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Latvian Folk Dance: Sustaining Cultural Heritage in the Context of Christianity and Communism

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Sustaining Cultural Heritage in the Context of Christianity and Communism"*

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**Latvian Folk Dance:
Sustaining Cultural Heritage Within the Context of Christianity and Communism**

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Emilija Karina Grinvalds
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For Eduards Grinvalds.

Many thanks to Susan McGuire and Paul Valliere.

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Introduction

In times of chaos and violence, brutality and oppression, one would not think of the arts as a guiding light for maintaining cultural identity and establishing peace and independence. However, the small country of Latvia serves as a prime example of how the arts, specifically folk dance, helped to maintain Latvian culture through centuries of oppression and war. As Swedish and German missionaries sought to spread Christianity throughout the pagan tribes in the 11th century, dance helped to sustain the cultural and religious beliefs of the ancient Latvians. Folk dance created a sense of unity within their communities, and the Christian missionaries were not able to suppress the art form enough to discontinue its ritualistic use. Jumping forward to the 20th century, folk dance played an important role in what is known as “the Singing Revolution” that began in 1987 and eventually led to the independence of the Baltic States in 1991. Large-scale Song and Dance Festivals served as the platform for this artistic protest movement. Whilst under the grasp of the Soviet Union, Latvian folk dance served as a form of political protest, which created a sense of unity by reminding Latvians of their cultural heritage, and ultimately bolstering their national movement.

This thesis will attempt to answer the question: How has Latvian folk dance helped to sustain Latvian cultural identity in spite of the introduction of Christianity and the oppression of communism?

Through the analysis of historical, cultural and theological texts, notated folk dances, interviews with current Latvian theological historians, and my own experience as a Latvian folk dancer, I will gain an understanding of the Latvian folk dances and their connection to the culture and beliefs of ancient and modern Latvians. I will specifically focus on how

changes in the fabric of society affected Latvian folk dancing during two periods: the introduction of Christianity in the 11th century and communist rule from 1918-1991.

The Nature of Folk Dance

Let us first define folk dance and its historical use in society. The study of “ethnic dance” became popular among anthropologists during the Victorian age. Despite their efforts in studying dance as it related to various cultures, their ethnographies often overgeneralized the dances and the people; painting pictures of primitive savages dancing wildly in a ritualistic ceremony to honor their gods. Since then, folk dance has not been able to rid itself fully of the “primitive” label. Ethnochoreology is the modern branch of anthropological study of dance in terms of its cultural setting, positions of individuals and sexes, organization and economic patterns. Ethnochoreologist Drid Williams presented a series of historical explanations as to why “primitive” people danced.¹ Some of these widely accepted explanations included:

1. Dance is fun and relaxing and serves as an entertainment and leisure activity
2. People need to fulfill a biological or instinctual need to communicate (implying dance as a precursor to language)
3. To communicate symbols from their everyday lives
4. A need to experience catharsis
5. A spiritualistic or religious manifestation

Other historical explanations from Victorian anthropologists argued that ethnic dance originated from sexual acts (Ellis, 1920) or the “primitive” people’s desire to imitate animalistic behavior (Sachs, 1937). Another popular historical view was that dance stemmed

¹ Williams, Drid. *Anthropology and the Dance: Ten Lectures*. Urbana: University of Illinois, 2004. Print.

from people's desire to play (Huizinga and Jensen 1949) and return to a childlike state (Frobenius, 1908).²

While some of these explanations may be valid, they cannot all apply simultaneously to a single culture. They also do not account for the invisible aspects of dance, where most of the meaning of dance lies. Drid Williams writes that when people dance together they are creating and maintaining social relationships, strengthening their social connections, and enacting roles that are significant to them based on history, politics, mythology, or religion.³ The dance is therefore a collection of signs and symbols rather than a symptom of the personal feelings of the dancers and choreographers. What is visible is the expression of the choreographer's and participant's knowledge of human existence, expressed through symbols within a dance.⁴

Dance theorist Rudolf von Laban stated in 1966, "The whole world is filled with unceasing movement. An unsophisticated mind has no difficulty in comprehending movement as life."⁵ This basic principle, that life is movement, and without movement, life would not exist, is fundamental to understanding dance in society. However, folk dance is more than just patterned movement performed by people of a particular culture. According to ethnochoreologist Anna Duggan, folk dance may be defined as, "The traditional dances of a given country which have evolved naturally and spontaneously in conjunction with everyday activities and experiences of the people who developed them."⁶ This definition accounts for the ever-evolving form that is dance. As the political, economic and social landscape changes,

² Williams, Drid. *Anthropology and the Dance: Ten Lectures*. Urbana: University of Illinois, 2004. Print.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Duggan, Anna S., et al. 1948. *Folk dances of the United States and Mexico*. (From "Folk Dance Library" Series.) New York.

dance remains as a significant part of culture and society. The pattern that emerges is that in times of greatest stress and oppression, the arts come to the forefront as a representation of national identity, solidarity and power.

While reading this essay, it is important to consider the difficulty in recording dance and inherent biases that occur as dance is passed on to future generations. Dance, as a language of the body is a subjective art form, meaning the way it is learned and performed is entirely dependent on the people performing the dance and the environment they are in. This allows for subtle changes in choreography or meaning as dance is passed down, but it also allows for freedom in new interpretations. While it is impossible to pinpoint the exact choreography of the dances performed by the ancient Latvians, meaning can still be gleaned from the dances that we do have a record of. In this essay I do not claim to know or possess any original Latvian folk dance choreography. The dances that I researched were from written recordings and missionary texts. It is impossible to say that the ancient Latvians performed these dances precisely as they were described, but the fact that they were recorded and are still being analyzed and performed today nevertheless makes them valuable resources.

