

Review article

# Aukusti Robert Niemi's contribution to Lithuanian folklore studies

*Vilma Daugirdaitė*

The Finnish folklorist Aukusti Robert Niemi (1869–1931) can be considered a unique case in the cultural history of Lithuania. Following academic ambitions, he came to Lithuania at a complicated moment in the nation's history. For many years he fostered cultural ties between Lithuania and Finland, took part in political discussions of the time, and contributed to reforms of Lithuania's educational system. For this reason, alongside his folkloric works, facts about the professor's cultural and political activities are also quite well integrated into the Lithuanian discourse.

Yet what remains unknown (mostly due to language barriers) is the Finnish evaluation of his academic work, which would be most helpful when trying to formulate a more general view of his impact. Undoubtedly, even in the Finnish literature, a historical reflection on Niemi's academic works during his Lithuanian period is not presented in greater depth. And this is not just because of the language barrier. That which should have been and was important to Lithuanians might have had no definitive importance for Finns both then and now looking back on his academic legacy from the perspective of time. The review article aims to present the cultural and historical situation in Lithuania in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which influenced the contemporaneous assessment of his works, as well as introduce the tradition of evaluating the scholarly activity of the Finnish folklorist, established in Lithuanian historiography from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present day. The impetus to reconsider the folklorist's legacy arises from the fact that this year marks the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Niemi's birth.

## Preparing to study Lithuanian folksongs

We would not be mistaken in saying that Lithuanian folklorists unanimously agree that Aukusti Robert Niemi occupied an important role in the history of collecting and researching songs and helped to form Lithuanian folklore studies as an independent discipline. Accepting such a claim as an axiom, it is important to understand that one should not identify him only with the professorial spread of academic ideas in the Lithuanian field of folklore studies. In fact, it is because of the historical cultural circumstances and conditions of academic life in Lithuania that his work serving national Lithuanian needs is given the most significance. For this reason, it is important to keep in mind the historical context of Lithuania at that



time. It is necessary to mention that after the defeat of the 1831 rebellion against Tsarist Russia, and with the crackdown on political and societal life, the imperial University of Vilnius was shut down in 1832. As a result of losing the 1863 uprising against Tsarist occupation, the conditions for cultural life in Lithuania became even worse: in 1865, a ban on printing, importing and distributing Lithuanian publications in the Latin alphabet was implemented, lasting until 1904. In our case, it is important to mention that up until this ban on Lithuanian press in Latin print was lifted, there existed no means to integrate folklore into the field of institutionalised culture.

Meanwhile, coming from significantly different historical conditions, yet also under Russian rule, folklore studies in Finland had already gained world-wide recognition at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Finnish entrance into European folklore studies was made possible thanks to research on the runic origins of the *Kalevala* according to the so-called historical-geographic method, or the Finnish method. This method "emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as an adaptation of philology (a broad field that combines history, linguistics and literature) to folklore" (Frog 2013, 19). Bound up with the construction of national identities (Frog 2013, 20), this method encouraged a deeper investigation into questions of the genesis of Finnish oral culture as well as its connections to the cultures of other European nations.

All of this also determined the direction of Niemi's research, when after having studied Finnish language, philosophy and history at the University of Helsinki he decided to turn his attention to the field of folklore. The turn toward folklore started with research on Elias Lönnrot's life and work, followed by the content of the Finnish epic *Kalevala* (1835, 1849). According to Stasys Skrodenis, compiler of Niemi's Lithuanian writings and researcher of his Lithuanian works, as a young philologist he was encouraged to pursue comparative folklore by his teacher, Kaarle Krohn, one of the creators of the historical-geographic method. There were most likely several factors that motivated Niemi to study specifically Baltic and Baltic Finnish comparative song research. Having researched the origins of the *Kalevala* in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Niemi undoubtedly was well acquainted with the works and bold hypotheses of Julius Krohn, founder of the historical-geographic method, who argued that runes had ties with Lithuanian and Latvian folklore (Skrodenis 2018, 23–27). As Finnish folklorists have noted, this choice was influenced by the context of linguistic studies, since at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century research on the relations between Baltic and Finnish languages were intensively developed, which gives reason to believe that a similar dynamic occurred in folklore (Skrodenis 2018, 28–29).

Yet Niemi's true acquaintance with Lithuanian folklore began with Lithuanian language studies. In 1900, the young folklorist travelled to Tartu University with the aim of studying Baltic (first of all Latvian) language and folklore. There he attended the lectures of the Latvian literary critic, linguist and folklorist Jēkabs Lautenbahs. As Estonian linguist Paul Ariste notes, these lectures were especially rich in content, providing an introduction to Latvian language, literature and folklore by drawing on comparisons with Lithuanian materials (Skrodenis 2018, 51). During the summers of 1900 and 1902, Niemi also travelled to Lithuania with the purpose of learning the language (Skrodenis 2018, 45–50). Already at that time, with the help of his language teachers, he began to translate Lithuanian songs that had been published. After receiving the Herman Rosenberg Fund's stipend from the University of Helsinki in 1909, Niemi was able to conduct serious comparative research. Essentially,



it was during this rather short, yet intense time that he accomplished his most important works, those that he is most known for in the history of Lithuanian folklore studies.

