

NEWS IN BRIEF

26TH ISCLR CONFERENCE IN DUBLIN

On 7–10 July 2008, the 26th annual conference of the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research was held in Dublin. The conference participants were presented 32 papers and two films: *Shutter* (2004) introduced by Mikel Koven, and *Return to Glennascaul: A Story that is Told in Ireland* (1951), introduced by Sandy Hobbs and Paul Smith. The ISCLR has established an Annual Book Prize in honor of Brian McConnell. The winner of the 2008 prize was *Haunting Experiences. Ghosts in Contemporary Folklore* by three well-known folklorists: Diane E. Goldstein, Sylvia Ann Grider and Jeannie Banks Thomas. The book discusses ghost lore while examining it from multiple angles in modern contexts. Stephanie Singleton was awarded the Annual Student Prize to honour the memory of Dr. David Buchan (1939–1994) for the research on the conspiracy theory.

For the following overview I have singled out some presentations from the entirely interesting and enriching conference. The presentations analyzed the different angles and subtopics of contemporary legend (see abstracts at <http://www.folklore.ee/FOAFtale/ftn70.htm>). The main themes discussed at the conference were politics, media



From the left: Eda Kalmre, Mare Kalda and Mare Kõiva from the Department of Folkloristics, Estonian Literary Museum, in Ireland. Photo from the author's personal collection, 2008.

power and influence of media channels on the oral traditions, the origin of different stories, symbolized characters, anti-legends and parodies, theory of contemporary legend research, etc.

David Main examined and updated Sandy Hobbs's (1987) ideas of classifying contemporary legends from a psychological perspective. Bill Ellis looked at the legendary significance of politics. The crusade against illegal immigrants has become one of the dominant themes in the 2008 political campaigns, which drew much of their momentum from legends and legend types documented both in previous times and also in other cultures where immigration has become a volatile political issue. Carl Lindahl analyzed levee legends after hurricanes Katrina and Rita, comparing rationality/non-rationality styles, and the political use of legends.

Using Pamela Donovan's work on online crime legends, Peter Burger integrated criminology, studies in journalism and legend studies to analyze the rhetoric of crime legend debates in different media. He took a closer look into stories about drink spiking, snuff movies, organ theft, and the Smiley Gang. Mark Glazer reviewed the manner in which prescriptions and proscriptions are a part of contemporary legends, as well as the effects these miniature horror stories have on our perception of taboos and proper cultural behavior in modern culture.

David Clarke analysed the 19th-century ghost panic connected with Spring-heeled Jack – a robber who was believed to have springs in the heels of his boots. The first panic surged in the London in the 1830s; in the late 19th century, a legend of a similar ghost spread across England and Scotland. Clarke's source material was the 19th-century British Library newspaper digitizations which enabled to follow Spring-heeled Jack's visit to Sheffield between Easter and Whitsuntide in 1873. Petr Janecek analyzed the rumours about a mysterious phantom called Perak (Springer) or Perovy muz (Spring Man), which were spread in Czechoslovakia in the 1940s under the Nazi occupation. The rumours are close to Czech wartime urban phantoms like Ziletkar (Razor Blade Man), Fosforak (Phosphoric Man). As a source of inspiration, the researcher introduced the British urban phantom Spring-heeled Jack from the 19th century, the local East-Bohemian demonic beings, or the influence of anti-Catholic legends from the end of the 19th century.

Eda Kalmre centred in her paper on a popular post-Second World War rumour, which circulated in Tartu, about an alleged human sausage mill in the ruins near the Tartu market.

Diane E. Goldstein explored the creation of three folk heroes or anti-heroes – “Looter man”, “Green helmet guy” and “Flat Fatima” on the Internet. They became powerful anti-legends, critiquing the legendary characteristics of their initial subject through parody. These characters were depicted in news photography, and subsequently became the subject of parody in popular culture contexts. Applying the theory of Vladimir Propp, Mare Kalda analyzed the narrative content of media messages discussing incidents of searching for hidden treasures, published in the Estonian written press.

