



newsletter

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Front cover: old market in Shillong.

Photo by Ergo-Hart Västrik

Back cover: boys in Nartiang, the village with the biggest cluster of megaliths in the Jaintia Hills, Meghalaya.

Photo by Ülo Valk



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Dear Friends in Folklore Research,

the sixth issue of the newsletter marks the way of the ISFNR from the interim conference, which was held in Shillong, India on February 22–25, 2011, to the 16th congress, to convene in Vilnius, Lithuania on June 25–30, 2013. The main goal of the ISFNR is to develop scholarly work on folk narratives and to stimulate contacts among researchers, although its regular forums, held on different continents and within different cultural contexts, always offer some extra values to the benefits of academic discussions. Participants in the meet in Shillong experienced the famous ethnic and cultural diversity of North-East India in many aspects: in the variety of papers, dedicated to the local traditions; the cultural events of the conference program; and the daily life in the city and in the state of Meghalaya, which is the home of several indigenous peoples. In the inaugural lecture of the interim conference, published in this newsletter, Ulrich Marzolph, the president of the ISFNR, discusses cultural hybridity and exchange as universal phenomena, characteristic of diverse forms of human expression. The world of North-East Indian cultures, touched by Hinduism, by Western and Christian influences and yet unique as a constellation of local indigenous traditions, offers many convincing examples to his arguments about the weakness of early folklore scholarship that tended to overwrite the narrative cultures of the world according to familiar patterns of European standards.

In order to see the ISFNR interim conference in Shillong from a variety of perspectives, I asked five participants from different countries to reflect upon their memories and impressions. Sometimes it is difficult to find people who will agree to write conference reports and who later fulfil these enforced promises – however, this did not happen this time. The ease of receiving the articles from Sarmistha De Basu, Meenaxi Barkataki-Ruscheweyh, Mark Bender,

María Inés Palleiro and Pihla Siim reminds me of the easy, happy and friendly atmosphere of this smoothly run event. Professor Desmond L. Kharmawphlang, his team and the North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU) deserve our great gratitude for their remarkable work, making the conference possible and marking Shillong on the mental map of international scholarship as a vibrant centre of folkloristics. The folklore program of the Department of Cultural and Creative Studies, NEHU, definitely has a great mission in service of the ethnic communities of North-Eastern India and academic folkloristics, which is both a well-established and rapidly developing discipline in this part of the world.

While the memories of North-Eastern India are still fresh among the conference participants, the ISFNR is looking into its near future to hold its next regular congress in North-Eastern Europe, in Vilnius, the capital city of Lithuania. Please find in this issue the calls for papers for the 16th congress of the ISFNR, Folk Narrative in the Modern World: Unity and Diversity, and symposium of the Belief Narrative Network, Boundaries of Belief Narratives, to be held at the same congress in Vilnius on June 25–30, 2013. Lithuania is known not only for amber, basketball and the mystic art and music of Mikalojus K. Čiurlionis, but also for strong traditions in folklore research, represented by famous scholars, such as Jonas Balys, Norbertas Vėlius, Marija Gimbutas, Algirdas J. Greimas and many others. As an example of current Lithuanian scholarship we can read the article by Giedrė Šmitienė from the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore, one of the leading centres of folklore research in the Baltic states and Northern Europe and the main organiser of the next ISFNR congress. Relying on her rich fieldwork experience, Giedrė Šmitienė shows that tradition cannot be defined as a closed set of possessed knowledge but can be

understood as a lived, embodied and narrated reality. Tradition thus takes individual forms, appearing in relationship with home as a lived place, and is in constant flow. The concept of life-tradition, introduced by Šmitienė, can probably also shed light on the joint activities of communities and networks in creative and developing forms. The Belief Narrative Network (BNN) of the ISFNR, established in 2009 at the 15th congress in Athens, held a successful conference in St. Petersburg in May 2010, organised by professor Alexander Panchenko, and a symposium, Belief Narratives and Social Realities, at the ISFNR interim conference in Shillong in February 2011. In the current issue we publish the address of Willem de Blécourt, the chair of the BNN, to the conference in St. Petersburg. Unfortunately, he was unable to attend the meeting because of complications of getting the visa and also the Skype link did not work in the end. In his short introduction Willem de Blécourt delineates some of the guidelines to studying and problematising beliefs and their expressions in narratives.

The productive work of the ISFNR Committee on Charms, Charming and Charmers is discussed in this issue by Jonathan Roper, the chair of the committee. Landmarks of 2011 are the successful conference in Moscow and the first issue of the journal *Incantatio*. Claire Wheeler, Eleanor Wilkinson and Mark Turin introduce the World Oral Literature Project, which has even wider and further-reaching international dimensions. Founded in 2009, the project is carried out at the University of Cambridge, UK and Yale University, USA and aims to document and preserve the most endangered cultural traditions of our planet. As the initiative promotes fieldwork among marginalised ethnic communities and safeguards their oral traditions, the ISFNR shares the ethos of the project and completely supports its goals. Hopefully, readers of the current

newsletter find this informative article appealing and the World Oral Literature Project gains new fans and participants among us professional folklorists, whose interests in documenting, preserving and studying vanishing traditions have often guided our scholarly endeavours.

The last articles of the newsletter reflect upon a few other folkloristic and inter-disciplinary forums, held in 2011 in different parts of the world. Faguna Barmahalia, Rupashree Hazowary and Ülo Valk draw attention to the initiatives of the new Centre for Indigenous Culture at the Central University of Jharkhand, India. Its first large-scale conference, *Tradition, Identity & Diversity: The Future of Indigenous Culture in a Globalised World*, offered a variety of insightful papers about indigenous Indian minorities, too often overlooked in international scholarship. Merili Metsvahi has offered a synopsis of the symposium of folklore and folkloristics among the Finno-Ugric peoples, organised at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands. Ambrož Kvartič has noted

down his participant observations of the international symposium on traditional and literary epics, held at the University of Tartu, Estonia.

The year 2012 will also be rich in conferences with plenty of options for ISFNR members to meet and discuss their work face-to-face. On February 6–8, 2012 professor Mani Meitei, professor Sanatombi Soram and their team in co-operation with the ISFNR will organise a symposium entitled, *Local Legends in the Global Context*, at Manipur University, Imphal, India. As the first major international forum organised by the folklorists of the young Manipur University, it will definitely be of great importance for the development of folklore studies in Manipur. On May 18–20, 2012 the conference, *Body, Soul, Spirits and Supernatural Communication*, will be organised by the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology of Pécs University, the Folklore Department of the Hungarian Ethnographic Society and the ISFNR Belief Narrative Network (BNN). This initiative has come from professor Éva Pócs who has arranged several

successful conferences in Hungary. On August 28–30, 2012 the Department of Serbian Literature, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Novi Sad, Serbia will organise conference called *Belief Narrative Genres*. Professor Zoja Karanović presented an invitation to this event at the BNN meeting, held in Shillong during the ISFNR Interim conference. It is remarkable that belief narratives, often regarded as a minor genre if compared with folktales and epics, have turned into a lively field of studies and that the ISFNR has shown leadership in this research.

Finally, I would like to thank all the authors for their contributions to this newsletter, our language editor Daniel E. Allen, artist Marat Viires and my helpful colleagues Liilia Laaneman, Merili Metsvahi, Jonathan Roper, Elo-Hanna Seljamaa, Pihla Siim and Ergo-Hart Västriik at the folklore department, University of Tartu. I also thank the readership, whose positive feedback and interest in the newsletter helped us bring you the current issue.

Ülo Valk, editor

Presidential Address at the Opening of the ISFNR Interim Conference

by Ulrich Marzolph, *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*, Göttingen, Germany

Dear Participants in the ISFNR Interim Conference at Shillong,

As the acting president of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research let me welcome you to the 2011 ISFNR Interim Conference, organised by the Department of Cultural & Creative Studies at the North-Eastern Hill University in Shillong. It is a great pleasure for me to thank the organisers of the conference, Professor Desmond L. Kharmawphlang and his team, as well as all the supporters at various levels, for inviting the members of the ISFNR to this stunningly beautiful venue in the state of Meghalaya. After the Society's memorable congress in Mysore, organised by Professor Jawaharlal

Handoo in 1995, this is already the second time in its fifty-year history that the Society has convened in India, and we are all looking forward to an exciting meeting and a challenging exchange of thoughts between local and international scholars. As the first ISFNR meeting outside of Europe, the conference in Mysore was, in fact, the perfect occasion for the Society to stand up to its vocation of representing a truly international body of scholars specialising in research on folk narrative and popular literature. Officially founded in 1962, the ISFNR has matured into a well-established organisation, and more recent meetings outside Europe have included conferences or interim conferences in Beijing, China (1996),



Ulrich Marzolph, president of the ISFNR at the interim conference in Shillong.

Photo by Pihla Siim.

Nairobi, Kenya (2000), Melbourne, Australia (2001), and Santa Rosa, Argentina (2007).

We are particularly happy to meet in Meghalaya since the first Indian Department of Folkloristics was founded in 1972 at the nearby University of Gauhati, the oldest university in the region. The Folklore Research Department at Gauhati was established with a view to study the oral literature, customs, art forms and performing arts of the communities of North-East India. Today, its mission statement deplors a certain cultural instability and the decay of traditional knowledge in the region. Such an evaluation of the situation of folklore is all the more regrettable since North-East India prides itself of a wealth of cultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversity.

Folklore, as we all know, is a pivotal constituent of cultural identity; folk narrative – the main concern of our society – serves as the verbal expression of this identity at a narrative level. The specific characteristics of folk narrative traditions differ widely on an international scale. Yet all folk narrative traditions share a notion of condensing the highly complex worlds of their narrators and the surrounding societies into the nutshell of a narrative. The extent to which these narratives correspond to the worldview, the ethical norms and the social circumstances of their surrounding cultures or societies eventually defines the degree of their reception and, hence, their popularity. Narratives may be lengthy and highly artful compositions, such as the long epics of Asian, European, or African tradition the oral performances of which at times takes days or even weeks to complete. Narratives may also be highly codified items, such as folktales and fairy tales, or even fairly simple and straightforward short items, such as jokes and anecdotes. While popular narratives are primarily texts, in live performance they may often go together with dramatic enactment or visual representation illustrating the text. Whatever they are, popular narra-

tives constitute highly meaningful items of verbal art, and their documentation and study is a constant challenge to our discipline. While popular narratives deserve to be preserved in published collections, they should not, and certainly not primarily, be stored away as museum pieces devoid of their original context and meaning. Documentation is a necessary part of research, but by no means should the study of folk narrative end with the simple recording or publication, and neither with the classification of narratives in national or international catalogues. In other words, the documentation, classification and publication of popular narratives are but the necessary first steps for their study. Popular narratives are very much alive. They change constantly while adapting and responding to the exigencies of surrounding societies and cultures.

Popular narratives are as much alive as the people who narrate the tales. At times we may have to face the deplorable disappearance from active tradition of age-old cherished narratives such as those we heard ourselves from previous generations. At the same time, new genres appear, such as the recent genres of urban legends or of internet lore. At any rate, a world without popular narratives is simply unimaginable. Humanity has been shaping its experience into narratives since time immemorial. The modern media have accelerated the lives of many individuals and communities, particularly in the technologically 'advanced' societies, to such an incredible pace that the term 'tradition' almost appears a contradiction in terms. Meanwhile, narratives have not disappeared. Rather the contrary, they document their superior position in human expression by adapting to the changing times, by forming new genres and by transforming old genres to fit the new media of transmission. To quote a favourite term of Kurt Ranke, the founding father of my institution, the German based *Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales*, the human being is a "homo narrans", and storytelling is a basic quality of human

existence. Wherever humans live, they will always strive to grasp their experience and communicate their worldview in the garb of narratives.

Against this backdrop of our discipline, let me stress once more the importance of staging the present ISFNR Interim Conference in Shillong. Since its inception in the nineteenth century, the discipline of folk narrative research has turned to India for some of the oldest narrative sources available, and certainly some of the most influential ones on an international level. The Sanskrit *Pancatantra* together with its numerous descendants in a multitude of languages is an influential constituent of world literature as well as international narrative tradition. The world's most renowned collection of narratives, the *Thousand and One Nights*, is heavily indebted to ancient Indian tradition. In addition, Indian tradition has produced several other large compilations of narratives that for many centuries have exerted a considerable influence on world narrative, East and West, such as the standard collection of Buddhist tales, the *Tripitaka*, Somadeva's *Kathâsarit-sâgara*, The "Ocean of Stories", or the anonymous *Śukasaptati*, the "Tales of the Parrot". Meanwhile, whatever we know about Indian folk narrative on an international level appears to pale into insignificance against the truly vast "Ocean of Stories" – to borrow the title of Somadeva's collection – that we encounter in Indian oral tradition. In particular, Indian folk narratives are primarily known to the West by way of a small selection of publications in international languages, yet the wealth of living oral tradition can only be guessed at by those without access to the native languages. This assessment notably not only holds true for India, but in fact for many of the world's oral traditions, for knowledge of which international scholars depend on the availability of accessible translations. At the same time, the international knowledge of worldwide narrative traditions has for a long time also been heavily influenced

by a certain predisposition, a certain bias on the part of the researchers, most of whom have been educated in the West. This bias has only faded in recent decades, eventually giving place to an adequate appreciation of local, regional, or national narrative traditions in their own right. The following considerations are but a small contribution to the ongoing discussion about the adequate perception of regional narrative traditions. With the limited time at my disposal, and for the sake of clarity, I propose to ponder in some detail on the term 'hybridity' and its implications as one of the crucial elements of international narrative tradition¹.

When, in the nineteenth century, comparative folk narrative research began to constitute itself as a discipline, it was primarily developed against the background of the Western experience. Meanwhile, since its beginnings, the discipline had also been aware of the international scale of its research. Nineteenth and early twentieth-century European scholars of the comparative school such as Theodor Benfey, Emmanuel Cosquin, Édouard Chavannes, René Basset, Victor Chauvin or Albert Wesselski have studied large quantities of texts from non-European, primarily Asian cultures, in their relation to European tradition. With their contributions, they have supplied ample material to allow European folklorists of the dominating historic-geographic school to question their focus, which used to view world narratives traditions from a European perspective. Based on their research, later scholars have become increasingly aware of the fact that the significance and meaning of folk narratives can only be assessed by taking into consideration their respective cultural backgrounds. In order to achieve its goal, the discipline of comparative folk narrative research has developed a range of theories. In the first place, these theories were related to the origin and diffusion of folklore, and since the middle of the twentieth century they have increas-

ingly considered aspects of context and performance. Studies undertaken in this vein have shown that the quest for knowledge combined with an unbiased and sensitive way of research is capable of achieving a high degree of understanding of foreign narrative cultures. Meanwhile, neither folk narrative nor, for that matter, knowledge are static. Quite to the contrary, they are by nature in a state of constant development and change. Consequently, folk narrative research is permanently challenged to reconsider the specific requirements the discipline faces in the contemporary world. As the impact of geographic distance diminishes and as our present-day world grows smaller, the concept of hybridity of narrative tradition becomes increasingly important.

In the humanities, recent years have experienced the introduction and high frequency of the phrase of *intercultural* or *multicultural* studies. Seen from a German perspective, a large number of the existing studies in this comparatively new branch of research treat their subject predominantly from the perspective of Western cultures. For them, the conscious appreciation of their complexity and related developments is a recent phenomenon of high political relevance. Like a number of other modern directions of research, the focus of intercultural or multicultural studies in Germany emerged against the background of the US-American experience. To a large extent, it represents a modification of the promise of the international melting-pot that in the reality of the USA as an immigrant nation has largely proved an illusion. For a long time, folk narrative research has been aware of its *international* scale. Meanwhile, studies treating intercultural and multicultural aspects allude to a point of view basically different from a focus on the *international*. While for the latter, the point of comparison is the 'Other' in its external relation to the 'Self', the former is rather concerned with the working of the 'Other' within the 'Self' (or vice versa): non-indige-

nous characteristics are primarily of interest in their relevance for the cultures of specific societies. Research is based above all on Western societies, whose inner problematics are studied with regard to their specific circumstances as immigrant nations and the resulting aspects of integration. One of the basic assets of this direction of research is the complexity of intercultural relations seen against the background of a detailed understanding of the original cultural circumstances. Intercultural studies presuppose the existence of specific smaller entities whose study is required.

While hereby, attention shifts from the 'Self' to the 'Other', another recent phrase comes into view, threatening to narrow the horizon again: that of globalisation. Globalisation is connected with the likewise US-American concept of the 'global village', the vision of a world in which the flow of information is interwoven so closely and so rapidly that knowledge spreads with the speed of village gossip. While its advocates evaluate this perspective as thoroughly positive, one has to keep in mind that knowledge of whatever kind is accessible first of all to those controlling the suitable technical means. This also means that those not commanding the suitable technical means are barred from participating in the 'global village' and risk being excluded from the process of decision-making or, worse even, risk being dominated by decisions taken by those individuals or organisations governing the 'global village'. Moreover, free access to knowledge, egalitarian as it may seem at first, is not necessarily equal to access for everybody. To put it in simple words – even the open door of a building with a sign saying "Please do come in" will not entice everybody to enter. Besides, the global availability of knowledge does not address the question of whose knowledge it is that is made available. At any rate, it is no matter of dispute that at least as of today the category of knowledge has to be added to the three Marxist categories



L-R: A.N. Rai, Vice-Chancellor of the North-Eastern Hill University, A.C. Bhagabati and Jawaharlal Handoo at the dedicated session of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (New Delhi), ISFNR interim conference in Shillong.

Photo by Ülo Valk.

of economy – capital, possession and work. Yet it is certain that knowledge is as unevenly distributed internationally as the other categories: globalisation suggests an equality that it cannot produce. Moreover, globalisation does not imply the functional equivalence of information that is made globally accessible; rather it means the hegemonising of standards, ever so often with the implicit goal of global commercial exploitation. In order not to turn my presentation into an anti-imperialistic pamphlet, I suggest, for the time being, to leave aside the political and economic implications of these considerations, some of which are deeply relevant for countries like India. So let me return to the specific problems of folk narrative research. The third conceptual complex to be mentioned possesses particular relevance for my discussion. While the concept of globalisation is explicitly concerned with hegemonising, the concepts of intercultural and multicultural studies implicitly regard culture as an entity that can clearly be defined and demarcated, only thereby making the comparison of different entities, in this case cultures, possible. In contrast to this concept, in recent years the related debate about the *hybridity* or *hybridisation* of cultures has created awareness of the fact

that cultures in themselves already represent a conglomerate of smaller entities of various origins². This concept, originally borrowed from biology, questions the monolithic and clearly demarcated character of cultures, and proposes we view cultures – in the words of Edward Said – as “closely interwoven; no culture is unique and pure, every culture is hybrid, heterogeneous, extremely differentiated and unmonolithic”³. The concept of hybridity thereby challenges the concept of intercultural studies insofar as it proposes a focus on constituents of common origin rather than on a dialogue of differences. The concept of cultural hybridity makes it possible – to quote Homi Bhabha – to study “difference without a received or decreed hierarchy”⁴. If cultures in themselves are already complex hybrid products whose characteristics originate both from different and common sources, then differences can be observed without the need for evaluation.

These general considerations lead to various questions for comparative folk narrative research, including the basic question against which theoretical background folk narrative research operates. How broad are the possibilities of perceiving foreign cultures by way of their narrative expression? To

what extent does the perception of the respective folk narrative researcher influence the understanding of foreign cultures? And finally: to what extent does folk narrative research act against the background of a self-centred matrix implying the perception of foreign cultures only against the background of the researcher’s own experience?

In discussing these questions, the following considerations are based on the evaluation of a number of texts dedicating themselves to the research of “European narrative X within the non-European culture Y”. This question relates to a special category of ‘displaced’ folktales in the sense of the term proposed by Norwegian folklorist Reidar Thoralf Christiansen in 1960⁵. The declared object of such investigations promises to supply basic information about the degree to which characteristics of foreign cultures can be perceived. In other words: When we are studying characteristics of an alien culture that originate from our own culture are we interested in what became of the ‘Own’? Or are we sensitive in relation to what the ‘Own’ means to the ‘Alien’, and moreover, what the ‘Alien’ means to itself?

