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Recovering the Voice of the Oppressed: Master, Slave, and Serf in the Baltic Provinces

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Abstract. Historians writing about the Baltic provinces allude to the harsh life of the peasants, but since the peasants did not leave their own historical records, their voice has been absent from scholars' accounts of the 700-years period of German domination. The elusive voice of the peasants may be found in the Latvian folk songs or *dainas*. The *dainas* inform us of the modes of oppression the peasants suffered and the modes of resistance they employed. They thereby contradict the widely held beliefs that the peasants had accepted their status and that the *dainas* do not depict concrete reality. This peasant poetry provides a window into their experience of slavery and thereby enables us to ground the history of the colonial period in that experience.

Introduction

For the past 700 years, German historians writing about the German Baltic provinces of Livonia and Couronia (German: *Livland* and *Kurland*) have focused on the German colonizers and given the indigenous peoples little attention. Latvian historians, for their part, have also utilized German sources and archival records and are hard put to portray the life experiences of the peasants. In the most recently published history, *The Latvians. A Short History*, Andrejs Plakāns focuses on "the Latvians themselves" (xix), but finds a paucity of written records before the nineteenth century. "The written sources for the [medieval] period [...] described principally the activities of the upper social orders and [...] provided information about peasants only to the extent that they were of importance to the functioning of administrators and churchmen or the occasional curious observer." (24) In the 16th century he finds that "less likely to enter the written record was information about the lives of the other 95 percent of Livonian society which consisted mostly of Latvian peasants [...]" (30f.) This frustrating situation persists "because the indigenous populations did not directly create historical records in their own language until the nineteenth century" (24).

In this paper I would like to suggest that to find the elusive voice of the colonized peoples we expand the search beyond the written "records" that are silent about the peasants and begin to identify other historical "sources" that have been preserved orally. For the Latvians such historical sources are the lyrical folk songs, the *dainas*, composed in the Latvian language, and typically consisting of two unrhymed couplets. The metre in most *dainas* is trochaic (four accented syllables to each line), or less frequently dactylic (two accented syllables per line). They are either recited or sung. The process of creation, recitation or singing, forgetting some,

remembering others, changing still others, was continuous for centuries. Vaira Vīķis-Freibergs points out that

> [...] the songs survived, immune to those kinds of changes that make the stuff of written history. Whatever the dates of battles fought and whatever the names of the kings who won or lost them, the land remained fundamentally the same, worked by the force of horse and man. Customs changed only slowly and gradually, and the songs changed slowly along with them, adding new layers as time went on, but always preserving deeper layers which went back to remote antiquity.[1]

They were collected and written down in the 19th century. Some earlier written examples can be found in the collections of several late 18th and early 19th century German clergymen.[2] The majority were collected by Latvians in an effort initiated by Krišjānis Valdemārs (1825-1891) in the 1860's. Starting in 1869 the project was directed by Fricis Brīvzemnieks (1846-1907). Transcribers traveled across Latvia to collect these songs as well as other folklore materials. They wrote down *dainas* that were being recited or sung from memory, and also recorded the names of the informants and the places where the *dainas* were transcribed. Brīvzemnieks broadened the search in 1877 when he wrote newspaper articles soliciting the submission of *dainas* by mail. By 1893, 150,000 *dainas* had been collected, and by 1912 the total was 217,996.[3] These texts were compiled and edited by Krišjānis Barons (1835-1923) who joined the project in 1878 and made it his life's work. His edition of the *dainas* was published in six volumes between 1894 and 1915.[4] The collecting of *dainas* continued during Latvia's independence under the auspices of the Archives of Latvian Folklore and by 1938 a total of 2,308,000 songs had been collected.[5]

Scholars of the *dainas* in the second half of the 20th century have focused both on their thematic content and on their poetic form. Since the *dainas* have not been translated into English, their accessibility is limited to those fluent in the Latvian language.[6] A comprehensive critical work in English is the volume edited by Vaira Vīķis-Freibergs, *Linguistics and Poetics of Latvian Folk Songs. Essays in Honour of the Sesquicentennial of the Birth of Kr. Barons*. Vīķis-Freibergs herself has done considerable work on various aspects of the *dainas*, and especially on the sun motif.[7] Research at American universities has yielded dissertations on the subjects of linguistic analysis of death and burial folk songs, and man and nature.[8] During the 50 years of Soviet occupation of Latvia, the Institute for Language and Literature carried on research and published the findings in the proceedings of the Institute. Today research is continued by the Archives of Latvian Folklore.

Latvian peasants created *dainas* for all situations that one might encounter during the course of life. The *dainas* both described the situation and also commented upon it. The text was freely improvised; the focus of each *daina* was specific. Barons' plan was to organize the *dainas* according to the cycle of life and the annual cycle in nature, thus grouping them according to the particular contexts to which they referred.[9] Together they described all the major events in a peasant's life: birth, child rearing, courtship, marriage, weddings, married life, death, and burial; the tasks men and women and children were called upon to perform in an agrarian or a seafaring society; their relationships to nature, animals and plants; their religious practices, and their magical spells and charms. The *dainas*, however, are not only a cultural archive of a peasant society. They are also a vehicle for transmitting the peasant's moral philosophy, his attitude towards the world he encountered, and his evaluation of it.

Because the *dainas* cover every aspect of peasant life, they are an important historical source for those seeking the peasants' own description of their own experiences. And since these peasants were enserfed and enslaved until the 19th century, the *dainas* are also the most direct and compelling testimony of life under the institution the Germans called *Leibeigenschaft*.[10] In addition to descriptions of the work the peasants had to perform and the physical conditions they had to endure, they also provide the peasants' commentary on their situation and the role the German colonizers played in their degraded lives.