Having decided in the first year to devote himself to Lithuanian and Latvian studies, in the fall of 1909 Niemi travelled to East Prussia<sup>1</sup>, now called the heartland of Lithuanian literature, which at that time was part of the German Empire. Such a choice reveals that he was in search of an environment that was conducive to research and in-depth study of the Lithuanian language, which, due to the above-mentioned historical situation, was unlikely to be found in Lithuania proper. The University of Königsberg, where a seminar on the Lithuanian language intended for priests and teachers had been offered since 1718, became an important centre for Lithuanian studies as well as a centre for Europe's Baltic scholars by the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Citavičiūtė 2004, 322).

It may very well be that this was one of the reasons why a Finnish folklorist would choose a German university for furthering his Lithuanian studies. Nevertheless, his interest in the land of East Prussia was also influenced by another circumstance related to the history of publishing Lithuanian songs: from the 18<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the favourable conditions for cultural and religious life resulted in the collection, publishing and research of folklore at a greater scale than in Lithuania itself. Clearly, Niemi knew about this environment conducive to academic work and had high hopes for this visit. This can be seen from a 1903 request for a stipend from the University of Helsinki to travel to Lithuania and East Prussia where he expected to gather information for his research from the Königsberg and Tilžė libraries, and also forge acquaintances with local Lithuanian language scholars (Skrodenis 2018, 50). However, it is unlikely that news of the changing situation at the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in East Prussia had reached the folklorist: after the unification of Germany in 1871, the growing trend of Germanisation limited the use of Lithuanian in the public sphere. Moreover, the decline of the Lithuanian language seminar in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century also disrupted active work in Lithuanian studies (Citavičiūtė 2004, 199). Perhaps this is why the professor chose to spend a large part of his time not in Königsberg, but in Tilžė, a town with a long history of Lithuanian traditions. It was known as a gathering place for many former students of Lithuanian language seminars and was also known for the Tilžė secondary education school, which was important for maintaining the Lithuanian identity and had a substantial library (Juška 2003, 640–655). Possibly this is what gave Niemi the impetus to dig deeper into the history of the collection and research of Lithuanian folk songs; a few years later Niemi compiled this history in his study titled *Tutkimuksia liettualaisten kansanlaulujen alalta* [Lithuanian Folk Song Studies] (1913). On the other hand, the decision to focus only on historiographic research and the published sources of the singing tradition of East Prussia rather than conduct a field expedition to villages where Lithuanians lived (Niemi 1996, 683<sup>2</sup>) arose from the changing situation of folklore in Prussian Lithuania. In an overview of the expedition, submitted to the Consistory of the University of Helsinki (for the period of 01/10/1909–01/05/1912) he uses the past tense to summarise the folklore tradition: folklore "in Prussian Lithuania is but a memory". Niemi was certain that the disappearance of the singing tradition was the result

1 East Prussia (Prussian Lithuania) is a historical and ethnocultural region that politically belonged to various foreign states (Duchy of Prussia, later the Kingdom of Prussia and the German Empire). This region formed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century on Baltic lands that had been conquered by Teutonic Knights in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The inhabitants of this region (at least until the 18<sup>th</sup> century) belonged to a specific Lithuanian ethnic group called *lietuvinkai* that had formed from other Baltic tribes assimilating into Lithuanian customs.

2 Archival reference: Helsingin Yliopiston arkisto. Suplik-Diarium 1909–1913, siv. 9, N:o 278. Sign. Ab 14.



of the forced assimilation of the Lithuanians, when laws were written to limit the use of the Lithuanian language in the public sphere (Niemi 1996, 699<sup>3</sup>). Actually, cultural scholars trace the early extinction of poetic folklore in East Prussia to the rise and spread of Lutheran piety in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, which preached against poetic folk creativity alongside all other forms of merriment (see Stundžienė 2018, 54–56).

When speaking on the published Prussian Lithuanian song collections that the Finnish folklorist encountered, it must be noted that they, just like the songbooks of Antanas Juška<sup>4</sup>, which began Niemi's acquaintance with Lithuanian songs, represented, as he himself later wrote, only material from "the best and most developed land of songs" (Niemi 1913, 154; Niemi 1996, 168–169). However, upon his first encounter with the songs published in these collections, Niemi thought that they belonged to the oldest layer, and thus he planned to conduct further comparative research on that basis (Niemi 1996, 683–684<sup>5</sup>). The singing tradition of other ethnographic regions, which significantly influenced the turn from searching for proto-Baltic borrowed material toward research of the dissemination of song forms, may have remained unknown if not for a coincidence. It should be mentioned here that published sources providing a panoramic view of the singing tradition of all Lithuanians, especially on the regional scale, did not exist. Institutionally organised conditions and possibilities to gather folklore, as already mentioned, were formed only at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, after the ban on the Latin alphabet press was lifted. The Lithuanian Science Society, established in 1907, took to organising cultural and academic life. It began to prepare the foundations for Lithuanian folklore studies; the gathering and collection of folklore was written in as the first point of the Science Society's statutes.

