

Are folklorists studying the tales of the folk?

Jürgen Beyer

Abstract

As has been pointed out in recent studies, collections of pre-industrial folklore found in folklore archives were made under the influence of certain presuppositions, which gave rise to important biases in the assembled material. For all practical purposes, however, many scholars continue to base their research on these materials only. The article suggests studying folklore preserved in other institutions in order to break this deadlock.

Many folklorists hold that folklore is an oral tradition characterised by variation (see Kaivola-Bregenhøj 2000). While I agree with including variation in a definition of folklore, I do not see any need to stipulate exclusive orality. Variants do not only arise in oral tradition; they also arise during the process of copying written texts, as medieval philologists well know. If certain types of folklore circulate within certain groups, this is something folklorists can and should study – regardless of whether they are dealing with the songs of drinking societies in Cambridge colleges or with letters of proclaimed heavenly origin spread primarily in less educated and less well-off circles. There is no need to label some kinds of folklore as being more “folklike” than others.

Unexpected Behaviour of the “Folk”

While investigating the spread of so-called heavenly letters among nineteenth-century Estonian peasants and townspeople, I chanced upon a document in the Estonian Historical Archives at Tartu, which may serve as a useful reminder that scholars ought reflect on what the object of folklore studies should be.

The earliest-known heavenly letter in the Estonian language dates from 1822, when the enlightened pastor and rural dean, Otto Wilhelm Masing, printed such a text in his short-lived newspaper *Marahwa Näddala=Leht* (*Estonian weekly*) as a warning against what he regarded as superstition. Masing was convinced that heavenly letters were spread by the Moravian Brethren, whom he sincerely disliked since almost everything they aspired to ran counter to his enlightened views (Masing 1822). At that time about fifteen per cent of the Estonian population were members of the Moravian (*Herrnhut*) movement, and more people can be assumed to have been

favourably inclined toward it without being formal members. We are thus not dealing with an insignificant number of godly people, but with one of the period's major social forces (see Philipp 1974).

This did not, however, prevent some later scholars from making condescending remarks concerning the Moravian movement. Rudolf Põldmäe, for instance, who was the folklorist who studied Estonian Moravianism most thoroughly, held views that were in many ways similar to those of Masing. Põldmäe was a typical representative of inter-war rationalist scholarship and had no hesitation about using expressions such as “fanatical prayer-brethren” (*fanatische Betbrüder*), “religious fanatics” (*religiöse Fanatiker*), “reactionary neopietism” (*reaktsiooniline uuspietism*) or “religious exaggeration” (*usuliialdus*) when referring to the Moravian Brethren (Põldmäe 1938a, 114; id. 1938b, 530).

In 1822 Masing claimed to have found heavenly letters in every parish of his deanery while conducting visitations (“Vermischte Nachrichten” 1822, 338).

Unfortunately, the deanery archives were destroyed during World War II (Jaago 2006, 327). Neither are the relevant visitation records to be found in the archives of Masing's own parish just north of Tartu (EHA, EELK Äksi kogudus, 2004, 6).

The parish archives, however, provide an interesting piece of information from the year before, 1821, when peasants in Masing's parish engaged in what would now be called an act of civil disobedience. As part of their corvée, they had to build school houses. Masing himself was very active in propagating schools and the spread of knowledge that he considered useful. However, when the work was finished, the buildings could not be used as schools. The peasants had built Moravian meeting houses instead! On 2 May 1821, the parish council (*Convent*) ordered the peasants to transform the buildings into proper schools; and after the next council meeting, on 29 December 1821, Masing was pleased to note in the minutes that the school buildings were fit for use (EHA, 1266-1-440, 115v, 120r).

This incident should make us pause for a while and ask whose folklore we are studying when carrying out research on pre-industrial societies. Should we view the enlightened and know-all writings of people such as Masing as evidence of genuine “folk” [1] culture? Probably not. Or should we believe in the constructs produced a generation later by folklorists, telling us that rural people were primarily concerned with fairies, trolls and ghosts, that they walked around in picturesque costumes, sang archaic songs, and never read books, but rather handed down fairytales from parent to child for generations on end? Likewise, probably not. And what about religious

leanings as shown by the Estonian peasants in 1821/22? Is there any documentation with regard to these in the folklore archives? I am afraid not. If folklorists collected Christian folklore at all, they were only interested in relics of medieval Christianity in Protestant countries and of baroque Christianity in Catholic ones (Daxelmüller 1990).