I quote all *dainas* in this paper from *Latviešu tautas dziesmas, (Chansons populaires lettonnes)*, I-XII. Švābe, A., Straubergs, K., Hauzenberga-Šturma, E. (eds.) Copenhagen: Imanta, 1952. I have focused on the sections entitled "The master, life on the plantation (*muiža*), servants, peasants" (X: 291-344) and "The relationship between Latvians and Germans" (X: 362-72), and found approximately 1300 *dainas* that document the brutal and harsh life on the German plantations. These *dainas* were collected across Latvia and are not the work of just a few disgruntled peasants. They document a condition that was common to all who had been deprived of human rights during the colonial period. I have chosen to translate the *dainas* into prose. "German" is a direct translation of the word *vācietis* as it occurs in the *dainas*, "slave" is a direct translation of the word *vergs*. The number following the translation is the number identifying the *daina* in *Latviešu tautas dziesmas*.

What these *dainas* reveal modifies Plakāns' view that after the conquest of the Baltic lands by Germans, Latvians accepted their status and "thoughts of revenge receded" (20). These *dainas* also modify what Vīķis-Freibergs says in her essay, "Oral Tradition as Cultural History in the

Lyrical World of the Latvian *daina*", *Linguistics and Poetics of Latvian Folk Songs*: "The *dainas* do not depict concrete reality, they transfigure it" (6). In these *dainas*, the enslaved peasant-poets enumerate their grievances, describe the hardships they face, and fantasize about revenge. Indeed, in many of the *dainas* they name actual German estates, the *muižas*, and describe their lives there. These *dainas* present an historical window onto aspects of the colonial period heretofore overlooked. Therefore the purpose of this paper is to recover an authentic and vibrant Latvian voice and add it to what little history books have been able to tell us about the lives of the peasants.

The *Dainas* of Master, Serf, and Slave

The *dainas* considered in this paper fall into two general categories. In the first category are *dainas* that describe the modes of oppression, both physical and psychological, that the peasants endured under the German masters. In the second category are *dainas* that describe the modes of resistance the peasants practiced in order to preserve their identity as independent human beings and to affirm their values.

Modes of Oppression

Arveds Švābe describes these songs as the "lyrics of the oppressed and the suffering". They are melancholy poems but lack in any kind of sentimentality or pathos:

> during the most difficult times of *Leibeigenschaft*, when Latvians were legally slaves according to Roman law and their master had the power of life and death over them, the folk song was the only legal form in which the slaves could lament to each other and to God the injustices perpetrated by foreign powers.[11]

Their laments focus on the following:

The muiža as locus of oppression: The *muiža* (pronounced: 'múy-zha) is the estate or plantation that is owned by the serf- or slave-holder. It is the locus of and symbol for the Latvian peasants' drudgery, slavery, and suffering. The serfs know that it is their work that makes it prosper. "A grand *muiža* on the hilltop, what made it so grand? It is the great effort of the workers, and the shouting of the overseer." (31409). Contrary to the usual claim that people and places in the *dainas* remain anonymous and are not grounded in "real" situations, in these examples particular *muižas* are referred to by name. Thus these *dainas* are an indictment of the conditions

they suffered at real *muižas*. The *muiža* at Birži (German: Gross Buschhof) is described as one of weeping (31415.1), located in a pool of tears; while the *muiža* at Litene (German: Lettin) should have been submerged ages ago at the bottom of a black sea. (31407.1) The slaves of Ozolmuiža, (German: Paulsgnade) have this to say: "Ozolmuiža, *muiža* of slaves, I wish you would sink down into the depths of hell. The young weep upon arrival, the old weep upon departure, the Iecava (river) flows by full of the tears of the servants." (31418).[12]

Selling of slaves and disruption of family units: The clearest indication of the oppression of *Leibeigenschft* and the terror it spread among peasant families is the master's power to sell the peasants. Unlike the generally accepted European practice of not moving serfs from the land, enserfed Latvian peasants were treated like slaves. They were bought and sold, and families were separated: "The masters traveled to Germany and took my brother with them. The masters returned from Germany, but my brother did not. The masters sold him for they were greedy. They sold him for two measures of gold, one of pure silver." (31330). The price mentioned in this *daina* is exaggerated. Baltic slaves were in fact comparatively cheap. The Baltic German pastor August W. Hupel (1737-1819) in his *Topographische Nachrichten von Lief- und Esthland 1774-1781,* II: 127f, writes:

> *Vaļinieki* (slaves who had no specific assigned duties) and their children are sometimes sold or traded for other things -- horses, dogs, pipe bowls, etc. Peasants here are not as expensive as Negroes in the American colonies. A single male goes for 30-50 rubles; if he is trained and has a skill, is a cook, a weaver, etc., he might fetch 100 rubles. A family (consisting of parents and children) costs the same. A maidservant seldom sells for more than 10 rubles, a child for approximately 4 rubles.[13]

German historians typically denied the institution of slavery in colonial Latvia by using euphemistic expressions for the buying and selling of Latvian peasants, as in this statement by the historian Jürgen Freiherr von Hahn: "*Seinen Erbherrn konnte der Bauer durch Flucht und Ansiedelung auf einem anderen Gute, durch Erbgang, Tausch, Verkauf oder Verschenkung wechseln.*" ("The peasant could change masters by fleeing and settling on another estate, by inheritance, exchange, sale or gift-giving.")[14] The German syntax of the sentence would have the reader believe that it was up to the peasant to choose whom he served, when indeed it was the slave-holding master who was entirely in control of the circumstances of the peasant.