Modern anthropologists now look to traditional dances as a way to learn more about the inner workings of a culture; mainly, the way people interact with one another and form relationships. Essentially, the dance becomes a microcosm for the culture. Because Latvian folk dance is performed in couples within a large group setting, one can learn about the way people are valued as individuals and the way genders interact with one another. The degree to which dancers are allowed to express themselves through interpretive dance can correlate to the degree of creative license and innovation within a society. In ritual societies, the dance can be reflective of the social hierarchy because the performance of the dance is organized in

accordance with the objectives and values of the enacting group.⁷ Dances can also reveal information about the geographical location and general environment. Historical anthropologists once believed and argued that people who lived in warmer climates danced slower, and people who lived in colder climates danced faster in order to increase their body temperature.⁸ While this belief is a complete generalization and only promotes further stereotyping, I think it is still important to examine how the dance is reflective of the natural environment of the culture without making broad statements. Dances can also reveal how the society conserves its cultural heritage. By examining the roots of dance steps and the dances of nearby cultures, one can learn about the degree of diffusion, or the spreading of culture. The borrowing of certain dance steps helps to paint a picture of how the society interacts with other cultures and how they influence one another.

The Lives of the Ancient Latvians

The ancestors of the Baltic people were believed to have inhabited the coast of the Baltic Sea nearly 6,000 years B.C. By the third century A.D., the Baltic ancestors formed five tribes on the coast of the Baltic Sea. The tribes planted their territories near rivers and large water sources. The longest river flowing down the center of Latvia, known as the Daugava, was the main source for transportation and trade. The Couronian tribe of the western Baltic coast, the Semigallian tribe to the west of the Daugava in the central region, the Selonian tribe to the west of the Daugava in the south, and the Latgallian tribe to the east and north of the Daugava, all fought against each other to maintain their territories and

⁷ La, Barre Weston. *Anthropological Perspectives of Movement*. New York: Arno, 1975. Print.

⁸ Lawson, Joan. *European Folk Dance; Its National and Musical Characteristics*. London: Pitman, 1953. Print.

defend their borders from the Lithuanians, Poles and Prussians.⁹ The tribes were largely comprised of hunters and gatherers, surviving on the fruits of the forest and the animals of the land and sea. Of the all the tribes that inhabited the area, only the descendants of Latvians and Lithuanians remain in the region today, and they also are the only two remaining cultures with their Baltic language intact.

Moving into the 9th century, the tribes were ruled by chiefs, creating a greater sense of organization and community. The introduction of agriculture also helped to establish villages and towns. The tribes began to join forces against the Scandinavians and the Slavs to protect their territory. The seafaring Couronian tribe developed quite a reputation and was most feared throughout Europe. In c. 1080, Adam of Bremen, a Viking, described the Latvian Couronians as being the most merciless of tribes, practicing sorcery and “possessing the best horses.”¹⁰ The Baltic tribes may not have practiced sorcery, but they did continue to carry out rituals to connect themselves to the spirits of the earth through song, poetry and dance.

The Ancient Latvian Calendar

As a result of their reliance on the earth for their food, shelter, and basic living needs, the Latvians based their calendar on the Solar Year and the changing of the seasons. Evidence of their time reckoning system is known through the study of ancient Latvian *dainas*, or folksongs, which can be compared to the Vedas of India.¹¹ The *dainas* depict everyday life, religious beliefs and rituals and holidays through poetry and song. These folksongs were passed down by word of mouth from generation to generation, but an effort

⁹ Cedrins, Peteris. Print. <http://www.kultura.lv/en/heritage/157/>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Grīns, Margērs, and Māra Grīna. *Latviešu Gads, Gadskārta Un Godi*. Rīga: Everest, 1992. Print.

to collect and record them began in the 19th century. It is believed that some of the *dainas* have remained unchanged throughout the centuries and could possibly date back to the early Iron Age.

The *dainas* show evidence that the ancient Latvians divided the year into eight festivals, four of which coincided with the changing of the seasons. The other four were spaced in between those.¹² This created units of 45 days between each festival, and the remaining calendar days were added onto the Winter Festival and Spring Festival celebrations. The four major holidays included:

Ziemassvetki - Winter Solstice
Lieldienas - Spring Equinox
Jani - St. John's Day also known as the Summer Solstice (near June 21st)
Mikeli - Autumn Equinox

The following four lesser holidays marked the beginning of each season and included:

Meteni - Spring
Usini - Summer
Maras - Autumn
Martini - Winter

This calendar system differs from the Gregorian calendar because the holidays do fall on the same date each year.¹³ The first usage of the Gregorian calendar in Latvia occurred in 1752, but the observance of these traditional holidays follows the ancient system.¹⁴

Each holiday had specific rituals to be performed that also carried symbolic meaning in invoking good luck and fortune from the gods. The holidays were observed to, “assure bountiful crops and the future welfare of the people and livestock, as well as express appreciation for benefits received in the past.”¹⁵ Studies of these ancient festivals reveal that

¹² Grīns, Marģers, and Māra Grīna. *Latviešu Gads, Gadskārta Un Godi*. Rīga: Everest, 1992. Print.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

many elements of the festivals were borrowed from other ancient Indo-European tribes. One of these elements was the use of personification to assign human qualities to the gods so that they could be present on Earth and help carry out each festival.¹⁶

Ancient Latvian Gods and Goddesses

These ancient deities were called the *Dievadeli*, or literally translated, “the Sons of God”. It is important to clarify that the term “God” at this time did not refer to the Christian God, but rather the Supreme Being who controlled the Universe.¹⁷ The ancient Latvians used the word *Dievs* (God) interchangeably with their concept of heaven or the afterlife. A clearer translation of *Dievadeli* would be “the Sons of Heaven,” because the Supreme Being did not actually have any sons or daughters.¹⁸ The *Dievadeli* were thought to live in the sky among the sun, the moon and the stars, which was also where the soul went when someone died. Similar to the dual meaning of the word *Dievs*, many of the names of other Latvian mythical beings were shared names with Christian figures. This was helpful for the Christian missionaries as they tried to find similarities between the two belief systems in order to spread their religion. This is evident in the Goddesses *Mara* and *Laima*, who represented two aspects of the Supreme Being. *Mara* is also called the Mother of the Earth, which sounds strangely similar to the name *Marija*, or Mary, the Mother of Jesus Christ. *Mara* is in charge of all life and death on Earth. She controls the water, the earth, and harvest. She is also the protector of fertility, and she ushers the souls of the deceased into the afterlife. *Laima* is the Goddess of Fate, who works alongside *Mara*. She dictates the length of one’s life, the

¹⁶ Grīns, Marģers, and Māra Grīna. *Latviešu Gads, Gadskārtā Un Godi*. Rīga: Everest, 1992. Print.

