Maintaining the oral storytelling traditions in modernity – some projects carried out in Latvia

The object of this article\(^1\) is a brief summary of experience on what can be done with one such less noticed genres of oral culture which is of no less importance for the existence of culture – namely: traditional oral narratives. It must be emphasised here that by the aforementioned term not only such rather international genres as folk-tales and legends which are widely recognised by folklore researchers are meant but also seemingly mundane stories of everyday life as well as recollections told in families, different social groups and small communities. The attention is not so much focused on the texts as the very process of narration, where texts may change but the telling of those is connected with traditions of different age – that is telling of stories as a necessary part of everyday communication.

Since the very first attempts at re-establishing of their national identity (since the second half of the 19th century) the Latvians have identified themselves as a „singing nation.“\(^2\) The Latvians are proud of their song and dance festivals, with tens of thousands of participants there. Regaining of independence in all three Baltic States at the end of 1980’s and early 1990’s is known as „the singing revolution“ – non-violent resistance, mass events marked by singing. One of the great symbols of the Latvian nation is ”Dainu skapis“ – the Cabinet of Folksongs. It is a manuscript collection creating the base for the most important edition of the Latvian folksong texts – ”Latvju dainas“ (1894 – 1915) containing some 220 thousand texts, compiled and edited by Krišjānis Barons (1835 – 1923).\(^3\) Both folklore scholarship and folklore movement in Latvia are mainly song-oriented.

Modern Latvians have no ancient oral epic. In the last decades of 19th century there was a heated discussion regarding the issue whether the Latvians have never had an epic of their own or it was lost in the course of the history. The Latvians wished to be like other culture nations of the world, therefore there were poets who attempted to “reconstruct” the epic from folklore texts or to create it anew. The status of the national epic was acquired by the work “Lāčplēsis” (1888) created by Andrejs Pumpurs.\(^4\) It creatively uses texts and ideas of Latvian folklore, pseudo-mythology and epics of other nations. “Lāčplēsis” has never circulated in oral tradition, but is well-known and continues to live in literature, theatre, artistic and musical works, as well as commercial products (beer) and parodies.

In Latvian culture the function of epic as the formant of identity is taken on by the folksongs, especially ”Latvju dainas“ edited by K. Barons – they describe the human life from birth till death, the main rituals, all work of soil cultivation, mythology and festivals, as well as social relationships and participation in warfare over the course of history. Latvian folksongs are short quatrains, using extremely concise poetic expression, they can be improvised and combined relatively freely dependent upon the situation. Which is not less important: for the study of their formulaic structure, variation and mechanisms employed in their memorisation theories created for the study of epic oral literature (especially those by M. Parry and A. Lord\(^5\)) have proven of use.

In the Latvian traditional culture the stories do not have equally high status as the songs do. Different stereotypes (now overcome in regard to traditional folk singing) are still current in connection with the stories, namely, that storytelling cannot be taught, that the interest of a folklorist and public performance can „spoil“ the storyteller. Unlike the traditional singing, the national and local storytelling traditions are not yet defined.

This little article will try to shed some light on the attempts to create a modern storytelling movement in Latvia, mainly within the folklore movement, uniting, first, the best of the Latvian experience and traditions and, second, the experience of those countries where there are developed modern storytelling communities. I admit that this experience can be of use in other countries with similar historical situation, especially in the so-called post-socialist countries.

Very briefly – how I usually explain what storytelling is. Storytelling does not only mean the skill of particular persons to relate events orally to smaller or larger audience. It is a movement, a subculture, a renaissance that takes place in many countries. Storytellers have their

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\(^1\) The aim of this article is not to provide a survey of institutions and activities related to maintenance of traditional culture. If put briefly and simply the following are engaged in preservation of folk traditions in modern Latvia: ca. 300 folklore groups of adults and children (http://www.folklorasbiedriba.lv/); folklore scholars – Archives of Latvian Folklore (http://www.lfk.lv) as well as some individual researchers at higher education institutions and other organisations; folklore is also taught at schools, but not as an independent subject; more than 2,000 life stories have been documented in the Archives of the National Oral History Project (http://www.dzivesstasts.lv); The Centre of Culture Education and Culture Heritage – a subsidiary of Ministry of Culture, supervises the preparation of Song Festivals and other culture events (http://www.kncm.gov.lv/); state funding for small projects – through the State Fund of Cultural Capital (http://www.kkf.lv); romantically interpreted folklore elements were used in the national religion «dievturība» created in 1920’s, its myths and rituals (see for instance http://www.marasloks.lv).


