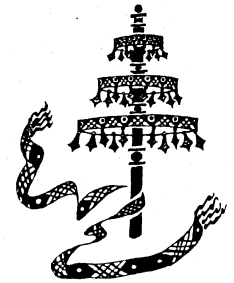


THREE LATVIAN CAROLS

by
Andrejs Jansons



A I. N A M A M Ā M I Ņ A

Bambadi, bambadi, bambadi bam.
Bambadi, bambadi, bambadi bam.

Ai, nama māmiņa, laid mani iekšāja.
Oh, house mother, let me inside,

Ķekatas atbrauca ar vezumiņise,
Mummers have arrived with little wagons,

Kavājat ilenus, kavājat susekļus,
hide awls, hide brushes,

Ķekatu pulkaja rāvēji ļautiņi.
mummers' crowds greedy folks.

Nezagšu ilenu, nezagšu adatu.
I won't steal awls, I won't steal needles.

Susekli, to zagšu, tā mane vajaga,
Brush, that I'll steal, that I need,

Kalada bērnieme galviņu sukāte,
mummer children's heads to brush,

kaladū, kaladū.
kaladū, kaladū.

Notes

This song is written in the dialect of Nīca, a region in southwestern Latvia, not far from my native Libau Liepāja which is to the south, across the lake. The people of that region preserve some of the oldest Latvian customs, costumes, language, and buildings that are known today.

Nama māte is the mistress of the house. In this song she would be the farmer's wife, the all-powerful matriarch. The refrain *kaladū, kaladū* comes from the church Slavonic word *kolyada* of the beggar monks order from Lettgallia which meant "alms" or "charity." It is found in many Latvian folksongs associated with the winter solstice.

Elsie Thomas

Oh, Mistress of the house, let me inside.
Mummers have arrived with little wagons,
Hide the awls, hide the brushes,
the crowds of mummers are greedy folks.

I won't steal your awls or needles.
I'll steal your brush, that I need
to brush the mummer children's hair,
kaladū, kaladū.

MUMMERY IN OLD LATVIA

Mummersy is one of the ancient customs that goes back to the pagan days. Christianization began in the Baltic region in the 13th century, but it took hundreds of years for it to take root in the Baltic cultures. Some heathen rites, like the summer solstice celebration, exist to this day.

Most of the knowledge about Latvian mummersy is derived from old Latvian folksongs and is later on described by various scholars studying the ethnic customs of the Baltic peoples. The Latvian word for mummersy is *kekatas*, and the folks participating are *ķekatnieki* or *budēļi, sukatnieki*. *Budēlītis* is the ring leader and main person, like Jānis or Jānītis ("St. John") at summer solstice festivals.

The origin of this ancient custom goes back to ancient fertility rites. Just like on St. John's Day (summer solstice), folks out on the farms anticipate the *Budēlītis*' coming by decorating their house and preparing a full table of food and drink. Upon arriving, *Budēlītis* and his masked followers invited in so that, according to ancient beliefs and customs, the cabbage would grow as large as his headdress, the grain would produce plenty of bread, and the livestock would get big and fat.

The masked mummers come in crowds, costumed as the devil, death, gypsies, horse dealers, etc. Sometimes their faces were made up and painted with coal or chalk and they also made false hair from grasses or flax. They also wore large wooden face masks of bird or animal heads which portrayed spirits and fertility demons and were meant to impress them.

As *Jānītis* and his crowd have to be received with cheese and beer, the mummers expect to get various meats. When they arrived at the farmstead they would be invited in and given the traditional gifts: meat, home-knit socks and mittens (so that the lambs would grow lots of wool). It was here that the singing, dancing, and merry-making began. The mummers' songs were usually monologs or dialogs which were acted out in the traditional games and dances. Before departure it was obligatory for the mummers to "steal" something, i.e. brushes, combs, or awls.

Traditionally mummers went around on the following days: St. Michael's (Sept. 29); the autumn festival which marked the beginning of winter, starting with *veļu laiki* - the time of the ghosts of the dead; St. Martin's (Nov. 10), the time of offerings of thanksgiving; and then there is, of course, the Winterfest, lasting from December 24 through January 6, the return of light.

Elsie Thomas

ZIEMASSVĒTKU NAKTS

Jau vieglās ēnu šūpās
Already light shadow's waves

Tumst egļu tornis zils,
darkens fir-tree tower blue,

Un dziļās sniega kūpās
and deep snow drifts

Dus plava, lauki, sils.
rest meadow, fields, heather.

Tik zvaninš liegā taktī
Only little bell gentle rhythm

kaut kur aiz meža trauc:
some where behind forest tolls:

Varbūt, ka svētku naktī
perhaps, that holy night

kāds celnieks mājūp brauc.
some traveler homeward drives.

Caur dārzēm aizmigušiem,
Through gardens asleep,

Ko mīkstas pārslas sedz,
which soft snowflakes blanketed,

Aiz logiem aizsnigušiem
behind windows snow-covered

kāds gaišas sveces dedz.
someone bright candles burns.

Balts ceļš caur tumsu lokās,
White road through darkness winds,

Un tālē zvaigzne māj--
and far away star blinks--

kāds siltas, mīlas rokas
someone warm, loving hands

Pār zemi svētot klāj.
over earth blessing spreads.

Already the light shadows sway,
the fir-tree tower darkens blue.
And in the deep snow drifts
the meadow, fields, and heather rest.

Only a small bell jingles
somewhere within the forest:
perhaps, on that holy night
some traveler is headed home.

Through sleeping gardens
blanketed by soft snow,
behind snow-covered windows,
someone burns bright candles.

A white road winds through the darkness,
and far away a star blinks--
someone with warm, loving hands
spreads blessings over the earth.

In Latvia the fir-tree forests are a dark blue from far away and the tops look like Gothic cathedral spires. Hence, "the fir-tree tower darkens blue." The light shadows of the trees sway -- there is always a little breeze, at least.

Elsie Thomas

MEKLĒTĀJA CEĻŠ

Meklētāja ceļš ir galā
Seeker's path has ended

Vakars metas, tālu iets.
evening falls, far walked.

Baltā ziemā, sveša malā
White winter, foreign land

Sārti uzplaukst blāzmas zieds.
Rosy unfolds dawn's blossom.

Vai tur Ziemas svētku roze
Does there winter fest rose

Debess dārzos ziedus ver?
heaven's gardens blossoms open?

Brīnumaino krāsu kvēli
Wondrous color glow

Acis atdzerdamās dzer.
eyes to capacity drink.

Mana debišķīgā [debess] roze,
My heavenly [heaven's] rose,

Mātes maigo roku dēsts:
mother's mild hand tended:

Jaukā bērnu dienu gaisma,
beautiful child's day light,

Brīnišķīgā Kristus vēsts.
wonderful Christ's message.

Zinu arī tavā sirdī
I know also your heart

Šonakt Kristus roze zied,
tonight Christ's rose blooms,

Un tu izej ziemas laukā
and you go out wintery field

klausīties kā zvaigznes dzied!
to listen how stars sing!

The seeker's path has ended;
evening falls, I have walked far.
In the foreign white winter land
dawn's rosy blossom unfolds.

Does the Christmas rose
bloom in heaven's garden?
My eyes drink their fill
of the wondrous colorful glow.

My heavenly rose,
tended by a mother's gentle hand:
the beautiful light of childhood,
the wonderful message of Christ.

I know also that in your heart
Christ's rose blooms tonight,
And you go out in the wintery field
to listen to the stars sing!