In Search of Nineteenth-Century Folklore

It has become customary to blame nineteenth-century (and early-twentieth-century) [2] folklorists for asking the wrong people the wrong questions at the wrong time (see Virtanen 1993, 256). In the course of the twentieth century, folklorists considerably improved their collecting methods by paying due attention to context, performance, individual storytelling strategies, and so on, while at the same time reflecting upon the researcher's role in the process. Unfortunately, it is not easy to apply these new approaches to texts written down a century ago with the sole aim of preserving a piece of living memory for posterity. Today's folklorists nonetheless try to read social tensions at village level, individual informants' self-expression or worldviews out of (or into) material that was gathered one hundred years ago, as it is worth repeating, by asking the wrong people the wrong questions at the wrong time.

While many such studies are theoretically well informed, their methodological approach seems to be rather simple: in practice, nineteenth-century folklore is still being defined as the material assembled in folklore archives. This, I am afraid, is a source-positivist fallacy. Despite their sizeable collections, folklore archives only contain a small part of the sources that could be used for analysing the folklore of the nineteenth century. Justifying this claim is the purpose of the present article.

To begin with I shall give an illustration, again a Moravian one, of what could have made the folklore archives more complete. In 1912, shortly before World War I, Hendrik Ruus wrote the following preface to a book containing stories about the Moravian movement's past in Estonia and Livonia [3]:

“When sending out this weak and imperfect work, I am saddened to see how little one cares about those old ruins, which stand in every parish as relics of antiquity. These are the meeting houses. The present book wants to describe the spiritual movement and the foundation of meeting houses in the Baltic provinces. For this purpose I collected manuscripts, which are more than 100 years old, from the meeting houses. I have also taken descriptions from *Perekonnaleht* and *Wahimees* [that is “Family Journal” and “Watchman”] as well as from the biographies of many guardians. I have also used the church histories by Lipp, Põld and others. [4] Very learned clergymen indeed have been working in the field of our literature, devoting their time and energy to collecting the songs of

the Setu, [5] as in his days did the Reverend Hurt. [6] Similarly the Reverend Eisen [7] spent his time collecting tales about the Devil and the fairies. [8]

Therefore this book contains descriptions of the work done by the Spirit of God and a short overview of the life of those men, who shone as stars in the dark sky of the Christian parish.

I am asking everyone showing affection for this kind of work to help me in the compilation of another, more complete issue by sending me descriptions of the foundation of meeting houses, of the spiritual work or of various spiritual movements to Viljandi – be it from oral or from old written sources” (*Waimu töö ... 1912*, [3]).

Unfortunately, the author never managed to publish much more and most of his material was lost during the following war (*Waimu töö ... 1928*, [6]).

Looking back almost a century later on countless collecting campaigns by folklorists trained according to ever-improving fieldwork standards, we have not, I am afraid, advanced a single step further than Ruus in 1912. The mental framework of peasants erecting religious meeting houses rather than schools seems to be as strange to modern scholars as it was to folklore collectors or to enlightened pastors such as Masing. I am not sure whom we should blame most: Romantic folklorists, Soviet atheism campaigns or pure lack of methodological awareness among folklorists who simply parted from the assumption that what is documented in folklore archives must be folklore, and since there is so much of it, it must be representative. This, I repeat, is nothing but a source-positivist fallacy.

Obviously, we cannot turn back the clock and start collecting the folklore of meeting houses now. They have long ceased to exist, at least in Estonia. But we can start to work on collections other than folklore archives in order to gain a fuller view of what nineteenth-century “folk culture” was like. Some research in this vein has been conducted, mainly in the German-speaking and Dutch-speaking countries, but one cannot fail to recognise that such an approach is not generally acknowledged in mainstream international folkloristics.

In recent decades we have become accustomed to the notion that the old folklore collections poorly reflect female issues (most early collectors being bourgeois males) (see Malmberg 1991; Wienker-Piepho 1999). Neither do they, despite the good efforts of Friedrich Salomo Krauss (see Köhler-Zülch 1996a; Lixfeld 1977; Uther 1996), contain much – to use that old-fashioned word – obscene material collected from men. In both cases it is probably too late to do something about it, since nineteenth-century folklore of bawdy tales and female gossip is hardly preserved anywhere (at least not from the lower social strata).

But these are not the only gaps in folklore collections. I have already mentioned religious folklore, and in the following I should like to give a very rough sketch of what kind of material is waiting to be studied by folklorists. It is obviously impossible to quantify this – at least at this stage –, but I am firmly convinced that the folklore archives are only home to a minor part of the folklore that circulated at the time of collection and happened to be recorded. By this I am not referring to the odd variant of a local legend that escaped being written down by folklorists, but rather to entire genres and themes that never attracted the attention of professional collectors.

