

# REVIVAL OF LOCAL MASKING TRADITIONS IN LATVIA AS THE RESULT OF COOPERATION BETWEEN PERFORMERS AND RESEARCHERS

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*At a time when it is possible to identify oneself with the global and universal, an opposite process is also occurring: an increase in interest in the local. This article describes the process of renewing three previously interrupted traditions. Is it possible to reconstruct a tradition at all, and what are the general conditions of cooperation between the researchers and participants to ensure a successful process?*

Keywords: researcher, performer, masked processions, local traditions, reconstruction of ritual

*V času, ko se je mogoče poistovetiti z globalnim in univerzalnim, se pojavlja tudi nasprotni proces – porast zanimanja za lokalno. V razpravi avtorica opiše proces obnavljanja treh predhodno prekinjenih tradicij in se sprašuje, ali je mogoče rekonstruirati tradicijo in v katerih okoliščinah lahko sodelovanje raziskovalca in udeležencev zagotovi uspeh?*

Ključne besede: raziskovalec, izvajalec, maskirane procesije, lokalne tradicije, rekonstrukcija rituala

The end of the nineteenth century in Latvia was marked by the beginning of complicated changes related to the gradual disappearance of traditional lifestyles. Traditional costumed processions were gradually losing their religious ritual functions while their entertainment function was coming to the fore. Although there were major changes in social life, in several rural regions of Latvia masking remained a common practice and small groups of enthusiasts found it important to participate in the masked processions for one reason or another, especially to repeat the traditions created by their ancestors.

In the revival of masking traditions, major input was provided by the folklore movement that arose by the end of the 1970s. Within this movement, existing materials and traditions were acknowledged, reproduced, and popularized. However, in reviving masking traditions, the time, place, look, and symbolic meaning of these traditions were ignored, thus unifying the structure of the masked processions, their activities, and their names.

## THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF MASKS

The source of this problem of loss of tradition can be found at the beginning of the twentieth century, when Krišjānis Barons, a folksong collector, published a six-volume set titled *Latvju Dainas*. One of the volumes has a collection of folksongs related to masks and masking. Barons united them under the title “Songs of *budēli*, *ķekatas*, and *čigāni*” and commented: “These songs are of a similar nature and content, so we place them together, and around Christmas time” (Barons & Visendorfs 1989–1994: 165).

At that time in Latvia, there were at least seventy different names for local masking groups. This situation is explained by the fact that the three masking traditions mentioned above, very different in their nature, are the ones that have an impressive number of songs, and so it was from them that the majority of oral folklore in the form of folksongs was gathered. Thanks to this written source and ignoring the context of masking which was started by Barons and continued in schools and schoolbooks, these three names—*budēļi*, *ķekatas*, and *čigāni*—came to be used when describing all local masking traditions at different festivals throughout the year. One cannot deny the similar nature of the *budēļi*, *ķekatas*, or any other masking group, but naming them all alike robs one of an opportunity to understand individual masking rituals because the time, place, and symbolic meaning are ignored. Like the names, the very structure of all masked processions and activities during the processions are unified.

At the end of the twentieth century, revival of the tradition of masked processions in the folklore movement occurred as follows: the folk groups that practiced masking attempted to create a program of masked processions using the songs and activities of the masks of different regions from various seasonal festivities. For instance, a masked group that called itself *Budēļi* (Shrovetide – region Zemgale / Semigallia), sang songs about jumping and stomping on weeds from the repertoire of *Ķekatas* (Shrovetide – Kurzeme / Courland). They also danced with the figure of Death (Gypsies, Christmastime – Vidzeme / Livonia), played the game Wolf and Goat (Gypsies, Christmastime – Latgale / Latgallia), danced with the figure of a Bear (Christmastime – Kurzeme / Courland), and even managed to sing a song from recent folklore about a Gypsy girl, her good looks, and her desire to find a Gypsy husband.

Some of the most popular mask figures were the Crane, the Bear, Female and Male Gypsies, Death, Female and Male Goats, and the Horse and Rider. If the group was larger, one might also find the Tall Woman, Short Man, Grain Sheaf, Sieve, Broom, Living Dead, Musician on a Hay Stack, and Wolf. All of these personas could be related to the Christmastime masked processions, although there has been little research to establish this. The bottom line is this: during this period, it was unacceptable to have the entire group comprised of only Goats, Cranes, or Little Men, a fact seen in the testimonies of the narrators (Rancāne 2009: 43–76). In the same way, the standardized educational information on masked processions stated that it was possible to wear costumes from St. Martin's Day until Shrovetide. In this case as well, the folklore archives expanded the boundaries of the masking period. They show that processions were common from St. Michael's Day (29 September) until St. George's Day (24 April). There are also records of the presence of masks at baptisms, weddings, funerals, home blessings, and harvest festivals.