¹⁷ Grīns, Marģers, and Māra Grīna. *Latviešu Gads, Gadskārtā Un Godi*. Rīga: Everest, 1992. Print.

¹⁸ Grīns, Marģers, and Māra Grīna. *Latviešu Gads, Gadskārtā Un Godi*. Rīga: Everest, 1992. Print.

happiness of a marriage, and the prosperity of a family. *Dievs*, *Mara* and *Laima* are considered the main forces controlling the Universe.

Several other lesser gods that control aspects of nature include: *Perkons* (Thunder), *Meness* (Moon), *Saule* (Sun), and *Auseklis* (Morningstar). *Perkons* is also called the Old Father, and he is the God of justice and warfare. He wards off evil and fights against enemies. *Meness* is called the Father of the Sky. The waxing and waning phases of the moon symbolize vulnerability and perishability, which is why he is also the guardian of warriors and agriculture. *Saule* is the symbol of life and motion, which is why she is so often alluded to in folk dances. *Saule* is also known as the Mother of all Children, and she is responsible for giving warmth to the earth. *Auseklis* is the God of hope and victory against darkness and evil.

Many other lesser deities are personified as characters and are thought to live on Earth and walk with humans on certain holidays. They are in charge of regulating the rituals of holidays, and to communicate with the celestial Gods. These lesser Gods are also believed to arrive and depart over a hill, symbolizing the movement of the sun.¹⁹ These Gods include: *Metenis*, *Usins*, *Janis*, *Mikelis*, and *Martins*. When these Gods arrive at the celebratory festivals, they are treated as honored guests. They are showered with gifts, songs, dances, food and drink. In order to prepare for the arrival of the Gods, families clean their homes, brew beer, bake bread, slaughter livestock, make new clothing, and cook large feasts in accordance with the season and holiday rituals.²⁰

¹⁹ Grīns, Marģers, and Māra Grīna. *Latviešu Gads, Gadskārtā Un Godi*. Rīga: Everest, 1992. Print.

²⁰ Grīns, Marģers, and Māra Grīna. *Latviešu Gads, Gadskārtā Un Godi*. Rīga: Everest, 1992. Print.

Signs of the Latvian Gods

An important aspect of the ancient religion is that each God is represented by a symbolic ornament. These symbols are found in jewelry, pottery, textiles, architecture, and the formations of Latvian folk dances. These symbols are more than just visual signs or pictures; they are instilled with magical properties that invoke the power of the Gods they represent. The function of the symbol is to act as an intermediary to provide communication and understanding of something else.²¹ “Although symbols can hardly describe an abstract concept as precisely written or spoken language, they speak to our imaginative thinking, which without, we would lose the magical comprehension of our Universe. Symbols are keys that call on upon our traditional cultural heritage and orient our current and future actions.”²² The origin of these ancient symbols is difficult to determine, but it is believed that they are based upon a very basic understanding of the rhythm and geography of life.

²¹ Celms, Valdis. *Latvju Raksts Un Zīmes: Baltu Pasaules Modelis : Uzbūve, Tēli, Simbolika*. Rīga: Folkloras Informācijas Centrs, 2007. Print.

²² Celms, Valdis. *Latvju Raksts Un Zīmes: Baltu Pasaules Modelis : Uzbūve, Tēli, Simbolika*. Rīga: Folkloras Informācijas Centrs, 2007. Print.