The following list is certainly not exhaustive, and it might appear that I have made it even shorter by concentrating on material in Estonian. This was not done, however, with obscurantist intentions. Estonia has possibly the world's largest collections of folklore per capita. If it is possible to show that even such sizeable collections only contain a smaller part of the preserved folklore, this will hold true also for countries with less impressive folklore archives.

Choosing to concentrate on Estonian material also serves to make another methodological point. Until the middle of the nineteenth century, only a limited number of books were published in Estonian [9] and, apart from parish courts (since 1819) and local rural administration (since 1866), the language was not used in administration until 1918. The use of Estonian thus clearly indicates the social background of the people involved. We are dealing with material directed at and to a large extent consumed by the very same people whom folklorists of the day would seek out as bearers of ancient traditions; that is, the lower social strata in the countryside, since better educated and more affluent persons would conduct their affairs in German or, later, in Russian. Material available in Estonian should be counted among the most basic matters accessible also to those parts of society that had least contact with book learning. Tales circulating in this milieu can safely be regarded as the tales of the "folk." Readers will easily be able to find corresponding sources in their countries of expertise, at least if these are Protestant ones. Socially and linguistically differentiated societies such as those of Estonia and Livonia, therefore, provide a great advantage for modern scholars in that the reading matter of the lower social strata can easily be determined by the language it is written in. In earlier centuries, the linguistic and social divisions of Finland, Flanders or some other countries far from the folkloristic mainstream allow similar conclusions (see Beyer 2009b on circumstances in which Estonian material can contribute to international debates).

Religious Narratives

Even though the godly sub-culture of the nineteenth century was not noticed by the folklorists of the period, this omission is somewhat easier to remedy than other lacunae left by earlier folklore collectors, since pious circles used the written word to a significant extent. Despite folklorists' lack of interest in collecting edifying booklets, copyright libraries placed them on their shelves as they did with everything else that came from the printing presses. To the extent that the godly had organised themselves into societies of some form, one might still find these societies' minutes, reports and contracts in public record offices. Of course, the pious activities of such groups did not go unnoticed by the regular clergy of the official church. They sent countless reports, either approving or disapproving, to their superiors, which are preserved to this very day. On the other hand, the private written legacy of pious circles (diaries, autobiographies, letters, and so forth) has disappeared to a large degree, but some of it has survived in manuscript collections here and there.

When studying such papers, we soon discover narrative traditions expressed in different variants. However, we find little of the well-known folklore genres such as legends and fairytales but rather tales about how God guided His children along the narrow path to salvation. Some of the favourite genres were biographies and autobiographies, helping writers and readers to understand their path in life. These texts served as tools of life-improvement (*Se öige Soldat ... 1837; Usklik Lambakarjane ... 1838; Waimu töö ... 1912*; see also Dekker 1985/86; Lieburg 2002; 2003 and 2006).

Members of the Moravian movement were expected to compose an autobiography to be read out at their funeral. A fair number of such autobiographies are preserved in the Estonian language. Literary scholars might find them rather boring as stylistically they are often unpolished and the same kind of experiences are retold in many different texts. This should alert folklorists to the possibility of finding folklore in this material: there was a certain number of ways for describing stages in life in this kind of literature, and these patterns could be combined to tell about individual lives. The resulting lifestory is thus a combination of individual biographical data (parents, birth, spouse, children, and so forth) and of interpretative models. I do not want to claim that these life-descriptions are mainly fictional, but rather that the existing literary models helped people to make choices during their lives and even more so to describe the choices they had made. The result would again be read and digested by later generations (Beyer 2009a).

Apart from biographical texts, the godly people were fascinated by tales about God's interventions in this world, either issuing warnings or meting out punishments when His warnings had not been heeded (Beyer 2002a). It is to this tradition that the heavenly letters mentioned above belong. Their core messages – keeping the Sabbath and calling for repentance – are stock admonitions from the Christian tradition. Manuscript versions of heavenly letters are not only preserved in folklore archives, but also in public record offices or libraries (EHA, 5166-1-30; ULU, F 257 Fol.; F 276; K 38; Nordin 18 Fol.; T 142z; X 299x; on heavenly letters, see Köhler 1912; Röhrich 1959).

