanation.

During the past 50 years the topic of death in the humanitarian and social sciences in Estonia has been treated mostly in the form of articles, first and foremost ethnological descriptions (except for those discussing it from the archaeological aspect). The only exceptions are the studies of burial customs of several ethnic groups, the Estonians of the Caucasus, and others (Marika Mikkor) and East-Estonians (Merike Land), which in their thoroughness could form the

groundwork for further generalisations. All these studies focus on the tradition of a certain territorial or ethnic group, which is also the case in M. Torp-Kõivupuu's work.

In the late 20th century some student studies were written, but the scope and format of these works hardly enables to cover the topics in depth: these are mainly eclectic data corpora or deal with issues that remain to the periphery of the topic. The most prominent among the recent MA theses is the study of death culture maintained by Tiia Kõss at the Chair of Estonian and Comparative Folklore at the University of Tartu. The most recent overview of funerals, and related social and ritual aspects was written by Ülo Tedre; but due to the limited scope it resembles an aerial photograph of the funeral customs of the Estonians in the 19th and early 20th century.

What is new in the thesis of Marju Torp-Kõivupuu in comparison with the above mentioned studies, as it consists mainly of previously published material? Typically, the source material originates in Southeast Estonia, hence belonging to a group fixed on certain territory. It is also a relatively large area, inhabited by different linguistic-cultural-religious groups. The author was born and spent her childhood years in this area, which should give her advantages in finding the competent control group; she can also rely on her personal tradition competence. This can be a great advantage, but also a burden in studying traditional culture, which Kõivupuu has also touched upon in her articles.

The thesis opens with discussing the development of funeral customs, with material which has not been previously published. The function and changes in funeral customs are observed from the perspective of archaeological data. During the last few decades attempts have been made to interpret the archaeological excavation data through folkloric parallels, also, excavation sites have been chosen on the basis of folkloric accounts. The former approach is methodologically not always practical: folklore accounts remain far too late and their dating is problematic, or at least speculative. Authentic models concerning the dating of institutions based on social memory are still missing, whereas the reconstruction of funeral traditions of a certain period based on archaeological data has proved very promising, as we can see in the findings of Marika Mägi, Priit Ligi, etc.

Marju Torp-Kõivupuu with family at the promotion. Photo by Tiit Torp, 2002.



The defender presents an overview of funeral traditions in the 13th – 21st century Võrumaa. M. Torp-Kõivupuu has merged the interpretations of archaeological findings with data on church and religious history. The treatment of the last centuries, in particular, has taken into account the impact of church rituals on folk tradition and has estimated the influence of different confessions of faith on spiritual culture. This long interval has been periodised, providing information on the changes in church laws concerning burial, but also views into conversion during the past few centuries. Reconstructions based on the archaeology of the 13th–15th century have been applied in interpreting the funeral customs of the 19th and 20th century.

The topics and subtopics discussed in the first part of the thesis would certainly require a more thorough treatment. Considering the distinctive essence of the 20th century and the church historical background of the area, the thesis seems to centre too much on Lutheran funerals. It would be interesting to learn at least something about the arrangement and popular structure of, say, the Orthodox or secular funerals, draw parallels between the church and the secular funerals, read about their differences and similarities.

Early folklore distinguishes between the traditions of baptism and funeral of different confessions: what about in contemporary lore?

Apart from her keen interest in history M. Torp-Kõivupuu is also skilled in coming across intriguing and novel topics. On many occasions Kõivupuu has been the first to come up with authentic Estonian material, or sometimes the first one to describe a topic in depth (road-side burial places, freshman initiation ceremonies, tradition of a small temporary group, etc.). In treatments of contemporary tradition she has demonstrated the abundance and conventionality of the survived customs (customs related to cross-trees, ritual funeral food, etc.).

The successive articles focus on contemporary funeral customs and related beliefs. The article on funeral foods is based on fieldwork conducted during the past ten years, introducing ritual food and the arrangement of meals during the funeral ritual. Contrary to the arguments in previous articles maintaining that the tradition of funeral food is becoming extinct, the author proves that ritual food has preserved its significance. The custom to offer the first person to encounter a funeral procession food/cake or alcohol, depending on its gender, is still very much alive. Other interesting customs include the offering of food to the mourners and animal sacrifice.

The article *What Might We Need after the Death?* provides an overview of contemporary grave objects. The overview is based on the results of recent sociological surveys within the 18–60 age group. In addition to traditional objects, such as the Bible or a sheet from the Hymnal, it has become customary to place these objects into the coffin that the deceased considered important in lifetime, e.g. cigarettes for the smoker and vodka for the alcoholic. This behaviour presumes the continuance of the state of mind and environment even after death and perhaps reveals not only the conventionality of tradition, but also stereotypes of religious thought?

In the South-Estonian funeral tradition cross-trees are a topic that has been well documented and analysed on the initiative of the defender. The article offers a versatile overview of associations in customs related to death tradition and trees. The custom of cutting crosses into trees at funeral, and popular interpretations of the tradition are described at greater length. Next to the ancient explana-

tions (prevention of revenants, etc.), the customs are now interpreted differently, i.e. with the need to commemorate the deceased, and to preserve the ancient and traditional burial ritual.

Supplementary part discusses the topic of Estonian animal burial grounds and the fate of an ancient cross-tree. Both topics are worth elaborating on and could have been included in the main body of the thesis.

It appears that some of the customs that have survived in this region of Estonia are old beyond belief. Families are close, people are willing to follow disciplinary traditions and those that offer solace in times of trouble. M. Torp-Kõivupuu's thesis insists that the contemporary life and beliefs of Estonia should be observed attentively. Perhaps it would be practical to continue the generalisation of main issues, on the one hand, and study certain elements of tradition in more detail, on the other hand? Peripheral topics drawn into focus certainly offer intriguing and astonishing material.

Mare Kõiva