

R5. materials

Name of the element:

**Mumming and masking in Estonia during St. Martin's Day and St. Catherine's Day**

Nomination by **Estonia**

Submitted to the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Additional document is translated extract of the inclusion of the element in an inventory.

**Entry to Estonian inventory of  
intangible cultural heritage  
KNOWLEDGE, SKILL, CUSTOM  
or TRADITION**

**Basic data**

Name in official language	
Name in local language, dialect or slang	
Mardi- ja kadrisandis käimise traditsioon Eestis (Estonian)	
Domain CUSTOMS AND RELIGION; PASTIME AND PLAYFUL ACTIVITIES; LANGUAGE AND POETICAL GENRES	
Location	
Administrative district	
Municipality or town	
Village	
Other	all over Estonia

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## Description

### Description

Mumming on St Martin's Day and on St Catherine's Day is a well-known autumn and winter ritual and amusement in Estonia. There are regional differences in the celebration of these two holidays, but the customs and purpose are similar. Mumming takes place the day before St Martin's Day, November 9th, and the day before St Catherine's Day, November 24th. In some places, Catherine's Day mummers go out on November 25th.

This custom is practiced by both children, young people and adults. People often go mumming with family, friends, classmates, kindergarten groups or colleagues. People visit both complete strangers and acquaintances who live in the city or the countryside, in both apartment blocks and private houses.

The mummers disguise themselves as different characters according to their imagination and knowledge of tradition. The more fun, unfamiliar and funny the character, the better! Often, the mummers gather at someone's house to dress up and make preparations together.

Mummers on St. Martin's Day – *mardisandid* – usually dress in dark men's clothes, wear inside-out fur coats or other furry outerwear, hide behind a dark mask and beard, or even paint their faces black. They are also often disguised as animals, and in the past also as birds. St Martin's Day mummers are noisy and frightening.

Mummers on St. Catherine's Day – *kadrisandid* – are usually dressed in light women's clothes, they are more feminine and more decorated. Among the mummers, there are frequent disguises of a young man with a peeing baby and a goose.

The Mummers' costumes and masks are often invented by the people themselves and made from items of clothing or jewelry found at home – fur coats, gloves, scarves, etc. The mask is often intended for single use or as long as it can withstand. Nowadays, it is more common to wear makeup instead of wearing masks.

With the masks on, the mummers go on the move. The participants go from family to family, knocking on doors and asking for permission to enter while singing. In rural and urban communities, mumming is held mainly at dusk, while in work collectives and educational institutions the mumming is being done during the day. When the mummers enter the room, they sing, play instruments, ask riddles, joke at both their own and the host's expense, play folk games, perform their prepared activities, or entertain the family in some other way.

The Mumming ritual ends with wishes for good luck to the family, which is often accompanied by throwing grains and peas (traditional food for the holidays celebrating the souls and spirits of the deceased) on the floor as a symbol of fertility. The mummers are given various gifts as a token of gratitude: mainly food, money, and sweets. Traditionally, every activity of the mummers has been accompanied by long, fixed form runo songs, of which only two remain in use today: the entrance song sung at the door and the thanking/gratitude song performed before leaving.

Even today, families believe that the mummers bring good luck and prosperity for the coming year with their visit, and their arrival is eagerly awaited. Rooms must be cleaned and gifts, often sweets, must be prepared for the mummers to arrive. It is believed that the mummers embody the souls of our departed ancestors, who roam around during this autumn-winter period, the time of souls, and who must be kindly let into the house and entertained. In addition, the visit of the mummers is a nice change during an otherwise dark and inactive time, especially in remote rural areas. According to the mummers themselves, having fun together, meeting up with friends and “doing something nice” are important to them. Today, there are several communities and groups that are consciously engaged in reviving old mummers' songs and customs, researching the mumming practices and memories of older people in their area. Mumming is like improvisational theatre, where each family has a unique performance. In mumming, the host family plays an important role, and by playing and communicating with them, an activity suitable for that moment and situation is invented on the spot.

The mummers base the activities they present to the family on their own imagination, current social issues, the family's specific characteristics and thoughts that have arisen on the spot, but they still follow a specific goal: to bring happiness to the family and have a fun time.

#### Historical background

St Martin's Day and St Catherine's Day are the autumn and winter holidays of the Estonian folk calendar. Historically, in Estonia, people have been dressed up on several different autumn and winter holidays, but apart from these two mumming traditions, other customs of dressing up are rarer and more local. Only St Martin's Day and St Catherine's Day were known nationwide. However, all the dressing ups had a common function: initially to bring fertility and happiness to the family, and later (from the mid-19th century) to have fun among the village youth. To this day, only the transformation into St Martin's Day and St Catherine's Day mummers has survived as a national tradition.

The origin of the celebration of St Martin's Day and St Catherine's Day is not entirely certain – it has been considered both a native Baltic Finnish holiday, originally related to New Year's holidays or the celebration of the dead (K. Salve, H. Tampere, Ü. Tedre), and a more recent Germanic loan (O. Looorits). The derivation of the names St Martin's Day and St Catherine's Day from Catholic tradition, including the 4th-century Bishop Martin of Tours and later Martin Luther, cannot be unequivocally proven, as can the sound similarity with the North Estonian name for the god of death *marras*, *mardus* (A. Saareste, M.J. Eisen). What is certain is that the modern custom of going mumming combines stratifications of many centuries.