It seems as though a personal acquaintance with Jonas Basanavičius<sup>6</sup> at a theatre is what drew Niemi to the archive of the Science Society, where his encounter with the folklore collection severely upended his previous ideas and plans (Niemi 1913, 154; Niemi 1996, 168–169). In the report submitted to the Consistory of the University of Helsinki we find only vague hints about the new research data that goes beyond all expectations, which called for correcting the tasks foreseen in the academic fieldwork expedition (see Daugirdaitė 2017b, 2–3). Unfortunately, the fund of collected song manuscripts, which could open up the perspective of comparative, was sparse. After completing a preliminary survey of the folklore manuscripts kept in the Society's archives, Niemi counted around 3600 songs (Niemi 1913, 163–164; Niemi 1996, 177). For this reason, he was left to lay down the basis for comparative studies himself by organising two individual ethnographic expeditions to collect folklore: in 1910 he travelled to Northeastern Aukštaitija<sup>7</sup>, and a year later – to Dzūkija<sup>8</sup>. When we read the folklorist's own sparse reflections about his experience collecting folklore in Lithuania,

3 Archival reference: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura. Käsikirjoituksien arkisto. B. 2056, jäljennös.

4 The Lithuanian Catholic priest, folklorist, and lexicographer Antanas Juška (1819–1880) recorded around 7000 songs, 2000 melodies, and wedding ritual descriptions around Veliuona and Vilkija in Central Lithuania. The most important of these were published in the books *Lietuviškos dainos* [Lithuanian Songs] (3 vol., 1880–1882), *Svtobiné réda veliuonyčių lietuvių* [Wedding Customs of Veliuona's Lithuanians] (1880), *Lietuviškos svetbinés dainos* [Lithuanian Wedding Songs] (2 vol., 1883).

5 Archival reference: Helsingin Yliopiston arkisto. Suplik-Diarium 1909–1913, siv. 9, N:o 278. Sign. Ab 14.

6 Jonas Basanavičius (1851–1927) – a public figure who significantly contributed to the realisation of the cultural and political aims of the Lithuanian national rebirth, and was the founder of the Lithuanian Science Society. He is also known for his achievements in folkloric work.

7 Aukštaitija – a historically formed ethnographic region that includes Northeastern and Eastern Lithuania.

8 Dzūkija – a historically formed ethnographic region that includes Southeastern Lithuania.



one might get the impression that he would choose a site for his field expeditions without putting much thought into it. However, one shouldn't doubt that when traveling to North-eastern Lithuania he already had knowledge about the unique singing traditions of this region – *sutartinės*<sup>9</sup>. The choice of Dzūkija was not a matter of happenstance either: even if there was a lack of information on the uniqueness of the genre of the repertoire of songs in this region (Sabalaiuskas 1923, 18), among the circle of Lithuanian intellectuals interested in oral heritage, Dzūkija figured centrally and was known as the land of songs (Üsaitytė 2009, 42; Daugirdaitė 2017b, 5–6). Of course, the fact that Niemi collected songs in Lithuania in and of itself would not have become something important or special if the first expedition's material had not been published; because only in printed form can folklore overcome historical oblivion.

## Lithuanian studies and their contemporary reception

Taking into account Niemi's contribution to Lithuanian folklore studies, it is important to understand that his collected and published songs received more attention in his time than his research, which had brought the folklorist to Lithuania. This may be due to various circumstances. Most importantly, the intelligentsia's active interest in oral culture was mobilised by the reclaiming of the press and the national movement. The importance of oral culture for solidifying or bolstering national identity, as other national communities' experiences show, becomes more prominent in moments of national crisis and rebirth (Pocius 1996). The press represented Niemi as a foreign professor interested in Lithuanian language and folklore, and his arrival to Lithuania was a notable event in itself. An ethnographic expedition in 1910 through Northeastern Lithuania also received publicity in the press: short notes in daily and weekly newspapers (which can be read almost as the expedition's chronicle) reveal both an interest in the professor's work, as well as the widespread positive valuation of his work that dominated public discourse.

