

REPORT FROM THE SIEF WORKING GROUP OF THE RITUAL YEAR CONFERENCE ON 2–6 JULY 2009 IN KAUNAS, LITHUANIA

This year, the Ritual Year Working Group was welcomed in Lithuania and at the Vytautas Magnus University (VMU) in Kaunas. Not only were the conference participants treated to lovely summer weather, but also to warm welcome speeches by Arūnas Vaicekauskas, the host and Head of the Department of Ethnology and Folklore at VMU, Jonas Vaičėnonis, Dean of the Faculty of Humanities, Rūta Marcinkevičienė, Head of the Department of Lithuanian Language and the Centre of Computational Linguistics,¹ and Emily Lyle, President of the Working Group of the Ritual Year and Honorary Fellow at the Celtic and Scottish Studies at the University of Edinburgh.

The theme of the fifth conference was ‘The Power of the Mask’, something that several presenters discussed from both the historical and the modern perspective: Evy Johanne Håland spoke of the ‘Masks of Dionysus and Other Ancient Greek Divinities and their Parallels in Modern Greek Carnivals’, Mare Kõiva showed how contemporary characters are added to the already known masks that have been traditionally used in the celebration of Estonian calendar days in the paper ‘Masks on Faces, Faces on Masks’, Arūnas Vaicekauskas pointed out the international influences in the contemporary Lithuanian masking tradition in his paper “Mask and Modern Society: ‘Thematic Parties’”, and Molly Carter spoke of the transgressions the masks allow its wearers and the physical dangers this can pose to spectators and researchers alike in her paper ‘Mask as Limen: Transformation and Transgression in the Mumming Performance-Encounter’.

Laimutė Anglickienė demonstrated to the audience in her presentation ‘Masks of Strangers in Lithuanian Traditional Feasts’, the traditional masks that included stereotypical representations of Jews and Gypsies. The masks had prompted some polemic



Emily Lyle, President of the Working Group of the Ritual Year and Honorary Fellow at the Celtic and Scottish Studies at the University of Edinburgh. Photo by Andres Kuperjanov, 2009.

in Lithuania, but in the concluding discussion Anglickienė explained to the audience that the masks were only seen as festive, even Jews in Lithuania voiced their support for the tradition, and the masks had taken on a negative connotation only among foreigners.

The interesting discussion continued on the second conference day with John Helsloot's paper 'Contest Ambiguity: The Power of the Black Peter Mask in Dutch Cultural Heritage', where he spoke about the Black Peter mask found at Dutch Christmas celebrations, and the problems this mask presented. On the one hand, the mask is tradition, and Black Peter is a popular figure, thus the mask is not used to convey a negative message, but on the other hand the mask is a stereotypical representation of people of colour and was therefore found offensive by some Dutch and by foreigners. As a Dutch person John Helsloot wished to protect his cultural heritage, but as a professional ethnologist he could both perceive and criticize the masks as stereotypes that should not be used. These two papers, and the questions and discussions they raised, were immensely interesting. It would be intriguing to follow the debates and see how the use of these masks changes in years to come.

Several papers touched upon the topic of Americanization, among them Carola Ekrem's 'Baby Showers – an Innovation in the Finnish Festival Year'. There were also interesting papers on post-Soviet changes, as shown, for example, in Ekaterina Anas-



*The Kryžių Kalnas ('Hill of the Crosses') near Šiauliai.
Photo by Andres Kuperjanov, 2009.*

tasova's paper 'Birthday Party with Masks in Latvia – Between Socialist Past and Democratic Present'. Taive Särg gave a paper exemplifying the celebration of calendar days in 'The Appearance of Local Identities in the Celebration of St George's Day in Estonia', and Aado Lintrop continued enlightening us about the Udmurt in his paper 'About Some Udmurt Folk Calendar Holidays Connected with Pentecost'. Emilia Karjula from Finland presented the paper 'Same-Sex Weddings as Rites of Passage'.

The third theme of the conference was the research carried out in the hosting country, and the Lithuanian speakers and the conference committee put considerable effort into showing us various parts of their culture: Bronislava Kerbelytė spoke of Lithuanian fairy tale types in 'Rituals in the Context of Folk Narratives', Arūnas Vaicekauskas and Laimutė Anglickienė spoke of Lithuanian masks from the traditional and contemporary points of view, Rasa Račiūnaitė touched upon the westernization of Lithuanian wedding traditions in the paper '*Rites de Passage* in the Contemporary Lithuanian Wedding', and Žilvytis Šaknys spoke of calendar customs and the upholding of Lithuanian culture during times of foreign occupation in his paper 'Ritual Year in Time and Space: Calendar Customs in North East Poland and South Lithuania'.

The conference program incorporated several social events, which included a guided tour in the Old Town of Kaunas, a visit to Kaunas City Hall with a meeting with vice mayor Algimantas Kurlavičius, and a banquet where the folklore ensemble of VMU students (*Vytauto Didžiojo universiteto folkloro ansamblis*) performed Lithuanian instrumental music, songs, and traditional dances. Conference participants were offered a chance to visit the Millennium Song Celebration of Lithuania in Vilnius, the *Kryžių Kalnas* ('Hill of the Crosses') near Šiauliai, the *Kuršių Nerija* ('Curonian Spit') National Park, Museum of Devils, the Antanas Žmuidzinavičius Memorial Museum, and a trip to the Open Air Museum of Lithuania.

The city of Kaunas was part of the Lithuanian experience, treating us to beautiful examples of 16th- to 19th-century architecture, and street art (graffiti, stencils, etc.) found on many of its fine buildings.

The participants enjoyed both the hospitality of the Lithuanian people and the rich culture they were introduced to throughout the conference. In conclusion, this was another fine SIEF Working Group of the Ritual Year Conference.

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Notes

¹ Since the conference, Rūta Marcinkevičienė has been elected the dean of the Faculty of Humanities at VMU, and Jonas Vaičenonis is now the vice dean.