As far as I know, no scholar has ever seen an original (that is, written by God or Christ), only copies, either in manuscript or in print. We are thus dealing with xeroxlore *avant la lettre*. An oral heavenly letter is unthinkable. Heavenly letters can be divided into several types and subtypes – with many contaminations between them. Since most copyists were not professionals at all, rather substantial variations occur. Furthermore, most intermediate versions have disappeared. Therefore it is almost as impossible to arrive at a philologically satisfying stemma for heavenly letters as it is for oral texts.

The claim that a certain letter was written by God or Christ is certainly non-biblical, but that did not prevent Lutheran theologians of the sixteenth century from publishing such heavenly letters (Herman 1891; Palladius 1555). In the course of the centuries, varying theological factions were more or less critical of heavenly letters (and enlightened theologians were certainly among the most hostile), but should we really blame laypersons for not understanding that the theologically correct message was presented in an inappropriate way? Heavenly letters are, indeed, another part of the pious culture that has not been sufficiently studied by folklorists. If dealt with at all, such letters were labelled “superstition,” a concept rivalling “folk” in vagueness (see also Valk 2008a).

One type of heavenly letters carries an introduction about an angel appearing to a man named Just (or Jonas, Gildiuius, Gelderibus, and so on) (Partanen 1936, 80-4; Pöldmäe 1938b, 531 and 534; Clausen 1985, 82-6). This introduction apparently served to increase the credibility of the account. It goes back to an apparition recorded in 1689 (Hornemann 1911-13). Similar apparitions of Christ, saints or angels were said to have occurred frequently in many Christian confessions and caused people to tell stories, especially if they had been instructed by the apparition to spread a message (see Pöldmäe 1935; *Jälle ...* 1891; *Lugu ...* 1928; Bugge Amundsen

1994; Beyer 2011). Since enough people – although no folklore collectors – found the messages important, they were recorded, and therefore they can now be studied.

Folklorists have published extensively on *exempla* – short illustrative tales for use in sermons – from the middle ages and the early modern period, but only in recent years have Protestant *exempla* collections from the nineteenth century attracted scholarly attention (Brückner 1999). Material apparently taken from such sources can be found in the Estonian sermon collection that Jakob Hurt published in 1907. Hurt served as a Lutheran pastor, but is otherwise famous as a collector of Estonian folklore. He stated in the Preface that he had taken these true stories (*siündinud lood*) from other books (Hurt 1907, VII, 65, 80, 181-2 *et passim*). He apparently thought that the events recorded in them had actually taken place and that the stories thus were not folklore. Consequently this kind of material was omitted from Hurt's folklore collection now preserved at the Estonian Folklore Archives at Tartu. Unfortunately, no Estonian folklorist has so far studied Hurt's sermons.

Lutheran hymnals contained a tale with many traditional motives: Johannes Bugenhagen's account of the destruction of Jerusalem, based on Josephus Flavius's *Jewish War* from the first century A.D. (see Schreckenber 1993). It was reprinted from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries in countless appendices to hymnals in all tongues used by Lutheran churches (some late editions in Estonian are: "Jerusalemi" ... 1883; "Jeruusalemma" ... 1901; for earlier editions, see Beyer 2011, chap. 3). These were books that literally were in every man's hand.

Livonia had its share of tract societies that would finance the printing of edifying tales – see the indices in *Eestikeelne raamat* (1995, 863-4), under the headings "Jumala sõna väljalaotamise sõbrad" (Friends of the spreading of God's Word) and "Kristliku rahvakirjanduse agentuur" (Agency for Christian folk literature), and in *Seniespiedumi* ... (1999, 764), under the heading "Rīgas Kristīgu rakstu gādātāju biedrība" (Riga society for the provision of Christian literature). Journals and newspapers such as *Kristlik Perekonna leht* (1903-40) and *Wahimees* (1907-20) referred to by Ruus in his preface of 1912, would carry edifying tales as well (see *Eestikeelne ajakirjandus* 2002, no. 523, 1611).

Most folklorists are not trained in the use of this material and are therefore not familiar with it. Their primary instinct might therefore be to leave it to ecclesiastical historians, but these are certainly not as interested in narrative traditions among lay people as folklorists are. But are folklorists really interested in the tales of the "folk", or only in folktales?

Secular Narratives

In the preceding chapter on religious narratives, biographies and autobiographies have already been mentioned. Even for more recent periods, much research on these genres remains to be done, since hagiographic stories were widespread in Estonia – about national heroes in the 1930s and about their communist counterparts during the time of the Soviet occupation (Hanko 1936; Tupits 1938; Tohver-Raud 1940; Gubarev 1954; Renzer 1970).