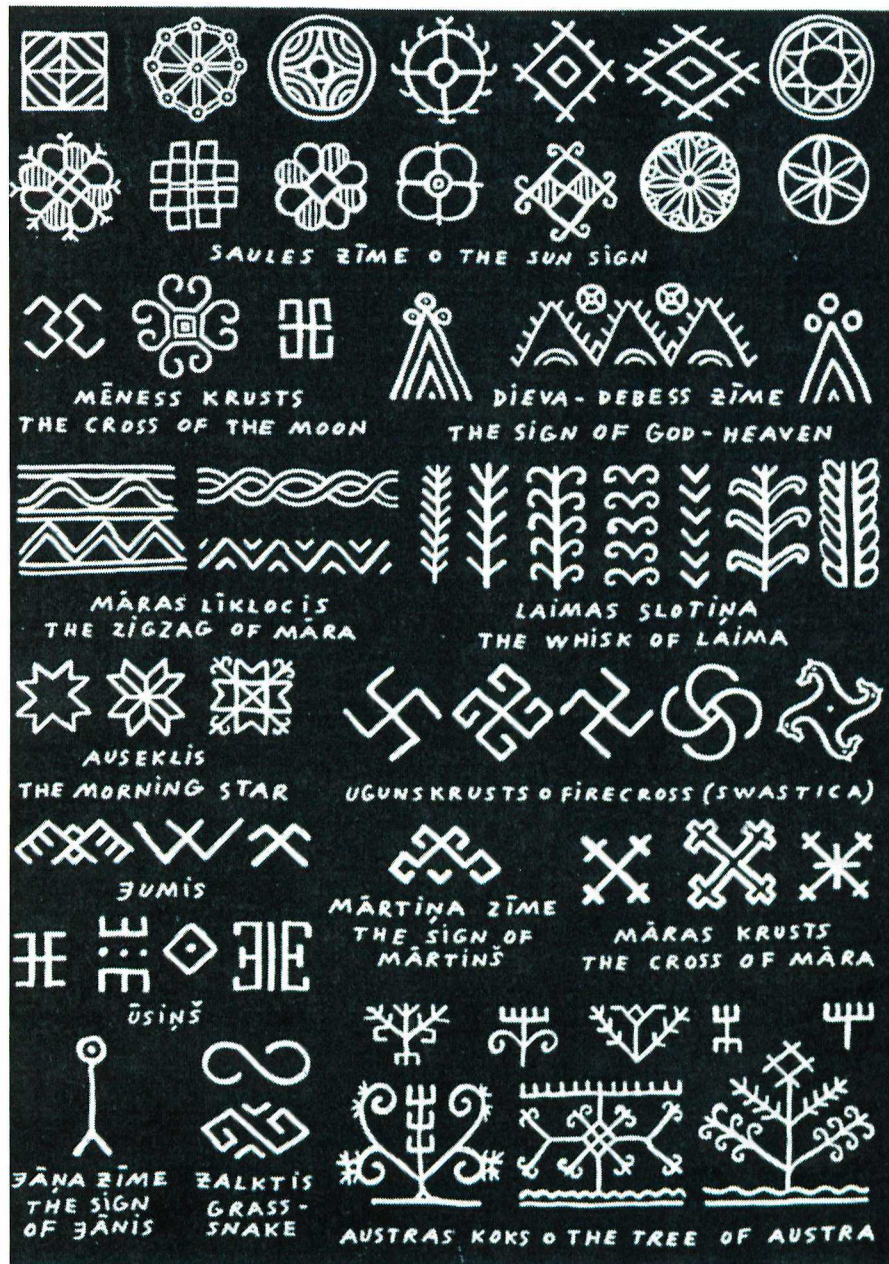


Figure 1²³

All symbols are variations on the use of lines, directions, and points. A straight vertical line is representative of the connection between heaven and earth. A straight horizontal line is representative of the land, or horizon. A circle is a curved line centered on a

²³ Kletnieks, Voldemars. *Sencu Raksti: Latvju Raksti Berniem*. Riga: Laikraksta Dailrade, 1990. Print.

point in space, which is representative of unity and harmony. Often the signs are quite literal in their symbolism. See Figure 1 for the visual representations of these symbols. The *saule* (sun) symbol is almost always circular and has spokes emanating from the center, like sunrays. The sign of *Mara* is often a zigzag horizontal line, similar to the waves of the sea, which she controls. The firecross, or swastika, which is representative of *Perkons*, the God of thunder, is a derivative of the *saule* symbol. It is constructed from a vertical and horizontal line, which creates a cross. The cross is tilted on the diagonal, which makes it appear to be more dynamic and suggestive of movement and power. It is important to understand that these symbolic ornaments were more than decoration. Improper use of these symbols was considered a crime and was thought to be able to damage one's health and future.²⁴ Therefore, significant attention was placed on the proper education in the symbols. This is evident in the learning of folk dances, where the symbolic formations are considered the most challenging part of the dance.

Characteristics of Latvian Folk Dance

Dances typically were performed to build a sense of community and to portray everyday events surrounding agriculture, and corresponded with the changing of the seasons. Dances were also performed to honor special life events such as births, weddings and funerals. Dancing played an important role in the worship of the ancient Latvian deities, who were believed to have control over the Universe and the afterlife.

Latvian folk dances are most often performed in couples, with a male and a female. Generally, males and females dance the same steps except with a different emphasis. Men

²⁴ Celms, Valdis. *Latvju Raksts Un Zīmes: Baltu Pasaules Modelis : Uzbūve, Tēli, Simbolika*. Rīga: Folkloras Informācijas Centrs, 2007. Print.

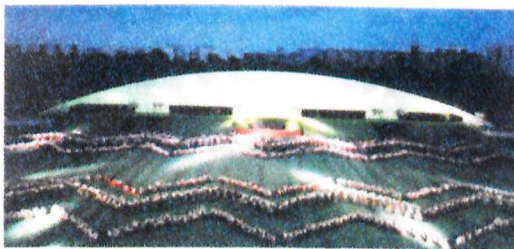
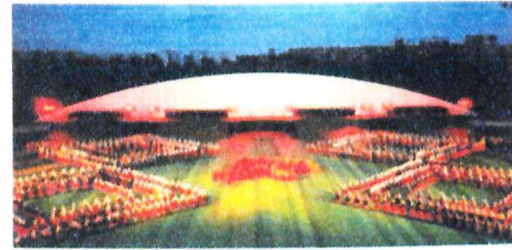
dance with a greater sense of weight and strength as they stamp their feet into the ground, and women dance with ease and lightness. Most often, dances have between four and eight couples. Most folk dances are made up of only four different steps: the polka, walking, small running steps, and the gallop. All Latvian folk dances are some combination of these basic steps, which makes them very easy to learn. However, what differentiates Latvian folk dance from many other types of dance is the use of geometric patterns. As the couples dance, they move in accordance with each other to create different symbols on the floor space (see figure 2). These symbolic patterns can be very simple, such as a circle or a square, or very complex, such as a firecross (swastika), or a sun (wheel). There are no solo performances or moments to “show off” virtuosic technique during Latvian folk dances. However, that does not imply that Latvian folk dance requires little technique. Emphasis is placed on the carriage of the upper body, the precision of the arms and steps, acuteness to the music, and the ability to sense the space. Not having solos also creates a greater feeling of community and unity because there is no competition and everyone’s participation is equally valued.



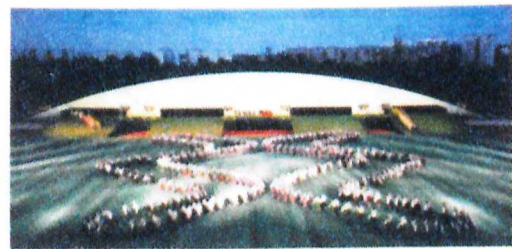
Zeme



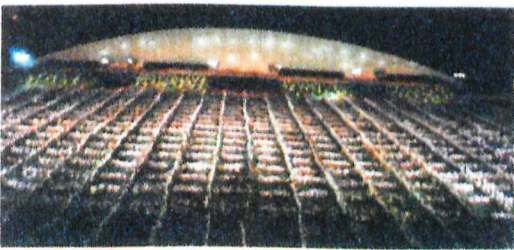
Uguns



Ūdens



Gaiss



Debesu kalējs

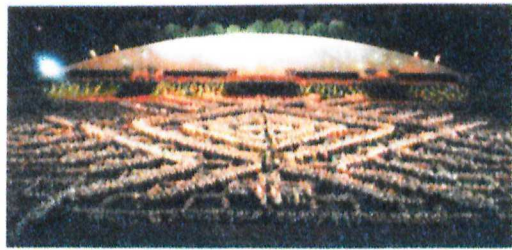


Foto: Valdis Celms

Figure 2²⁵

²⁵ Celms, Valdis. *Latvju Raksts Un Zīmes: Baltu Pasaules Modelis : Uz-būve, Tēli, Simbolika*. Rīga: Folkloras Informācijas Centrs, 2007. Print.