Moreover, the behavior of the masked processions organized by modern folk groups differed significantly from those processions that were still taking place in Latvia's countryside. It proved difficult for urban people to reach the same level of vitality and enthusiasm that came naturally to the rural people in their natural habitat. At the same time, this

difference was partly a result of the Soviet era that had, intentionally or not, overwhelmed society for a long time with the deprivation of personal liberties and standardization of the performing arts. Although many found the folklore movement attractive because it offered an opportunity to feel natural and free of any artificial norms, a society needs time until its members begin to realize their own uniqueness and start demonstrating it without restraint; for example, by taking on the masked personas.

On the other hand, research on masking in Latvia has its own special features. Although several authors have described various masked processions (Jansons 2010: 56–69), there is only one researcher Latvia can be proud of during the previous century: Jānis Alberts Jansons, thanks to whom testimonies from rural people about masked processions were collected in the 1920s and 1930s. However, the research was reported in German because Jansons' dissertation was defended in Cologne, Germany. For this reason, this material was not widely available and understandable to the revivers of masking traditions in Latvia. Only in 2010 was this work translated into Latvian and published. In his work *Latviešu masku gājieni* (Latvian Masked Processions), Jansons mentions the interesting and different nature of various processions, but later he places them on the same level and only speaks about the basic structure of the event: arriving at the household, questioning the people of the household, instructing them, teasing them, and singing teasing songs about them; this is followed by presenting masks with humorous imitations of housework and fieldwork, walking around the house with smoking twigs, dancing, riding in a sled, performing jokes and games involving masked people, feasting, and finally either saying goodbyes and proceeding to the next household or removing the masks and continuing with the games (Janson 1933: 73). In this schematic, one can see the traditions of different regions and different festivals combined. It was not the objective of Jansons' work to reconstruct the different processions or to single out their differences in activities and nuances, characters, or symbolism.

## MASK FESTIVALS A CURRENT FORM OF MASKING

At the beginning of the 1990s, a new political, economic, and cultural situation manifested itself in Latvia. It resulted in two opposite tendencies that also appear in the masking culture. On the one hand, new elements have been introduced from global culture, such as Halloween and city carnivals; on the other hand, interest in local traditions seems to have grown stronger. In the various regions, interest has grown in local cultural characteristics.

This period may have brought along a mix of values for some. People are searching for the real thing, the true, the natural. It is the urban people that, being the furthest from nature and the traditional way of life, are approaching traditional heritage again intellectually and are searching for a fruitful way to connect it to modern life and its forms of

communication. “As finite beings we stand in traditions, whether we know these traditions or not, whether we are conscious of them or so blinded as to believe that we begin anew. This does not affect at all the power of tradition over us,” writes the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (2002: 92). He believes a tradition is not merely conservation, but rather transference. It is awareness of the ancient and expressing it anew.

Whereas folk groups have their masked processions each year during seasonal festivities, in 1995 the city council of Daugavpils presented an initiative to hold a mask festival that would unite traditional masking and the individual and artistic approach of the students of a local art school in creating contemporary masks. After that, for several years the traditions were unchanged, until 2001, when the National Center for Folk Art became involved in reviving masking and held the International Mask Festival together with people from Daugavpils for the four following years. As the name of the festival indicates, the participants included one or more groups of masks from abroad. In this way, the Latvian participants had the chance learn about the masking traditions of Lithuania, Estonia, Russia, Belarus, Bulgaria, and Poland. Beginning in 2005, the festival started “moving” through all of Latvia’s regions, thus giving a wider circle of society the chance to learn about traditions.<sup>1</sup> Since 2010, the responsibility for organizing the festival has shifted to a non-government institution—the Latvian Folk Society—which is responsible for organizing the festival together with the corresponding municipality. It is interesting that some of the municipalities involved in holding the festival have expressed a desire to continue with a similar festival of their own. One of them, Salacgrīva, has already done so, which means that there were three International Mask Festivals scheduled for 2012: in Milzkalne (the thirteenth), in Salacgrīva (the third), and in Daugavpils (the ninth).

The desire of the organizers of the festivals to ensure the survival and popularization of traditions is demonstrated by the fact that in 2001 the National Center for Folk Art started issuing printed material about and masks in Latvia. (Rancane 2001) In 2002, the organizers of the festival published methodological material, giving the participants their first opportunity to learn from archive materials. (Rancane 2002) In 2003, another set of material comprising both of the previous issues was printed with melodies for songs, lyrics, and illustrations. (Rancane 2003) Another important step in understanding traditions is the research by Aīda Rancāne, published in 2009 as the volume *Maskas un maskošānās Latvijā* (Masks and Masking in Latvia).

