The Creation of Ethnicity: National Costume as Reconstruction or Construct?

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Abstract. Since its development at the end of 19th century, Latvian national costume has become a symbol of national identity. The task of this article is to trace how the publications of ethnographers during the 20th century shaped the view of Latvian national costume. The appearance of national costume was influenced by the growing knowledge of the national cultural heritage. Although national costume resembling ethnographic examples was recognized as highly authentic, in reality it was a reconstruction created by museum staff and other ethnographic researchers. The public demand for practical publications which could be of use in making national costume hindered more profound research into the history of national costume.

Key words: national costume, ethnography, renewed tradition, national symbols.

In the formative period of nations, intellectuals from European nations took part in the development of national education and culture, and created its national symbols. National costume is one of the symbols closely connected with national cultural heritage and ethnic consciousness. The task of this article is to trace the development of Latvian national or folk costume, paying more attention to the way that publications by ethnographers and handcrafters shaped the view of national costume. The aim of this article is to establish what was most important in publications: the search for historical truth, which is the basis of costume reconstruction, or the search for functional costume for public events. This view of the development of national costume is innovative in publications related to...
this topic. It is partly described in the monograph “Song Festivals and the Development of National-Style Dress in Latvia in the Late 19th and 20th Century”, written by the author of this article (7).

The beginnings of the development of Latvian national costume.

The development of Latvian national costume, which was the result of purposeful activity on the part of intellectuals, was one of the processes in the emergence of the nation. It took place in many European nations in the 19th century. The Dutch ethnologist J. Leersen has analysed this process in Europe, revealing its broad and all-encompassing character (9). Developing the national costume was one of ways of discovering national identity. An interest in creating a unique costume for celebrations that indicated ethnic affiliation appeared in Latvian society, mostly among intellectuals, in the 1880s. The formation and development of Latvian national costume is closely connected with the Latvian Song Festivals. At that time Latvian national costume was no longer being used as a daily dress in most of the area inhabited by Latvians, which is why the Dress Commission, formed before the Song Festival, decided that a new costume should be created. Ethnic affiliation could be displayed visually by wearing this costume. In 1888, when preparing for the Third Song Festival, the first drawings and suggestions for the appearance of Latvian national costume were published. It was called the “national suit” or “national costume”. The commission offered a new, modern form of Latvian costume, with features of Latvian-style dress (appropriate to the state of knowledge of that time about the national cultural heritage). At the beginning, its visual appearance was close to contemporary fashion and appropriate to romantic national ideas, a romantic view of peasant life. The Dress Commission of the Song Festival and its artist tried to show the Latvians as a modern nation. Likewise, the subsequent versions of Latvian national costume, created before every successive Song Festival until 1931, were a combination of contemporary and ethnographic knowledge.

Interest in national folk traditions and ethnography developed along with the development of national literature, music, science and art. In 1869 the Scientific Commission of the Riga Latvian Society established a Latvian museum. Its collections included a variety of exhibits from different fields: archaeology, ethnography, numismatics, botany and zoology. However, these collections still did not provide enough knowledge about the cultural heritage. Essential changes took place at the end of century. A significant change in views on Latvian-style dress was brought about by the First Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition, held in Riga in 1896 during the time of the X All-Russian Archaeological Congress. In preparation for the Ethnographic Exhibition the Riga Latvian Society Scientific Commission undertook several field expeditions in order to collect ethnographic
artefacts in various regions of Latvia. The majority of these objects came to form the beginning of a collection in the Ethnographic Department at the Latvian Historical Museum. The first ethnographic exhibition promoted the rise of national self-esteem and encouraged awareness of national identity. The appearance of national costume changed along with growing knowledge about the nation’s cultural heritage. At the beginning of the 20th century, by which time the Dress Commission had a wide range of ethnographic material available, the recommendations for costumes formulated before every Song Festival came to include more traditional elements of national costume. National costume was supplemented, for example, with a woollen shawl. Also, schemes and examples of ornaments were closer to ethnographic material, compared with the previous Song Festivals in 1888 and 1895. However, handcrafters were also offered the choice of making their costumes individually and according to personal wishes (10).

