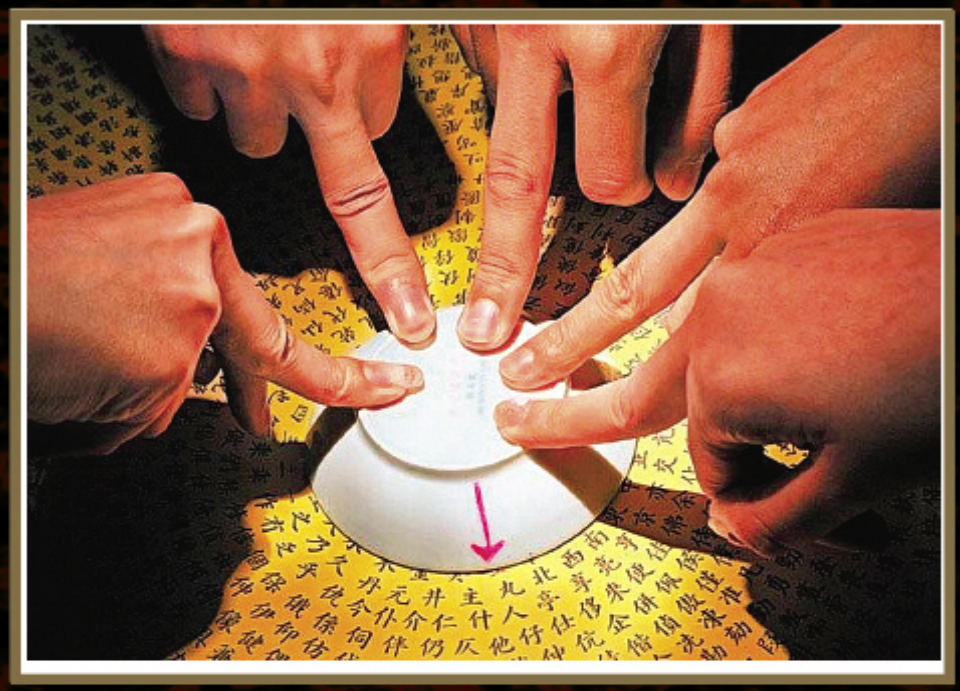

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**Editorial address:**
Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore
Vanemuise 42–235
51003 Tartu
Estonia
phone: +372 737 7740
fax: +372 737 7706
e-mail: folklore@folklore.ee
home page: http://www.folklore.ee/folklore





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# INTRODUCTION: BELIEF NARRATIVES AND THEIR RESEARCH

***Reet Hiiemäe***

This special issue of the journal *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore* is dedicated to belief narratives. The articles in the current issue are based on papers that were presented at two joint conferences that took place simultaneously in Macau (China) on March 23–28, 2015. Both conferences focused on the traditions of the supernatural: the conference under the heading *Vernacular Religion, Folk Belief, and Traditions of the Supernatural* concentrated on the representations of the supernatural in folklore, whereas the second conference, *The Supernatural in Literature and Film*, explored more specifically the role of the supernatural in literature and film. The idea of the conferences was to explore scientific theories and analyses regarding the concept of the supernatural and supernatural experiences, and find ways to compare respective data across cultures. The current journal issue offers a selection of articles and case studies that are additionally linked with the topic of belief narratives and narrativity, and investigate it from various angles. As for various reasons some of the initially planned authors could not be published, two other topical articles (authored by Victoria Chervaneva and Vito Carrassi) were added to the original selection. As a separate section, the journal presents a case analysis by Elizabeth Ann Berton-Reilly about an American Estonian woman, offering an example of how supernatural beliefs are integrated into life history narration and identity-building.

Research on supernatural experiences, belief narratives, and vernacular belief in a broader sense has increasingly become a trend not only among folklorists, but also other scientists of the humanities (e.g. theologians, historians, scholars of literature). In earlier folklore research, the term 'folk belief' was mostly applied to peasant groups in culturally homogeneous village societies. In the recent decades the meaning of the term has expanded, covering also urban populations and internet communities, which are similarly important contexts where such traditions of creative cultural production develop and spread. The emphasis in research is not any more on 'folk', but rather on individuals, groups, and communities. As Adam Grydehoj, the main organiser of these two confer-

ences, pointed out, supernatural phenomena, intertwined with vernacular belief, are a truly global phenomenon, and traditions of the supernatural are equally at home in crowded cities and on distant farmsteads. Additionally, interactions between the media (e.g. films, TV-shows) and belief narratives on global as well as local level have become a relevant research topic.

In theoretical discussions the question has been raised if the term 'belief narrative' is appropriate at all, because especially in the contemporary traditions narrating about supernatural phenomena does not necessarily include believing in them. In the same vein, Willem de Blécourt has expressed the opinion that the concept of belief is unsuitable for academic purposes because it is often hard to determine whether an informant 'believes' in something or not, or is unsure about it, or changes his or her mind in different situations (Blécourt 2012: 9). However, disputing about the reality or non-reality of supernatural phenomena or ways of interpreting them has been one of the key characteristics of belief narratives already in earlier times and this mere fact should not hinder us from using this term. The hope to find out the essence of mysterious phenomena or the truth about supernatural experiences is often the very reason why such narratives are generated and told. Therefore the attention of folklorists who study belief narratives should focus not that much on the question of believing, but rather on the ways how individuals and communities verbalise and communicate their experiences as well as various interpretations and beliefs connected with such experiences. I agree with Lotte Tarkka who stressed in one of her recent papers about word magic that rather than a matter of 'belief', word magic – as well as other folklore connected with belief – is a matter of social interaction and performance practices. Thus, the magical power of the word is intertwined in the intergeneric system of communication and cannot be separated from the other aspects of power and efficacy assigned to words and utterances (cf. Tarkka 2016: 7). On the other hand, Vito Carrassi argues in this issue that some sort of belief is included in any narrative and even in fairy tales one may not conceive the ideas of magic, wonder and, above all, fairy separated from vernacular belief. Yet the attitudes of a narrator towards a tale may vary even in the lifetime of a single individual more than once. Concludingly, I would argue that irrespective of the degree of believing, the ways how individuals verbalise their experiences influence the ways that the world is perceived by the narrators themselves and by surrounding people. Ultimately the narrated representations have the power of gradually shaping social reality, as my own article about the interpretation of non-verbal communication in belief narratives in this issue also exemplifies.

The processes of meaning-making of otherwise unexplainable experiences through narrating are described also in several other articles. **Kirsten Marie**

**Raahauge** points out that nowadays many people continue to experience things that they cannot understand or explain (e.g. weird voices, sensations or visual appearances). She describes in her article, based on her recent fieldwork on haunted houses in Denmark, how people who do not believe in the possibility of supernatural agency struggle to make sense of their experiences, producing vague narratives that refer to possible explanations derived from traditional Danish folklore, but also use elements from entertainment products, such as TV-series on haunting, ghost movies, or advertisements about ghost lore used by owners of castles and manors for tourism-related reasons.

Most of the articles in this volume analyse, among other things, how supernatural ideas are adapted and transformed in new social and cultural settings. **Huai Bao** in his contribution about Chinese thrillers describes how traditional concepts of mediumship and foretelling find resonance in modern films and work there, in turn, as a trigger for the creative fantasy of the audience and for their new or modified beliefs and rituals. **Kaarina Koski**'s article focuses on continuities and changes in Finnish belief traditions. She points out that modern Finnish people who are confronted with out-of-the-ordinary experiences often seek to interpret their experiences through a scientific or Christian vocabulary. Even though neither the Lutheran Church nor science accept personal supernatural encounters, these two discourses are perceived as culturally legitimate and thus help to retain the experiencer's own normality. Koski also outlines a third interpretative line that involves seeking alternative information from various sources and gradually developing an alternative worldview with spiritual emphasis. She concludes that these new worldviews, drawing on international literature and the Internet, have little in common with preindustrial belief traditions in which the presence of unseen realities was accepted more readily.

**Victoria Chervaneva**'s contribution offers the reader a structural approach to the belief narratives. She describes the system of character nomination in oral demonological narratives about the dead, paying particular attention to the syntagmatic level, i.e. methods of introducing demonic characters and linguistic tools employed for this purpose. Chervaneva also attempts to explain the role that this naming system plays in the organisation of a demonological narrative, and to show the relationships between character references and storyline of the text. The questions of structure and classification are also the topic of **Vito Carrassi**'s article about fairy tales within the historical-cultural context of the Irish tradition. The author concludes that the fairy tale can express a multidimensional worldview and has a potential for a more complex idea of reality than usually depicted in the narrative research.

**Kirsten Møllegaard** combines literature and the supernatural in her case study about the rich folklore surrounding the famous writer Edgar Allan Poe. Poe's short and complicated life and mysterious death have fuelled both academic and folkloristic narratives. Møllegaard brings to the reader's notice that academic narratives often analyse Poe's fiction biographically as reflections of his life, such as his impoverishment, alcoholism, and frustrated ambition, yet folk narratives typically focus on dark romantic mysteries, especially his fascination with pale, dying women and death. Møllegaard realises that a comparison between Poe's fiction and contemporary legends surrounding Poe's person offers broader sociological perspectives on the complexity of folklore in urban settings.

I hope that the readers will benefit from the articles in this volume, understanding better the interactions between lived and narrated supernatural experiences, and the inputs and adaptations from films, television, and literature, which influence the ways that they are verbalised and re-narrated. Finally, I am deeply grateful to all the authors for their time and effort in writing their articles for this special journal issue. It became clear already during the conferences that not all research questions regarding supernatural experiences and their reflections in belief narratives can be clearly answered and sometimes there is more than one valid interpretation. Thus, further formal and informal debates and analyses will surely follow on this topic in the form of conversations, conferences, articles, and books. I hope that the current collection of articles provides a good platform for continuing these discussions in the future.

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# DISCUSSING THE SUPERNATURAL IN CONTEMPORARY FINLAND: DISCOURSES, GENRES, AND FORUMS

*Kaarina Koski*

**Abstract**: The supernatural is a debated issue on the Internet even though people generally avoid face-to-face discussion about it. This article[1] gives an analytical overview of discussions about the supernatural in contemporary Finland. The research material consists of a sample of Finnish media and online discussions about the supernatural, as well as letters describing and interpreting personal experiences. Texts published on different forums show different generic features of style, content, and the traditionality of expression and interpretations. The texts can be entertaining or argue about moral and ontological issues, about the emergence of these experiences in human mind, or the status and sanity of people who have had these experiences. Opinions and interpretations on all forums draw on various discourses, of which five are presented. The science-oriented and mental discourses seek for natural explanations. The spiritual reality is accounted for, albeit in different forms, in the popular Christian, fundamental Christian, and alternative spiritual discourses. The discourses can be combined in various ways. The experiencers themselves primarily seek legitimate interpretations and sometimes they modify or stretch the collectively accepted scientific or Christian worldview to fit their experiences. However, sometimes the experiences lead to a change of the worldview. The sciences are also criticised for their narrow attitude.

**Keywords**: Christian, discourse, experience, interpretation, legitimacy, mental, scientific, spiritual, supernatural

## INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to interpret or explain experiences that seem to be beyond our understanding of the ontology of everyday reality. Various belief systems interpret such experiences as supernatural, divine, or paranormal. Institutionalised religions are selective about what kinds of experiences they find appropriate. Scientific worldview, in turn, denies the existence of such phenomena altogether and suggests that the experiences originate in the person's own mind.

Scholars of religion characterise Nordic societies as post-secular: the public sphere is secular and relies on natural sciences but various religious activities

have visible roles in public and political life, making the society pluralistic (Casanova 2012: 30–32). At the beginning of the 20th century, 98% of the Finnish population were still members of the Lutheran Church. In the year 2014, the percentage was 73.7% while the amount of the non-religious had grown (Ev.lut.kirkko 2014; Palmu et al. 2012: 29). At the same time, there are over 600 different religious or alternative spiritual societies in Finland (Ketola 2007: 33), and the contradiction felt between religion and science is milder than in most European countries. There are no substantial differences between the values held by religious and non-religious population. One reason is that the Lutheran Church has affected the moral atmosphere of Finland for centuries (Ketola & Kääriäinen & Niemelä 2007). In this context, namely non-Christian supernatural or paranormal experiences and beliefs are regarded as inappropriate and illegitimate for both religious and scientific reasons. Especially the science-oriented sceptics who represent the core values of the society actively defend their superior worldview against what they regard as gullibility, ignorance, stupidity, and the corruption of reason.

Yet, there are still people who do report having had experiences that they regard as supernatural. They may see grey or bright figures that they interpret as dead relatives, spirits, extraterrestrials, or angels. They may hear voices that give advice and save them from danger or scold and humiliate them. They can feel a hand on their shoulder, or a cold or fragrant whiff in the air (see, e.g., Laiho & Kaunonen & Aho 2014: 51). Especially when the sensation is very strong or the experiences occur frequently, people urge to find an interpretation and explanation to the phenomenon. Even though researchers have found a strong correlation between paranormal beliefs and extraordinary experiences (e.g. Pechey & Halligan 2012), the latter occur also among those who have no such beliefs (Woodard 2012). Especially for people with a secular worldview, finding a meaningful and reasonable explanation is a challenge and may require changing one's worldview and rejecting the publicly legitimate expectations.

People whose experiences differ from their own expectations as well as from the legitimate mainstream views adopt various strategies in their search for meaningful explanations and legitimacy. The three major frames of reference to interpret one's unusual experiences in Finland, as well as generally in the Western world, are: the scientific, the Christian, and the alternative spiritual (see Gilhus 2012: 240; Northcote 2007: 53). The institutional legitimacy of science and Christianity makes people want to rely on them even if their experiences do not actually fit into the frame. If the difference between the experience and the legitimate meaning system is unbridgeable, people turn to alternative spiritual interpretations. However, not everybody considers it necessary to find a special explanation. In some families precognition and omens have been fre-

quent enough to make these phenomena seem almost ordinary and natural to the family members. Furthermore, some people simply accept that inexplicable things happen and do not find it disquieting.

In this article, I analyse the collision between the experiences that have no legitimate interpretative frame and the unwelcoming public discussion. I study the ways people make sense of their experiences and the power struggles that permeate the discussions and interpretations, and use discourse analysis and genre approach to structure the discussions, narratives, views, and attitudes around the supernatural and unusual experiences.

## INTERNET FORUMS, NARRATIVES, AND GENRES

My research material consists of various written sources that touch upon the topic of the extraordinary or supernatural experiences. A greater part of my research material originates from the Internet, which has become an important forum for discussing the supernatural and extraordinary experiences. People who are afraid of losing their face if they reveal their controversial experiences to others can share their thoughts and questions anonymously on the Internet. In many cases, the Internet also appears to be the most preferred channel to find information about these things (see, e.g., Hiiemäe forthcoming). I have used professional media content, such as articles and blogs from newspapers and magazines, to outline the public discussion about these topics. To study the popular response and opinions, I have used internet comments to the media content as well as posts on various discussion forums. I have also used a collection of letters that were sent to the research project *Mind and the Other* during the years 2013–2014. The internet materials create a cultural context for the experiences and feelings reported in the letters, which, in turn, deepen the view of the experiences and interpretations.

The internet discussions that I have analysed can be divided roughly into three types, which show slightly different attitudes and styles. The first type is internet forums and comment threads of daily news with a wide reception. These forums are known for their thoughtless and rude comments, so it is not surprising that here the reluctant and stigmatising attitude towards the topic is most salient. Below is a typical reaction to an article of seers:

> *What kinds of drugs do these shamans take? I have also been pissed sometimes, but I have never seen gnomes. People used to be taken for treatment when they saw little men!* (IS_Vir/Lapponia 22.1.2014, 19:42)

Generally, the comment threads of daily news do not focus on the ontological questions per se but show the weak status of deviant experiences and beliefs in a society that they, according to the dominant attitude, do not and should not belong to. The focus is on the people involved in esoteric activities and on what is wrong with them: either mental health or morals. I will return to the features of public discussion further on.

