

## SILLE KAPPER DEFENDED HER DOCTORAL THESIS ON TRADITIONAL FOLK DANCE

On December 12, 2013, Sille Kapper defended her doctoral thesis “Muutuv pärimustants: kontseptsioonid ja realisatsioonid Eestis 2008–2013 / Changing Traditional Folk Dance: Concepts and Realizations in Estonia 2008–2013” at the Estonian Institute of Humanities at Tallinn University.

The research discusses the multiple meanings of the concept *rahvatants* (folk dance), which have evolved by the beginning of the 21st century. It becomes obvious that in public discourse the Estonian term *pärimustants* (traditional folk dance), which was coined only five to ten years ago, is understood differently by users with different backgrounds. The dissertation focuses on the meaning of the term *pärimustants* among its users in contemporary Estonia, highlighting the main codes – *historicism*, *community*, *participation* and *variability* – in the text coding schemes of both scientific and everyday discourses.

The author points out that the two approaches that emanated in the first decades of the 20th century – the ‘stylised folk dance’ and the ‘original folk dance’ – diverged in Estonia especially significantly during the period of the Soviet occupation. This fact inspired her to treat stage folk dance as a specific form of dance art within the framework related to Epp Annus’s concept of *Soviet colonialism*. The influence of the Soviet period in variations of dance texts as well as the modes of action required further investigation.



*Sille Kapper in Warsaw in November 2013. Photo by Edite Husare.*

The researcher has sought for dance realisations, which, while analysed, would reveal the dancer's knowledge and readiness to apply them, or unconscious yet culturally determined *habitués* and habits, or both simultaneously. This kind of dance texts were mainly provided by spontaneous participant dancing at festivals and concerts, dance clubs, traditional folk dance workshops, and classes for choreography students and folk dancers.

The qualitative content analysis of the research material mainly focuses on the codes that express the values of the members of different communities: what they think about different variants and ways of variation, to what they pay/do not pay attention, and who, why and in which situations speaks about these topics, for what reasons and in what ways. The author has endeavoured to find reflections that would indicate relationships between actual dance realisations and their interpretations and evaluations. Estonian traditional folk dance has never been explored like that.

The author also makes a mention of the fact that today the topic of nationalism is involved in the concept of traditional folk dance, especially in the texts of folk dancers and folk dance teachers.

While discussing the learning of traditional folk dances at the present time, the author recognises that a dialogue with dance texts becomes evident in the study process, in which the conception of the dance and its realisation are supplemented alternately. She maintains that such a dialogue with dance takes much time and folk dance groups rather learn traditional folk dances briefly and quickly, as a project. Yet, this does not exclude going into details. As an example, she mentions a young people's folk dance group who intently practised a basic dance move, and, as a result, their dance movements became practically void of the impacts of stage folk dance (p. 69).

The author holds that the newest phenomenon that influences the variations of traditional folk dance is the role of dance texts as a medium in the intrapersonal communication of the dancer or the audience. She also presents a widespread opinion that traditional folk dance is boring both for dancing and watching, and therefore it never initiates intrapersonal communication. As the dance teacher's interpretation of the situation is that if the text does not address the audience, it has failed, they add new elements to the traditional folk dance in order for it "to be more interesting". This coincides with the mentality of the modern lifestyle, which constantly requires something new; yet, the aesthetic values of stage folk dance and the dance style rooted in the memory of generations as correct and authentic are also based on the same way of thinking.

This approach is opposed by the subculture of those deeply interested in traditional folk dance. They try to detach themselves from stage folk dance aesthetics and restore economic body use, regarding it as an essential component and valuable asset of the peasant dance. The interpretations of historic and regional communities are characterised by a relatively distinct line between the "right" and the "wrong". Regional peculiarities and identities are emphasised by certain movement variants.

According to the author, traditional folk dance is often distinguished from stage(d) folk dance by the criteria of participant-centeredness and performativity. Different approaches can be distinguished in performing traditional folk dance to the external audiences: the dancers' manner of moving might be similar to the stage style, yet it can also be purposely opposed to. While discussing the intertwining of participant and performative functions today, the author remarks that dance simultaneously involves

both the dancer's personal enjoyment and performance to the audience, whereas the proportion of different factors depends on the group's inner culture, values, acting period or a concrete situation.

The dissertation states that traditional folk dancers and amateurs deeply interested in traditional folk dance have started to look for new alternative methods in order to adapt peasant dances to today's aesthetics and lifestyles, with no diminishing emphasis on the dancer's individuality, the absence of which in stage folk dance they criticise.