At the beginning, until the establishment of Latvia as a state, national costume was created as a visual image for the whole country, providing all choristers with costumes conforming to a unified pattern. After independence country, beginning in 1926, different national costumes were proposed for each region. It was a way of showing the variety of national culture. National costume was one of the reflections of culture. Versions of national costume continued to follow contemporary fashion, although they now had ethnographic features. Sometimes there were discussions and arguments between artists, because there were no separate names for the newly-created national costume and traditional ethnographic national costume, which people were already familiar with. The appearance of national costume and particular features of it became more and more similar to traditional ethnographic costume.

**National costume as an imitation of traditional costume.**

**The 1930s.**

Beginning in 1931, costumes that closely followed ethnographic examples were referred to as “national dress”. Beginning with this year, instructions for artists making national costume were prepared according to a new approach. In contrast to the previous practice, when the recommendations for costumes had taken the form of figural drawings with a short description, practical material was now published. There was an overall image of a costume as well as detailed descriptions and pictures of the garments and decoration schemes. The first such publication was “Latvian ethnographic costumes”, prepared by the Song Festival Society (4). The author of the text was artist Arvīds Dzērvītis, although Rihards Zariņš, the teacher of Arvīds Dzērvītis, presumably also took part. He was an artist, collector of ethnographic objects and author of the three-volume work “Latvian Design” (16). In 1931 and 1933 R. Zariņš was on the Dress Commission and served as its chairman. For the first time, the publication “Latvian national
costumes”, which consist of 12 books, presented reconstructions of costumes from separate regions. But the distribution of local costumes was not always shown very precisely. For example, the region of the common costume described in Book 1 is very extensive, including Riga along with eastern Latvia up to the Russian border (4, I). However, there were few differences in the combinations of garments making up a costume from those given in later publications. The aim of this publication was to provide teaching material for the makers of national costume who wanted to take part in Song Festivals or other events, and so it was important to show all the necessary parts of a costume. This is why the historical truth shifted into the background. It was important for costume wearers to obtain information as to the kind of costume that could be used.

In the 1930s other works were published, too. The authors included Aleksandra Dzērīvīte, Marta Eše, A. Rugāja-Boriss and Anna Antena, Jānis Niedre, Kristīne Pāvuliņa and others. These were mostly descriptions of traditional dress or particular garments in order to provide supporting material for imitation and for putting together an appropriate set of garments. The factual material was, of course, appropriate to the level of ethnographic research of that time.

The idea of bringing national costume closer to ethnographic examples was connected with a new approach to the cultural heritage and its use in strengthening national ideas. Here a significant argument was the degree of authenticity of the material (in this case, replicated costume). National costume that was close to ethnographic examples and officially claimed to be very authentic was in reality a construct by museum staff and other ethnographic researchers. It needs to be borne in mind that any dress of this kind is only an approximate reconstruction, something that, on the one hand, is connected with the fact that objects in museum collections only partly reflect the overall historical situation. On the other hand, reconstructions of costumes are open to subjectivity, which could be influenced by a variety of aesthetic criteria. Lithuanian researcher T. Jurkuvienė points out that this was unavoidable (6, p. 74–75).

Published at the end of the 30s was a description of regional costumes entitled “Regional Costumes”, a publication equivalent to the work “Latvian national costumes” published in 1931. As published at the beginning in 1938, it consisted of separate books (8), but a year later it was published in one volume, but with the page numbering and the layout of texts and pictures as in first publication. Compared with A. Dzērīvītis’s reconstructions, this time the author, Ādolfs Karnups, who was an archaeologist and an ethnographer, was more historically precise in specifying the region where a costume was used and putting together costumes from separate garments. The descriptions of regional costumes included information about newer or older versions. This provided a short description of the historical development of a costume. However, the aim of this publication, too, was to offer practical information for costume makers. It was easier to make a costume thanks to weaving and handicraft teacher Elga Kivicka’s detailed descrip-
tions of separate garments. “Regional costumes” became the basis for the making of national costumes during Soviet times.

The first publications containing practical information showed objects in regional costume sets that were of very different chronological date. Of course it was not possible to determine the precise date of many garments. But nobody paid attention to this. Bringing to life the idea of national costume as a reflection of national cultural heritage, people tried to show the most decorated garments in the preserved collections. In gathering exhibits for the Latvian Museum collections, attention focussed on the most decorated garments. Everyday dress and undecorated dress very seldom appeared in museum collections. This was because fieldwork was carried out by people with a background in art, and the initial aim was to create a collection of ethnographic objects for the Latvian Museum that might serve as examples for the development of Latvian applied art.

