

Oral Tradition in Lithuania

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Here in Lithuania, it would be difficult to separate the idea of what is oral tradition, which is most commonly understood as folklore (in the sense of German *Volkskunde*), from its studies and research. Throughout history the role of orally transmitted folklore in our country has been especially prominent. Folklore was regarded as a unique expression of the “national soul,” and allotted special importance during the national liberation movements that were taking place in Lithuania not only in the wake of German Romanticism at the end of the nineteenth century, but also in the second half of the twentieth century. The folk singing tradition was considered especially essential for (and by) the Lithuanians; for example, the national liberation movement “Sajudis” promoted the so-called “singing revolution,” which dovetailed with Gorbachov’s Perestroika.

That is why, probably, the scholarly ideas of what is (or should be considered) oral tradition stayed petrified along the lines inherited from Romanticism—much longer than they should have, anyway. The criteria of authenticity, archaism, and ethical and aesthetic values were crucial in determining whether a particular fragment of folklore was to receive scholarly attention, that is, whether it would be recorded, archived, studied, and published. Striving to search out and rescue the folk treasures, which were conceived as disappearing or dying out, was imperative for the major part of the fieldwork conducted up to the very end of the twentieth century—perhaps understandable for a people accustomed to being on the verge of extinction for centuries, but that’s another question. Moreover, this quest for archaism defined to a considerable extent the folk’s ideas about their own traditions, and the content of those traditions as well.

Yet from the 1990’s onward the situation has been visibly altering. First, the elderly people from the countryside are no longer considered the prime sources of oral folk tradition. Other social and age groups, different folklore “genres,” the role of folklore in everyday situations, and transformations and paraphrases of the tradition have also become the focus

of students and researchers, who in turn have been influenced by modern methodological and theoretical trends penetrating from abroad.

With society and people's lives becoming more "open," and with the spread of mass media, the conditions for the existence of folklore are changing rapidly, causing some traditional genres to sink into oblivion and others to change and adapt to the present situation. For example, the once-popular folk legends telling of supernatural beings such as devils, witches, mythical animals, and nature spirits are being replaced by stories about inhabiting ghosts, UFOs, or just some vague unidentified forces. In addition, all kinds of anti-legends and anti-proverbs are devised and gain popularity. Of course, all these changes did not occur during the last decade; they certainly took longer to "ferment." Yet with scholarly attention suddenly focused on them, it all looks like a breakthrough.

In short, the most monumental change in the field related to folklore in Lithuania could be defined as "modernization" of the core idea of folklore. This fundamental concept has ceased to be envisaged as something very ancient, inherited from our forefathers, and consequently perhaps a little boring for the young, and is turning into a living and evolving thing, created here and now.

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References¹

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¹ Greimas 1992 uses a semiotic approach to the Lithuanian oral tradition as well as other materials. Greimas is one of the most famous Lithuanian scholars in exile and his works are very popular in Lithuania. The foreword to Greimas 1992 is by Dan Ben-Amos and Alessandro Falassi.

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