Musical accompaniment to Latvian folk dances often includes singers, percussive instruments, bagpipes, violins, *kokles* (type of zither), and reed flutes. The tempo is usually very lively and upbeat, and dancers often clap and stamp their feet to the rhythm of the music. When the dancing becomes exceedingly vivacious, dancers will even vocalize their joy through melodic howling. When performing Latvian folk dance, dancers are expected to wear the national costume which is representative of their dance troupe or of their hometown. Men wear woolen suits in grey or tan over an embroidered linen shirt. The embroidery on their jacket corresponds to a geographical area in Latvia. Sometimes they will wear large metal belts embellished with rubies or other jewels, and they wear charms on the backs of their tall boots to make a pleasant sound as they move. Females typically wear a linen blouse, a corset-like vest, and a heavy woolen skirt that nearly touches the floor and is woven with elaborate patterns and stripes that are representative of their geographic location. They also wear long woven belts and black character shoes. In the ancient times, both men and women wore *pastalnieki*, which were sandals that laced up the ankle and were made of thick tan leather. Sometimes men wear hats, but they typically do not while dancing. Females wear either a short white headscarf or some type of crown. The marital status of the female dictates which style of headdress she should wear. Married women wear the headscarf, while young females typically wear crowns woven from flowers.

The Feast of St. John

Jani, or the Feast of St. John, is one of the most important and joyous Latvian celebrations of the year. It occurs on June 22nd, the summer solstice, which is the longest day and shortest night of the year. The celebration is held in honor of *Janis*, who is the

personified son of the Supreme Being, and one of the *Dievadeli*. *Janis* is portrayed as a Dionysian-like character and is said to arrive on the back of a horse with his beautiful wife and children. All participants are called *Jamuberni*, or the children of Janis. Traditionally Latvians stay up all night singing, dancing, drinking beer and eating St. John's cheese in honor of *Janis*. The holiday stems from an ancient sun-worshipping cult ritual that was common among many European cultures. To name a few, the Greeks idolized Apollo, the Romans worshipped Janus, the Indians worshipped Devjana, the Germans had Ianus, the Etruscans had Ani, and the Slavic people worshipped Jans.²⁶ Where the ritual began is unknown, but the wide evidence of sun worship across such a broad expanse of land proves how vital the sun was to life, and also suggests that some of the cultures could have come in contact with each other at some point. There are an estimated 2,000 *dainas* that describe the events of the celebration, most of which are still practiced today.²⁷ One of the most important elements of the holiday is the burning of a great bonfire. The lighting of a bonfire is symbolic in several ways. The fire is representative of the sun because it is the giver of warmth and light. Without fire, food could not be cooked, and therefore it is also symbolic of the hearth and home. Lastly, as the bonfire is lit when the sun begins to set, it represents the victory of good over evil and light over darkness.²⁸ The festival is also a celebration of fertility and community. If all elements of the celebration go as planned, and everyone lasts through the night, then everyone will have a bountiful and productive summer and harvest season.²⁹

²⁶ Grīns, Marģers, and Māra Grīna. *Latviešu Gads, Gadskārtā Un Godi*. Rīga: Everest, 1992. Print.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

To prepare for the holiday, women take care of their flowerbeds, prepare the feast, craft special cheese in the shape of solar disks, and clean their homes. It was the responsibility of the men to brew beer, build the bonfires and prepare the land. Families also decorated their festivity area with birch and oak branches, green garlands and wildflowers. Oak branches were believed to ward off evil spirits, and therefore they played an important role in the selection of an area to celebrate. The celebration was a community affair, and many families would gather together to prepare for the festival. People often travelled from one festivity area to the next until they found a group of people they wanted to celebrate with. While the adults took care of the food and hanging decorations, the elder community members watched over the children and sang folk songs about the sun. Children and young adults went off into the meadows in search of magical ferns, wildflowers and oak branches to weave into crowns for everyone to wear. Other essential rituals included filling a bucket with tar and placing it on the end of a pole, high into the air, and lighting it at the beginning of the celebration. Once the bucket burnt out, the rituals of the celebration were considered fulfilled.

As the sun set, the festivities commenced when the bonfire was lit. It was believed that jumping over the bonfire would cleanse the soul and instill a sense of optimism and light in the jumper. Everyone sat around the fire, drank and ate, and sang *Ligo* into the night. Songs were very simple, and usually repeated the word *Ligo*, which means to sway or make merry. The idea was that everyone would sway into the following morning. Dancing would not begin until *Janis* arrived over the hill and led the group in a traditional folk dance.³⁰

The original choreography of the *Jani* folk dance is unknown; however the *dainas* suggest that the steps were very simple and the dance was not performed in couples. *Janis*, the mythical being, began the dance around the fire in a circular pattern and then led the

³⁰ Grīns, Margers, and Māra Grīna. *Latviešu Gads, Gadskārta Un Godi*. Rīga: Everest, 1992. Print.

dance around an oak tree. Very little is known about this original dance. However, missionary texts describe the steps as “jumping” rather than “dancing.”³¹ Perhaps it was because the missionaries’ German heritage and education gave them a certain idea about what dancing should look like, and these Latvian pagans were far too vivacious to be considered dancing. This differing translation of the word “dancing” could also be just that - a mistranslation. It is also likely that the dancers at times held hands and also sang *Ligo* with the rest of the group. The simplicity in this dance also allowed for everyone of all ages to be able to participate. By the end of the dance *Janis* leads the line of dancers into the house of the host family in order to bring happiness and light into the house.

This notion of dancing as a form of communication with the Gods can be a difficult concept to grasp. It is important to understand that the dances themselves can produce emotions of happiness, joy and catharsis. However, anthropologist Paul Radin writes:

“In an individual’s experience, the acquisition of rites and beliefs preceded the emotions which are said to accompany them before he experiences any emotion at all, so the emotional state, whatever it may be, and if there is one, can hardly be the genesis and explanation of them. A rite is part of the culture the individual is born into, and it imposes itself on him from the outside like the rest of his culture.”³²

Therefore, the emotions experienced after dancing are a part of the rite, which are a learned part of the culture. The emotions cannot proceed the dancing, which means that the act of dancing is an activity that is much greater than our comprehension. While people are dancing, they are organizing, attaining, experiencing, communicating and representing their beliefs as their culture dictates upon them.

