History of Lithuanian Culture

Dalia Senvaitytė
Rasa Žukienė
Edgaras Klivis
Dalia Kuizinienė
Vijolė Višomirskytė
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The History of Lithuanian Culture was an idea of five authors who aim to present a diverse overview of Lithuanian culture of the 20th century. Five scientists of Vytautas Magnus University, who study Lithuanian culture from various aspects, are the authors of the book. Culture is a reflection of the spiritual activity of each nation. It reflects the forms of the most significant historical memory. The book presents and reveals the most significant development stages of Lithuanian ethnic culture, art, theatre and literature of the 20th century.

Ethnologist Assoc. Prof. Dalia Senvaitytė presents the concepts of modern national culture and national identity, discusses Lithuanian ethnographic regions and the changes of ethnic traditions until the present days by saying that “the perception of national culture develops alongside the formation of a modern nation and the emergence of self-awareness of a modern nation”.

Art historian Prof. Rasa Žukienė focuses on the most important and the most significant development stages of Lithuanian art history. The researcher discusses the manifestations of national romanticism in the early 20th century, as well as the manifestations of modernization of independence, Soviet modernization and the expression of conceptual artistic ideas in contemporary art by presenting both art coryphaei and Lithuanian artists who create nowadays.
Theatre researcher Assoc. Prof. Edgaras Klivis looks for the manifestations of the formation of national Lithuanian theatre from the second half of the 19th century. He presents the most significant changes of Lithuanian theatre of the 20th century through the reconstruction of the past in the theatre of the early 20th century, as well as through the dissemination of modern ideas in the context of Lithuanian theatre, the forms of the Soviet theatre and the newest development stages of the present Lithuanian theatre.

Literary scholar Dr. Vijolė Višomirskytė presents the centenary history of Lithuanian literature through the change of national identity. She focuses on the Lithuanian national revival, the period of independence, Soviet and modern literature. The most significant features are depicted through the analysis of expression of national identity.

Literary historian Assoc. Prof. Dalia Kuizinienė introduces readers to the most important stages of Lithuanian exile literature, the generations of writers of the second half of the 20th century, the works of authors who wrote in English, the rich press of Lithuanian émigrés and the most significant stages of Lithuanian exile theatre.

The author of each monographic chapter presents his/her own attitude towards the depicted aspect of Lithuanian culture. The volume of the publication did not permit authors to develop their topics in more detail or to present the most prominent Lithuanian cultural personalities. Nevertheless, a comprehensive list of literature with bibliographic references, which offers readers the opportunity to read about one or another topic in more detail, is provided in the book as well. The authors present literature in both the Lithuanian and English languages. The book also presents the references of literary anthologies and Internet websites, which give a chance to become acquainted with the works of Lithuanian writers.

_Dalia Kuizinienė_
The History of Lithuanian Culture

DALIA SENVAITYTĖ

Lithuanian Ethnic Culture
Ethnic culture is the culture of one or another concrete ethnus (nation) in a broad sense. Today the concept of Lithuanian ethnic culture is also defined formally, “Ethnic Culture includes the sum total of cultural properties, created by the entire nation (ethnos), passed from generation to generation and constantly renewed, which makes it possible to preserve the national identity and consciousness and uniqueness of ethnographic regions” (Lietuvos etninės kultūros valstybinės globos pagrindų įstatymas // Valstybės žinios. Vilnius, 1999 m. rugsėjo 21 d., Nr. 28, p. 5; Law on the Principles of State Protection of Ethnic Culture No. VIII-1328 of September 21, 1999 (as amended on January 9, 2006 – by Law No. X-484)).

The history of ethnic culture is the history of the everyday lifestyle. There is no doubt that people of any nation have never all lived in the same way, therefore, this type of history focuses on the peculiarities of the majority’s way of living. As the limited extent of the book does not permit a description of all the aspects of everyday living and its change, this chapter presents only the most characteristic features of Lithuanian ethnic culture and the most important factors that have influenced its change. Even though this book is dedicated to the cultural history of the 20th century, as traditional we consider features of Lithuanian ethnic culture that had formed earlier than that. This is why the work inevitably deals with the previous period of time and the features of Lithuanians’ everyday life that have formed during that time.

Individuals living, creating, and representing ethnic culture do not consciously think about their culture. In order to distinguish one or another ethnic
culture and see its specific features, a certain distance is needed. An understanding of national culture develops together with the formation of modern national identity and their self-consciousness. A present-day Lithuanian, singling himself out from other nations, identifies himself with Lithuanian descent and also specific cultural features, first of all, the Lithuanian language, and then – certain imaginary features common to Lithuanian ethnic culture.

On the other hand, the concept of ethnic culture is not homogeneous. Its definition is a matter of agreement among individuals who talk about it. In the Lithuanian language, along with the concept of ethnic culture, the concept of national culture is often used. Both concepts are often used as synonyms, but in certain cases ethnic culture is understood as an artificial construct, created by ideologists of the modern nation on the basis of traditional ethnic culture and representing the specifics of the nation’s culture.