The second type is discussions or sites particularly dedicated to extraordinary experiences or the supernatural. On these specialised forums, the discussants have more information about the topic than on the general sites (see also Hiiemäe forthcoming). They are also more committed to the subject and find it worth discussing. Not only the experients but also their opponents generally make a more justified and careful contribution. These forums often include detailed descriptions of experiences and personal interpretations about the connections to another reality:

> *I am not afraid of death. My mother and my child left for the hereafter and they have both sent me messages. We go home when we die. Only now I am sure about it, because after my child's death I did not believe in anything anymore, I was just angry and bitter – time helped me to understand my child's messages. Be open, ask angels to help you, pray! And you will be shown. I don't even belong to church myself, religions have been invented by us on earth, but we all have a common god, which is love itself. Our dead loved ones constantly visit us. And we all have the ability to sense them if we just close our minds for a moment to all this surrounding fuss, trivialities, and reasoning, and trust our intuition. Full stop.* (S24_KEF/en pelkää 29.7.2011, 01:35)

The third type consists of sites in which people are invited to send ghost stories. I have focused on one ghost story site that was established by a daily newspaper in 2010. The invitation read: "Share your own ghost story with the readers! It can be a so-called true story, your own experience that seemed supernatural – or just a story that has given you the creeps" (IS_Kumm). The site received 230 posts, which included both traditional and first-hand experience narratives, comments to them, discussion about interpretations, and also encouraging comments from the audience, such as: "I have never encountered a ghost, but I love ghost stories. I hope this thread will be looooong!" (IS_Kumm/Essi 16.2.2010, 19:56)

Narratives on this forum show similarity with older legend tradition at least in three respects. First, unlike in the other internet discussions and the letter material, there are expressions of collective moral and belief tradition, such as the moral point that the deceased comes to express his/her disapproval if the offspring ignores his/her wishes. Second, the stories are aesthetically elabo-

rated: they have a neat and self-validating narrative structure that makes them dramatic and entertaining. A typical storyline first describes the setting and the haunting event. Later the protagonist is told that the haunting had been earlier sensed by others as well, and that a tragedy – an accident, murder, or some other premature death – has happened in that place:

> *I was visiting a summer cottage of an acquaintance. He asked me to heat the sauna. Well I went and filled the water cauldron and put wood into the stove. I felt like smoking a cigarette on the steps. It was a calm afternoon. While I was smoking I felt a very cold current of air passing me. I wondered what it was.*
>
> *Well I talked about it in the house. The owner said it was nothing new, he had heard the floor creaking when he stayed overnight in the house, even though there was no one else.*
>
> *Afterwards, I heard that a person had been murdered in that house.* (IS_Kumm/Jarski 16.2.2010, 17:55)

A third feature in which this corpus parallels with the older legend tradition and its collectivity is that in these stories haunting is often connected to places. In the letter material as well as on discussion forums, the experiences and abilities are personal and almost entirely related to the experiencing individual. A place, in turn, gets a reputation as being haunted when there are multiple collectively shared encounters. This also shifts the responsibility for seeing weird things away from the narrator: it is not him or her that keeps seeing things but it is the place in which anyone could have experienced it.

In belief narrative tradition, the wish to discuss one's own experiences and the limits of reality is combined with the desire for entertainment. In a later stage of the thread, the discussion develops in two directions: arguments over whether the experiences need to be scientifically explained or not, and popular horror movies and novels. On ghost story forums, the questions about ontology or appropriateness are not salient. Instead, the stories are legitimate as entertainment – the creepier the better.

In addition to internet sources, I have a collection of nearly 200 letters that people have spontaneously sent to researchers. These letters have been carefully anonymised and the names given to the writers are aliases. This collection (MT) started when the research project *Mind and the Other*, financed by the Finnish Academy's Human Mind programme, started its work in 2013 and received some publicity in the traditional media. Dozens of people who are involved in these issues contacted us to share their experiences, to bring forth their suppressed truth and also to offer their contribution to the research. The letter corpus is valuable but the researchers also realise it is biased in two re-

spects. First, the age distribution of the writers concentrates on middle-aged and older. The younger generations are absent – perhaps because they have discussed their experiences on the Internet. Second, it is known that spiritual or New Age circles appreciate personal experiences and are generally critical about the sciences (Partridge 2005: 75–76). These people who spontaneously chose to share their experiences with an academic research group appear more sympathetic to sciences than spiritually inclined people in general. In addition to describing their experiences, the writers have expressed their gratitude to researchers for studying these issues, offered their help, given tips to the researchers and wished luck to the project. While this has been encouraging, in research it forms a bias. These biases I have hoped to repair with internet materials. People who wrote to us trusted that the researchers who read the letters would understand and respect them. Nevertheless, many of them first emphasised that they were healthy and normal. They wished that the researchers would finally illuminate the problem of their out of the ordinary experiences, such as the following:

> *This happened in the 1980s. In the small hours, I dreamed that my father had a big wound in his head and was bleeding terribly. The dream was so distressing that I had to call my mother and ask her if everything was OK. I started by asking whether my dad was all right, to which my mother answered, how come you know about it already; we just came back from the hospital. My father had had a cerebral infarction and been taken to hospital.* (Helena MT 12/2)

The style of the letters is intimate and the meanings they convey are personal. The circumstances of the experiences, as well as the social relations with people involved, are carefully explained. Many writers present scientific, Christian, or spiritual frames of reference to explain or analyse what happened, but practically no one applies any moral or other narratively motivated solution to the encounter. Compared to the ghost stories above, which resemble traditional belief legends, these letters could be characterised as personal experience narratives that also used to be called memorates.[2] The narrator is truly committed to the narrated event and the story or description has maximum personal relevance and no aspiration towards traditional meanings or entertaining performance. Furthermore, while the motifs and contents of the ghost stories mainly iterate collectively known imagery likely to be accepted by the audience, the descriptions in the letters are not standardised. For example, farewells from the deceased loved ones are common in both materials, but only the letters involve farewells also from dogs and cats. A personal relationship with a pet is very important to many people today, but visits from deceased pets are a relatively

new phenomenon and not – at least not yet – recognised in collective belief tradition.

Many of the writers at least implicitly maintain that there is something very general or even universal in their experiences. In this respect, the experience narratives have a testimonial character. Testimonies are reactions to situations where there are competing truths. The concept has been used in connection to politically suppressed people's life experiences. Anthropologist and oral historian Vieda Skultans (1997) introduced the term to describe Latvians' narratives about their fates in the Soviet period. In this sense, the testimonial aspiration is wider than in traditional storytelling, in which the narrator wants to prove that the narrated event has truly taken place. Here, testimonies of supernatural encounters stand for all the people whose uncanny experiences have been neglected or stigmatised by the majority, by the church, medicine, and science. They testify to the suppression and disapproval they have faced:

> *I have had a deep feeling of being different and not understood. I have been judged because of my spirituality and because I see and experience more than others. Today I hide this side of me from all but those adept in these issues. If I want to manage in working life well enough to earn a normal income, I cannot risk being labelled as a nutcase*. (Laura MT 71/1)

By sharing their stories, the writers want to make the world understand and acknowledge their reality. Almost all the letters are from people who have experienced something uncanny or supernatural themselves. Opposing views and discourses are, nevertheless, present in their texts as they constantly defend themselves against the critique inherent in the dominant worldview.

Some of the letters are from individuals who have, after active seeking, found or developed a spiritual worldview, either a personal one or within a society of the like-minded. A few of these writers also function as psychics or channel spiritual energies and messages. These specialist practices, as well as the wide field of spiritual and esoteric societies and entrepreneurs in Finland, are beyond the scope of this study.

## THE PARANORMAL TURN

Since the 1970s, researchers have observed a growing interest in the occult and paranormal in the Western world. Supernatural motifs and esotericism have been estimated to have entered the Western mainstream culture, and not exclusively as fiction (Northcote 2007: 170–172; Partridge 2013: 115–117). On the one hand, supernatural topics and motifs have permeated popular culture and

the media. On the other hand, alternative spiritual beliefs and practices such as Neo-Paganism, eastern meditative practices, and esoteric traditions have gained popularity in the religious life, while institutional religions are declining. Christopher Partridge has named the commonly shared reserve of esoteric ideas and the various ways to use it *occulture*. He portrays occulture as part of ordinary life in the Western world (Partridge 2013). While this development is without doubt in motion, we should remember there is also an opposition to it. The rise of paranormal interests has been followed by the emergence of sceptical societies as well (Northcote 2007). Furthermore, not all the developments reported in the Western countries have occurred in the same form in Finland.

The metamorphosis of religious life has been characterised as a *spiritual revolution*, which goes hand in hand with the need for more democratic religious societies and personal experiences. Younger generations prefer self-centred spirituality in which one's own experiences are the final authority, to the collective and hierarchical religious institutions in which one has to conform to an external, higher authority. At the same time, they turn from adherents to clients and choose elements for their spiritual life from various sources. This tendency is part of a *subjective turn* in the Western world (Heelas & Woodhead 2005: 2–5; Ketola 2007: 30; Lassander 2014: 15). The theory of spiritual revolution, however, needs some modification when applied to Finland. First of all, religiosity and spirituality are not mutually exclusive: Finnish survey data show that a third of the population identifies themselves as both religious and spiritual. Furthermore, not only the spiritual activities have grown but also the independent Neo-Charismatic denominations, especially Pentecostalism, have increased in popularity (Ketola 2007). In other words, the structural change of religiosity leads to a shift from institutional forms to small, more democratic groups, but does not always involve the adoption of new spiritual imageries.

In the field of popular culture, the so-called *paranormal turn* has brought occult and supernatural motifs into the core of popular fiction and television shows. In many countries it has also introduced a variety of commercial products, such as psychic magazines, legend tripping tours, and ghost hunter kits. Annette Hill suggests that one reason for this tendency is the participating audience that seeks for uncanny experiences. The commercial production follows this demand (Hill 2011: 1–8). The film industry has partly superseded the old narrative traditions and, indeed, many popular films reiterate and update traditional folklore motifs (Schechter 2001 [1988]). It has been noted that even openly fictional contents have an impact on the readers' and viewers' thinking and increase their belief in the supernatural (see Bao about supernatural thrillers in this volume). Therefore, fictive films and texts cannot be considered as mere entertainment (Dégh 2001: 248–251; Goode 2000: 196).

As serious face-to-face discussion on these topics is scarce, horror movies are sometimes the main source of information about certain supernatural beings. Occasionally, interpretations of strange experiences are taken from movies (see Hiiemäe forthcoming).

Erich Goode has argued that the media is sympathetic to the paranormal because it provides astonishing news. The tabloids publish items that could be characterised as folklore and affirm the paranormal claims. In empirical research, it has been found that uncritical media content increases the recipients' beliefs in the paranormal, whereas critique presented by authorities diminishes them. The stance of the tabloids is based on the fact that paranormal claims sell better than scientific facts. In the United States and Great Britain, occult and paranormal news are recurrent in tabloids with a low prestige. Prestigious newspapers, in turn, keep to scientific scepticism which is, after all, the dominant view in Western societies (Goode 2000: 193–196; 202–204). If we compare the media in the United States and Great Britain to Finnish media, we can detect considerable differences. The afternoon newspapers sold in Finland are not similar to the yellow press that advertises with sensational headlines. While it is true that the supernatural has gained access to the mainstream media during the past few years, it would be an exaggeration to regard the Finnish media particularly sympathetic to it. In the following, I aim to show how the public reacts to supernatural experiences and articles on paranormal topics.

## PUBLIC DISCUSSION AND CONTROL

Public discussion[3] consists of the expressions, opinions, and values that are publicly uttered in the media with a wide reception. As concerns supernatural issues, the same views and attitudes dominate the factual content of national broadcasting and the press, as well as internet discussions that have a wide public visibility. The voice of experts and professionals, such as researchers, politicians, officials, and journalists is well presented. However, the Internet has given the floor to the audience as well. Public discussion is not a static and univocal formation. It is spiced with expressions, texts, and arguments that challenge or confront the default expectations. Both professionals and laymen, however, practice control by opposing deviant views and strengthening the mainstream discourses. Deviant views can be publicly invalidated or they can end up in the margins ignored, disapproved, or not taken as serious arguments. The depreciation in public does not prevent these issues from being discussed and favoured on special forums, in *micro-public spheres* that focus on topics beyond the mainstream. The marginality of these forums diminishes the public interest and control (Northcote 2007: 2–3).

Despite the increased visibility in Finnish media, supernatural and paranormal issues are marginal in public discussion. Disapproval, repression, and censure are on offer if such topics try to penetrate the factual core of the society. Public discussion in Finland has not been particularly welcoming, and readers do not expect prestigious newspapers to touch upon these issues. In the mainstream media, positive or neutral stance towards the supernatural can most probably be found in periodicals that are not profiled as serious reading[4] and include such topics in touching stories as entertainment. While there is interested audience for such articles, a controversial topic also triggers negative and resentful comments. When a women's magazine published an article about a married couple who practised unicorn healing, there were numerous critical comments:

> *I don't know which I am more upset about: that such shocking phony is on offer or that* [the magazine] *writes an article about it. For my part, I thus totally condemn your publication. This was too much.* (MNYks/Visitor 25.1.2015, 18:18)

> *I thought* [the magazine] *was of quality in its genre. To write a seemingly neutral story about such 'healers' is irresponsible and underrates the readers.* (MNYks/Visitor 26.1.2015, 6:52)

The response was even more negative when a popular channel of the state broadcasting company YLE published a short news article about the same undertaking. In this case, the inexperienced reporter had apparently found the topic funny and unbelievable and, perhaps to make the joke more efficient, also included the information of how to attend a course to become a unicorn healer. The article raised strong reactions and was later judged by the Public Council of Mass Media for surreptitious advertising and a lack of source criticism (Yleisradio 2015). However, many readers shared the interpretation that the news was nothing else than humour. It was possible to view the release in the context of the contemporary vernacular practice to share on the Internet ironically unbelievable topics that nobody would take seriously. While the majority of comments expressed disapproval towards the fact that a state-driven company promoted such humbug and judged the article as "unsuitable to norms and values" (YleX/kekekeee 29.1. 2015, 21:25), the more entertained readers argued it was humour or continued the joke:

> *Nobody is stupid enough to take this news or the education seriously…* (YleX/Valon voima 27.1.2015, 05:57)

> *This must be pure humour.* (YleX/Elmeri 29.1.2015, 10:10)

> *Long live sarcasm! A concept unknown to so many?* (YleX/mipu 17.2.2015, 13:24)

> *If you meet a unicorn, please do not take more bleach*. (YleX/Kuukupööpötin 27.1.2015, 18:01)

There were only a couple of comments that slightly defended alternative healing in general, and there was no dispute about the suitability of making jokes about unconventional beliefs. Besides the fact that many commentators declared the article as 'shit', the problem seemed to be that the news forum was no place for jokes and the text was thus judged as factual. As the above example shows, the public discussion is controlled both by the audience and by professionals. A journalist can also be reproached by colleagues.[5]

The society actively defends its core values against violations. It is witnessed in many societies that those in power suppress the morally, culturally, or racially *other*, who they perceive as a threat or challenge to the prevailing order and values. The *other* is stigmatised, which means that the whole person is judged by the one deviant feature and deprived of his or her value as a community member (Dijker & Koomen 2007: 6–7). The fear of being stigmatised makes the majority of people with supernatural experiences keep silent about them. Especially on discussion forums and sites with a wide publicity, there are rude comments towards the deviant, and also a clear aspiration to suppress a serious discussion about the topic:

> *Insanity and ignorance keep increasing (at least if we believe in these discussion forums). People who see gnomes should be taken to compulsory hospitalisation.* (IS_Vir/qwerty 22.01.2014, 20:48)

> *Seeing angels and such things is a sign of unstable mental health. There is nothing else to discuss. Full stop.* (IS_Vir/JRe 23.01.2014, 09:46)

Sociologist Jeremy Northcote uses the term *paranormal debate* for all the disputes and discussions on various forums in the Western society, which concern the ontology, epistemology, and ideology of the paranormal or supernatural. He has noted that the main hindrance for reaching or even approaching any consensus about ontological questions is the attitude of the participants. He writes that opponents are seen as demonic *other*, who threaten the right order and morals (Northcote 2007: 2–3). The same tendency can be seen in Finnish discussions.

## DISCOURSE AS A MEANING SYSTEM

In what follows, I will present various discourses that create and maintain attitudes and opinions about the supernatural issues and about people with opposing views. The discourses have taken shape in historical processes, build on various presumptions, and each see the world from their own angle. Discursive formations have also been characterised as *cultural models*, *interpretative repertoires*, or *meaning systems*. They guide the way we see and understand the world and human activities in it. By giving only a limited set of roles or *subject positions* to people involved, discourses maintain stereotypes of people who do not think or act the same way as 'we' do. In social sciences, largely following Michel Foucault's views, one important task of discourse analysis has been to reveal the discursive nature of social and cultural 'facts' that people have taken for granted (Foucault 1991 [1972]: 50–53 et passim; Gee 1999: 7–8; Jokinen & Juhila & Suoninen 1993: 38–40; Pietikäinen & Mäntynen 2009: 22–28; Potter & Wetherell 1987). Here, the question is not about revealing some hidden prerequisites because there is an open dispute going on. Discussions about the supernatural concern the point where the legitimate assumptions have been violated. In such situations people can revise their assumptions about the world or deny or perhaps even stigmatise the deviant statements. A recurrent strategy when power and values are at issue is to associate deviant or opposing views with mental and moral flaws (e.g. Dijker & Koomen 2007: 7; Northcote 2007: 3–5). My discourse analysis presents culturally shared views and opinions about the natural world, the supernatural, and the 'inappropriate' experiences. I study how people who have experienced something alien to the conventional meaning systems reinterpret and mould the hegemonic discourses to fit in. I also ask how they struggle against the negative labels embedded in them. Our social reality is shaped by competing views and an individual can rely on various discourses depending on the situation. Discourses can be overlapping, contradicting with, or supplementing each other. Some are marginal; others have become hegemonic (Jokinen & Juhila & Suoninen 1993: 17–19, 24, 29).