The example of the European reception of the Orient may serve to remind us how strongly the perception of an alien cultural sphere can be determined by the conditions of the perceiving culture⁶. When, towards the end of the seventeenth century, the Muslim Ottoman empire ceased to constitute a military threat for Christian central Europe, the previously reigning anxiety directed against the Turks faded away and soon gave rise to an uncritical enthusiasm for everything Turkish, a so-called *Turquoserie* that generated a popular enthusiasm for things ‘Oriental’. An essential constituent of this form of Orientalism – notably both product and producer – was the European translation of the originally Arabic *Stories of the Thousand and One Nights*, in English commonly known as *The Arabian Nights*

Entertainments, in short, *The Arabian Nights*, or shorter even, the *Nights*. The *Nights* were first introduced to the European public by French orientalist scholar Antoine Galland from 1704 onwards in a form that has aptly been termed an “appropriation” rather than a translation⁷. Galland’s text not only furnished new narrative material to the French literary salons, but rather quickly in the whole of Europe evoked a tremendous inspiration in various areas of creativity, including literature, music, drama, painting, and architecture. The cultural complexity of the *Arabian Nights* was unravelled by research only following its popular reception and today remains rather unknown to the general public. It is quite telling that in common apprehension a few tales from the *Arabian Nights* became more or less synonymous for the collection itself. Notably, these tales prior to Galland’s translation had never belonged to the original Arabic collection. Moreover, they owe much of their particular characteristics to the individual influence of the ostensible translator. The most productive of these stories in terms of worldwide inspiration is the story of *Aladdin and the Magic Lamp*. While the basic structure of that story is legitimised as ‘authentic’ by the oral performance of the Syrian Christian narrator Hanna Diyab, the story contains elements that strongly suggest an autobiographic re-working by Galland. What the readers perceive therefore as the ‘Orient’ within the tale is little more than their own imaginations and fantasies about the Orient in pseudo-authentic garb; in other words, an Orient ‘within themselves’. This critique similarly applies to wide areas of the reception of the *Arabian Nights* in the nineteenth century, above all for the abundantly annotated translations prepared by Edward William Lane and Richard Burton. Both correspond to a ‘text in the mind of people’ rather than conveying Arabic or ‘Oriental’ reality. Since the days of Galland almost three centuries have passed, and one might feel inclined to think that such forms of the perception of the cultural ‘Other’ are now relegated to popular entertainment – such as

the Disney cartoon version of Aladdin that was screened in 1992⁸. With a certain amount of reassurance, it seems unlikely that contemporary folk narrative research would fall into the old trap. But are we really entitled to think so? Dutch folk narrative researcher Jurjen van der Kooi recently felt obliged to publish a strong plea for “worldwide comparative studies”⁹. Justified as it is, his plea also reveals that this author regards the ways in which the complexity of processes of transmission are perceived by current research as insufficient. This critique also applies to the corpus of European studies in folk narrative research here investigated. It soon becomes clear that even though there is discernible progress from the colonial attitude¹⁰ towards indigenous narrative traditions, a conscious effort is needed in order to discard a traditional perspective in favour of contemporary requirements. Let me give you a few examples.

When the German orientalist (and esteemed translator of the *Arabian Nights*) Enno Littmann expresses concepts of the “truly lower German” or “authentically oriental” in his essay “Sneewittchen in Jerusalem” (1932)¹¹, we might feel entitled to evaluate his remarks as old-fashioned and outdated. But what are we to think about the debate that was going on up to the 1970s between Richard Dorson and his critics about the African background of Afro-American narratives?¹² How should we evaluate Africanist scholar Sigrid Schmidt’s remark, who in 1970, when reporting about the missionary Robert Moffat’s experiences in 1818, evaluated the behaviour by one of his informants as “an act of conscious lying”?¹³ What are we to think when psychologists Amine A. Azar and Antoine M. Sarkis in their study of the “migrations of *Little Red Riding Hood* in the Levante” after a highly sensitive investigation of the early European history of international tale type 333 treat the Levantine editions of the fairy tale surveyed by them (in Turkish, Armenian, and Arabic) exclusively under the aspect of to what extent they adapt the foreign

story to the respective cultural background – reaching the unsurprising conclusion that none of the surveyed editions contains illustrations prepared by an indigenous artist?¹⁴ What are we to make of the fact that German linguist Gunter Senft in his study of the tale of the brave tailor in the Trobriand Islands is almost exclusively interested in how the original fairy tale became adapted to the alien culture in terms of language and content?¹⁵ Somehow these studies remind me of what Werner Daum remarked years ago about his field research undertaken in order to collect fairy tales in Yemen, when he wrote: “... and what I heard everywhere did not interest me: anecdotes of all types, witty stories ... It was endlessly disappointing.”¹⁶ One aspect is common to the quoted studies: They investigate their subject against the background of their own experience, their own expectations and their own system of cultural values. Against this background, possible results lie anywhere in between disappointment at insufficient capacities of reception on the one hand and patronising statements on the other hand, such as the statement that indigenous people like to learn and are willing to adapt, perhaps are even open to conscious manipulation¹⁷ or demonstrate “a certain inner understanding for the European fairy tales”¹⁸.

Contrasting with the studies quoted so far, there are a number of studies concerned with the reception of European folk narratives in non-European cultures that demonstrate a different degree of sensitivity vis-à-vis alien values. In addition to US scholar Margaret Mills’s essays relating to *Cupid and Psyche* or *Cinderella* in Afghanistan¹⁹, one might mention several other studies. French Africanist Denise Paulme supplies her investigation of a *Cendrillon* variant in Angola²⁰ with a detailed analysis of the role of women, of patterns of marriage and of familial relationships; the European reader who at first might have judged the final incestuous relationship between the heroine and her brother as unsuitable, is thus enabled to understand it from a cul-

turally immanent point of view as the only possible way of attaining ultimate happiness. James M. Taggart after an extensive discussion of variants of *Hansel and Gretel* in Spain and Mexico concludes that there is a relationship between the symbolic content of the stories and family relations in the Hispanic world²¹. And Cameroon scholar Norbert Ndong studies in great detail the references to living reality in variants of *Snow White* told by a narrator in south Cameroon – while in his quality as a member of the studied tradition group he obviously felt the need to demarcate his research against the “proponents of a theory regarding the African people purely as a consumer and not as a producer of culture”²².

This second group of studies demonstrates how fruitful the concept of hybrid cultures can be if researchers become aware of the fact that cultural exchange takes place always and everywhere. Though this assessment is fundamentally valid, both modern media and the mobility of people in the modern world have considerably expanded the temporal and geographic dimensions of communication. With the changing conditions, the question what ‘Alien’ actually means and what is perceived as alien, and why and how, gains a new relevance. A final example might serve to demonstrate this point.

The Hamburg based sociolinguist Mechthild Dehn has related the poignant example of the migration of a specific variant of *Little Red Riding Hood* around the world²³: her example originates from an investigation in the fourth grade of elementary school aiming to provoke pupils to “actualize cultural terms in the process of writing”. The Persian girl Maryam, when offered a choice of contemporary popular characters (Pippi Longstocking, Batman, Arielle, Aladdin, The Lion King, etc.) decidedly opts to write about Little Red Riding Hood. Two points are particularly interesting in her execution of the task: On the one hand, Maryam writes in Persian (and not in German); on the other hand,

the tale of *Little Red Riding Hood* is clearly not a component of traditional Iranian popular tradition. These discrepancies are gradually explained: Maryam has come to Germany only a short while ago and does not command the language well enough to write in German. She is familiar with *Little Red Riding Hood* from a children’s book in the Persian language that she had received from one of her teachers. This text in turn turns out to be one of the numerous simplified comic-book adaptations of popular stories originating from Japanese production that in contemporary Iran enjoys a considerable popularity. The adaptation clearly derives from the version presented by the brothers Grimm. In consequence, the tale told by the Persian girl has made a voyage around the world before returning to Germany, including several adaptations and transformations in cultures alien to its place of origin. Maryam regards her tale as a product of her own culture and is not aware of its long and complicated history. At the same time, the alien culture in which Maryam lives at present also regards the tale as its own propriety while perceiving the changes as alien.

In order to decode similar processes, we need not only knowledge about the respective cultural backgrounds in the sense of taking into account and interpreting facts. In addition to the accumulation and analytical apprehension of factual evidence, knowledge here rather means sensibility and, above all, responsibility. The study of foreign cultures always implies a form of demarcation. In many ways, this demarcation of the ‘Self’ against the ‘Other’ cannot be avoided, since researchers are always bound to act against the backdrop of their individual experience, much of which is related to the values of their original culture and society. But even though a certain alienation vis-à-vis foreign cultures is unavoidable, the conscious effort to be aware of one’s own background and limitations will help to counterbalance the implied cultural bias. In modifying a statement from Eva Sallis’s book on the *Arabian Nights*, the ideal folk narrative research-

er “is not characterized by the absence of prejudgmental cargo, but by a consciousness of prejudgment and a willed maintenance of flexibility”²⁴. When striving for a dialogue of cultures, or even understanding, the contemporary responsibility of folk narrative research is to contribute to public awareness of common grounds and to evaluate and honour the evident differences of hybrid cultures as divergent yet fully equivalent forms of human expression.

Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues! Two centuries after its inception, the discipline of folk narrative research has matured into a major field of cultural studies. Considering the close link between human existence and the expression of human experience in narratives, we do not only study popular narratives as they were passed on by tradition. Rather, we take into account popular narratives as vibrant and active constituents of our contemporary daily existence, regarding them as the pivotal expression of cultural diversity and common concerns of humanity at the same time. Judging from the conference abstracts I have had the pleasure to read, staging the present conference in Shillong and the state of Meghalaya implies the tremendous chance for all of the participants to gain insight into an otherwise little-known complex of regional narrative tradition that at the same time is part of a larger South Asian and South East Asian web of tradition. Moreover, by convening in Shillong, the ISFNR takes pride in acknowledging the scholarly achievements of Indian folklore scholars and institutions. It is to be hoped that the present event will also serve to support and strengthen the study of folklore and folk narrative in the present institution. I am confident that the presentations of the conference participants will convince the audience as well as the responsible authorities of the discipline’s strong standing and its pivotal relevance for assessing and understanding the complexities of life as expressed in narratives, both from a traditional and a contemporary perspective. Let me thus express my sincere wishes for a challenging and inspiring meeting!

¹ The following considerations are largely based on my essay "Globale Nabelschau? Vergleichende Erzählforschung in der Periode interkultureller Globalisierung." In: *Schweizerisches Archiv für Volkskunde* 97,1 (2001), pp. 137–143.

² See, e.g., Robert J. C. Young: *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*. London/New York 1995.

³ Edward W. Said: *Culture and Imperialism*. New York 1993, p. XXV.

⁴ Homi K. Bhaba: "Verortungen der Kultur." In: Elisabeth Bronfen, Benjamin Markus, and Therese Steffen, eds.: *Hybride Kulturen: Beiträge zur anglo-amerikanischen Multikulturalismusdebatte*. Tübingen 1997, pp. 123–148, at 127.

⁵ Reidar T. Christiansen: "'Displaced' Folktales." In: *Humaniora: Essays in Literature, Folklore, Bibliography. Festschrift Archer Taylor*. New York 1960, pp. 161–171.

⁶ For the following, see Ulrich Marzolph: "Der Orient in uns. Die Europa-Debatte aus Sicht der orientalistischen Erzählforschung." In: *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 15,4 (2004), pp. 9–26; see also Rana Kabbani: *Imperial Fictions: Europe's Myth of Orient*. London 1986, particularly at pp. 37–66.

⁷ On Galland's version of the *Nights*, see Sylvette Larzul: "Les Mille et une Nuits de Galland ou l'acclimation d'une 'belle étrangère'." In: *Revue de littérature comparée* 69 (1995), pp. 309–323; ead.: *Les Traductions françaises des Mille et une Nuits: Etude des versions Galland, Trébutien et Mardrus*. Paris 1996.

⁸ See Michael Cooperson: "The Monstrous Births of 'Aladdin'." In: *The Arabian Nights Reader*. ed. Ulrich Marzolph. Detroit 2006, pp. 265–282.

⁹ Jurjen van der Kooi: "He bringt dat nich wedder tohoop. Plädoyer für eine weltweite Komparatistik." In: *Kulturen – Sprachen – Übergänge. Festschrift H. L. Cox*. Cologne/Weimar/Vienna 2000, pp. 207–216.

¹⁰ For the present context see, most recently, Sadhana Naithani: *The Story-Time of the British Empire: Colonial and Postcolonial Folkloristics*. Jackson, Mississippi 2010.

¹¹ Enno Littmann: "Sneewittchen in Jerusalem." In: *Festschrift Georg Jacob*. Leipzig 1932, pp. 165–173.

¹² Dorson, R.: *American Negro Folktales*. Greenwich, Conn. 1967; id.: "African and Afro-American Folklore: A Reply to Bascom and Other Misguided Critics." In: *Journal of*

American Folklore 88 (1975), pp. 151–164; Crowley, D.: *African Folklore in the New World*. Austin 1977, reviewed by D. Ben-Amos in *ASA Review of Books* 4 (1978), pp. 103–105.

¹³ Sigrid Schmidt: "Europäische Volkserzählungen bei den Nama und Bergdama." In: *Fabula* 11 (1970), pp. 32–53, at 33.

¹⁴ Amine A. Azar, Antoine M. Sarakis: "Les Pérégrinations du Petit Chaperon Rouge au pays du Levant." In: *Cahiers de l'Orient* 7 (1987), pp. 213–237.

¹⁵ Günter Senft: "What happened to 'The Fearless Tailor' in Kilivila. A European Fairy-Tales from the South Seas." In: *Anthropos* 87 (1992), pp. 407–421.

¹⁶ Werner Daum: *Märchen aus dem Jemen*. Cologne 1998, p. 299.

¹⁷ Doris Jedamski: "Literatur und Kolonialismus: Der Gestiefelte Kater und Dornröschen in javanischem Gewand kolonialistischer Bearbeitung." In: *XXIV. Deutscher Orientalistentag*. ed. W. Diem, A. Falaturi. Stuttgart 1990, 537–544.

¹⁸ Schmidt (as in note 13), p. 47.

¹⁹ Margaret Mills: *Cupid and Psyche in Afghanistan*. New York 1978 (Afghanistan Council, Occasional Paper 14), ead.: "A Cinderella Variant in the Context of a Muslim Women's Ritual." In: *Cinderella: A Folklore Casebook*. ed. A. Dundes. New York/London 1982, pp. 180–192.

²⁰ Denise Paulme: "Cendrillon en Afrique." In: *Critique* 394 (1980), pp. 288–302, at 296–302.

²¹ James M. Taggart: "'Hansel and Gretel' in Spain and Mexico." In: *Journal of American Folklore* 99 (1986), pp. 435–460, at 458.

²² Norbert Ndong: "Das Märchen vom Meisterdieb und vom Mädchen im Sarg. Ein Beitrag zur vergleichenden Erzählforschung anhand von zwei Erzählungen aus Kamerun." In: *Fabula* 33 (1992), pp. 269–283, at 272.

²³ Mechthild Dehn: "Sprache und Fremdverstehen: Mehrschriftigkeit." In: *Sprache und Fremdverstehen*. ed. H. Decke-Cornill, M. Reichart-Wallrabenstein. Frankfurt 1999, pp. 71–87.

²⁴ Eva Sallis: *Sheherazade through the Looking Glass: The Metamorphosis of the Thousand and One Nights*. Richmond, Surrey 1999, p. 14.



Megaliths in Mawphlang, Meghalaya.
Photo by Pihla Siim.



The ISFNR Interim Conference 2011 in Retrospect

by Pihla Siim, University of Tartu, Estonia



Pihla Siim is writing her dissertation about transnational families in Estonia, in Finland and in Russia.

Photo by Toomas Pajula.

In February 2011, the ISFNR interim conference took place in Shillong, North-Eastern India, with the theme "Telling Identities: Individuals and Communities in Folk Narratives". This conference was my first ISFNR meeting and probably very different from the 'ordinary' ones – the location being so unusual and far away, if looked at from Europe. As we found out, even for Indians themselves, North-Eastern India may represent something different, even frightening. I did not experience it that way at all, since we were very warmly welcomed and taken good care of. Our hosts did a wonderful job to make our stay there unforgettable. I suppose the February was the ideal time for the meeting, because it was not too hot, not too cold and not too wet either – just perfect.

Shillong is the capital of Meghalaya, one of the smallest states in India. Because of the rolling hills around the town, it is also known as the "Scotland of the East". During the conference we came to know and experience why Shillong is also known as the Rock Capital of India.

The conference was organised by the Department of Cultural and Creative Studies (North-Eastern Hill University – NEHU) under the guidance of the head of the department, folklore professor Desmond L. Kharmawphlang. Once before, in 1995, an ISFNR meeting was organised in India. That conference, organised by professor Jawaharlal Handoo in Mysore, was historical because it was the first ISFNR conference to take place outside of Europe.

The first Indian department of folkloristics was founded in 1972 at Gauhati University, which is also the oldest University in North-East India. The North-Eastern Hill University in Shillong was established in 1973 and the Centre for Creative Arts was set up in 1977. The Centre for Literary and Cultural Studies was started in 1984 with special emphasis on the folklore of the North-Eastern Region. In 1997, the above two centres were re-structured and amalgamated.

The NEHU campus was located a little outside the city limits. All the services and departments seemed to be neatly and compactly situated near to each other, and buildings surrounded – a little surprisingly – by pine trees. The climate in Shillong was actually very different from tropical India. Even when driving the 100 kilometres from Guwahati to Shillong we observed the astonishingly large changes in nature, as well as the changes in the text and symbols painted on trucks, reflecting the different beliefs in these two towns. While Hinduism is the main religion followed in Guwahati, there are a lot of Christians (Presbyterians, Catholics and Protestants) in Shillong, as well as people who follow Khasi beliefs.

There were around 100 participants at the conference: from India, other Asian countries, Europe, South and

North America. A little more than 30 participants came from outside India. Some had cancelled their participation at the very last minute, as I understood. Estonia was very well represented with eleven participants, probably thanks to Margaret Lyngdoh, who is a PhD student in folklore from Shillong, doing her doctoral studies at the University of Tartu.



Desmond L. Kharmawphlang, the main organiser of the ISFNR interim conference in Shillong.

Photo by Merili Metsvahi.

The conference had nine sub-themes, most sizeable of them being "Ethnicity and Cultural Identity" and symposium "Belief Narratives and Social Realities" with 23 and 29 papers respectively. Since my research topic is related to transnational families, I was especially interested in sub-themes "*Identity and Belonging in a Transnational Setting*" and "*Places and Borders*". There were 4–5 parallel sessions running all the time and here I can only shortly discuss some papers and themes that I personally found most inspiring.

In his presidential address, Ulrich Marzholph (Göttingen, Germany) brought up the problem of Western-

centred folkloristics; most folklorists have until recently received their education in the West and thus narrative traditions of the world have been studied predominantly from the Western perspective. In addition, within multicultural studies the perspective has been mainly that of Western cultures (cf. also women's studies: in 'third countries' women have been very critical about the Western model claiming to speak for all women). We should further analyse who this knowledge has been produced by and to whom it has been made available. Globalisation has not lead to equality yet – and probably never will. Ulrich Marzholph posed an interesting question: If we are studying traits/characteristics of our own culture found in another culture, are we then really interested in other cultures? It is always difficult to study the other without reflecting our own culture, without starting from the classifications of our own culture. One of the tasks for folklorists would be, according to Marzholph, to help to understand hybridity of cultures, and also to value this hybridity. We should not understand culture as something bounded and 'pure'; or polluted when contacted and influenced by other cultures. Neither should we think that one should define oneself with one culture exclusively.

William Westerman (New Jersey, USA) raised similar questions in his paper, titled "Xenophobia, Narratives of Migration, and the Sociolinguistic Drawing of Borders". He posed a question of what kind of folklore we should study – that which is pleasant and harmless, or should we also pay more attention to those moments and periods when folklore turns 'ugly'? Folklorists tend to turn their backs on 'unpleasant' folklore. The case that William Westerman introduced in his presentation was immigration related hate speech generated in the social media. His question was: if we don't look at that kind of folklore, are we in that case quietly supporting it? He encouraged folklorists to meet this challenge. We should be willing to take part in the complex moral discussions



L-R: Sadhana Naithani, Parag Moni Sarma and Sadananda Singh (all from India) at the session on ethnicity and cultural identity.

Photo by Pihla Siim.

going on in our societies.

The presenters from India touched on the question of defining ethnicity and cultural identity in many ways. I enjoyed, for example, the paper by Mrinal Medhi and Mira Kumara Das (Guwahati, India), who analysed identity construction among the Kumars in Guwahati using personal narratives. The Kumars used to live near the temple of Kamakhya in Guwahati until World War II, when they were given 72 hours to evacuate from this area. The authors were interested in their evacuation experiences, the memories and interpretations that people gave to the events and to their own lives. Most of the interviewees were born in the current settlements, and thus reflected on the experiences of their parents.