Nineteenth-century Estonian primers not only taught the letters of the alphabet and Martin Luther's *Small Catechism*, but often also tried to educate children by including instructive and exciting stories (*ABD Ramat* 1804; Gehewe 1841; Busch 1895). Newspapers regularly contained narrative material, be it old or modern legends or just rumours. During the first years of the Estonian Republic, Walter Anderson, professor of Estonian and comparative folklore at Tartu University (see Ranke 1977; Seljamaa 2005), diligently indexed all folklore material published in the press as well as in school books for the folklore section of a running bibliography (*Kritisch-bibliographischer Jahresbericht ...* 1918; *Jahresbericht ...* 1919; 1920; 1921). Unfortunately, Anderson's successor as editor of this folklore bibliography did not carry on the work with the same thoroughness (see below).

Almanachs and calendars were among the print genres with the widest circulation. Besides the constituent calendary notices, they contained tales of various kinds (Annus 2000; see also Brunold-Bigler 1993). Practical guides were often presented in the form of tales, regardless of whether the subject was agriculture, medicine or sexuality (Arwelius 1790; Ludse/Luce 1807, 1812; Kalkun 2006). In the course of the nineteenth century, more and more narratives were published, the primary function of which was entertainment, even though the authors or publishers still might have had pedagogical applications in mind (Vinkel 1966).

As in other Protestant countries, Estonians were exposed to tales about prophets predicting changes in the landscape and in costume. Most of the Estonian variants seem to have been first documented from the twentieth century onwards ("Eesti naisprohwet ..." 1930; Eisen 1921; Masso 1928; Uibo 1930), while elsewhere similar texts can be traced back several centuries. At the outset, this narrative tradition was full of eschatological speculations, but by the twentieth century it had been largely secularised (Beyer 2002b; Kõiva 2010).

Studies on urban or modern legends led folklorists to the realisation that legends and rumours are closely related. This came as no surprise to scholars with a longer historical perspective. The historian Kristian Erslev equated legends with rumours already at the beginning of the twentieth century in his textbook on source criticism (Erslev 1972, 65). Maybe he was aware of the fact that in his native Danish the word for legend (*sagn*) in earlier centuries also meant “rumour” (*Ordbog* 1939, 413-6). Despite their name, urban or modern legends are neither exclusively urban nor modern. It would be fruitful to extend their study backwards in time (see Beyer and Hiiemäe 2001; *Rygternes magt* 2004; Messerli 2006).

As early as 1926 Anderson published a now famous study on Estonian rumours of his day. News was spreading that the planet Mars had burst into three pieces, of which one would fall to Earth. Anderson’s article was based on newspaper reports, apparently discovered while excerpting the press for the *Jahresberichte der estnischen Philologie und Geschichte* (Anderson 1925/26). [10] More work on rumours in newspapers from the heyday of folklore collecting could easily be done.

Tales reminiscent of local legends can be found in parish registers such as those of the early eighteenth century from Rõngu, of which relevant excerpts have recently been published (Beyer 2003, 86-8 and 92-3; Kalda 2007). Church records, however, also contain other exciting stories; for instance, different reports about the same involuntary journey by seal hunters across the Gulf of Finland on an ice-floe in 1796 (Beyer 2004).

Rummo Jüri, who started out as a common thief in 1876, has by now achieved the status of an Estonian Robin Hood. Documentation of his deeds and misdeeds can be found in the public record office (EHA, 861-1-4355 and 4356), but most elements of the current tradition seem to have been later additions. Apparently this criminal came to serve as a crystallisation figure for robber-lore because he managed to stage some spectacular escapes early in his career (see Kalda 2000; Köhler-Zülch and Shojaei Kawan 2004; Köhler-Zülch 1996b). Court records in general contain many a good story: after all, many defendants were not telling the plain truth in order to obtain a more favorable judgment (see Graf 2001).

Tales advocating temperance held a certain share of the book-market. Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald made his literary debut in 1840 with a cautionary tale about the dangers of alcohol (Kreutzwald 1840). It was only many years later that he established himself as the author of what would become the Estonian national epos, *Kalevipoeg* (see Raudsep 1996; Jaago 2005a). Temperance tales, however, were printed

in much larger numbers than this famous work. For the period between 1851 and 1900, the Estonian national bibliography lists thirty-seven books on temperance with a total print run of 101,000 copies. During the same period, *Kalevipoeg* did not exceed 3,500 copies, while the sixty folklore books published numbered only 99,000 copies (*Eestikeelne raamat* 1995, 328, 734 and 736). Kreutzwald was not the only folklorist to engage in the temperance movement. Eisen, for instance, eagerly contributed tales to this cause (Eisen 1893; 1900; see also Eisen 1910). Later folklorists, however, have devoted as little attention to Eisen's temperance tales as they have to Hurt's sermon *exempla*.

