

# Expression of Ethnic and Social Identity: Transition from Regional Clothing to Unified Fashion in Latvia<sup>1</sup>

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Clothing, especially the folk costume, is one of the features showing social and ethnic identity. The aim of the paper is to study issues of the expression of ethnic and social identity found in the press of the 19th century about the development of the Latvian festive dress at a time when this kind of dressing was adopted from the European fashion and started to dominate in the rural areas of Latvia; at a time when the first attempt was made to create a special Latvian-style clothing that might unite rural people and town-dwellers, the wealthy and the poor.

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## Introduction

Transition from traditional clothing (folk costume) to a unified fashion was a process that differed slightly in time in various European countries. On the whole, it lasted approximately from the end of the 18th century until the beginning of the 20th century. The development of clothing in Europe was notably influenced by the French Revolution as it created changes in society. The boundary between the traditional and the modern clothing was marked in the 19th century in many countries including Latvia. With reference both to forming the nation and the spread of ideas of national romanticism in Europe beginning at the end of the 18th century, interest in folk cultural heritage and history of the nation grew considerably. These processes, common for all of Europe, found expression in the development of clothing in Latvia as well. As at present,

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dress with ethnic or national features continues to be one of the symbols of national culture, one of the ways to show national originality and identity.

The aim of the paper is to study issues of the expression of ethnic and social identity that can be found in the press about the development of the Latvian clothing in the second half of the 19th century, when the festive dress, corresponding to the European fashion, started to become dominant in the rural areas of Latvia. It was at that that first attempts were made to create a special Latvian style clothing that might unite rural people and town-dwellers, the wealthy and the poor. This paper deals with various aspects of the history of clothing as a sign of expressing ethnic and social identity, a topic has been little studied in Latvia to date. Thus far, fashionable clothing and its manufacture has been analyzed in only in a few publications (Jansone 1996; Karlson 2003). Some publications of the ethnographer M. Slava (Slava 1963; Slava 1973) deal with aspects of wearing fashionable clothes in rural areas of Latvia. The Latvian press issues from the 60s-80s of the 19th century (*Mājas Viesis*, *Balss*, *Baltijas Vēstnesis*, *Dienas Lapa*, *Tēviņa*, etc.)<sup>2</sup> are a significant source for the study of Latvian style costumes, as well photography and drawings from the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century<sup>3</sup>.

### Socio-economical Background for Changes in the Manner of Dressing in Latvia

In the second half of the 19th century, as a result of industrialization, as in other European countries, big changes took place in the way of life of many Latvian people. The paper studies the processes that affected people living in the Russian Empire's Province of Courland (Kurzeme) and Latvian part of the Province of Livland (Vidzeme) in the second half of the 19th century. These two Provinces constitute most of the area of present-day Latvia. Eastern part of Latvia, Latgale, was part of the Province of Vitebsk at that time. Thus the

<sup>2</sup> *Balss*: political and literary paper. 1878–1907, Vēbers etc. (ed.), Riga.

*Baltijas Vēstnesis*: political, public and literary daily paper. 1868–1906, B. Dīriķis etc. (ed.), Riga.

*Baltijas Zemkopis*: weekly paper. 1875–1884, J. Māters etc. (ed.), Jelgava.

*Dienas Lapa*: sociopolitic paper. 1886–1897, Ā. Butulis, P. Bisnieks etc. (ed.), Riga.

*Mājas Viesis*: political and literary weekly paper. 1856–1908, A. Plātes, A. Leitāns etc. (ed.), Riga.

*Mājas Viesis Mēnešraksts*: pictorial literary and scientific magazine. 1895–1905, A. Plātes, P. Zālite (ed.), Riga.

*Tēviņa*: political and literary weekly paper. 1886–1914, J. Butulis, J. Čakste etc. (ed.), Jelgava.

<sup>3</sup> Photos from funds of the Museum of History of Riga and Shipping.

economic system and social politics that was realized by government in Latgale differed from that of the other parts of Latvia.

