

Būgienė, Lina, editor. *The Storytelling Human: Lithuanian Folk Tradition Today*. Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2020. Bibliography. Index. Xvii+270 pp. \$109.00 (cloth). ISBN 978-1-64469-423-7.

Alan Dundes, in his last plenary address to the American Folklore Society, hailed Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia as “prime movers” and “major players” of twenty-first century international folkloristics (2005: 405-406). The tradition continues strong in this new volume of essays by eight Lithuanian folklorists.

The Storytelling Human presents, in English, a new generation’s search for new directions. The authors came of age in the current millennium, with dissertations defended 1999-2017. What they offer is, quoting Estonian folklorist Ülo Valk’s cover blurb, a “manifesto of renewed Lithuanian folkloristics... in close dialogue with international scholarship.” The book is divided into two mutually complementing parts, four chapters each: Part One, titled “History and Tradition in a Changing World,” assesses Lithuanian experiences in the second half of the twentieth century; and Part Two, “Traditional Folklore and Modernity,” documents twenty-first-century innovations within folklore genres.

Aelita Kensminienė hypothesizes that the recent disappearance of classic riddles in oral tradition signals broader linguistic change. The few people who currently do remember these poetic texts are semi-literate, favoring “auditory” perception of language, whereas literate people’s “visual” (read, not heard) linguistic perception may render the poetic textures and longer texts of oral riddles less memorable. People’s mental landscapes also changed in the mid-twentieth century, argues Radvilė Racėnaitė, who compares nature descriptions in autobiographical narratives recorded from star folklore informants, with memoirs of acclaimed literary authors. When preindustrial farmers embraced nature’s beauty, they did so through shared traditional genres, differently from images in the individualized life stories and personal memoirs of farmers who were forced off their land by Soviet collectivization and deportations. Their mental landscapes, like those of later urban poets, were shaped by existential loss.

The twentieth century’s violent wars and foreign occupations left deep scars in Lithuanian worldviews. Healing could begin only when the Soviet Communist Party’s power waned. In 1989, thousands of Lithuanians traveled to Siberia to exhume the remains of relatives who had been arrested and forcibly deported by the Soviets, returning them to Lithuania to be reburied in their native land. Daiva Vaitkevičienė interprets personal experience narratives recounting these journeys, including memorates about supernatural encounters with the dead and descriptions of rituals at gravesites, to document deep ties across generations who finally laid to rest trauma inflicted by the Soviet Union. Unhealed traumatic memories close to home are studied by Lina Būgienė, in a village that experienced waves of killings from 1939 to 1953, during the Second World War and the Holocaust, and guerilla warfare under Soviet occupation. The region’s history “dramatically disrupts each individual’s personal history, and each individual has his or her own way of experiencing, surviving, reflecting upon and relating that

history” (110). Conflicting memories and narratives nevertheless coalesce around the major historical issues.

The book’s anchor, for me, is the first two chapters of Part Two, which engage the persistent vitality of two classic folklore genres—folktales and proverbs.

Jūratė Šlekonytė studies the repertoires of two narrators encountered during fieldwork in 2006-2010. One, a “traditional” storyteller, well known in his community as an entertainer, told folklorists more than fifty stories, among them variants of twenty classic folktale types that he adapted for current audiences, for example, “These days there are people who like to steal cars – people drive cars, so it’s cars that are stolen. But earlier it used to be horses...” (130). The second, “rational” narrator rejected the fantasy world of folktales but referred to their plots as illustrations of attitudes and opinions, in skillfully crafted stories about local characters (126). Such stories were not recorded by earlier folklorists who concentrated on the classic, repeated plots, but it is likely, argues Šlekonytė, that similar, highly innovative narrators also existed in the past.

Dalia Zaikauskienė’s magisterial assessment of contemporary Lithuanian proverb traditions continues where the great paremiologist Kazys Grigas (1924-2002) left off, highlighting both transnational and nationally unique features. Lithuanian is continually absorbing international proverbs and proverbial sayings like, “putting the cart before the horse,” which is well known in Western Europe since the 1700s, but appeared in Lithuanian only about two decades ago, quickly spawning variants. Other recently documented proverbs such as “time is money,” and “the customer is always right,” indicate shared, transnational worldviews in Lithuanian everyday life. But I am at a loss to explain why Lithuanian politicians rarely use proverbs in public oratory (165), unlike numerous American presidents whose repertoires were documented by Wolfgang Mieder.