The above list of sources for narrative traditions could be continued, and it could be made much longer by adding material from other countries (see Schenda 1993; Hopkin 2004; Simpson 2005). My intention, however, was only to give a number of examples, and concentrating on material in Estonian ensures that similar sources will be available in other (Protestant) countries as well.

Four Basic Tenets of Folklore Studies

As is generally known, institutionalised folklore studies (that is, university chairs and folklore archives) thrive best in those countries that experienced difficulties in forming a proper nation-state during the nineteenth century. Perceived deficits could be the lack of unification (for example, Germany or Italy) or of independence (for example, Latvia or Ireland), dominance of an originally foreign language (for example, Scotland or Norway) or the difficulties of coming to terms with the loss of an empire (for example, Denmark or Sweden). To this day, early nation-states with large colonial empires (such as France or the Netherlands) have little institutionalised folkloristics but rather well-developed anthropology departments, originally set up to study so-called primitive cultures overseas. Estonia, on the other hand, is a good example of a country with thriving folklore studies. Soon after Estonia gained independence in 1918, a chair of folklore was established at Tartu University, where Estonian was made the language of instruction. A few years later, the Estonian Folklore Archives at Tartu were founded. Not content with housing the huge collections of Hurt and Eisen, the archives continuously sent collectors into almost every Estonian village in order to gather more material. During the decades of Soviet occupation, the folklore archives continued to serve as a reservoir on which to draw when renegotiating national identity.

At the age of large-scale collecting, folklorists agreed, by and large, on the following four principles: true folklore was oral, rural, ethnic and pagan, and there was no need to collect recent and secondary folklore that was written, urban, of other (not to speak of mixed) ethnicity or Christian (see also Lilja 1996; Frijhoff 1997; Briody 2007). In their nation-building efforts, folklorists constructed dichotomies between the “own” and the “foreign” along these lines, trying to create a national culture with the help of what they perceived as relics of the ancient indigenous culture. Estonian folkloristics were no exception, but these four tenets received additional emphasis, as I shall explain in the following.

Orality: Since high age was attributed to tales in oral circulation, there was little interest in tales circulating in print, even more so because much of this was obviously of recent date. For some reason, folklorists thought that the “folk” was illiterate. There was, therefore, no point in investigating what people were reading and writing. Until the middle of the nineteenth century, most printed texts in Estonian had been written by German pastors, which made the world of print even more suspect in the eyes of folklorists searching for the roots of Estonian culture. While some scholars abroad had already pointed to written sources for oral folktales, this was thought to be irrelevant in the Estonian case where there was no centuries-old culture of the written word.

Rurality: The first towns in Livonia were founded in the thirteenth century by the German conquerors, and, until industrialisation, they were predominantly inhabited by Germans and certainly ruled by them. However, Estonians did live in the towns, mingling every day with Germans and Russians at work, and partly even lived with them – as servants – in the same households. As a result, Estonian urban culture was much more multi-cultural than its rural counterpart. At the time, Estonian nation-builders would call the urban culture Germanised and seek the Estonian roots in the countryside. In recent decades, neo-pagans and other intellectuals in search of an indigenous Estonian identity have again travelled the road to the countryside – at least in their minds, since in practice they have ended up in the folklore archives and in libraries. One of their discoveries was the ethnonym *maarahvas*, which had been used until the middle of the nineteenth century, when it was replaced by the term *eestlased* (“Estonians”). *Maarahvas* literally means “land people” or “country folk”, falling thus seemingly well in line with the search for rural roots from pre-Christian times. However, claiming *maarahvas* as a primeval name is nothing but an invented tradition. The word, as it turns out, is a medieval loan-

translation of the German *Landvolk*, which originally meant “a country’s indigenous inhabitants” (see Beyer 2007; 2008, 120-5).

Ethnicity: Nation-builders worked hard on this dichotomy, which did not exist to such an extent until the first half of the nineteenth century, when social mobility in Estonia and Livonia meant a change in ethnicity. However, bilingualism and multilingualism, and to a certain extent also intermarriage, blurred the boundaries to some degree. The rhetoric of ethnical unity should not cause us to forget that there was social differentiation among Estonians, and that it was steadily increasing throughout the nineteenth century (see also Plath 2009). For Estonian folklorists, ethnic identification not only extended to all Estonians, but also to so-called “kindred peoples”; that is, other Finno-Ugrians. To this very day, Estonian folklorists would prefer to study the Votes across the Russian border or the Livonians in Latvia rather than the Russians or the Latvians. By contrast, no Swedish folklorist would feel called upon to do research on the Frisians in the Netherlands in order to help this “kindred people” because they, too, lack national independence.