The presentation by Sadhana Naithani (New Delhi, India) was also based on lengthy fieldwork. Naithani has been studying folk performances in India, in traditional and non-traditional fields, and discussed changes in the roles of folk performers. As society and communities have changed, the communities of folk performers have become dispersed and modern values of performance – including commercialism – have been adopted. Naithani criticised folklorists for lamenting the changes, rather than analysing them. To keep people interested in participating in performances, traditions

have to change along with society and community. A dynamic phase of reformulation of traditions is taking place and descriptive anthropology is not enough to document it. According to Naithani, what one *should* be worried about is the state not supporting the education of folk artists at schools. The state, instead, is using folk forms in its own propaganda. In addition to which the documentation of different forms of performance is insufficient.

Etawanda Saiborne (Shillong, India), who gave her paper on the last day of the conference, also touched on the same theme. Communities have experienced big changes when facing the processes of modernisation, globalisation and Christianisation. Saiborne compellingly discussed the different and even contradictory roles of new media in the (re)production of folklore in these new contexts.

One of the most positive sides of the Shillong conference was the possibility to meet numerous Indian researchers. While listening to their papers and discussions I also observed the familiar juxtaposition of emic versus etic accounts. There are positive sides to be found in both of these standpoints – in studying one's own group, as well as in studying from the outsider's perspective. Still, as is often the case, this theme seemed

to be emotive. Some researchers from outside the communities they studied, were accused of being too dispassionate and representing an “urban” view. On the other hand, a certain kind of reflexivity and analysis of the researcher’s role, as well as

the aims and effects of his/her study, are certainly needed when studying one’s own community. I suppose one of the eternal challenges for folklorists is to balance these two viewpoints. As pointed out earlier, folklorists also need to be ready to take a stand in

relation to societal questions – and also when a somehow repulsive political aspect is present.

ISFNR Review: Shillong Lives up to Its Reputation

by Meenaxi Barkataki-Ruscheweyh,

Academy of Sciences and Georg-August-University of Göttingen, Germany

It was in Kohima, capital of the North-East Indian state of Nagaland, in December 2010, that I first heard of the Interim meet of the ISFNR to be held in Shillong in February 2011. I was in Kohima to attend the annual session of the Indian Folklore Congress (IFC). Many of the participants at the IFC were planning to also attend the ISFNR meet. I was a bit surprised to hear that two such big events would be held so soon after one another, in more or less the same part of the world. But a rapid run of the ISFNR website convinced me that the ISFNR was in a different league altogether. Although I could see that I had missed all deadlines I thought I’d try asking. Desmond’s answer was clear – yes, I could participate but no, I could not present a paper. Sometimes that can be the most convenient arrangement, since you don’t have to feel guilty about not having presented something. Also since I am not technically a folklorist, I was relieved that I wouldn’t need to pretend to be one. So I happily made plans to attend.

And I’m glad I did. For those four days in Shillong were a real treat. I am not sure how this meet compares with other Interim ISFNR meetings since this was my first contact with the ISFNR, but for Shillong, perhaps even for India, it was a really big show, with more than a hundred participants of which a sizeable proportion were from outside the

region. The facilities at NEHU have improved significantly over the years and the Guest Houses, Conference Rooms and technical infrastructure were as good as anywhere else in the world. The army of very friendly and helpful volunteers kept things going and Desmond Kharmawphlang did an amazing job of keeping everything together. And for me, coming as I did from the outside, both in terms of the discipline and the fact that although I am Assamese, I now live and work in Germany, it made me proud to belong to this region and to have the chance to show ourselves off to the rest of the world.

The very impressive inaugural session set the tone for the rest of the conference – the presence of the Governor of Meghalaya at the inauguration lent ceremony and glamour to the proceedings, and the presidential address of Professor Ulrich Marzolph, President of the ISFNR, set the benchmark for the high academic standard for the event by giving a systematic account of the historical developments as well as the present concerns and priorities of the ISFNR as well as of folklore studies worldwide.

The other star of the meet, at least in terms of his engagement with North-East India, was Professor Ülo Valk from Estonia. In addition to asking me to write this article for the newsletter, Professor Valk also told me of an



Meenaxi Barkataki-Ruscheweyh is doing research among the Tangsa ethnic minority in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh.

Photo by Pihla Siim.

agreement between Göttingen University and his own university which could enable me, as a student at Göttingen, to visit the University of Tartu. I was also excited to meet the celebrated folklorist Sadhana Naithani, about whom I had been hearing for many years now, and she certainly did not disappoint.

Of the many sessions and papers I attended, my personal favourites were the talks by Mark Bender (USA) on oral traditions in south-west China and that of Ulf Palmenfelt (Sweden) on individual histories and collective local histories of a community. There were

a few new trend setting papers too, especially the one by the very young American folklore student Jeana Jorgensen. Looking at her many neat pie charts with percentages and proportions, scepticism arising from my mathematics background made me wonder if 'cataloguing gender and body in European fairy tales' using modern technology will tell us significantly more than what we already know (or can reasonably guess) about attributes like beauty and age. Talks by a few young Assamese and Mizo folklorists were also very interesting. I immensely enjoyed the talks about local landscapes, places and borders and their role in framing identity narratives and could sense that this was probably another exciting new direction that folklore studies would take in the next years. And many times during those four days there was so much that interested me that I was not sure whether I was turning into a folklorist or whether this was just an illustration of the fact that folklore and anthropology have a lot in common, much more than either care to admit.

There were quite a few scholars from the Nordic and Scandinavian countries who had all done amazing work. Listening to the incredibly meticulous and minutely researched documentation done by several such folklorists in their talks I wondered whether the age old



Sudheer Gupta from New Delhi introducing his film.
Photo by Merili Metsvahi.

stereotypical images of the cold and serene landscapes of their country and their reserved and quiet natures made them naturally suited for folklore studies. On the other hand, there was not much talk about Africa (or for that matter about Australia and Latin America). One can't have it all, I suppose.

On the whole, there were some great sessions with some excellent papers. Since questions of identity, ethnicity and cultural constructs interest me I tried to attend as many talks on those themes as I could. There were five parallel sessions at any given point of time. Parallel sessions are unavoidable I guess in meetings of this scale. What could have been avoided, however, is having parallel sessions with the same theme. I kept wondering why the division of themes was not done vertically across time instead of horizontally across locations. The other factor that severely restricted choice was the fact that the 5 venues were not all located in one building. That often implied that participants could not really choose talks, rather they had to choose sessions, and since the five sessions often had to do with at most two or three thematic categories. Typically, a participant wished he could be present at several places at the same time for certain sessions and could not find even a single talk of interest in some others.

In addition, as is inevitable at such large gatherings, there were quite a few last minute cancellations. This kept people wondering until the last minute and did cause some confusion as the programme was not updated at all once the conference got under way. On some occasions, participants having arrived at a venue would find out that an entire session had been reduced to a single paper or had lapsed completely, which was not very pleasant. Getting to read the papers in the conference proceedings would have been some consolation. But I was surprised to hear that the practice of publishing the proceedings has been discontinued. I don't know what the

reasons are, but it would be great if the practice could be revived.

Given the many cancellations, it would have been much nicer to have planned a few more plenary sessions. The solitary plenary session, apart from the opening event, was on the last day, for which many new people arrived on the scene. While Professor A.C. Bhagabati did a great job of chairing that session and Professor J. Handoo was at his usual combative best, I couldn't help wondering why Professor Birendranath Datta, who is undoubtedly a very senior and much respected folklorist from the region, and certainly one of the best known folklorists in the country, was not there to share his thoughts with the gathering.

But there were a few other things as well that I couldn't figure out, for example, the reason for the complete lack of information on the internet about the actual programme during the run-up to the event – I was perhaps doing something stupidly wrong all the time because despite looking repeatedly at what looked like the official conference website I did not manage to find out what the conference registration fees for Indian participants was, also if there was a late fee; nor did I manage to locate the third announcement which was supposed to contain the detailed programme. Other participants told me that they had also had trouble with the website and had found out when they were scheduled to speak by mailing Desmond. Since I was only going to listen, I didn't bother him but kept wishing that the website would tell me more.

While listening to the talks by the foreign scholars gave me the chance to learn about new areas and topics, the talks by folklorists from the region often gave me a sense of *deja-vu*, often also enabling me to see familiar things in a new light. And sometimes when I was just sitting around, unable to decide which talk to go to, and chatting with whoever happened to be nearby, I had the feeling that while Western scholars today



Some of the conference organisers and participants. L-R: Desmond L. Kharmawphlang, Betty Laloo, Elishon Makri, G. Badaiasuklang Lyngdoh Nonglait, Ulrich Marzolph and Chitrani Sonowal.

Photo by Merili Metsvahi.

might be more than ready to give up their superior attitudes and to treat Indian scholars as friends and equals, the colonial hangover was taking longer to leave the local scholars, many of whom seemed not quite ready to stop being deferential and servile to their European counterparts, simply on the basis of skin colour. It is perhaps this very phenomenon that prevents us from striking out on our own and formulating our own paradigms, despite living in a region that has so much to offer in terms of folklore.

In that sense I did hope that this meeting in Shillong, which brought these two worlds to an undifferentiated common platform, would perhaps help local scholars to shed their diffidence and begin to speak their minds a little more boldly. Many papers presented at the meet were excellent illustrations of the very high demands of present day academic scholarship. There were many great lessons to be learnt. In that sense it was a pity that most of the volunteers at the conference, many of whom were young students of folklore, could not attend the talks (or they could not pay attention to what was being said, even though they were present at the venue) being busy with mundane organisational chores.

The cultural programmes which interspersed the academic sessions were as motivating and of the same

elevated standards as the sessions themselves. The spectacular cultural programme on the evening of the first day was very colourful and very entertaining. I was quite amazed at the professionalism and the technical perfection of the artists. Furthermore, the cultural events every evening conveyed a very good sense not just of the colourful ethnic diversity of this region but also of how Western music has come to play a big part in the lives of the Khasis and the other hill people of the region.

Also very impressive was Sudheer Gupta's documentary film, which was screened just after the sessions ended on the second day. Over and above the singularly interesting theme of the seamless manner in which multiple religions seem to flow into one another in certain parts of India as illustrated by the community of Muslim Jogi singers portrayed in that film (who still celebrate the Hindu festival of Shiva Ratri), the incredible cinematographic techniques Gupta employs in the film were very impressive.

I cannot end before I use this chance to express my thoughts about something which has begun to bother me very much in recent times – for while there was so much being said about various folk traditions, narratives and practices in different parts of the world, most conspicuous by their ab-

sence were the 'folk' themselves. The longer I have been working in the field, the more convinced I have become that we must include our folk singers and storytellers in some real sense in our learned discussions and deliberations about them. I can speak only for myself, and I am not really sure how to go about doing this, but as a native researcher, working with my own people, I am convinced that for me it is collaborative much more than participatory ethnography that must be practised. But it didn't seem to bother too many others at the meet. It would have made me so happy to have actually seen a few Khasi storytellers or traditional priests sitting in at least at the talks when their 'lore' was being analysed and being given a chance to speak for themselves.

Perhaps that is mere wishful thinking at this point of time. But the ambience of the beautiful and sprawling NEHU campus was conducive to such day dreaming. To end, by attending the ISFNR meet at Shillong I learnt a lot, met some wonderful people, heard some superb talks, made some new friends, and have had the pleasure once more of wandering around under the enchanting pine trees in the beautiful NEHU campus dreaming about what is and what could be... I couldn't have wished for much more.

An Experience from India

by Sarmistha De Basu, The Asiatic Society, Kolkata, India



Sarmistha De Basu delivered a paper on urban folklore in Kolkata and West Bengal.

Photo by Merili Metsvahi.

Surrounded by the scenic beauty of one of India's most beautiful cities Shillong, known as the Scotland of the East, the North Eastern-Hill University arranged the Interim Congress of the ISFNR 2011. It was my pleasure and pride to participate in this conference as a member of this prestigious organisation.

The conference was well organised with one symposium, one dedicated session and six sub-topics. I attended some selected lectures of my own interest but tried to share ideas with various participants from multiple disciplines who had flown in from many parts of the world. It was a grand experience indeed. Another interesting thing was to roam around the vast area of the university and introduce oneself to the conveners and scholars who made the whole effort successful. The main theme of the conference was to explore identities of individuals and communities in folk narrative, which was successfully covered by the four sub-topics. The main sub-topic 'Ethnicity and Cultural Identity' covered community identity whereas 'Identity in the History of Folkloristics'

covered the national identity of different casts and societies. 'Revisiting Colonial Constructs of Folklore' was the sphere in which folkloric identities of colonial communities came to our attention and 'Identity and Belonging in a Transnational Setting' was also very interesting. Of the other two sub-topics, 'Places and Borders' and 'The Making and Mapping of Urban Folklore', my paper was on the later. The identity crisis is a great problem and the subject matter is also very complicated. Perhaps, we can sort out a large portion of these issues from a folkloristic angle.

There were many interesting papers in the 'Belief narratives and social realities symposium' sessions. The scholars who participated from North-East India took the chance to express their local beliefs and the realities of their condition in these sessions. Some of their papers were quite thought provoking. Besides, there were various interesting papers from Estonia, Serbia, Argentina and the USA.

In the 24th February afternoon session we met Sudheer Gupta, a scholar cinematographer who presented his lecture demonstration with his short film on Rajasthan's street singer family. This family has pursued this profession generation after generation not only due to extreme poverty or lack of education, but also because they feel proud enough to inherit and continue their age-old tradition. That session was excellent and we enjoyed the film very much.

Another presentation of the city puppet show from Manpreet Kaur, an eminent scholar from Delhi also shone a new light on contemporary experimentation in the process of formation of urban folklore. On 25th February an important session was arranged by the organiser dedicated to Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New

Delhi, on North-East India and South-East Asia: Inter Cultural Dialogue. In recent times, this particular theme has been emphasised by the Central Government of India among the modern research scheme on socio-cultural aspects. Therefore, a special effort was given to the three sessions of this theme. The first session was held on 22nd February and the second along with the third on 25th February. Papers on the 'Cult of Goddess Tara to the Mode of Worship in Umpha-Puja' (by Archana Barua), 'Durgabori Ramayan' (by Prabin C. Das and Monika Chutia) and 'Indigenous Naga (serpent) Cult: a Study of Assam (India) and Thailand' (by Sanghamitra Choudhury and Pratima Neogi) were also very appealing.

This conference was held in India and as I am an Indian participant, I was able to meet many known scholars here with whom there were no interactions otherwise. It was a kind of reunion for us taking this opportunity. Interaction with them enriched my experience many fold. In addition I interacted directly with ISFNR members, the President and Vice president for the first time at the conference and I consider it to be very encouraging. This kind of personal meeting within scholars from different countries definitely makes a conference successful. An exhibition of national and international journals and books was held which was very rich in the quality of the authors and publishers. I benefited by being informed about various international journals, such as *Folklore*, *Electronic Journal of Folklore*, published in Estonia, e-journals about socio-cultural studies, etc.

The co-operation of the programme committee members, food and finance assistants, book exhibition assistants and public relations assistants were very much appreciative. However, I do not think it will be out of place to put one suggestion. I request the authority to publish the entire programme with



L-R: Ülo Valk (Estonia), Soumen Sen, P. Subbachary and Ranjeet Singh Bajwa (all from India) at the ISFNR interim conference in Shillong.

Photo by Merili Metsvahi.

locations on the ISFNR website before the conference. It will be very helpful for participants to plan their attend-

ance accordingly at the conference. I do remember that the 15th Congress ISFNR authorities gave all programme

details on the website beforehand and it was quite helpful in arranging my own schedule.

In the free sessions and after the conference we did not forget to enjoy the beauty of Shillong. We visited Wards Lake, Umiam Lake, Cherrapunji, Mousingram, and enriched our experience by visiting various waterfalls. Our footprints were found at local marketplaces like Police bazaar wherein we met the local people, collected gifts and souvenirs for friends, colleagues, guides and relatives. We went to Kaziranga, a wildlife sanctuary in Assam after the conference was over. It was also an amazing experience and an extra opportunity to know the place where the conference was arranged.

Impressions of the Local Aspect of the ISFNR Interim Conference, Shillong, 2011. Telling Identities: Individuals and Communities in Folk Narratives

by Mark Bender, The Ohio State University, Columbus, USA

The Interim Conference of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research was held at the North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, Meghalaya,

from the 22nd to 25th of February, 2011. It allowed participants from around the world a chance to engage with scholars from various places in the north-east

and other parts of India. The multicultural region is home to hundreds of local cultures, many with cultural and linguistics links to peoples in South-East Asia and China. The sponsoring organ was the dynamic Department of Cultural and Creative Studies at the North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong. The Department started as a centre founded in 1984 by Prof. Soumen Sen. The centre produces world-class research and nurtures a cohort of well-trained graduate students in folklore and cultural studies under the guidance of educators that include the ISFNR conference organiser Desmond L. Kharmawphlang. Conference participants were exposed to many aspects of the multicultural matrix of North-East India during the welcome ceremony, which included a multicultural folk dance program, various food events, and a conference program filled with talks and papers on various aspects of folk narrative and culture in North-East India.



L-R: Mark Bender (USA) and Ergo-Hart Västriik (Estonia) at the ISFNR interim conference in Shillong. Mark Bender has published several books on oral traditions and performance in China, including Han and ethnic minority cultures.

Photo by Merili Metsvahi.



L-R: Sandis Laime (Latvia), Badaplin War (India), Margaret L. Pachau (India) and Jeana Jorgensen (USA) at the session on identity in the history of folkloristics.

Photo by Ülo Valk.

Topics on the local cultures of North-East India were included in numerous sessions and symposiums on ethnicity and identity, belief narratives and social realities, inter-cultural dialogue between North-East India and South-East Asia, identity and the history of folkloristics, urban folklore, identity and belonging in transnational settings, colonial constructs of folklore, and places and borders in relation to folk narratives and belief. One session included a critique of the paradigm of north-east India as a “folklorists’ paradise”, placing the study of regional folklore in a reflexive context.

The discussions in every session this author attended were spirited, inspiring, and girded by exemplary scholarship and unique viewpoints. Given its history, geographical locale, and cultural mix, North-East India is an ideal place to discuss many of the issues raised by both famous and upcoming folklorists from the North-East and other parts of India. Key addresses were given by a host of accomplished scholars, many of whom helped pioneer folklore studies in the region. These included a thought-provoking keynote address by Jawaharlal Handoo at the dedicated session of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi.

Given the consistently engaging topics and lively exploration of theory, it is difficult to single out individual presentations for attention. Moreover, the significant number of papers

presented by graduate students from NEHU and other regional institutes, reflect strong programs that are contributing to the leading edge of folk narrative theory and local culture. Many papers specifically concerned issues involving the peoples of North-East India, often presented by scholars from the ethnic groups being discussed.

Examples include a paper by Monalisa Borgohain, which discussed the emerging social meanings of one of the multi-ethnic *bihu* festivals in Assam. In a paper that resonated with several others on identity in North-East India, Somingam Mawon engaged the multi-faceted topic of British colonialism, the role of Christianity in assimilating Western culture, and the on-going process of identity construction in Tangkhul Naga communities. Sadananda Singh presented on the role of storytelling in the cultural revival of the Meiteis of Manipur.

Two papers, by Margaret L. Pachau and Vanlalveni Pachau, respectively, reassessed processes of identity construction and the roles of women in Mizo folk narrative. Margaret Lyngdoh gave a paper on the “vanishing hitchhiker” motif in the local Khasi community in Shillong, stimulating a good discussion on interpreting ‘urban legends’ cross-culturally. Urban legends were also explored in a paper by Rimika Lanong on the motif of “harvesting human heads” in the Jaintia Hills District of Meghalaya in narratives

of indigent hired hands in search of sacrifices to the goddess Leshka.

Purabi Baruah and Prabodh Jhingan’s paper discussed the convergence of myth, ritual, and drama in a performance narrative known as *Deodhani*, from Assam. The relationship between folklore and contemporary theatre in Manipur was explored by Talhelmayum Omila Chanu. Zothani Kiangte and C. Sheela Ramani presented a more general paper exploring the complex historical relations between various groups in North-East India and South-East Asia and responses to external cultural influences.

A surprise addition to the program was an exciting paper by Etawanda Saiborne, a teacher of Mass Media studies at St. Anthony’s College, a constituent college of NEHU. She argued that while the new media is a key driver in the globalisation process, it can also be characterised as a convergence of aspects of life that works to create folklore in spaces outside formal entertainment and news streams.