**Modern National Identity and Ethnic Culture**

Theories of national identity differ a lot. The theory of cultural symbolic identity proposed by Anthony D. Smith (see *Theories of nationalism*, 1971, and other works) is probably the one, which best explains the establishment of modern Lithuanian national identity and employing ethnic culture as the basis of that identity. According to this theory, the formation of a state is the result of a long-term process; nations develop from ethnic communities (ethnoses), and the latter – from tribes. Nations are both constructs and the result of a spontaneous process. Some elements of the nation are artificial, however, while constructing them, national intelligentsia selected, codified, and propagated cultural traditions that had already existed before and did not invent any new ones. It also became an important factor in determining the successful spread of the concept of national culture.

When modern Lithuanian national identity was being created in the 19th century, the new Lithuanian intelligentsia played a very important role, choosing national symbols. One of the most important criteria for creating national symbols, along with the Lithuanian language and ancient Lithuanian history,
was ethnic culture. Associating traditional ethnic culture, which at that time was related to the culture of villagers, with the national identity helped to distinguish between “us” (Lithuanians), i.e., those who spoke Lithuanian (and at that time it was basically spoken only by peasants living in villages), and “them” (others, strangers), i.e. first of all, Poles and those who spoke Polish.

Tribal identity and, later, also the state identity of Lithuania was different from that of the 19th–early 20th century. The Grand Duchy of Lithuania (further, GDL), formed in the 13th–14th centuries, was a multinational state where the Lithuanian ethnos made up only a small part of its population. Therefore, ethnic self-consciousness was probably shared by separate and relatively small ethnic unities. Self-consciousness of every such community was formed on the basis of differentiation between the self and the other according to certain cultural characteristics (speaking, behaving, dressing, etc. in the way common among us and not among “others”). The notion of “Lithuanian” was attributed to all inhabitants of the GDL who spoke different languages.

During the period of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the word “nation” determined a community distinguished by its territory and social class. In the 16th century the nobility gradually started to speak Polish, whereas Lithuanian remained the language of people living in Lithuanian villages. The national self-consciousness of the Lithuanian nobility (Lith. bajorai) conformed to the self-consciousness of the state.

Building of the modern Lithuanian national identity and its ideologists’ glance back to the rural culture took place under similar circumstances as the creation of modern national identities in many other European countries. As Norman Davies has noted (Europe: A History, p. 812–821), modern nationalism was greatly stimulated by the French Revolution and then formed in the 19th century under the influence of social and political changes in Europe. There were different forms of nationalism, which could relatively be divided into two groups: 1) state (civil) nationalism, supported by the states’ ruling classes; 2) ethnic (folk) nationalism moved by the requests of communities living in those states, directed against the politics of the ruling powers. The latter type of modern nationalism is common to many Central and Eastern European countries, as well as Lithuania.
The formation of modern Lithuanian national identity was also influenced by the ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Johann G. Fichte, Friedrich W. J. Schelling, Johann. G. Herder and others, which were popular in Europe during the 18th—19th centuries. A nation was started to be considered a community made up of all of its social estates. The spirit of nation was thought to express itself through folk language, customs, mythology, and folklore, which in its turn inspired a romantic interest in the past, languages, customs, and folklore of the European nations. In Lithuania interest in ancient Lithuanian history, language, and folklore grew as well. The uniqueness of the past culture of Lithuania became an object of pride. Gradually the idea was formed that Lithuanians are the same as every other nation, and have a natural right to have their own political organization – a state.

It’s noteworthy that in Lithuania the process of formation of the modern national identity took place under the conditions of occupation by tsarist Russia. In tsarist Russia the internal administrative division of the country was arranged in a way not corresponding to the ethnic borders and, therefore, divided the nations that made part of it. In the second half of the 19th century, even the name of Lithuania was officially abolished and its territory, as the rest of the territory of tsarist Russia that earlier belonged to the GDL, was called the “North-western Krai”. The authorities claimed that the land of Lithuania from ancient times belonged to Russia and was Polonised later. It resulted in efforts to weaken the influence of Poles, which were considered to be political enemies, by the “re-Russification” of the land. However, such policy resulted in something undesirable for tsarist Russia; Russification of the land eventually provoked the birth of the Lithuanian national movement.

In the beginning the fight for the national liberation of Lithuanians was closely related to the fight for the liberation of Polish people (for instance, it may be seen in the aims of the uprisings of 1831 and 1863), however, in the second half of the 19th century, the national aspirations of Lithuanians and Poles gradually separated. The part of participants of the Lithuanian national revival movement looked back on Lithuanian-ness related to the pre-Polish and at the same time pre-Christian “Lithuania of the dukes” (Lith. Kunigaikščių Lietuva). Later on a new Christian trend oriented towards Lithuanian-ness started to form, and
church services in the Lithuanian language were introduced. Patriotic Lithuanians tried to define their cultural self-perception by juxtaposing their language, ancient history and ethnic culture against those of Poles.