Disguising oneself beyond recognition has been important in this tradition. The custom of wearing masks made mumming come into fashion in the 20th century, first in cities. In the older strata of mumming, people mainly disguised themselves as animals (goats, geese, bears), later altered clothing was used (men in women's clothing, etc.). Traditionally, mumming has been an amusement for village youth, often men, and unlike today, children did not go mumming.

An integral part of the St Martin's Day and St Catherine's Day traditions have been long songs that accompanied all the activities. The old mumming songs have a definite cyclical form, but the songs themselves vary from place to place in terms of melody and order of the cycle. Over time, the appearance of the mummers (the masks have been removed), the performances (poems, riddles, jokes instead of long runo songs) and the general meaning of mumming (togetherness and joint fun instead of fertility rituals) have changed.

**Sustainability**

Carrying and transmitting the phenomenon, skill, knowledge

The tradition of going mumming on St Martin's Day and St Catherine's Day is passed on to children mainly from parents and grandparents, but also through school and kindergarten programs. Most of adult mummers have been mumming sands as children themselves or have memories of visiting mummers. The tradition is encouraged when children are born into the family and the adults wish to pass on the positive experiences of one's childhood to own children. Mumming is mainly attended by friends, but also by the schools and by the kindergarten groups. Adult mummers are mainly gathered around various hobby groups (folk dance groups, hiking clubs, hunters, choirs, sewing circles, sauna clubs, etc.).

St Martin's Day and St Catherine's Day mummers are very welcome guests, especially in rural areas and in the homes of the elderly, where there is less entertainment and socializing during the winter, and an eventful visit gives family members something to talk about and think about for weeks.

Thematic events organized in communities, youth centers, and community centers, training courses, museum programs, printed books and instructional materials, various internet sources (website hakkamesantima.ee, etc.), information seen in the media, and seeing other mummers on the street also contribute to the transmission of the practice.

People go mumming to receive gifts (mainly children), to meet each other and to have fun together. Sharing good wishes to family members and consciously passing on traditions are not considered the main goals.

**Possible threats**

Mumming on St Martin's Day and St Catherine's Day has remained viable over time. Its transmission is threatened by the strong and commercial marketing and visibility of foreign holidays (Halloween) in the public media, as well as the early promotion of Christmas in commerce (for example, from October). Engaging in the St Martin's Day and St Catherine's Day customs does not encourage superficiality, comfort and laziness, which are often caused by the abundance of modern entertainment options (you no longer have to be active yourself). Since the materials needed for making costumes and masks can be made from household or recyclable materials, popularizing this custom does not increase consumption and is therefore not a commercially attractive holiday for companies.

A significant risk is forgetting the deeper content and meaning of the holiday (the mummers as the souls of ancestors and bringers of good luck), as a result of which the custom becomes superficial for people. For example, people do not want to wear masks in front of their faces because the deeper meaning of this custom (disguising oneself beyond recognition in order to impersonate someone else) is no longer known and therefore it does not seem important.

Also considered obstacles are lack of knowledge (not knowing exactly what to do), fear of public speaking and making a mistake, and fear of looking ridiculous (especially among children and young people). Locked entrances in apartment buildings, dogs in private dwellings, and rude receptionists also scare away mummers. The unpleasant experience resulting from not knowing the custom directly threatens the transmission of the tradition.

Unpleasant experience and ignorance are often encouraged by school programs that focus on the theoretical and historical part of the custom, but do not provide the opportunity to creatively put it into practice, and therefore the young person does not develop a personal connection with mumming.

**Steps taken to support the phenomenon, skill, knowledge**

The educational network plays an important role in supporting the tradition – schools, kindergartens, where the tradition of mumming is reflected in school textbooks and where school or kindergarten mumming activities are organized. St Martin's Day and St Catherine's Day traditions are also promoted through various events (trainings, exhibitions, quizzes, mumming, mask making, singing), by many museums, libraries, community centers, social centers and youth centers, as well as various associations (Estonian Folklore Council, Estonian Folklore School, Estonian Traditional Music Center). Longer training courses produce new leaders who pass on this knowledge to their families, neighbours or communities (kindergarten, community center, hobby group).

In 2018, the Estonian Folklore Council, in cooperation with the Estonian Centre of Folk Culture, launched a campaign to popularise the custom of mumming, titled "Let's start mumming!". As part of the campaign, the following have been implemented:

- The website [hakkamesantima.e](http://hakkamesantima.e) and various social media platforms have been created to revive the custom;
- An annual mummers' census has been carried out since 2019;
- A network of county curators has been created to popularise the mumming tradition;
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Several educational videos, instructional materials and creative ideas for celebrating St Martin's Day and St Catherine's Day have been prepared;

- A collection competition and an idea competition for St Martin's Day and St Catherine's Day mummers in the 21st century have been organised;
- Two major international festivals have been organised, which ended with concert performances, in addition to school concerts and nationwide St Martin's Day and St Catherine's Day celebrations in the counties;
- Training courses on St Martin's Day and St Catherine's Day customs, food and theatre have been conducted;
- visited the offices of the President of the Republic of Estonia, the Prime Minister's Office, the parliament, city governments and elsewhere;
- published two newsletters on the topic of mumming every year, the first of which provides ideas and inspiration for the upcoming mumming period, while the second provides summary information and includes experience stories.

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