In conclusion, the author states that we lack a common conception of the nature of traditional folk dance. Everyone construes the concept of traditional folk dance on the basis of their own knowledge and experience. So, in some cases, the existence of movement elements originating in peasant culture or the sequence of motifs is regarded as a characteristic determinant, while in some other cases the decisive factor is the participant-centeredness of the dance as opposed to performativity, and in still other cases improvisation is emphasised, or, vice versa, local community rules, norms and peculiarities are brought to the fore. Today, the traditional folk dances of the peasantry and their elements have moved from the village community to the communities of different enthusiasts and hobbyists, and are continued as a modern tradition recreated over and over again at each realisation.

As an option to continue the research, the author considers the application of post-colonial approaches in studying, for instance, the relationship between Baltic-German and Estonian peasant dance culture. Another possibility would be the topic of relationships of Estonian traditional folk dances with those of neighbouring peoples, which has not sparked a wider interest until now. As dance has no language restrictions and is therefore international, it would be feasible, in the future, to compile a catalogue of European dances analogous to the international fairy-tale catalogues.

The value of this research cannot be disputed, yet there are a few arguments based on opinions unsubstantiated by facts. Such statements cannot be accepted in scientific literature as they might result in an undesirable snowball effect.

The author claims that Kristjan Torop's collection *Viron vakka* was first published in Finnish in Tampere, Finland, for "economic and political reasons". This argument is not grounded. When Kristjan Torop started work at the Institute of Language and Literature in 1979, he began to compile a collection of Estonian folk dances, which became his lifelong assignment. So, the publication of the folk dance collection was included in the state plan of the institute. Torop continued his work at the collection even when he left the institute and started work at the Folk Culture Training and Development Centre, as he was allowed to take all the materials with him. Nor were there any obstacles for publishing the completed manuscripts as institute publications, and no folkloric source materials remained unpublished "for economic and political reasons".

A *Viron vakka*-format publication was initially not planned at all. Torop received an order for such a book directly from Finland, from a society called Friends of Finnish Folk Dance, and started to execute it in Finnish. As preparatory work had been done in Estonian and he was good at Finnish, it did not take him long to complete the book. *Viron vakka*, a collection of Estonian folk dances, was published in Finland in 1991.

So, there was no Estonian manuscript to be published, and nor were there any political reasons for not publishing it. Books of folk dances were published in Estonia also in more unfavourable times (Toomi 1953, Tampere 1975), and when *Viron vakka*

was translated into Estonian, it did not remain unpublished either. It was great that our Finnish friends, who have always supported Estonian folklorists, had this idea and helped to realise it, but we do not need any groundless arguments in this regard.

Another argument based on ungrounded statements is that waltz and polka as independent dances were generally danced in a circle in Estonia. This postulate is derived from Heino Aassalu's citation. There are relevant data about the island of Kihnu, but Aassalu does not refer to any other concrete regions. Yet, the inhabitants of Kihnu distinguish their manner of dancing from that of mainland Estonians. Hiimäe's footnote that the author refers to does not mention waltz or polka. Many Estonian peasant dances were danced in a circle, but ordinary waltz and polka as independent dances were usually not. During my fieldwork, I have never encountered people dancing waltz and polka in a circle other than on the island of Kihnu. I would not insist that it never happened anywhere, but the citations referred to do not include any concrete data about it.

The source references on the materials of the Estonian Folklore Archives in the appendix would also need some specification. Incomplete references, which actually would not allow for identifying materials, could rather have been left out; instead, the author could have just noted that she had used older sources at the Estonian Folklore Archives as background materials.

However, the abovementioned minor shortcomings do not diminish the general value of the dissertation. It is methodologically novel and analytically thorough in its approach. The diversity of materials and the researcher's own experience as a dancer and dance teacher further enhance the credibility of the results. In conclusion I can say that Estonian ethnocoreology has been supplemented by a new efficient study.

Ingrid Rüütel

## **WINTER SCHOOL OF FOLKLORISTICS IN JHARKHAND, INDIA**

On January 12–21, 2014, a winter school of folkloristics under the heading “Tradition, Creativity and Indigenous Knowledge: Winter School of International Folkloristics and Indigenous Culture” took place in Jharkhand, India. It was organised by the Centre for Tribal Folklore, Language and Literature at the Central University of Jharkhand, in cooperation with the Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore at the University of Tartu. The participants included, besides folklorists, also historians, linguists and media researchers from Estonia, India, Denmark, Italy, Ireland, the United States and China. The majority of the presentations were dedicated to folk beliefs, and several researchers focused namely on Indian tribal folklore. Rabindranath Sarma offered an overview of the beliefs, customs and traditions of the Oraon people in Jharkhand, G. Badaiasuklang Nonglait introduced the jokes of the Khasi people in north-east India, and Li Ansiqi's presentation discussed the traditions of the Miao tribe in China. Stefano Beggiora provided an overview of the beliefs about the end of the world and end of a time cycle in the tribal cultures of India, raising a philosophical question about whether the ongoing modernisation and globalisation constitutes not only a mythological but also a real end to tribal worlds. To counterbalance these ideas, Madis Arukask offered, by