Salomėja Bandoriūtė is the first Lithuanian folklorist to assess 7,842 narrative jokes (Lith. *anekdotai*) preserved in archives and collected online, looking for common characteristics of *homo ridens* (laughing humans) through time. She focuses on jokes that “mock” or “exclude” specific social groups such as women, ethnic groups and foreigners (Jews, Roma, Chukchi, Germans, Georgians, Armenians, Russians), and the powerful (landowners, kings, priests, Communist officials, current politicians, doctors, adults); these objects of humorous aggression have remained stable across the past century’s historical epochs. Further fieldwork and interpretation are warranted: the author points out that this corpus of jokes was mostly collected from men (189), begging the question, does a Lithuanian *femina ridens* also exist, and what funny stories does she tell? Where do puns and other language-based jokes fit in, and humor based on regional stereotypes? Incongruity as a possible core of human laughter is mentioned in passing (206), but could be further explored to seek alternative interpretations regarding stories that elicit Lithuanian laughter.

The book’s last chapter dives into two topics new to Lithuanian folkloristics: sports and digital traditions. Povilas Krikščiūnas compiles online folklore surrounding Lithuania’s national pastime, basketball, zeroing in on 400 FOLKLORICA 2021, Vol. XXV

basketball-related “demotivational posters” (a subgenre of memes), shared in an online forum. Currently circulating jokes display similar thematic patterns, bolstering the thesis that this is traditional communication adjusting to new online contexts. Traditional themes include Lithuania’s obsession with basketball, the opposition of “self” and “other” in opposing teams, and the unity of basketball and beer: “Basketball without beer is like a birthday without cake.” A picture of a toilet with free-throw markings painted on the floor is particularly interesting in international comparative context: American variants add an obscene joke, “no dribbling allowed,” where Lithuanian texts affirm the national obsession, “It doesn’t matter where, as long as it’s basketball” (221).

Lithuanian folklorists tend to view folklore in a longer time frame than my American colleagues, who typically concentrate on current, “informal traditional culture.” A Lithuanian-eye-view of folklore passes through two overlapping portals. First, massive archival collections present a sea of variants for any single text or performance, demanding comparative study. And second is deep fieldwork. From the 1920s on, rigorous methods of long-term research ensured familiarity with the contexts and people who maintained traditions. It is a pleasure to follow Lithuanian folklorists on fieldwork expeditions where we meet living people of Lithuania in the twenty-first century, for example, when fieldworkers drink coffee with the informant on her birthday (6), or swap stories with a gifted folktale teller (121).

The book’s authors center attention on narrative traditions; for equally stimulating treatment of folksongs, look to recent books by Austė Nakienė and Daiva Račiūnaitė-Vyčinienė (listed in the bibliography). I remain as convinced as Alan Dundes was, that Lithuanians will continue to be major players in global folkloristics in the second quarter of the twenty-first century.

Guntis Šmidchens
University of Washington
Seattle, Washington, USA
guntiss@uw.edu

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Dundes, Alan. (2005). “Folkloristics in the Twenty-First Century” (AFS Invited Presidential Plenary Address, 2004). *The Journal of American Folklore* 118(470): 385-408.
- Nakienė, Austė. 2016. “From Traditional Poliphony to the Polyphonic Tradition. The Evolution of Lithuanian Music in the 20th and 21st Centuries: Summary,” in *Nuo tradicinės polifonijos iki polifoninės tradicijos: Lietuvių muzikos kaita XX-XXI a.* Vilnius, Lietuvių literatūros ir tautosakos institutas, 341-351.
- Račiūnaitė-Vyčinienė, Daiva. 2002. *Sutartinės: Lithuanian polyphonic songs.* Translated by Vijolė Arbas. Vilnius: VAGA.