The owners of these objects, collectors and participants in fieldwork were the people who brought together the objects in this collection. These included garments still in use as well as garments no longer used and kept as “a memory from old times”, because they represented fine examples of handcraft. Initially, the mode of wearing some garments was unknown, or there were only inaccurate recollections. For example, the ethnographic material from the 19th century includes straight, embroidered women’s caps from Vidzeme and Kurzeme. Their cut is similar, but the style of embroidery is different. Thanks to research by Arnolds Speke (15), who was a historian and diplomat, we know that similar caps were worn in other parts of Livonia. Hats in the same style can be seen in drawings of Livonia in the 17th century and also in a map of Riga dated to 1612. There are few caps from eastern Vidzeme (mostly without precise information about the place of origin) in the museum collection, and these have been included in the complex of eastern Vidzeme costume, together with a skirt from the middle or second part of the 19th century. From western Vidzeme, too, there are caps in the same style. An even greater incompatibility in terms of chronology and style can be found in the regional costume of Zemgale. There is a woven patterned skirt together with a woollen shawl, which has a sophisticated patterned edge made in a card- or tablet-weaving technique. Some woollen shawls in the museum collection are not accurately dated, but they could be from the end of the 18th century. The technique and style of their decoration coincide with the decoration of medieval costumes in the territory of present-day Latvia.

Examples of national costumes made by artists were accepted as appropriate for visual presentation of Latvian identity. In the public view, garments belonging to historical costumes, regardless their age, were perceived belonging to a unified cultural heritage. They could be used in a symbol reflecting national identity – national costume. Apart from this, peasants’ costumes used to have a combination of garments in different styles. Peasants did not have enough money to replace all
of their festive dress at once. The best parts of the costume were kept and handed down to the next generation. Only the worn-out garments were replaced with new ones. However, dress habits gradually changed and old items were replaced with new ones, appropriate to that particular period. To determine how great a chronological difference is acceptable in combining different garments in a costume requires careful research work.

In the 1930s the first publications appeared reflecting more extensive research into the history of Latvian costume from prehistory up to the 19th century. The most significant work, with a collection of articles by archaeologists, ethnographers and historians, is the book “Introduction to the history of Latvian national costume” (5). This can be regarded as the most extensive study in the field of national costume reconstruction. Unlike the descriptions of traditional national costume in particular regions, these publications present information about dress in different historical periods. In many cases the dress was reflected only partially, but it showed the development of the tradition of wearing and making costumes.

Analysing the range of publications in the 1930s connected with traditional national costumes, it is possible to discern two approaches: practical and historically explorative. Both were based on real studies of ethnographic and historical materials, but the most significant difference is in the presentation of this material. In the practical descriptions the most important thing was to give information which provided the reader with a clear and detailed concept of garments belonging to traditional Latvian costume, how they were made and how to put together the full costume corresponding to a definite territory. The emphasis is on the phrase “the full set of costume of a definite region”. The diversity of national culture, as reflected in the variety of national costumes from particular regions, was also demonstrated through local costumes, where the place from which particular objects came was very significant. Moreover, national costumes were used in public events, and people who made and wore them needed information about each element, from footwear to the headdress. Publications giving practical information tried to provide such information, regardless of whether historical evidence was actually preserved.

On the other hand, the works based on historical research gathered and published information from historical resources about the dress of previous generations of the native population of the territory of Latvia. As these materials were connected with evidence of different historical periods, the principle of territoriality in the descriptions of garments was not significant. It was not important “to fill empty spaces” – to provide a description of the full set of a costume even when there was no real information about it. However, because of the social demand for the wearing of national costume, the practical publications prevailed over ethnographic research works.
Publications about traditional costume in Latvia during the Soviet period

Publications retained a practical emphasis after World War II. Published in 1966 was the first major study of Soviet times on traditional costumes. This was the monograph “Latvian folk costumes”, written by ethnographer Mirdza Slava (14). Before this publication M. Slava had published separate articles in various works, mostly in the series “Archaeology and ethnography” (11, 12, 13). The book “Latvian folk costumes” was based on the author’s dissertation in historical sciences, which was defended in Moscow. There are many contradictions in her evaluation of earlier publications and ethnographic material, evidence of the difficult, even cruel political conditions under which the work was written.