An important part of the festival has always been a scholarly conference or seminar with the participation of carnival researchers and folklore specialists from Latvia and abroad. During these conferences, it has been possible to learn about the traditions, festivals, and new research from different countries. In the workshops, interested people have the chance to learn how to make a traditional mask properly and how to use the mask to create a particular persona.

<sup>1</sup> Places where the festival takes place: Madona (2005), Bauska (2006), Liepāja (2007), Riga (2008), Dagda (2009), Salacgrīva (2010), Viesīte (2011), and Tukums and Milzkalne (2012).

During the festival each year, the activity of masking inside a rural household is organized like a competition. Each group presents its tradition in contact with the household's people. Although the contexts of a festival and the traditional environment of a home are impossible to compare, there is still the opportunity for successful activity of a in a contemporary situation without losing the sense of authenticity. A huge room, bright lights, amplifiers, a big crowd of spectators, the presence of a jury—these are significantly different factors that cause the participants to adjust the traditional materials to the competitive situation. However, on one of the festival's days an opportunity is given the groups to enjoy the rural environment and visit a countryside household, where the situation is very close to the traditional one.

In this way, the festival is an opportunity to motivate those interested to learn, cherish, and popularize masking traditions. In this situation, there is the opportunity for planned and successful three-way cooperation involving researchers, organizers, and performers. At the same time, the festival is a creative workshop for polishing one's masking skills and learning the tradition.

#### THE *VECĪŠI* MASK GROUP

As mentioned above, the archives have a fairly rich amount of material relating to masking traditions. However, not all regions of Latvia have preserved masking as a living tradition. This article describes three traditions of masked processions, typical for their respective regions and periods of time but completely unknown to contemporary groups, or perhaps forgotten by them. These traditions are no longer present in the rural environment and they have not been inherited through oral transmission from the previous generation.

The first of these is *vecīši*. This tradition was completely unfamiliar to the mask groups of the folklore movement; not even the name was known. Moreover, archive materials are quite scarce. Nonetheless, the first impulse to renew this tradition came from these materials. Later, after analyzing the ritual context, the etymology of the name, and the symbolism of the ritual, the researchers' next step in reconstructing the tradition was to understand the meaning of the ritual. Finally, a group from the region where the recorded materials had originated showed their efforts to specialists at the festival. Their revival centered on the autumn seasonal cycle of costumed processions, marking the end of the harvest and the beginning of the season of ancestor spirits. This period lasts until St. Martin's Day, believed to mark the end of autumn, the beginning of winter, and the end of the ancestor spirit season, when the spirits of the deceased come to visit their families, feast on the wealth brought by autumn, and thereby bring blessings for the following year.

The masks are anthropomorphic. The name of the group—the Old Men—is related to the ancestor cult. An important aspect of the ritual is the light color of the robes, indicating their link to the world of the dead. The next important aspect is their silent behavior; if they sing at all, the songs are very specific. The old women directing the singing have been very secretive about the art so that nobody else would learn it. It is written that they would

repeat the same phrases over and over again and sometimes spending the entire evening at one household. They would be offered a thick porridge and meat, specially prepared and kept for them (Rancāne 2009: 43–44). Thus there is a close resemblance between the masks and the rituals of the ancestor cult, when the spirits of the deceased are welcomed and offered food and drink.

In renewing this tradition, the greatest problem is the textual material, which is not fixed. Thus it would be more correct to speak of a partial reconstruction of *vecīši*. As already mentioned, the art of singing was cherished but was not passed on. Because of this, they were forced to use folklore material from the archives (riddles, tales, games, and songs) relative to the period, the place in question, and its relation to the ancestor cult. Currently, three folk groups of Livonia in Vidriži, Salacgrīva, and Katlakalns are attempting to revive the tradition. Each of them has a different approach and form of expression.

The masks of Vidriži allow themselves to be carried along by their creative impulses more than the others. “Just as a soup needs to be salted, folk events, even if very familiar, need to be accompanied by a fresh and creative spark!” the leader of the group believes (Interview 1). Their masking can be characterized as a performance or as ritual theatre, but the performance is created based on an understanding about the ritual and the meaning of masks. One respondent said:

*Old—that means “wise”. I understand the vecīši masks as images of the spirits of our ancestors. Both my parents and grandparents are no longer in this world, but I don’t feel like I’ve lost them forever; maybe it sounds a little weird, but by putting on the Old Woman mask I always feel a surge of joy, strength, and something like an invisible uniting line. When I put on this mask, it’s as if all my female relatives were standing behind my back. (Interview 1)*