Paganism: Since a great age was attributed to folklore it was thought possible to use it as a basis for the reconstruction of pre-Christian religion. As Christianity was brought to Livonia by the crusaders, folklorists (although many of the early ones were Lutheran pastors) tried to find or to construct relics of pre-Christian religion. For them, Christian folklore was by definition a later borrowing from other nations and would thus not pass the authenticity test.

While the study of contemporary folklore – in Estonia and elsewhere – has abandoned these tenets to a significant degree, they still determine what can be found in the folklore archives and, indirectly, what folklorists write about when doing research on the nineteenth century.

Concluding Remarks

Historians have always reminded folklorists that tales collected from oral sources cannot serve to provide information about the centuries preceding their collection, since oral transmission lacks the constancy of written sources. Each storyteller modifies the tales to a certain extent. However, as historians have been taught for a century in Erslev’s textbook, orally collected tales may be excellent sources for studying the time when they were recorded (Erslev 1972, 69). This insight, unfortunately, remained largely theoretical, since the preferred fields of study of this discipline were the history of diplomacy, politics, economics or the urban class

struggle. Only in the last three decades – as part of rising interest in cultural history – have historians started to show serious interest in folklore, and, in recent years, some of them have even suggested doing research in folklore archives (see Hopkin 2004, 197-8).

In recent decades, some folklorists have actually set out to study texts from folklore archives using a synchronic rather than a diachronic approach. They thus followed the lead of Erslev of almost a century ago, probably without ever having read his historical methodology. Folklorists would now analyse legends, for instance, as reflections of social and economic tensions at village level (for recent examples, see Tangherlini 2008; Valk 2008b). While obviously using a research library, folklorists, however, would not necessarily go through its legal deposit material in order to see what kind of reading matter had been available to the informants they are studying at the folklore archives. Hardly ever would they visit a public record office in order to find out more about nineteenth-century informants and their backgrounds (such as degree of literacy, economic status, number of children and so on). [11]

Unfortunately for folklorists, public record offices are generally arranged by provenance; that is, according to the administrative units producing the documents. This makes it difficult to find material on topics not dependent on administrative structures (such as folk narratives). While the implementation of electronic information systems in public record offices has somewhat eased the way to relevant records, the structural difference between folklore archives and public record offices still remains, however.

When trying to apply the widened canon of contemporary folklore studies to the period in which the classical collections of folklore archives were assembled, one should not just routinely go to the folklore archives and search for answers there. Instead of such a material-oriented approach, one should start by defining one's research problem. One could, for instance, simply ask: what did people tell in the nineteenth century, how did they do it, and for what reason – and then start to look for sources that could help to answer these questions. More often than not, the sources will be found outside the folklore archives. In order to take full advantage of this approach, it is advisable to include the teaching of the necessary skills (such as palaeography and languages) into the curriculum.

Some traditional scholars will object to the approach suggested in this essay by saying that the material presented is simply not folklore because most of it is of foreign or literary origin, adding that true and authentic folklore is the one to be

found in folklore archives. Furthermore, even though these collections may contain some spurious material, an experienced folklorist will always be able to separate the chaff from the wheat. A typical example of how this approach was put into practice was the decision by Oskar Loorits (see Oinas 1996; Västriik 2005), director of the Estonian Folklore Archives and Anderson's successor as editor of the folklore section of the *Jahresberichte der estnischen Philologie und Geschichte*, only to include material from the press and from schoolbooks in the bibliography if he deemed it to be of "folk" origin, and excluding, for instance, translations into Estonian (*Jahresbericht ... 1929*, VIII). Loorits thus contributed to the narrowing of Anderson's much wider (and more appropriate) definition of folklore to the detriment of future generations of Estonian folklorists. I am afraid scholars in the Loorits tradition will never open their eyes to the world surrounding them and their folklore archives. Folklore, to their mind, is what they think the "folk" (a word they would use without inverted commas) should tell, while in my opinion it is rather the narratives [12] occurring in variants among certain groups, both in oral and written form. One such group of people was certainly the rural population at the eve of the mechanisation of the countryside, but they also consumed much folklore that traditional scholars would not recognise as such in their quest for authenticity and antiquity (see also Seidenspinner 2005; Valk 2005).