However, it should be mentioned that the perspective on Niemi's work and his collected folklore was formed by the non-academic publications of the periodical, cultural press, which fused the professionalism of the Finnish folklorist with love for Lithuania and Lithuanians. In reality, it was essentially one person who formed the emotional basis of the Lithuanian narrative about Aukusti Robert Niemi at that time – Niemi's close friend, the priest Adolfas Sabaliauskas who selectively chose certain aspects of his work for scholarly attention and certainly did not concentrate solely on folklore. There was a lack of comprehensive reviews that would offer a deeper reflection, even though the Finnish professor's interest in Lithuanian folklore became a serious incentive for Lithuanians to devote themselves to collecting folklore (Daugirdaitė 2017b, 3–4). Another thing is that the Lithuanian intellectuals' interest in folk culture at that time could not be considered academic. In the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when they still did not have their own universities and academic institutions, science, as the literary historian Vincas Maciūnas phrased it, was more or less a personal pursuit of academic amateurs (Maciūnas 2003, 802). It is these academic "amateurs" who laid the foundation for Lithuanian folklore studies according to their abilities without having any education in folklore or at times even a background in humanities. They engaged in folkloristic works alongside their other professions and in addition to their other social and political activities. Besides this, they had to solve practical questions regarding collecting folklore

9 *Sutartinė* – a unique Lithuanian polyphonic folk song that is sung simultaneously by 2, 3, or 4 singers or groups.



and publishing textbooks and syllabary-like publications for schools. To summarise, it can be said that in Lithuania at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there were neither the means nor intentions to aspire to the experiences and developed research studies of the international folklorist community.

Folklore gained a new status – a necessary step in its formation as an independent discipline – only after the Lithuanian University was founded in 1922, which became the country's centre of academic and cultural life. In 1930, a Folklore Commission was established as part of the University's Department of Humanities, which functioned as an official institution specialising in the collection and preservation of folkloric materials. Lithuanian folklore became a mandatory course at the university, and later on, a wider variety of folklore courses was offered. Such an environment fostered the need to reconsider Niemi's works: the very first folkloric study of Lithuanian folk songs was translated into Lithuanian from the 1913 Finnish study *Tutkimuksia liettualaisten kansanlaulujen alalta* [Lithuanian Folk Song Studies]<sup>10</sup>; moreover, the published collection of songs *Lietuvių dainos ir giesmės šiaur-rytinėje Lietuvoje* [Lithuanian Songs and Chants in Northeastern Lithuania]<sup>11</sup> also finally received attention from the humanities.

There is no doubt that the complicated reception of Finnish academic works in the Lithuanian context was due to the fact that they were inaccessible because of the language barrier. In the best case scenario, over the course of several decades only a hazy mention or a bibliographic citation about the study *Tutkimuksia liettualaisten kansanlaulujen alalta* (1913) would slip into explanatory reports. For instance, the Lithuanian literary historian Mykolas Biržiška, who also researched the historiography of songs, did not have the possibility of citing the Finnish folklorist's work when discussing the historical and literary sources relevant to folkloristics. He wound up mentioning Niemi's study only as though it were a footnote and included it only in the bibliography (Biržiška 1919, 92). Meanwhile, in the first chapter of this study, "History of the collecting Lithuanian folk songs", an overview of the collection and publication of Lithuanian folklore was presented in detail, beginning with sources from the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Later (when he was teaching a folklore course at the university) with the help of a dictionary and Finnish grammar book, it seems as though he was finally able to read Niemi's Finnish research (Biržiška 1955, 7, 15). It is in fact Biržiška who offered to translate this work into Lithuanian when the professor visited Kaunas in 1930. The problem of disseminating a text written in Finnish was obvious to Niemi as well, and therefore in 1913 he had appealed to the Lithuanian Science Society for financial support to translate his study into German, a language more widely used in academic contexts. Unfortunately, the request was not granted due to financial circumstances.<sup>12</sup> The Lithuanian translation of the work was published only in 1932 in a publication of the Folklore Commission titled *Mūsų tautosaka* [Our Folklore].<sup>13</sup> At that time the first professional and comprehensive commentary by Jonas Balys, who had studied folklore in the universities of Western Europe, also appeared in the cultural journal *Vairas* [Steering Wheel] (Balys 1933). However, it did not resonate with a wider

10 Niemi, A. R. 1913. *Tutkimuksia liettualaisten kansanlaulujen alalta*, I (*Suomalaisen Tiedeakatemian Toimituksia*, sarja B, nid. XII). Helsinki.

11 *Lietuvių dainos ir giesmės šiaur-rytinėje Lietuvoje*, Dr. A. R. Niemi ir kun. A. Sabaliausko surinktos. [Helsinki], 1912.

12 The question of financing the translation was raised at the Lithuanian Science Society Committee's meeting on 31 May 1913 (LLTI BR F22-3, l. 65–66), as well as at a meeting at the 7<sup>th</sup> general gathering of the members of the Lithuanian Science Society that took place on 10–12 June 1913 (LLTI BR F22-3, l. 72–73).