Sandy Hobbs and Seonaid Anderson analyzed the accounts of people being gassed and robbed on trains, in caravans, trucks, villas and hotels. The vivid stories tend to be first-person narratives but bear resemblance to urban legends.

Elissa R. Henken introduced a genre of proverb legend, *chwedl dihareb* – a genre of legends which provide explanation (or an origin) for proverbs.

Mikel J. Koven continued with filmic folklore, searching for the roots of horror film based on temporary Thai ghostlore, and the film as a model for cinematic storytelling.

It is clear that rumours and legends are closely connected to the political and social situation of a country, vanishing after the end of the conflict, but returning some years later. Nevertheless, some legends and rumors or legend characters are and remain deeply rooted in the memories and oral traditions of the people, as well as in the popular culture.

Mare Kõiva

MEDICA 2008: NARRATIVES ABOUT ILLNESSES AND THEIR TREATMENT

Medica 2008, the fifth international seminar on ethnomedicine was held on 21 October 2008 at the Estonian Agricultural Museum in Ülenurme near Tartu, Estonia. The large number of participants present at the seminar was a proof that narratives about illnesses and their treatment truly interest people. The contemporary society has been successful in mediating to the general public a myth of health being a normal physical condition and illnesses as a threat to it. Thus, health care, healthy lifestyle choices and battling with diseases represent one of the most important themes of human interaction. We hear stories about illnesses and methods of treatment while listening to the radio at breakfast, we read about these in newspapers and magazines and come across them on television and at online websites. Narratives about illnesses and open discussions regarding their treatment form an inseparable part of everyday life.

The seminar was organized by folklorists and therefore there was very little discussion about specific diseases. The main focus of the seminar was on the representations of illnesses and their meaning in different contexts.

Mare Kõiva (Estonian Literary Museum) held the opening speech in which she introduced the online community of people suffering from diabetics at a medical portal www.kliinik.ee. Eve Annuk from Estonian Culture Historical Archives discussed the different interpretations of the letters, and references to illness in these letters, by Ilmi Kolla, an Estonian poetess who died of tuberculosis at a young age. Piret Paal's (University of Helsinki) paper tackled the sociocultural significance of the concept of cancer in the illness narratives of Finnish cancer patients. Particularly the latter two papers allowed to conclude that for an individual the condition which is perceived as abnormal and which causes suffering is far more important than a specific disease with its official diagnosis and treatments. The suffering caused by illness is not only physical and it also has an effect on people's mental and spiritual condition and the general quality of life. Finding a way to express one's emotions regarding the situation is therefore highly important.



Participants at the 5th International seminar on ethnomedicine Medica 2008.
Photo by Alar Madisson, 2008.

Defining an illness and the culture-specific interpretation of illnesses depends on specific time, circumstances and the social situation. Kristi Salve, senior researcher at the Department of Folkloristics, Estonian Literary Museum, argued in her paper that according to the practical beliefs of Vepsians, the first symptoms of an illness are the sense of ringing in the head and pain in limbs. While Vepsians have been called forest people, they either seek help from a home medicine box, house plants, or the local medical assistant. Airi Pekkola (University of Helsinki) discussed attitudes towards dental diseases in rural Estonia and Finland. According to Estonian and Finnish ethnomedicine people used to regard only pain, inflammations and tooth abscess as dental illnesses, and in healing they used substances which helped to relieve pain and cure inflammation. Kristel Kivari's (Archimedes Foundation) paper about *maa-alused*, elflike creatures in Estonian mythology, sought answers to questions about symptoms of illnesses which are related with a specific time, place and tradition, and with determining their origin. Why is it that modern people no longer catch diseases from the ground? Is it because we lack experience in this area or because we simply do not notice the direct connection between man and nature anymore? It is problematic to reconstruct certain aspects of diagnosis and the cultural meaning of a certain situation by using archive materials about illnesses. Nevertheless, Liina Paaes' (doctoral student at the University of Tartu) paper about deafness and hearing diseases clearly demonstrated that deafness has a quite different meaning for the deaf than it has for the hearers and that deafness is regarded as a disease, that is something abnormal, by hearers rather than the deaf themselves.