In addition to their being very familiar with the Latvian folk material, helpful materials from Finno-Ugric folklore are also used because the region where the group operates was also populated by Livonians.<sup>2</sup> When asked about the method being used in reconstructing the tradition, the respondent replied:

*I use my intuition. I don’t know who’s sending me those visions, but I’ve seen all of our masked performances (and every other ritual) on my inner screen—in a clear, concrete vision—all that’s left for me is to write it down and relate to my people, to stage a performance. . . . In my group, I teach them to be responsible about the entire process. My duty is to give everyone their instruments and methods on how to work with themselves, by showing them the “map” of our common activity ground, and at the same time it’s an invaluable opportunity for myself to be growing together with them. In the rehearsals, we’ve got a fantastic harmony and openness, a free and*

<sup>2</sup> A Baltic Finnic people in Latvia who speak a Finno-Ugric language.



Figure 1. The *vecīši* group. The 12<sup>th</sup> International Festival of Mask Traditions in Viesīte, Latvia, 12 February 2011. (Photos by A. Rancane)

*light flow of energy and information. Every project is a creative, dynamic process for us, and all of us are winners, in an equal manner, I'd say: the richer each one's individual experience, the fuller our understanding of the event.* (Interview 1)

Alongside books and materials about methods, the masks of Salacgrīva also rely on their own feelings in renewing the traditions. The motivation of the leader of the *vecīši* mask group is the following: “For me, this link to the spirits of our ancestors is very important, as is the positive energy and preserving the tradition” (Interview 2). The group has been participating in the festivals and mask events in their own region for ten years in a row now, but it seems they have not found the “true key” to the masking activities. In addition, one of the participants has confessed that she would prefer another tradition, one more exciting, fun, and appropriate for the modern day.

The renovators of *vecīši* in Katlakalns (Figure 1) have the least experience in reclaiming the tradition, but it must be pointed out they are very careful in creating the masks and reconstructing the images. The selection of folklore material also is appropriate, but the skill to act freely and improvise still has to be acquired.

Because it is mostly urban people or young people attempting to revive the *vecīši* tradition in this region near Riga, the participants lack the living link of generations that gives a tradition its life energy, and sometimes the behavior of the costume-wearers is in between a true experience and a theatrical performance.

THE *KAITAS* MASK GROUP

The next group, renewed thanks to the successful cooperation of researchers and enthusiasts, is *kaitas* (or *koitas*). *Kaitas* masks are seen between Christmas and Epiphany in the central and southern parts of Latgallia. Here, unlike the previous local tradition, the textual material has been amply recorded. The difference between this tradition and the others is the nature of its presentation, which is enriched by improvisation. There might be, for example, a simple dance evening in a rural household during which the *kaitas* characters would present a play once in a while. The masks of *kaitas* may be anthropomorphic (social characters), zoomorphic (animals and birds), or allegorical (Death, the Devil, the Tall Wife, the Little Boy, etc.). In Latvian, the name *kaitas* is related to teasing and playing pranks. The *kaitas* figures are joined by the most celebrated pranksters of the area, who improvise performances based on a particular topic, which may be given by one of the members of the household present at the event. Usually, the choice would be something seemingly of no particular interest. However, the prankster is capable of speaking the entire night through and making the others laugh, talking, for instance, about a stove in the house, a pair of boots, or some other simple thing. The *kaitas* characters would also play some joking games, such as Burglars, Fiddlers, Crayfish, Death-Devil-Angel, and others, exciting and funny enough to simultaneously evoke loud laughter, merriment, and fear (Rancāne 2009: 59-60).

A mask group from a rural area of southern Latgallia (Figure 2) that has spent years reviving this tradition has been very successful because their group includes people talented enough to create interesting play scenarios and to act them out with witty dialogues. The leader of the *kaitas* group stated:

*Material is very scarce but, while researching that which exists, I understood the goal we have to achieve through our masking. That is, through the masks, we have to illustrate the changes in human nature during the Christmastime season that are real for us, but at the same time conserve the basic principles of kaitas masks—kaitas figures don't arrive all at once like other mask groups do, they don't sing much, and they use double meaning in their dialogues. Just like other mask groups, their activities carry the very meaning for masking: to help people.* (Interview 3)

The *kaitas* group in Dagda need to develop their skills of improvisation in various situations, both in composing texts on the spot and creating scenarios. Perhaps that would allow the audience to perceive the masking tradition with greater clarity. The leader of the group says

*Speaking about kaitas, if they're created outside festivals, the audience perceives them like a theater play, without being conscious of their hidden meaning. This is why I often have to explain the nature of this tradition.* (Interview 3).

