

People From Under the Lone Oak: Using Culture for Constructing Identity in Local Livs’ Community

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The paper describes ways of constructing cultural identity of one of the smallest European nations – the Livs, who live on the north shores of Baltic Sea in Latvia. Brief historic and cultural overviews are the background for following Livs’ stories, in whose lives historical events are interwoven. The stories show how Livs are using their cultural resources in order to construct local communities.

The stories share some common points, but each one is different as it focuses on matters important for each speaker. Looking at individual stories through history and vice versa enables us to perceive Livs’ culture in new dimension and at the same time to perceive what is truly important: consciousness of cultural identity that enables Livs to endure all misfortune. Preserving the fragments of centuries old traditions prove to be the only way to subsist culture.

The paper can also be considered a part of this year’s celebration of Year of Liv Language and Culture.

INTRODUCTION

Along the Baltic coast in Latvia there are several little Liv villages. Close to one of the houses grows a huge, old oak tree. It stands alone as the area is forested mostly by pines. But the old oak is growing steadily and its branches are reaching far around. People from the area say that it has some special powers and medicine men wander to it for energy. And Livs say that their whole nation would fit under the oak's branches.

Livs are indeed very small nation: there is supposed to be not more than two hundred Livs and the Livs' language is spoken by not more than twenty of them¹. But the nation puts a lot of effort into keeping the culture at least partially intact.

Year 2011 was announced the Year of the Livs Culture and Language by International Liv Friends' Society i Līvõ Kultūr Sidām Society as it encloses many important Livs' anniversaries². Surely it will cause intensification of research of Livs' culture. At the same time people who live nearby could learn about the culture.

Research in cultural identity is always a challenge that requires different methods of gathering data. In this case I used scientific literature and fieldwork during which I was conducting interviews with Livs on the Livonian Coast in Latvia in 2009 (map 1).



Map 1: Villages along the Livonian Coast in Latvia

Livonians are recognized by Latvian law as nation. The appropriate paragraph says: “Livs are ancient nation that lives in Latvia and its culture and language are important for Latvian tradition”³. The Livonian flag has three colors that encompass the colors of life on the coast: blue (the sea), white (sand) and green (the forest). These colors were seen by every Livonian fisherman coming back from the sea.

The Livonian culture is considered endangered because many of its aspects were lost in history. Nonetheless it lasts against the odds.

¹ Ernštreits, Valts. The Liv Language Today, <http://www.livones.lv/libiesi/valoda/?raksts=168>, accessed on 20.11. 2010.

² Among others: 150th anniversary of publishing the first grammar book about Liv language (Sjorgen A.J. i F.J. Wiedemann, published by Russian Academy of Science in Petersburg), 90th anniversary of publishing the first non-religious book in Liv language (Līvõd ežmi lugdõbrõntõz – literacy anthology published by Estonian Academic Native Language Society), 80th anniversary of publishing first issue of “Līvli”, 75th anniversary of publishing first Liv elementary school book (wrote by Kārlis Stalte and published by Estonian Academic Native Language Society) and 20th anniversary of creating Līvõd rānda, the Livonian Coast in Latvia (<http://www.livones.lv/libiesi/norises/?-raksts=535>)

³ Damberga, Baiba. 2006. Introduction, In: Mednis, Janis (ed.) 2006. Green, White and Blue, Riga: Kolkasrags.

BACKGROUND

Livs called themselves Raandalist⁴, which means "coast dwellers" and Kalamied which means "fishermen". The name "Livonians" came from Latin and was first used in XIIIth century. It is unknown what it was supposed to mean⁵.

The Livonians lived on the coast of contemporary Latvia and some parts of the inland and their ancestors were there more than 3000 years ago⁶. They are part of one of the seven Finno-Ugric groups that live along the coast of the Baltic Sea. About 1500 years ago the group split onto different cultures that evolved separately. The Livonian "golden age" was probably between Xth and XIIIth centuries⁷. Regular information about the nation were noted since XIIth century.

There never had been many Livonians. They lived in small villages and in XIIIth century were only 20 percent of the whole population in the area⁸. They were mostly fishermen, traders, farmers and crafters.

Livs language belongs to south group of Balto-Finnish languages. Many different writing systems were developed over the time that were used in print from year 1863. There were only about thirty texts published prior to the Second World War, between them religious literature, calendars, literacy and poetry anthologies and the "Livlist" periodical (published 1931-1939). The Livs situation changed after Second World War.

HISTORY

As was mentioned before, the "golden age" of Livonian culture was between Xth and XIIIth centuries. Livonians were trading with Gotland, Rus and Finland. Material culture was developing and people were wealthy.