To define the various discourses in contemporary discussions about the supernatural, I have used three main criteria: 1) a discourse shares some basic assumptions about the world and what is right and reasonable in it; 2) a discourse uses certain vocabulary that reflects the values and assumptions embedded in it; and 3) discourses generally only provide a limited set of *subject positions* for people involved. Especially the third criterion is realised in my research material both as explicit judgments of the 'other' and as explicit denials of its validity especially by those to whom the role of the 'other' would be on offer. I will first present the discourses that approach the question as scientific and mental

phenomena, and then discuss the discourses that involve spiritual themes and morals. Having already presented the mainstream attitudes dominating the public discussions, I focus on the attempts to make sense of the extraordinary experiences in a society that is generally unwelcoming to them.

## KEEPING IT SCIENTIFIC, MAKING IT MENTAL

The discussions that involve both the experiencing minority and members of the non-experiencing majority roll around two major questions. The first is whether a spiritual world really exists or these experiences originate in the experiencing mind. The second is whether these experiences or phenomena are positive or negative. Not all discourses involve unequivocally either a positive or a negative stance. Furthermore, nearly similar arguments can actually advocate opposite views. For example, popular scientific reasoning has been used both to reject and to justify the existence of an invisible reality.

**Science-oriented discourse** follows the legitimate scientific worldview that is favoured in the public discussion and supported by central institutions such as education and health care. The basic assumption is that science defines and explains reality. 'Science-oriented' refers to the fact that real expertise is not required for participating in this discourse. The minimum requirements are the will to share a scientific worldview and the reliance on the legitimacy of scientific explanatory power and scientific vocabulary. The vocabulary of the popular scientific discourse borrows mostly from physics, biology, medicine, and psychology, including expressions such as *natural laws*, *quantum theory*, *physical objects*, *electric impulses*, and *DNA*. This dominant discourse expects modern Finns to be rational individuals who understand the natural laws and the material basis of existence. The *other* are portrayed as irrational, mistaken, blinded by some religious ideology, or perhaps mentally ill or stupid. Humorous expressions that support the popular scientific discourse are creative when they characterise the people who have deviant perceptions or beliefs. Thus, the vocabulary also includes expressions like *nutcase*, *drunk*, *stupid*, or *magic mushrooms*.

People who subscribe to a scientific worldview but still have experiences that oppose it are not necessarily willing to identify themselves with the irrational, hallucinating, or ridiculous *other*. Nor are they necessarily willing to reject the dominant discourse and build a marginal identity on the grounds of some spiritual subculture. Our informants frequently frame the reports of their experiences by declaring first that they are healthy, normal, and rational. The aspiration to see haunting as a natural phenomenon also tells us about the drive

to belong to the rational and reasonable, who only accept natural phenomena. Thus, experiences that contradict the scientific worldview are frequently still interpreted within its frame. For example, a woman who wrote to researchers about experiencing spiritual beings and a time-space distortion as well as a strong feeling of a previous life, explained to them:

> *Myself, I reckon my own experiences are connected to physics, possibly to quantum physics, and the experience about a previous life I suppose to stem from the similarity of the DNAs of two people who lived in different times. I think that DNA includes memory.* (MT 16/1 Ilona 12.3.2013)

To explain a discrepancy between the deviant phenomenon and contemporary science, it is typically noted that science will develop and explain things that today are not understood or accepted to be true or natural. Some of these statements share an optimistic tone, others are more critical of the present situation:

> *I really hope that research on human brain and cognition will develop. I do not find these so-called supernatural things otherworldly at all. Some day our time will be regarded as really primitive. I hope the time will come soon.* (MT 16/2 Ilona 5.5.2013)

> *What today feels humbug can well be science in the future. Was it not the aim of science to develop and not to stick in its position and repeat the old-established attitudes? In ancient times, the highest truth claimed that the earth was flat. If someone stated otherwise he got killed*. (US_YRI/ Stellaangela 23.2.2011, 21:02)

Naturally, most of the arguments that represent and strengthen this discourse deny the supernatural experiences and interpretations. They point to the lack of scientific proof and judge the supernatural or spiritual world as non-existent. For example:

> *Of course it would be nice to believe that life does not end in death, but yes it does. After death, we are only a lump of phosphorus, water, nitrogen, iron, etc. – a lifeless lump of atoms*. (S24_KEF/tietopankki 1.8.2011, 21:21)

A widely accepted natural explanation is that supernatural experiences are produced by the human mind. However, the discussion about the imagining, hallucinating, and experiencing mind only partly belongs to the science-oriented discourse and therefore I present the mental discourse separately.

**Mental discourse** regards the experiences as real and seeks their origin in the characteristics and reactions of the human mind. These popular discussions and statements are informed by neurological and psychological research.

Compared to the science-oriented discourse, the question is not primarily about ontology but about the bodily or chemical processes, as well as psychological tendencies that lead to these experiences. People engaged in this discourse discuss, for example, sleep paralysis, hypnagogic sensations, or out-of-body experiences, as well as the effects of medication, drugs, or compounds produced by the human organism itself. The next example is one of the numerous posts about sleep paralysis:

> *Hmm... When I read these ghost stories it keeps coming to my mind that many of them could be experienced in a sleep paralysis. Namely, sleep paralyses could be interpreted as feelings like instant ghost attacks. In them one can get out of the body and start bouncing around the room thrown by an unknown figure, hear voices, see lights, and have no control upon anything, and feel as if totally awake but not able to move or shout*. (Mix/JM 16.11.2007, 00:21)

If supernatural beliefs or experiences are judged negatively and seen as a problem, they can all be regarded as symptoms of a mental illness. Mental illnesses, of course, need to be taken seriously, and proper care to those who need it is important. But not all hallucinations are signs of an illness. Modern societies have been criticised for medicalising various behaviours, crises, and troubles in human life, along with health problems (Conrad & Schneider 1992: 242–245; Koski 2016: 2–3). A central part of the criticism targets medicalisation as the professionals' strategy of assuming control (Barnet 2012). However, today medicalisation is not only an activity of professionals but is also realised as popular categorisations and labelling (Davis 2006: 54). Practically, participants in public discussion present their opinions in the form of stigmatising diagnoses. Comments in which medicalisation is used as stigmatisation, such as telling a person who reports having seen spirits to go and get therapy or medication, refer to mental discourse. However, such arguments lack interest in the actual mental processes. I rather see them as ways to repress discussion about the supernatural.

Without the stigmatising tendency, mental discourse is a legitimate interpretative frame for those who have experienced something themselves. It claims that the human mind is sensitive and reacts in various ways to stressful situations, such as grief.

> *When my child died in early spring, I grieved and cried so much that it cannot be described. He has appeared in my dreams twice…. I know that these dreams have come to me as comfort, from my own subconsciousness. Longing makes a person believe in signs and omens, dreams come from*

> *one's own mind, they do not actually have anything to do with the deceased.* (S24_HT/Kaipaava äiti 9.6.2010, 9:04)

> *Perhaps it is longing that makes us see what we wish. After my mother died, I often cried alone in the evenings. Then one morning I woke up and she was standing beside my bed, and I reached out my hand and said, 'How come you are here?' She looked at me, smiling, and disappeared. After that I had a tranquil feeling because it seemed that she had everything all right.* (IS_Kumm/suopursu kukkii 16.2.2010, 22:53)

Mental discourse also allows flexibility between the normal qualities and malfunctions of the mind, or between positive and disturbing sensitivity. It can also be combined with spiritual explanations, such as the belief that certain mental abilities make some people more apt to contact the spiritual world than others. Likewise, it is compatible with New Age ideas about the mind as the source of divinity and cosmic connection (e.g. Hanegraaff 1996: 151, 204–207). An analytical approach to the topic can find the scientific explanations of the human mind as valid, yet insufficient. One of our informants explained the idea of conscious, collective dreaming, and referred to the mental discourse but argued there was also a supernatural component:

> *The question is not about sleep paralysis, dream, or otherwise a confused state of mind, but a fully conscious state, in which a person is aware of his / her environment through the so-called third eye. However, conscious dreaming and the experience of 'supernatural' through it require a lot of personal energy and practice, as well as a suitable set and setting*. (MT 19/2 Henrik 2013)

He continues about his own experiences:

> *My personal experiences of the supernatural concern mainly the sensing of energy and a temporary improvement of sight. This is connected to the point that in a 'normal' state of consciousness, a very low amount of the potential of the human brain is used, compared to another state of consciousness, in which impulses and neurotransmitters flow in a totally different way in the brain*. (MT 19/2 Henrik 2013)

The scientific approach and the reference to mental processes, as we have seen, do not only speak against the supernatural reality but are also harnessed to explain it. People who use scientific grounds to explain the supernatural frequently criticise the term itself, arguing that everything that happens in the world is actually natural. Some phenomena are just difficult to grasp and explain and are thus declared as supernatural.

## DISCOURSES BASED ON THE EXISTENCE OF SPIRITUAL REALITY

The conviction that a supernatural realm exists is shared both by Christianity and alternative spiritual believers. As sociologist Erich Goode puts it, conventional Christian beliefs are actually paranormal as well: they are contrary to the laws of nature (Goode 2000: 179). An important difference between paranormalism and Christianity is, however, that the latter is organised, controls religious ideas, and has a legitimate status in Western societies. A greater part of the experiences described in letters and internet discussions would not be accepted by Lutheran theology. The Lutheran Church allows for spiritual phenomena that are from God, but demands that those that are from Satan should be avoided and fought, and denies other possibilities, for example visits of the deceased. Practically, the religious experiences recognised in Lutheranism are feelings of relationship with the divine or experiences of the grace of God (Strohl 2005), or personal fulfilment and happiness (Zehnder 2010: 312). Christian education and discipline fighting heresy and superstition have a long history. Today, the Lutheran Church in the Nordic countries opposes the New Age and debates the syncretistic angel beliefs that have become popular (Gilhus 2012; Utriainen 2014: 250).

It has been suggested that Christian and paranormal beliefs would be mutually exclusive so that paranormal would be a substitute where Christian faith is weaker. However, according to numerous surveys this is not the case. The same people who believe in God and think that Satan is real are likely to have non-Christian paranormal beliefs as well (Goode 2000: 177–185; Mencken & Bader & Stark 2008). The correlation is not the same for all Christians, though. Those who attend church at least once a week and associate with similar believers are likely to reject non-Christian paranormal beliefs and activities. These people are more committed to the dogma and are also controlled by their religious collective (Mencken & Bader & Stark 2008: 201–203; Orenstein 2002). These surveys have been conducted in the United States but the same pattern seems to prevail in our Finnish materials. There is difference between broad, popular interpretations and more fundamentalist ones.

**Popular Christian discourse** allows flexible ways to interpret Christianity and integrate various non-Christian spiritual experiences within the religious frame. Angels, the deceased, omens, and various meaningful signs can be interpreted by Christian terms. For example, a woman who has experienced a visit from her deceased mother, as well as several omens, explains:

> *My experiences have made me sensitive to the distress of others and to sensing occasions and atmospheres. I find this state of affairs as positive and sometimes I feel that I could develop this sensitivity even further. My belief in God, the otherworld and angels is firm. I am only afraid to encounter something that involves real evil.* (MT 61/2 Birgitta)

A man who has had several omens about deaths and an especially tragic premonition dream, writes:

> *I am a member of a Lutheran congregation. I am not an active member. I only go to church at Christmas and sometimes at Easter. I do not belong to any spiritual circles or such. But I try to explain my visions in terms of Christianity. In my opinion, there is no sense in belonging to a congregation and simultaneously seek answers in alternative spiritual literature or, on the other hand, to deny the spiritual side of events because it contradicts science. The dream that I told about was weird in a sense that it does not fit into my Christian worldview…. The dream has clearly strengthened my connection to the Christian world, despite the contradictions with Christian dogmas.* (MT 30/2 Pauli)

> *Psychics say they have a contact with the souls of the departed. Myself, I do not think that way, but as a Christian I believe that visions are mediated by the Holy Spirit. I reckon that Christians are connected with each other in the Holy Spirit, just like leaves on different branches of a tree are connected to each other by the liquids flowing in the tree.* (MT 30/1 Pauli)

**Fundamental Christian discourse** takes the experiences reported by others as real but does not allow flexible versions of the Christian dogma. To people who discuss their experiences, this discourse gives subject positions as misguided individuals who endanger the Christian world by associating with demonic powers. It condemns non-Christian spiritual phenomena and interprets the experiences as the activity of demons:

> *Probably the question is not about a deceased person but an evil spirit. Dead people cannot communicate any more. It is perhaps a demon who pretends to be a dead woman. By the way, it is intriguing that people are interested in supernatural issues, but once someone talks about Jesus and the God, they play the atheist card.* (IS_VA/Rejjsk32 26.12.2014, 19:32)

> *Supernatural phenomena do exist. The Bible really tells us what 'ghosts' are and also how long they will astonish and even frighten people. The holy word of God reveals how these supernatural visions emerge and*

> *where they come from. Having abandoned his God and Creator, a formerly good angelic person became eager to occupy the position of his Creator and earn the worship of people. It was him that appeared as a snake to Eve and caused the loss of their home in Paradise as well as all evil to the world*. (MT 52/x)

The latter writer had signed the text as Jehovah's Witness. My research material does not reveal the possible denomination of the writers if not explicated in the text. There are several Christian groups that share this stance towards supernatural phenomena. Here I find it sufficient to note that this stance is actively represented especially on internet sites that specialise in the supernatural or paranormal.

**Alternative spiritual discourse** is an open interpretative frame that adopts influences from various sources and, accordingly, uses their vocabularies such as *astral bodies*, *energies*, *chakras*, and *the third eye*. People who are interested in alternatives to the mainstream material worldview or experience things that do not fit into it, develop new outlooks with the help of literature, as well as courses and meetings organised by societies in this field. Some people use freely the reserve that we could well label as occulture. Others are involved in one particular ideology. In Finland, spiritualism and theosophy have a long tradition, and recently a wide array of New Age and occult movements have entered the scene. Finnish records show that in 2011 there were 34 esoteric societies, 93 that presented New Age spirituality, and 20 that could not be categorised as any particular tradition (Palmu et al. 2012: 32). In my research material, spiritual explanations are usually applied to questions of death and afterlife:

> *Soul-spiritually, when a human being dies, he/she is followed as a spiritual being by a so-called ethereal body, which, for a moment, enables feelings of a parallel world, such as touches, ghostlike visions, etc.* (MT 18/2 Esko)

People who feel that they have gained a wider and deeper knowledge may regard it as a gift and ability to see truths to which the majority is blind. Some writers tell about being in contact with wider universal spheres and energies that would not be graspable to everyone, at least not yet, as the majority is reluctant.

> *Human understanding is limited. What is not grasped is willingly invalidated one way or another. Simply because human comprehension is insufficient to handle everything, especially issues about which there is no prior information or which have no stable credibility created by some authority. This is a typical human relation to things. It is human and understandable.* (MT 7/Hannele 17.6.2013)

While the majority of people with supernatural or paranormal experiences keep quiet about them, it has been estimated on grounds of various surveys that there is a strong occult undertone in contemporary culture and that it correlates with the rapid development of science and technology (Ervasti 2006: 266).

## A QUEST FOR LEGITIMACY, AUTHORITY, AND VALUES

People with supernatural beliefs or experiences suffer from the marginality of their worldview and the mocking and stigma that are activated whenever these issues are publicly discussed. This situation has been changing for some time now. In 2011, two discussants in the Paranormal blog noted:

> *I think that luckily the atmosphere is developing in a more positive direction all the time. The more mainstream these issues have become, the more people dare speak about them. Today, people with experience of UFOs and stuff seem to share more openly in media, too.* (PaSS/Wespa 14.6.2011, 23:56)

> *Yes, you are right. I believe that more and more of us are 'awakened'. People are also encouraged to speak about things, at least via the Internet. People did not have a chance of this type of communication before*. (PaSS/Ogeli 15.6.2011, 00:27)

Surveys in various Western countries have suggested that people with lower income and less education would be more likely to have supernatural beliefs. In addition, women are more likely to hold supernatural beliefs than men. Support to this so-called marginalisation theory has recently diminished. It seems that attitudes towards science and technology are more decisive in this respect: supernatural beliefs go together with a negative attitude toward science (Ervasti 2006: 264; Mencken & Bader & Stark 2008: 195–200). As the impact of education was notable only on the academic level, the controversy between science and the supernatural is not necessarily a question of education and ignorance but rather of values. Highly educated people are more committed to scientific thinking. In Finnish surveys, people who identified themselves as religious or spiritual were more likely than others to agree with the claims "we trust in science too much instead of belief", and "our lifestyle changes too rapidly because of science and technology" (Ketola & Kääriäinen & Niemelä 2007). It has been noted that New Age spirituality is critical to information mediated by others, as well as to scientific objectivity. Personal experiences are regarded as the most reliable source of truth (Partridge 2005: 75–76). Also

in my research material, dialogue with the sciences has been experienced as belittling and one-sided.