13 Niemi, A. R. 1932. *Lietuvių liaudies dainų tyrinėjimai*, iš suomių kalbos vertė Adolfas Sabaliauskas. (*Lietuvių tautosaka* 6).



audience. Knowing that literati (writers, literary historians and critics) interested in folkloric work were concentrated in the Humanities department of the university, it is unlikely that research based on the historical-geographic method would spark wider discussions. Even later on, Niemi's research propagating Finnish methodological ideas did not make a dent in Lithuanian folklore studies. On the other hand, even in the first historiographic surveys of research on Lithuanian songs (wherein Lithuanian folklore studies was established as an independent discipline), the work was labelled as *of the times*, was considered as a significant fact, and the historical-geographic method was mentioned as one of the foundational ways to the academic research of folklore (Biržiška 1938, 1348).

A different aspect of Niemi's Lithuanian works related to the collection of folklore took root in the field of academic discourse (folklore studies) and culture more generally. As was already mentioned, the professor organised two individual ethnographic expeditions in Lithuania to gather enough material to compare Lithuanian and Finnish songs. The success of his ethnographic expeditions and the aim of supplementing the rather sparse publications presenting the Lithuanian singing tradition encouraged him to publish the material gathered during expeditions, which resulted in an academic breakthrough. However, only the compilation of songs from Northeastern Lithuania was published. The unique songs encountered in Aukštaitija – both *sutartinės* and archaic songs useful for comparative studies – are what provided the impulse to publish materials gathered during the 1910 ethnographic expedition (Niemi 1996, 692–693<sup>14</sup>).

Yet the most crucial incentive to publish was probably Niemi's encounter with priest Adolfas Sabaliauskas, whom he met in one of the parishes he visited in Nemunėlio Radviliškis, one of the parishes he visited. The priest who had grown up in the area himself had started collecting songs at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and amassed a substantial collection of songs and *sutartinės*. It is believed that this professional folklorist was impressed not only by the content gathered by the amateur folklore collector (since both collections were incredibly similar), but also by his knowledge about the singing traditions of this area, especially *sutartinės*, a unique style of song. Without the help of such knowledge, Niemi would probably have not been able to prepare a publication for the press. As it is known, the collaborative song book of Niemi and Sabaliauskas was published in 1912 as the sixth volume of the Finnish Academy of Science's B series of academic works, titled *Lietuvių dainos ir giesmės šiaur-rytinėje Lietuvoje*.

Regardless of the positive valuations of the Finnish folklorist's interest in Lithuanian folklore, there is a clear lack of more explicit contemporaneous accounts of what sort of ideas the published song collection inspired, especially for the intellectuals who had become more or less consciously involved in national affairs and initiated the gathering, study, and publication of folklore. However, the publication of the collection of songs did not go unnoticed. In the year that the book appeared, the knowledgeable editor of the Catholic cultural journal *Draugija* [Society], priest Adomas Jakštas (real name Aleksandras Dambrauskas), wrote a review of it in which he describes the book as "beautiful, conscientious work that is of great use for Lithuania" (Jakštas 1912, 286). In this review, after mentioning several significant moments in the edition's history of Lithuanian songs and thanking the Finnish academy for helping the Lithuanians pursue their interests in this field, the author specifically indicated

14 Archival reference: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura. Käsikirjoituksien arkisto. B. 2056, jäljennös.



important aspects of the book which were reiterated more than once by other researchers: 1) that the collection presents the especially unique sung folklore of a region that had until then received little attention, 2) that the collection draws attention to the advantages of preparing and "facilitating future song researchers in their studies" (Jakštas 1912).

The collection *Lietuvių dainos ir giesmės šiaur-rytinėje Lietuvoje* ended up acquiring the status of a resource for cultural studies only in independent Lithuania together with the expanding horizons of folkloristics. Based on the evaluation of the song collection, the image of Aukusti Robert Niemi took root as one of the key supports of Lithuanian folkloristics. As Balys summarises, *Lietuvių dainos ir giesmės šiaur-rytinėje Lietuvoje* is one of the best organised and published collections of Lithuanian folklore which "provided a direction for our young science as it embarked on its first steps" (Balys 1955, 11). The collection served as a good example of collecting and publishing folklore and considering folklore classification systems.

Niemi and Sabaliauskas's song compilation did not receive any special attention from humanities scholars. Yet, when considering the principles according to which folkloric sources are prepared or evaluating the published song collection, *Lietuvių dainos ir giesmės šiaur-rytinėje Lietuvoje* became a foundational text. The professor's experience with arranging sources and his own academic preferences resulted in the systematisation of his data, which was presented to researchers in an accessible way, and was edited in line with the dialects as much as possible. For the first time ever, this compilation offered a classification system for Lithuanian folk songs which would help navigate in published materials, and for which it was lauded (Balys 1955, 11; Biržiška 1955, 7). The grouping of songs on an academic level came to be a requirement for published sources (Sruoga 2003, 244), even though the classification system that Niemi suggested for Lithuanian songs never caught on (Skrodenis 1996, 18). It is true that some of the compilers of song collections used this classification system in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, albeit with some reservations (Biržiška 1931, 29–30). It came back into use in the 1950s when work on the *Lietuvių liaudies dainų katalogas* [Catalogue of Lithuanian Folk Songs] was begun (Kazlauskienė 1971, 320–322). To summarise, it can be said that even though Niemi was unable to grasp the whole variety of the Lithuanian singing tradition (Skrodenis 1996, 18), just like the compilers of the systematic song catalogue, he chose the song's function and theme as the primary principles for classification.