Another, more positive thing must be mentioned: another winter tradition, *čigāni*, is still alive in that area of Latgallia, and the participants are familiar with it. In fact, some of them even inherited it from their parents. Consequently, the characters of the masks and their



Figure 2 The *kaitas* mask group. The 12<sup>th</sup> International Festival of Mask Traditions in Viesīte, Latvia, 12 February 2011.

behaviours can be copied from that mask group, although some of them still remember the *kaitas* processions. The interest of the participants in learning the *kaitas* tradition is genuine:

*It's very difficult to explain, but as the carnival season approaches, people tend to come and ask what we're going to do this time. . . . Returning from the festival, we shared our feelings. The strange feeling of peace was unanimous. (Interview 3).*

#### THE *BUDĒĻI* MASK GROUP

Any masked character previously and even now in Latvia is called *budēlis*. As already mentioned, this tradition has the most singing because every dialogue with the members of the household is entirely sung. The songs are fixed in a four-line format and the majority of them are published and available to any user. It is important to note, however, that there are cases when, during interviews in another region, the respondent initially uses the term *budēļi*, and only later is it revealed that the local people in fact call the masks by a different name.

Traditionally, the *budēļi* procession is typical of the southwestern region of Latvia, including two culturally historic regions, Semigallia and Courland. These processions are seen only at Shrovetide, the beginning of spring, and the start of a new agricultural year. In many places, the masking season ends with Shrovetide, which is why this tradition was especially popular. With the approach of spring and the awakening of nature, the topic of fertility becomes important in the processions. Sexuality, merriment, laughter, jumping, pouring water, thrashing, and talking about the phallus are very typical of *budēļi* processions (Rancāne 2009: 67–71).

The first important input by researchers into the renewal of the *budēļi* tradition was the reconstruction of the typical headdresses. There had been reports of specific humorous headdresses worn by the *budēļi*, which were made by tying the upper ends of straw. Printed editions from the beginning of the last century also mention *budēļi* wearing decorated straw headdresses (Līdeks 1991: 128). Finally, during field research in 1993 the geologist and ethnographer Viktors Grāvītis learned how the *budēļi* straw headdress is made, according to a hundred-year-old woman's description. He found some straw and made the headdress together with the elderly woman (Grāvītis 1995: 98–99). Afterwards, master classes were held and those interested had the opportunity to learn how to make the headdress.

At the same time, researchers were not unanimous about the meaning of the *budēļi* mask group. The successful reconstruction of the *budēļi* masks gave the researchers an understanding of the symbolism of these masks. The *budēļi* headdress reminds the people of the last stalk of grain, which is usually left unharvested to stand in the field so that the living force of the harvest can hide inside it. The *budēļi* figures that visit a household at the beginning of the new agricultural year personify those forces of fertility and perform magic activities. In this way, the etymology of the name *budēļi* becomes understandable, related to the Latvian word for 'excite' or 'wake up' (Rancāne 2011).

The next important stage for researchers in renewing the tradition was to find the lyrics of the songs, many of them quite erotic, in the archives for the benefit of the mask-wearers, who could then learn to freely improvise with the lyrics, especially in song battles between household members and mask-wearers, or only between the ed characters. Learning the lyrics and the method of free improvisation in a situation is a skill that traditional societies spend years developing, and members of such societies are often familiar with the tradition since childhood. Nowadays, the mask-wearers usually write a scenario with songs in sequence. To attain free improvisation, the mask-wearers still need to learn massive amounts of lyrics in order to be able to express themselves freely. On the other hand, the inability of the heads of a household to reply with a song is also a problem. To reconstruct the tradition fully, a dialogue between both parties, turning into a "song battle," is necessary.

The renovators of the *budēļi* masks (Figure 3) must prepare in a timely fashion: "Preparations begin during the end of summer, by making the *budēļi* headdresses, afterwards acquiring fur-coats, sewing satchels and face masks, and learning lyrics" (Interview 4). To reconstruct the mask tradition completely, bells made in Latvia to hang from the belts are still necessary. Currently, bells made in other countries are used.

Recently, another feature testified by the narrators has been used in the festivals: members of the most ancient processions were only male. "I was even more attracted to the *budēļi* tradition when I realized only young men were taking part, that it's a men's thing" (Interview 4), relates the leader of a *budēļi* group. The list of participants changes over the years, but by preparing and teaching new members using photographs from the previous years, men become interested in learning the skills. However, the experience is difficult to describe, depending on previous experience and knowledge: "I personally get



Figure 3. The *budēļi* group. The 12<sup>th</sup> International Festival of Mask Traditions in Viesīte, Latvia, 12 February 2011.

good emotions from the masked processions. It is the realization that you're a messenger of spring, a rouser, a fosterer of fertility. By wearing the *budēļi* costume, just a little tipsy from alcohol, entering a different state through noise and movement, I feel special, I'm a *budēļis*" (Interview 4).