\(^3\) Since 2001 Dainu skapis is inscribed on the UNESCO Memory of the World register. More: www.ifk.lv (also in English), www.dainuskapis.lv.

\(^4\) The translation of the epic „Lāčplēsis“ into Russian with comparatively extensive commentaries can be found here: http://skazki.eclub.lv/.

organisations, festivals, books, training systems and vast resources on the internet. Storytelling has several rather different subdivisions: storytelling on stage, professional storytelling, traditional storytelling in a community, digital storytelling, storytelling in business, storytelling at school, library, church, storytelling as healing and a solution of social problems, etc.

Storyteller training means development or acquisition of a special identity – that of a storyteller. Storyteller is a person in possession of several things: the stories, the skill of telling them orally, connection with the tradition (the people, "behind" them) and community (the people "in front of" them). For the folklorists I try to provide a popular explanation that a storyteller differs from an informant by being more active and independent, while greater freedom in performance differentiates a storyteller from an actor.

Here are a few ideas that lie in the basis of the modern storytelling ideology:

1) Telling of stories and listening to stories told is considered one of the main human necessities. 2) Modern technology cannot displace an oral narrative, but technology provides it with new opportunities. 3) Storytelling skills can be awakened, developed and perfected – everyone really willing to can learn to tell. 4) The main thing in order to learn storytelling – do tell! 5) Storytelling is no monologue – it is a subtle art of situations and dialogues, a skill to choose the right story for the right situation, a skill to adapt it. 6) Don’t learn a text by heart – create your own story! (It may be observed that nearly all of these ideas contradict with the classic ideas cultivated by the science of folkloristics!)

As I am quite closely connected with this process and involved in it, my story about the recent history of storytelling in Latvia will be quite personal. I have had several rather different identities and roles in the storytelling projects and events in Latvia: project writer and leader, organiser and moderator of events; a member of the jury; “an honorary guest from the capital city”; a male in a community mainly consisting of females; a storyteller; a driver; a photographer; a cameraman and video editor; a translator; a developer of training materials; at the same time remaining a scholar who should provide an impartial analysis, a view considered „objective“ and that of an outsider. At the moment being our team is rather small, and this creates additional responsibility.

My interest in Latvian folk-tales and legends started when I was studying the work of my outstanding ancestor – Anss Lerhis-Puškaitis (1859 – 1903; he was a brother of my great-grandmother). He worked in a small countryside school in Džūkste parish at the end of the 19th century. He edited the largest edition of Latvian folk-tales and legends of his time, compiling some 6000 texts into 7 volumes. Having graduated from the Faculty of Philology in 1983 I took a position at the Archives of Latvian Folklore. And I may have turned into a routine cabinet scholar, if it was not for some wonderful meetings.

During one of my first fieldwork sessions in 1987 near my native town I met an informant: Alma Makovska. She spoke a dialect close to mine. In over 18 years I recorded more than 200 hours of audio from her, including some 60 folk-tales and tens of ghost stories. She had inherited the folk-tales from her grandfather, father and his brothers. Sometimes we performed together at schools, also on the radio and TV – she with the stories and me with the "scholarly commentary". I tried to understand how she could "hold" nearly any audience with her simple performance – and this secret turned into one of directions of my scholarly activities.

The next turn came about the same time – at the end of the soviet period. At a public lecture I was telling the audience of my relative (Lerhis-Puškaitis), when I mentioned the folk-narrative classification system created by him, centred on ghost stories. The audience suddenly fell silent and I understood that I must tell at least some of those stories. In the next years I became known as a performer of ghost stories; later I also tried to tell urban legends, anecdotes and folk-tales. A folklore scholar usually "hides" behind a microphone. But very much about stories and telling of those can only be found out when appearing on the other side of the microphone – that of the teller. I used to include stories in my lectures, I have prepared several cycles of radio programmes, where I tell folk-tales and legends and comment them. The storytelling skill provides a special enjoyment and becomes an addiction, beyond the comprehension of those who have not ever told one.

And now at last – about the five different storytelling projects I have taken part in. I chose those as examples in order to show the opportunities as well as the way to change the situation in the folklore movement and that with the preservation of intangible culture on the national level with the help of small projects. Any project, even a small one can influence the situation when it works on the right target groups, has good publicity in mass media (including the Internet) and the participants to the project go on with their work even after the official conclusion of the project. In nearly all of those projects I have collaborated with a person who is a philosopher by education and a leader of children folklore movement by occupation – Māra Mellēņa (who were the guest of the First World Festival of Epics in 2006.)

