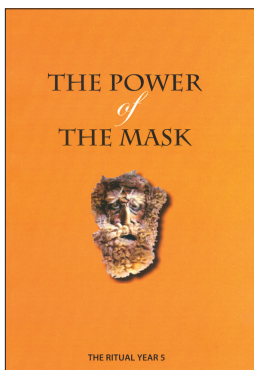


BOOK REVIEWS

THE POWER OF THE MASK



Arūnas Vaicekauskas (ed.). *The Power of the Mask. The Ritual Year 5*. Kaunas: Vytautas Magnus University, 2013. 150 pp.

The collections published by the Ritual Year Working Group of the International Society of Ethnology and Folklore (SIEF) provide a unique overview of the key points of the ritual year, not only by means of theory but also through detailed case analysis. The treatments proceed from various methodological bases and specialities (history, anthropology, folkloristics, ethnology, religious studies, ethnomusicology). The collections of the series cover a wide time range: festivals and celebrations from long-gone times, medieval traditions side by side with the festivals from the recent past and modern society, such as granting citizenship, the celebration of national days, etc. The articles also dwell upon institutional new rituals, festivals constructed or re-established by alternative religious movements, as well as customs related to the key events in human life. The articles in the series constitute a peculiar thematically coherent set.

The collection recently published in Kaunas is not an exception either. The majority of the contributions add to the former knowledge of masking and history of masks as well as local interpretations of masks in European traditions. Researches in this collection are related to the former treatments published by the SIEF Ritual Year Working Group, expanding the observations made on masking rituals in several European countries during the past decade (e.g., Fikfak, Gunnell, Raicane), adding also descriptions of new religions.

The researches included in *The Power of the Mask* indicate the unification of rituals and spread of similar tendencies over a vast territory. The whole ritual is undergoing changes: masks and masking also keep changing throughout eras; new masks and costumes are merged into it, ways of celebration are modified and unified, whereas old traditions are also preserved. A good example of it is Arūnas Vaicekauskas's treatment of modern Baltic masking traditions. He refers to masking as a tradition of great variability, which is not connected with former calendar holidays any more, but is currently replaced by public carnivals, private masked parties, or personal masking. Unified characters follow the examples of movies, fiction, fairytales, etc. Also, village masks typical of Lithuanian tradition have been preserved.

John Helsloot's article written in 2008 within the wave of a wide-ranging public discussion dwells upon Black Peter, who accompanies St. Nicholas in the Netherlands. Black Peter is a well-known and beloved character in folk tradition. The mask lacks any negative meanings although it is easily identifiable as a racial stereotype, as has been

emphasised by some Dutch and especially by foreign researchers. J. Helsloot inquires about the position of the ethnologist willing to protect cultural heritage, especially in the case of a missing negative stereotype.

The masking rituals of different regions are discussed from a wider philosophical perspective. Aida Rancane treats masking as a form of symbolic behaviour, enabling transition to the key values. Transformation into mythic heroes and repetition of archetypal activities offer a possibility for the renewal of primeval time. Tatiana Minniyakhmetova introduces traditional masking and zoomorphic and anthropomorphic masks. The author also touches upon rare masking traditions (old women disguise as men and imitate them), as well as their mythological and social background. Božena Gierek presents the Polish *pucheroki* masking tradition on Palm Sunday. This custom involves boys at the age of four to fifteen and is based on 16th-century university students' customs. Modern masking traditions are discussed by Marlene Hugoson in her article about Star Trek fandom, and by Ekaterina Anastasova in her treatment of a Latvian private birthday party with participants disguised as pioneers, as well as its background. Žilvytis Šaknys introduces changes in calendar customs in the south of Lithuania and north-east of Poland during the Soviet period and after that.

However, masks and masking is not the sole topic in the collection. In each volume of the series, Emily Lyle, president of the working group, presents a treatment of the general theoretical problems of the Ritual Year. This time it is dedicated to the summer/winter and decrease/increase transitions in the year and their life-cycle equivalents.

In addition, the collection comprises articles on some celebrations that have recently been introduced into European cultural space, such as baby showers originating in the United States (Carola Ekrem), and same-sex weddings as rites of passage (Emilia Karjula). Irina Sedakova discusses changes in Russian rituals related to love and weddings, and Rasa Račiūnaitė touches upon the westernisation of Lithuanian wedding traditions.