Bishop Albert set the city of Riga on the Livonian area in 1201. The christianization process was started and the Livs resisted for some time. They were defeated during one of the so called northern crusades on the beginning of XIIIth century. The Latgals, ancestors of contemporary Latvians, started to settle in the area. As an effect the inland Liv culture started to disappear. The coast became the main Livonian area that was separated from the rest of the country by forests and swamps. This is the only area where Liv culture survived.

Part of the Liv area was under the influence of Poland, Sweden and Russia and some wars over it were waged in XVIth century. After overtaking the land by Swedish the situation of Livs improved as they were allowed to cultivate their culture. Swedish were fighting off Poles but they lost to Russians and as an effect Livs found themselves under the Russian rule. The use of Liv language and manifesting cultural identity were banned.

XXth century started with the German occupation in 1915 and the order to leave the villages (the area was an important military point). Many inhabitants did not return to their houses after the First World War even if Latvia regained its independence and gave Livs some cultural freedom.

The Livs Society (Livõd Īt) and the national flag were created in 1923 with the help of Finnish and Estonians⁹.

⁴ This old ethnonym is not widely known today even between Livonians themselves (information from fieldwork conducted in 2009).

⁵ Name of the Livonians first appeared in Russian chronicle "History of the old times" (1180). Viires Ants (ed.) 2006. The Red Book of the Peoples of the Russian Empire, <http://www.eki.ee/books/redbook/>.

⁶ Šuvcāne, Valda. 2008. The Livs. A brief look at their history, In: Nakamura, Juki. 2008. The Livs, Stockholm: Booksencounters, p. 189.

⁷ Ibid., p. 189.

⁸ Ibid., p. 189.

Development of Livs culture lasted till the Second World War. In 1940 Latvia was announced the Soviet Republic. All societies, including Livs Society, were banned. After the war some Livs returned to their houses and some were sent to Siberia¹⁰.

Soviet authorities controlled Livs' activities. The fishing was restricted to marked areas and all catch had to be handed to the officials. Fishermen's kolkhozes had been organized since 1946¹¹. Fishing was prohibited in Ventspils in 1952 which led to disappearing some basic elements of local culture. Other villages that still could fish became the centers for cultural and social activities. There were schools, choir and festivals were organized. But the Soviet authorities found the way to destroy the very tradition of Livs' culture – fishing. The people were very poor and they needed money for everyday life, so Soviet authorities were paying the fisherman for every boat cut in half. This way the local people lost their source of income and also the tradition of fishing that lasted for centuries.

At the beginning of the sixties the cultural life started to decrease in the villages. People could not find work; the school and the post office were closed. Some of the people sold their houses and moved away.

The Livs' situation was changed in year 1990 when Latvia gained its independence again. In 1992 the Livonian Coast was created (Livõd Rānda) in the territory of northern Kurzeme, the only area still inhabited by Livs (picture 1). The main idea was to create a possibility to revive the culture but it was not fully possible. Many Livs did not return to their houses and other did not fish anymore. Nonetheless many activities were undertaken to save the language and the culture and to set proper relations between Latvians and Livs.

Picture 1: One of the Liv's houses on Livonian Coast. Most of them are over one hundred years old



There were few initiatives before 1991 and between them should be noted the creation of music group and the choir Livlist (since 1972) and Skadinieki (1977). The Livs' Society was revived in 1988¹² and its local groups are active to this day. Many activities about Livs' culture and language are being undertaken and between them the Livs' Festival every year.

As scientists note¹³ Livs are active in many international and national organizations (Liv Cultural Centre and Finno-Ugric Peoples Congress). The most important is the work

⁹ Waligórski, Miłosz. 2010. Ludzie z wybrzeża, <http://www.pk.org.pl/arttykul.php?id=115>, accessed on 23.09.2010.

¹⁰ Juki Nakamura states that today probably there are no Livs in Siberia (Nakamura Juki, op.cit. p. 222).

¹¹ Šuvcāne, Valda, op.cit., p. 199.

¹² Šuvcāne, Valda, op.cit., p. 202.

¹³ Šuvcāne, Valda, op.cit., p. 203.

connected with preserving the language – there are many courses and books¹⁴ on the theme. There is a summer camp organized every year in Mazirbe for young Livs so they can learn the language of their ancestors.

The periodical "Līvli" is published quite regularly and it informs about contemporary events, but also about memories and the outcome of cultural and historical research.

Valda Šūvcāne wrote that "Livs did not disappeared, they assimilated with the Latvians"¹⁵, but the the Livs still defend their cultural independence even if they do not have many ways to do that.

STORIES

History and culture is different when look from the perspective of the nation and the perspective of an individual. Cultural identity looked upon from statistic point of view does not necessarily give the information about individual understanding of the term. A story about one man life can contain the bits of history and this is the reason why anthropology uses the open interviews instead of statistical data.