> *Personally, I have encountered dozens of experiences concerning the otherworld, but it is impossible to prove them afterwards. How to prove that a prayer makes a person wake up from a coma, without having several eyewitnesses, etc.… On the other hand, spiritual events that are alien to science are usually easy to explain as coincidences, events inside one's mind, or caused by medication.* (MT 30/2 Pauli)

Adherents to the alternative views scold scientists for their fear and prejudices that prevent a proper research on these issues. One commentator criticises the restricted scope of scientific methods:

> *Imagine that you have a bathtub full of water, which you scoop with a spaghetti sieve. A 'scientific' experiment shows that there is no water in the tub because no water was left in the sieve*. (IS_Vir/Palikkatiedettä palikkapäille 23.1.2014, 03:04)

While the contemporary spiritual movements are critical towards science, ordinary people who all of a sudden encounter something beyond reality prefer to stick to the legitimate scientific explanations. The institutionalised sources of worldviews – Christianity and natural sciences – can be slightly stretched so that the experience can fit in a legitimate interpretative frame. The shift from supernatural to scientific interpretations can be seen in the fact that even the experiencing individuals themselves often think that the source of the encounter was in their own mind.

To sum up, there is an ongoing lively discussion about the supernatural and paranormal on the Internet. The emergence of these topics in the mainstream media has triggered both positive and negative reactions. The supernatural is likely to be acceptable if it conforms to some well known belief system or if it is handled as fiction or entertainment. Random experiences are easily labelled as hallucinations. Even though the atmosphere has become more open towards extraordinary phenomena, it is common that the experients and believers report mocking and stigmatisation. The contemporary debate mainly focuses on the relationship between the supernatural and science. It not only concerns ontological questions but also disputes about the legitimate methods of studying reality. Furthermore, the flaws of the opposite party are saliently brought up. The proponents of the supernatural are portrayed as gullible, mentally unstable, and ignorant. The sceptics, in turn, are accused of being prejudiced, scared of new ideas and defending mainly their ideology and not the truth. In addition to the debate between these established parties there are people

who struggle with their own worldview and identity, unwilling to reject the mainstream worldview and to adopt a marginal identity. The mental discourse that can actually combine with both scientific and supernatural interpretations would seem to be the most plausible frame for an understanding between the disputing parties. However, concord does not seem likely as long as the dispute concerns not only knowledge about these issues but also values and identities.

## NOTES

[1] This research was undertaken as part of the *Mind and the Other* project funded by the Academy of Finland within the research programme *The Human Mind*, No. 266573.

[2] Folklore scholars used to distinguish memorates as experience narratives showing personal commitment to the experience from legends that adopt various forms to convey the traditional core (Pentikäinen 1968; von Sydow 1948: 86–88). Since tradition and the alleged 'true' experiences often intermingle in narrative performance, some scholars have found the division impractical and the memorate has later been given a stylistic meaning only. Furthermore, the meaning of the memorate has been reduced into the rendition of the legend in first person (Dégh 2001: 40–42, 58–63). Thus, the term memorate is no more apt to make unequivocally the difference it was designed to make. Still, there are contexts in which the personal commitment (which used to be the point of second- and third-hand memorates compared to legends) is distinctive of the narrative.

[3] From a linguistic point of view, this verbal action that I here call *public discussion* could also have been called *public discourse* as a collectively constructed communicative sphere (see Gee 1999). I chose the word discussion to avoid confusion between discourses as meaning systems and this larger formation that is characterised by its status and legitimacy, as well as the publicity of the forums. In sociology, *public sphere* (e.g. Keane 1995) resembles this but perhaps without the emphasis on vernacular participation, which is my point of view as a folklorist.

[4] While newspapers represent objectivity, various weekly journals appreciate touching life stories and polemic discussion about hot topics. A Finnish periodical which, among other topics, handles experiences of angels or mystical issues, is characterised in an advertisement as a trusted friend that offers great experiences and people to identify with, and has a good story as its core (see http://www.lehtimesta.fi/product/28/seura-lehti-maaraaikainen-tilaus, last accessed on April 20, 2016).

[5] For example, Saska Saarikoski, a journalist working for *Helsingin Sanomat*, the leading newspaper in Finland, deserved public critique from colleagues after writing reportage about his visit to specialists of the supernatural (e.g. Raevaara 2014).

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# NONVERBAL EVENT AS PART OF BELIEF NARRATIVE[1]

*Reet Hiiemäe*

**Abstract**: A communicative act that involves the presence of two or more persons always involves a nonverbal aspect. The focus of the article is on nonverbal situations as a basis for the evolution of belief narratives. This pre-narrative aspect has not received much attention in narrative research as most analyses are based on texts that already exist in verbalised form. However, on many occasions the basis for a belief narrative is a nonverbal act that has triggered its witness or re-narrator(s) to interpret it within the framework of vernacular belief. Hence, texts that contain a nonverbal part consist of two components: 1) description of a nonverbal occurrence; 2) its meaning/interpretation that is verbalised by the narrator within the framework of a topical belief tradition. By bringing examples from Estonian belief narratives, the author points out some models and patterns that leap to the eye in texts narrating about nonverbal occurrences (e.g. the context of described situations, the types and results of activities described, etc.). As a theoretical basis, works on communication theory and vernacular belief research are used.

**Keywords**: belief narrative, narrating, nonverbal behaviour, nonverbal communication

## INTRODUCTION

Studies into belief narratives are in most cases based on recordings of narrators' stories in writing. I am interested in the evolution process of such texts and, above all, the role of the nonverbal component in belief narratives. A communicative act with the presence of two or more persons always involves a nonverbal aspect, both when transmitting and receiving information (cf. Streeck & Knapp 1992: 3), and often it seems that the folkloric narrative is based on a nonverbal situation that has inspired an eyewitness or a re-narrator to interpret the situation in terms of vernacular belief. So far this facet has remained largely outside researchers' sphere of interest, as the deductions made are bound to be somewhat hypothetical. Nevertheless, involving the nonverbal aspect enables a more complete approach to belief narratives, promising at least heuristic added value. In the following I am not trying to reconstruct exact original situ-

ations that have engendered belief narratives, but my aim is, on the example of mainly older folklore tradition, to point out some regularities that could be observed in narrating nonverbal occurrences, as well as the circumstances that have made it possible for these narrations to persist in the tradition. The belief narrations under study originate from the manuscript collections of the Estonian Folklore Archives. In addition, I am trying to find out to what extent it is possible and efficacious, by merging communication and narrative theories and applying them to concrete archival texts, to study the nonverbal aspect in the context of belief narratives.

## NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION AND NARRATIVE RESEARCH: THEORETICAL STARTING POINTS

Definitions of nonverbal communication have been proposed since the term became more widely known in the middle of the 20th century (in Estonian context e.g. Kimmel-Tenjes 1993: 536ff.). Nonverbal communication involves all ways of information transmission that people use in mutual communication in addition to the verbal part. It includes the use of gestures, facial expressions, position of body parts, movements, postures, touches, as well as aspects of information that are perceivable as inappropriate in the context (cf. Kendon 1981: 4). Already some classics of social sciences have mentioned voluntary symbolic gestures and described them as means of self-expression prior to verbal communication (e.g. Durkheim 1982 [1895]: 57ff.). More recent communication studies also emphasise that in the course of nonverbal communication information is exchanged, in addition to words, in all modalities, whereas most of the nonverbal communication takes place simultaneously with the verbal and is premeditated (Giri 2009: 690).

Communication theories predominantly focus on spontaneous communication acts rather than nonverbality in the written text or even in folktales including a supernatural component (although in a few cases definitions categorise as nonverbal communication also extrasensory perceptions; cf., e.g., Calero 2005: 280). Therefore, as expected, the study of archival texts in light of these definitions reveals a few bottlenecks; for example, it is difficult to specify telepathic contacts described in belief narratives. Mainly in memorate narratives there is a motif according to which a dead relative (e.g. mother) gives a sign to a living relative (e.g. daughter) with its appearance that someone among the living is under threat. More often than not, no direct verbal communication takes place within this kind of experience. The visionary perception of a human figure,

interpreted as a warning from the deceased, can be treated as a nonverbal communication act; yet, decoding of the information within it takes place solely in the head of the recipient (cases with several witnesses are rather infrequent). Therefore, we cannot speak about premeditated messages but only the interpretation of the recipient, which they present by verbalising their experience.

Communication theories, when speaking about the communication process, distinguish between the sender of information and the recipient (the former transmits information and the latter receives and processes it). However, in the context of this article differentiation between these two is relevant, above all, for pointing out the fact that the information possessed by either of the parties can be of very different quality, whereas in the case of belief narratives based on nonverbal occurrences the recipient often has the key role. Sociologist Niklas Luhmann in his communication-theoretical approach also regards the recipient as more important, as it is the recipient who dictates whether and in what way information is communicated (Luhmann 1984: 191ff.). So, in the context of this article we can say that the recipient may sometimes receive information that has not been sent altogether, or not to notice or understand the information sent out. The alleged eyewitness or narrator also defines the status of the persons described in the narration, categorising them as supernatural beings, performers of magic rituals, ordinary people, etc. As in the cases I have described the more active party is the recipient, I have avoided emphasising the aspect of activeness on the sender's side and rather used, instead of the term 'nonverbal communication', concepts like 'nonverbal occurrence', 'nonverbal behaviour', or 'nonverbal situation', in order to involve also acts that do not include purposeful transmission of information (e.g. in cases when a person is not even aware of the fact that he/she is being observed and his/her nonverbal behaviour is interpreted as a magic ritual).

It is worth mentioning here that nonverbal behaviour occurs practically all the time; even complete immovability and silence can be treated as nonverbal information, and especially in the context of belief tradition silence can be very eloquent. So, as a rule, human contacts contain more nonverbal than verbal information. Several researchers studying communication have acknowledged the fact that a human being is incapable of not transmitting information with his/her behaviour and that the information the human mind uses to make decisions is predominantly nonverbal (Weisbuch & Ambady 2008: 163–164; Giri 2009: 690). This is why it is interesting to involve the nonverbal component in the study of belief narratives.

## NONVERBALITY AND BELIEF NARRATIONS: FOLKLORISTS' WORKS

In his study on games as nonverbal folklore, published in the 1960s, folklorist Alan Dundes (2007) argues that, when discussing intangible heritage, we mainly bear in mind verbal folklore and study texts, but we should also explore nonverbal forms of folklore as they are similar by structure. By now Estonian scholars have published several researches on nonverbal folkloric phenomena (e.g. Kapper 2013 about traditional dance; Voolaid 2011 about droodles and graffiti). In the case of narrative folklore, the aspects of nonverbal communication and multimodality have been observed, above all, in the presentation of folklore (e.g. Voolaid 2011: 36), while multimodal communication is understood as communication involving more than two sensory modalities (verbal, activity-related, perceived aspects) (more about the term see Tenjes 2014: 116). So the terms multimodal and nonverbal partly coincide; yet, as this research mainly focuses on the mutual influence of the verbal narration text and nonverbal occurrence, I hereinafter use the term 'nonverbal'.

So far, research into the connections between nonverbal occurrences and belief narrations has been rather scarce. The theory formulated by David Hufford (1989), who studied the nightmare phenomenon, emphasises that a folk legend describing supernatural experience is based on real-life experience, which is verbalised in the existing folklore tradition according to the established ways of formulation and description. This theory is also valid for nonverbal experiences. Madis Arukask points to the initial nonverbal nature of getting lost in folktales, saying: "Verbal expressions are but reflections of something nonverbal – of the sensory, bodily" (Arukask 2003). Ethnologist Elena Novik describes the interpretation of acoustic signals in the surroundings (e.g. crackling of fire, birdsong) as omens in the tradition of Siberian people, and concludes that the interpreted sounds are regarded as communication in terms of interaction, i.e. the sound producer's intention to transmit some kind of information or provoke reaction. In the case of narrations studied by Novik we can also, for the most part, speak about the interpretation of the recipient. Narration based on nonverbal elements also works here, as an acoustic detail could become the core of the organised storyline or its fragment (cf. Novik 2002: 107). This article, however, is not aimed at more detailed investigation of nonverbal signals as omens; it rather concentrates on nonverbal behavioural situations involving two or more persons.

In his research into the oral presentation of the folktale Juha Pentikäinen argues, referring to Dell Hymes: "Interaction at the verbal level is not possible if the storyteller and the listener do not understand each other; that is, if they do not share a common linguistic and paralinguistic code" (Pentikäinen 1978: 242). It should be emphasised that in the case of nonverbal communication the shared linguistic and paralinguistic codes really exist; yet, due to this shared code (which is expressed, for example, by describing various everyday life phenomena in magic key) the belief (mis)interpretation is also possible. Daniel Hutto, who has studied narrative psychology, adds to this: "Narratives function as normalizing explanations, allowing us to cope with unusual or eccentric actions, by putting them into contexts that make them intelligible, where possible" (Hutto 2008: 7). Silvi Tenjes points out that human perception tends to classify the obtained information under certain types and categories:

> *If a person faces a new object, situation, or problem, they link it to their knowledge in order to classify it under a certain type. As they have classified the object, situation, or problem under a certain type, they start using the knowledge related to this type to define how to deal with this object or problem, how to behave in the novel situation.* (Tenjes 2004: 155–156)

So nonverbal behaviour is understood in light of the knowledge formerly acquired by the experient, predominantly in verbalised form. Besides, the way that nonverbal activity is interpreted determines the narrative genre evolving from it: if the things experienced are perceived merely like silly behaviour, the verbalised narrative based on them may be categorised as a memorate or a funny story, yet if it is perceived as magic threat, it may rather get into circulation as a belief narrative.

## FROM NONVERBAL OCCURRENCE TO VERBAL NARRATIVE

Jerome Bruner, who has studied cognitive psychology, has, among many others, presented an argument that also pertains to narrative and memory studies, declaring that people arrange their experiences and memories narratively, in the conventional form of narratives and beliefs (Bruner 1991 [1990]: 4–5). Walter Fisher, one of the creators and pillars of the theory of narrative paradigm, goes even further by claiming that any communication is narrative by its nature, as narrating renders structure to human experience and makes people shape its common interpretations and ideas. Within his theory, Fisher defines narration as "symbolic actions – words and/or deeds – that have sequence and meaning for

those who live, create, or interpret them" (Fisher 1987: 58). Although Fisher's theory has been blamed for excessive generalisation (e.g. Benoit 1988: 536), it is relevant in the context of this article as it helps to illustrate the mutual influence of activity (or, more exactly, nonverbal behaviour) and belief narratives.

In the case of belief narratives two levels of understanding can be highlighted on the basis of nonverbal occurrence:

1) nonverbal occurrence described in the text;
2) meaning/interpretation of described events explicitly expressed by the informant.

Fisher has emphasised, as an essential criterion of narrative, its inner coherency and logicality: the narrator regards the narrative as worth narrating if he/she perceives it as coherent, whereas coherence is required both in motifs and in characters (Fisher 1987: 58). In the context of belief tradition studies it seems only justified to maintain that the pre-narrative interpretation of a nonverbal occurrence emanates from the analogy of belief and narrative coherence. The experient verbalises his/her experience depending on what they feel to be coherent in connection with their earlier beliefs. The automatic comparison of the experience to earlier known beliefs/belief narrations results in categorising the phenomenon in the same class as the belief phenomenon with the most similar features, and it is described accordingly, adding, if necessary, some missing details that are needed for understanding the occurrence. Folklorist Laura Stark also points to the observation of narrative coherence, noting that we adapt our experience according to characters that are generally narratively possible in our culture, and proceed from stereotypes and plots that our fellow men are able to recognise (Stark 2015: 118).

Nevertheless, in the case of belief narratives narrative coherence rules are not absolute, but seem to be interacting with the demands set by a concrete experience or situation, for example, perception of the level of danger. In the following example the absence of any visual sign acts as nonverbal information; namely, the experient finds confirmation to his doubts about the creature in the carriage being supernatural (the Old Nick), as he finds no footprints or other traces of him – a fact that has been repeatedly mentioned in belief narratives as a feature characteristic of supernatural beings.

> *A miller, the old Jaan of Käusaare, was walking along the road from Kõo through Käusaare forest. He was walking along the road and saw that there were four grey horses with a carriage, going down Joosta road, and Jaan of Käusaare thought what it might be, going down there with such big horses and a nice carriage. And he went to the road and looked*

> *for traces but did not find any. He was amazed and understood that it was nothing else than Old Nick.* (E 29140 (37) < Pilistvere parish, 1896)

Unlike the above example, in the following text the communicative hint betraying that the woman was visited by Old Nick and her deceased husband is the existence of traces and the association with the idea that the devil has a hoof (or cloven hoof) on one or both feet.