In the beginning of the 19th century, almost 93 % of the population of Latvia was rural (Skujenieks 1927: 211). Most were Latvians. In the first half of the 19th century, in the rural area of Latvia words “the peasant” and “the Latvian” usually were used as synonyms (also craftsmen, fishermen and others living in the countryside were called peasants) and denoted the lower orders of society. A united ethnic and social identity dominated in the countryside of Latvia at this time. Simultaneously, folk costume was a common feature for every ethnic group living in a certain region. The abolishment of serfdom (in 1817 in Kurzeme and 1819 in Vidzeme) and further reforms were preconditions for alteration in the folk life style, self-awareness as well as clothing. In the beginning, these changes appeared slowly, the growth of ethnic self-awareness being a slow process.

The situation changed in the second half of the 19th century. Towns played the essential role in the processes that took place in Latvian society in the 19th century. After the reforms of 1860s, when corv was abolished and freedom of movement was established, more and more peasants moved to towns for better living conditions. In the second half of the 19th century, the number of Latvians who lived in towns grew rapidly. The increase of Latvian population was especially remarkable in Riga; the city began to develop into a significant center of Latvian culture and economy. While in 1867 Latvians were only 23,6 % of all the inhabitants of Riga, at the end of the century – in 1897 – the number of Latvians had increased to 45 % (Skujenieks 1927: 268). Similar growth of the Latvian population could be observed in other Latvian towns. As a result the earlier ethno-social situation changed. Although most Latvians were still peasants, more and more of them became town dwellers, and, gradually, they formed the group of wealthy Latvian citizens. These processes promoted growth of national self-awareness. There were more opportunities to get jobs and better education in the towns. In the second half of the 19th century, a powerful stratum of Latvian intelligentsia began to form. It took an active part in the movement of national awakening and strengthening of Latvian ethnic self-awareness. Formation of the new identity of town dwellers was reflected in clothing as well. The Latvians that dwelled in the town or were educated there, did not more wear traditional folk costume from their region but dressed according to the European fashion. In the beginning, in the 1860s, urban identity involved accepting a different ethnic (in this case German) identity, as well. Recognition of Latvian ethnic identity became more important beginning with the 1870s. Urban identity was no more a priority of only one ethnic group and the style of clothing became a European category. Also, in the rural areas,

wearing dress according to the unified fashion was a demonstrative mode to show that Latvians are equal to other nations of Europe, inter alia to Germans, the majority of whom were not only different ethnically, but also, as owners of manors, a social group as well.

In addition to the abolishment of serfdom, the other process that substantially promoted the growth of national consciousness was the establishment of the stratum of Latvian land-owners. In the 1860s, after the agrarian reforms, the buying of estate lands by peasants living there became widespread (Skujenieks 1927: 397–398). The peasants bought their farms and lands “for generations”, as heritable property. After many hundred years, the Latvian peasants were again lawful masters of their land; a turning point in the peasants’ self-awareness, that was also reflected in their clothing. If the Latvian could be a master of his farmstead, then he could dress like the inhabitant of the manor – to man from the social upper class living on the estate or in town.

In the middle of the 19th century, Latvian peasants were open to innovations and advanced methods of economy. Under the leadership of the local noblemen, peasants from several parishes of Vidzeme founded the first agricultural society in Latvia in 1866 (*Mājas Viesis* 1866). This organization had its prototype in the nobles’ “The Agricultural Society of Southern Vidzeme” that was established in 1842. Similar agricultural societies were later founded by peasants in other parts of Latvia. The new Latvian landowners, tried to introduce new agricultural machinery, pedigree cattle, and other innovations in their farms, that up to that moment were used only in the manors. As in the economy, new ideas were accepted in the peasants’ personal life: innovations for preparing soft goods (clothes, knitting, textiles) that were introduced in other countries of Europe and spread fast in to Latvia (*Mājas Viesis* 1864; *Mājas Viesis* 1868; *Mājas Viesis* 1873).

