

NEWS IN BRIEF

THESIS DEFENCE: AVE TUPITS

ASPECTS ON FOLK MEDICINE: DEVELOPMENT OF THE DEFINITION, DATA COLLECTING AND RESEARCH IN ESTONIA IN THE 20TH CENTURY

On 27 November 2009, Ave Tupits, a researcher of the Estonian Folklore Archives, Estonian Literary Museum, defended her PhD thesis, *Aspects on Folk Medicine: Development of the Definition, Data Collecting and Research in Estonia in the 20th Century*, at the University of Tartu.

The Doctoral thesis, written under the supervision of Ülo Valk, Mare Kõiva and Marju Kõivupuu was reviewed at the defence by Mall Hiimäe with regard to folkloristics, and by Ain Raal in the field of pharmacy who considered the treatise an extremely topical one – although folk medicine is usually regarded a research field for folklorists, the relevant subject matter is also of serious interest for pharmacy wherein three selection principles are being used as a point of reference in ascertaining new medicinal plants and drugs: 1) phylogenetic, 2) mass-scale screening, 3) ethno-medicine. The latter also provides some subject matter for researchers with regard to the novel aspects in using currently known medicinal herbs. Thus, it can be stated with assuredness that folk medicine, as an object of research, is inter-disciplinary and the associated problematique, rather than being solely confined to history and cultural history, is also of tangible importance from the viewpoint of pharmacy and medicine.

The thesis summarises an aspect of ethno-medicine which has so far not been thoroughly covered – the course of relevant data collection and research activities in Estonia during the 20th century. The corpus of the dissertation is mainly supported by the annexes comprising different questionnaires.

The main value of the thesis, according to the reviewers, is the presentation of an integral and complete overview regarding the ethno-medicine related collection work and research in Estonia during the 20th century. In this regard, the monograph facilitates further research in the field of folk medicine. Primarily, the author was criticised for the descriptive style and scanty reflection regarding the results of the research in folk medicine.



Photo by Ragnar Kruusimaa 2008.

Ain Raal

Institute of Pharmacy, University of Tartu

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



*The annual meeting of SEAC took place at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina.
Photo by Andres Kuperjanov 2009.*

astronomy in education, a field of research which is very important for the future of awareness-raising in cultural astronomy, astronomy, and sciences in general. A particular point of discussion throughout the meeting was set by the question of certain anthropological conditions related to ancient worldviews and their appearance in cultural astronomy.

SEAC 2009 at Bibliotheca Alexandrina was a credit regarding the research activities in cultural astronomy. This statement is confirmed by 21 colleagues, who decided to ask for membership in SEAC and who had been approved – effectively a record in the 17th year since the foundation of the society.

Finally, the executive committee of SEAC congratulates the organizers and their numerous helpers of SEAC 17th 2009 for their excellent work.

On behalf of the executive committee

Dr. Michael A. Rappenglück MA
Secretary of SEAC

KREUTZWALD DAYS 2009: FOLKLORISTIC ISSUES

As of 1957, the Literary Museum holds an annual two-day conference for researchers of Estonian literature and folklore in December of each year, referred to as the Kreutzwald Days in honour of the founder of Estonian national literature.

The 53rd Days of Kreutzwald were dedicated to the International Year of Astronomy. Traditionally, the first day of the conference concerns issues of wider cultural and social interest, followed by a session on literature, and the second day, on 18 December, 2009 was organised by the Department of Folkloristics. The content of the interdisciplinary event was diverse – at first, the floor was given to professional astronomers: Ene Ergma provided an overview of the current situation in Estonian astronomy, from individual attitudes towards the multi-faceted nature of the of the world, to the Estonian space policy in general. Jaan Einasto, the most recognised astronomer in Estonia, spoke on the birth and development of the world, giving an insight in the advancement of cosmology during the last century wherein Ernst Öpik had a great role at the onset of studying the physics of galaxies. According to the recent data, the universe is estimated to be 13.7 billion years old. The presentation touched upon the pulsating universe theory, the measuring of the redshift of millions of galaxies, and the utilisation of these data to compile maps of the networks of superclusters. Thereafter, the speaker elaborated on cosmic microwave background radiation and the dark matter, the material of which is so far unknown to people. One of the most significant scientific out-



*At the conference. From the left: Janika Kronberg, Jaan Einasto and Ene Ergma.
Photo by Alar Madisson 2009.*

comes in the cosmology of the last decade reveals that since the epoch which corresponds to redshift of 0.7, the density of the dark matter is higher than the density of the visible matter and thus, the universe is currently expanding at an ever accelerating speed.