M. Slava has always “fought” for the wearing of “correct folk costume”. Her views were the same as those of R. Zariņš and A. Dzērvičīs, but, of course, their names were not mentioned. Probably, this is the reason why she had to pay a lot of lip service to Soviet ideology.

Several chapters of her monograph present new research on the typological development of particular garments (14, p. 23–102). The most significant contribution by M. Slava to the development of ethnography is her typology of shirts in traditional costume (11; 14, p. 44–48).

On the other hand, the chapter “Local variants of the complex of Latvian folk costume” is a repetition of Ā. Karnups’s and E. Kivicka’s descriptions of folk costumes, as published in 1938 (8). Although the two publications describe the variants of local costume in a different order, this does not reduce the similarity of content. In some places M. Slava has repeated almost precisely the text by Ā. Karnups. But maybe this was actually a way of ensuring that the ideas developed by “bourgeois nationalists” were maintained under Soviet conditions. There are differences in content only in those parts where M. Slava supplements the text by Ā. Karnups with a historical excursus and comments, or where there are differences in the chronological-typological treatment of particular garments. For example, Ā. Karnups and A. Dzērvičīs believed that shirts with a round neck are a type of very ancient shirt, but M. Slava was of the opinion that this is the most recent type. By its nature, M. Slava’s monograph “Latvian folk costumes” was not so much a scientific, ethnographic study of costume history as yet another work presenting “suggestions for people wearing folk costumes”.

The following year, 1967, another publication appeared that contained material on the appearance of Latvian traditional folk costume and was used as reference work for making national costumes for participants in Song Festivals. This was the third volume “Dress” of the three-volume work “Latvian folk art” (17). The author of the book, Biruta Zunde, was an active participant in ethnographic fieldwork. The textual part of this work provided an overview of traditional festive dress, specifying both typological aspects and the characteristics occurring...
in larger territories, not going beyond the description of local types. Technical descriptions of weaves, patterns for garments and pictures of particular objects as well as costume drawings by artist Voldemārs Vimba provided extensive and detailed material for folk costume makers. However, it was these publications in particular that introduced more freely developed constructs of Latvian national costume. This meant combinations of items differing in chronological terms.

Since there was no information about different kinds of headdress for married and unmarried women in 19th century Zemgale, headdresses from earlier periods were used, in accordance with the tradition in other regions. In the course of excavation in Zemgale crowns made of metal sheet had been found, dating back to the beginning of the 17th century. Since there were typologically equivalent crowns in the ethnographic material from Kurzeme, the maiden’s costume of 19th century Zemgale was supplemented with a crown from the 17th century.

Likewise, variants of Liv costume published in Soviet times could be considered constructs. Currently we have no information about the author or origin of the Liv costume published in the third volume of the book “Latvian folk costumes”. However, in 1965, two years before the publication of this book, singers from Kurzeme at the Song Festival were wearing precisely the kind of costume described in the work. There are some preserved photographs from Song Festivals in the period between the wars with singers in Liv costume, but this differs from the material published by B. Zunde. Later, the actual appearance of Liv costume has been determined using museum and archive evidence.

Latvian national costume, even as a construct, which did not reflect the historical truth, was a clear sign that divided society into two parts – strangers and our own people. It was a mark of identity, even though in Soviet times there was an attempt to turn folk costume into concert costume, depriving it of any sense of cultural-historical affiliation.

The appearance of national costume in publications by ethnographers in Latvia after the re-establishment of independence

At the end of the 20th century, after Latvia regained its independence, there appeared a three-volume publication of new and extensive material under the title “Latvian national costumes” (1, 2, 3). On the one hand, it may be viewed as a study on the history of traditional dress, but at the same time it was the publication of a museum collection (the National History Museum of Latvia), which had a very practical character. In each volume, the extensive illustrative material is preceded by a text. The authors describe the characteristic features of costumes from different regions, based on material in the museum’s scientific archive and earlier publications by other authors. There are no essential changes in the overall characterisation of the costumes. Only the Liv costumes are more extensively
covered, with a firmer basis in historical resources (2, p. 116–119; 124–137). As before, sets of garments include items of different date, although in some cases the authors have tried to introduce at least some kind of chronology of costume development, dating sets of garments from the first half, middle and second half of the 19th century.