Relying on archive material and posing modern research questions inevitably leaves a scholar in a complicated situation. The paper by American-born folklore researcher Frog (University of Helsinki, University College London), who explored the use of charms

and narrativity in healing rituals, emphasised that the former selective and context-defying methodology of folklore collection complicates the interpretation and understanding of the collected materials. The archive materials, on which Estonian ethnobotanist Raivo Kalle (Estonian Literary Museum) relied in his presentation, also lack vital information about plants: in order to be able to determine the plant discussed in certain materials, a scholar needs to rely on his or her imagination.

As mentioned above, illness is not only a physical ailment but it affects the state of mind and spirit. The highly informative paper by Ellen Pärn (Estonian Agricultural Museum), which celebrated the International Year of the Potato, discussed the health benefits of potato and busted several myths about the plant. Renata Sõukand (Estonian Literary Museum) introduced the use of herbs in making healing teas. The last seminar session tackled the various stages of medical history in Estonia. Kaarina Rein (University of Tartu) introduced the studies about diseases found in the soils in the surroundings of Tartu and the curative effects of the local water by Johannes Raicus (*ca* 1580?–1631), a Swedish-born Estonian scientist. The last paper was delivered by medical examiner Jaan Käsmel (University of Tartu), who discussed an interesting period in the history of Estonian medicine. The latter two papers emphasised the need for a comparative study of medicine and ethnomedicine, as the fields have developed alongside each other.



Mr. Frog and Piret Paal at the Medica 2008 seminar. Photo by Alar Madisson, 2008.

Mare Kõiva summed up the rich and informative seminar day, noting that numerous narratives about illnesses and their treatment have been heard over the past five years, and expressed the wish of organizers and seminar participants alike that such meetings for scholars of folk medicine, ethnobotany, medical anthropology and medical history would continue in the future.

The Medica 2008 seminar was supported by the Estonian Cultural Endowment. The participants wish to thank Estonian Agricultural Museum and all the people at the Department of Folkloristics, Estonian Literary Museum involved in organizing the seminar.

Piret Paal

NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS IN THE RUSSIAN NORTH

From 2006 to 2009, a team of scholars from U.S., Finland, France, Switzerland, Russia and Estonia carried out a Collaborative Research Project (CRP) within the framework of EUROCORES BOREAS Programme. The BOREAS Programme is the first large-scale international initiative in the humanities and social sciences and is targeted at developing global cooperation in the Arctic studies. Urgent need for such collaboration has been voiced also by the BOREAS Programme's initiator and coordinators:

The circumpolar North is now widely accepted as a unique early warning system for changing relations between society and the environment. This region, which includes the Arctic and the sub-Arctic, has moved to the centre of global debates on environmental change, human adaptation, new post-cold-war partnerships and issues of post-colonial governance and strategy. (Klein, Rustat-Flinton & Vitebsky 2007: 3)

The Collaborative Research Project entitled "New Religious Movements in the Russian North: Competing Uses of Religiosity after Socialism" (NEWREL, Project Leader Patty Gray) aims to better understand the contemporary religious landscape in the Russian North as it appears after Glasnost (1985–1991) and the collapse of the Soviet system. Freed from restrictions on religious practices, the inhabitants of the former Soviet Union have shown in recent decades a growing interest in various forms of spirituality, religious experience and religious institutions. Nonetheless, few scholars have paid attention to the recent rearrangements of religious life in the Russian North, the area stretching from the Finnish border to the Bering Sea.