Some more ideas that form the basis for the further discussed storytelling projects. Modern folkloristics tends to reflect and analyse with increasing criticism such previously (seemingly?) self-evident and romanticised categories as nation (folk), tradition, ancient heritage and so on. Traditions are not just some “ancient texts”, but also, e. g. the process of telling itself. Texts may also be recent, personal and situative (e. g. events of one’s life), but the tradition of narrating such is ancient and substantial. What is more important and more difficult: to perform some tradition on stage or to maintain it in everyday situations – in family and small communities? Tradition can not only be passively inherited, but also deliberately learned and shaped – of course, the result depends upon the knowledge and intelligence of the involved individuals... Frozen, unchanged tradition is a dead tradition. “The ancient matters” only then are of interest when they can be used by the modern person. For the existence of a nation not

6 Entering the word storytelling in a web search one can find hundreds of sites devoted to storytelling: http://www.storynet.org/; http://www.storybug.net/links.html; http://www.courses.unt.edu/efiga/STORYTELLING/StorytellingWebsites.htm; http://www.eraehlen.de/, etc.


8 I have described this experience in several publications including: Pakalns, G. Ghost Narratives In Latvia – Changes During Recent Years // Foafale News, No. 37, June 1995, p. 1–3; http://www.folklore.ee/FOAFtale/ftn37.htm.
only its most famous, specific and impressive traditions are of importance, but also the ones
that seem so mundane that even no scholars and culture bureaucrats have noticed them.

In 1997 Māra Mellēna, the “head and brain” of children and youth folklore movement in
Latvia involved me in organisation and evaluation of the first storyteller contest. As a team we
still go on with this. The rules of the contest provide every entrant with five minutes of time
during which one must introduce oneself (name, age and location represented), and then tell: a
tale, a story of a real-life event, and an anecdote. The semi-finals of this contest are held in
12 – 15 regions, with some 300 – 400 participants, a hundred of which compete at the final held
in Rīga. The contest does not establish a single winner and „many sad losers” – every participant
receives some presents and the title of outstanding, great or small storyteller. Those having
received the title of the outstanding storyteller for three times may enter a contest to become a
folk-tale king.

On the 1st April an anecdote contest is held. Some 50 participants in 3 – 4 hours tell around
300 anecdotes – not from age-old publications but still current. Thus the participants learn how
to use the anecdotes and develop their skills to choose the right story for every occasion.

It must be emphasised that these contests are not the ultimate aim, and their organisers
do not want them to become the one and only and main storytelling event within the children
and youth folklore movement – they are an organic part of the programme of inheritance of
traditional skills. Since 2005 story evenings are organised along with the dances at the children
folklore festival national event. Several storyteller camps have been organised, storyteller
workshops becoming more frequent at folklore camps and other events.

The storytelling and anecdote contests have been documented since their beginning – the
finals were usually videoed. These recordings have been used in the annual analysis of the
contests, storytellers’ success and typical mistakes, growth of individual storytellers, etc.

Thus every year several hundred children learn at least one folk-tale and acquire some
experience in storytelling, while their teachers and leaders of folklore groups learn what it takes
to prepare the contestants and are urged to get interested in storytelling traditions.

Unfortunately the contests are held only once a year, also other storyteller events are rare,
therefore it is difficult to achieve development of young storytellers. Training is indirect – the
teachers learn at the seminars and later work with children. At the same time the adult folklore
movement still shows little interest in these activities and experience.

But also a chance to work with adults came about. At the beginning of 2006 we were found
by storytellers from Munich in Germany – „Goldmund” storytelling academy. Its leader, a
professional storyteller and storyteller trainer Norbert Julian Kober was then writing his doctoral
thesis about storytelling competence.\(^9\) The main idea of this EU lifelong learning programme
Grundtvig 2 (learning partnership)\(^11\) project named “The development of storytelling skills of
adults – a European approach” (October 2006 – June 2008) was to train the „younger seniors” –
people retiring – in storytelling. Beyond that we in Latvia had our own interests – to raise the
prestige of storytelling in folklore movement and to provide storytelling training for folklore
teachers.

Project results: A network of storytellers and organisers of storyteller events was set up in
different parts of Kurzeme (western part of Latvia), creating a community with a shared
identity – that of storytellers from Kurzeme. This network still continues its operation after the
completion of the project work.

Over a longer period of time we had an opportunity to witness the life of two different
storyteller communities. The one of Munich storyteller societies „Goldmund” represents more
of the stage storytelling way, the storytelling academy implements training courses of different
duration; the graduates of the courses take part in diverse social projects. The Village
Storytelling Centre from Glasgow\(^13\) (at that time led by Rachel Smillie) and storyteller Colin
McAllister from Lanarkshire represent storytelling in communities and the inherited tradition.
They co-operate with the Scottish Storytelling Centre in Edinburgh,\(^14\) which we had an
opportunity to visit.