Besides historical references, in this work considerable space is given up to practical information. This includes photos of objects from the museum’s collection, as well as patterns for particular garments. There are no detailed explications in this work, although the many close-ups of fabrics and drawings of decorations on squared paper reflect the practical function of this work. Nowadays these three volumes are widely used for producing national costumes, despite the fact there is no consistency in the provision of information about the making of each garment (for example, technical drawings of fabric or samples of embroidery are missing).

For the makers and wearers of national costume this type of publication provided the necessary information about decorative costumes corresponding to folk art aesthetics, which had a basis in cultural history. The display of local differences in costume provided an opportunity to express feelings of local patriotism.

Conclusion

In the 20th century the social demand – the interest in making Latvian national costume and wearing it at Song and Dance Festivals as well as other events – determined the practical approach taken in publications about folk costumes. This created a basis for the construction of costume sets, making full sets of costume even when there was no historical evidence.

Since 1926, as Latvian national costume has become a diverse representation of different regions, the main criteria for combining particular garments into one set has been their connection with a particular territory. Less attention has been given to the dating of items, which has resulted in significant departures from the historical truth.

The social demand for practical publications that could be used for producing Latvian national costume hindered the development of in-depth research on the history of folk dress. There were other reasons for this, too, but these deserve to be discussed in a separate publication.

The constructs developed in the process of supplementing the costume have not reduced the capacity of Latvian national costume to serve as a symbol of national identity.

References

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ETNIŠKUMO GAIVINIMAS: TAUTINIS KOSTIUMAS – REKONSTRUKCIJA AR KŪRIMAS?

Santrauka

XIX a. pabaigoje susiformavās latviņu tautinis kostiums tapo tautinēs tapatybēs simboliu. Šiame straipsnyje pateikiami tyrimu apie XX a. latviņu etnografu publikacijas šia tema rezultatai, esminį dėmesį atkreipiant į tai,
kaip ši spauda veikė ir atskleidė tokio lygio pagarbos tautiniam kostiumui susiformavimą. Paaškėjo, jog visa tai lėmė būtent aktyvi informacijos sklaida ir ja suformuota pozityvi masinė nuomonė apie šį tautinio paveldo objektą. Tačiau, nors etnografiniai latvių tautinio kostiumo pavyzdžiai yra laikomi neginčijamai autentiškais, iš tikrųjų visų pirma tai yra kruopštus muziejininkų ir etnografių rekonstrukcijos darbo rezultatas.

1888 m., rengiantis trečiajai Latvijos dainų šventei, spaudoje buvo paskelbti pirmieji tautinio kostumo eskizai, jų piešiniai bei aprašai. Tuo metu jie buvo palyginti artimi šiuolaikinei jų sampratai ir vizualiai išreiškė romantines tautiškumo bei pozityvaus valstiečių gyvenimo būdo idėjas.

Nuo 1926 m. latvių tautinis kostiumas toliau buvo formuojamas regioniniu principu, atskiras aprangos detales siejant su konkretaus etninio regiono tautinės aprangos savitumais. Tai buvo daroma kūrybiškai, bet vis mažiau kreipiant dėmesio į faktinę istorinę medžiagą, t. y. ne visada šį procesą siejant su moksline tiesa.

Pradedant 1931 m., tautiniai kostiumai, vizualiai atitinkantys minėtu būdu sukonstruotus atskirų Latvijos etnografinių regionų tautinės aprangos standartus, buvo įvardyti tautinių kostiumų etalonais. Pastebėta, jog spaudoje viešai prieinama informacija apie galimybęs plačiai siūdintis tautinio kostumo pavyzdžius kartu ir trukdė siekti išsamesnių istorinių latvių tautinio kostumo studijų. Tam buvo ir kitų priežasčių, kurias vertėtų aptarti atskiromis straipsniuose.

Taip sukurtas latvių tautinis kostiumas, net ir moksline perspėjante būdamos gana toli nuo istorinės tiesos, padėjo aiškiai atskirti dvi socialines visuomenės sanklodas – savus (latvius) ir svetimus (kitataučius). Taip jis tapo ir tautinio identiteto išraiškos simboliu, kas net ir sovietiniai laikais leido latviam juo didžiuotis ir nekreipti dėmesio į tolomas nuo istorinės ir etnografinės tiesos koncertinio tautinio drabužio sceninės dėvėsenos apraiškas.