## Influence of European Fashion

Publications in the Latvian press show changes in the manner of dressing, revealing territorial peculiarities and differences between generations. Information about developments in fashion was generally obtained in rural areas from itinerant Jewish merchants and the goods they offered; from craft workers (tailors and weavers) who had been professionally trained in the towns; from people encountered at the manor and the administrative centre of the parish – officials, manor servants, members of the landowner’s family; from relatives and other acquaintances working or attending education institutions in towns; from markets or shops in the town. A newspaper article about fashion, published in 1866 ([anonym author] 1866), is devoted to Latvian regional clothing

(folk costumes) and the new features of fashion from London and Paris as two different stages of the same process. Both the traditional and fashionable dress were considered to be two different expressions of Latvian clothing – the old and the new fashion. Moreover, both of them were addressed critically. It was recognized, that in some cases the new fashion could be better because, for example, less fabric is needed for the production of the new half-long men's coat than for the traditional long coat from the region of Piebalga. But in other cases, traditional clothing is recognized to be better as the new fashion is considered to be unhealthy. Examples listed include the wide hoops for women's skirts of crinoline that do not allow preserving warmth and the new mode of men's waistcoat with deep bosom cutting, making it easy to catch a cold. These comments on countrymen's fashion affirm that peasants wore both traditional and fashionable clothing in the 1860s in the rural areas of Latvia: the crinoline is a good example of the rapid acceptance of European fashion. However, this trend was not universally accepted. Narratives of respondents who were interviewed during the ethnological expeditions in the second half of the 20th century (E<sup>4</sup> 18, E 20, E 38, E 58, etc.) tell us that crinoline was worn only by the landlady and not by the respondent's mother. Other records attest that only wealthy peasant women could afford the steel hoops from Jewish tradesmen for their crinolines. Others, not so wealthy, made their hoops at home from different natural materials, such as hazel trees, pine roots, or twisted straw. It is important to notice that these and others trends of fashion played a significant role in Latvian clothing traditions as early as in the 1860s, the transition from traditional folk costume to unified fashion had already started. In the press of 1888 people were encouraged to collect artifacts for the first Latvian museum of ethnography, a recognition that the old Latvian folk costume had already disappeared in some places or could only be found in grandmothers' wedding chests (Bērziņš 1888a; Bērziņš 1888c; W 1888). Later, in the 1890s, ethnographic expeditions concluded that most of the Latvians living in rural areas wore fashionable clothing: folk costume was no longer in use except for a few regions.

<sup>4</sup> Documents from the Ethnographical Fund (Institute of Latvian History at the University of Latvia, Agency of the University of Latvia):

E 18, 5593: Limbažu r., Ainaži; (collected in the year 1960)

E 20, 766, 772: Jēkabpils r., Sēlpils, Dignāja; 1765, 1778, 1779, 1781: Jēkabpils r., Slate; (collected in the years 1947-1949)

E 38, 1835: Alūksnes r., Alsviķi; 1894: Gulbenes r., Stāmeriene; (collected in the year 1964)

E 58, 1709: Dobeles r., Kroņauce (collected in the year 1984).

Modern dresses worn in rural areas differed from those in towns. The festive dress of countrymen were unlike the town dweller's not so much in cut, but more in type of cloth; fabrics, for both traditional and fashionable clothing, were still hand-woven in rural areas. They were made by home-weavers or by professional weavers who were called "vēveri". At the end of the 19th century more and more fabrics were ordered to be woven by the local small manufactures – spinning and weaving mills (Alsupe 1981: 174). There is evidence in the Latvian press (Abuls 1889) and other sources, that the Latvian country weavers' skills, weaving techniques and looms ensured that fabrics were of high quality. The look and the quality of fabrics woven in the countryside were similar to ones that could be bought in towns. In advertisements in the Latvian press, for example in 1864, there is mention of a great variety of cotton weaving threads, the new aniline dyes and other factory made dyestuff available in Latvia's market (*Mājas Viesis* 1864; *Mājas Viesis* 1868; *Mājas Viesis* 1873). For the festive dress, peasants tried to get, according to their means, ready-made pieces of cloth or sew it from bought fabric. In the rural areas, on the one hand, there is a desire to dress like the manor owner, to overstep the still existing boundary of social groups, on the other, however, public opinion expressed disapproval about crossing the mark; in the Latvian press, in 1875, a long discussion about the suitability or harmfulness of "urban" fashion for rural people was published (*Mājas Viesis* 1875). Quite intensive polemic continued in the 1880s and 90s (*Balss* 1888; *Balss* 1889; *Tēviņa* 1892), regarding the question whether is it good that the countrywomen now look similar to the women in town? The problem of crossing the established boundaries of social identity played a significant role, as well as the practical considerations concerning the suitability of up-to-date fashion: clothing was still supposed to be an essential marker of the social identity of the person (Kalniņš 1875). While the folk costume expressed both ethnic and social identity, modern clothing was mostly looked upon as a characteristic feature of different social groups. In this case it is important to discover the conditions that formed so quick a transition from regional folk costume to a unified mode clothing.