These and many other papers reflect the lively folklore and cultural studies scene in North-East India and the great potential to continue the already significant contributions to folk narrative studies coming from the region. To complement the papers, an outstanding aspect of the sessions was the high level of audience involvement in discussions.

Beliefs and Narratives in Shillong, India

by María Ines Palléiro,

National Council for Scientific Research, Buenos Aires, Argentina

The Interim Conference of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research, "Telling Identities: Individuals and Communities in Folk Narratives", which took place in Shillong, the capital city of the state of Meghalaya, India, from February 22 to February 25, 2011, offered an excellent frame within which to further the discussions of the Belief Narrative Network (BNN). Around this main topic, other subjects have also been proposed, such as ethnicity and cultural identity; identity and transnational settings; identity in the history of folkloristics; places and borders; revisiting colonial constructs of folklore; the mapping of urban folklore in North-East India and South-East Asia: intercultural dialogue, and "Critiquing the Paradigm of Folklorists' Paradise: A North-East Indian Perspective". Prof. Desmond Kharmawphlang, in charge of the organisation committee of this conference, inaugurated the event in a touching ceremony. This ceremony included a wonderful performance connected with vernacular traditions. Both this performance and the inauguration discourse held by the governor of the state of Meghalaya highlighted

the dynamics and richness of North-Eastern Indian Khasi culture.

This Conference, organised by the Department of Cultural and Creative Studies of the North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU), incorporated a symposium on "Belief Narratives and Social Reality", focusing in the discussion on the narrative organisation of beliefs in very different parts of the world. Folktales, legends and other narrative genres were considered in this symposium as expressions of social identity, which explore the boundaries of historic experience. Topics such as flying churches, vanishing hitchhikers, haunting ladies wandering around urban graveyards and other 'incredible' subjects were analysed as different ways of telling cultural traditions.

The believability of these narratives, dealing as it did with the traditional backgrounds of different cultures, was one of the main aspects of discussion in this symposium. The relevance of such narratives in local contexts was wisely stated by Professor Handoo in the press conference on the first day of the meeting. Regarding North-Eastern Indian culture, Handoo stressed that "the North-East is an ancient society and an oral society", in which the old tradition of passing wisdom and knowledge orally from one generation to the next is still practised. Such oral culture mentioned by Handoo has a counterpart in the detrimental effects of technology, which, according to Margaret Lyngdoh, offer a favourable context to the genesis of urban legends.

In her presentation, Lyngdoh stated that in fact the uncontrollable traffic situation in Shillong city, due to industrialisation, has engendered an urban legend about a female vanishing hitchhiker. This female ghost can be seen in a taxi, which can be considered as a metaphoric expression



María Ines Palléiro has authored several books on Argentinean folk narrative, including *Fue una historia real* ('It Has Been a Real Case', 2004).

Photo by Pihla Siim.

of contemporary cultural spaces. According to Lyngdoh, this urban legend contains a tension between what the Khasi community believe and what actually occurred in a tragic accident, which caused revenant visitations to taxi drivers. The urban legend of the vanishing hitchhiker creates in this way local meanings, as seen in different variants of the plot collected by American folklorists.

Other variants can easily be found in different parts of the world. I dealt with other versions of the same narrative pattern registered in oral and virtual channels. In oral versions collected in Argentina, this narrative pattern, centring on the lady ghost', deals with the supernatural appearance of a vanishing young woman whose untimely death took place on the same day as her wedding. I also focused attention on virtual versions circulating in the internet. In such versions, I examined the rhetorical resources used by the narrators, and those used by the receivers whose comments in virtual forums dealt with the believability of



Margaret Lyngdoh giving her paper on urban legends in Shillong.

Photo by Ülo Valk.

the narratives, with the aim of showing how new channels of discourse contribute to spread them in different contexts. The protagonist of all these versions is a lady ghost who takes the names of historic young ladies who did exist in local environments. One of her names is Clementine, whose tragic death took place in the residence of Maria Luisa Auvert Arnaud, the owner of an urban palace in Buenos Aires at the beginning of the 20th century. The lady ghost also appears in the Estonian context, connected with the historic tragedy of the young lady Frederike von Grottes, also known as the Lilac Lady. Frederike was an aristocratic young woman of German origin who died tragically as the result of unrequited love in an ancient building, which is today Tartu Literary Museum, in the same period in which Rufina's death took place in Buenos Aires. The Estonian ghost is said to be seen in a lilac dress in the haunted building. Another lady ghost is the Italian Beatrice di Canossa, who also died tragically on the day of her wedding during the Middle Ages. I analysed some virtual

versions of her haunting appearance in the Italian castle of Livorno, also circulating in internet forums. Such forums discuss the believability of this virtual legend, and some participants include metapragmatic reflections on the argumentative resources of constructing social beliefs. The constructive process of all these narratives is based on a poetic reconstruction of history. Such poetic reconstructions can also be recognized in oral and virtual versions of stories about other Argentinean lady ghosts, such as the young Rufina Cambaceres, who died the day after her nineteenth birthday, the victim of a catalepsy attack; and Felicitas Guerrero, who was murdered the day before her engagement and whose ghost is said to be seen once a year in the tower of an ancient Argentinean church.

Haunted churches and lady ghosts are in fact metaphoric expressions for the supernatural in different living cultures. That is how the presentation of the Serbian scholar Zoja Karanović examined belief tales about

miraculous churches moving from one place to another in Serbia and other regions once inhabited by the Serbs, like Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Slovenia-Croatia and Macedonia. The author stated that these tales are based not only on social beliefs but also on the real existence of an orthodox church in certain places. According to such beliefs, these churches moved by themselves in a sort of self-dislocation. The rhetoric of believing can be recognised in these Serbian narratives, in which individual sacred places become symbols of collective religious belief.

In all these belief tales, as well as in others analysed in the symposium, names, colours and places are changing details of narrative frameworks stored in a latent state in each narrator's memory. Such general frameworks serve to express diverse world models with a spatial and time orientation, as well as expressing social contextualisation of similar sequences of events located in the most distant places. Every narrator,



A group of the conference participants visiting the sacred grove in Mawphlang, Meghalaya.

Photo by Damang Syngkon.

whether in Shillong or in the United States of America, in Italy, in Serbia, Estonia or Argentina, recreates similar narrative patterns in different contexts and channels of discourse, using argumentative resources oriented to convince the audience of the believability of their tales.

The fictional recreation of history and the argumentative orientation can be considered discursive strategies dealing with the rhetoric of believing. Aristotle characterises rhetoric as

ment. Legends and other belief tales are also narrative expressions of differential identities, the study of which contributes to understanding social realities of different parts of the world, from Eastern India to Western Europe and North and South America.

The Shillong conference gave the participants a good opportunity to study such belief tales, and also to discuss different aspects of folk narrative. The Estonian scholars made excellent contributions to this discus-

an excellent scholar and a charming narrator. "The Beatles Night" also showed how English pop music can be recreated in the fascinating atmosphere of Shillong. The atmosphere of Khasi culture of the North-East of India, shown in another evening gathering dedicated to artistic performances, was a challenging context in which to discuss belief narratives.

The success of this Symposium encouraged Zoja Karanović to propose another meeting of the Belief Narrative



The sacred grove in Mawphlang, Meghalaya.
Photo by Pihla Siim.

the art of persuasion, and he points out that the aim of rhetoric is not to reason but to convince, appealing to belief. The narratives examined in the Symposium have shown the relevance of belief, whose true value depends not on reasoning, but in a collective agreement. Belief can be considered as modal expressions of the certainty whose truth depends on a subjective or intersubjective agree-

sion, both in a theoretical and in a pragmatic dimension. In fact, not only the academic sessions but also other activities such as a visit to a haunted forest, whose participants were Ülo Valk, Merili Metsvahi, Jeana Jorgensen and other dear friends, were a very important parts of the meeting. This visit also gave us the occasion to listen to Khasi belief tales, told by Margaret Lyngdoh, who is both

Network (BNN) of the ISFNR, organised by the Department for Serbian Literature of the Faculty of Philosophy at Novi Sad, Serbia, from August 28 to 30, 2012. Members of the BNN warmly accepted this proposal, which will give an important opportunity to develop the academic research on belief narratives.

CALL FOR PAPERS

The 16th Congress of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research (ISFNR)

Folk Narrative in the Modern World: Unity and Diversity

Organizers:

Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore & Vilnius University

The 16th Congress of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research (ISFNR) will take place in Vilnius, Lithuania, in June 25–30, 2013.

The **International Society for Folk Narrative Research** – ISFNR (www.isfnr.org) is an international academic society whose objective is to develop scholarly work in the field of folk narrative research. The research interests of ISFNR members around the world cover a number of disciplines in humanities and social sciences, including folklore, anthropology, cultural studies, comparative literature, language, history, museology, education and ethnography from the point of view of narratives.

The **Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore** (www.liti.lt) is a major national research center, carrying out fundamental investigations of Lithuanian literature, folklore and cultural heritage. The Institute also hosts the Lithuanian Folklore Archives – the largest and oldest repository of folklore in Lithuania, documenting centuries-old peasant culture as well as contemporary folklore. Altogether the Archives now store over 10,000 collections comprising over 1,9 million folklore items. Among the chief objectives of the Institute, preservation, editing and publication of the monumental sources of the Lithuanian cultural heritage should be named. The Institute publishes annually about 30 academic publications, and organizes about 10–15 research conferences, seminars and other academic events.

Vilnius University (www.vu.lt) is the oldest university in the Baltic States

and one of the oldest universities in North Eastern Europe. It is also the largest university in Lithuania. The University was founded in 1579 and ever since, as an integral part of European science and culture, has embodied the concept of a classical university and the unity of studies and research. Vilnius University is an active participant in international scientific and academic activities and boasts many prominent scientists, professors and graduates. The 16th Congress of ISFNR will convene in the Old Campus - the complex of University buildings extending over a whole block of the Old Town. Its original architecture attracts the visitor's attention. The construction of the University buildings was carried out over the centuries under the changing influences of the Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque, and Classical styles. Bounded by four streets, the campus is composed of 12 buildings, arranged around 13 courtyards of different shape and size. At present, the Rector's Office, the Library, the Faculties of Philology, Philosophy, and History, as well as some interdisciplinary centers, are situated in the old town.

General Topic: *Folk Narrative in the Modern World: Unity and Diversity*

Subtopics:

- I. What is Folk Narrative? Theoretical Definitions vs. Practical Approaches
- II. Narrative Genres: Heritage and Transformation
- III. Homo Narrans: Remembering, Telling, Forgetting

- IV. Folk Narrative and Social Communication
- V. Crossing the Boundaries: the Local and the Global in Narrative
- VI. Folk Narratives and Modern Technologies: Preservation, Transmission, Creation

Panels: Participants wishing to suggest a panel are most welcome. Please submit your suggestions (indicating chair/convenor of the panel, topic, titles of papers and participants), complying with the thematic guidelines of the subtopics and the general topic of the congress. The deadline for submitting suggestions for pre-organized panels is October 1, 2012.

Some preliminary suggestions for panels include:

CHILD-LORE AND YOUTH-LORE
by *Laima Anglickienė* (Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas, Lithuania)

FOLKLORE AND / IN TRANSLATION
by *Cristina Bacchilega* (University of Hawai'i at Manoa, Honolulu, USA)

STORYTELLING: THE BUILDING AND TRANSFORMATION OF IDENTITY
by *Jurga Jonutytė* (Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas, Lithuania)

FOLK NARRATIVE IN THE MODERN WORLD: COMPUTERS AND THE INTERNET
by *Theo Meder* (Meertens Instituut, the Netherlands)

WORLD IS MADE OF STORIES
by *Algis Mickūnas* (Ohio University, USA)

Symposiums. Two symposiums are scheduled to be held within the framework of the 16th congress of the ISFNR in Vilnius:

1) BNN: Belief Narrative Network will hold its symposium entitled

Boundaries of Belief Narratives

Evolving through “legends” and “belief legends”, the latest manifestation of “belief narratives” does not just signal an adjustment of the label granted to a certain kind of story, it also indicates the inclusion of stories such as “myths” and “saints legends” that have mainly been considered separate from “legends”. Whereas the concept of “belief legends” (which some would consider as pleonastic) already constitutes one of the most problematic kind of story, these problems multiply when faced with “belief narratives”. This also makes them extremely fascinating and a fertile ground for new research and discussions.

As part of the 16th ISFNR Congress, the Belief Narrative Committee is organizing a series of sessions exploring the boundaries of belief narratives; lively exchanges on the following, sometimes overlapping topics are anticipated:

**Beliefs, Truths, and Disbeliefs
Defining Belief Narratives
Old Figures in New Shapes
Myths
The Issue of Eurocentricity
Prospects and Projects**

The above themes are merely meant as guidelines. They are meant to be expanded and criticized. For abstracts sketching the scope of the suggested themes, please check the BNN website: <http://www.isfnr.org/files/beliefnarrativenetwork.html>. Please send your proposals for papers and/or other contributions to: Willem de Blécourt, wjc.deb@googlemail.com. Do not hesitate to get in touch when in doubt about the suitability of your subject. The deadline for final proposals is October 1, 2012.

2) The ISFNR Committee on Charms, Charmers and Charming will also hold its symposium entitled

Charms on Paper, Charms in Practice

Once again, following meetings in London (2003, 2005), Pécs (2007), Athens (2009), Bucharest (2010) and Moscow (2011), the ISFNR Committee on Charms, Charmers and Charming will hold a symposium during the 16th ISFNR Congress in Vilnius (2013). More details about the Committee’s work is available via the Committee’s website <http://www.isfnr.org/files/committeecharms.html>

While paper proposals on all aspects of charms studies will be welcome, the symposium’s title, *Charms on paper, charms in practice* is intended to highlight two topics that are particularly welcome, namely the status of charms as text (in manuscripts, in books, in archives) and the practice of charming. Proposals touching on both such spheres are welcome, as are those which attempt to link ‘words on paper’ and ‘living practice’. As long as there is a focus on the verbal aspects of magic, there are no restrictions as to the period or the language of the material.

Please email your proposals of 150 to 300 words to Jonathan Roper, roper@ut.ee

The deadline for proposals is October 1, 2012.

The congress will also host a **book exhibition** of recent folklore publications. Participants wishing to contribute their publications for the exhibition may send them to:

Ms. Rūta Pleskačiauskienė (for the ISFNR book exhibition)
Library of the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore
Antakalnio 6, LT-10308 Vilnius, Lithuania.

REGISTRATION

Please submit your registration by e-mail: isfnr@liti.lt
by fax: + 370 52616254

by mail: ISFNR 16th Congress
Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore
Antakalnio 6, LT-10308 Vilnius, LITHUANIA
on-line: available later

Registration Fee

Regular registration **until February 1st, 2013**: 250 EUR
Reduced fee for accompanying persons, unemployed colleagues and PhD students: 150 EUR

Late registration **after February 1st, 2013** or on-site: 300 EUR
Reduced fee for the accompanying persons, unemployed colleagues and PhD students: 200 EUR

Note

Participants of the Vilnius Congress are reminded that this is an event organized primarily by and for members of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research. To ensure their full ISFNR membership status, including the right to vote during the general assembly, participants will be asked to check with the treasurer or the treasurer’s representative, and ISFNR members who have not yet paid their dues will be asked to do so prior to registration. The current membership rates are 25 Euros or 30 US Dollars for the period between the major congresses, to be paid in advance. The current membership period is 2009–2013, so the next period will be 2013–2017. Non-members wishing to participate in the Vilnius congress are welcome. Meanwhile, non-members will be expected to pay an additional registration fee of 50 Euros or 60 US Dollars prior to registration. Reduced rates at 25 Euros or 30 Dollars for non-members will only be applicable for students, unemployed, and accompanying persons. Please note that all payments to the ISFNR treasurer must be made in cash.

Submission of Abstracts [Deadline: October 1st, 2012]

Sessions and panels will be structured according to topics (with a maximum of four participants).

Suggestions for panels are going to be treated as separate units, organized and submitted by the panel organizer / chair.

Participants are kindly asked to indicate the sub-topic for their papers while submitting the abstracts.

Format: RTF, Rich Text Format

Typed: Times New Roman, 12 point.

Length: up to 300 words.

Space: single [double space between title/subtopic/author/address and the body of the abstract]

You will be notified about approval of your submitted abstract by January 31, 2013.

N.B. Presentations should not exceed

20 minutes followed by 10 minutes of discussion.

Please submit your abstract

by e-mail: isfnr@liti.lt

by fax: + 370 52616254

by mail: ISFNR 16th Congress

Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore

Antakalnio 6, LT-10308 Vilnius, LITHUANIA

on-line: available soon.

Local Organizing Committee:

Mindaugas Kvietkauskas (Chair)

Antanas Smetona

Lina Būgienė (Secretary)

Daiva Vaitkevičienė

Jūratė Šlekonytė

Radvilė Racėnaitė
Gintautė Žemaitytė
Bronė Stundžienė
Uršulė Gedaitė
Lina Sokolovaitė

Further Information

Should you have questions, please e-mail: isfnr@liti.lt

Please find regularly updated information regarding the congress, next circulars, registration procedures, etc., on the following websites:

www.liti.lt

www.isfnr.org

CALL FOR PAPERS

ISFNR Belief Narrative Network Symposium

Boundaries of Belief Narratives

at the 16th Congress of the ISFNR

in Vilnius, Lithuania, in June 25–30, 2013

Evolving through “legends” and “belief legends”, the latest manifestation of “belief narratives” does not just signal an adjustment of the label granted to a certain kind of story, it also indicates the inclusion of stories such as “myths” and “saints legends” that have mainly been considered separate from “legends”. Whereas the concept of “belief legends” (which some would consider as pleonastic) already constitutes one of the most problematic kind of story, these problems multiply when faced with “belief narratives”. This also makes them extremely fascinating and a fertile ground for new research and discussions.

As part of the 16th ISFNR Congress, to be held in Vilnius, 25–30 June 2013, the Belief Narrative Committee is organizing a series of sessions exploring the boundaries of belief narratives; lively exchanges on the following, sometimes overlapping topics are anticipated:

Beliefs, Truths, and Disbeliefs

What for some is a “belief”, is “truth” for others or “falsehood” for yet others. At the best beliefs are characterized by discussion, at worst by religious wars. This field of tension will be examined by focusing not just on the relationship between belief narratives and religion, it should also be illuminating to approach religion or “world view” as a particular set of belief narratives. This way the relationship becomes one between inside and outside narratives, or between particular and overarching narratives. This can be compounded by temporary shifts in opinion; one of the questions to ask then is: can “belief” be suspended as easily as “disbelief”? Another possible question is about gender hierarchies within religious systems and how these are reflected and sustained in inside and outside stories.

Defining Belief Narratives

As a label attached to a certain group of stories, “belief narratives” is clearly an academic construct. Yet each so-called “belief narrative” is also a genuine expression used by real-life people. What should be of concern is whether the academic label, and as such the categorization with other “belief narratives”, facilitates communication and understanding or presses a narrative into a pre-conceived pigeonhole and thereby undermines its purpose and meaning. Matters of definition include indigenous classification, the question of “belief systems”, but also situating the researcher and his or hers “beliefs” vis-à-vis those of the research subjects.

Old Figures in New Shapes

Relatively new media such as film, comics, television, internet and RPGs have contributed to a revival of

legendary figures, ranging from angels to zombies. Folklore may offer fresh insights into these already well-studied phenomena. Are they to be considered as “literary”, that is to say as primarily functioning within a fictional world? Or have they, through ostensive action, become part of the actions and rituals of at least some people? How have the new media reshaped these figures in comparison to their “folkloric” predecessors and are the new forms now predominant? Does the screen witch help or hinder awareness of the historical witch? Can superheroes still function as (mostly male) role models? How to understand the recent proliferation of female werewolves? Or has the appearance of these figures in a different universe contributed to their decline in daily-life?

Myths

Within the western context, myths (that is, narratives involving deities of all kinds), especially of the Greek, Roman, Celtic and Nordic variety, have long ceased to be part of a system of beliefs and have become integrated in a literary universe. As part of this development a second meaning of “myth” as something unproven, a fictitious narrative that at least some consider realistic, came into being. While this duality may be typical in a western setting, there are also situations in which myths are more fruitfully juxtaposed with rituals. Can monotheistic religious narratives be considered as “myths”? How do they relate to other “belief narratives”? This last question opens up a re-examination of folklore’s historiography, ranging from the theory about survivals to the mythological interpretation of fairy tales.