Shame: Closely related to the psychological oppression and dread of being sold, is the system's direct assault on the individual's pride, humanity, and standing in his own community. The *dainas* reveal a stratification within the ethnic peasant community, with some having slave status, others not. Those enslaved regarded slavery as shameful and wanted to hide it from the others. This was difficult because they carried visible signs that betrayed their status. When peasants reported to the master's estate, the *muiža*, for their designated period of service, they had to bring their own food from home. The week's rations were put into the slave's food bag, a haversack, that was hung around the neck and was considered a symbol of shame: "Sister, dear, you go and do the work, you are used to it; I would go, too, and I would get used to it, too, but I am ashamed to be seen carrying the haversack." (31658). This shame and psychological trauma affects the peasant's behavior in life situations. Thus, a woman looks to marriage to save her from the shame of slavery, yet her husband cannot or will not keep her from doing the work of a slave: "God, punish my husband, for he did not take the haversack from my neck; when Monday comes, the sack goes around my neck." (31654). To avoid the fate of a slave, another woman hopes to marry young: "Because of the masters, because of the slaves, I married young." (31682). Sometimes the marriage ends in disappointment, and therefore we also find the opposite viewpoint: "My brother, standing up, says: Here comes the master's drudge! I say, better the master's drudge than the bride of a scoundrel." (31703). The slaves also appeal to their fellows not to ridicule them because of their status: "Dear people, don't laugh that I am a slave. The masters drive me and I have to keep working [...]." (52735). And some curse their parents: "God, punish my father, God, punish my mother, for allowing me to grow up in this land of slaves." (31655).[15]

Corporal punishment: The constant threat of torturous corporal punishment was an effective tool of oppression. Under the German law of *Hausrecht* (Latvian: *mājas pārmācība*; there is no equivalent in English), the master of a *muiža* was given the power to administer corporal and even capital punishment as he wished and occasionally some masters did so capriciously. The master's word was law. Consequently, the peasant could be subjected to cruel physical abuse. Public beating with a pair of canes, each the breadth of a finger, was common. "Harsh masters flogged the people with nine pairs of canes; with nine pairs of canes, and tied to the stake by their hair." (52591). This harsh physical punishment caused permanent and often crippling injuries and led the peasant to pray: "God,

let me serve the master but not experience the master's hand. When the master lays his hands on me, my body languishes ever after." (31282.1).

Absence of a means of legal redress: Since there was no legal recourse and no avenue to appeal the master's judgment, the slave could only hope for retribution after death. Only when the master dies, will there be punishment for his cruelty. "Poor me -- the master was thrashing me with a pair of canes. You will regret this, master, when I am in Heaven." (31340). The sister of a slave appeals to the master and holds out the threat of punishment after death: "Oh, master, why are you torturing my brother? The devil will make your soul dance in a vat of boiling pitch." (31266). The wife of a slave says: "The master was making my plowman dance at the end of his cane. For now, master, he is in your power and you can torture him. But just you wait: the God of Thunder will catapult you into the lowest depths of hell." (31319).[16]

Control of the peasant's property: The masters deprived the peasants of the right to own personal property. Men lost their horses: "[...] my wonderful colt; I bought it yesterday, and today the master has it." (31365). They lost their clothing: "When I go to work for the master, I wear a jacket and a sheepskin coat underneath. When the master takes my jacket, I still have the sheepskin to keep me warm." (31371). A slave could not choose a wife without the explicit permission of the master: "The poor slave was whipped three times during the week. Why did he go a-wooing without the master's permission?" (31651).

Exploitation of peasant women: The master exercised the *droit du seigneur* and claimed the slave's bride, and the slave bewailed his hard life: "[...] the wolf killed my horse, the master took my bride." (31368; 52515). An eighteenth-century Baltic German pastor marveled that

> [...] an arrogant German, who views the indigenous peoples with such scorn that he would feel humiliated if he had to sit down at the same table with an honest peasant, even though both have either their jobs or something else in common, that same German seeks ecstasy in the embrace of a peasant girl. And it is not only the more common Germans; among the slaves of many an aristocrat will be a considerable number of his own and his father's children.[17]

The aristocratic poet Elisa von der Recke (nee Medem) married Magnus von der Recke and moved to his *muiža*, Jaunpils (German: Neuenburg) in 1771. She wrote in a letter to a friend dated July 6, 1771 that she was distressed to see children in rags running barefoot about the estate.

She observed that these little geese- and pig-herds "looked just like Recke and were said to be his children."[18] She was horrified less by her husband's sexual promiscuity than by the fact that he ignored the existence of these children and his paternal obligations to them.

Child labour: The *dainas* provide evidence for oppressive labour exacted from children. Servitude begins in childhood and drives the child to tears: "I was a tiny girl when I had to go to work in the manor house. I worked well, but I wept bitterly." (52588.1). Service starts young at the *muiža* and the peasant worries that it will last forever: "[...] only God knows when I will stop working." (52588). Some children are "house slaves." A man speaks of starting service as a waiter in the *muiža* when he was a little boy: "Oh, God, I started as a little child waiting on the harsh master; I carried a jug in one hand, and a golden cup in the other." (31423). Other children had to herd animals (31671.1) and do even the most debilitating work, the threshing of grain at night in the master's threshing barn (Latvian*: rija*, German: *Riege*): "I am a tiny, tiny girl, and already I know the master's threshing barn: high sills, wide doors, pegs full of flails." (52720). The *dainas* also speak of another job for children, the gathering of river rock: "Come, children, run, children, I'll show you work: see the tiny pebbles in the river? Get them all out onto the river bank!" (31672.1). Historical documents record that even though children were to be spared from hard labor until the age of fifteen, exceptions occurred. Thus, in Nabes *muiža* (German: Nabben) the boy Indriķis was counted as a *mazpuisis* or an hostler (man in charge of horses), the thirteen-year-old boy Jānis was a farm hand or *kalps*, and the twelve-year-old girl Trīne was a farmhand or *kalpone*.[19] The Baltic German journalist, historian, and reformer, Garlieb Merkel (1769-1850), reports that six-year-olds were assigned herding jobs and thirteen-year-olds were already plowing the fields.[20]

Long hours: The prescribed time the peasant had to spend doing the master's work varied from plantation to plantation but often was oppressively long. A woman tells us that she has to work two nights, her kinsmen three nights (31542.1); another woman works three nights in a row, the same as the males of her family (31542.1). "Neither God nor the devil can complete the tasks the master sets: my brothers served months, my sisters -- weeks." (31694.1). For some, happily, the designated time is shorter: "Don't squeak, doors in my master's estate; I won't be opening and shutting you much longer. Soon there will be another Monday, soon another mother's daughter will be working here." (31695).