Throughout times, high school graduation has been a festive event at the end of the long educational road. For young people this is a considerable rise in status, an official transition to the adult world, a rite of passage. Lina Gergova writes about Bulgarian high school graduation ball as a phenomenon that has gained much popularity during the past fifty years.

The collections of the Ritual Year have always featured treatments of (Neo)-Paganism. Kamila Velkoborska's contribution introduces the Czech branch of Slavic Paganism.

The scientific approaches of *The Power of the Mask* make the dimensions of our social life comparable and understandable.

Mare Kõiva

CANNIBALS, RITUAL MURDERERS, ORGAN ROBBERS: THE DARKER SIDE OF FOLKLORE



Christa Agnes Tuczay. *Die Herzesser. Dämonische Verbrechen in der Donaumonarchie*. Wien: Seifert Verlag, 2007. 160 pp.

Christa A. Tuczay's book provides a detailed overview of the darker side of folklore: killings with a religious background, on which the author has gained material from court minutes, folktales, hearsays, and the press and fiction of different eras. Traces of thematic folklore can be found already in the Bible and in Ancient Greek myths. The author has paid special attention to the cases concerned with removing and eating of the heart. However, the author has not aimed at finding the final truth or the motives for these crimes, but rather at placing this complex lore in the framework of European cultural history.

Tuczay describes cannibalism as an act usually attributed to the cultural *other* as a powerful symbol, which has been associated with most different peoples and ethnic groups from the times immemorial, and which has sometimes also been successfully applied as a means of propaganda. Among other things, the author also discusses the role of *interpretatio christiana* in the demonisation of fellow citizens (for instance, the questions proceeding from Christian discourse, which were posed at trials to those accused of witchcraft, greatly influenced the evolution of cannibalism lore). While some Early Middle Age sources still argue that "pagan beliefs" about women feeding on human flesh are a complete nonsense, then under the influence of Late Middle Age demonological writings the situation changes and the defendants' testimonies increasingly feature – often supported by torture – descriptions of cannibalism and removal of body parts for ritual purposes.

Tuczay mentions that a modern researcher often fails to differentiate between a legend and reality; yet, it was also difficult for the then narrators and even the perpetrators. For instance, folk tales about a specially processed hand, which, when carried along, was supposed to make the thief invisible, spread widely, and this kinds of accusations were frequent at courts, yet in reality evidence was very scarce. Cases of cannibalism could arouse heated arguments between the religious and court authorities of the time (for example, whether a human being was able to turn into a werewolf and, in this form, kill small children), and more often than not, the defendant's life depended on which opinion got the upper hand.

A separate chapter is dedicated to vampire belief; for instance, changes in the acts and characteristics attributed to vampires throughout time. Also, the author provides an overview of the evolution of the fairytale about the Bluebeard in different literary and folk presentations.

The numerous detailed descriptions and examples test the endurance limits of even folklorists; however, in a certain sense, the presentation of such material also makes sense, as in light of one's own reactions the effectiveness of certain symbols and images (e.g., murdering of children, certain ways of torturing) is especially clearly perceivable

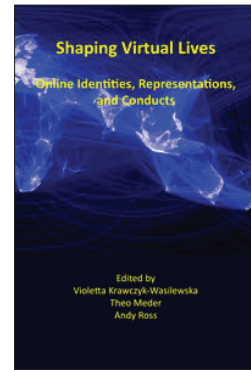
and we might also understand the reasons why some of them can be encountered even today, for instance, as interpreted by the modern mass media.

Reet Hiimäe

HOMO LUDENS: DESCRIBING VIRTUAL LIVES

***Shaping Virtual Lives. Online Identities, Representations and Conducts.* Violetta Krawczyk-Wasilewska, Theo Meder, Andy Ross (eds.). Lodz: Lodz University Press, 2012. 148 pp.**

Real life and virtual reality – these are two categories that, when explored, can reveal quite a bit about contemporary people and the present of the whole human culture. The seven articles in the collection *Shaping Virtual Lives. Online Identities, Representations and Conducts*, authored by researchers with the background of mainly folkloristics or ethnology, are dedicated to the exploration of the Internet. The book is compiled on the basis of papers on Internet studies from a panel session of the SIEF congress in Lisbon in 2011.