The Issue of Eurocentricity

Like folklore itself, the study of legends arose in the context of western nationalism and is in several ways still defined by it. This has resulted in fierce criticism of which the exclamation by the French ethnographer Jeanne Favret that “folklorists have

ignorance as their profession” is perhaps the most famous. But how does this whole complex of acts and counteracts translate to a non-western setting? While this question itself already displays a western perspective, it should also be considered whether folklore’s vices have been uncritically copied elsewhere. Can the concept of “belief narratives”, in spite of its history, be applied to the analysis of what is taken as a universal practice, in case, the narrating of “beliefs”? Can the study of narrative practice in one place throw light on a presumably different narrative practice in another?

Prospects and Projects

This session is envisioned as a working session in which both future research and collaborations can be discussed. Compared to the other sessions it is envisioned as primarily practical. Participants are encouraged to present their plans and ideas, have them scrutinized at an early stage, and in the process find discussion partners and perhaps co-workers. Projects which cross national boundaries are especially encouraged, for example the inventarisation of folklore archives throughout the world and finding sensible ways to deal with the collected texts. Or the writing of a volume of essays on the problems of belief narratives, which ideally should function as a future handbook of the subject.

The above themes are merely meant as guidelines. They are meant to be expanded and criticized. Please send your proposals for papers and/or other contributions to: Willem de Blécourt, wjc.deb@googlemail.com. Do not hesitate to get in touch when in doubt about the suitability of your subject. Deadline for final proposals: 1 October 2012.

Life-Tradition: Contribution to the Concept of Life-World¹

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People's daily attitudes, behaviour, even gestures and experienced emotions belong to tradition. The forms of acting and reacting, feeling and bearing in regard to environment are culturally defined and inherited from one generation to another. In spite of their fluid and ephemeral nature (alternately appearing and disappearing), attitudes and gestures make up culture, forming its body in so far as it exists.

Methods of fieldwork research, providing instruments for tradition recording, also imply certain concepts of tradition. In Lithuanian ethnological research, asking informants about certain allegedly traditional things used for a long time to be (and partly still is) a typical procedure. If the person thus questioned knows the answer, he/she is regarded as belonging to the tradition, and if not, is left outside it. Such a concept suggests tradition to be hard and inflexible, with a clear outline, and thus easier to define.

Let us consider the situation of asking the informants a simple question, for example: what phase of the moon is most favourable for sowing and planting? The expected answer, in more or less elaborated form, would be: root vegetables should be planted (sown) during the full moon, while leaf vegetables or herbs during the new moon. Nevertheless, it does not require particularly sharp insight to grasp that some people give such an answer because of having heard of it from somebody else, while others describe their own practices. The latter may be engaged in gardening and the phases of the moon are really experienced by them to be in correlation with plants. However, when filling in questionnaires, the received answers are similar in both cases. What makes the situation even more complicated is the existence of a third

party, people who, while being fond of gardening and very good at it, claim to disregard the moon completely, noting that plants should be planted on earth, not on the moon. These informants do not answer the question at all, although their inner motivation and qualifications make their praxis, understanding, and their self-perception very important in sounding out a tradition. Let us leave this third party aside for a while and return to those giving some kind of answer. Who of them supposedly finds it easier to answer? Undoubtedly those who do not actually practice the tradition, but have heard of it, i.e. they possess the tradition in the shape of knowledge. They provide the recorder with a sure, clear and handy answer. They have heard of such things being done, and that's it. The practitioners, as a rule, give more complicated answers. Thus tradition immersed in praxis is more complex, ambiguous and difficult to reveal.

The ambiguity of tradition is brilliantly illustrated in a work by Ernest Gellner dealing with wearing the veil in Muslim countries. According to E. Gellner, if we consider any veiled woman as adhering to the ancient tradition, we are greatly mistaken. For many centuries, two forms of Islam – the high Islam of the scholars and the low Islam of the people – have survived in harmony. The women adhering to the latter branch did not wear veils while either working in the fields or attending the mosque. Only in modern times, as result of the Islam reformation movement, which amounted to a national movement in Muslim countries, did wearing the veil come to be regarded as a universal feature and an inherent part of tradition. Thus the tradition of wearing the veil was made much more radical. The example given by E. Gellner is a typical case of singling out and exalting some individual fea-



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Photo: private collection.

tures of tradition, and subsequently proclaiming them the most inherent and absolute marks of this tradition, although the living tradition is capable of sustaining rather different variants (Gellner 1992: 9–16)².

Two trends in comprehending tradition may be discerned: the first perceives tradition as a lived praxis, while the second perceives it as a possessed knowledge. In the first case, tradition is flexible because it exists in constant search for new possibilities of manifestation, and fluid because it has to keep up with the pace of human life. It is characterised by aspects of accommodation, metamorphosis, and improvisation. In the second case, which has already been mentioned in relation to fieldwork, tradition is regarded as a static phenomenon that can be clearly defined.

These two trends of comprehending tradition are based on different modes of knowing, including the practiced or latent, and thematised or declared,

modes. The knowing may be accessed from outside, gained from other people as information without becoming integrated into practical actions; alternatively, it may be manifested in praxis and remain unthematized; or it may simultaneously be both practiced and thematized. In discussing tradition as a possessed knowledge, the word “possessed” should be stressed, since praxis is also characterised by certain knowledge, although this is incorporated into the body and its actions.

Thus, tradition may be possessed as *objectus*, i.e. as ordered collection of norms and rules. Or, it may be practiced. One may be devoid of knowing and of proper training, but, having once seen one’s mother act, one is ‘bound to know’ the right way of acting in a similar situation many years afterwards. A grandparent’s gesture or tale may recur when the grandchild becomes a grandparent. This implies the capacity of tradition to be mimetically transferred from one body to another, rather than being inherited as some objective possession. Tradition resurfaces and establishes itself anew. A key notion of phenomenology, current even in the works of those authors who have never studied Edmund Husserl, is the life-world (*Lebenswelt*). By this concept phenomenology aims to reveal humans and the surrounding world as being so interconnected that we can never know of one part without the other. “The total ensemble of human actions – including thoughts, moods, efforts, emotions, and so forth – define the context in which man situates himself. But, in turn, the world-context defines and sets limits to human action.” (Mickunas, Stewart 1974: 65). In this study I attempt to formulate the more local concept of life-tradition against the background of life-world notion.. This methodically foregrounds research into tradition as constituted and embodied by an individual. Perception of tradition through an individual implies the possibility of tracking it as active in the corporeality and sensitivity of human life.

Nevertheless this study, although dealing with the above-mentioned issues relating to tradition, is anything but a study in theory. It is focused on an individual female informant, Ona Lukšienė, who was encountered by my colleague Daiva Vaitkevičienė and I in 2010 during a fieldwork session in Švenčionys district, an underdeveloped region of eastern Lithuania. Although having spent quite some time with her, we could not boast of having recorded a wealth of folklore. Nevertheless, communication with this woman gave us a sense of having met a person living a traditional lifestyle. The situation provoked thought.

This study aims to contemplate, in as detailed a fashion as possible, a particular person, embracing the total amount of recorded material combined with the direct experience of first-hand encounters. Nevertheless, the purpose is not to produce an individual description. In this study it becomes increasingly obvious that examining an individual also reveals the structure of a community and a tradition. This paradox has already been noted and comprehensively discussed by phenomenologists. The communality acts through particularity, and the objective through the subjective. The more thoroughly the individual experience is examined, the more precisely the common human or cultural traits are revealed. Communality is never manifested in anything other than particularity; and being discussed in terms of particularity enables abstractedness to be avoided. Partly due to such an idea of individuality the proper name of the informant is preserved in this study, allowing her to remain a person rather than becoming an anonymous social unit.

The indeterminacy of tradition

Lukšienė was an attentive and considerate informant. She tried to stick to the questions asked when telling us something, and kept inquiring about us. Her memory seemed quite good, and her manner of speaking was vivid.

However, when we repeated our questions in a more matter-of-fact way, she was unable to give clear answers. And if we persisted, dragging from her one word after another and seemingly succeeding finally to learn something, she would immediately contradict the painfully procured answer with her concluding remark. For instance, when talking about beekeeping, she mentioned *medokinė*, a special drink made from honey. When we tried to find out its recipe she explained that the drink used to be made from honey and vodka, but was vague regarding the exact proportions. We suggested several plausible answers, encouraging her to choose the most suitable. Finally, she seemed to consent that the drink was made from half a litre of honey and half a litre of schnapps. Nevertheless, our joy at getting an exact answer was short-lived: when we tried to repeat the question in order to become better assured, the answer was again “you put as much as you wish” and “you drink whenever you wish”. “Surely such a drink cannot be consumed daily?” We still persisted in persuading her that a certain order must have existed. “If you wish, you can drink it daily.” (LTRF cd 447-1).

Her world is anything but objectively measurable. The only ‘measure’ lies in her own actions: “as much as I put in”, “until I finished”, “when I went”, etc. She does not even consider another state being remotely possible, and seemingly does not comprehend the meaning of normative measurements. By this, I do not imply that she does not understand reasons behind measuring the land and separating one owner’s strip from another’s. But such activity is not part and parcel of her life-world. In her world, the life is performed according to such principles as: you have as much as you take; you find as much as you put in; you put as much as you’ve got; etc.³ She constantly considers the situation and acts accordingly.

Time is also not identical or neutral to Lukšienė. When describing herself



Ona Lukšienė during our first meeting in June, 2010.

Photo by Daiva Vaitkevičienė.

suffering badly from the effect of the “evil eyes”, the woman did not only stress her firm belief in the illness having been caused by the evil eyes, but, what is equally important, added that “perhaps in a particular minute this happened”. “Are there different minutes?” we inquired. “Surely they are not similar,” she answered seemingly rather perplexed at our ignorance. According to her, the effect of the evil eyes might not have “stuck” to her, had it occurred in another moment (LTRF cd 447-9).

Tradition as manifested in case of Lukšienė always depends on the individual situations. And as such it cannot be completely defined. Each moment and situation supposes various possibilities of its perception and continuation. Husserl has thoroughly revealed the essential indeterminacy of the given world, naming phenomena that we perceive and interpret as “determinable indeterminacy” (2001: 42–48). The life-tradition develops in a dynamic way, requiring inclusion

of our experience into its development and resisting its simplification to unambiguity. Here, we confront the tradition that is not a normative fundamental phenomenon, and which sustains different variants (as in the case of wearing veils, described by E. Gellner). Such tradition exists along with people’s wishes, emotions and intentions.

D.V. How did bee-friends share the honey among themselves?⁴

O.L. [...] you give as much as you wish, give them some jar to carry home, according to your conscience [here and further on italics in quotations are mine – G. Š.] (LTRF cd 447-1).

D.V. Who used to be invited to that feast?

O.L. Well, if I liked you, you'd be invited (LTRF cd 447-1).

D.V. Does everyone have to drain the glass dry?

O.L. Well, as they wished. [...] Look, it's the same nowadays:

who is anxious to drink, empties one glass after another, but there are people who barely drain one glass during the whole feast (LTRF cd 447-2).

It is essential to grasp that, according to our informant, following one’s wishes does not imply breaking away from tradition. In its flexible living form, tradition is implicit in human will and desire. We are safe to assume that Lukšienė does not see tradition as imperative, because tradition for her is fluid and shifting. Tradition embraces her whole life. Whenever questioned about customs, she does not recognise them as such, but instead she tries to consider her life, in which they abound. She acts by way of induction: deriving rules from life rather than vice versa.

Had we lived together with her, it would have been easy to learn things that she knew and did. But writing it all down was hard. One has to actually see things, to know the meaning

of “half-thick” as distinct from “thick”, or what the phrase “to hold a little” implies, etc. Some existing practices may only be transmitted as practices, unmediated by thematised knowing. These practices are communicated along with the corresponding situations and grasped in the process. Lukšienė may not know the answer, but she knows the way of doing things. Therefore tradition is so difficult to determine.

Regarding the method of transmission, the following comment by Lukšienė seems particularly illuminating:

G.Š. Who did you learn cooking from? You said you could cook everything...

O.L. From my mother. As mom used to do, so I did... They used to drive to the market, in those days. And I was left behind to feed the little ones. The kids were many. And so I learned <...> (LTRF cd 450-5).

Whenever her mother left, she learned cooking from her even in her absence. The statement is illogical, but motivated by experience. She had seen her mother cook, and that enabled her to undertake the job. What is equally important in terms of tradition is the fact that she only undertook the task in her mother's absence. Her mother's place was then free, allowing Lukšienė to ‘master’ everything by emulating her mother and re-creating things. Lukšienė acutely perceives the way “things happen in due turns”: people repeat what someone else used to do; and what she has been told by her elders, in her present old age she tells us (LTRF cd 450-4). She does not feel in the least inhibited by this, because there was no plan to follow in the past, and neither will there be one in the future. There is only life, which flows “in due turns”, telling her what to do. If her mother is absent and her little siblings are hungry, she has to feed them. The absent mother does not even have to give orders: the way to act would be indicated by the hungry siblings. Tradition also rests on attention to the life-world.

The concept of the rigid traditional community seems to be deeply entrenched in our thinking. But in ethnographic descriptions and fieldwork recordings, just as in case of our informant, tradition is revealed as a multifaceted and ambiguous phenomenon, which is no less playful than strict.

Common tradition and individual life

While continuing the elucidation of the fluid tradition, I am going to discuss the way that the life of this woman, whom we have encountered, merges into the common flow of tradition, thus increasingly unfolding the concept of life-tradition.

We kept asking Lukšienė about numerous things generally considered traditional. I would like to dwell here on her own relationship to her answers. Several subtypes of her relations could be discerned. The first subtype would embrace the third-person narration. This group could be characterised by the minimal connection between the informant and the subject matter of her narrative within the framework of the story. This enables her to talk about things that she has once witnessed, but has not actually experienced from within. A suitable example can be found in her memory about the village women coming to visit her mother after giving birth to her younger brothers. The women would bring fried eggs, which they would eat together from the same vessel, and would perform libations upwards when drinking (LTRF cd 447-3). The narrative is undoubtedly important to us as collectors of tradition. However, paradoxically, this custom is no longer valid for the informant herself, in terms of her own life, because this was no longer performed “in her turn”. That was only valid in her mother's “turn”. The second group would embrace narratives that she has once heard from somebody else, who had assured her of their reliability. This group could be defined as the second-person narratives. A typical case would be her narration of something that once hap-

pened to her female acquaintance. Somebody once came to buy piglets from that acquaintance, grabbed one piglet along with straw and a piece of dung stuck to the piglet's leg, and pushed it into a sack. Since then, the sow has not farrowed, no matter what. The involvement of our informant in the story remains present in the narrative: “I did ask, how this could have happened, and why? She said that she had foreseen this coming, that housewife” (LTRF cd 447-8). In this second case, traditional folk beliefs are current in Lukšienė's life. Although she does not follow these practices herself, they belong to her life-world thanks to other people.

The third group would embrace cases in which tradition completely coincides with the informant's life. The tradition is given by the course of life rather than being personally performed: something just happens. Such narratives are told in the first person. The following is an example relating to the “evil eyes”:

O.L. I was bridesmaid at my brother's wedding. We all were sitting at the table. And suddenly something happened: I ceased seeing people around, but poles instead, as if people had turned into poles. You know, something was wrong with my head. And I was mighty sick afterwards, and puked also. That's it... I was mighty sick because of the evil eyes. <...>

G.Š. But maybe you had eaten something bad? Could this indeed be caused by the “eyes”?

O.L. By the eyes, yes, by the eyes...

G.Š. How do you know?

O.L. Oh yes, it's the eyes. I was shaking all over. This couldn't be caused by food, no way (LTRF cd 447-9).

Having experienced the effect of the “evil eyes”, Lukšienė does not doubt the existence of such phenomena. The narratives of this third group are very important to her, forming the basis of her life-world. Yet researchers might



The flowers grew closest to the house; balms and mints in the sunshine against the wall.

Photo by Giedrė Šmitienė.

find such narratives in the first person to be too immediate. It would be much more convenient to be told the same things in the form of a neutral story: to receive it all as a text rather than life. Nevertheless, texts do not exist separately in the life-tradition; they fill up life by creating it. Culture and nature form life together, shaping each other and therefore being inseparable; this basic statement of phenomenology is encountered in analysis of our informant's life⁵. For Lukšienė, knowing traditions and customs means knowing life. No borderline exists between her life and tradition. Such a line can only be drawn if reducing life to psychology and elevating tradition to the realm of metaphysics. Life is lived according to tradition, while tradition flows through individual lives.

The narratives make up more stable and self-contained units in the dynamic flow of speech. This self-sufficiency of narrative sometimes entices us to consider them as separate from life, belonging instead to the realm of language. However, my aim here is to

reveal the way that life is lived through narratives. Speaking about Lukšienė's narratives, it should be noted that she has a stock of her favourite stories and enjoys telling them. These stories are well known to her family members, who in turn have their pick among these narratives, selecting those that they find especially interesting. "We were telling stories late into the night yesterday," confesses Lukšienė's visiting sister. The vitality of tradition is primarily attested by a willingness and ability to narrate, and the capacity of the narrative to find its proper place, time and listener. Albert B. Lord starts his investigation from the practice of storytelling that is primarily traditional itself and only then turns to traditional narratives (Lord 1995: 3–4).

The key narrative for Lukšienė seems to be a story about her marriage. She herself initiates its telling as soon as she finds a break in our questions: "I was fifteen when I married him<...>". During our visits, we listened to this story several times, its separate segments being repeated almost word-

for-word. This story consists of tradition manifested in the concrete events of a personal life; not only in customs, but also in the display of their sensual perception. It might be reasonable to question whether this story is a personal or a traditional one. Tradition here has been filtered through a personal filter. It's the kind of tradition that has been turned into a situation by each individual human life. No such individuality exists that would be non-intersubjective⁶.

The classical folk narratives recorded from Lukšienė are rather few, but their number is nevertheless sufficient to grasp the way they function from her point of view. For instance, when discussing her faith in God, Lukšienė vividly described her trust in her prayers. We inquired if she had ever had a vision of God. The question seemed appropriate indeed, since informants characterised by intense religious experiences frequently share their visions or dreams of God. "Yes, such things happen, one can see God." Lukšienė gave us an unwavering answer and

proceeded to narrate a story that folklorists classify as an etiological legend about God walking the earth and spotting a man making a straw fence (Kerbelytė 2002: 66–67). If previously we encountered the life story being penetrated by the tradition, here we have a case of a traditional narrative making its way into life. Our modern tenacious tendency in separating texts from life and vice versa is nothing other than a result of the dualistic worldview. The phenomenologists of literature have demonstrated ways in which literary texts had grown into our life-world, becoming identified with our thinking and senses (cf. Daujotytė 2010).

The following is another story from Lukšienė, included into her life-world. She narrated her dream to us. In her dream, Lukšienė saw her late husband coming to her during his funeral to fulfil his earlier promise to tell her whether or not dying was easy:

Here, we both used to live, and he slept over there <...>. He used to come to me, sloshing with his galoshes on the floor. And he would say: "Look, woman, whenever either of us dies, let us tell the other if dying is easy." That he kept saying. <...> And he died here, in our house, and he was taken care of, dressed and brought out to another room, and laid out there, in the coffin. And here, the cooking women started working, making fire, setting pots, preparing the funeral meal. And my daughter told me to have some rest; she made me to go to sleep. You know, I had spent many a night attending to the dying, and she probably saw that I was worn out, so she made me to climb up onto the top of the oven to rest. And I was lying there, listening to the cooking women talking. They distributed the tasks among themselves, discussing who would have to do what: who makes porridge, who cooks meat, and so on. The cooks were three, and each had work to do. I kept listening to them, and listening, and I did not feel myself dozing off. There were four steps to climb

onto that oven, on its side <...>. Suddenly I heard something slosh slosh slosh – climbing up those steps. "Listen, woman!" "What is it?" I cried. "Dying is very easy," he said. That was true, indeed. <...> he died easily enough without any convulsing or tossing around. Our son turned him onto one side, placed his arm like this, and we watched, we were all there, so his breathing came out thinner and thinner, and then he sighed, and he was off, only the arm [fell down] like this, and it was over. So easily, you know, others would be tossing and turning, but he died very easily. So he said: "It's very easy for me." That's clear (LTRF cd 450-4).

This is an authentic and beautiful rendering of what we recognise as a folk legend (Kerbelytė 2002: 96–97). Dream legends are a curious topic in itself. Here, we are content with establishing how deeply the traditional is rooted in human life, not only in practical actions and perceptions, but also in the sleeping consciousness.

Tradition and sensitivity: the sense of self and of one's own place

Glancing at our informant's garden and orchard makes it clear that she does not only care for plants, but is adept at growing them. However, when questioned, she claims to pay no heed to any customs, disregarding the phases of the moon and doing whatever she fancies (LTRF cd 447-10). Therefore, should her skills raise any interest in us, researchers of tradition? What does her claim of planting "whichever way I fancy" mean exactly and how does it function in practice? Let us consider her attitude towards her surroundings.

