

A FEW IMPRESSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

**American Anthropological Association: 109th Annual Meeting.
November 17–21, 2010. New Orleans**

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In November 2010, our small group of Estonian scholars participated in the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) in New Orleans, Louisiana.¹ The general theme of the meeting was “Circulation”, inviting participants to explore the moving and mobility of people, objects, ideas, images, goods, practices and technologies, in various contexts as well as to critically assess scholarly understandings of circulation. The AAA is the world’s largest professional organization of scholars in anthropology and related fields. On this major scholarly forum of the year we presented our own papers and also visited several other panels. Since around 6,000 scholars participated in the meeting and there were 10–15 panels running simultaneously all the time, we could attend only a minor segment of the overall amount of sessions. Hereby we attempt to provide a few impressions gathered during this significant forum, focusing on anthropology of post-colonialism (including post-socialism), anthropology of Christianity and urban anthropology. First though let us give a short summary of the papers authored by us and our closest collaborators from abroad.

In the morning of the first day of the meeting, Elo-Hanna Seljamaa presented her paper on reflections on Estonian nationalist discourse in a panel titled *Migratory Spaces of Inclusion and Exclusion*. She strove to provide a balanced overview of Estonian minority policies and commented on larger societal drives that have shaped them, arguing that the post-Soviet Estonian state seeks to contain Soviet era immigrants while at the same time keeping them at bay. In addition, Elo-Hanna gave a few hints about the discrepancies between dominant integration discourse and grass-root-level responses from her fieldwork partners commonly classified as “the Russian-speaking population”.

The rest of us were, together with our Russian and Swiss/US colleagues, involved in a panel bearing the title of *Pentecostalism in Contemporary Rus-*

sia: Globalization, Indigenization, and Social Context of Charismatic Christianity. The concept of the panel was derived from the theoretical framework of an international project, which studies Pentecostal and Charismatic movements in Russia, predominately in the northern regions. Our joint project is coordinated by Alexander Panchenko and Sergei Shtyrkov from the European University at Saint Petersburg.

The panel was introduced by David Koester (University of Alaska, Fairbanks) who presented a retrospective on an earlier project of our joint team (NEWREL, see <http://www.newrel.org/nrm>) that similarly focused on contemporary religious change in different regions of Russia. David expressed his optimism about the prospects of our new project and proposed that the continuation of the teamwork would promise reasonable progress in this important strand of research.

Piret Koosa provided an overview of social strategies of a small group of Evangelical Christians in a remote Komi village in the Ust-Kulom district in the south-eastern part of the Komi Republic. In spite of attracting much attention, mainly negative and because of the American missionary present, the group has remained very small, having less than 15 regular members. Preaching locally of a new faith is irritating for the villagers because they perceive it as an attack against their traditions and Orthodox religious continuity in their families. Furthermore, Evangelicals evidently carry and somehow give off the idea that their faith is more real and “right” than that of many of whom consider themselves to be Orthodox. It causes serious tensions between the Evangelical group and the rest of the community and makes the dialogue between them quite intriguing.

Art Leete analyzed social strategies of another Protestant group in the same region. The tiny Pentecostal community, led by a local-born Komi missionary, has existed for 10 years since 2000. The predominant issue that determines the slow social progress of the Pentecostals in the Ust-Kulom district is connected to the missionary’s personal choices of style. He does not try to apply extensive methods of missionization. At the same time he is convinced – in a rather inactive or fatalistic way – that better times for his group are still ahead.

Laur Vallikivi explored an ethnographic case of idol destruction in an encounter between a reindeer herding family and a Ukrainian Pentecostal missionary on the slopes of the Polar Ural Mountains in the northernmost part of the Komi Republic. The negotiation practices of idol destruction illustrate remarkable discrepancies between the Nenets and Russian Protestant understandings of the language (e.g. linguistic persuasion and coercion) and materiality. The act of destruction potentially cuts existing relationships both

with the spirits, kin and one's own past self among the Nenets, yet what is exactly destroyed and what a rupture brings about is not necessarily understood by the Nenets in the same way as the missionary expects.

Tatyana Bulgakova (Saint Petersburg, Russia) dedicated her report to the development of the Pentecostal Church in the context of post-Soviet religious transformations among the Nanay people in Russia's Far East. Tatyana argued that the post-Soviet religious change appeared among the Nanay people without causing a loss of shamanic traditions (although traditional shamanism was very much lost by the end of the Soviet era). When the Pentecostal missionaries arrived and demanded converts to reject shamanism, the Nanay perceived it as a request to renounce their ethnic cultural traditions and not their religion. Actually, when the Nanay people came across multiple new religious choices after Perestroika, a number of them preferred the Pentecostal Church because its religiosity seemed to match with the Nanay understanding of inherited shamanic practices.

Alexander Panchenko gave the last presentation of our panel. His paper was titled "*They Keep Killing Children*": *Pentecostalism and the Rise of "Anti-Sectarian" Discourse in the USSR after 1960*. Alexander analyzed the blood libel legend and other stereotypes employed in the anti-sectarian discourse by Soviet propaganda against the Pentecostals in the early 1960s. He demonstrated how certain interpretations of religious practices and behavioral models were represented by official propaganda and public opinion in order to attack the Pentecostals and other religious minorities in the former Soviet Union.