The collection deals with a range of topics related to social media and the Internet: rules, rituals, moralities, self-representations and gaming; stereotypes and rivalry on Russian Internet forums; grief and mourning and commemoration of suicide victims on the Internet; the way that the Internet can be used as a medium by the new religious movements.

Below I dwell upon a few studies in the collection that somehow addressed me more or made me find parallels at home. The dominant key word in this collection could easily be *homo ludens*, as four studies out of the seven focus on play and playfulness and person's self-image in this play. The reality created in cyberspace can be fantastic and mystical, with its human relationships and morality as described by Óli Gneisti Sóleyjarson in his article "Rules and boundaries: The morality of Eve Online". However, several virtual games popular among adults, such as IMVU (*Instant Messaging Virtual Universe*) and *Second Life*, try to imitate human life in its diversity. In these games the participants can create a complete image of themselves, choose for their avatars everything starting from gender and name to clothing, place of residence, job and partner; they can have fun, flirt, have a wedding, engage in cyber sex and give birth to children. For example, online dating, as it is described in Violetta Krawczyk-Wasilewska and Andrew Ross's article "Matchmaking through avatars: Social aspects of online dating", which safely realises people's romantic dreams, is an increasingly popular trend in the cyber world, but actually also business, because the creators of these online environments collect real money from the participants for a romantic date in a virtual Paris or New York café.

Theo Meder in his article "‘You have to make up your own story here’: Identities in cyberspace from Twitter to Second Life" does not define these environments as games

but rather as chatting in real time, carried on by animated avatars in 3D environment. Theo Meder argues that this image – the avatar – which the player creates to represent him/herself, is an idealised image of him/herself and has to be attractive also for other players. Through this image, the person realises his/her dreams and secret fantasies. So, many players of Afro-American or Asian origin have chosen an avatar with European appearance, or players have created an avatar of an opposite sex, i.e., men have created female avatars and vice versa. However, as Meder argues (p. 32), connection between the player and his/her avatar is quite close and is expressed in avatar's actions and words: "Our lives online are not something separate from our lives offline: both are an inherent part of our existence. In both realms we act, react, play roles and make choices about our representations."

As I come from Tartu, the second largest town in Estonia, I find Maria Yelenevskaya's article "Moscow and St. Petersburg compete: Negotiating city identity on ru.net" very interesting. In general lines, the problem seems to be the rivalry between physical and mental power, as is the case also for Tallinn and Tartu in Estonia. Yelenevskaja in her article discusses the change of internet identities of the two leading Russian cities and the stereotypes related to them, trying to find out what the most conspicuous categories are in their comparison and how Internet users present themselves in terms of these two cities. The author has used for analysis texts from different genres as well as visual material selected by the Yandex search engine: essays, interviews, media coverage, television and radio interviews, poems, jokes, etc. In the case of these two cities, the researcher points out nine opposing categories. While Moscow is central, powerful, rich, dynamic, commercial, Russian, female, cruel and vivacious, then St. Petersburg is peripheral, weak, poor, stagnant, culture-oriented, European, male, friendly and romantic. Maria Yelenevskaya's research reveals that even if several stereotypes related to these two cities have faded away due to post-socialist socio-economic changes, opinions based on the 19th-20th-century folklore and literature have become more fixed in people's minds.

Anders Gustavsson gives an overview of Norwegian and Swedish Internet pages that commemorate suicide victims. Currently, Norwegian and Swedish societies still relate suicide to taboos, dislike and condemnation, but also shame, misunderstanding, attempt to understand and certainly mourning. According to Anders Gustavsson, the memorial websites created on the Internet especially for expressing the last-mentioned feelings and emotions are more popular in Sweden. Norwegian society as a whole is considerably more conservative and sceptical as to attitudes towards suicides and memorial websites. Also, in Norway old traditions and beliefs related to suicides have survived, whereas in Sweden several innovative ideas connected to the death topic, for example, from the field of religion, have been adapted. The author points out that society's attitude towards suicide is influenced by several factors; for instance, a more open press, which, following all the laws of ethics, tries to elicit the causes of the final decision that people make in their utterly private sphere.

To conclude this brief overview, I would like to mention that this is an interesting and necessary book, which should stand side by side with Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga's book *Homo ludens: Proeve ener bepaling van het spelelement der cultuur* (Playing Man: A Study of the Play Element in Culture) on the bookshelf of a cultural researcher investigating the Internet, but definitely on that of each folklorist.

Eda Kalmre