The work extends far beyond the hours of sunup and sundown: "Only his mother and God took pity on the poor worker! He put on his footwear in the dark, he harnessed his horse in the dark; [he had] inadequate clothing, hard work, and a place to flop by the door." (31656). The long hours demanded by the master either limited what he could accomplish at his own homestead or required him to work to the point of exhaustion. A constant worry is not having the time to care for one's own homestead: "I must work for the master today and tomorrow; I'll be able to turn to my own work only when I have no more strength left in me." (31706). "At night I threshed the master's grain, in the dark I went home; in the dark I spun, in the dark I wove, and in the dark I wept bitter tears." (31589).

Sleep deprivation: The work exacted from the peasant often meant that he could not lie down at night and remove his footwear. Sometimes there is not a sufficient interval between work shifts to dry one's foot wraps and the peasant turns to God: "May God forbid that I become a slave. The life of the slave is hard. The slave sleeps at night with his feet shod," (31692) or: "Dogs should become slaves, not decent human beings. Many a night I sleep with my feet shod." (31692.1). They cannot lie down for as "the slave of the master, I cannot sleep but simply support my head in my hand." (31676), or: "the masters call me a slave and keep me a slave; I have no place, either night or day, to rest my head." (31680).

Conditions that cause bodily harm: As a consequence of the chronic sleep deprivation and the excessive workload, the peasants suffered physical deformities and ill health. While one peasant bemoaned his deformities: "Why are my legs bowed? Why does my back have a hump? They were brought on by the master's threshing houses, by the master's vast fields" (31641), another humorously and stoically turned his physical deformities to his advantage: "My bow legs are good, my humpback is good; it is easy to climb uphill with bowlegs, it is easy to carry a load on a humpback." (52803). Aches and pains were common. A man says: "My head hurts as much as that of the woodpecker; I have to work night and day and build a palace for the master." (52589). A watchman laments: "My throat has worn out as that of an old raven, for day and night I must call out as I guard the master's property." (31702.2). Young men became old prematurely at the hands of the harsh masters: "At the edge of the rushing creek, the willow branches are bent into the water; the moving ice floes have broken them. In the same way young men are bent down in the service of harsh masters." (31711).

The physical deformities of women were also blamed on the harsh working and living conditions. "Why are the women of Suntaļi teeny tiny? They are overworked: during the day they labor in the master's fields, at night in the master's threshing house." (31642, 31642.4). "I drove through the region of Ezernieki weeping: why are all their girls tiny? At night they threshed the master's grain, in the daytime they spun fine thread." (31642.6). Occasionally it is said that the combination of work for the master and work for the family was responsible: "Why am I teeny, why am I tiny, why did I never grow taller? It's because of the hard milling work I have to do, and the work in my brother's fields." (31642.2). Women noted the pallor of their cheeks, caused by overwork and especially night work in the threshing barn: "My cheeks are so pale, what has made them so? The master's threshing barn, the acrid smoke, and the dust of the threshing floor." (52700).

Deplorable living conditions: The peasants' deplorable living conditions, their meager food and dark and dingy housing contrasted starkly with the luxury and abundance enjoyed by their privileged German masters: "Come, masters, see how we live: water runs through the room, frogs leap in the beds." (31350). This might appear to be a humorous exaggeration, until we read the account of the 19th century Englishwoman, Lady Eastlake (Elizabeth Rigby), who described an Estonian peasant's dwelling in the early 1840's. She was visiting a married sister living in Estonian Livonia and in her letters reported on the lives of the German colonizers and the subservient Baltic peoples. She was taken to the "abode of a hard-working, respectable Estonian":

> The house was a one-storied erection, built of roughly-squared logs [...] with a double wall on the entrance side, separated by a passage [...]. In this passage an extremely filthy sow and a whole litter of little pigs were grunting and tumbling about with some other little animals, seemingly of the same generic origin, but which, on nearer inspection, proved to be part of our host's youthful family. To pass through the inner wall we stepped over a high ledge, through an aperture wide enough for a Lambert, but hardly high enough to a child of twelve years old, more adapted apparently for quadrupeds than for men. Once housed, we were obliged to wait a few minutes before our eyes accustomed themselves to the darkness, or threw off the film of water with which the strong, stinging atmosphere of wood-smoke obscured them, when the first object we discerned was a rosy peasant-girl weaving a piece of linen in the same gloom by which we could scarcely distinguish the loom. The room where we stood was at least twenty-five feet long, with a black earthen floor, strewn with fir-tips, and the chief object was the great stove. This was a

> huge mass of masonry towering among the dry rafters of the roof, with rough ledges of stones, up and down which a second litter of children were climbing in their shifts, while on the highest ledge lay a baby fast asleep. A projecting shelf of wood ran round two sides of the room, about two feet from the floor, which, strewn with straw, serves as the family-bed for the night, is converted by day to any household use, and was conveniently fitted up with hen-coops underneath. There was no chimney in the apartment, and no light but from the low door. Further on were two other rooms, mere little dens, with a pane of dusky glass in each and a few articles of furniture -- a couple of chairs and chests for clothes. The same roof houses the little horse and other cattle. There was nothing in all this to disgust -- hard fare and independent habits; and when we took our leave we made the little dirty shock-headed children very happy with some rolls of white bread, a dainty they see much more rarely than our poor children do cake (Rigby, I: 183-5).

