

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION IN A GLOBAL VILLAGE: INTERMEDIARY RESULTS AT THE 2009 ISFNR CONGRESS IN ATHENS

One of the topics tackled at the 15th Congress of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research (ISFNR) in the summer of 2009 in Athens was folk narratives in the contemporary media. Thirty scholars who had registered to the congress, though not all were able to participate, had shaped their papers to fit this utterly topical and current viewpoint. The main research aspects that were explored with different methods and level of detail discussed folklore material in contemporary films and literature (Vivian Labrie from Canada, Con Anemogiannis from Australia, Jeana Jorgensen and Kimberly Lau from the United States), narratives spread on the Internet or as mobile phone text messages and simultaneously in other channels (Nancy McEntire from the United States, Maria Kamilaki from Greece, Bairbre Ní Fhloinn from Ireland, Gordana Blagojević from Serbia), databases that have been completed and are under construction (Theo Meder from the Netherlands, Jūratė Šlekonytė from Lithuania) and every turns and bends that inspire narratives on the informational highways of the global village and on smaller paths.

On the first hot day of the Athens conference folklorists from the Department of Folkloristics, Estonian Literary Museum – Mare Kõiva (panel chair), Piret Voolaid, Anneli Baran, and Mare Kalda – formed a panel in a media session. This panel with four papers served as part of the task connected with the Estonian Science Foundation research grant “The Internet. Processes of Construction, Reproduction and Transformation of Narratives, Values and Identities” (ETF6824). Below I will take a closer look at these four papers.

Piret Voolaid, researcher of the periphery of the riddle genre, discussed humorous abbreviations and their use in Estonian folk narratives. It has to be remembered that such forms constitute the genre periphery only in the framework of traditional folklore, because conundrums, abbreviation riddles and doodles have proved viable with their frequent use in oral and written communication. While the riddle structure clearly consists of a question part and an answer part, in abbreviation riddles an acronym serves as the question. The conventional, often official explanation of an abbreviation parody ultimately proves wrong and alternative explanations are provided for acronyms subject to folkloric processing. Answers to abbreviation parodies are essentially alternative interpretations to acronyms of political institutions and concepts, sexuality, technological devices, etc. Since the creative mechanism of the genre is so dynamic, the acronyms are regularly given new interpretations. The provided numerous examples included a number of commonly known Western acronyms that are spread in English also in the local tradition. Next to these texts, the database of Estonian abbreviation riddles, compiled by Piret Voolaid, contains acronyms and their interpretations based solely on Estonian language. These abbreviations imply understanding of the Estonian context and explaining these to the international audience may prove quite a challenge. Voolaid, fortunately, has acquired considerable skills in taking on such challenges. The speaker applied the incongruence theory of humour as a theoretical framework for the analysis.

Anneli Baran, researcher of folklore studies and psycholinguistics, explored in her paper sayings and their spread in culture. At the congress, she gave an overview of the database of Estonian phrases and discussed at greater length the popularity of phraseological expressions among Estonian high school students on the basis of questionnaire responses. The results revealed that the fixed phrases which had been recorded in written documents of the first half of the eighteenth century are well known today, even though there have been semantic shifts in their reception. The direction of conceptualization is almost “correct”. For instance, the phrase *süda kukkus saapasäärde* (literally, ‘heart fell into the boot’s leg’) the traditional meaning of which in Estonian phraseology is ‘losing courage’, ‘having one’s heart in one’s mouth’, has come to signify disappointment, frustration, shame or sadness for modern users. The phrase *hunt lambanahas* ‘wolf in sheep’s clothing’ which marks an evil person pretending to be pleasant and friendly was believed to signify someone who seems shy but is tough on the inside. Baran is also interested in the actualization of phrases in netspeak. Comment pages of news portals, websites and weblogs are evidently the places where Internet users can express their attitudes and seek acceptance, using as a linguistic tool various constructs and established idiomatic phrases. Analysis of idiomatic phrases in their context of their online use shows that more than a century old phrases necessarily have not been abandoned and people use these in conversations about new phenomena, although in a somewhat altered meaning.