> *Once upon a time a woman lived in the village of Salmistu. The woman's husband had died. One night some strangers came to visit. The strangers stayed in one room whereas the woman was pottering about in the next room. Later on the woman joined them. When the strangers left, the woman went to see them off. The others were waiting for her to return, but she did not. In the morning, when her parents went to sea, they found the woman in a fishnet. In daylight they saw in the mud the woman's footprints and horse's hoofprints. Finally the others said that her husband had gone to hell and then, together with Old Nick, had come to fetch his wife.* (E 51392 < Kuusalu parish, 1921)

The texts of belief narratives make us realise that the initial processing of nonverbal information takes place on the basis of basic criteria: familiar–unfamiliar, natural–supernatural, dangerous–non-dangerous. This assumption is also supported by the uncertainty reduction theory formulated by communication researchers Charles Berger and Richard Calabrese (1975: 99ff.), according to which, when meeting with strangers, the experient first observes their nonverbal behaviour and on this basis decides what to expect. In the past, in villages with sedentary lifestyle, meeting a stranger was quite rare and belief narratives served as a predisposition to consider a stranger as dangerous or supernatural or even both (cf. also Blacker 1990: 162 about perceiving a stranger as a dangerous or supernatural being). For example, in folktales both the plague spirit and the devil are often characterised with the epithet 'stranger'. Therefore being a stranger in itself was nonverbal information, which induced distrust and even hostility before the stranger was able to say or do anything. But before dwelling upon belief interpretations related to strangers, it is relevant to add some ideas about another type of nonverbal communication – silence – as from the point of view of belief it can perform a special communicative role.

## SILENCE AS COMMUNICATION

Silence, the taboo against naming certain things or creatures, avoiding verbal contact in certain situations – all these are practices known in Estonian folk tradition, which were supposed to be observed especially in connection with certain periods of time (e.g. during epidemics and specific periods in the annual circle), magic rituals (e.g. predictions about the future spouse), or in places where magic influence was presumably manifested (e.g. when being alone in the forest). There were certainly plenty of rituals accompanied by incantations or other verbal forms, yet in the case of the latter the frames of interpretation were not as wide. Silent situations, on the other hand, offered highly ambivalent means of interpretation, especially in the cases when a stranger was involved; however, the incomprehensible silent action of familiar persons also increased the probability of supernatural interpretation of events. Estonian folk belief (as well as that of many other countries) regards verbal contact with a supernatural being as dangerous; that is why, when encountering a person of unclear status, it was preferable to keep silent and observe their nonverbal behaviour, in order to ascertain their further intentions or adopt preventive protective measures. In the following example, fellow men's silence is interpreted as ominous, which makes the experient launch a preventive attack on them, striking them with a cudgel.

> *Shadow Men*
> *It once happened that a man came from the pub. Suddenly he noticed that two of his acquaintances, who had not been at the pub with him, were walking side by side with him. The man said hello but they did not reciprocate. He tried to talk to them but they did not respond to him. Now the man thought that the neighbours were plotting something evil against him; he grabbed a cudgel and struck them both with it. But the cudgel went as if through the air. Now they reached the forest and the two disappeared into the forest, while the man continued homewards. He should long have been home already, yet he walked until cock-crow. Only then did he see his house and understood that he had circled four times round his courtyard.* (E 27327 (82) < Tartumaa, 1896)

The only supernatural interpretation expressed in the narration is the heading referring to the world of ghosts – *Shadow Men*; yet the specific motifs, such as the cudgel going through the body or men disappearing in the woods, are typical of traditional descriptions of ghosts, whereas walking until the cock crows and not recognising one's own home refer to the supernatural experience of getting lost.

Coming from the pub, which is mentioned at the beginning of the story, insinuates that the experient might have been drunk and therefore in a changed state of consciousness. This might also explain why the person who came from the pub was not able to hit his neighbours (the cudgel went as if through the air) and later on lost his way. Suppose the men walking with him were his neighbours, their sudden disappearing could have been not due to their supernatural nature but rather the fact that they were not willing to continue their way with the bully. In any case, I would agree with Aado Lintrop, who has argued that in the case of a changed state of consciousness orientation to reality resulting from religious imaginations transmitted by way of folklore becomes relevant (Lintrop 2014: 16–17).

## STRANGERS AND THEIR ROLES IN BELIEF NARRATIVES

The spread of folkloric phenomena and their persistence in traditional lore is guaranteed, among other things, by their openness to the different interpretations of experients/mediators/recipients. In the case of nonverbal behaviour the belief interpretation space is even wider. Below I will present the categorisation of strangers on the example of plague legends. According to legends the plague spirit used to appear in the shape of a human being, wearing ordinary clothes and looking like any other human; nothing in its appearance betrayed its dangerous nature (cf. a similar remark about the devil in Valk 1994: 19). However, sometimes belief narratives try to distinguish supernatural beings from humans on the basis of colour symbolism, for example, by claiming that both the plague and the devil wear black, whereas ghosts and spirits have been depicted as white or grey. However, we should also bear in mind that common people of the period also wore clothes of the same shades and hues. So the only facet of such beings that urged caution was them being strangers. Villagers could indeed be infected by random travellers or fugitives, so if people were taken ill after a stranger had come to a village, it was only logical that the latter was categorised under a negative status class. On the other hand, plague legends also feature neutral or positive strangers, described as random guests staying for the night, beggars, or helpers; the same appearance could refer to four different status types:

1) plague spirit;
2) harbinger of plague;
3) spreader of plague (in a few cases also depicted as a familiar person);
4) plague preventer or fighter.

In legends all the four are connected to the outbreak of a plague epidemic and their different status is manifested only in further action (a herdboy pokes people with a stick, a random traveller gives advice, etc.); however, in quite a few cases the stranger's destiny is decided upon right after their appearance.

The stranger's destiny is determined by the alleged eyewitness of the event or the narrator (cf. Valk 2015: 426 for a similar observation about interpreting strangers as supernatural beings). So, the following text classifies one of the boys as plague and the other as a benevolent helper.

> *In days of yore, the lord of Rummu manor notified people that plague was coming to the village of Neeme. He ordered people to wash themselves and prepare for death. A beggar boy came to a family and asked if he could stay overnight at their place. The family told him they were going to die and could not put him up. The boy was pleading with them to take him in, then nobody would die. Finally the family decided to let him stay.*
>
> *The plague was supposed to come in the form of a small boy. The lord of the manor had sent him. He had a stick in his hand with poison on one end. When the plague boy tried to enter the house through a window, the beggar boy jumped at him and killed him. So the family survived.* (Hiiemäe 1997: 284)

The narrator seems to have believed that the audience did not need an explanation about why the first boy was not taken for the plague spirit, although it was known that the disease moved about in the form of a strange boy. The status of the character was not defined and was therefore open for interpretation. So the first stranger is attributed the role of a protector from the plague, which makes him a positive character. The second boy, on the other hand, is killed on the spot, making no attempt to find out whether he really intended to spread the disease or was just another travelling beggar boy.

It could be assumed that in a dangerous situation people may have projected more than one role in an unfamiliar person, which at the same time did not eliminate a complete inconsistency of these roles (Hiiemäe 2004: 71). Niklas Luhmann, when commenting on selective understanding of communicative acts, argues that each selection is contingent, i.e. possible in a different way, so the number of choices is theoretically unlimited (cited in Kõuts-Klemm 2007: 2429). In belief tradition (and probably also in other contexts) possibilities of performing a certain role are not entirely endless, as the selection has to be situation-related (or, in this case, linked to the belief that visiting strangers may indeed have caused infection), and in the context of belief narrations also coherent from the point of view of belief (or, in this case, linked to the belief

that the spread of a disease can be terminated by killing the disease spirit). Luhmann's argument about attributing meanings to the impacts emanating from the environment is quite relevant; namely, it enables us to "either postpone our reaction or react almost instantly, as we can take over, from similar experienced situations, formerly used reactions that have already found justification" (Luhmann 1997: 45–46). In belief narratives, besides attributing meanings to situations, there is also the aspect of hereditary legitimacy, which vindicates also actions unpermitted in terms of general moral convictions (e.g. violence or even killing).

## NONVERBAL BEHAVIOUR AND VIOLENCE

In the case that nonverbal signals are perceived as too menacing, the characters in belief narratives react by using protective magic or even resort to physical conflict. In a remarkable number of descriptions in the narratives the experient, deciding by the nonverbal behaviour of a fellow man, carries out a physical attack against them, as is described in the following story.

> *At the old sexton's place someone used to shear sheep at night-time. The old man took a cudgel, lit a candle under a bin and started watch. The door of the barn squeaked and someone came in. The sheep rumbled into another corner. The old woman started clipping with scissors. The old man pushed the bin off the candle to get more light, and beat her black and blue. She could not get out of the barn on her own feet; the old man dragged her behind the door and then went to bed.*
>
> *For half a year the old woman remained bedridden; she could not tell anybody what she had done.* (ERA II 254, 91/2 (29) < Käina parish, 1939)

In the above text the old woman remains silent during the whole narrative, the timeframe of which is half a year, nor does she comment on what she aimed to do; nevertheless, the narrative describing her action is characterised by figurativeness and vividness. It is a phenomenon that Laura Stark calls narrative voicelessness and which has a rhetorical function in a folktale: folktales involve certain types of characters (as, for example, alleged performers of magic and other persons deviating from social norms), who never speak about themselves and whose action is discussed only by others (cf. Stark 2015: 118ff.).

As a matter of fact, in the above text the narrator also fails to explain why in his/her opinion the old woman went to shear sheep. If she had used scissors and not sheep shears, the quantity of sheared wool could not have been

as large as to cause economic loss worth mentioning. According to the magic beliefs of the era, if you went to shear sheep in another man's barn, your intentions may have been either harmful or harmless; for example, 1) to ruin the owner's sheep luck; 2) to make a garment guaranteeing a quick marriage (the piece of clothing was supposed to combine symbolic amounts of wool from one to nine different farms); 3) to knit mittens guaranteeing winning at court (you were supposed to knit mittens from wool sheared in nine different barns on Shrove Tuesday night and wear them to court). Principally it was possible, again based on nonverbal information, to exclude part of interpretation variants: it was presumably not Shrove Tuesday night (wool had been sheared on more than one night), and obviously the old woman was not in her prime for getting married. However, according to some texts, the girl's mother could also obtain wool for this particular ritual, so the old woman's age did not automatically exclude this version. Nevertheless, it is doubtful if the old man could have analysed the situation so thoroughly during this brief moment between the old woman's entrance and the attack; in case of suspecting danger, it was safer to react with violence immediately. From the point of view of belief interpretation, the magic explanation of the occurrence was also supported by the timeframe of the event – night-time.

## TEMPORAL AND SPATIAL DIMENSIONS OF AN OCCURRENCE AS NONVERBAL INFORMATION

Several researchers studying communication add in their definitions that the environment can also transmit nonverbal 'messages' and that temporal dimensions also have to be considered (e.g. Kendon 1981: 5; Giri 2009: 693). Understanding of the nonverbal aspect of belief narrations is supported by the semantic temporal or spatial context. If a person originating from the environment of living tradition enters such a mythologically charged sphere (e.g. night-time, taboo or critical period, a specific place related to the appearance of spirits or one where magic acts are performed), they are predisposed to intensifying fear or readiness to contact with the supernatural. Probably, in the periods of plague epidemics, it made people more receptive to interpreting certain persons or groups as mythological beings (cf. Hiiemäe 2004: 69); temporal and spatial components of the same kind could also have contributed to interpreting fellow men as magic evil-doers. Here we can speak about the impact of cultural predetermination, which has been analysed by several folklorists (e.g. Honko 1972; Laagus 1973: 407–409), or – from the point of view of the communication theory – about the 'message' transmitted by the environment.

Lauri Honko points out that in the case of a supernatural experience presented in a memorate we should also take into account the type of supernatural experience (visual, auditive, tactile, or combination thereof) and the conditions under which it is perceived (darkness, dusk, impact of monotonous stimuli, the state of the experient, such as illness, exhaustion, drunkenness, deep fear or desire) (Honko 1972: 95–96). In addition, Aado Lintrop suggests that those breaking taboos expect to have a supernatural experience pointing to punishability for an unacceptable act: "Tradition induces or causes the formation of experience; for example, a person who has deviated from a norm expects the appearance of a supernatural being as a chastener and is prone to interpret the appearing figure as such" (cf. Lintrop 2014: 17). So, according to belief lore, ghosts also have their status, rights, and obligations; they are expected to behave in a certain way, which is actualised in a situation perceived as supernatural (cf. Laagus 1973: 408).

In the following example the nonverbal component is limited to an auditively perceived sound. To enhance the credibility of the occurrence, both men's real names have been used.

> *It once happened that Jüri P. and Jaan K. decided to steal spruce wood; they went to the forest and started felling logs so that slivers were flying about. As soon as they were done with one spruce they took up another, working hard at it. And this was a Thursday night. But suddenly the men stopped and listened, and they heard as if the sound of hoofbeat from afar. And it came nearer and nearer. The men were terribly frightened and saw that the forest grew lighter and the cracking noise came nearer. The men hopped on their sledges and darted for Unakvere village, and never dared to come back.* (E 29130 < Pilistvere parish, 1896)

An unacceptable act performed at the magically charged time (Thursday night) and the accompanying fear correlate with the interpretation of the heard sounds in the function of a supernatural chastener. Predisposition to the intervention of the supernatural excludes the possibility of interpreting the heard hoofbeat as a sound produced by other people also stealing wood.

## AUTHORITATIVENESS OF THE NARRATOR'S INTERPRETATION

If the communicative act has two parties visible to each other, both decode their messages from the other's nonverbal behaviour. The listener of the folktale or the one who reads the written text learns only about one party's interpretation or its derivatives. In case the one being regarded as a plague spirit turned out to be an ordinary human being, he/she probably developed his/her own interpretation about the occurrence (for example an assumption that the others are drunk or raving due to an illness) when seeing the other party's odd behaviour – for example, attempts of physical attack or ritual sleeping on the floor – which have not reached us as a plague legend, yet in another lore context might have developed into a folktale. In the same way, a person suspected of having an evil eye, who was actually not trying to bewitch anybody, might have developed their own interpretation of a fellow man demonstrating their butt for parrying magic purposes or throwing salt in their wake. For instance, they might, in turn, have potentially interpreted these nonverbal acts – according to belief tradition, pursuant to which these acts may have been used also for damaging purposes – as an attempt of black magic. Magic-related explanations to acts difficult to understand were in turn supported by the fact that magic methods did not merely exist in belief and folktale world but – as several authors have emphasised (cf., e.g., Bever 2013 [2008]: 38ff.) – were practised in the pre-modern society and somewhat later also in real life. This article does not depict nonverbal behaviour endeavouring for a magic effect (e.g. bewitching by a malevolent glance) in belief narrations, which actually occurs rather often. The following memorate presents two brief episodes of nonverbal behaviour: 1) a young man offered some sweet pretzel to a girl he liked; and 2) a dog sniffed a girl under her skirt. The experient sets these activities in a framework of love magic beliefs, adding his/her own interpretation based on prior knowledge. The verbalised text is coherent with tradition and excludes the possibility that the young man may have offered the girl a piece of sweet pretzel without any magic implication or that dogs could sniff people without eating magic substances prior to that.

> *In the olden days people used to play pranks, fed others with various things to cast a spell on them. There was a guy who wanted me; he gave me a sweet pretzel at a fair, a beautiful white one. I did not eat it; I threw it into the Võtikvere River. If you give it to a dog, it starts to follow you, it won't fall behind. I had a housemaid. The dog had eaten a bun she had baked; there was nothing else to do than make her leave. The dog kept*

> *following her, sniffing under her skirt.* (ERA II 193, 113/4 (108) < Torma parish, 1938)

Here we could paraphrase a comparison made by Mikhail Lotman, replacing 'memory' by 'nonverbal behaviour', as in belief narratives the interpretation of nonverbal behaviour can evoke just as great meaning shifts:

> *Memory could rather be compared to a magician's hat in which you put a scarf but take out a rabbit. The only difference is that a human being / culture sincerely believes that it was the rabbit that was in the hat, and is therefore surprised by the reconstruction of the scarf.* (Lotman 2012: 182–183)

## IN CONCLUSION

As is shown in the above analysis, belief narratives mediate more than a precise description of a nonverbal event in narrative form. The information influencing a person at the moment of perception covers both earlier images and the situation experienced at the moment and its interpretations. So understanding of the nonverbal behaviour occurs in light of the earlier belief knowledge acquired chiefly in verbalised form. Narratives based on both verbal and nonverbal events are rather interpretations or fabrications of a situation or experience, in the course of which an insignificant event can take on a new meaning essential in terms of belief, acquiring a form suitable for spreading in narrative tradition. It is probably because in the case of nonverbal behaviour belief interpretation space is so wide that experients and narrators use repetitive concretising models. For example, the initial processing of nonverbal information seems to take place on the basis of basic criteria, such as familiar–unfamiliar, natural–supernatural, dangerous–non-dangerous, and, depending on the results, it is followed by a neutral reaction or the usage of more passive protective measures or directly aggressive behaviour. It cannot be argued that all these folktales including a nonverbal component have been initiated by someone's real nonverbal experience; yet, it is even not important in the current context. A fact of interest worth mentioning here is that the folktale namely in this form has been regarded as corresponding to the rules of narrative coherence, and this is why it has been able to enter narrative tradition.