Lady Eastlake's observation about the scarcity of white bread in the peasants' diet confirms what the *dainas* tell us. The peasants' food consisted mainly of the tails of salt herring and porridge (52590), and poor quality bread with little to put on it. We find strange corroboration for this in some of the works of Gotthard Friedrich Stender (1714-96), the Baltic German pastor who wrote didactic and "edifying" poetry in the Latvian language for his peasant congregation. In his poem, "The Poor Man" ("*Nabadziņš*"), he purports to comfort the peasants in their poverty by showing them how much better it is to be malnourished than fat. He juxtaposes the posthumous fate of the well-fed rich man with that of the malnourished poor man. While in life the poor man has only dry bread to eat and the rich man feasts on countless delicacies, in death the corpse of the rich man will provide the maggots "with a tasty feast," while the corpse of the poor man will provide them only with "lean little bites".[21]

The experience of chronic hunger and deprivation became part of the historical memory of the peasant. Thus, many years after emancipation, in a *daina* collected at Lubāna, a peasant states with irony: "The people of Lubāna's *muiža* (German: Lubahn) are weeping, for the old master is dead. See how well we have served him! We haven't worn leather shoes but bast moccasins; our bread was baked of chaff, spread with a paste made from the cabbage stumps left to rot in the field after the heads had been harvested." (31293). The masters meanwhile ate "roast pork dipped in cream gravy" (31860), and reclined on pillows while the peasant toiled (31304). For the peasants, the luxurious life style of the colonizers seemed to be a universal law: "Big roads, little roads, all lead to Rīga; great masters, small masters, all lie back on pillows." (31339).

Modes of Resistance

While externally slaves in the eyes of the German master, internally the peasants refused to have the master define who they were. The status imposed on them by the Germans did not stop their critical thinking nor damage their sense of self worth. Švābe points out that:

> If in daily life, at the *muiža* or in court, the peasants had to feign humility and obedience, then among their own people they felt intellectually free and unconquered, and could ironize with gentle humor or sharp sarcasm about the arrogance of their masters. (xix).

Their resistance is expressed in the following areas:

Challenging the legitimacy of the German presence: Far from being unaware and accepting of the status quo, the peasants question the very presence of the Germans in Baltic lands and the colonial order they have instituted. The peasant is bluntly assertive. He asks the German why he has come here to exploit the peasants: "Where is your land, German, where are your horses? Why did you come to this land to feed off my sweat?" (31876). Another peasant answers his own question and portrays the German as an impoverished fortune hunter: "Oh, you poor German, why did you come to Couronia? You have dried bread in your sack, water in your wooden cup." (52856). Alternatively the peasant sees the Prussian as a knacker, collecting bones, and prophesies a life of poverty for him: "Just come, you obnoxious Prussian, bring along a sack and a broom! You'll need the broom to sweep up bones, which you'll drop into the sack." (52889). Sometimes the peasant takes pains to show that the German and his mother are grotesque and not quite human: "Oh, German, son of the devil, why did you come to this land? Your mother is cooking porridge and stirring it with the leg of a mare, adding the milk of a bitch" (31858). By making the German or the Prussian so grotesquely different from themselves, the poets of these *dainas* are creating a category of "otherness". For the peasant, the designation "German" is pejorative, while for the Germans, the designation *undeutsch*, non-German, is the pejorative term.

The ethnic caste system is evocatively portrayed in a dialogue between the anthropomorphized foot wear of the Latvian, the *vīze* or moccasin made of willow bast, and the shoe of the German: "The bast moccasin [of the Latvian peasant] quarreled with the German's shoe. Whatever the moccasin provided, the shoe consumed." (31875). Another poet concludes the moccasin/shoe dialogue with the command to the German to leave: "My bast moccasin quarreled with the German's shoe; Get out of my sight,

you sponger, I am the one who provides the bread!" (31875.1). The peasant knows he is exploited by the German, and rejects the German's presence in a language the master cannot understand.

The peasant's awareness of his role in the economic prosperity of the master: The peasant is aware that he is enslaved and exploited, and that the master's wealth increases at the expense of his effort. He questions the social order: "The master has a big belly, but not as ordained by God; I work all day, I work all night and I still cannot stuff it [the master's belly] full enough." (52542). But the knowledge of the importance of his work also provides a sense of superiority which in turn helps the peasant to resist the dehumanization the system imposes upon him. He can joke about the obvious source of German wealth: "I thought serious thoughts about where the masters got their money; they neither plow nor harrow, nor do they plant hops" (31285 and 52526), nor "do they fish in the lake" (312855.2). And, wryly, the peasants can see the connection between the master's wealth and the peasant's efforts: "Why are you looking at my feet, master? Is that where your gold coins are, tied to my [moccasin] laces?" (31308). The untutored and seemingly unsophisticated peasant reflects upon the master/slave relationship and the benefits for the master. Without the slave, the master is not a master: "What would you do, master, if we all died? Who would earn your bread, who would honor you?" (31307).

Affirmation of the peasant's superiority and true ownership of the land: The peasants believed that it was their skill that made the fields yield abundant crops. In the *dainas*, they undermined the legitimacy of the German masters by affirming their own superiority and true ownership of the land and by ridiculing the master's inability to run the estate. They asserted the belief that they knew how to plant the land, the colonizers did not. The masters were foolish, with "as much brains as a tiny child" (31311) and ignorant of farming methods. A German master was told to go and sow barley since what he called a "nightingale," but was actually a magpie, was singing, thus signaling the start of the planting season. (31865). The master was so ignorant that he could not tell the two birds apart. "You will go under, master, together with all your people: yesterday you sowed the peas, today you are already looking for pea pods." (31356). The master also did not know how to plow a field: "Hey, kids, come and see the strange sight" (31863) of a cat pulling the plow, the German weeping; then the German harnesses the cat up to a wagon to drive his harvest of five peas to Rīga (52890).

The peasant's work ethic and "ownership" of the work: What is remarkable in this record of resistance to oppression is that the peasants did not allow the brutality of the master to define them. They maintained their humanity, dignity, and morality. They continued to create poetry in spite of the conditions they suffered. They continued to take pride in their work and thus, by assuming "ownership" of the work, they paradoxically defied the master. Women's pride is evident in *dainas* about spinning for the master. "I spun the master's flax into the finest thread; I spun it one filament at a time, as though I were creating a dazzling ornament." (6964). One sees the poet's pleasure in knowing that the fine linen thread she has spun will be woven into fabric by the weavers of Rīga: "Spin, girls, the master's flax one filament at a time; the weavers of Rīga will weave them into fine cloth following patterns in a book." (6967). By doing exemplary work, they claimed ownership of it. They did it because they wished to do it and it satisfied their standards, not because they were ordered to do so.