Livs' life stories have some similarities, of course, as they were lived through the same history. But the life of an individual is shaped differently and may associate different values.

The following Livs' stories have one thing in common: strong cultural identity and efforts for sustaining the traditions.

Gundars

Older man that lives in a small house far away from so-called "Livionian villages" is Livonian by birth. All his ancestors were Livs and his mother was the very first Latvian woman in the family. His wife was the second.

Gundars was taking a lot about his father who was well known in the area for his Livonian poems. He was fluent in Liv language and scientists from Estonia and Finland were gathering data from him.

Gundars lives in the school building – he remembers that in twenties and thirties of XX century there were special classes in Liv language in the school once a week. All other classes were thought in Latvian. The Second World War put an end to learning and Russians banned using the local language. Soon young people started to loose the language and replaced it with Russian.

Gundars' father started to speak a lot in Liv language in the nineties and made his son to learn. As an effect Gundars can speak, read and write in his language, but he is one of the few that can.

Today Gundars is retired. He is active in Livonian Society and plays the key role in the activities of the local group that consists of sixty two people. Their main goal is to teach Liv language and cultural traditions to the children.

Gundars also collects documents about his family's history so he was able to create his family genealogical tree. It dates back to year 1720. The family was pure Liv and in the last twenty years many Latvian, Russian and English names can be found on the family tree. One of Gundars' dreams is to organize family reunion, because – as he puts it – "we have to stick together, we are the Livs". The Livs – "the people of the sea", as opposed to others – "people from over the hill".

¹⁴ As for example: Boiko, Kersti. 2000, *Līvõ kēļ*, Ryga: Līvu Savienība.

¹⁵ Šūvcāne, Valda, op.cit., p. 205.

Helda

Helda's father was Liv, mother – Latvian, but the Liv language was spoken at home. The family lived in the village for many generations.

Helda had three brothers. They were separated just on the beginning of the Second World War and they found each other in Russia. They decided to come back home but it turned out their land was taken by some other people. Helda's family started to work for these people and soon they were able to live on their own. One of her brothers became a tailor, the other one – a blacksmith. And soon the year started to repeat itself as it was in the old days, when everything was in natural order. Winter, when father did not fish, was for making coaches and sleds to sell, spring was for work in the fields, summer was for fishing and smoking flounder, that was used to barter with the other villages and autumn was for fishing salmon, that was sold in Riga.

The most important part of Helda's story takes place in the thirties of twentieth century. The time of Latvia independence was also very good time for Livs. There was a fish processing factory in the area and Helda's father was its local manager. Every year the fish caught between October and January were cleaned, spiced and canned. Cans were being sold in Riga. Local fishermen were decently paid and remember this time as the time of wealth.

Helda was taught Liv language in school and she still speaks it, only there is no one to talk to – there are only three Livs in her village. Nevertheless she is active in the Livonian Society only as she is way over eighty it became almost impossible for her to get to the meetings.

She also gladly talks about her grandchildren. One of them studies Liv language, but the most important is that they all more or less speak it. Helda stresses that many young people speak better than older Livs because young ones were taught the language on special courses.

Aina B.

Her father was Liv, mother – Latvian. Her parents were sent to Siberia and when they came back their house was taken over by Russians. Aina's father wanted to stay so much that he decided to let the house go.

Aina is one of the last Livonian weavers. She was working on her loom for decades but few years back she had to stop due to eye sickness. She was making colorful Liv fabrics out of wool. The art was taught by her grandmother and for many years she was weaving in exactly the same way as generations before her. The wool was colored by natural dyes and it was easy to distinguish Livs from Latvian weaving as the latter was not even half that colorful (picture 2).



Picture 2: Liv textiles in vivid colors

The most characteristic is Liv coat – colorful, striped and folded in special way so the top layer could be used as a cap during rainy weather.

Apart from weaving Aida was also making all kinds of crafts from wool. When as a small girl she was grazing cattle she always was taking some wool and tools with her and coming

back home in the evening with a pair of socks ready or a sweater or a pillow case. She remembers that in the old days everybody made his own fabrics out of wool or flax.

Today nobody is interested in hand-made fabrics. Creating them is hard and time-consuming work. Aida's loom rests now in the local museum and some of the fabrics she gave away. Lately her hopes were awakened by her niece who wants to learn more about traditional weaving.

Keldre

Her mother was Latvian, her father – Liv, but at home Liv language was spoken. Keldre did not talk about her family and its history – she was focused on her activities in Livonian Society where she specializes in Liv traditional dishes.

The basis for Livs' diet was fish. Herring was eaten all year long. The flounder was fished mainly in the summer, when it was quite fat. It was smoked. Fish for the winter were salted and then eaten with fried bacon, sour cream and onion.