One should be extremely careful in pronouncing judgements such as "this subject is very rare in Estonian folklore". More likely than not, this only means it is rarely to be found in the folklore archives simply because the collectors did not consider it to be authentic folklore. It might well have been more popular among the "folk" than some of the collectors' favourite items.

Having started this essay with a question, I should no longer delay the answer: yes, the study of contemporary folklore is concerned with the tales of the "folk" and does not exhibit too many blind spots anymore. [13] Folklorists studying narratives from the nineteenth century are also dealing with tales of the "folk", but only with a small part of them. Many nineteenth-century narratives are forever lost, but a very substantial body of material – written, urban, multi-cultural, Christian – is to be found in collections outside folklore archives. It is time to have an unprejudiced look at this source material.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to express his gratitude to Ülo Valk (Tartu) for references to Estonian prophets, and to the Targeted Financing Scheme SF0180040s08 of the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research, as well as to the Estonian Science Foundation (grants 6211 and 7439), for financial support.

Notes

- [1] The definition of “folk” in sociological terms is notoriously vague. In recent years, folklorists have taken to using the term “vernacular” instead. Since this word is similarly imprecise, I might just as well stick to the established word, but prefer to place it in inverted commas.
- [2] For brevity’s sake I shall speak of the nineteenth century, even though I am referring to the heyday of folklore collecting from oral sources in rural areas. This took place in Europe by and large between 1850 and 1950.
- [3] The present-day Republic of Estonia roughly covers the territory traditionally inhabited by ethnic Estonians. Until 1918 it was divided between the administrative units of Estonia and Livonia. The northern half of Livonia was settled by Estonians, the southern half by Latvians. Today the former territory of Livonia is divided between the Republics of Estonia and Latvia. The word “Estonian” is correspondingly unclear, relating to a territory of varying dimensions, its Estonian-speaking majority population and their language as well as to its German-speaking minority population. This will probably sound confusing to the general reader, but the only way out would be to switch language. In German (and similarly in Swedish or Estonian) it would be possible to differentiate between *Este*, *Estländer*, *estländisch*, *estnisch* and *Estnisch*. It should also be remembered that a smaller part of the populations of Estonia and Livonia was made up of Swedes, Germans and Russians. The last two of these groups shared the economic and political power in the area until the establishment of the Estonian and Latvian Republics in 1918. There is yet one more cause of terminological confusion: until the sixteenth century, the entire territory of later Estonia, Livonia and Courland was called *Livonia*.
- [4] See Lipp 1898/99 and Oehninger 1908. The second of these books is a translation by Pöld of a German manual, see Oehninger n. d.; the Estonian version contains an appendix on pp. 453-530: M[artin] Lipp. “Kodumaa kirik kristliku hariduse ja äratuse töös” (The Church of our own country working for Christian education and awakening). On the publisher’s cloth one can read “Pöld-Lipp. Oehningeri Ristikoguduse ajalugu” (Pöld-Lipp. Oehninger’s Church history), which could explain why Ruus does not mention Oehninger.
- [5] A Russian-Orthodox population in the south-eastern corner of the Estonian language area.
- [6] See Levin 1990 and Jaago 2005b.
- [7] See Masing 1981 and Kuutma 2005.
- [8] Literally “very old stories” (*muinasjuttusi*). On the claims to antiquity inherent in the Estonian genre terminology, see Beyer 2003, 81-4.
- [9] See *Eestikeelne raamat* 2000. Of the 1,210 titles in this bibliography of books printed in Estonian up to 1850, only seven were published before 1600, eighty-three before 1700, 422 before 1800, and 624 before 1820; that is, almost one-half of the titles were published during the final thirty years covered by the bibliography.

- [10] Some bibliographical additions in *Jahresbericht ...* 1921, 123-6; reprinted (without the additions) in *Studies in Estonian folkloristics ...* 2005, 169-200.
- [11] A large number of the relevant sources in Estonia can already be consulted online: available from <http://www.ra.ee/vau/>; INTERNET [accessed 13 July 2009].
- [12] Folklore comprises, of course, also customs, beliefs, music and so forth, but this article is only concerned with narratives.
- [13] I should love to see, for instance, a study of mafia folklore, but I am not keen on doing the research myself.

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Biographical note

Dr Jürgen Beyer is a senior research fellow at Tartu University Library. He has published widely on the folklore and cultural history of Scandinavia, the Baltics and Germany.
<http://lepo.it.da.ut.ee/~jbeyer>.