A man took pride in his horse's strength. The knowledge of his horse's superiority allowed him to defy the master by demonstrating his own prowess and maintaining his sense of himself. Since the task of hauling goods to market fell to the peasant, possessing a reliable horse was crucial. "The master, trying to spite me, loads my wagon with a great load. I, spiting the master, harness up an excellent horse." (31781). Another peasant-poet states that he, spiting the master, drove the wagon sitting up on top (31782). If the horse were weaker, then the driver would not sit but walk beside it. In order to have strong horses, the peasant had to care for them. "I fed my horse not only on the days when my master told me; I fed my horse every day." (31691). An unusual 18-line *daina* bragged that the peasant sowed rye, barley, and oats in abundance. They all thrived and grew, and he had plenty to feed his horse. When the master summoned him to the *muiža*, the horse reared up and whinnied at the master's veranda. The master, trying to spite him and humble him ordered him to fill his wagon with a huge load. The peasant, "spiting the master, loads up his wagon. Furthermore, he knows the way to town so that he can deliver the load, he knows how to drive, and he has an excellent horse." (31827). Another peasant wished for a good horse so that he could carry out the master's orders: "How might I earn from God a couple of good horses, so that I would not have to abandon my master's load by the roadside." (31767).

A peasant's pride empowered the peasant to fight against the harshness of the conditions with stoicism: "I experienced cruelty in my work at the *muiža*, but I never told my mother. I did not want her to know everything, I did not want her to pity me." (31652). Another poet does not reveal to her

mother how hard the work is "so that she does not pity me, so that I don't have to start crying" (31562.1).

Magic and flight: When life at the *muiža* became unbearable, the peasants' recourse was flight. Normally the peasant would have to obtain permission from the present master to leave the *muiža* and move elsewhere. Permission was seldom granted. Therefore the peasant used magic incantation *dainas*, such as: "God, wind the master's mind into a ball of white thread, so that he might release me soon to another master." (31404). If the peasant was not released to a better master, he fled. In the years between 1761-1800 the Riga German-language newspaper *Rigische Anzeigen* carried 600 advertisements in which slaveholders sought information about their runaways. For the years 1766-95 the Jelgava German-language newspaper, *Mitauische Zeitung*, carried 300 advertisements looking for 580 runaways: 442 men, 92 women, and 46 children.[22] The two most common reasons for running away was the excessive work required at the *muiža* and the fear of crippling punishment. A woman says that she ran away because the overseer required too much milling of her (31524). She is referring to the grinding of grain between heavy millstones. The miller, always a woman, turned the millstones by hand. This work began before sunrise and was backbreaking. Another woman says that she was required to do particularly difficult milling work because the overseer suspected that she was planning to run away (31668). Escape was never easy: "Oh, God, where can I hide; the countryside is full of masters" (31263). For some, the chosen path lay across the river, to the lands of a less severe master (52578).

For many, especially the men, the destination was the city where they hoped to be free. Their talk is tough and swaggering, and they praise the material benefits of living in Riga. There they will be paid for their work in gold (31785). The city holds the promise of beer, brandy, and beautiful women. (31747; 31748; 31748.1). A goodly amount of fantasy and bravado accompanies this wishful thinking: "I rode around the castle of Riga; the mistress herself escorted me inside and seated me on a golden chair" (31749).

To effect their escape, the slaves prayed that the master might have "lead feet, pewter ears, so that he neither sees us nor catches us" (31460.1). They prayed that the overseer become lame so that they could outrun him (31461). And they humorously admitted that the overseer was a clever man, for he had the tailor make him a short jacket so that he could run faster than the slaves (31514). If they were caught and returned, punishment was harsh, ranging from ten strokes with a pair of canes (i.e.

twenty strokes in all) in front of the congregation after church on three successive Sundays, to wearing shackles for a year, to branding of the face, to cutting off the ears and the nose, to cutting off one leg, to hard labor for as long as the master wished.[23]

Thoughts of revenge: Although the peasant was powerless and could neither stop the master's cruelty nor avenge himself, his desire for revenge was strong. Since revenge could not be carried out physically, the peasant fantasized about the possibility. The *dainas* contain outright curses, delivered as songs: "May God give our master a long life -- so that his legs may turn to lead, his eyes to pewter, and he lose his hearing." (31281). Some curses retaliated for wrongdoing against one's kinfolk, "for torturing my kinfolk like little mice!" (31857). "The German has long hair; let's hang him in the oak tree; why did he torture my brother like a little bird?" (31891). Some wished to see the master burn: "Oh, German, oh, German, tomorrow you will be singed! Yesterday the slaves of three masters were cutting aspen wood for the fire." (31445.2). A peasant might attempt to transcend the punishment meted out by the overseer by wishful thinking and bravado: "Listen, workers, listen: the wolf ate the overseer! Let him eat the overseer together with the devils as punishment for caning the workers!" (31457). These *dainas* add a new dimension to Plakāns' view that after the conquest, Latvians accepted their status and "thoughts of revenge receded." (20).

The death of the master was grounds for rejoicing: "Oh, God, oh, God, one master is dead! Now my kinsmen will have it easier, my sisters will have it easier." (31262 and 52514). The peasant envisaged divine retribution: "The overseer was caning me at the command of the master; let the devil cane the master at the command of God." (31486). And the peasant comforted himself by imagining the torment of the master. In such *dainas* the German invariably ended up in Hell: "Who is screaming and yelling at the bottom of the cauldron in hell? It is the soul of the master who tortured peasants." (31306).