### Latvian Style Clothing

The answer can be found in the publications before the Third Latvian Song Festival in 1888, when the first attempts to create a unified Latvian national folk costume were made. The question "How does the old time or Latvian folk clothing look?" can be more and more often found in the press. Such a question indicates, once more, that alternations in the traditions of folk clothing had appeared very fast in the middle of the 19th century: during a couple



Figure 1. The first drawing sample of the costumes for singers (Fonds of the Library of the J.Roze at the Latvian Academic Library (A 902.7 (47.4))

of generations folk clothing had essentially changed. These changes were mostly provoked by the transformation of the people's self-awareness. There is a polemic in the Latvian press, where we can find two opinions about the reconstruction of Latvian folk costume for the needs of the participants of Latvian song festivals. One of them supported the necessity to reconstruct authentic clothing as it was worn by peasants 50 and more years ago - in the beginning of the 19th century (e. g. Bērziņš 1888a). The other viewpoint was that the clothing that was worn in the time of serfdom was not acceptable for "the modern (19th cent.) free Latvians", because the social status of Latvians had changed (e.g. Bērziņš 1888c). The first, at present known as special Latvian-style clothing was made for singers of the choir, established by Jūlijs Pūrāts, for participation in the Russian Overall Exhibition of the Art and Craft in Moscow in the 1882. (Kalniņš 1882) A special Commission of Clothing was organized to create the modern Latvian folk costume (Lautenbahs 1888: 16). The first drawn sample of the costumes for singers, only for women of all choirs, participating in the III Latvian Song Festival, was made in 1888 (Bērziņš 1888b) (Figure 1). Supposedly, the author of the drawing was one of the first Latvian ethnographers, Miķelis Skruzītis (1861–1905) (Vanaga 2002). The stylization of Latvian folk costume was started already in the 1880s. (Figure 2) It was based on serious arguments of Latvian self-awareness. Later, the approach of authen-



*Figure 2. Choir from parish of Kalsnava – Vietalva (Vidzeme) on the III Latvian Song Festival in the 1888: VRVM 38739 (Museum of History of Riga and Shipping)*

tic folk costume reconstruction became dominant. Collecting items of ethnography and folklore also contributed to the growth of knowledge about traditional folk clothing.

## Conclusions

Rapid changes in the Latvian folk clothing took place in the second half of the 19th century. They were inspired by changes in the lifestyle and in the social status of Latvian people: a stratum of Latvian town dwellers was established and consisted of workers and wealthy town dwellers; Latvian intelligentsia formed both in the country and in towns; a stratum of Latvian landowners appeared, mainly consisting of two groups: landowners, and peasants without land property or servants.

The new town dwellers' identity was reflected in clothing. Having settled in towns or received education in towns, Latvians ceased to wear traditional clothing of their region and started to dress according to the European fashion. The clothing of the rural people changed as well.

Communication between the towns and the countryside increased in the second half of the 19th century. However, common features of the dress of rural people still remained, ethnic and other regional differences tended to disappear. As a result of modern influences, the social aspect of identity, rural or town in this case, became a dominant feature of clothing. The rapid transition from traditional to modern dress may be regarded as an unconscious protest against long-endured ethnic and social oppression.