One of the most typical Liv dish was pūtelis, made out of cooked grass seeds, that were then dried and grinded as flour. It could later be mixed with sour cream and milk and served with fish and rušrāceni (potatoes cooked with peels).

Everyday meals consisted also of variety of bread, mainly made out of rye flour (pledīņas, sīdīņas, striales), that had different shape and way of preparing¹⁶.

One of the Liv traditional desserts is widely known in Northern Latvia today: skalundraunši, also called dižraušī. Small bowls made out of semolina are filled with mixed sweetened potatoes and carrots with some cinnamon and sour cream on top. It is favorite dessert for both Livs and Latvians.

Aina R.

Her father spoke Liv when he did not want his children to understand, but even so Aina can speak the language today.

There is one of the last traditional Liv smoking house on Aina's backyard. It is made out of traditional Liv boat. It was built when Aina was ten (so seventy years ago) and it is used to this day. In the old times, when Russians banned smoking fish, flounder was packed in suitcases, covered with strong smelling herbs and smuggled into the city for sell. The smoking house was the source of family's income for many years (picture 3).

¹⁶ For example: striales were precel-like in shape and were eaten with the meal; sīdīņas were soaked in broth, baked and later served with soup and meat.



Picture 3: Traditional Liv smoking house made out of a boat cut in half

The smoking house is built out of boat cut in half and put upright. Thus the small room for smoking fish was created. Usually the old boats were used for this purpose but the one is made out of only a year-old boat that was shattered during strong storm on the sea. There is a second smoking house in the same backyard and it was made out of the boat that was used for fishing for ten years.

Those two are probably the last smoking houses made out of traditional Liv fishermen's boats. One more was built in the nearby village for tourists but it is not used and another one stands in one of the Liv house, but it is covered with ivy.

CONCLUSIONS

The stories reported above are only fragments of complex Livs' history. But even out of these fragments some consistency can be read.

The Livs are currently a very small representation of the nation that survived centuries. There are so few of them that the portraits of them all fit into one book¹⁷. But it is not the number of the men that decides about surviving or disappearing of the culture – it is the will to keep traditions alive or the lack of it.

Livs are taking care of remnants of their old culture that survived the meanders of history: they teach the language to the young generations, teach old songs, history and crafts. The fishermen traditions cannot be sustained as there practically are no Liv fishermen but the consciousness of the connection with the sea is still very strong (picture 4). It is similar with their knowledge of being a part of Finno-Ugric group: Livs joke that they are actually quite tall as for the smallest part of this group.

¹⁷ Nakamura Juki, op.cit.



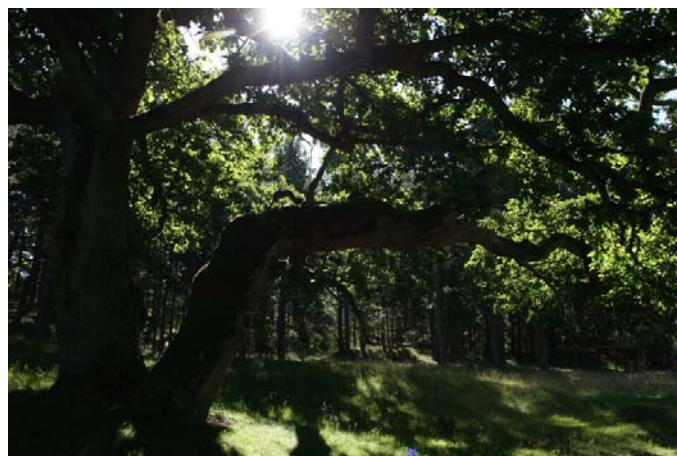
Picture 4: Fishing gear in local museum

Each of the people described above has a cultural specialty: one is putting together genealogical tree of the local Liv group, the other is saving traditional Liv dishes and the other is using the craft of traditional weaving to teach about the culture. All of them use different fragments of history to built new identity of local group.

My argument is that their experience and history prove that reconstructing parts of endangered culture is possible as long as there are people who think it is worth every effort. These might be the last Livs that care enough for their heritage to try to save as much as possible of it. The younger generations would not know the power of their culture if it would not be for these lone culture saviors.

Livs also have the understanding of the passing of their culture. There were days where whole villages were speaking Liv, today – only single people speak it and they are usually over eighty. Young people learn the language but they do not care much for the traditions.

What can be the future of the nation that can whole fit under the tree crown? (picture 5) Mixed marriages are common, language is less and less used, young people look for jobs in big cities and nobody thinks about sea fishing or agriculture. So Livs probably will assimilate with the Latvian nation. Only their strong cultural identity pushes this process over one day every day.



Picture 5: The all Livs' oak

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