Mare Kõiva’s paper was entitled ‘Medicine Online. Narratives in Patient Discussion Forums’. Kõiva has observed the forums over a longer period. By juxtaposing types of communication at doctor/patient communication websites, Kõiva highlighted the dialogue between users with the same diagnose or suffering under similar symptoms. Forum users join in discussing the possibilities and effect of cure, introducing alternative cures, sharing experience in coping with a disease and telling stories. Not the least important is the emotional support shared at these forums. This way, the patient discussion groups serve as a type of writing therapy. Through these activities evolves a collective identity that affects the construction of the users’ individual identities. Thus it is possible to speak about a community of patients involved and point out the characteristic features of such a temporary group. Kõiva concluded that the construed narratives are similar to stories narrated in offline conversations and even more so, the discussion groups and their narratives are strongly related to reality.

Mare Kalda’s paper ‘Geocaching Online and Offline. On Representations of the Game in Estonia’ offered the panel audience a chance to transform from “muggles” into Geocachers. The speaker’s subject group was an online community the members of which share the same hobby and depend on the data available at the game’s website in planning their schedule. In practice, the game is not played by typing on the computer keyboard but by visiting different geographic locations and searching for hidden caches. Since the Geocaching website functions as a participative web, Kalda associated her observations with cultural influences of interactive media and the multiple solutions offered by information technology and paid more detailed attention to the attitudes the players themselves have towards the game. The latter is carried out on two dimensions: first the users describe the visits to particular caches and second they chat in the forum in order to control the game, construct player identities and create connections between the reality inside and outside the game in special sections of the forum.

Estonian paremiologist Arvo Krikmann has compared the collection of Internet folklore with pumping water out of a bottomless well. As the well shows no signs of drying, there is plenty of work to be done on studying the composition and sediments of the water.

Mare Kalda
Estonian Literary Museum

THE EUROPEAN SOCIETY FOR ASTRONOMY IN CULTURE 17TH ANNUAL MEETING (SEAC 2009)

The annual meeting of SEAC took place at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina in Alexandria, Egypt, October 25–31, 2009. It was a very hospitable ambience at a famous place, which perfectly embodied the spirit of the Mediterranean ancient world, Egyptian and Islamic culture. The conference had been convened by Prof. Mosalam Shaltout (National Research Institute of Astronomy and Geophysics – NRIAG, Egypt), Dr. Juan A. Belmonte, President of SEAC, Instituto de Astrofísica de Canarias, Tenerife, Spain, and Ms. Hoda El-Mikaty, Director of the Planetarium Science Center, Bibliotheca Alexandrina, Alexandria, Egypt. SEAC 2009 was especially dedicated to be a part of the International Year of Astronomy (IYA 2009) activities.

Around 80 talks, including 8 invited lectures, were given. There was a diversity of issues discussed, concerning the main topics: Megalithic Phenomena in the Ancient Mediterranean and Beyond, Archaeoastronomy in the Ancient Mediterranean and Beyond, Eastern Mediterranean Astronomy (Egypt, Greece, and Rhodes), Astronomy at the Ancient Bibliotheca of Alexandria, Astronomy in Old Europe, Astronomy in Middle Ages, Islamic Astronomy, Copernicus and Galileo Galilei Revolutions, Babylonian Astronomy, Mesoamerican and Pacific Astronomy, Minoan Civilization Astronomy, Traditional African Astronomy, Beyond: Other Topics in Cultural Astronomy.

To a great extent the quality of the presentations was very good or, in fact, excellent. Nevertheless, and as usual at the annual SEAC meetings, methodological approaches and problems were discussed frequently and intensively, mostly during the coffee breaks. The interdisciplinary and multifaceted researches presented had been inspiring, but also made it obvious that cultural astronomy needs to further develop ideas about bringing together methodologies and perceptions from very different fields and to ensure the strength of evidence. The focus of SEAC 2009 was set on Ancient Egyptian astronomy, but results of research in cultural astronomy in the Mediterranean area, ancient India, China, Mesoamerica, South America, and Africa were also presented. The time scale spanned several millennia, from the early Neolithic to the Islamic and Christian Middle Ages and the Baroque. Some talks were dedicated to aspects of