#### COOPERATION BETWEEN RESEARCHERS AND PERFORMERS

In creating any kind of product, especially one as complicated as masks, the interest, mutual understanding, and help of all those involved is very important, especially the willing participation of people in learning a tradition. None of the groups had been talked into renewing their local tradition; it was the desire of the participants themselves to find and present their regional identities.

They dedicate their time, money, and intellect. What is their motivation? One of the leaders of the *kaitas* group said:

*When putting on the masks, the participants cease to be Johns, or Sandras, and so on. There's a strange aura present within the group—elation, commotion, joy. People's true nature is unlocked and revealed. It even brings them closer together; the participants return from the festivals different and better. I'm not the only one to notice; so do other members of the folk group that haven't been to the festival for one reason or another. They even find it difficult to go back into the collective that had worn costumes.* (Interview 3)

The respondent's answer confirms what anthropologists have already observed: collective rituals may become vehicles for social organization and transformation by contributing to

the formation of strong emotional bonds among group members (Dunbar 2006) and by reinforcing social solidarity and group cohesion (Whitehouse 2004: 193).

Masking rituals also have more than social significance. The religious aspect communicated by the traditional masks and wearing them is also present. The genuine interest in the meaning of the symbols and rituals on the part of the performers (at least some of them) adds a spiritual dimension to their performance that cannot be missed by an observer. Perhaps that is an obstacle to continuing the popularity of traditional masking in the general society of Latvia. The entertaining nature of the masks is saturated by a rich, ancient culture, not easily understandable by many contemporary persons. As one mask leader said:

*We have neighbors with a Christian background or simply contemporary thinking. Ours is the only home celebrating on 21 December, 21 March, 21 June . . . nobody knows much about the Old Faith and, even if they do, they don't practice it. There have been awkward moments when we enter a household and realize we're not welcome. What's left is to invite friends or go visit those of similar minds.* (Interview 1)

In regions where the masking traditions have disappeared, the renewed tradition might not take root in general society. Although it is part of a region's heritage, contemporary life seems to have moved away from specific traditions. One possible problem in renewing the tradition is that the intellectual aspect often dominates the emotional, and that limits both the maskers and the observers. A long time has to pass, and quite a bit of experience be gained, to enable the participants in the ritual to adapt the ancient folklore material, learn the "rules of the game," and be capable of improvising freely within those rules.

Comparing mask-wearing in Latvia to the popularity of carnival festivals in other European countries, an expert on traditional cultures recognizes that it "has become a form of mass entertainment, and commercialized by losing its ancient sociological and symbolic context. Popularization of those forms of mask-wearing will not be supported in our society" (Interview 5). A specialist from a museum thinks likewise: "By turning mask-wearing into an extra popular activity, we risk losing its true meaning and content" (Interview 6).

Masked processions and festivals are not being popularized and followed by the mass media. Traditional mask-wearing is not being taught in the public schools, and so researchers and organizers are the only ones attaching social significance to the phenomena. Lately, it is through the initiative of the mask-wearers themselves that videos of masked groups' activities during a festival are placed on the internet; this is a modern form of self-representation as recognized by the ethnologist Jurij Fikfak (2011). The opportunity to see the ritual activities of masks via the internet is a great help in educating the public.

When the performance is finished, the mask wearers are interested in the researchers' opinion. This is why seminars are organized about the traditions observed. The first part includes general questions (the semantics of masks, reasons for masking, meaning of

activities, etc.), and the second part is dedicated to analyzing the performances and evaluating them. The groups most successful in representing the tradition are congratulated, as are the makers of individual masks.

The gathering of groups for performances within festival competitions gives each of them an opportunity to compare themselves with the others and to compete. Often, this is a greater stimulus in reconstructing costumes than the specialists' evaluation. After years spent observing masks, it is clear how a character or his behavior, or even an episode of a scenario, can be copied from another group or participant. However, it is not a matter of merely copying the other, but including the idea or the tradition within the local tradition in a creative manner. This process can be related to other countries as well. Bulgarian masks can be a source of inspiration. Moreover, several groups from Latvia have participated in the Surva International Kukeri Festival in Pernik. Anthropologist Cesare Poppi, the research advisor to the project Carnival King of Europe,<sup>3</sup> has visited Latvia repeatedly and introduced mask wearers to videos of Alpine and Balkan masking traditions.