Examining the formations of this ancient sun-cult dance reveals more information about the beliefs of the people. First, it is known that the large group encircles the bonfire.

³¹ Biezais, Haralds. *Seno Latviešu Debesu Dievu ģimene*. Rīga: Minerva, 1998. Print.

³² Williams, Drid. *Anthropology and the Dance: Ten Lectures*. Urbana: University of Illinois, 2004. Print.

The circle is a very basic but meaningful symbol. Dancing in a circle creates a sense of unity and community around a common object. Encircling the bonfire is further evidence of its significance to the celebration. The circle is a symbol for the sun and harmony. It was believed that the circle created magic within its structure, while also separating its contents from the outside world. The circle is also associated with light and warmth and represents the continuation of life. Just like the sun, the circle is immortal.³³ The *dainas* also discuss the encircling of an oak tree. The oak tree, or *ozols*, is a symbol of strength, growth, life and power. The dancers believed that by encircling the tree, some of its power would transfer onto them.

The Effect of Christianity on Folk Dance

In the 11th century, the Crusades led an armed struggle against paganism in the Baltic region. Swedish merchants were tired of constantly being raided by Estonian and Kurish (Courland) marauders, so they sought to spread Christianity into the area in order to control them.³⁴ The Crusades were mostly unsuccessful due to the lack of control and the lack of communication and conversation with the native tribes. In the beginning, the Crusaders did not even leave governors or churchmen to oversee the area when they left, because they knew it was unsafe. They did not want to continue because they knew that, "even peaceful conversation would result with a bastardized form of Christianity...that may even be dangerous to the true believers at home."³⁵

³³ Celms, Valdis. *Latvju Raksts Un Zīmes: Baltu Pasaules Modelis : Uzbūve, Tēli, Simbolika*. Rīga: Folkloras Informācijas Centrs, 2007. Print.

³⁴ Urban, William L. *The Teutonic Knights: A Military History*. London: Greenhill, 2003. Print.

³⁵ Ibid.

It was not so much that the pagan tribes were bloodthirsty and ruthless, but rather they wanted to remain independent. Their goal was to set the great powers against each other to destroy their local rivals.³⁶ By the 12th century there was a renewed effort by the Roman Catholic Church to expand their territory. In Livonia, or present-day Latvia, the Swedes and Danes were attempting to take over the port city, Riga, by way of the Daugava. The Germans were attempting to overthrow the Swedes. The tribes were largely successful in setting the two against each other and dodging the Christian church.³⁷

Bishop Meinhard from Germany was one of the first missionaries to stay in 1180. He built two fortifications to protect him and hired mercenary troops to defend his land. But when it came time to preach the gospel to the tribes and attempt to form relations, the pagan priests would have nothing to do with him. His attempts at mass baptism were also unsuccessful. Documents from that time describe the pagans symbolically washing off their baptism in the water of the Daugava River.³⁸ Meinhard died soon after, but his experience laid the groundwork for future missionary attempts. In 1197 Berthold, a monk, was left in charge of Meinhard's original mission. He sought to make friends with the local chieftains, but was disappointed.³⁹ In response to his friendly efforts, the pagans consecrated a cemetery, burnt down his church and sought to kill him as he fled back to his ship. Extremely disturbed by what he had experienced, he returned to Germany and Sweden and wrote a letter to the Pope asking for permission to lead an army against the tribes. In 1198 Berthold returned to the Baltic coast with a well-armed army made up of men from Gotland and Saxony.⁴⁰ This time, the tribes allowed him to stay on the land so long as he used persuasion, not force, to

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Urban, William L. *The Teutonic Knights: A Military History*. London: Greenhill, 2003. Print.

³⁸ Avotiņa, Austra. *Latvijas Kultūras Vēsture*. Rīgā: Zvaigzne ABC, 2003. Print

³⁹ Urban, William L. *The Teutonic Knights: A Military History*. London: Greenhill, 2003. Print.

⁴⁰ Urban, William L. *The Teutonic Knights: A Military History*. London: Greenhill, 2003. Print.

preach the new faith. When Berthold demanded the release of several hostages, the Livonian tribesmen launched an attack on his troops. Ironically, the only one killed in this attack was Berthold himself. When the battle was over, the troops left a few garrisons in the land and sailed home. The pagan tribes surrounded the castles and threatened the monks that if any of them stayed, they would be killed. The monks, knowing that they were far outnumbered and unwanted, fled.⁴¹

Bishop Albert of Saxony was the only bishop to have any success in the region. He brought a large army from Saxony, founded the capital city, Riga, and with his organized troops he overwhelmed the tribes. Unlike the first missionaries, Bishop Albert's first step was to make the native elder tribesmen a knightly class of their own.⁴² This was partially successful because very few of the elders had sufficient funds to outfit their new status. Albert's second strategy was to grant tax relief to the German knights and his friends and to share some of his church funding so that they would not have to rely on the land. Many of these knights married native women, which created a larger upper class that supported his efforts. His final strategy was to create a new military order called the Swordbrothers. The Swordbrothers acted as a more reliable source of defense and protection, and were trained to be more professional warriors. When Bishop Albert moved his church to Riga, the city soon became a bustling trade and port center. Russian traders travelled along the Daugava to trade their furs and goods with the traders from Germany, Denmark and Sweden. The Swordbrothers continued to protect the Bishop and the land for many years, and remained loyal to the Pope.⁴³

⁴¹ Urban, William L. *The Teutonic Knights: A Military History*. London: Greenhill, 2003. Print.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

As the missionaries attempted to change the ancient belief systems of the native tribes, they realized that it would not be an easy task because the rites and rituals were deeply embedded. The ancient Latvians did not take to mass baptism or any imposing threat to their land and culture.⁴⁴ The first missionary attempts were unsuccessful because the missionaries did not make an effort to understand the native culture, language or belief system. Anything the missionaries saw that was “different” was a pagan activity and therefore not permissible. Missionaries were advised that acts such as singing and dancing were acts of the devil. In many other European countries, dancing was forbidden and dancers fled to the remote forests and hills. Dance was considered sinful because it was an improper use of the body and also served in the communication with pagan deities. However, missionary texts reveal that in Latvia, dancing was used as a tool to spread Christian morals and beliefs. The missionaries realized that if they could not suppress the activity, then they must use it to benefit their needs.