The Latvian-style dress created at the end of the 19th century reflected the ideas of the time regarding the appearance of the festive dress of previous generations, corresponding to the level of ethnographic research of the day. These ideas were influenced by the ethnic and socio-political ideals prevailing in society. The heritage of national culture was a significant basis for the further development of ethnic consciousness.

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## Etninio ir socialinio tapatumo raiška: perėjimas nuo regioninės aprangos prie vienodos mados Latvijoje

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### *Santrauka*

Straipsnio tikslas – ištyrinėti etninio ir socialinio tapatumo raiškos klausimus remiantis Latvijos šventadieninių drabužių raidą atspindinčia XIX a. spauda, t. y. tuo metu, kai šio pobūdžio aprangą latviai perėmė kaip europietišką madą, kai ji ėmė vyrauti Latvijos kaime ir kai pirmą kartą pamėginta sukurti ypatingus latviškus drabužius, gebančius suvienyti kaimiečius ir miestiečius, turčius ir neturtėlius.

Pirmojoje XIX a. pusėje Latvijos kaime žodžiai „valstietis“ ir „latvis“ dažniausiai vartoti kaip sinonimai žemesniems visuomenės sluoksniams įvardinti. Baudžiovos panaikinimas (1817 m. ir 1819 m.) ir po to vykusios reformos sudarė sąlygas keisti gyvenseną, savimonę, taip pat ir aprangą. Latvijos žemės savininkų sluoksnio susidarymas buvo kitas dalykas, labai skatinęs nacionalinės sąmonės augimą ir veikęs lygiagrečiai su baudžiovos panaikinimu. Po šimtų metų trukusios pertraukos Latvijos valstietis vėl buvo teisėtas savo žemės šeimininkas. Jeigu latviai galėjo valdyti savo ūkius, vadinasi, jie galėjo drįsti mėginti apranga prilygti dvarininkams ir kitiems aukštesnei socialinei klasei

priklausantiems žmonėms, gyvenantiems dvaruose ar miestuose. XIX a. viduryje Latvijos valstiečiai gana greitai perėmė pažangiuosius ūkininkavimo metodus, taip pat ir tekstilės naujoves.

Miestuose gyvenusieji ar mokslus ėjusieji latviai jau nevilkiėjo tradiciniais savo krašto drabužiais – jie rengėsi europietiškos mados rūbais. Be to, kaimo gyventojų dėvimi unifikuoto fasono drabužiai demonstratyviai rodė, kad latviai prilygsta kitoms Europos tautoms, be kita ko, vokiečiams, kurių dauguma priklausė ne tik etniniu, bet ir socialiniu požiūriu skirtingai grupei (dvarininkijai). Latvijos kaime valstiečių bendruomenėje lengva išvelgti procesą, rodantį, kad, viena vertus, siekta puoštis taip, kaip ponai, ir peržengti vis dar gyvuojančią socialines grupes skiriančią ribą, bet, kita vertus, Latvijos visuomenės viešoji nuomonė nepritarė šitokiam ribų nepaisymui. Spauldoje aptikta informacija leidžia suprasti, kad liaudies savimonės pokyčiai buvo vieni svarbiausių veiksnių, skatinusių laikytis modernios mados reikalavimų siuvant latviškus šventadieninius drabužius.

Aprangos, kaip tautiškumo raiškos, klausimas pasidarė itin svarbus artėjant Latvijos tautinės dainos šventei XIX a. devintajame dešimtmetyje. Tuo metu nusimanymas apie etninius arba latviškus drabužius ir jų, kaip tautinio simbolio, naudojimą dar tik formavosi. Latviški drabužiai, sukurti XIX a. pabaigoje, atspindėjo (priklausomai nuo to, kiek turėta etnografinių žinių), kaip tuo metu žmonės išivaizdavo ankstesniųjų kartų dėvėtus šventadieninius rūbus. Šiuos išivaizdavimus veikė visuomenėje gyvavę etniniai ir socialiniai idealai. Kultūrinis paveldas buvo svarbiausias pagrindas toliau plėtotis tautinei savi-monei.

*Gauta 2006 m. lapkričio mėn.*