The classical statement by Immanuel Kant maintaining that actions always take place in a certain space and time is currently being replaced by the modern philosophical idea of space being instituted by actions (Casey 1993). A person reveals himself/herself along with his/her own place. In

order to talk with us, Lukšienė sat down on her bed. On its one end, two big pillows were placed, while on the other lay a folded cover; the bed itself was covered with a home-made bedspread. Behind the bed was the warm wall of the old-fashioned oven; at the end of the bed were pegs on which her rolled-up headscarves and blouses, combs and scissors were hung. When looking at those items one could almost see her taking off her headscarf and hanging it on a peg; as well as combing her hair and putting on the scarf again after waking up. All this she could accomplish without rising, because reaching up was enough.

While sitting on the bed she was situated directly in front of the window. Thus she was able to see her space outside, which was arranged in four increasingly higher rows: flowers grew closest to the window; further back there were vegetable beds of the kitchen-garden; then her orchard and bee-hives; and lastly, the linden trees. Everything was arranged in a way that nothing would be overshadowed and could be readily visible for the owner. During our first visit, Lukšienė kept keenly watching over her bees through the window, in order to detect if they were not going to "swarm out" in the orchard.

When going outside to the yard and rounding the corner of the house, we would primarily see the flowers again. The ends of the vegetable rows were planted over with high Turkish carnations. And if one opened the window and bent out to look, one would see balms and mints growing against the wall below the window. There is usually plenty of sunshine by the wall, and the warm rays of the sun are bound to further increase the heady smell of the ethereal plants. At another leeward and sun-heated place by the barn, Lukšienė has planted a row of tomatoes.

Such a space, in which everything seems to be placed as if of their own



Vegetable beds, then the orchard and bee-hives, and lastly, the linden trees.

Photo by Giedrė Šmitienė.

accord to be readily available to see and smell, could safely be described as *created*. Similarly Francis Bacon discusses the way that the population of Bensalem grows plants, describing that they *make this by art* (Bacon 2004: 183). Creativity can be discussed with regards to the high level of sensibility. What smells is planted bellow the window. Flowers, vegetables and fruit trees reveal themselves to the eye in succeeding rows. One could assume that everything here has been well measured, calculated, and probably laid out by a professional garden architect. But this space makes up the life of an 85-years-old illiterate woman.

The space in question is far from representative. To the contrary, it is very handy and made up according to the living body. Those flowers at the ends of the vegetable rows have been planted not to overshadow something unsightly, i.e. the kitchen garden (which is just as nice as the flowers),

and not to present themselves to people passing by on the village road, but rather in order to be readily seen and smelt. Everything here has been planted according to the woman's sense and wishes. Having been instituted by the moving and sensitive body, this space opens up along with the directions of its movement. Here the owner passes daily, therefore the flowers are close enough. The tools are placed in order to be handy on the way to the garden and to be put back on returning. There is no storage for the tools: they are just tucked in along the way. This place has no other classification or gradation as movements of the eye and body. What does it mean? The woman's own lived place is one with her own body: the body is implicit in it, while the space is arranged according to the body.

What would be the most suitable place to grow a capricious plant – one that does not ripen in our country according to many gardeners' complaints? Natu-

rally, a lee and sunny place is required, and that is exactly where Lukšienė has planted her tomatoes! The plant tells her its needs and the place shows her for what it might be best suited. Rather than thinking everything over or knowing it all in advance, the owner just notices and hears the best way to do things. Her mode of actions in her own space is rather similar to the way of artist's painting, noted and described by Merleau-Ponty: the artist does not choose his colour while painting, because the colours that are already present on his painting ask or cry for another, just as a line already drawn indicates its continuation (1964a: 46). Similarly, the owner finds the solutions that are being suggested to her. Here is how she talks about her potted plant:

O.L. Oh, my most beautiful one has been beaten down, that one by the window [she indicates the potted plant hanging outside the window]. It was blooming so nicely, yet now it is beaten down,

you see, and very few blossoms have remained. It wanted me to bring it inside, you see. I saw a black cloud approaching from over there, and the wind was rising, so I closed the shed and was walking past it, and it poked me on the shoulder. It wanted me to take it off and fetch it inside, but I didn't. <...>

D.V. What poked you on the shoulder?

O.L. ...This flower pot, when I walked past it after having closed the shed. It poked me, and if only I had taken it off and fetched inside!.. (LTRF cd 448-4).

Our repeated question ascertained that the woman was sure that her plant had recognised the danger and warned her about it, only she did not acknowledge it. The critics might regard such an expression as anthropomorphism, yet a phenomenological perspective would consider it a certain worldview. The woman 'heard' what the plant 'told' her. Her ability to 'communicate' with plants and to feel equal to them was manifested in other ways as well. When we visited our informant later that autumn, she was unwell and while looking out of the window, she said:

O.L. Everything grew so nicely this year, perhaps it's the last time already, so everything grew well. Look, these are my cabbages [indicating the kitchen garden visible through the window] and everything; probably I will not need this any longer. Perhaps they will overcome me, they will.

D.V. What do you mean by "they"?

O.L. Well, all these plants. They grew up so nicely this year, so perhaps they will not grow any more. <...> I feel so poorly now, and I think they are going to overcome me (LTRF cd 448-6).

People usually say that plants can overcome each other. Yet our informant makes it sound as if she was growing in her garden together with her plants and is able both to overcome them and be overcome by

them. Therefore such description of her passing away is possible: "they will overcome me". Clearly, the plants make an integral part of her life-world. Tim Ingold when discussing the formation of agriculture made a subtle remark regarding people's affiliation to a place being related to their beginning to tend for plants. Humans learn both how to cooperate and how to work with nature by acquiring skills of growing things, rather than just picking and taking what nature gives (Ingold 2000: 77). The sense of cooperation is vividly present in the movements of the tiller, and is acutely individually experienced by Lukšienė.

We should also note the way this woman perceives her activities. The results of her work are readily visible to us, yet hard work (such as we usually perceive it) seems not to be done here. When trying to understand what happens in this case, I remember a comment by Jonas Mekas, a member of the Fluxus movement, who was raised in a Lithuanian village. According to him, while living in the village they would never work: instead, they would water horses when these became thirsty, or plough fields when the time came. I began to realise his meaning only thanks to Lukšienė. Work in the definition of both Mekas and Lukšienė presents itself as integration into the surroundings and as being one with them. When we visited Lukšienė in June, we saw a big plot of the kitchen garden being planted over, and the rows of potatoes already ploughed in. When visiting her in autumn, we found everything already harvested. "Who did everything?" we asked her truly at a loss. She just smiled, although seeing us still looking at her inquiringly, she raised her hand. She did not say "me" or point to herself. Her hand had accomplished everything. According to her, work truly penetrates her hands. She tells us, of starting the work and subsequently finding it difficult to believe in having accomplished so much: "I was wondering myself in the evening, as to how I could have done so much <...>It's truly a miracle!" (LTRF cd 447-6).

The lived place is inseparable from the person. His/her actions, habits and perceptions are visible in it. The modes of relationship between the body and the place may be different⁷. In our case, it is essential to recognise that the active person perceives himself/herself as equal to the place, therefore acting according to the place. Although seemingly creating it, he/she does not stand above it. The personal expression is incited and supported by the surroundings. Lukšienė's attitudes and her regard for the place, as described here, undoubtedly make up an important part of the tradition. Yet more generalised research into the traditional methods of place perception is still a matter for the future.

Conclusion

If we regard tradition as the structural part and the necessary condition of the life-world, tradition is perceived as the previous time vividly manifested and continuing into the present. Although being past, it is solely given to us as the present, and as actively functioning in the present.

The case of 85-year-old bright yet illiterate woman, who baked her own bread and slept on home-woven sheets for her whole life, allows us to formulate the concept of the life-tradition. It presents the traditional as being inseparable from the informant, as being embodied in his or her life and therefore even as not immediately recognisable. Thus it is not accidental that, in Lukšienė's view, knowing the traditional information that we kept asking her about meant knowing life. Tradition, immersed in the life-world, is not fully definable primarily because of the flexibility of life. It is inevitably fluid, i.e. simultaneously shifting and continuing. Thus, when pointing out the qualities of tradition we have to maintain the methodological attitude of the determinate indeterminacy of human life.

Life-tradition manifests itself via human corporeality and sensitivity. It is evident

in the present perceptions, attitudes, reactions and decisions. It allows for and enables one or other way of sensing, of entertaining predisposition to certain things over others.

Thus tradition is able to function even when not completely definite by finding the most suitable answers to situational questions. It does not exist as being set once and forever. Living tradition constantly re-embodies itself. It is implied in attitudes, emotions, senses, desires and acts along with them. Rather than being purely normative or limiting, it is also liberating, permissive. Therefore along with the notion of the life-world, the concept of the life-tradition is discussed, which is always constituted together with a person.

In part such study is not unlike the tasks undertaken by anthropologists heading to foreign lands of unfamiliar customs. If we wish to perform such research in our own local ethnic culture, we may be obliged to put away our systemic knowledge of traditional life in order to re-discover it anew as acting in the life-world in all its ambiguity.

¹ The article is based on research performed thanks to a grant from the Postdoctoral Fellowship funded by the European Union Structural Funds project "Postdoctoral Fellowship Implementation in Lithuania".

² While discussing the religious tradition, Karl Rahner has outlined his famous concept of an anonymous Christian, asserting that an individual who has never even heard of Christ, may be Christian in terms of his/her "basic orientation and fundamental decision". K. Rahner regards the inner attitude and actions as more profound than the accepted and declared position. He opens up a new way of determining the tradition by means of revealing how a person may belong to a tradition despite being incapable or unwilling of its thematisation and unaware of the answers to its basic questions ([Rahner] 2006: 614–617).

³ The tendency and habit of counting out and measuring the world and all things in various

ways as a specific mode of perception is described by Stuart Elden in his book *Speaking Against Number* (2006). Working largely in the sphere of politics, this author gives a brilliant analysis of the cultural phenomenon itself.

⁴ In Lithuania, people who share a hive of bees have the status of bee-friends (*bičiuliai*). They should respect each other and share the honey.

⁵ "There is no break at all in this circuit [of human activity]; it is impossible to say that nature ends here and that man or expression starts here" (Merleau-Ponty 1964b: 188). We must not imagine that any God, asserts Maurice Merleau-Ponty elsewhere, could determine what we owe to freedom, choice, culture and what to nature (2003: 196).

⁶ This is the main insight of the fifth Cartesian meditation by E. Husserl (1973).

⁷ For the different styles of perception and corporeal actions, see Behnke 1984: 7–9, 20–25, 27–28.

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Abbreviation

LTRF – The sound recordings of the Lithuanian Folklore Archives at the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore.

Address to the ISFNR Belief Narrative Network Conference in St. Petersburg (Russia), May 17th–19th, 2010

The Problem of Belief Narratives: A Very Short Introduction¹

by Willem de Blécourt, Sicklehatch, UK

The village of ... was in uproar. At the house of farmer S. a child has died. It had been bewitched and beghosted, it was told. Because people who would know such things had heard strange things in and around the house. At night chains were rattling in the barn, and they had seen invisible shapes wandering around, going in and out without opening doors or windows.

I have translated this newspaper report as literally as possible (beghosted is thus a neologism, meaning affected by a ghost). It appeared in 1926 in a Dutch daily newspaper. Here it may serve as an example to illustrate two issues that I want to put to you at the beginning of this conference. One: how should we deal with 'narratives'? Two: how should we approach the concept of 'belief'? For now I will skip the question as to how different topics classified as 'belief' (in this example witches and ghosts) can be combined and about the usefulness of the concept of a 'belief system'. We may want to address this at a future conference. There may be other problems and I hope you will raise them in the course of the next days. There may be other solutions than the ones I am going to suggest. After all, this is just to wet your appetite.

My examples tend to be mostly Dutch or Flemish, just because that is the area I am most familiar with. Other places have, of course, produced different examples, but what is important to stress is that to understand any sort of 'belief', it has to be localised, situated and contextualised. If you want to use the emic-etic distinction: the indigenous, 'emic' view deserves preference. 'Etic' merely turns out to be 'academic', an interpretation imposed from above that hinders rather

than helps. Applying this to what we have agreed to call 'belief narratives' causes a certain kind of friction.

Newspaper reports obviously contain some sort of narrative. While the study of 'legends' used to be concentrated on oral narratives (etymology notwithstanding), the distinction with papers is less strict than it seems at first sight, for one reason because the vast bulk of legends has only survived as texts – written down and often neglected in folklore archives. But orality and print are primarily media and people may retell what they have read in papers and papers may print what people tell. It is much more important to take account of that other distinction: that newspapers are supposed to report truthfully and that legends may be considered just stories, that is to say products of the imagination. While there is some 'truth' in the opposition, it also needs to be questioned. It would certainly be foolish to ignore the fact that the newspaper report quoted above (and hundreds if not thousands of similar ones), did refer to events. A child died (which can be checked in the death registers); people told stories about it. While a narrative in itself, the report also refers to other narratives. It may moreover be seen as a part of a greater narrative, to be constructed by the researcher; whether about the farm, the particular village, about witchcraft, or about 'belief narratives'.

In other cases newspapers reported on the unwitchment specialists who were consulted on the maltreatment of witches, or people who were instrumental in causing phenomena that were interpreted as ghostly. These are all 'facts' (if you want to call them such) and in a number of cases they



Willem de Blécourt has published extensively on magic and witchcraft in European history, including the book *Werewolves* (2005).

Photo by Úlo Valk.

can be corroborated by other sources. Stories are never free-floating, autonomous entities, but are embedded in the society they circulate in, are part and parcel of daily life experiences. It just may not always be possible to contextualise a story properly when all there is, is a text. On the other hand, there are many more texts than those collected by folklorists. And when it concerns present-day research, a simple collecting of tales may not be enough. I have always found it very revealing to hear from Linda Dégh that only eighteen years after her last visit to the Hungarian Kakasd, people began to tell her things they had never mentioned before.

This time, women took me into their confidence more as an equal, as well as an old acquaintance who came from far away to visit and remember old times and old people who are not with us anymore.

They were very open and sincere. They spoke of human weaknesses, family feuds, intrigues. They told me secrets. 'I will kill you if you tell this to anyone,' warned one woman jokingly, but not laughing. I had heard gossip in Kakasd before, but none treated sensitive themes.

Anthropologists have had similar experiences, meaning that our work is never finished and that there are always deeper layers to penetrate.

If you allow me to dwell a little longer on the work of Linda Dégh: she has, of course written seminal contributions to our subject and I would strongly advise everyone who has not done so yet, to get acquainted with her work. At one point she remarked: "that all legends are based on beliefs" and that the term 'belief legend' would thus be a pleonasm. I doubt whether changing the subject of research into 'narratives' would make much difference here. As long as these narratives are supposed to be about 'beliefs', there still lurks the ghost of circularity, which on the one hand defines the stories by their subject and on the other takes the subject itself for granted. What, then, are 'beliefs'?

Journalists, or their local correspondents (teachers, among others), tended to report these kinds of things to combat what they called superstition. Although the newspaper reports on witchcraft, ghosts and visits to lay healers may have had some entertainment value, they were foremost meant to educate by way of warning example. "How is this still possible in our enlightened times?" was the general, if not always expressed, complaint. The implication is that the reported 'beliefs' were not just approached from an outside and usually hostile perspective, but that the very definition of these 'beliefs' and their categorisation depended on it. In that respect the journalists were proper descendants of earlier clergymen who used to fulminate against anything 'superstitious', meaning anything that did not suit their particular denomination,

even within Christianity (Protestants denounced Catholics as superstitious, for instance). However little we may like it, this tradition still constitutes a formative part of our research interest. In the course of the nineteenth century 'superstition' may have been replaced by euphemistic terms such as 'folk belief', although the subject matter remained the same.

'Beliefs' are thus defined in opposition to both religion and science, especially medicine, and if we seriously want to engage with them in a critical way, we will have to pay attention to precisely those contrasting but also encompassing fields. Although we no longer regard such beliefs as survivals of pre-Christian ideas, we often do not pay proper attention to religion, to 'religious beliefs'. To return to the opening report: this stemmed from a Roman Catholic area in the Netherlands and it is therefore very likely that the people who thought their child bewitched, had consulted Catholic clergy and applied Catholic counter-measures. Even if they had not done so in this case, it was certainly done in others. There are subtle differences between Catholic and Protestant ghosts, too. In cases of illness, people had at least the choice to consult a physician, a priest or a witch-doctor; the relevant 'belief narratives' should enlighten us about the mechanisms of precisely such choices.

The discussion of saints, legends and miracles within the context of 'belief' legends is a relatively recent development. Given, however, that devils and 'popular religion' were already incorporated in surveys of 'folk beliefs', this is only a natural development. Now we even consider disbelief and competing 'beliefs'. Indeed, not everyone held the same 'belief' and it would not be very difficult, for instance, to find someone who does believe in ghosts but not in witchcraft. All the more reason to focus on individual expressions.

In themselves statements by informants are always 'true', although it

would be very exciting to conduct a study of indigenous concepts of untruths, or 'lies'. But even a lie is 'true' in the sense that it is uttered. What has often been questioned in the case of 'belief narratives' is their referential value. If there are no witches and no ghosts, people who talk about them must be referring to something else, to neighbourhood conflicts, for instance, or to adolescent anxieties. It can be fruitful to proceed in that direction, but it is often forgotten that people often acted the way they did precisely because they were convinced of the existence of witches or ghosts. (This line of argument becomes even more interesting when applied to the notion of a god.) Others have, of course, instrumentalised 'beliefs' and used them to achieve their own ends.

People adopted a whole range of positions between 'belief' and 'disbelief' and it may be necessary to take their expression of different opinions in different situations into account, depending on how they fitted into the relations of power; and also to take into account that they told differing stories to their families and their neighbours, and again different versions to teachers, policemen or judges. And even the position of the folklorist within this spectrum cannot always be taken for granted. Here the concepts of 'register' and of 'discourse' come in useful. When your interlocutor does not 'believe' in witches, you simply switch to a rationalist discourse and agree. "No, my grandparents used to believe in witches, but we know better now." Within a particular context, that may not even be a lie, but just the application of a different discourse.

In other words, 'belief narratives' are problematic in a number of ways. This also makes them extremely fascinating. I wish you a very fruitful conference.

¹ Reactions and discussions are very welcome. Please write to the author: Willem de Blécourt, wjc.deb@googlemail.com

Report of the ISFNR Committee on Charms, Charmers and Charming, 2011

The Year of Moscow and *Incantatio*

by Jonathan Roper, University of Tartu, Estonia



Jonathan Roper giving a paper at the conference in Moscow in October 2011.

Photo by Alvetina Solovyova.

This year the committee held its largest meeting yet, entitled *Oral Charms in Structural and Comparative Light*, in Moscow, October 27th–29th. Over the three days, 35 speakers delivered their papers on charms, charmers and charming in the President's Hall of the Russian State University for the Humanities. For many years, scholarship on charms in the Russian language has been among some of the most significant and fascinating produced anywhere, especially in its engagement with living charming traditions, but also in its engagement with historical and transhistorical aspects of charms. And yet, due to language barriers and also the sheer difficulty in obtaining russophone academic books outside of Russia, this scholarship has remained also largely unknown, apart from to area specialists such as Will Ryan. Thus the goal of this conference was to establish a dialogue between russophone and anglophone scholars. Such a development requires more, of course, than a single interchange, but

future dialogue was certainly given a solid foundation by the papers and the discussions at this event. Happily, the work of this conference is available in a more permanent form in the form of an e-book, also entitled *Oral Charms in Structural and Comparative Light*, on our website (under the 'Moscow 2011' heading): <http://www.isfnr.org/files/committeecharms.html>

The book also exists in a limited number of physical copies that were presented to conference participants and to some libraries, and is also available with additions in Russian at the site: <http://www.verbalcharms.ru/books.html>

The second main event of the year is that the committee launched an online journal, *Incantatio*, under the General Editorship of Mare Kõiva, already well-known to many of us as the editor of *The Electronic Journal of Folklore*. Like that title, *Incantatio* is an open access internet journal, and it is accessible at: www.folklore.ee/incantatio

A limited number of physical copies will

be produced for libraries as well. In our first issue, you can read the work of Haralampos Passalis, Svetlana Tsonkova, Martin Lovelace, Lea Olsan and James Kapaló, as well as book reviews and a conference report. Already we are gathering material for issue two, which will be produced under the guest editorship of Emanuela Timotin.