It holds true also about modern belief narratives that the interpretations of nonverbal behaviour described in them proceed from prior folkloric knowledge,

presenting the shadow figures transmitting nonverbal signals as spirits of the dead, nightmares, guardian angels, or malevolent bewitchers, and, when need be, resorting to protective belief mechanisms. What has been added is the component of media impact: in hitchhiker's folklore, for instance, there are stories in which the communication act consists in merely the driver's silence and the hitchhiker's interpretation thereof, whereas the whole narrative can be built on the hitchhiker's expectation of the driver, who "looks like in a gangster movie" or "like a zombie", also to act as such. However, in the case of such extensive predisposition it is not even necessary for the driver to say or do something as the memorate of him is already born. Therefore, it is the narrator that interprets the nonverbal event and defines the status of its participants, whereas the context of the event (for instance, contexts perceived as endangering or unusual evoke supernatural interpretations more often) and the way the participants act (for instance, their silence provides the narrator with wider frames of interpretation) play a significant role in making choices at verbalising.

Changes in beliefs and alternation of theme epochs in mass media are promptly revealed also in the interpretations of nonverbal events: for instance, as the relative importance of aliens and UFOs in media coverage has diminished in the past decades, they are encountered to a lesser degree also in belief narratives. However, the process of the interpretation of nonverbal behaviour itself does not seem to have changed in belief narratives. Communication and narrative theories offer a significant framework for discussing the nonverbal aspect of belief narratives and facilitate the analysis of described interpretation processes; yet, as could have been predicted, they can be applied in such contexts only with certain reservations. For instance, in the case of belief narratives the principle of the intentionality and reciprocity of communication is often not valid; rather, the nonverbal event is interpreted unilaterally.

Translated by Tiina Mällo

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E – Matthias Johann Eisen's manuscript folklore collection from the years 1880–1934 at the Estonian Literary Museum

ERA II – Folklore collection of the Estonian Folklore Archives

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# MEET THE DEMONOLOGICAL CHARACTER: TWO TYPES OF NARRATIVE STRUCTURES

*Victoria Chervaneva*

**Abstract:** The article describes the system of character nomination in oral demonological narratives about the dead. The syntagmatic level, i.e. the methods of introducing demonic characters and the linguistic tools employed for this purpose, are given particular attention. I also attempt to explain the role this naming system plays in the organisation of a demonological narrative, and show the relationship between character references and storyline of the text.

**Keywords**: demonological character, demonological narrative, function, name, narrative organisation, reference

## INTRODUCTION

In modern studies of oral demonological narratives, which are defined primarily as texts about human contacts with demonic creatures, there are some preference points, or focuses of the researchers' attention, so to speak. In the first place these texts are of interest to scholars as source material providing demonological information, therefore the greatest attention is given to demonological creatures – their functions, attributes, naming patterns, and beliefs associated with them. A look at the bibliography of the subject clearly demonstrates that.[1]

The idea that, in order to understand the specific nature of a demonological text it is crucial to analyse the image of a demonological character, has been well established in folklore studies. The popularity of this idea is indicated by the mere fact that demonological prose compilations are traditionally structured around the type of demonological creatures. Moreover, almost all attempts to systematise demonological prose by topics (mainly in motif-indexes of demonological narratives) are based on classifications by the type of the demonological character (hereinafter DC).[2]

The quite fair view on the DC as the central semantic point of a demonological text is confirmed by the analysis of demonological prose language. But I would like to draw attention to one point. The way the human being, i.e. the other part of interaction, is represented in a demonological text, is largely a lacuna in the folklorists' knowledge. However, it is the human being only, not the demon,

that is an obligatory and always verbalised element of the system of actors in demonological narratives. In demonological texts some kinds of supernatural phenomena may well be described without identifying the supernatural actant and without giving its name (moreover, "a mysterious indifference of the informant to the name of demonological phenomena, which he or she talks about" (Levkievskaia 2008: 348) is a typical feature of demonological narratives), but the event of a demonological text is impossible without human participation. The semantic structure of the text implies the existence of an addressee or recipient (in the broadest sense of the term), who receives a certain demonological message (sees or hears the character, is affected by DC's actions).

The researchers' 'mysterious indifference' to the problem of human description in demonological prose is in many ways understandable. The person who interacts with the DC is a representative of 'their' human world, or the pole of norm, and the norm is less interesting than its violation. The norm attracts less attention and is much less verbalised, and its rare verbalisations are not as extensive or distinguished as those of an anomaly (Arutiunova 1988: 307; 1999: 83).

Nevertheless, I have set this research goal and aim to explore the patterns in human image-modelling in demonological texts through the analysis of lexical items. To solve this problem, I used the texts of one thematic group about human contact with the dead. By analysing these texts one can compare the two forms, natural and supernatural, in which human beings are represented, as in most cases both interacting parties of these texts are anthropomorphic.

The material for the analysis consists of 532 demonological stories from the collections published by Zinov'ev (1987), Cherepanova (1996), Pukhova (2009), and Vinogradova and Levkievskaia (2012). The corpus of data comprises the East Slavic mythological texts that were collected on the territory of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus in the 20th century. Thus the texts represent different local traditions – Siberia, the Russian North, the south of Russia, and Polesye. So representativeness of the sample and abstraction from the narrow local characteristics of the material are ensured.

During the preliminary phase of the study, I found all lexical units that represent and characterise a person, and then classified them into categories: characters, their features (attributes), and actions (predicates). This material made obvious which categorisation parameters of human characters are relevant for the studied texts and helped to determine the subject for the analysis, i.e. the types of human beings appearing in the text.

The analysis showed that the most frequent parameter describing a person in a demonological narrative is the actor's function. According to their function in the studied texts the characters fall into five types.

**1. Demonological character** – the dead.
**2. Recipient** – the person who receives the mythological message, 'reads' it, and thus interacts with the demonological creature. It is important that the recipient is a common human in a position equal to that of the listener and the narrator (while in memorates the recipient and the narrator are usually one and the same person). The recipient's 'commonness' (alive, profane, common person in society) is his or her normative feature, a sign that the actor is included in society, and a necessary condition to consider the information in a demonological text reliable. It is impossible to imagine a situation when the narrator is a magic specialist, as the teller always takes the position outside the sphere of the supernatural.
**3. Characters who are not in contact with the demonological creature** – usually family members, relatives and neighbours of the recipient, i.e. people from the immediate social environment. Their function is to identify, in terms of tradition, what is happening with someone in close proximity: they reveal the true demonic nature of the demonological creature, return the recipient to the reality and save him or her from the harmful influence of supernatural forces.
**4. Generalised agent** – people from a distant social environment (referred to as *people*, *everybody*, *every man*). As a rule, they perform some usual actions prescribed by tradition. Most often, actions of the generalised agent are described by overtly subjectless sentences (in Russian grammatical tradition they are analysed as indefinite-personal or generalised-personal sentences). Cf.:

| | |
|---|---|
| *... So they **opened** the coffin, and there she lies, and her dress has three spots on it, three days old* (Cherepanova 1996: № 48). | … Tak otkryli grob-to, a ona i pravda, lezhit, a na plat'e tri piatna, trekhdnevnoi davnosti (Cherepanova 1996: № 48). |
| *They **buried** one woman in shoes* (Pukhova 2009: № 550). | U nas odnu khoronili v tufliakh (Pukhova 2009: № 550). |
| *They **buried** her, and her daughters were all alone* (Zinov'ev 1987: № 83). | Ee pokhoronili, a docheri sovsem odni ostalis' (Zinov'ev 1987; № 383). |

**5. Narrator** – a storyteller, in texts where he or she is distinguished from the recipient of the demonological phenomenon. This type of person in the texts has different degrees of verbal representation. Quite often, the narrator does not manifest him/herself at the lexical level, and in some cases self-reference appears by the 1st person pronouns ('I'), or other characters' direct speech is addressed to him or her ('you', etc.).

Thus, the lexical-thematic field 'person' (all lexical items denoting a person) in the demonological prose is formed of five groups differentiated on a functional basis. It is important that among people mentioned in the text there are none that would not perform any function. The first type (demonological character – a dead person) corresponds to the first term of the binomial 'supernatural/natural', and in this sense is opposed to the other four types representing a human being in his or her natural incarnation. The narrator, the recipient, and people from their social environment are always portrayed as being outside the world of the supernatural and having the same pattern of world perception as the audience.

Next I classified all words referring to these five types of actors by parameters N (names), P (predicates), and A (attributes), which gave a result of 15 lexical-thematic groups. With this approach, practically all the vocabulary in the text is involved in the analysis (only such parameters as 'localisation' and 'temporal characteristics' are left outside the database).

Then I carried out content analysis of the vocabulary for actors from a thematic-ideographic point of view, and also statistical analysis. I examined character names as well as references to their attributes: a) permanent (gender, age, appearance, marital status, social characteristics (occupation, property, etc.), intellectual qualities, spiritual (ethical) characteristics) and b) processual (nature of actions they perform).

Such an analysis produces results that are interesting, first of all, as compared to general linguistic data or the specifics of human image modelling in other folklore genres and other semiotic systems: fiction, 'naive' literature, belles-lettres, memoirs, and others. To understand the mechanisms of narrative organisation, however, we should apply the syntagmatic analysis of lexical items (i.e. analyse the order in which the items of specific parameters appear) and pragmatic analysis, which allows to identify the relationship between the verbal representation of parameters, on the one hand, and the plotline of the text as well as the communicative situation in which it lives, on the other.

In this article I will describe only two of the five types of demonological narrative actors (DC and recipient), focusing on their naming. Moreover, in terms of the syntagmatic relations between these lexical units I will characterise only the act of introduction (a text fragment introducing the new character).

The empirical basis for the study provides 1,936 lexical items – references to the DC (863 items) and to the recipient (1,073 items), which have different semantic and grammatical characteristics:

- names of demonological characters (*dead man*);
- proper nouns (*Ivan*, *Natalia*);
- words with general categorical semantics (*a woman*, *old man*);
- kinship terms (*brother*);

- names indicating social environment (*neighbour*);
- naming by profession/job (*blacksmith*) / property relations (*house owner*);
- names of animals (DC transformations: *crow*, *dove*);
- verbal references (*it is rustling*);
- pronouns (*she*, *it*, *I*, *someone*);
- metonymic references (part of body as character: *head* / *foot*);
- evaluative characteristics as references (*fool*, *sinner*).

Below they are presented in order of decreasing frequency in the corpus of examined texts.

| **Demonological character** | **Recipient** |
|---|---|
| pronouns – 448 (51.91%) | pronouns – 777 (72.41%) |
| kinship terms – 177 (20.51%) | kinship terms – 130 (12.12%) |
| words with the general categorical semantics 'a person' – 88 (10.2%) | words with the general categorical semantics 'a person' – 99 (9.23%) |
| names of demonological characters – 66 (7.65%) | |
| proper nouns – 36 (4.17%) | proper nouns – 41 (3.82%) |
| names of animals (transformations of DC) – 16 (1.85%) | |
| naming by profession / job / property relations – 9 (1.04%) | naming by profession / job / property relations – 9 (0.84%) |
| names of people from the social environment – 3 (0.35%) | names of people from the social environment – 10 (0.93%) |
| verbal references (verb as reference to a person) – 9 (1.04%) | |
| metonymic reference – 9 (1.04%) | |
| evaluative characteristics as reference – 2 (0.23%) | evaluative characteristics as reference – 7 (0.65%) |

I would like to draw attention to the following features of character names in demonological stories. Firstly, DC names are more diverse than those of the recipients, and among them there are specific ones, such as direct names of demonological characters, names of transformations into an animal, specific verbal references to the DC designating its action in the complete absence of substantive, metonymic references (note that this way of naming the character could also be used to refer to the recipient; there are no semantic constraints).

Paradoxically, when calculating word usages in folk demonological stories, it becomes clear that the dead man in the Russian folk tradition is rarely referred to as 'dead'. In the analysed text corpus names for a dead person (*dead man*, *dead*, *drowned man*, and others), and the words qualifying it as a supernatural character (*evil spirits*, *devil*, *ghost*, *spirit*, *soul*, etc.), constitute only about 8% of all the names. Moreover, such names are used, as a rule, in conclusions and explanations, i.e. in constructions that are placed outside the story's plot. Most of the names for demonological characters are words that categorise them as human beings (anthroponyms in the broadest sense).

Secondly, the analysis reveals lexical poverty of demonological narratives, especially in the lexical-semantic field 'recipient'. It becomes especially obvious if we compare the obtained data with the corresponding fragment of the national linguistic worldview, which is described in the works of Yuri Apresian (1995), Nina Arutiunova (1999 [1998]), Elena Uryson (1998), Aleksei Shmelev (2002), Anna Wierzbicka (1997), and with the data from dictionaries. For example, in the *Russian Semantic Dictionary* the semantic field 'human being' is represented by nearly 400 pages, the table of contents itself taking 10 pages (RSD 1998). In folk prose texts many parameters describing a person are absent; for example, there are almost no emotional, imaginative, or expressive components in the meanings of words serving as names.

Characteristics of a person by job and profession are irrelevant for demonological narratives. The language of demonological prose shows that the person is included in the society primarily at the family level. A considerable quantity of kinship terms, compared to a small number of social group characteristics, is obviously due to the content of the studied texts related to the family and family relationships.

An important feature of demonological narratives about the dead is the frequency of pronominal references to a human being, first of all through personal pronouns – in the narrator's speech, as well as in direct and indirect speech of the characters. There are several reasons for this. On the one hand, demonological stories, being included in a dialogue and integrated into a situation of direct communication, acquire features inherent in colloquial speech. It is known that pronoun is the most common content word in colloquial speech, which is due to the importance of direct communication of anaphoric functions inherent in pronouns (Zemskaia 1979: 72; RCS 1983: 138–139). Thus, the 1st person pronoun ('I') is a usual way of the narrator's self-reference. The second reason for the widespread use of pronominal references to the DC is in the genre's pragmatics, that is, the narrator's intention to avoid direct names of supernatural phenomena or agents (Levkievskaia 2006: 197–198).

However, in the analysis of names in folklore texts little is achieved or explained by looking at the range of lexemes. The study of their syntagmatics in

the text proves to be much more useful. For references to characters of different types, this approach reveals a number of rules, as well as the relationship between these references, on the one hand, and the storyline and event sequence in the text, on the other.

'Reference', here understood as correlation between the sign (word, phrase) and the object of extralinguistic reality in the communication process (Arutiunova 1990), varies depending on the differences between the interlocutors' knowledge on the discussed matter. If the subject discussed is known only to the speaker, it is an introducing reference (I have one friend); if it is known both to the speaker and the addressee, there is an identifying reference (This child does not listen), and if the subject is not included in the knowledge fund of the interlocutors, it is an indefinite reference (Peter married some woman) (Arutiunova 1990).

As found by Elena Levkievskaia, the mechanisms of reference used to refer to demonological phenomena differ from general linguistic rules. They are much more varied and much less standard than mechanisms used in literary language. Thus, in a demonological text, a new subject (demonological character) is introduced into a speech situation using ways that are 'deviant' as compared to those of literary language. Elena Levkievskaia points out that the narrator "persistently avoids" calling the character by a direct name, and to refer to it uses either different pronouns (*he*, *it*), or descriptions pointing to one of the character's properties, or the so-called 'relevant' names referring to an external sign as DC's distinctive feature at the moment of speech (e.g. *girls in white*, *old man in a red shirt*, etc.), or an impersonal form of the verb in subjectless sentences (e.g. *frightens*, *appears*) (Levkievskaia 2006: 197–198).

This feature of linguistic text organisation is related, according to the researcher, to the peculiarities of the communicative situation surrounding a demonological story, namely to the interlocutors' opinion about each other as equally informed on the subject matter, equally involved in the tradition, and understanding without additional comments what or who is being discussed. On the other hand, the subject of conversation (a demonological phenomenon) is incognisable in many aspects, and this cognitive uncertainty causes the referential uncertainty observed in a demonological text.

Looking into the way that the character is introduced into the narrative, how he or she is called by the narrator, and what the context of these references is, can reveal certain other regularities of referring to the DC in the text.

As it turned out, the DC introduction is performed in two basic ways that correspond to the two ways of the text's content organisation.