Our specific interests could be characterized by emphasizing

[...] religious practices over beliefs, since it is practices that best reveal the social relations that are of interest to us. We see religious practices as creative solutions constructed by local residents who find themselves at the convergence of multiple influences. We are also highly attuned to the various discourses being constructed by participants in religious activity in the Russian North, the ways they represent their religion to themselves on an everyday basis, as well as how they represent it to those outside their practice. (about the CRP: *online*)

The Estonian research team is responsible for carrying out the individual project "Discourse of Religions, Mentalities and Languages in the Russian North". Our work team is constituted of seven researchers: Art Leete (principal investigator); Eva Toulouze and Aimar Ventsel (researchers); Laur Vallikivi, Liivo Niglas, Kaur Mägi (junior investigators), and Agrafena Pesikova-Sopochina (associated investigator).

Our research examines the worldview of Siberian indigenous peoples, analyzing the long-lasting stability of different mentalities (i.e. their adaptation to the Orthodox religion and later to Communist ideology) in conjunction with the restoration of the Orthodox Church and intensive growth of Evangelical missions in the Arctic. Discourse of Religions, Mentalities and Languages in the Russian North evaluates the strategies of northern groups as part of an 'in-between phenomenon': the religious mainstream being negotiated between indigenous peoples themselves, religious contacts

between indigenous groups and institutions, and with newcomers to this religious space. This multi-project study will investigate the worldviews of peoples of the Sakha Republic, Taimyr Peninsula, Western Siberia and the European part of the Russian North, and the ways in which these worldviews are altered by conversion strategies.

The Estonian team of the BOREAS has conducted fieldwork on the Kamchatka Peninsula, in Sakha Republic, Taimyr Peninsula, Western Siberia, the Nenets Autonomous Region and the Komi Republic.

We have presented papers at several international conferences. But the most prominent scholarly meeting in which the NEWREL project has been involved was the 6th International Congress of Arctic Social Sciences (ICASS VI), held in Nuuk, Greenland, on 22–26 August 2008. For the ICASS VI, the NEWREL project prepared a panel “Creative Use of Religiosity in the North: Approaching Change among Russian (Sub-)Arctic Communities through Religion”.

The researchers, whose interests are related to the NEWREL project’s topic, presented preliminary results of their studies. Eight papers of the panel were dedicated to the following topics. Patty A. Gray and Alexandra S. Antohin discussed the emergence of alternative religious discourses in Magadan. Piret Koosa and Art Leete studied the relationship between the new Russian Orthodox priest and a local Komi community. Another paper which concentrated on the Russian Orthodox issues was delivered by Viktoria V. Petrasheva and David Koester (“Past and Present Forms of Religiosity in Itelmen History”). Issues of contemporary Siberian shamanism were touched upon by Tatiana Bulgakova, Anna-Leena Siikala and Piers Vitebsky.

Different approaches to the Protestant missions in the Russian North were demonstrated by Eva Toulouze, Tatiana Vagramenko, and Laur Vallikivi (using the Nenets example) and by Patrick Plattet and Virginie Vaté (discussing the Chukchi and the Koryak cases). Alexander Panchenko and Sergey Shtyrkov analyzed the relationship between knowledge and power, science and religion as it appears in the case of the Last Testament Church that has functioned in Siberia for almost twenty years (see Research Results: *online*).

On the bases of Nuuk Congress presentations, the NEWREL project plans to publish a collection of scholarly articles (with few changes in the list of contents). Actually, the topics of the ICASS VI panel reflect the research interests and developments of the whole NEWREL project rather adequately.

In addition, the NEWREL project has paid much attention to networking inside the CRP. We have already organized the NEWREL meetings in Tartu (2006), St Petersburg (2007), Helsinki (2008) and one more meeting will be arranged in Tartu in the near future.

Active and continuous communication between the NEWREL project’s partners has significantly tightened our cooperation. Established partnership between the NEWREL scholars will enable us to plan further cooperation in the study of recent religious changes in the northern areas of Russia.

Art Leete

References

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