Aside from Moscow and *Incantatio*, other activity has included the steady updating of our part of the ISFNR website. For example, the annotated bibliography of primary and secondary texts in charms studies now encompasses twenty one languages and cultures. Also on this page can be found the call for papers for our next meeting, which will be held during the large ISFNR congress in Vilnius at the end of June in 2013. As with proposals for the larger meeting, the deadline for proposals on any aspect of charms, charmers and charming to be sent to roper@ut.ee and daiva.vaitkeviciene@gmail.com is October 1st. See you in Vilnius!



Members of the ISFNR Committee for Charms, Charmers and Charming at their Moscow meeting, October 2011. Front row: Emanuela Timotin (Bucharest), Éva Pócs (Pecs), Lea Olsan (Cambridge). Back row: Haralampos Passalis (Thessaloniki), Jonathan Roper (Tartu), Mare Kõiva (Tartu), Andrei Toporkov (Moscow).

Photo by Alvetina Solovyova.

Collect : Protect : Connect – The World Oral Literature Project

by Claire Wheeler, Eleanor Wilkinson and Mark Turin,
University of Cambridge, UK and Yale University, USA

The World Oral Literature Project is supporting the documentation of traditions from some of the most endangered cultures on the planet. Alongside training workshops and a lecture and publications series, these collections from oral communities can help to preserve and revitalise threatened cultural practices.

The Situation

The Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger,¹ released by UNESCO in early 2009, claims that around a third of the 6,500 languages spoken around the globe today are in danger of disappearing forever. With each language lost, a wealth of ideas, knowledge and history also vanish – and vanish without a trace if the language has no established written form.

Threats to endangered and marginalised cultures come in many forms: some are implicit and unintended, others are decidedly more explicit. Globalisation and rapid socio-economic change exert particularly complex pressures on smaller communities, often eroding expressive diversity and transforming culture through assimilation to more dominant ways of life. A well-intentioned and important national education programme in one of the world's major languages may have the side effect of undermining local traditions and weakening regional languages. In the name of national unity, some governments may even intentionally suppress local languages and cultural traditions as a way of exerting control over minority populations.

Knowledge, identity and culture are often encoded in oral literature by communities with no established written language. The term 'oral lit-



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Photo: private collection.

erature' broadly includes ritual texts, curative chants, epic poems, folk tales, creation stories, songs, myths, spells, legends, proverbs, riddles, tongue-twisters, recitations and historical narratives. Such traditions are rarely translated when a community switches to speaking a more dominant language.

Until relatively recently, few indigenous peoples have had a means of documenting their cultural knowledge, and there is still little agreement on how historical and contemporary collections of oral literature can be responsibly managed, archived and curated for the future.

Archiving and documenting oral traditions

Founded in 2009, the World Oral Literature Project is co-located at the University of Cambridge, UK and Yale University, USA. By working with field researchers and members of threatened communities worldwide, the Project is archiving audio and video recordings of endangered oral traditions and making them available online when appropriate. These resources are used by researchers studying diverse cultural traditions; by the public to gain an understanding of unfamiliar cultures; and more recently by authors and printmakers as an inspiration for artistic projects. Fieldwork



Claire Wheeler is a Research Assistant at the World Oral Literature Project, and has a background in Modern and Medieval Languages, educational publishing and teaching English as a foreign language.

Photo: private collection.

is partly funded by the World Oral Literature Project, and researchers are expected to adhere to guidelines on ethics, cooperative working standards, financial budgeting, recording and appropriate archiving. The output of this model has been high-quality recordings of oral literature with accurate and rich metadata, produced with agreement and participations from the performers and with recorded material and copyright remaining with the community of origin.

Twenty-three collections from ten countries are currently hosted online for free access through our website. The content of these collections ranges from songs, chants and speeches in Paiwan and from other minority language-speaking groups in Taiwan in the 1950's, to African verbal arts documented in the last three years. We are fortunate to have particularly strong collections from Asia, although we hope that in time, all parts of the world will be equally represented. The mixture of historical and contemporary material held in our collections ensures that we fulfil our role of protecting collections from cultures that have seen vast change since the recordings were made, offering insights

into the history of oral traditions; and that we help to create a snapshot of cultural traditions as they exist now. Individuals with historical recordings of oral traditions in legacy media formats typically approach us with the aim of finding a secure archival platform for disseminating materials that have not been accepted by traditional museums who may have little experience of curating audio and video content. Using USB conversion technology, and often in partnership with audio-visual media groups in our universities,² we are able to digitise collections that come to us on audio cassette or VHS, gramophone records or even on reel-to-reel tapes. More recently, we have started to receive unsolicited collections from source communities, as news of our work spreads and community members approach us to securely archive recordings of traditional performances.

The majority of our contemporary collections are 'born digital', in that traditions are recorded using digital devices in the field and transferred over the web to the World Oral Literature Project from the location of the fieldwork. This provides immediate backup and storage for the researcher, and faster archiving and dissemination of urgently endangered customs. From our offices in Cambridge, Melton Mowbray and New Haven, we upload these fieldwork collections and digitised heritage collections to Cambridge University Library's DSpace digital repository.³ DSpace is a managed environment with a commitment to forward migrate digital items when formats evolve and change. Uploaded collections, and large amounts of associated linguistic and geographical metadata, are therefore securely archived for posterity. In addition, we upload audio and video recordings, with basic metadata (for example, a brief description of the item and the location and date of recording), to the University of Cambridge Streaming Media Service.⁴ This platform allows for more immediate and simple streaming of audio and video content in a variety

of formats, making the materials accessible worldwide to audiences with varying speeds of internet connection, including those connecting to the web from rural or remote regions.

An immediate benefit of such documentation for communities of origin is the return of materials to them in an accessible format – whether on DVD, CD or hard disc – to be used in cultural revitalisation programmes and educational contexts. Younger community members in particular are being introduced to oral traditions through digital media, inspiring interest in their cultural heritage. Acting on the wishes of indigenous community members, and tailored to the expressed needs of each community, our approach harnesses the energy of the young to help them to reconnect with traditional cultural content.



Eleanor Wilkinson is a Research Assistant at the World Oral Literature Project, previously working as a freelance collections assistant after completing her MA in Museum Studies from the University of Leicester.

Photo: private collection.

Training and workshops in field methods

Training workshops and conferences convened by the World Oral Literature Project provide a further opportunity for fieldworkers to be exposed to best practices in documenting endangered cultures, and to share their

experiences with a wider community of academics and independent scholars. The Project has held two annual conferences with the themes 'Collections from the Asia-Pacific' and 'Archiving Orality and Connecting with Communities'.⁵ The high levels of interdisciplinary involvement demonstrated at these two past events have helped project staff conceive a more interactive workshop for 2012, entitled 'Charting Vanishing Voices: A Collaborative Workshop to Map Endangered Cultures'.⁶ Students, linguists, anthropologists, museum curators, librarians, technicians and community representatives – among others – will draft and design a web catalogue and online map of existing resources on endangered oral cultures. We hope to produce at least a draft index of oral cultures that will reflect the level of documentation of, and assess threats to, the vitality of verbal arts. Envisioned as a collaborative development of the World Oral Literature Project's existing database of language endangerment levels,⁷ we hope that the new resource will function as a research portal that is open to the public, and will help to highlight the most endangered cultural practices in need of urgent documentation and support.

Embracing new models of academic publishing

Free online dissemination of published materials is another aspect of the World Oral Literature Project's pledge to wider access and greater connectivity, and we are firmly committed to a dissemination model that overcomes the constraints of traditional publishing. The Project publishes an Occasional Paper series of case studies and theory relating to the documentation and archiving of endangered oral traditions.⁸ Hosted as PDFs on our website and co-hosted through other platforms, these papers can be downloaded for free or printed on demand from anywhere with Internet access. To date, we have found this model to be effective for making materials available to fieldworkers, researchers



The shaman Dirga Bahadur Dumi reciting for the ethnographers. Baksila, Khotang district, Nepal, 2006.

Photo by Marion Wettstein.

and interested members of the public as well as to indigenous communities around the world. Titles include *Faroese skjaldur: An endangered oral tradition of the North Atlantic* by Dr Stephen Pax Leonard, and *The Epic of Pabuji ki par in Performance* by Dr Elizabeth Wickett, both of which have been downloaded many hundreds of times since being hosted.

For larger manuscripts, we have launched an innovative partnership with the Cambridge-based Open Book Publishers to create affordable paperback, hardback and PDF-downloadable versions of new titles and out-of-print classics in oral literature, bypassing the problems inherent in conventional academic publishing (such as remaindered copies through over printing, high unit cost and poor dissemination). This method of digital publishing has the distinct benefit of greater global access to scholarly content and rich online supplementary material. Authors are not restricted to the page, but can incorporate a wealth of audio, video and photographic material to support their text. Our first Project-supported Open Book – a revised edition of Ruth Finnegan's classic *Oral Literature in Africa*⁹ – will be launched early in 2012, with many other monographs to follow. A website

of African photographs from the 1960s to the present, including images from Finnegan's own fieldwork, will coincide with the book launch, and will be hosted on the website of the Open Book Publishers.¹⁰

Public engagement and outreach

Public support for communities struggling to preserve their endangered oral traditions is an important factor in maintaining political engagement with cultural diversity. The World Oral Literature Project's involvement with social networking and media, through Facebook and Twitter, allows us to share our news and our most recent publications with a global community who are interested in the diversity of human cultural expressions. These platforms allow us to participate in discussions on current issues related to endangered languages and traditions, keeping ourselves and others up to date with events around the world that affect the future and fate of oral traditions.

Media coverage extends the activities of the World Oral Literature Project to wider public domains. Our presence in print, online and on air has helped generate publicity for the cause of protecting endangered traditions, and a greater familiarity with

our chosen methods of achieving this. Recent coverage includes interviews with the Project director on BBC radio discussing current issues in language and cultural revitalisation;¹¹ articles in the Guardian and the Daily Telegraph on the Project's role in archiving and disseminating endangered traditions;¹² and a series of feature articles in The Observer on the experiences of one of our recipients of a fieldwork grant, documenting oral literature in Greenland.¹³ We believe that such publicity helps to foster a sustained interest in our methodologies, approaches and commitment to documenting oral traditions and contributing to cultural revitalisation.

Outreach opportunities allow us to engage a wide variety of groups in supporting or working towards the preservation of cultural traditions. By presenting at open days for academic institutions, participating in community events and working with artists and authors who have been inspired by recordings of oral traditions, we are extending knowledge of other cultures beyond the confines of the ivory towers and silos of the academy. Working from the assumption that a deeper understanding of cultural diversity can enhance empathy for others and discourage prejudice and stereotyping, our outreach programmes encourage

interaction with materials created by indigenous communities themselves. At a recent event for Young Carers, we showed videos of songs and dances performed in rural communities, based on which the young participants completed confidence – building drama and artwork activities to imagine how the indigenous performers might feel if their language or traditions were taken away from them. The participants' empathy for the difficulties experienced by people far removed from their own familiar lifestyles provided a compelling example of how best to understand threatened communities through their own voices.

Our ultimate goal

The three verbs *collect*, *protect* and *connect*¹⁴ encapsulate our aims: collection is the gathering and documentation of oral literature in the field, not in an extractive or acquisitive manner, but in a way that is responsible, collaborative and predicated on trust. Protection is its archiving and curation – doing the best we can to ensure that these unique cultural materials are maintained, migrated and refreshed as new technologies become available and older technologies become obsolete. The connection is made when collections are returned to source communities and when they reach a wider public in print and online.

The way in which the World Oral Literature Project coordinates documentation and dissemination between indigenous communities, fieldworkers and the general public is vital to mitigating cultural endangerment, advancing documentation from an academic initiative to a worldwide effort in which community members are invested. We are interested to hear from – and explore partnerships with – like-minded projects and researchers who are committed to widening access and participation to traditional resources for the purpose of responsible documentation and community revitalisation.

To find out more about the Project or to explore ways to support the initiative, please visit:

<http://www.oralliterature.org/>



Ranki, one of the oldest inhabitants of Cholakkad, being interviewed by Ramu K. A. and Kiran Tom Sajan. Attapady, Kerala, India, April 2010.

Photo by Ramu K. A. and Kiran Tom Sajan.

¹ See <http://www.unesco.org/culture/languages-atlas/>

² For example, the Anatomy Visual Media Group, Cambridge: <http://bit.ly/camavmg>

³ See <http://www.dspace.cam.ac.uk/>

⁴ See <http://sms.cam.ac.uk/>

⁵ For links to abstracts and videos of presentations from past conferences, please see: <http://www.oralliterature.org/research/workshops.html>

⁶ See <http://www.crassh.cam.ac.uk/events/1685/>

⁷ See <http://www.oralliterature.org/research/databaseterms.html>

⁸ To view or download publications, please see: <http://www.oralliterature.org/research/publications.html>

⁹ First published in 1970 by the Clarendon Press

¹⁰ See <http://bit.ly/obppartnerships>

¹¹ See, for example: <http://bit.ly/oralliteraturebbc5mp3>

¹² See, for example: http://bit.ly/oralliterature_guardianeducation

¹³ See http://bit.ly/dspace_leonard_guardian_pdf

¹⁴ These verbs reflect the mission of the inspiring New Zealand Film Archive. See <http://www.filmarchive.org.nz/>

Tradition, Identity and Diversity: The Future of Indigenous Culture in a Globalised World (Conference at the Central University of Jharkhand, February 1–2, 2011)

by Faguna Barmahalia, Gauhati University, Assam, India,
Rupashree Hazowary, Govt. B.Ed. College, Assam, India
and Ülo Valk, University of Tartu, Estonia



Faguna Barmahalia and Rupashree Hazowary at the conference on indigenous cultures at the Central University of Jharkhand.

Photo by Ülo Valk.

In order to discuss the socio-political situation of indigenous peoples in India, their cultures, basic needs and the necessity of negotiating with the new and rapid changes of globalisation, an international conference was held at the Central University of Jharkhand from 1st to 2nd February 2011. This new university was established in 2009 and in 2010 the Centre for Indigenous Culture was founded under the School of Cultural Studies. As Jharkhand is the homeland of several indigenous Indian peoples, such as the Kharia, Munda, Oraon and many others, the new centre, led by Dr Rabindranath Sarma, has great potential to become a leading institution in the field.

Sub-themes of the conference were as follows:

- Conceptual Ideas of Indigenous Peoples in India
- Tradition and Identity of Indigenous Peoples

- Integration, Assimilation and Regionalism
- Revivalism and Nationalism
- Ethno-Archaeology and Living Culture
- Indigenous Cultures of India
- Indigenous Cultures of South-East Asia
- Indigenous Cultures of the other parts of the World
- Indigenous Culture and Media
- Indigenous Peoples and Globalisation

Due to the diversity of topics and great number of participants, it is not possible to give a complete survey of the conference. The current review offers some reminiscences of papers that represent folkloristic and ethnological research.

Gargee Chakraborty from D.K. College, Assam, talked about women's space in culture, focusing on Garos, an indigenous people of the Garo Hills in Meghalaya and Assam known for their matrilineal traditions. G. Chakraborty showed that folktales are an important source in research on gender relations. Dipen Bezbaruah from Pub Kamrup College and Mrs Jilmil Bora from D.K. College, Assam, discussed the role of the traditional drink *jorlang* in the customs of the Karbis, an indigenous people living in Assam and some neighbouring states. *Jorlang* is enjoyed by both sexes who drink it together; it also plays a great role in all the festivals and celebrations. Karbis regard *jorlang* as sacred and offer it to God before they serve it to people. Jano L. Sekhose from Nagaland University, Kohima discussed the cultural and traditional practices among the 16 major Naga tribes. There are many culture-specific words in the Naga language that denote supernatural entities, such as Supreme Being or Creator, known as *Kepenuopfii* (Angami); *Lichaba* (Ao); *Thmilhou* (Sema), etc. In spite of Christianisation the Nagas have maintained belief in, and a rich vocabulary about, a variety of spirits who receive offerings and are appeased and propitiated in rituals. Jano L. Sekhose argued that in order to understand the supernatural world of the Naga, close attention should be paid to vernacular terminology, which differs among the tribes to a great extent.

Gitanjali Chawla from Maharaja Agrasen College, New Delhi analysed Punjabi women's songs known as *Bolis*, sung on the night before wedding ceremonies and expressing



Rabindranath Sarma, the main organiser of the conference, *Identity and Diversity: The Future of Indigenous Culture in a Globalised World*, doing fieldwork among the Kharia ethnic community in Jharkhand.

Photo by Ülo Valk.

emotions and concerns about marital relationships. These songs articulate and construct female identity; they also express feminist struggles with patriarchy. G. Chawla discussed folklore as popular discourse and field of negotiation between past and present that has an important role in constructing Punjabi identity. Geetanjali Deka from Belsor H.S. School, Assam offered a psychoanalytical analysis of Rongali Bihu, Assam's spring festival. She showed that in the patriarchal society of Assam, where women's voices tend to be silenced and sexuality is not discussed in public, the hidden dimension of culture finds expression in festivals, such as Rongali Bihu, loaded with symbols of reproduction and fertility.

Swapna Bujar Baruah from Gauhati University traced the relationship between death culture and mythology among the Meiteis of Darrang district in Assam. She showed that worship of the snake goddess Manasa and the

related folk epic about Behula and Lakhindar have a strong impact on the place-lore of local communities. Places are glorified because they are connected with mythic events of the past. Marbhador M. Khyndeit from the North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, showed the connection between archery, gambling and dream interpretations among the Khasis. Dream symbolism is complex, polysemantic and even gender-specific but the tradition of interpreting dreams is maintained until it has social functions (such as the context of gambling). Faguna Bar-mahalia and Rupashree Hazoary discussed in a joint paper the revivalism of the Bathou religion among the Bodos, indigenous people of North-Eastern India. The word 'Bathou' contains two words: 'ba' meaning 'five' (referring to air, fire, sun, land and sky) and 'thou' meaning deep philosophical thought. The word also refers to the Supreme God Bathoubrai, whose worship has a socio-cultural significance and expresses the Bodo ethnic identity.

The meeting was very well organised; in addition to academic sessions it also offered a memorable cultural program of chhau dance, performed by Anil Mahato and his group, whose acrobatic skills mesmerised the audience during a long show when the Hindu deities, such as Durga, Kartikeya and their demonic adversaries appeared on the stage. The conference demonstrated the great variety of indigenous cultures in India, the significance of this growing field of studies and the relevance of folklore to identity politics among these peoples¹. Folkloristics has much to offer towards theoretical analysis of the processes of formation and negotiation of ethnic identities, including not only harmonious development but also tensions and conflicts. The Centre for Indigenous Culture, Central University of Jharkhand has already become a well-known venue of important academic forums. On December 12–14th the Centre organised the 35th session of the Indian Folklore Congress. Recently it has been announced that the Central University of Jharkhand will open full-fledged folklore department as a part of the Institute of Culture. We wish great success to Dr Rabindranath Sarma and his colleagues in these important endeavours, which could have a most positive impact on the development of folkloristics at regional, national and international levels. We also wish that the Centre for Indigenous Culture would develop close ties with the ethnic communities in Jharkhand, spreading knowledge, offering excellent education for the indigenous peoples of India and supporting them in developing their languages and cultural traditions.

¹ The indigenous peoples (Adivasi) of South Asia have often been overlooked in academic research, although recently there have been several positive developments in the field. See for example the web site of the Adivasi Religion and Society Network (<http://www.arsnetwork.org/>), established and coordinated by Professor Greg Alles, McDaniel College Maryland, USA.

Symposium on Finno-Ugric Folklore

by Merili Metsvahi, University of Tartu, Estonia

On 7–9 June 2011 the symposium *The Finno-Ugric Contribution to International Research on Folklore, Myth and Cultural Identity* took place at Groningen University. Groningen in Netherlands is among the few places outside the Finno-Ugric world where Finno-Ugristics can be studied. In the year 2011 the Department of Finno-Ugric Languages and Cultures at the University of Groningen celebrated its 45th anniversary. To mark this occasion the symposium dedicated to the topic of folklore, myth and cultural identity was organised. The symposium belonged to the series of international Finno-Ugric symposia that have been held every fifth year since 1980s in Groningen.

During the two-and-a-half days there were three plenary lectures and two parallel sessions with 35 papers altogether. The plenary lectures were held by Mihály Hoppál, Seppo Knuuttila and Ülo Valk. While it would take too much space to review all of the papers that I listened to at the symposium, I decided to choose in addition to plenary lectures only some and cast a glance at them.