The first method of character introduction (the most frequent one, accounting for approximately 80% of all cases) is the anthroponymic name (kinship

terms, nouns with a general categorical semantics 'person', proper names) in combination with the characteristics of the 'dead', which can take a variety of lexical and grammatical forms (*died*, *drowned*, *hanged himself*, *deceased*, etc.):

| | |
|---|---|
| ***Our grandfather died*** (Zinov'ev 1987: № 387). | ***Umer*** *u nas* ***ded*** (Zinov'ev 1987: № 387). |
| *One woman's* ***husband died****. And he comes to her* (Pukhova 2009: № 575). | *U odnoi zhenshchiny* ***umer muzh****. I on stal k nei prikhodit'* (Pukhova 2009: № 575). |
| *One man's* ***wife died*** (Zinov'ev 1987: № 386). | ***Pomerla*** *u odnogo muzhika* ***zhena*** (Zinov'ev 1987: № 386). |
| *Only* ***the old woman who died*** *was in the village* (Cherepanova 1996: № 10). | *A v derevne byla tol'ko* ***pomershaia starukha*** (Cherepanova 1996: № 10). |
| *A* ***young girl died****, and later her mother had a dream* (Pukhova 2009: № 552). | ***Umerla molodaia devushka****, a pozzhe ee materi snitsia son* (Pukhova 2009: № 552). |
| *There* ***a man hanged himself*** (Cherepanova 1996: № 33). | *U nikh* ***muzhik povesilsia*** (Cherepanova 1996: № 33). |
| ***Here lived Ilyukha****,* ***who drowned*** *near Petushok* (Cherepanova 1996: № 18). | *Byl tut* ***Il'iukha****, kotoryi* ***utonul*** *pod Petushkom* (Cherepanova 1996: № 18). |

In this case, it is important to note that reference to the character as to the deceased, despite the predicative form (*sister died*, *his wife died*) is the most common name for a 'walking' dead man in demonological stories.

This feature corresponds to the tradition bearer's logic, described by Elena Levkievskaia, which defines a demonological character primarily through its functions (Levkievskaia 2007: 78–106), and tends to use predicative forms to represent the DC (ibid.: 174–206). Moreover, this feature is presumably a manifestation of a more general rule of naming in folklore, noted by Sergei Nekliudov – the organisation of folklore world through action: "… the character is usually defined by the type of its behaviour" (Nekliudov 1972: 213).

The second way of character introduction (much less frequent in the studied corpus) uses structures with an indefinite (rather than an introducing) reference, such as: generalised name (*man*, *woman*, and others), often in combination with indefinite pronouns (*someone*, *some*), and characteristics of appearance (usually clothes), i.e. relevant names, but also through subjectless sentences. Characters introduced into the text by indefinite reference are described by their location in space – their names are often combined with verbs of movement.

| | |
|---|---|
| ***Some man*** *is walking along the ditch,* ***without a cap*** (Cherepanova 1996: № 5). | *Idet* ***muzhchina kakoi-to*** *po kanave, bez shapki* (Cherepanova 1996: № 5). |
| *... I come home, and there's* ***some seventeen-year-old boy*** *washing the floors* (Pukhova 2009: № 576). | *… Prikhozhu ia domoi, a tam* ***kakoi-to iunosha 17 let*** *moet poly* (Pukhova 2009: № 576). |
| *Now there is our Galka, when her son was ill, she says,* ***a man*** *came to her, a* ***tall one, with a black beard****, was asking for her son, but she did not give him away* (Cherepanova 1996: № 29). | *A vot Galka-to nasha, vot syno-ot u nee bolel, tak govorit, muzhik k ei prishel,* ***vysokii takoi****,* ***s borodoi chernoi****, vse syna prosil, tak ne otdala ona ego* (Cherepanova 1996: № 29). |
| *She stood up, opened the window, and suddenly saw* ***a woman there, in a white dress and a head-scarf****, who says, "Give me some water"* (Cherepanova 1996: № 30). | *Nu, ona vstala, otkryla okoshko i vdrug vidit, chto* ***zhenshchina taka v belom plat'e i platke*** *i prosit, dai mne, mol, voditsy* (Cherepanova 1996: № 30). |
| *...* ***A man*** *sitting* ***in a sheepskin coat*** (Cherepanova 1996: № 11). | *…* *Sidit* ***v tulupe muzhchina*** (Cherepanova 1996: № 11). |
| *He says, I hear* ***the rustling*** (Zinov'ev 1987: № 411). | *Slyshu, govorit,* ***shoborchit****. <…>* ***Shurudit*** (Zinov'ev 1987: № 411). |

It is easy to notice that the second type of character introduction is the way of introduction specific to demonological texts, described by Elena Levkievskaia. Such texts contain an intrigue: the event is first described as trivial (indeed, is there anything unusual in the fact that a person sits, walks, goes away, washes the floors?), and only then it becomes clear that the character is a dead man.

Actually, this is the main event of the text, according to Yuri Lotman, "a meaningful deviation from the norm" (Lotman 1998: 166), and the communicative task of the text, therefore, calls for a correct identification of the character, requiring one to recognise it as a dead man. Texts of this type have a thriller plot and evoke strong emotions, especially fear. The functions they perform best are thus emotional and phatic ones, inherent in demonological stories (Levkievskaia 2008: 352–353).

The analysis showed that the texts that do not state at the outset that the story is about a dead man, have only one plot type – they describe only the fact of the dead person's appearance, and this event is sufficient for such texts.

The stories in which the listener knows in advance that the character is a dead man are more diverse in content; there are such motifs as cohabitation

of wife and her late husband (e.g. Zinov'ev 1987: № 397; Cherepanova 1996: № 23, 24), malicious actions of the deceased towards children (Zinov'ev 1987: № 386, 399; Cherepanova 1996: № 41), identification of the deceased as a demon (Pukhova 2009: № 581–585; Cherepanova 1996: № 20, 22), protective actions (Zinov'ev 1987, № 390, 397; Pukhova 2009: № 581–595), and interaction with the demonological character – the transfer of objects to the other world (Pukhova 2009: № 547–557; Cherepanova 1996: № 46–47). There are texts, though, that have nothing but the description of a demonological character (e.g. Zinov'ev 1987: № 405; Cherepanova 1996: № 13).

In these texts the identification of the character as a dead man takes place at the beginning of the narrative, the listeners' expectations thus being prepared: the case is immediately described and perceived as supernatural, and therefore another kind of communicative task emerges – to correctly identify the character, from the standpoint of the tradition, and to teach to behave correctly in this situation (again from the viewpoint of the tradition).

Texts of this type are more informative and often didactic. Obviously, a large number of such texts in folk prose collections are due to the informants' perception of the interlocutor-folklore gatherer as a person who first of all needs information, and, importantly, information of a specific kind. Perhaps the informative orientation of these texts has caused a greater variety of motifs: the narrative serves as a clear illustration of beliefs associated with this demonological character, 'a walking dead'.

Thus, the described text types differ, depending on where in the text the character is defined as dead – at the beginning or the end of the text.

In other words, if we consider the demonological text as a statement, then we face its various theme-rheme organisation: a message that is the rheme ('new') in texts with a second type introduction, is already given in the texts of the first type, or the theme.

The observed correlation of character reference with the storyline suggests that text generation is conditioned communicatively: the introduction of different DC types 'provokes' action development through various plot schemes.

The study of the methods of introducing demonic characters in mythological narratives has revealed certain rules of naming of the DC in text. The nomination of mythological characters in oral stories does not always coincide with those names that are assigned to them in traditional beliefs (so the most common name for a 'walking dead' man in demonological stories is the anthroponymic name). The principles of mythological characters and phenomena naming are directly related to the communicative situation of telling the text and its communicative purpose for the sake of which the narrator begins to talk about the supernatural.

A further study of this problem can be continued in research of the principles of reference of mythological characters or phenomena in different forms of presentation of traditional knowledge such as stories, legends, and beliefs.

## NOTES

[1] See, for example, the ethno-linguistic dictionary, *The Slavic Antiquities*, 1995–2012, Vol. 1–5, Moscow, as well as papers by Tatiana Agapkina, Olga Belova, Liudmila Vinogradova, Marina Vlasova, Alexander Gura, Neonila Krinichnaia, Elena Levkievskaia, Sergei Nekliudov, Anna Plotnikova, Irina Razumova, Nikita Tolstoi, Svetlana Tolstaia, and others.

[2] See the review of motif-indexes of demonological prose in Nekliudov 2006.

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# A BROADER AND DEEPER IDEA OF FAIRY TALE: REASSESSING CONCEPT, MEANING, AND FUNCTION OF THE MOST DEBATED GENRE IN FOLK NARRATIVE RESEARCH

*Vito Carrassi*

**Abstract**: In this essay I try to argue a broader and deeper notion of fairy tale, beginning from an overview of some of the key terminologies and classifications devised and employed by folk-narrative research, passing through an etymological and semantic scrutiny of the word 'fairy', and developing, eventually, a structural analysis purposely framed within the historical-cultural context of the Irish tradition. What I attempt to let emerge – challenging to some extent the established concepts and theories – is a more comprehensive narrative category, characterised by a specific epistemological and ontological value, through which a sort of intermediate, neutral space is modelled, where boundaries are crossed and elements more or less heterogeneous are connected. Thus, the fairy tale can express a multi-dimensional worldview and the potential for a more complex idea of reality.

**Keywords**: belief, classification, etymology, fairies, fairy tale, Ireland, narrative genres, otherness, supernatural, worldview

## INTRODUCTION

Let me begin with a basic question: what is a fairy tale? Or even better: what does fairy tale mean? What do we mean when we say "fairy tale"? Certainly, fairy tale is one of the several genres by which folk narrative tradition is classified. But what is a (narrative) genre? As Willem de Blécourt (2012: 9) puts it: "I consider a genre as a rather stable, encompassing category. Such a category may be used, albeit differently, by both narrators and theorists." According to Ülo Valk (2012: 23):

> *Genre is one of the fundamental concepts of folkloristics, reminding us that vernacular orality takes traditional forms. The idea of generic qualities of folklore helps us to create preliminary order in huge corpuses of recorded texts.* [---] *Genre is a gap that keeps some texts apart and a bond that ties others together.*

Hence, if the fairy tale is a genre, and a genre is an encompassing category as well as a gap keeping apart and a bond tying some texts, then the fairy tale could be considered as a sort of homogeneous and well-ordered space – within the greater space of folklore – including a certain kind of narratives sharing a certain number of qualities. Yet, the scope and the meaning of narrative genres is all but a clearly established issue – if anything, a subject of numerous and multifarious discussions and arguments. There are too many elements and variables to take into account to reach a final and absolute agreement. In Stith Thompson's words (1977 [1946]: 7): "Much hair-splitting has taken place in the past and much useless effort devoted to the establishment of exact terms for the various kinds of folktale."[1] However, in the following line, he clarified: "Yet some *very general* terms are not only helpful but necessary" (ibid., my emphasis). Classifying is a complex and potentially counter-productive work; nonetheless, we cannot do without it, at least in a *very general* way.[2] Accordingly, my proposal is that the genre of fairy tale, rather than a whatever – and quite limited – narrative item among many others might be interpreted, through a structural and historical-cultural reassessment, as an epistemological tool by which individuals and communities can explore the world around them. At the same time, it might function as a sort of ontological category, flexible enough to provide a *very general* classification of the folk-narrative tradition and a deeper view on reality itself.

To be sure, the concept of fairy tale is one of the most controversial issues in folklore research,[3] the main problems deriving from the meaning(s) associated with the term 'fairy' (and 'fairies'). Let us read, for instance, the opening lines of an essay about fairy tale by Ruth Bottigheimer (2003: 57): "The term 'fairy tales' connotes tales about fairies such as 'The Yellow Dwarf' as well as fairy tales like 'Cinderella' and 'Puss-in-Boots'. Tales about fairies and fairy tales differ considerably from one another." She draws a clear-cut distinction between these two genres:

> *Tales about fairies treat fairyland and its fairy inhabitants* [---] *as well as the complex relationships that develop between fairies and human beings.* [---] *Fairy tales are commonly narratively and lexically simple, may or may not include fairies, unfold along predictable lines, with magically gifted characters attaining their goals with thrice-repeated magical motifs.* (ibid.)

This (alleged) ambivalence entails that many "folk-narrative scholars prefer the analytic term 'magic tale' or 'wonder tale' to the more popular 'fairy tale' because fairies rarely appear in such tales" (*The Greenwood Encyclopedia* 2008: 214).[4] On the contrary, I think that the concept of 'fairy tale', more than those of

'wonder' or 'magic' tale, has a clear analytic value by which one can encompass both tales about fairies and fairy tales – along with other kinds of narratives. We need to assume an idea of 'fairy' not just as a mere synonym for 'wonder' or 'magic', but in light of a broader and deeper meaning, allowing to go beyond the traditional dichotomy between wonder/magic and belief, and to build a bridge between the canonical notions of the fairy tale (or *Märchen*) and legend (or *Sage*). To the question posed by de Blécourt (2012: 10) – "Are there any narratives without some sort of 'belief'?" – I would answer negatively: in fact, one may not conceive the ideas of magic, wonder, and, above all, fairy separated from "some sort of belief", all the more in the living historical and cultural context of storytellers, their listeners, and the larger folk-society[5] – unlike what happens when folk-narratives are removed from their original contexts and re-framed in a literary sphere, where they become self-referential and purely aesthetic items.[6] This is, for instance, the case with the French *conte de fées*, from which the English term 'fairy tale' derives, as well as the usual meaning ascribed to it.[7] Likewise, may we say that legends or belief narratives in general are lacking in magic or wonder? Indeed, they are often the foremost elements of these stories, even the very motive of their passing on; and I am not solely referring to the abovementioned tales about fairies. Thus, I believe it could be useful to find a different and more objective criterion leading to a *very general* classification in the *mare magnum* of folk-narratives.

In my opinion, starting from an overview of some classical definitions and classifications in the folk-narrative studies, paying critical attention to the place and role reserved to the fairy tale, passing through an etymological and historical re-evaluation of the word 'fairy', and framing it in a suitable cultural-historical context – as I believe the Irish one is – it is possible to address the *vexata quaestio* of the fairy tale from a quite innovative and thought-provoking (at least I hope) point of view. I am dealing with a dynamic and changing field of research, affording several and varying opinions, approaches, and interpretations, as demonstrated by the history of our studies, especially by its latest developments.[8] Nevertheless, it is exactly this long and strengthened history that has sewn a sort of sacred veil around the more or less traditional idea of 'fairy tale', within the greater system of folk-narrative genres. I will try to ignore this veil, at my own risk, so as to supply a useful contribution to redefine the function and the sense of a thing named 'fairy tale'.

## A THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

My analysis begins with the seminal and theoretically all-embracing classification provided by Aarne-Thompson's *The Types of the Folktale* (AT 1961) – later revised and enlarged by Hans Jörg Uther (ATU 2004). In this catalogue, the narrative material is organised according to numerical succession, from 1 to 2399; each number corresponds to a specific *type*, i.e. a narrative pattern in which all the stories roughly conforming to a same plot can be included. More generally, the types of the ATU Index are grouped and subdivided in seven broader categories, basically identifiable as different narrative genres: Animal Tales, Tales of Magic, Religious Tales, Realistic Tales, Tales of the Stupid Ogre, Anecdotes and Jokes, Formula Tales. Each of them, in its way, is split in several sub-categories, each comprehending all the tales sharing a specific character, a certain class of characters, or any other distinguishing feature. Famously, the fairy tale falls under the second category, Tales of Magic (numbers 300–749), whose all sub-categories, except one, refer to the concept of *supernatural*, which is clearly regarded as the major and noteworthy trait of these narratives.

To be sure, supernatural cannot be considered as an exclusive feature of Tales of Magic; its key function in most Animal Tales or Religious Tales, for instance, is unquestionable. And yet, according to this typological classification – regardless of its insufficiencies and drawbacks (Propp 2003 [1958]: 10–11) – only in the so-called Tales of Magic (i.e. fairy tales) the supernatural has such a prominence and significance to deserve explicit recognition. Consequently, to tell a fairy tale would mean to tell a story concerning figures, phenomena, situations, and beliefs included in that indefinite, mysterious, fascinating, dreadful subject called supernatural, which gathers all that lies beyond the natural, known, usual, realistic boundaries of the daily life: a sort of parallel and alternative world with its own rules and customs, more or less different from those being current in our world. In other words, the fairy tale, through the extraordinary experiences or adventures of a hero, or the vivid imagination of a storyteller, would disclose a more or less hidden dimension of reality, bringing to the fore such concepts as magic and wonder, as well as marvellous, fabulous, preternatural, fantastic, miraculous, numinous, uncanny, and so on: all concepts that, in different ways, are used both by scholars and storytellers to try to explain the distinctive *otherness* of this genre and its topics. Ultimately, the fairy tale could be seen as the narrative place in which a *radical* otherness, recognised as such – and otherwise unknown or scarcely known – takes a visible, identifiable, and shareable form: "An *other world* is very much alive in fairy tales, thanks to our capacity as storytellers," an other world where it is possible to "create and re-create gods, divine powers, fairies, demons, fates, monsters, witches, and other supernatural characters and forces" (Zipes 2012: 4).