The missionaries viewing the celebration of the summer solstice, or *Jani*, for the first time were likely horrified.⁴⁵ In response, they renamed the celebration “St. John” after St. John the Baptist and called the celebration a Christian holiday. The pagans likely did not care for any of it and continued their way of celebrating their gods. “The Christian church fought against the pagan customs and avoided their actions in accordance to the recommendations of Gregory I by assigning Christian meaning to the pagan celebrations.”⁴⁶ Instead of dancing in honor of the *dievadēlis, Janis*, they were now dancing to honor St. John the Baptist. Other Christian values were also easily assigned to the holiday. The circular dance became representative of the eternal love of God. The bonfire became a symbol of God’s burning

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Biezais, Haralds. *Seno Latviešu Debesu Dievu ģimene*. Rīga: Minerva, 1998. Print.

⁴⁶ Grīns, Marģers, and Māra Grīna. *Latviešu Gads, Gadskārtā Un Godi*. Rīga: Everest, 1992. Print.

love and his creation of earth. This exchange of meanings spread to other religious holidays and customs, and helped to create a hybrid pagan-Christian religion. Latvians became more willing to be baptized because they were able to keep their “pagan” traditions. Over time, these customs began to lose their religious meaning. Rather than honoring St. John, or *Janis*, the holiday was celebrated because it was a part of the culture. The holiday and the meaning of the dance shifted to be about community, family, and the connection to the land. This flexibility in the art form allowed for its continuation and current practice.

The Song Festival and the Cultural Awakening

Following the Great Northern war in 1700-1721, the Russian Tsar, Peter I, wanted to take over the rich port city of Riga. Having Riga would give Russia a clear passage to the Baltic Sea, and allow them to trade with Scandinavian countries. The descendants of the German Swordbrothers held political and economic power, and became a noble class. They lived in castles throughout Latvia and ruled over the Latvian peasants. The Germans thought of the Latvian peasants as a lower class of people, not worthy of education or enlightenment, and therefore two separate cultures emerged independent from one another. By the end of the 18th century, all of Latvia fell under the rule of Russia, as the German nobility struck a deal with the tsars. So long as they could maintain their land and power, the nobility would report to the Russian Court. But underneath the current of exchanging great powers, a peasant reform movement began to brew. In 1849 a law was finally passed granting permission for peasant-owned farms. Slowly, the Latvians were gaining more recognition. Soon, the peasants were granted the freedom to travel throughout Europe. Passports were issued to peasants, and without last names of their own, they took the last name of their German

landlord. As Latvians began to travel and educate themselves, a few were able to break out of the lower ranks and join the higher class. Those Latvians who learned to speak German or had artistic talent were invited to German seminars, and were invited to teach others.⁴⁷

This new class of educated Latvians formed a group called the *Jaunlatviesi*, or the “Young Latvians.” The Young Latvians sought to create a Latvian cultural awakening. They did this by collecting Latvian texts and literature, publishing journals including the “Petersburg Newspaper”, and organizing events celebrating Latvian culture. In 1868 the first Latvian Association was created in Riga. Successful Latvian artists and intellectuals gathered to create a plan for independence and to make a case to the German overlords that the Latvians were not a servant class. From this association emerged *Dziesmu Svetki*, or the Latvian Song Festival.

Modeled after the large-scale German choir festivals, the Latvian Song Festival movement began very slowly at first. The very first gathering occurred in 1864 in Dikli, and consisted of only six university choirs.⁴⁸ The first official Latvian Song Festival occurred in 1873.⁴⁹ About 1,000 singers participated and sang patriotic songs expressing their national identity and desire for independence. The event was considered a success, and festivals continued in 1880, 1888, 1895, and 1910.⁵⁰

As the first Russian Revolution began to take place from 1905-1906, the Latvians sensed their chance for independence could be near. After the shooting of demonstrators in St. Petersburg in 1905, a large-scale strike occurred in Riga. Russian troops opened fire on demonstrators killing 73 and injuring 200 people. The revolutionary movement then moved

⁴⁷ Avotiņa, Austra. *Latvijas Kultūras Vēsture*. Rīgā: Zvaigzne ABC, 2003. Print

⁴⁸ Avotiņa, Austra. *Latvijas Kultūras Vēsture*. Rīgā: Zvaigzne ABC, 2003. Print

⁴⁹ *Latvian Song Festival 2012*. Latvian Song Festival 2012. Web. 24 Mar. 2012.

⁵⁰ *Latvian Song Festival 2012*. Latvian Song Festival 2012. Web. 24 Mar. 2012.

away from the urban centers into the rural areas. Branches from the Latvian association opened up throughout Latvia, and soon the German gentry began to feel threatened. In Courland on the Western coast of Latvia, peasants seized several territories and in another city they took over a portion of the Rujiena-Parnu railway line.⁵¹ Martial law was declared over many portions of the country in order to repress the movements. The Russian troops burned hundreds of peasant farms and thousands were executed without trial.

As each year of the revolution went by, the Song Festival audience grew larger and larger, eventually forcing the organizers to move the event to an outdoor venue. At this point the Song Festival grew to be more than a performance, but rather a necessary tradition. The Song Festival became very significant to the unity of the country, and as it continued it became a showcase for new artistic and political talent. The Latvian National anthem “*Dievs Svētī Latviju*” was born out of the event, and was sung immediately after the tsarist Russian anthem.⁵² Songwriters, poets, choreographers and musicians worked for years creating new patriotic songs and pieces of art to express their discontent with oppression.

In addition to singing, dancing was an important part of the festival. Hundreds of dancers learned traditional folk dances and performed them together in large-scale formations of the ancient ornamental symbols. Rather than using the symbols as a means of communicating with the pagan gods, the symbols became representative of the “old Latvia” and the rich cultural history of the ancestors. The use of ancient symbols and imagery in political songs and traditional dances created a huge surge in nationalism, and in a sense protected the Latvian culture.