Transcending degradation with songs and humour: The peasant strove to transcend the harsh conditions by his strong work ethic and pride not only in the work but also in the manner in which it was accomplished. In the value system of the *dainas*, cheerfulness was one of the cardinal virtues. One of the manifestations of that joy was singing at work or singing to overcome sadness. If one were singing while working, then no matter how hard the work, one appeared to be doing it with joy and serenity. Thus, "My mother weeps as she sees me off to work. Don't cry, dearest mother; I

came home singing." (31666), or: "[...] if God helps me, I will return singing." (31666.1 and 36258). In carrying out their tasks in an exemplary fashion and hiding their suffering, they were in fact defying the master. They were not succumbing to the role of slave that the master wished to assign to them. They sang at work and thus transcended the suffering with music. "O, master, you have tormented us cruelly; we will disparage you in talk and in song." (608). And although work for the master is compared to work in hell, some peasants exaggerate it to the point of ridiculousness to lessen the sting: "Oh, God, we kinfolk will have work aplenty in hell. The master will be boiling the kettle and we will have to make the fire." (31264, 31264.1, 52528).

Humour also helped the peasant as he compared his circumstances with those of the master. One peasant jokes about making a fur coat out of the pelts of mice (52623), another speaks of his "coat" that is made of willow bark or bast (31573.1) They can joke even as they are aware that the rich dress of the master is supported by the peasant's labor: "The master has three coats, I have three fields. Where did the master get his three coats from other than from my three fields?" (31312 and 52554).

An Estonian response to oppression: The prevalence of these perceptions of slavery under the German domination is also reflected in an Estonian folk song from the Estonian-speaking part of Livonia that Johann Gottfried Herder included in his 1778/79 collection of folk songs. Indeed, the following Estonian lament serves as a summary of the peasants' deep anger, resentment, sorrow, and the desire to escape German domination. It touches all the themes found in the *dainas*. Uppermost is the desire to escape -- not from hard work but rather from the "evil German master." The lament describes the suffering of the peasants: in chains and shackles, tied to a stake. In the folk song the peasants try to appease the German with gifts. But the gifts are useless since the German asserts that the food the peasant produces, the farm animals, and the sons of the Estonian mothers belong to him anyway. The peasants dream of escape from the hell of the plantation where they drink a cup of sorrow and eat a bread that burns them.[24] Indeed, the canes that are used to punish the peasants, are hidden under the very crust of the loaf of bread. The lament ends with the promise to feed the dogs, i.e. the Germans, and a plea that they not bite anymore.

The Slaves' Lament about the Tyrants

Daughter, I am not fleeing from work,
I am not fleeing from picking berries,
I am not fleeing from Jaan's (my husband's) lands;
I am fleeing from the evil German,
From the terribly evil master.

The poor peasants tied to the stake
Are caned bloody.
Poor peasants in shackles,
Men clanked in their chains,
Women knocked on the doors,
Brought eggs in their hands,
They had presents in their mittens,
Under the arm squawks the hen,
Under the sleeve squawks the goose,
In the wagon the sheep bleats.
Our chickens lay eggs,
All for the dishes of the German;
The sheep gives birth to its spotted lamb,
That too is for the German's roasting spit.
Our cow has its first ox,
That too is for the fields of the German,
The mare gives birth to a frisky filly,
That too is for the German's sleigh,
The mother has one single son,
He, too, is for the German's stake.

Our life is purgatory,
Purgatory or hell.
We eat burning bread at the manor,
We drink our cup moaning,
Fiery bread with firebrand
Sparks in the crumbs of the bread,
Canes under the crust of the bread.
If I can get away from the manor,
I'll return from hell,
I'll return from the wolf's mouth,
I'll return from the lion's maw,
From the back teeth of the pike,
If I can get away from bite of the spotted dog,
Free from the bite of the black dog.

Hey, you should not bite me any more,
You, spotted dog, and you, black dog!
I have bread for you, you dogs,
Here, in my hand, is bread for the black one,
Here, under my arm for the gray one,
Here, under my shirt for the doggie.

(Herder, 244f. Translated from German by M. L. Ray)

The only commentary that Herder makes regarding this harrowing lament, is: "The song would be more beautiful if it were shortened, but it shouldn't be shortened. The genuine sigh of a people moaning, in a situation that is not poetic but is truly felt, should be allowed to sound as it is." (244). While Herder focuses on the "beauty" of the song, the modern reader cannot ignore the meaning of its words. The song is a summary of all the injustices, evils, exploitation, and brutality that the peasants of Livonia and Curonia experienced under German colonial rule. It contains the essence of slavery as defined by the African-American historian, Orlando Patterson: dishonor, violence, the namelessness and invisibility, and endless personal violation.

Conclusion

From the small sample of *dainas* included in this paper we can see that a voice of the oppressed peasants can indeed be recovered from the *dainas*. The *dainas* were the only outlet the slaves and serfs had for expressing their feelings in a system that allowed them no recourse and presented no possibility of changing their situation. The *dainas* were composed in a language the master did not understand, a circumstance that helped keep the *dainas* inviolate. The *dainas* truly became "vehicles of memory" (Confino, 1386) for the shared experiences of the peasant society. The fact that they were remembered after emancipation and were orally transmitted to later generations until they were written down in the late nineteenth century shows how important they were to the Latvians' understanding of themselves and their history. Indeed, the *dainas* represent the Latvian collective mentality under German colonial rule. The *dainas* testify to the peasants' intelligence, wit, creativity, and pride in their work, their stoicism and their resistance to German oppression. They reveal that the peasant lived two separate lives. In the eyes of the German master, he was a subhuman slave; at home, among his own people, he was an independent, thinking human being with an acute perception of his situation within the institution of *Leibeigenschaft*.

Furthermore, these peasants possessed considerable poetical gifts. The peasant-poets went about their daily work with stoicism, yet they were also capable of viewing their lives with biting wit and sarcasm, with benevolent humour and pointed irony. It is this peasant poetry that allows us a glimpse into their experience of slavery and thereby enables us to ground the history of the period in that experience. In the interests of democratizing history, validating the enserfed and enslaved experience of the Baltic peoples, and ending the hegemony of history written by the colonizers, this voice should be added to the historical record of the Baltics.