Nevertheless, only a small number of groups take part in reconstructing masking traditions, and so the lack of competition may discourage the exchange of experiences within local traditions. Attempts to gain the recognition of researchers and folklore specialists by competing with other masked groups, and to obtain a recognized status among them, can be positive, but there have also been cases when the strict evaluation criteria and the quality of performance of other participants have caused several groups to quit the festival.

Similarly, involvement of just one or a few researchers in renovating the masking tradition can create the risk of subjectivity. Unfortunately, there are few researchers in Latvia that direct scholarly interest towards masks and masking. One of the reasons is the lack of traditional Latvian masks as objects of applied art. They have always been created "for a reason"; that is, in relation to calendar festivities. Masks are made using easily found materials that are "just lying around," and so they usually lack durability. Moreover, the tradition of wooden masks had disappeared even before efforts to collect them were begun, so museums do not have rich collections of masks. There are only two wooden masks from Courland at the Latvian National History Museum. The nonexistence of masks in museums dictates the focus of research:

*Researchers working in museums will have to choose research projects with results that can be used in the museum's work. So they will pick themes related to the existing museum archives or specifics. . . . The ethnographers at our museum usually begin their work by making a catalogue of a collection. . . . To begin research on masks, they would have to be in the collection. It would be analyzed and catalogued, and the research would be as thorough as possible. (Interview 6)*

<sup>3</sup> Carnival King of Europe is a research project funded by the Culture Department of the European Union. It aims to bring to light the important similarities that can be observed among specific aspects of carnivals and winter fertility rituals across different areas of Europe.

In a situation like this, with a very small number of interested researchers, it is important to involve international experts. It has been possible to carry out this idea at least partially, thanks to the International Masks Festival in Latvia.

Researchers are interested in the usefulness of their research to society. In the schematic below (Figure 4), it is clear how research—the product created by the researcher—is embodied in life. During this process, both the performers and the researchers themselves encounter new questions that demand new answers. In this way, the performer becomes the consumer of the research in a way. At the same time, a successfully renewed tradition can produce interest in an observer previously unfamiliar with it. This interest can stimulate their research, thus strengthening their understanding of the subject.

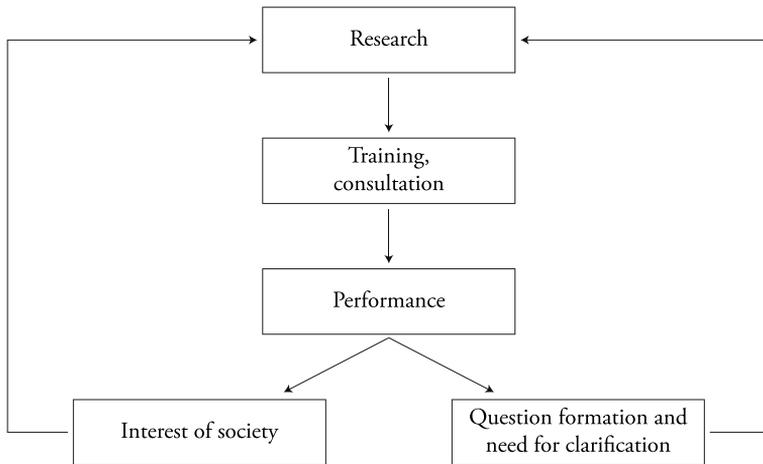


Figure. 4. Interaction of research between performers and society in renewing a tradition.

## CONCLUSION

The viability of cultural expressions in contemporary Latvian social environments has taken very different directions during recent decades, sometimes even moving in opposite directions. The social status and influence of the caretakers and their groups within traditional culture in the 1980s were quite high, and the message they bore was generally accepted and incorporated into family traditions. That period was accompanied by the motto “We have to learn and use the heritage of our ancestors as much as possible.”

After the restoration of Latvia’s independence in the 1990s, attitudes toward the process of inheriting culture changed. The change started with the belief that “now we are free from ideological sub-layers, and inheriting traditions should continue within their natural environment, within the family.” This opinion coincided with the period just after the Iron Curtain had fallen and a wave of Western mass culture rapidly filled Latvian

culture space. The opinions of specialists of traditional culture and the performing groups lost significance and influence. Folk groups were often seen by researchers and politicians as a relic of the Soviet amateur movement. It was years later that the realization came that inheritance of traditions was no longer possible within families. There had been an interruption in cultural inheritance. The current middle generation that is socially and financially active is unfamiliar with traditions, their significance, and their meaning. An interesting phenomenon occurred: traditions were brought into families by children, who were taught them in preschool and school.