It is impossible to tell about all the scope of the emotions, experience and adventures we
had in the course of the project. A group consisting of 3 – 4 persons visited our foreign partners
four times, had the opportunity to witness the Munich 2nd storyteller days in October 2006
organised by „Goldmund”. Also the partners visited us, participating in the International
Children Folklore Festival and visiting places where our storytellers work. Both discussions and
workshops of storytelling skills took place as well as storytelling events.

Training in Latvia took place once a month, usually in the most beautiful town of Kurzeme
– Kuldīga. Without clear methodology but with overwhelming enthusiasm we tried to develop
the storytelling skills of a 20-plus group, consisting nearly entirely of women (unfortunately
nearly all further described projects for adults only have women as the participants), in the age
range of 40 – 70 years. The most difficult task was not that of developing the skills, but that of
strengthening their self-esteem – to make them believe that they really can perform their
stories in front of an audience. We participated in singer and teller contests in other regions of
Latvia, as well as in children and youth storyteller contests and camps, organised the first
storytelling evening in the framework of the international folklore festival “Baltica 2009”\(^14\).

One of our brands is the storyteller festival „Ziv zup” (“Fish Soup”), organised since 2007, at
the end of April. At this time fish are jumping up the widest waterfall in Europe – that on the
Venta river near Kuldīga, and the town festival is taking place. The winners of fishermen contest
donate fish, then on a bonfire the fish soup is cooked, of which anybody can earn a bowl – by
telling a story. The festival has a good publicity, for instance in 2008 there was one and a half
hour long live broadcast from it on the first programme of the Latvian radio. Beginning with the
second year festival events have been also held in other towns with foreign guests participating:

\(^9\) http://www.goldmund-erzaehlakademie.eu/.


\(^12\) http://www.thevillageonline.org.uk/.

\(^13\) http://www.scottishstorytellingcentre.co.uk/.

\(^14\) In „Baltica 2012” were 5 storytelling events, see video from one of them: http://www.diena.lv/diena-
Several women changed their lives thanks to this project. Liesma Lagzdiņa was a janitor, now she is the most famous storyteller of her town. Līga Reitere performed social work with low pay, now she works in several town museums of Ventspils as a storyteller. Other storytellers use their experience on folklore groups, libraries, museums, schools and in work with handicapped children.

Documenting project workshops and events, I have recorded some 170 hours of video. I have devoted much time to creation of a training disk, providing audio and video documentation of the project, folklore informants, recordings of radio broadcasts and children storyteller contests, a total of some 60 hours of audio and 20 hours of video. One can also find hundreds of files with texts on stories and storytelling there, mostly collected from the internet. Unfortunately this disk was not sufficiently effective as the participants of the project were not sufficiently computer-literate and also their English language skills were rather limited, but I continue to use it as a training material for students and different courses.

In 2009 we started a new project: „Storytime in libraries“ in collaboration with the UNESCO National committee. In March 2009 two introductory lectures took place in five regions of Latvia, with participation of eighty libraries. In autumn a UNESCO Story library network was created, with participation of 19 libraries willing to continue storytelling. The Project envisages development of storytelling and storytelling event organisation (not only for the children as the audience and narrators, but also the adults, who are mostly interested in stories connected to the local history), development of skills for librarians and will attempt to find the „market“ for the storytellers of the above mentioned projects. The project offers its experience to the network of the public libraries – both through the experience of the most active participants and stories on the websites of the libraries, as well as library printed media.

Some conclusions. I believe that one of the greatest achievements of these projects is that they will not train single storytellers, but create communities where live storytelling takes place, where people know one another and can work together in different situations. In our days these communities do not necessarily have to be narrowly local – people can come together, communicate; the common identity, common experience are the most important. Peculiarity of storyteller training: while telling along with good storytellers the audience may suddenly switch the roles! Cooperation of the three generations is of importance – everyone has his/her own experience and knowledge; renewal of the tradition can be started with the youngest generation.

Live telling of stories is more important than a discussion about the “most authentic” and “ancient” traditions. Therefore – let us tell stories! Only by telling one can learn to tell, attract an audience, to get acquainted with the storytelling traditions and to maintain them.

http://www.rahvakultuur.ee/?s=332.
http://www.stastubibliotekas.com/storytelling-libraries/

17 Video 53 min form 2012: http://www.youtube.com/embed/6_70MBrAVLs.