Notes

1. Vaira Vīķis-Freibergs, "Oral Tradition as Cultural History in the Lyrical World of the Latvian *Daina*," *Linguistics and Poetics of Latvian Folk Songs*: 4.
2. For a discussion and a bibliography of earlier German collections of selected *dainas* see Kārlis Egle,"Tautas mantu krāšana un kārtošana" In Bērziņš, Ludis, ed., *Latviešu literatūras vēsture*, I. Rīga: Literatūra, 1935: 409-7.
3. Arveds Švābe, "Tautas dziesmu likteņi," Švābe, Arveds, Straubergs, K., Hauzenberga-Šturma, E. eds. *Latviešu tautas dziesmas, (Chansons populaires lettonnes)*, I-XII. Copenhagen: Imanta, 1952: I, xiii.
4. The original collection of the *dainas*, under the double editorship of Krišjānis Barons and H. Wissendorff, appeared in installments between 1894-1915. The first installment of the first edition of the *Dainas*, entitled *Latwju dainas. Chansons nationales*

lataviennes was published in Jelgawa /Mitau, 1894, by H. I. Drawin-Drawneeks. The subsequent installments 1-4 of volume I appeared in Jelgava/Mitau; the next 6 in Rīga, published by Kalniņš and Deutschmans; the remaining volumes were published in St. Petersburg by the Imperial Academy of Sciences. A complete second edition appeared in 1922. Barons died in 1923. It is interesting to note that the 1928 edition, *Latvju tautas daiņas. Illūstrēts izdevums ar variantiem un zinātniskiem apcerējumiem,* vols. 1-4, eds. J. Endzelīns and R. Klaustiņš: Rīga: Literatūra, 1928, published at a time of independence and nation-building, did not include any verses that spoke of the degradation of slavery and oppression by German masters. The editors probably judged that such *dainas* would harm the process of forging a national character and instilling pride in the Latvians about their past. The illustrations portray prosperous peasants dressed in holiday ethnic costumes, and prosperous farmsteads.

5. Švābe, "Tautas dziesmu likteņi," *Latviešu tautas dziesmas*: I, xiii.
6. An overview of the trends of *daina* research may be found in Edmunds V. Bunkše, "Latvian Folkloristics." *Journal of American Folklore*, 92. 364 (1979): 196-214.
7. See *Linguistics and Poetics of Latvian Folks Songs,* 355 for a bibliography of her studies.
8. Lalita Lāce Muižniece, "Linguistic Analysis of Latvian Death and Burial Folk Songs." Ph.D. Dissertation, the University of Michigan, 1981. Edmunds V. Bunkše, "The Earth, Forest, and Sea: Man and Nature in Latvian Folk Poetry." Ph.D. Dissertation, Berkeley: University of California, 1973.
9. What Barons sacrificed was the informant's ordering and sequencing of the *dainas* into cycles or *virknes*. Such cycles were thematically grouped songs intended to be sung in a certain order. To some extent such cycles might be reconstituted if one were to seek out the *dainas* recited by a particular informant, but they can never be fully recovered. See also Švābe, I, xxi f.
10. It is unfortunate that the authors have omitted the term *Leibeigenschaft* from the glossary of historical terms which appear in the *Baltisches Historisches Ortslexikon, v.II: Lettland (Südlivland und Kurland),* Hans Feldmann and Heinz von zur Mühlen, eds., in the series *Quellen und Studien zur Baltischen Geschichte. Herausgegeben im Auftrag der Baltischen Historischen Kommission von Paul Kaegbein and Gert von Pistohlkors*, vol. 8/II. (Böhlau Verlag, Köln,Wien, 1990), p. xxvi. The Latvian word is *dzimtbūšana.*
11. Švābe, I: xix. German law at this time was Roman law. "The codification of positive law and legal procedures, which took place in the territorial states beginning in the last decades of the fifteenth century, were conceived in the spirit of the Roman law [...]" Hajo Holborn. *A History of Modern Germany. The Reformation.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967: 35.
12. The concordance of Latvian and German names of *muižas,* as well as maps pinpointing their exact locations by district and parish, are found in Edgars Dunsdorfs, *Muižas.* The topographical index of places where the *dainas* were collected is found in Švābe: I, 403-418.
13. A. W. Hupel, *Topographische Nachrichten von Lief- und Esthland* II: 127f. Quoted by Edgars Dunsdorfs, *Latvijas Vēsture 1710-1800.* Sundbyberg: Daugava, 1973: 76.
14. von Hahn, 28.
15. On the subject of slavery, see Edgars Dunsdorfs, *Latvijas vēsture 1600-1710.* Uppsala: Daugava, 1962: 263f.
16. "It is interesting to note that hell, designated by the church as the place of punishment and torture for the souls of sinners after death, appears in the *dainas* only in the context of the hard tasks assigned in the muiža [...] and also as the place where the overseers and other drivers and tormenters of the peasants should end up." Nora Valtere, "Vai dainas ar kristietības motīviem ir pazudušas," *Labietis,* 71, 1986: 2297.

17. Hupel, *Topographische Nachrichten von Lief- und Esthland, 1774-81*, II: 65. Quoted by Andrejs Johansons in *Latvijas kultūras vēsture 1710-1800*. Stockholm: Daugava, 1975: 22.
18. Recke, 227f.
19. Dzidra Liepiņa, *Vidzemes zemnieki un muiža 18.gs. pirmajā pusē*. Rīga: Zinātne, 1983: 44.
20. Garlibs Merķelis, "Latvieši, sevišķi Vidzemē filozofiskā gadsimta beigās," 70.
21. Vilis Plūdons, "*Laicīgās rakstniecības sākums*" In Ludis Bērziņš, ed., *Latviešu literatūras vēsture* II, Rīga: Literatūra, 1935: 99.
22. Andrejs Johansons, 69f and 82, and Dunsdorfs, *Latvijas vēsture 1710-1800:* 78ff.
23. Johansons, 82, and Dunsdorfs, *Latvijas vēsture 1710-1800*: 78f.
24. This most probably refers to bread that in times of hunger was baked from chaff and might occasionally spontaneously combust.

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