Recently, it has become painfully clear that, in the organized system of municipalities' cultural life, the best and only way to renew traditions is the folk group and its activities. It must be recognized that a folk group that has been organized in a certain region is very similar in its form and nature to the spontaneous groups that once existed at weddings, funerals, shared work projects, and similar group activities. There is no insurmountable contradiction here. Of course, there is no traditional society any more, but the intangible cultural values created by these groups are wonderfully capable of existing in contemporary life. Those groups are a valuable source of research as well as its partner.

This situation requires researchers to adapt to changes of circumstances, and to alter their research methods or create new ones. In a situation like this, it is possible to obtain good results through participant observation. Essentially, the researchers become active users of the given tradition because they are familiar with the folklore material and its traditional contexts, understand symbols, learn the means of expression (songs, music, choreography, etc.), and orient themselves in matters of meaning and significance.

The problem lies in the fact that contemporary society is oriented towards the passive consumption of a culture product when traditional cultural expressions by their very nature require active participation of the members of society, both in the groups of the traditional culture as carriers of the tradition and in ritual events such as the masked processions. Otherwise, just a small number of people partake in the process and the general population may perceive that community as a closed one with its own particular interests.

Finally, it may be concluded that the process of renewing a tradition and the research associated with it can be successful only if a wide range of subjects is involved: the performers of a tradition, the organizers of the cultural life of a municipality, the mass media, the members of the educational system and, of course, researchers.

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## INTERVIEWS

Interview 1 with Aina Tobe in Vidriži, February 17<sup>th</sup> 2012. Private archive.

Interview 2 with Zenta Mennika in Salacgrīva, February 26<sup>th</sup> 2012. Private archive.

Interview 3 with Inta Viļuma in Dagda, February 14<sup>th</sup> 2012. Private archive.

Interview 4 with Jānis Jasjukevičs in Rīga, February 16<sup>th</sup> 2012. Private archive.

Interview 5 with Gita Lancere, an expert of traditional culture from the Centre of Culture Education and Immaterial Heritage, in Rīga, February 20<sup>th</sup> 2012. Private archive.

Interview 6 with Daina Kraukle, director of the Archive of Ethnographic open-air museum, in Rīga, February 22<sup>nd</sup> 2012. Private archive.

## OŽIVLJANJE LOKALNE TRADICIJE MASKIRANJA KOT REZULTAT SODELOVANJA MED IZVAJALCI IN RAZISKOVALCI

*Arhivsko gradivo v Latviji vsebuje številna pričevanja o veliki raznolikosti skupin mask, maskiranih procesij, o njihovem videzu in aktivnosti. Trenutno je znanih okrog sedemdeset imen skupin mask.*

*Ob koncu 19. in v začetku 20. stoletja je tradicionalna podeželska družba razkrojila; hkrati pa je potekalo intenzivno zbiranje in arhiviranje folklore. V tem času so zbiralci folklornega gradiva, novinarji in kulturni ter izobraževalni delavci, sami nosilci izročila, in celo raziskovalci, mnoga razširjena imena mask uporabljali kot sinonime, ne da bi razumeli razloge za tradicijo maskiranja. V 80. in 90. letih 20. stoletja se je nadaljevalo z rekonstrukcijo maskiranih sprevodov, ne da bi upoštevali značilnosti lokalnih izročil.*

*Enaindvajseto stoletje se je začelo z novim valom obnavljanja in raziskovanja tradicij maskiranja. K temu je prispeval tudi mednarodni festival tradicij maskiranja, saj si je za svoj glavni cilj zadal obnovitev lokalnih tradicij in njihovo popularizacijo v širši družbi. Izvajalci tradicij maskiranja, folklorne skupine, organizatorji kulturnega življenja ter raziskovalci so začeli sodelovati. Med rezultate tega sodelovanja je vračanje k tradiciji, k prvotnim oblikam maskiranja: veciši, budēļi in kaitas. V procesu rekonstrukcije so uporabili različna in med seboj komplementarna orodja:*

- a) etnologi in drugi strokovnjaki so raziskali arhivsko gradivo in izdali publikacije o metodah izdelovanja mask ter drugih spretnostih;*
- b) člani folklornih skupin so se naučili načinov izražanja konkretnih tradicij maskiranja (videza, ritualnih aktivnosti, folklornih veščin itn.);*
- c) organizirali so festivale mednarodnih tradicij maskiranja, kjer so te skupine predstavljale svoje veščine;*
- d) specialisti in raziskovalci so svoje analize in sklepe predstavili članom maskiranih procesij. V procesu rekonstrukcije tradicij maskiranja bi bila dobrodošla vpletenost širšega kroga folklornih skupin in raziskovalcev; to bi spodbudilo izmenjavo, obenem pa širši javnosti omogočilo razumevanje do vključevanja tradicionalne kulture v sodobni svet ter ohranjanja njene živosti.*

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