In the 19th century Simonas Daukantas was the first to write about Lithuanian history and the ethnic culture of Lithuanians in the Lithuanian language. With the help of his works Daukantas tried to make Lithuanians proud of their culture and the past. Specific attention was paid to the resistance to the Russification of Lithuania (for instance, Motiejus Valančius was the first bishop who did not idealize the pre-Christian times, but focused on Lithuanian-ness).

The newly formed Lithuanian intelligentsia that was made up of people who had originated from the common people living in the countryside and, the Lithuanian press that they published (the first newspapers published in the Lithuanian Language in the territory of Lithuania Minor were “Aušra” (“The Dawn”) and “Varpas” (“The Bell”), which were carried illegally across the border to “Lithuania Major” together with other publications) and, at the same time, the standardization of the Lithuanian language significantly contributed to the creation of the modern Lithuanian national identity and its ideas. While passing into national identity, based on the Lithuanian language, the transformation of people’s individual identities took place. For instance, Vincas Kudirka wrote I was saying that I am both Lithuanian and at the same time Polish, because it was history to unite Poles and Lithuanians. Later on he decided to become a Lithuanian, rejecting the Polish part of his identity.

During the process of formation of the Lithuanian national identity, very important significance was given not only to history and language, but also to ethnic culture, which, as it was already stated above, first of all, was associated with Lithuanian rural culture. Since the second half of the 19th century, recording, (re-) construction, and animating of various elements of ethnic culture became an important form of the expression of the Lithuanian national identity. Enthusiasts of national culture, inspired by the romantic understanding of the nation’s spirit reflected in folk culture, collected old facts connected to the ancient Lithuanian culture and its folklore. The older relics were recorded, the more authentic they were considered, and, therefore, were more suitable to
represent the ideal picture of the national culture, which was in the process of construction.

Due to the fact that intense interest in Lithuanian ethnic culture and its collecting started in the 19th century, material recorded during that period, and later explicated as specifically national Lithuanian culture, first of all had features common to the rural culture of the 19th century. It is noteworthy that, on the one hand, the traditional rural way of living had already undergone certain specific changes, determined by the abolition of serfdom and the newly forming capitalist relations. On the other hand, old people’s memories about past times and the Lithuanian village still under serfdom also had an impact on the understanding and the imagination of what that Lithuanian culture is/was like. Besides, it also has to be kept in mind that folklore recorders of that time collected material and published it in a rather selective way by picking out the phenomena, as they thought, proper to represent Lithuanian culture or, in other words, all the best that the nation had adopted often by ignoring “improper” cultural issues.

The intelligentsia of that time not only looked back to the ancient Lithuanian ethnic culture, but also set themselves as an object to “win back” cities from foreigners (because Lithuanians mostly lived in villages at that time, whereas most of the urban population in towns consisted of representatives of other nationalities: Jews, Russians, Poles, Germans) and, therefore, moved to towns and created active associations there. Side by side with the construction of national culture, based on ethnic culture, and attempts to adapt it to the new times, they also sought to create modern urban culture and develop “high” national culture.
Features of Traditional Lithuanian Ethnic Culture (Until the 19th c.)

The origins of Lithuanian ethnic culture are closely related to the dawn and development of the Lithuanian nation. The origin and culture of Lithuanians is closely related to the Baltic tribes (first of all – the Lithuanian tribe) and carry on the tradition of the culture of the Balts.

The specific features of Lithuanian ethnic culture were determined by the natural environment. Natural conditions determined the nature of economic activities, varieties of agricultural crops (rye, wheat, barley, oats, hemp, etc.), livestock (horses, cows, pigs, sheep, etc.), domestic birds, and, in consequence, the nature of products and food. Accordingly, natural conditions determined the peculiarities of architecture, the way of dressing, etc. For instance, it is natural that in the land, which is still the land of forests (and was especially wooded in the past), wood was the main building material, and most home items and working tools were also made of wood.

Lithuanian ethnic culture, from this point of view, has much in common with the cultures of neighbouring countries. In the flow of time, different historical conditions, administrational issues, contacts with other cultures, as well as technical and technological developments gradually changed and modified the Lithuanian lifestyle.

In the traditional Lithuanian village subsistence economy predominated and people used to produce everything they would need for living themselves. More complicated works (reaping of rye, pulling flax, building of different structures, etc.), were performed with the help of neighbours. Only very specific articles were usually bought from artisans. Works used to be divided according to gender and age (for instance, women most often prepared food, spun, wove, did the laundry, and looked after children, men did the majority of the agricultural and animal husbandry jobs, whereas children, depending on their age, helped the adults, herded animals, etc.).

Traditional Lithuanian ethnic culture is especially closely related to the formation of the rural community and its way of living. Researchers’ opinions on the time and circumstances of the formation of rural communities differ; how-