Mihály Hoppál (Hungary) talked about the past and the present of the folkloristics in the Finno-Ugric world. He concentrated most of all on those branches of research and activities in which he has taken part. So Hoppál looked back into the beginnings of ethnosemiotics initiated by J. Stepanov, A. Greimas, V. Voigt and M. Hoppál in 1970s. He also gave an insight into the history of the volumes of *Mythologia Uralica* and introduced the book series *Bibliotheca Shamanistica* and *Heroic Epics of the World*. Hoppál encouraged young researchers to continue the investigation of the folklore of Uralic peoples and emphasised the importance of studying cultural identities in connection with folklore in the era of globalisation.

Seppo Knuuttila (Finland) took as his topic *Visualising Myths*. Knuuttila started with the contemplation that there are a lot of myths everywhere, including popular culture. Myths propose different life philosophies and continuously influence popular consciousness. Knuuttila introduced the Artists' Kalevala project, which was organised on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Kalevala Society in 2011. In the project contemporary artists were asked to represent images that the Finnish epic *Kalevala* evokes in their minds. One of the interesting outcomes of the project was that the most popular figure in the pictures was not a male hero, but the mistress of the North called Louhi.

Ülo Valk (Estonia) concentrated on the legends that he considered one of the main genres (mega-genres) of folklore. He claimed that Estonian folklore is rich in belief legends. Valk emphasised that the legends should not be seen as survivals of ancient worldviews but rather as means of communication in specific social circumstances. Folklore as a social phenomenon was an idea that Walter Anderson already promoted in the 1930s. However, the idea never became the leading one in mainstream Estonian folkloristics, at least not yet. Instead, Jakob Hurt, Oskar Loorits and their numerous followers dedicated themselves to diachronic research into old stories that came from the past. Valk on the other hand stressed the importance of contextual and intertextual approaches to the legends that explore intergeneric relationships. For example, by comparing legends with newspaper articles from the 1800s one can find similar models and topics.

Janne Saarikivi (Finland) gave the etymological viewpoint on some of the denominations of Finnish deities in his presentation. In earlier times it



Merili Metsvahi's research interests include Estonian folk belief and werewolf traditions, the individual-centred approach in folklore studies and women's status in Estonian society as revealed through folk narrative genres.

Photo by Pihla Siim.

was common among Finnish folklorists to study the Pre-Christian religion. Martti Haavio's study *Finnish Mythology* published in 1967 was the last in the research paradigm and summarised the earlier work. After this book there has been almost no interest in the etymological research of Finnic deity names among scholars, despite there being much better possibilities to investigate the older layers of vocabulary than in Haavio's time. In Saarikivi's opinion many of the etymologies should be revised. The name *Lemminkäinen* for example comes from the name cluster **lempe*, which was the source of the Finnish name Lemmikki, the Estonian name Lembit, the Finnish word *lempoi* ('devil') and the word *lempi*, meaning love in the physical sense of the word. The appellation **lempe* denoted heat and fire. According to Saarikivi the deity names mentioned by Agricola and Ganander are relatively young.

Eila Stepanova (Finland) talked about one of the oldest and most universal genres of folklore – laments. In Finland laments were only written down in Orthodox areas. Ritual laments were only performed at funerals and memorial ceremonies, at weddings and at departure ceremonies. Non-ritual laments were performed for the folklore collector, for example. One of the features of laments is that almost nothing is named directly in them. Among the 1400 circumlocutions that one can find in the Dictionary of Karelian Lament Language, circumlocutions replacing the words ‘mother’ and ‘child’ are the most frequent. Laments can be considered as a special poetic register that was used only by women but was recognised by all the members of community. The more talented the lamenter, the more unique product arose in her performance.

Kärr Toomeos-Orglaan (Estonia) introduced the unfamiliar name of Martin Sohberg who published a lot of chapbooks in Estonia during the second half of the 19th century. These books contained arguably local national tradition but were in fact mainly adaptations from German fairy tales. Sohberg’s style however was close to the vernacular style of narrating – including the use of vulgar words – that was disparaged during his time. F. R. Kreutzwald’s book *Old Estonian Fairy Tales (Eesti rahva ennemuistsed jutud)*, which was published in 1866 and contained fairy tales in the German romantic style, has always been highly respected. Kreutzwald’s style has made a huge impact on the style of later publications of fairy tales. If the chapbooks received more attention in Estonian folklore studies, new discoveries could be made. Toomeos-Orglaan’s work indicates that several fairy tales received their places in Estonian folklore because of the chapbooks published by Sohberg.

Mária Czibere (Netherlands) talked about the role of Hungarian linguis-

tic myths in the formation of modern national identity. According to her, in identity formation the positive statements about the nation expressed

ing different pagan tribes included linguistically heterogeneous groups. Even today in the Khanty identity cultural traits are more important than



Cornelius Hasselblatt in his office at the Department of Finno-Ugric Languages and Cultures, University of Groningen.

Photo by Ülo Valk.

by outsiders are important. Czibere gave several quotes arguing that the Hungarian language is superior to other languages. One of the frequently used quotes belonging arguably to Jacob Grimm states: *Die ungarische Sprache is logisch, vollkommen, ihr Aufbau übertritt jede andere*. There are also many other similar quotes that stress the beauty, perfectness and masculinity of Hungarian language. Even the Balassi Institute, which teaches Hungarian language and culture to foreigners, uses this kind of false quotes in its booklets. Réka Zayzon’s (Germany) point of departure was similar to Czibere’s. She stated that foreign stereotypes can significantly influence the people’s identity. Zayzon concentrated on the Khanty identity and the ways in which early fieldworkers and the scholarly ‘truths’ have had their impact on the self-image of the Khanty people. The oldest denomination, Jugra, that can be found in Arabic sources of the 11th century was based purely on geography. The next denomination, Ostyak, which was based on religion denot-

linguistic. Linguistically the northern Mansi and Khanty dialects are closer to each other than different Khanty dialects.

Merili Metsvahi (Estonia) introduced the hypothesis that there was a matrilineal society in the territory of Estonia before Europeanisation in the 13th century. The most important proponents of this hypothesis are the Swedish historian Nils Blomkvist and the Estonian archaeologist Marika Mägi. In her presentation, Metsvahi put forward evidence from Estonian folklore and folk customs substantiating the hypothesis and gave a brief analysis of the Setu fairy tale *The Sisters’ Flight* (ATU 313*E) in which a brother wants to marry his sister, but the girl escapes and in the end the brother marries a heavenly girl instead.

Cornelius Hasselblatt (Netherlands) presented an interesting example of the metamorphosis of the Estonian epic *Kalevipoeg* (1857–1861) composed by F. R. Kreutzwald into a literary work. American author Lou Goble



Audience at the symposium, The Finno-Ugric Contribution to International Research on Folklore, Myth and Cultural Identity, at the University of Groningen, June 2011.

Photo by Merili Metsvahi.

has written a fantasy novel *The Kalevide* that has also been translated into German. The novel is based mainly on W. F. Kirby's work *Hero of Estonia* published in 1895 and which was based on Kreutzwald's epic. By scrutinising the rearrangements of the folklore material in later literary works that interpret *Kalevipoeg*, Hasselblatt tried to apply the adapted version of Walter Anderson's law of self correction. He concluded that most of the central events of the epics are still

preserved in the novel, but during the process of translation and adaptation they have changed their shape and meaning.

Frog (Finland) argued in his presentation that the Finno-Karelian mythical hero/deity Ilmarinen was a supreme sky god in an earlier period. His hypothesis, which was based on data from different Uralic languages, stated that **Ilma* denoted God in the Proto-Finno-Ugric language, and

later developed into the name of the sky. After introducing iron, which was considered a magically powerful substance, the **Ilmar(i)* could have had the meaning 'the God of wind (including storms and thunder), weather and travel'. From the 19th century Ilmarinen no longer denoted an active deity, although he found his place in the Finnish epic *Kalevala* and could have been an identity model for a man, as well.

Successful symposia and conferences always contain something beyond the scholarly get-togethers in the auditoria and the classrooms. And often precisely these moments outside the common academic settings make these events different from each other and memorable. The reception on the first evening, which was simultaneously the closing of the Hungarian days in Groningen in the Hungarian consulate, remains in my mind with the enjoyable speech given by Cornelius Hasselblatt in five languages – in Finnish, Estonian, Hungarian, French and German – in that he never repeated himself in different languages. Another memorable event was the dinner in which conference participants took part in a small village outside the town. Many thanks to the organisers from the Department of Finno-Ugric Languages and Cultures, University of Groningen!

New ISFNR Members Summer 2010 – December 2011

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 Monalisa Borgohain (India)
 Sanghamitra Choudhury (India)
 Frog (Finland)
 Diane Goldstein (USA)
 Pauline Greenhill (Canada)
 Helmut Groschwitz (Germany)
 David Hopkin (UK)
 Incoronata Inserra (USA)
 Sarat Kumar Jena (India)
 Maria Kaliambou (Greece/USA)
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Traditional and Literary Epics of the World: An International Symposium Review

by Ambrož Kvartič, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

The writing on these next few pages is dedicated to an international symposium entitled *Traditional and Literary Epics of the World: Textuality, Authorship, Identity* that took place on the last two days of November 2011 in Tartu, academic capital of Estonia. Both the descriptions of the presentations and the subjective views of the symposium are written by one of the observing participants, who just sat and listened during the symposium.¹

The conference was a joint effort by several (Estonian) parties – the Centre of Excellence in Cultural Theory, the Estonian Literary Museum and the Institute for Cultural Research and Fine Arts at the University of Tartu. Gathering an international scholarly community, the symposium added another important piece to an already rich mosaic of Tartu's academic – in this particular case folkloristic and literary – events. Furthermore, the symposium was organised in celebration of the 150th anniversary of the first edition of the Estonian national epic the *Kalevipoeg* (1857–1861). Celebrating the same anniversary, the new English translation of the *Kalevipoeg* was published only two months prior to the conference, prepared with the help by some of the participants, who were honoured during the gala reception with Tartu's city authorities. This thick book was available for purchase at the conference's registration point.

Participating at the symposium were scholars of different disciplines, primarily folklorists and literary scholars, but also language scholars, semioticians, and even an artist, Kärt Summatavet, who gave a paper on various levels of artistic (re)imagination of mythology and epics.

As the conference's venue, the organisers chose Tartu's former Dome

Cathedral, now University of Tartu History Museum, a majestic example of Baltic brick architecture overlooking the town. Lectures took place in two separate halls that could not be more different in the kind of atmosphere they conveyed. The so-called 'White Hall', where the conference opening and plenary lectures were held, lived up to its name with its bright and spacious interior, open to the outside world and with echoing walls. Positioned just below it was the 'Conference Hall', dressed in dark brown, with a low ceiling, and without natural lighting, illuminated only by two dimmed chandeliers. Differences aside – the chairs were equally (un)comfortable in both halls.

The symposium was opened by Ülo Valk and Art Leete, representing the two parties that organised the event. Art Leete greeted participants by reciting some passages from *Kalevipoeg* battle scenes, wishing everybody a successful 'combat' with the genre of epics and all the issues arising from it. Ülo Valk, on the other hand, welcomed all foreign participants from institutions outside Estonia, stating jocularly that the *Kalevipoeg* and Estonia are not the centres of the world.

Despite this particular statement and despite the organisers' apparent best intentions of bringing together as diverse a selection of epic traditions as possible and thus comprising very colourful panels, the Estonian national epic was clearly a predominant theme of the symposium. In fact, one only has to throw one glance at the conference program or at the book of abstracts to see that the *Kalevipoeg* was the main 'dish' on the conference 'menu'. In this regard, the conference probably did not fulfil its initial ambitions – and one could well use this fact as the main point of a critique



Ambrož Kvartič is writing his dissertation on contemporary legendry in Slovenia.

Photo by Ranibala Khumukcham.

– but the overwhelming presence of the main Estonian epic is not really surprising, given the celebratory motive of the conference and the national composition of the participants. What is very much surprising though is that neither of the plenary lectures was dedicated to the *Kalevipoeg*.

Two plenary papers were presented. The first lecture was given by David Elton Gay, an American independent scholar connected to Indiana University, who presented some issues dealing with the illusive definition of the genre of epic. Focusing on written texts he emphasised several different definitions of the genre, arguing that neither of them ever encompasses every aspect of the phenomenon. Furthermore he argued that canonic, published epics are primarily the result of scholarly work, and that pretty much every bigger or long epic (from *Gilgamesh*, through the *Mahabharata* to the *Kalevipoeg*) is a conscious compilation of various smaller texts or short epics found in folklore repertoires.



David Elton Gay (USA) giving his keynote lecture "The Idea of an Epic: Some Problems of Genre Definition".

Photo by Alar Madisson.

Contrary to the first, the second plenary lecture was more fieldwork/folklore oriented. Dmitry Funk, from the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology in Moscow, presented his case study of the Siberian ethnic group the Shors, showcasing their epic singing tradition. By comparing his fieldwork results with the data compiled by his predecessors, Funk argued that this tradition is disappearing, and presented different reasons – among them the religious conversion of the Shors not being the least important. Despite being quite interesting, one would argue that this paper somehow did not deliver what is required of a plenary lecture and might just as well have given up the plenary slot to some other paper from the 'regular' panels.

The highlight of the conference in this observer's opinion, shared by many others, was the first panel following the plenary lectures (and a very tasty lunch). Papers delivered by Lotte Tarkka and Frog from the University of Helsinki, and Tiina Kirss from the University of Tallinn, were a joy to listen to, and not solely for the fact that the presentations were vivid and clear. Lotte Tarkka proposed intertextuality as the methodological tool when analysing Kalevalaic poetry, where

genres interact and merge based on performers' own choices colliding with conventional forms and motifs resulting in diverse poetic creations. Frog's lecture not only complemented the ideas conveyed by the first plenary lecturer, but also surpassed them. It was structured very densely and thoroughly, approaching the definition of epic genre as formal, content-based and applied conventions within a vernacular genre system, highlighting the setbacks and traps of such endeavours as well. With her lively presentation, Tiina Kirss talked about the role of the Kalevipoeg on the reading and general culture of Estonians at home and abroad (in the Estonian diaspora).

As was already said, the Kalevipoeg was the predominant choice of topic among the presenters, becoming redundant from time to time, as some of the facts, illustrative material, and even ideas started repeating from one paper to another – a great example is the matchbox, produced in Sweden with an image of Kalevipoeg riding an eagle that appeared in three separate presentations. As was expected, the Kalevipoeg was covered from very different standpoints. Some lecturers focused on textual analysis of the epic, for example Madis Arukask, who talked about the presence of laments in the Kalevipoeg, and Mari Sarv, who contemplated creation and uniqueness of verse in the Kalevipoeg. Other presenters focused on wider implications of the epic, i.e. contextual analysis, historic and social background and the like. Hasso Krull thus looked for connections between the Kalevipoeg and the cultural construction of the Estonian landscape, and Ülo Valk presented the theme of the summoning of spirits in the Kalevipoeg and the contemporary fashionable practice of spiritism involving a medium to convey messages from the dead using various tools (planchette, oija board). In the same train of 'contextual thought', others focused on the Kalevipoeg's political implications in Estonia (Katre Kikas on the Estonian popular defence of Kreutzwald's work) and in



Lotte Tarkka (Finland) giving her paper about the dialogue of genres in Karelian oral epics.

Photo by Alar Madisson.

other regions (Cornelius Hasselblatt on the reception of the Kalevipoeg in Germany in the 19th century), and the possible historical and geographical influences on the development/creation of the Estonian national epic itself (Risto Järv and Eve Pormeister). Among these lectures Liina Lukas gave an interesting paper covering a wide geographical area of the Baltics and Germany, using the argument of Estonian influence on other folklore or epic traditions. Finally, papers on the application or even transformation of the Kalevipoeg as the basis of new narrative forms, i.e. comic books, plays, etc. (paper by Mare Kõiva), or in general popular culture (paper by Marin Laak), were a welcome addition to other more core text-oriented Kalevipoeg papers.

Among the presenters who did not discuss issues connected with Kalevipoeg, a division between literary scholars and (primarily) fieldwork-oriented folklorists was clearly evident. Aldis Pütli's presentation was a great addition to Liina Lukas' paper, showing Latvian epic examples, enabling comparison and search for common elements of the national 19th century epics of these two neighbouring Baltic countries. In the paper delivered by Mihály Hoppál an account of the vari-

ous Epics published by Russian scholars was delivered, illustrated with the cover pages of the various, relatively unknown epic works. Hoppál used Lauri Honko's work on the Tulu epic to state that epic and its performance remain a living tradition among some communities, giving hope to the folklorists. Rare are the conferences on epics tradition that pass without mentioning the Kalevala. At this symposium, two papers, delivered by Niina Hämäläinen and Jouni Hyvönen, presented the Kalevala from the point of view of its textualisation – the transformation of the text form oral to written, with special emphasis on Lönnrot's editorial choices and changes. Furthermore, Sonja Petrović presented different historical interpretations of the epic about the Battle of Kosovo, determined by the perspective of the interpreter – by being either Orthodox Christian Serb or Muslim Turk.

More fieldwork-oriented papers were lesser in number, but just as important. Ranibala Devi Khumukcham presented the epic of KhambaThoibi (featuring the male character Khamba and the female character Thoibi) from the North-East Indian state of Manipur, and Paul Hagu presented the (non-Kalevipoeg!) epic tradition of the Estonian Setu people, focusing primarily on female performers (known as "song-mammas") during the decade of the nineteen twenties. We also heard two lectures that were not directly connected to the genre of epics. The speakers were Tatiana Bulgakova, presenting the motif of competition in Siberian shamanic tales, and Margaret Lyngdoh with a paper about ritual practices among the Khasis in North-East India, illustrated by an explicit fieldwork video material of ritual sacrifices.

Taking a critical standpoint when looking back on the symposium, one might argue that accepting most of the sent abstracts in an effort to make the symposium open and diverse resulted in two set-backs: making it too narrow on one hand and too broad on the



L-R: Valentina Kharitonova (Russia), Dmitry Funk (Russia), Mihály Hoppál (Hungary) and Mare Kõiva (Estonia) at the symposium, Traditional and Literary Epics of the World.

Photo by Alar Madisson. (Photos by courtesy of the Estonian Literary Museum.)

other. The 'omnipresent' Kalevipoeg made it somewhat too narrow. As Estonian scholars – understandably the largest group of presenters – perhaps felt the "duty" or the general need to speak about their national epic, this resulted in the symposium being thematically not as balanced as it should have been – especially given the fact that epics are one of the least defined and broadest fields of narrative/literary study. On the other hand the conference was perhaps too broad because of participants' wide and dispersed disciplinary backgrounds. This was evident for instance during paper discussions where some basic disciplinary (methodological and even terminological) differences appeared, resulting in discomfort and, in some cases, *a priori* disagreement with the presented ideas. These are of course just observations.

The organisers of the symposium did a very good job of attracting such prominent (even 'superstar') names from the disciplines of folkloristics, ethnology, religious studies, and literary studies as were plenary speakers David Elton Gay and Dmitry Funk, Mihály Hoppál, Cornelius Hasselblatt, etc., to the conference. But as most of the 'neutral' participants agree, the most important presentations were not contributed by these names, but rather by (somewhat younger) scholars, namely Lotte Tarkka, Frog, Ülo Valk,

Liina Lukas, Aldis Pütelis and the like.

Good and not so good presentations aside, the key word to the whole symposium was 'discussion'. Apart from the regular discussion time after each and every paper, there were plenty of opportunities for informal talk and the exchange of ideas during the coffee breaks, lunch, and morning and evening recreational activities (visits to the Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore and Estonian Literary Museum). And the participants took this opportunity and ran with it. All the time, one could hear conversations returning to the questions of the definition of the epic genre, the methodology of its studying, and also the reasons for its decline. What it comes down to now are the hope and assumption that all that conference had to offer will be published and spread among libraries and scholars as soon as possible, so the discussion can be prolonged and some new ideas may emerge. Coming from the point of view of a folklorist, the symposium was thus sound, informative and simply 'epic'.

Over and out.

¹ I would like to thank Ranibala Devi Khumukcham and Margaret Lyngdoh for helping me with the information on those parallel (overlapping) panels that I could not cover myself.

The International Society for Folk Narrative Research is a scientific society whose objectives are to develop scholarly work in the field of folk narrative research and to stimulate contacts and the exchange of views among its members.

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A moment from the opening ceremony of the ISFNR Interim Conference at the North-Eastern Hill University in Shillong (Feb. 22, 2011).

Photo by Pihla Siim.



In February 2011 the ISFNR held its interim conference in Shillong,
Meghalaya, North-Eastern India.