The book *Lietuvių dainos ir giesmės šiaur-rytinėje Lietuvoje* is also mentioned as one of the main sources for studies of Lithuanian culture – both for researching various aspects of traditional culture, and for becoming acquainted with the singing tradition of Northeastern Lithuania (Sruoga 2003, 250; Sruoga 2004, 20–21). For the first time, the sung folklore of a little known region was integrated into literary cultural research thanks to this book, which matched the academic and cultural needs of society. As Niemi wrote when applying for financial support to the Finnish Academy of Sciences for the publication of this book, "this region was not studied at all until now and is a *terra incognita* even for Lithuanians" (Skrodenis 2018, 93). No less important is the fact that this was the first publication of *sutartinės* that was of a larger scope (in all, around 800 are published). Despite problems with song texts, their incompleteness and complications due to dialectological editing, Niemi and Sabaliauskas' song compilation remains one of the main documents of the folkloric identity of Northeastern Aukštaitija to this day. Likewise, with the professor's help, a book published several years later in Helsinki, titled *Lietuvių dainų ir giesmių gaidos* [Notation of Lithuanian



Songs and Hymns]<sup>15</sup> supplemented the previous work with melodies for a portion (315) of its song texts. Both of these books, published in Finland at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, supplement each other and present a rather thorough and coherent image of the compact area of Aukštaitija, long associated with *sutartinės*.

All the way up until the end of the previous century, Niemi was seen in the history of folklore collection solely in relation to the northeastern region of Lithuania (Korsakas 1963, 82). The manuscripts of the Dzūkija folklore collection, just like the ethnographic expedition in Dzūkija region, remained unnoticed by both society at large and the academic community of that time. Niemi had put in great effort to publish the songs of Dzūkija in a separate publication, just as he had done with the data gathered in the first expedition. He came back to this project one last time toward the end of his life. In the spring of 1931, the Finnish Academy of Sciences dedicated funds to prepare the collection for print as well as its publication as a volume of the B series of academic works. Over the summer of that same year, Sabaliauskas returned from Helsinki, where he was working with the author's help on translating *Tutkimuksia liettualaisen kansanlaulujen alalta* into Lithuanian, and brought back to Lithuania manuscripts of the folklore collections; the unpublished data therein (the collection of songs of Dzūkija) was entrusted to him to "classify and prepare for print" (Sabaliauskas 1931, 8). However, Niemi died in the fall and this intention of his never came to fruition. Manuscripts from both folklore expeditions were handed over to the Lithuanian academic institution that was compiling folklore material – particularly for the Lithuanian folklore archive. This archive later gave its folklore collections to the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore. Here the collection of songs from Dzūkija lived out what Jurgita Ūsaitytė calls "their determined destiny – hopefully awaiting the attention of researchers and publishers" (Ūsaitytė 2009, 46).

The review of the tradition of evaluating Niemi's Lithuanian works revealed that his research in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had a difficult path to finding its way to Lithuanian folklore studies, which at that time had still only been forming. Both the academic environment and historical conditions resulted in more attention being paid to the practical branch of activities in Lithuanian studies (collection and publication of folklore), particularly the printing of the collection from the first expedition, *Lietuvių dainos ir giesmės šiaur-rytinėje Lietuvoje*. The scientist's research works, unfortunately, remained in the margins of Lithuanian folkloristics.

### The approach from a time perspective

Niemi's Lithuanian studies and their early reception re-entered the limelight of Lithuanian folklorists only a hundred years later, because in the Soviet era the legacy of this foreign folklorist was assessed as being a past that was no longer relevant for Soviet folklore studies. On the other hand, his contribution to Lithuanian folklore studies was recognised. The publication *Lietuvių tautosakos apybraiža*, which presented the history of Lithuanian folklore collection, publication, and studies on the basis of Marxist ideology, claimed:

In the history of Lithuanian folk song collection and research, Niemi occupies a prominent place. He helped form Lithuanian folklore studies as an independent scientific discipline. [...] In his work, Niemi

15 Sabaliauskas, A. 1916. *Lietuvių dainų ir giesmių gaidos*. Helsinki.



raised and dealt with new issues of folkloristics, he accumulated a wealth of valuable material for song historiography, strengthened the critical outlook in studying Lithuanian folk songs, although in general he didn't exceed the limits of the bourgeois folkloristics of that time period. (Korsakas 1963, 82.)