The 2010 Annual Meeting reflects a sudden upsurge of the interest in the anthropology of Christianity (especially the anthropology of charismatic Christianity) which only ten years ago was a relatively marginal research topic. This trend echoes the quick spread of Christianity itself, especially in the southern hemisphere but not only this, as the panel on the Russian North demonstrates. For example, the panel *Going Global: The Transformative Power of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christian Networks* focussed on the specific ability of Pentecostal Christianity to spread fast (attracting 9 million people annually) and maintain its shape. Key questions of the panel tackled features of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity that mould their interaction with each other in local communities, Pentecostal networking practices and identity-making, and conditions that support or obstruct the flow of global Pentecostal-Charismatic Christian discourses and practices.

Another panel, labeled as *Belief, Participation, Circulation: Challenges in Participant-Observer Fieldwork with Evangelical, Pentecostal, and Charismatic Christianities*, was dedicated to problems of the anthropologist's personal and

professional self-analysis while in the field which is heavily loaded with intensive religious feelings and thoughts. A participant field-worker confronts several crucial problems among the different charismatic Christians. To what extent must one participate in intensive practices (prayer, prophecy, speaking in tongues, healing) of the congregations under study? What to do if people seriously expect a researcher to get converted? Or in other words, do they trust only those who are completely engaged in their shared spiritual venture? Issues related to uncomfortable feelings regarding the researcher's own possible religious concerns and demands of sincerity were also actively discussed during this session.

The panel titled *Rethinking Postcoloniality and Postsocialism: Circulations of Religiosity and Secularization in the Expansion of Sovereignty* approached religious issues from a different perspective, exploring similarities and differences between the contexts of colonialism/post-colonialism and socialism/post-socialism. Presenting case studies from different societies, the participants explored problems of modernity in colonized and revolutionary societies. These societies faced the rapid expansion of secularization, but after the decolonization or the collapse of state socialism, they have experienced certain religious counter-reaction. These responses include new religious nationalisms, non-state or anti-state religions, causing a complex interchange between secular and religious modernist projects. One of the ideas expressed in the discussion following the presentations was that both post-colonialism and post-socialism ought to be treated as a relation rather than a condition.

In the panel *Conversion as an Analytic Category: Creating Emerging Worlds*, effects of radical spiritual change on individual and collective lives were discussed. Panelists examined conversion both ethnographically and analytically, aiming to reveal its formal logic, and investigated conscious and unconscious shifts in values, understandings and knowledge that go along with such religious experiences.

We also attended the panel dedicated to the relationship between religious domain and medicine titled *Bridging Spirituality and Medical Practices in New Ways*. Our main interest was related to Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer's (Georgetown University, USA) presentation that was devoted to the analysis of spiritual aspects of contemporary Sakha healers. Professor Balzer explained how healers had combined their medical practices with spirituality in different ways. She demonstrated how multiple aspects of modern medicine were creatively mixed with traditional healing techniques relying on the support of ancestors and helper spirits.

In conclusion, this short overview suggests that studies of Charismatic Christianity are of crucial importance for several fundamental methodological

issues of cultural and social anthropology. Hot topics of the contemporary anthropological research on Christianity were prominently presented and thoroughly discussed at the Annual Meeting, with contributions from several major scholars of the field (for example, Simon Coleman, Webb Keane, Joel Robbins and others).

Many scholars in the field of urban anthropology used the Annual Meeting's general theme "Circulation" to explore links between the production of space and the formation of subjectivities and national identities. As Michael Herzfeld noted in his introduction to the panel, *Seeing Like a City: The Anthropology of Urban Planning*, no system can be perfect or better than people who put it into practice. Therefore, although Western modernist thinking emphasizes rationalism and efficiency in the use of urban space, built environment and its re-workings are always shaped by religious and other factors specific to the given culture. Several papers in this panel looked at instances in different countries whereby immigrant communities were invited to participate in town planning and came up with solutions that made visible and challenged the values and norms promoted by the nation state. For example, while urban planning in Sweden seeks to build sameness, the diasporic Syriac Orthodox Christians of Södertälje adopted the strategy of self-segregation by designing houses that differ from the "typically Swedish", but correspond to their family-centered and communal life style.

The panel titled *Between Governmentality and State Coercion: Governing Bodies in Space* focused more directly on struggles over public urban spaces and on spatial techniques used by states to reinforce their presence as well as to govern marginal groups deemed as a threat. The paper by Ilgin Erdem on the efforts of the Turkish state to suppress commemorative gatherings on one of Istanbul's central squares provided particularly interesting parallels with the Estonian 2007 Bronze Soldier crisis: in both cases the government sought to discipline citizens by appropriating a place and de-sacralizing it.

Another panel bearing the title of *Strangers and Neighbours* approached urban spaces and life from the perspective of the intertwined concepts of strangeness and intimacy. Panelists explored various practices through which intimacy is performed (e.g. distinction made in Italy between immigrant caretakers of the elderly and volunteers of Italian background who mimic the familiar care) or engineered by means of town planning, though in actuality, urban communities are more likely to emerge from situations of conflict where residents join forces in order to confront officials and make claims.

These and many other panels and papers in the broad field of urban ethnography demonstrated that rather than being just a setting in which social processes unfold and research takes place, space is a physical product of the work

of particular actors, a site of constant struggles and negotiations as well as a means of producing and resisting particular distinctions and subject positions. As a city and community that is still in the process of rebuilding itself after hurricane Katrina, New Orleans provided a symbolically laden venue for exploring these and other core questions of anthropology and related fields.

NOTES

- ¹ This research was supported by the European Union through the European Regional Development Fund (Center of Excellence CECT), Estonian Science Foundation (Grant No. 8335) and the Center for the Study of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements in Russia.