Jaak Jaaniste, professor of physics, focused on one of the versions of a cosmic catastrophe in 2012 – the invisible-unobservable planet/star Nibiru which is supposed to end our Earth in 2012, to be survived only by 10 % of living matter in a good outcome. The overview by the presenter showed that there are more than many of those who believe in this nonsense.

Astronomic issues were complemented by the session on folk astronomy during which Mall Hiiemäe gave an overview of the package, *Palmse Sky*, obtained from Johann Sõster, the head teacher of the local ministerial school and correspondent of Jakob Hurt in 1902. This material mainly comprises memories heard from Ann Meikar, and also a description of the village life and community lifestyle in Tammisspea at the time. Enn and Tiiu Ernits introduced Votian folk astronomy, providing a significant supplementation to their first overview on the subject matter published 25 years ago, in the nature magazine *Eesti Loodus*. The well-structured presentation first dwelt on the genesis and composition of the world, and thereafter focused on the day, i.e. the Sun and Moon. The Votians believe that there were more stars in the sky in quondam times, and the cause for this, according to one of the informants, is the fact that airplanes and sputniks have mixed up the sky (*taivaz porattu*). Likewise, according to one of the linguistic informants, the Votians had not given names to the stars in the sky, as people were working hard and had been too tired to look up into the sky. Despite all this, the Votians did have names for their stars, yet unfortunately, there is little information about these astronoms. Towards the end of their presentation, the speakers gave an overview of comets and falling stars in Votian folk astronomy.

The ethno-astronomic theme was continued by Urmas Sutrop who thoroughly discussed the designations for the North Pole and the Milky Way among different peoples. Yuri Berezkin elaborated on the earlier stratifications of European astronoms – following the geographical disposition of different chains of motifs, the presenter managed to highlight a relatively probable and dynamic development model of astronoms. With regard to the history of earlier astronomy, Peeter Espak discussed the myths associated with the creation or genesis of the cosmos as one of the main bases for the perception of life among the peoples of the Near East. Amar Annus spoke about the historical background for the making of horoscopes as a relevant brand.

Aado Lintrop's presentation on the self-mythology of the Roerich family observed how the authentic tradition of different peoples has been synthesised into a legend of a miraculous stone, first mentioned in 1911, accumulating the mystic energy flow derived from the Orion constellation. The speaker presented the further development of relevant events, myth creation and the belief that such myths would later become a reality. Andres Kuperjanov focused on some widespread astronomic everyday beliefs regarding constellations, and supported the previous speaker on horoscopes, stating that in the present-day meaning, astrology was used as the PR and fundraising source at the time when astronomy began to develop as science.

For economising reasons, one of the panels of the interdisciplinary medical anthropology conference *Medica VI, Influence of Astral Phenomena on Medicine*, took place in the framework of the same event. Mare Kõiva's presentation on lunar phases and the Sun in the treatment strategies of the 20th century introduced several healing methods and described the relevant understanding and incantations associated with celestial bodies. Raivo Kalle's and Renata Sõukand's paper on plants and stars was displayed as a poster presentation, specifying that several forest flowers with white petals have been associated with stars; whereas star flowers can also be the ones with yellow or red blossoms. There are a number of folk names given to plants and herbs which can be associated with the sky, the Moon and the Sun. The presentation also dwelled upon the influence of celestial bodies on different jobs of work, and on the utilisation of lunar phases in the treatment with medicinal plants. The signs of the zodiac, however, obtained significance in the practical life of people since the thirties of the previous century.

The rest of the session continued in a poster format, whereby I would like to mention Piret Paal's presentation on the treatment of cancer in Finnish folk medicine, with a special focus on the beliefs related to the Moon and Sun.

The intensive day ended with the promotional presentation of a CD of Kihnu dance tunes *Kihnu tantsulood* (compiled by Ingrid Rüütel, Angela Arraste and Krista Sildoja), and Dan Ben-Amos's book *Kommunikatsioon ja folkloor* 'Communication and Folklore' (published by Estonian Literary Museum, Department of Folkloristics).

Andres Kuperjanov
Estonian Literary Museum