Due to the ideologising of folklore studies and folklore in the Soviet era, Niemi's work did not earn greater attention from Lithuanian humanitarians. Probably Stasys Skrodenis was the only scholar interested in the legacy of the Finnish folklorist. Having taught himself Finnish during his student years, he continued to bring up Niemi's Lithuanian works in the cultural and academic press in texts intended to promote science, or in publications of archival documents (Skrodenis 1969; 1971; 1973; 1984 and others). In a study dedicated to cultural-folkloric connections between Balts and their northern neighbours (Estonians and Finns) that appeared in 1989, Skrodenis published the first thorough historiographic presentation of the professor's works (Skrodenis 1989, 145–161). Purposefully continuing his work, after Lithuania re-established its Independence, he prepared and published a volume of Niemi's Lithuanian folkloric writings (Niemi 1996) which presents not only the Lithuanian translation of *Tutkimuksia liettualaisten kansanlaulujen alalta*<sup>16</sup>, but also other texts that are meaningful for Lithuanian folkloristics, as well as documents found in the archives of Helsinki that were related to his Lithuanian works. Skrodenis' second major work was a monograph titled *Profesorius Aukusti Robert Niemi ir Lietuva / Professori Aukusti Robert Niemi ja Liettua* [Professor Aukusti Robert Niemi and Lithuania] (2018) published in honour of his 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The book's author summarises his earlier articles, and provides an overview of the academic, cultural and political activities of the Finnish academic. He also discusses Niemi's ideas of his own way of applying the Finnish method, shows the relevance and perspectives of comparative research for Lithuanian and Finnish traditional cultures, and presents unpublished materials found in Finnish archives. Refusing a critical evaluation of Niemi's academic ideas, Skrodenis initiates a new reading of works that were written over a hundred years ago and argues that "returning to Niemi's works using new sources and academic studies that touch upon various areas of folk creativity is by no means futile" (Skrodenis 2018, 149–165). It would not be an exaggeration to say that it was Skrodenis who reintroduced the Finnish academic into the limelight of Lithuanian folklorists. Today's surveys and articles grasp, at least in part, the most important directions of his academic works, reveal selectively chosen historical moments of the published and manuscript folklore collections, and discuss their impact on Lithuanian folklore studies (Skrodenis 1989; Skrodenis 1992; Skrodenis 2018; Ūsaitytė 2009; Sauka 2016; Daugirdaitė 2017b). However, the interpretive thread inherited from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century regarding Niemi's Lithuanian works remains unchanged.

The growing interest in Niemi's Lithuanian legacy encouraged a return to the unpublished archival collection of songs from Dzūkija. This collection was mentioned in the 1996 introduction to *Lituanistiniai raštai* [Lithuanian Writings] (Skrodenis 1996, 19). This reminder inspired academic consideration on whether it would be appropriate to publish Niemi's collection of songs from Dzūkija now, given the fact that the Folklore Archives houses a more trustworthy (in terms of recording quality) array of songs that reflect the long term singing tradition of Dzūkija (Ūsaitytė 2009, 47). Discussing the prospects of the manuscript collection as an academic publication, Ūsaitytė states that publishing a document of such historical and educational value for folklore studies would first of all repay a debt to national

16 Skrodenis heavily edits the 1932 publication of Sabaliauskas' translation and supplements it by translating sections that had been overlooked, and clarifies the terminology.



culture and a valuation of Niemi's contributions to Lithuanian folklore studies (Ūsaitytė 2009, 47–48, see also Sauka 2016, 91). Unfortunately, due to textual mistakes that obscure the songs' poetics and meanings, the editors (one of whom is the author of this article) have not yet taken on the challenge of reviving this unique and interesting, albeit problematic material as a book (see Daugirdaitė 2018). Rather, in the current stage of their research they have chosen a different way to remind about the ill-fated manuscript and integrate it into applied and academic research by preparing an electronic publication *A. R. Niemio lietuvių tautosakos rinkinių paveldas* [Heritage of A. R. Niemi's Lithuanian Folklore Collections].<sup>17</sup> The electronic medium allows the possibility of presenting the digitised manuscript's facsimile and the edited versions of the original texts simultaneously, which allows one to develop an adequate understanding of and to evaluate the hand-written texts.