⁵¹ Bleiere, Daina; Ilgvars Butulis; Antonijs Zunda; Aivars Stranga; Inesis Feldmanis (2006). *History of Latvia : the 20th century*. Riga: Jumava.

⁵² *Latvian Song Festival 2012*. Latvian Song Festival 2012. Web. 24 Mar. 2012.

Communism and the Song and Dance Festival

World War I began in 1914 between the Allies (United Kingdom, France and Russia) and the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary). In 1915, the first Latvian Battalion was created to protect the Latvian people from the German and Russian fronts. At the end of the war, Russia collapsed, and Latvia declared its independence on November 18th, 1918. By 1920 both Russia and Germany recognized Latvia as an independent country. Latvia was governed by democratic coalitions until 1934, when President Karlis Ulmanis established autocratic rule. When World War II broke out, the fate of Latvia had already been decided in the secret German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact.⁵³ In 1939 the Red Army of the Soviet Union invaded Latvia and built military bases. Nazi Germany took over Latvia from 1941-1944, only to be defeated by the Red Army. Clearly no longer independent, Latvia was forced behind the iron curtain of communism.

Joseph Stalin created a new "Latvian" parliament and took control over the government. About 35,000 Latvian intellectuals were deported to the Soviet Union, and about 100,000 Latvians fled to Germany or Sweden. The new parliament voted for the incorporation of Latvia into the Soviet Union, and the Soviet Union accepted.⁵⁴ By 1949 all of Latvia's farms were forcibly collectivized and Latvia's economy was integrated into the Soviet Union's.⁵⁵ Latvia's brief 20 years of independence seemed like a distant memory, but the Latvians remained hopeful that they could sustain their culture and regain their independence. Stalin banned Latvians from performing in traditional Song and Dance festivals, out of fear that the people would unite and revolt against the Red Army. During this

⁵³"History of Latvia: A Brief Synopsis." *Embassy of Latvia/Latvijas Vēstniecība*. Web. 03 Apr. 2012.

⁵⁴History of Latvia: A Brief Synopsis." *Embassy of Latvia/Latvijas Vēstniecība*. Web. 03 Apr. 2012.

⁵⁵History of Latvia: A Brief Synopsis." *Embassy of Latvia/Latvijas Vēstniecība*. Web. 03 Apr. 2012.

time and for the next several years the Soviet Union deported about 100,000 Latvians to northern Siberia in a mass campaign to collectivize agriculture. By this point Latvia lost a quarter of its population, but those casualties were not in vain.⁵⁶ Armed with song and dance, the Latvians continued to express their national identity and desire to become independent. A few from the lines from the song “*When one is divorced from their home*” sung at the 1941 festival describe the sentiment at that time:

*“Do not cry, if I don’t come home
Because it is not hard to die for Latvia’s freedom
Give me your hand goodbye, farewell
Because my warhorse is already saddled.*

*But remember again that day
When in battle sounded the bell of war
Do not cry, if I don’t come home
Because there are many, who remain on the battlefield...”⁵⁷*

The end of the World War did not mean the end of conflict in Latvia. Latvians continued to live in constant fear. Despite efforts to repress Latvian nationalism, the Song Festivals were allowed to take place in 1948, 1950, 1955, 1960, 1965, 1977, and 1985, but they were rigorously censored by the Communist state.⁵⁸ In the 1980s, as communism began to crumble, folk dance played an integral part in the “Singing Revolution,” uniting the Baltic nations against the Soviet Union. With Mikhail Gorbachev’s campaigns for “Perestroika and Glasnost” the Latvians again recognized the chance to unite and demonstrate for freedom. Mass protests and gatherings almost always included singing and dancing, which united the people and gave them a voice against the bonds of the Soviet Union. In 1990, the Latvians rebelled against the Communist state and held their first uncensored festival. This created a

⁵⁶ *Latvian Song Festival 2012*. Latvian Song Festival 2012. Web. 24 Mar. 2012.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

huge surge in nationalism and gave the people hope that freedom was in sight. In 1991 Latvia regained its independence, and by 1994 the Soviets pulled out their last troops.

Conclusion

In conclusion, folk dance has played a significant role in the lives of Latvians spanning the period from 2,000 B.C. to the present. The ancient Latvians performed folk dances as a ritual to communicate with the Gods and create a sense of community. A unique facet of Latvian folk dance is its use of geometric formations. These formations take shape in ancient religious symbols, which can be traced back to the early Iron Age. These ancient symbols were used as an abstract language to communicate with the Gods and spirits, and to portray the relationships between one's self, one's environment, and one's place in the universe. By examining Latvian folk dances and their use of ancient symbolic formations, it is possible to further understand the culture and religious beliefs of ancient Latvians. When Christianity was introduced to the Baltic region during the 11th century, Latvians developed a hybrid form of religion, maintaining their mythological pagan beliefs while accepting parts of Christianity. Folk dances are still performed today as a means of expressing unity and cultural identity; however those meanings have evolved over the centuries to become less religious.

Today, the content of Latvian folk dances has changed very little. References to ancient symbols and geometric patterns are still the most important features of dances. Folk dance is also still a vital part of the Latvian community in creating a sense of unity and nationalism. Folk dances today, however, are performed in a more formal setting than they once were, but they often are still performed spontaneously at holidays that celebrate

seasonal changes throughout the year. The most important change is that the dances have lost their original ritualistic meanings and are more about creating a sense of community rather than communicating with spirits and gods.

Currently Latvian folk dancing is an important part of national identity among Latvian-Americans. Song and Dance Festivals are held throughout North America every four to five years, and thousands of Latvian-Americans participate in them. Nearly every urban Latvian community has a dance troop of its own and practices all year in preparation for the festival. For the new generations of Latvian-Americans, this is way to express their “Latvianness.” Many of them have never been to Latvia, nor do they speak the language, and yet folk dance plays a large role in their social life and identity.

The flexible nature of Latvian folk dance allows it to take on new purposes and reflect the values and cultural beliefs of the time period in which it is being performed. In times of oppression and war, the Latvian people sustained their culture through the practice of folk dance. Ultimately, the power of the arts was stronger than the strength of the Holy Roman Empire and the Soviet Union, and folk dance was an integral part of that strength.

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