Having never entered the public sphere in its own time, the archival collection of folklore from Dzūkija today carries the scent of historical memory yet draws attention not only as a source of folklore. The collection reveals both directly and indirectly the professor's interests that permeate it. In some cases, they can be seen because he explicitly mentions them himself as, for example, admitting that he wrote down only works of the most archaic layer that might point to the origins of Finnish songs (Niemi 1913, 157; Niemi 1996, 171). In other cases, Niemi's academic intentions and assumptions that are felt in the texts of the manuscript have been attributed to the incompetence of his helpers to adequately write down the texts of the songs. Hence certain facts about the collection of folklore in Lithuania allowed for the presumption to accrue over decades that the professor himself did not record the material, but rather that "high school students, organists, priests, who did not understand or knew nothing about the requirements for recording/transcribing songs" were responsible for the mistakes therein (Skrodenis 1996, 19). Among these recording-quality issues for the collection – which one is encouraged to see as the fault of his helpers – are included the fragmentary nature of texts, which fail to maintain the poetic or musical form of the song (Skrodenis 1996, 19). However, a review of the collection from a historical and especially a textological perspective shows that most of the material from Dzūkija was recorded by the folklorist himself, and not his helpers, as has been assumed until now. The fact that the folklorist did not know the Lithuanian song tradition well enough, and had not learned enough Lithuanian is betrayed by texts that have lost the form and intonation of a poetic song (Daugirdaitė 2018, 100) but also by mistakes that impede a clear understanding of the meaning of the text which include: confusing vowels and consonants, not taking into consideration the morphological peculiarities of cases and inflections, lexical distortions (also acoustic mistakes, when the heard syllables are joined into words that do not reflect the meaning of the text) (Daugirdaitė 2018, 93–95). Such "linguistic" marks of a foreign researcher, found in the manuscript of songs from Dzūkija, allow one to consider the shortcomings of the collection not in relation with the incompetency of inexperienced helpers, but rather with the researcher's own academic interests. This becomes even more apparent knowing that Niemi was a representative of the historical-geographic method and was interested in Lithuanian songs not simply as poetic works, but also in the different motifs of songs and their dissemination (Daugirdaitė 2018, 100–101).

17 See *A. R. Niemio lietuvių tautosakos rinkinių paveldas*, parengė Vilma Daugirdaitė ir Jurgita Ūsaitytė, 2017, internet access: <http://archyvas.ilti.lt/niemi-dainos/>. Both the manuscripts and the published Lithuanian folklore collections are presented in the electronic publication.



The collection makes apparent the Finnish folklorist's academic intentions and experiences of recording texts, and gives impulse to supplement the commonly accepted interpretations of his Lithuanian works with new aspects. Furthermore, considering Aukusti Robert Niemi's legacy of Lithuanian studies as an undividable whole lessens the tension between the historical and cultural significance of the collection and the aesthetic value of the texts. Finally, the manuscripts attest to the important role that the gathering of folklore plays in laying a strong foundation for theoretical studies – an aspect often overlooked by historiographic texts.

## Conclusion

This overview of Aukusti Robert Niemi's Lithuanian works from the perspective of Lithuanian folklore studies allows us to see how this prominent person figures in the history of Lithuanian folklore studies. Perhaps, direct reception or reflection on his works (especially his academic research) was sometimes absent. At the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Lithuanian society became acquainted with the professor's academic and civic activities only through articles of an informative nature that appeared in the periodic and cultural press. Niemi is included into the academic discourse of those times only in a sporadic manner, several decades after the initial publication of his works. However in historiographic texts, through which Lithuanian folklore studies came to be considered an independent discipline, Niemi is mentioned as one of the keystone figures of Lithuanian folklore studies; his study *Lietuvių liaudies dainų tyrinėjimai (Tutkimuksia liettuvalaisten kansanlaulujen alalta)* was commonly used to support the argument that folklore studies, just like other sciences, has a variety of methodological approaches for studying and understanding its object of research.

In the fields of academic discourse (folklore) and culture, Niemi is widely regarded and reflected as a collector of folklore who (together with Adolfas Sabaliauskas) prepared and published the song compilation *Lietuvių dainos ir giesmės šiaurytinėje Lietuvoje*. This song book helped to develop ideas of academic song editions, since up until its appearance, the question of what sort of folklore source meets academic requirements was rarely considered. Also, it was presented as a book that fulfilled society's cultural needs already in the first decades after its publication. This happened because the purpose of printed folkloric sources was associated not only with scientific needs, but the needs of national culture. Songs in general occupied a particular place: with a still-existing lack of Lithuanian literature, they were viewed as poetry that could foster the nationalism of the Lithuanian enlightenment (Vaižgantas 2009, 71).

In the Soviet era, due to the politics of ideologising folklore studies and folklore itself, Niemi's work did not receive much attention. The opportunity to reconsider the Finnish folklorist's legacy in Lithuanian studies and the tradition of assessing the Lithuanian folklore that he collected as well his scientific work, appeared only at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the restoration of Lithuania's independence. Today the surveys and articles at least partially grasp the most important directions of Niemi's academic work, shed light on selectively chosen historical moments of the folklore collections in published and manuscript form, and offer new perspectives on his contributions to Lithuanian folklore studies. Nevertheless, it is worth noting, that the trajectory of evaluating the work of Aukusti Robert Niemi in Lithuanian studies, having found its direction in the 1910s–1930s, remains unchanged.



## Research materials

LLTI BR. Manuscript Collection of the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore Library.  
LTR. Folklore Manuscript Collection of the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore.

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Vilma Daugirdaitė, Ph.D., researcher at the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore, Department of Folksongs (Vilnius). Research fields include history of Lithuanian folkloristics, contemporary folklore processes, folksongs source editions and publication.