Moreover, the notions of supernatural and otherness appear to play an essential and paradigmatic role in the morphological analysis proposed by Vladimir Propp (2003). In order to surmount the insufficiencies and drawbacks bound up with the typological classification, Propp brings back all the fairy tales to a single and universal pattern of 31 character functions. According to this outline, among other things, there would not be a (fairy tale) plot without a villainy committed by a villain, or a lack felt by a character (the main function 8). Though, it is also indisputable that, without the departure of the hero destined to restore or improve the initial situation (function 11), the plot would not start at all and, consequently, there would not be any journey or adventure in another world where the hero might accomplish her/his tests and deeds. As such, the fairy tale hero must leave, though temporarily, her/his home, cross the threshold between the known and the unknown, and advance into another dimension of reality, where he/she chiefly encounters supernatural beings and phenomena. Note that the key figures of donor (functions 12–14) and villain (functions 16–18) are usually supernatural characters, who help or contrast the accomplishment of a heroic task; the task that entails not only the defeating of the villain and a triumphant comeback home, but also the discovery or a clearer knowledge of the world beyond our world. Indeed, another world.

However, is *all* that we identify as supernatural present in the domain of the fairy tale? If so, it would be an exceptionally widespread and certainly *very general* narrative category, theoretically able to encompass all the genres somehow relating to the vast concept of supernatural, leaving aside just the genres involving *natural* subjects. In fact, looking at the main scholarly definitions and classifications in the field of folk narratives, it clearly appears that the supernatural items are not regarded in the same way, but are essentially distinguished according to their level of belief or believability, namely whether and how they are believed as true, trustworthy, even historical, or, instead, as false, fanciful, and merely fictitious.

A dichotomous theorisation is already present in the Grimm Brothers, with their well-known distinction between *Sage* (legend) and *Märchen* (fairy tale) based on a "believing determinant" (Jason 1971: 143). According to this one, "the legend is a true story" dealing "with supernatural events [---] 'believed' by its bearers" and "regarded as pertaining to the real world of the narrator and his audience," whereas "the fairy tale, to the contrary, is not believed by the narrating community, although it too deals with supernatural events" (ibid.: 134). Both these *very general* genres, therefore, deal with the same theme, "supernatural events," but they differ because one of them is believed to be true, or at least believable, while the other is not, in a sort of opposition between the (real) 'history' and the (poetical) 'fiction'.[9]

This opposition characterises, to a variable extent, all the subsequent terminologies and classifications. Interestingly, Edwin S. Hartland, in *Popular Studies in Mythology, Romance, and Folklore* (1914), builds his taxonomy on an ambivalent interpretation of the concept of 'fairy': on the one hand there are the "fairy tales," or *Märchen*, on the other hand the "tales about fairies", or *Sagas*, the former intended as tales of marvellous events not to be believed seriously, the latter as serious tales more or less linked to historical places and characters. Conversely, the ambivalence inherent in the concept of 'fairy tale' – "*Fairy tale* seems to imply the presence of fairies; but the great majority of such tales have no fairies" (Thompson 1977 [1946]: 8) – leads Stith Thompson to prefer the German *Märchen*, which he describes as "a tale of some length involving a succession of motifs and episodes. It moves in an unreal world without definite locality or definite characters and is filled with the marvelous" (ibid.). On the opposite side there is the *Sage*, defined as a tale purported "to be an account of an extraordinary happening believed to have actually occurred. [---] It may tell of an encounter with marvelous creatures which the folk still believe in" (ibid.). Incidentally, it is noteworthy that both these genres, though in a different way, share a common subject: the marvellous, or supernatural. Thompson enumerates several other genres, yet the antithetical pair formed by *Märchen* and *Sage* appears to play, also by virtue of a scientific and historical relevance, a key role in the classification of the folk-narrative material (see also Lüthi 1986 [1982]), which is thus ordered according to a more extensive criterion, certainly more practical than those based on formal or content features – as for the typological ATU Index. But, I would say, not more objective, if only we think of the obvious and intrinsic variability and instability of such concepts as belief, believability, or truthfulness, which are affected by a number of changing contextual factors, without overlooking the 'individual' factor, as highlighted by Heda Jason (1971: 143): "Today we know that the quality of any narrator's attitude towards his tale is unstable, that it varies from individual to individual and even from period to period in the lifetime of a single individual." Likewise, as Willem de Blécourt points out (2012: 9): "[---] the concept of 'belief' is unsuitable for academic purposes, indeed it is often hard to determine whether an informant 'believes' in something or not, or is unsure about it, or changes his/her mind in different situations."

As a rule, the main scholarly classifications opt for a tripartition of folk narrative material, sometimes applying in a more gradual way the classical believing-centred principle. William Bascom (1965: 3) espouses the term "prose narratives" to designate all forms of "verbal art which includes myths, legends, and folktales." These three general categories are identified according to a combined evaluation of time and truth factors:

> *Folktales are prose narratives which are regarded as fiction.* [---] *Myths are prose narratives which, in the society in which they are told, are considered to be truthful accounts of what happened in the remote past.* [---] *Legends are prose narratives which, like myths, are regarded as true by the narrator and his audience, but they are set in a period considered less remote, when the world was much as it is today.* (ibid.: 4)

The use of the term 'folktale' instead of 'fairy tale' – a use that has become customary in the scholarship, above all in order to distinguish between the oral/popular folktale and the written/literary fairy tale[10] – is explained again: "because narratives about fairies are usually regarded as true, and because fairies do not appear in most folktales" (ibid.). In other words, fairies, as "usual" matter of belief, should not be connected to narratives regarded as pure fiction. However, as already said, I am really doubtful about the existence, in the field of folklore, of absolutely fictitious narratives. On the other hand, if the fairies, according to Bascom (and many others), are "usually" believed as true, when and why are they believed as untrue? Ultimately, is a clear distinction between the concepts of 'fairy' and 'fairies' quite necessary? I will return to this issue later on.

According to Linda Dégh (1972: 59–60), "As long as they [folk narratives] are told, they vary, merge, and blend; a change in their social value often results in a switch into another genre." After this cautionary statement, she proposes, "for practical purposes," to "divide the narrative genres into tale genres, legend genres, and true experience genres" (ibid.: 60). More than genres, these appear as wider categories, each including those genres sharing a similar degree of believability and truthfulness. Interestingly, beside tale (i.e. fairy tale, even though Dégh prefers *Märchen*) genres and legend genres, "true experience genres" are also present, so making more gradual the transition from fairy tale to legend. Furthermore, referring to the AT Index, she maintains that "the Märchen themes center on man's fascination with the supernatural adventures. They tell about an ordinary human being's encounter with the suprahuman world and his becoming endowed with qualities that enable him to perform supernatural acts" (ibid.: 62–63). Again, the supernatural is the key concept. It is seen as a fascinating matter related to a world beyond the ordinary world, another world discovered through the journey of an ordinary human being – coming from the 'real' world of narrator and her/his listeners – able to cross the threshold dividing two or more dimensions of reality.

The tripartition suggested by Steven Swann Jones retains the canonical terms, but these are intended from a pretty different perspective:

> *Myths are etiological narratives that use gods (divine, immortal figures) to explain the operation and purpose of the cosmos. Legends are quasi-*

> *historical narratives that use exceptional and extraordinary protagonists and depict remarkable phenomena to illustrate cultural ideals, values, and norms. Finally, folktales are entertaining narratives that use common, ordinary people as protagonists to reveal the desires and foibles of human nature.* (Swann Jones 1995: 8)

Here, the key distinction deals with the nature of the protagonists and of their contexts, according to a range including mythical gods (non-humans), legendary heroes (extraordinary humans), and common people (ordinary humans). Rather than focusing on an exterior issue, as the attitude of people towards the narratives, this classification seems to emphasise internal factors as their characters and space-time coordinates. In this arrangement, fairy tale is interpreted just as a sub-genre of folktale, but it is characterised by a momentous and distinguishing feature: "While these other genres of the folktale are reasonably mimetic – that is, they depict life in fairly realistic terms – *fairy tales depict magical or marvelous events or phenomena as a valid part of human experience*" (ibid.: 9). Thus, the peculiarity of fairy tale lies in its representation of events and phenomena reminding us of the abovementioned notion of supernatural, whose radical otherness is interpreted as a significant and serious experience, "not to be taken lightly, but rather to be regarded with respect and even some trepidation" (ibid.: 10): a claim that would seem fitting for a sacred myth or a quasi-historical legend rather than for pure fiction as a fairy tale should be.

## AN ETYMOLOGICAL SCRUTINY

Perhaps, if we look at the *true* subjects of folk narratives – in our case, the supernatural, in all its variety, and the radical otherness revealed through it – from a structural point of view, we could find the way to gather them in a more comprehensive and *very general* category. This way, in my opinion, deals with the potential implied in the pair formed by 'fairy' and 'tale' – as suggested, indeed, by some of the abovementioned authors – first and foremost with an etymological reassessment of the word 'fairy', so as to retrieve all its semantic scope and historical-cultural meaning.

For this purpose, I turn to the scrupulous and detailed analysis provided by Noel Williams in his essay, "The Semantics of the Word Fairy." Despite the difficulties by and large concerning the etymology of words referring to the supernatural (Williams 1991: 460–462), he is able to assert a generally accepted history of the term 'fairy', "derived from words denoting female supernatural creatures in other languages." More precisely:

> [---] *it would seem to be derived from Latin fatum = 'thing said.' This gave fata = 'fate,' a neuter plural which, it is supposed, was misinterpreted in the Dark Ages as feminine singular, fata = 'female fate, goddess,' and these goddesses of fate were supposedly identified with Greek Lachesis, Atropos and Clotho.* (ibid.: 462)

At this early stage, the notion of fairy, or better *fata*, seems to suggest a sacred and numinous idea of femininity, an idea dealing with the mysteries about the human destiny and the otherworldly. Interestingly, this meaning of Latin *fata*, following the Roman conquest of Celtic countries, appears to be associated with "various Celtic female deities" (ibid.), giving rise to a lasting and substantial connection with the Celtic culture (ibid.: 462–463, 468–470).

Leaving aside all the "imperfections and difficulties" (ibid.: 463) relating to an accurate etymological survey of the word 'fairy', I believe it is crucial, for our discussion, to emphasise the semantic expansion it had during its historical evolution:

> *All agree that fata was interpreted as feminine and eventually gave four distinct meanings in Old French which passed into English, namely (1) enchantment, illusion; (2) fairyland, land of illusion; (3) human with special power; (4) supernatural beings.* (ibid.: 463)

Therefore, beside supernatural beings, 'fairy' identified: a class of humans whose powers connected them to the supernatural; a kind of phenomena linked to a supernatural interference producing an alternative, illusory perception of the reality; a magical, fantastic place in which supernatural beings were believed to dwell. In consideration of this fourfold meaning, one is allowed to include, in the concept of fairy, fundamentally all those figures, phenomena, and events challenging the ordinary and officially accepted idea of reality, and showing the existence of other dimensions, parallel worlds, alternative realities. In this light, Swann Jones may properly claim, referring to Joseph Campbell, that in the fairy tale the fantastic and the quotidian "are perceived as coexisting in tangential worlds that the protagonist experiences and must reconcile" (Swann Jones 1995: 15). As we are going to see, this is a very fruitful view if placed in the context of the Irish tradition.

However, through its historical and literary investigation, Williams arrives to distinguish between *fay*, more directly related to the Latin *fata*, and *fairy* itself, coming to an important conclusion: "[---] the notion of *fairy* in its earliest uses is not primarily to denote creatures, but a quality of phenomena or events which may or may not be associated with creatures" (Williams 1991: 464). Hence, originally, rather than designating a supernatural female creature – whence it

passed to denote figures, places, and phenomena more or less correlated – the word 'fairy' would have had a more general and comprehensive meaning, an adjectival sense concerning a quality characterising not only creatures but also phenomena and events, thus identifying a veritable otherworld, alternative to the daily one. This quality referred to a very significant semantic field, quite different from the one we are used to assign to the 'fairy', as Williams explains:

> *Such a concept may lie in the vague idea of "fatedness," a quality in the world which can control and direct the actions of humanity, and hence is more powerful than humanity. For example, there is clearly a link between the idea of fate and that of death. Death is perhaps the mystery for which people feel they can never have an explanation fully adequate to their experience and the supernatural, in its widest sense, has always been connected with death, and is probably universally so.* (ibid.: 465)

This connection between the 'fairy' and the supreme mystery of death[11] – alongside the other incomprehensible facts relating to the human existence and the afterlife – gives us the most significant clue to grasp the full extent of a concept that, over the centuries, was ontologically and epistemologically shrunk, at least in the fields of literature and learned culture, where it underwent a progressive assimilation to the only dimension of 'fairies' (*fées*), namely to those supernatural beings *par excellence* representative of a magical, enchanted, illusory otherness, framed in a purely fictional and escapist kind of narratives. The semantic affinity between 'fairy' and 'fatedness' compels to reconsider, from a broader and deeper point of view, the role and meaning carried out by the whole world of fairies – and not merely by single figures known as fairies – in the folk narrative tradition, where the original sense of the term 'fairy' identified by Williams appears to survive and retain a real significance.

## THE IRISH FAIRY TRADITION

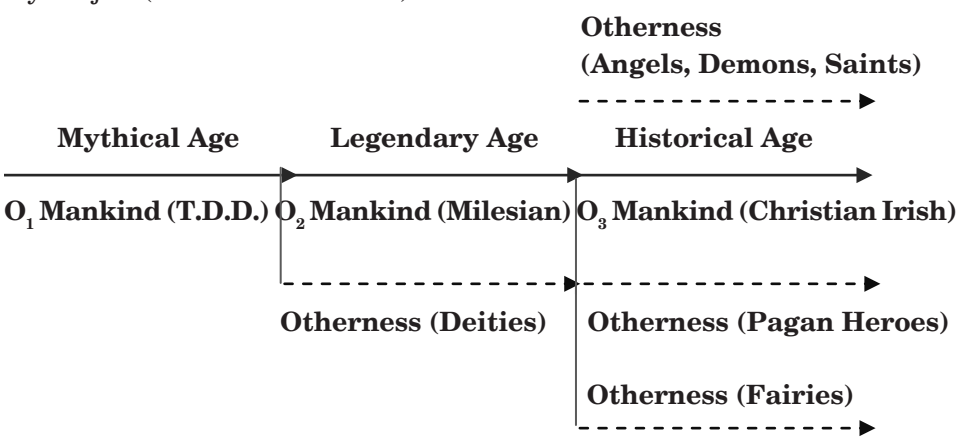
I think that the Irish context is particularly suitable for an evaluation of the actual breadth and depth of the concept of 'fairy'. As an essential element of folklore, this concept lies at the core of a complex system of beliefs and worldviews labelled as *fairy faith* or *fairy lore*, which, even though "is known from many countries [---] only in some places has it remained an active element in the life of the people. One such place is Ireland" (Christiansen 1971–1973: 101). If intended as "the complex of beliefs connected with the existence of another race side by side with man but normally invisible to him" (ibid.: 95), fairy lore is certainly just a part (the major part, as it seems) of a wider historical-cultural

system based on the multifaceted concept of supernatural, more specifically, a pretty organic set of beliefs that "has been an integral part of the world view of the Irish people over many centuries" (Lysaght 1995: 289). However, if we restore its early adjectival meaning, the notion of fairy would be allowed to include the several yet also similar meanings related to the concept of supernatural, which can be summed up as 'fatedeness', as explained by Williams. On the other hand, the nature of fairies as beings and fairyland as a place existing side by side with the humans and their world epitomises those historical and cultural events which, to a great extent, have shaped, as it were, the whole supernatural topography and brought about its influence on the earthly events. It is exactly in this spatial closeness, inherent connection, and functional correlation between worlds that one could identify the epistemological and ontological peculiarity of a redefined idea of the genre of fairy tale. An idea implying the multidimensionality of reality and the possibility – no matter how much believable or believed – of passing from one dimension to another; a means, therefore, to conceive and try to understand the radical otherness of all those things, beings, and phenomena alien to the common experience, yet deep-seated in folk mind and imagination (and elsewhere). To this end, I find extremely suggestive the following excerpt from Thomas W. Rolleston:

> *But the People of Dana do not withdraw. By their magic art they cast over themselves a veil of invisibility, which they can put on or off as they choose. There are two Irelands henceforward, the spiritual and the earthly.* [---] *Where the human eye can see but green mounds and ramparts, the relics of ruined fortresses or sepulchres, there rise the fairy palaces of the defeated divinities* [---]. *The ancient mythical literature conceives them as heroic and splendid in strength and beauty. In later times, and as Christian influences grew stronger, they dwindle into fairies, the People of the Side; but they have never wholly perished; to this day the Land of Youth and its inhabitants live in the imagination of the Irish peasant.* (Rolleston 1911: 136–137)

To me, in these few lines, Rolleston supplies a suggestive and quite significant picture, evoking a much longer and more tangled history, let us say the more or less fictionalised history of Ireland and its invaders (described in an exemplary way in a medieval Irish collection of narratives known as *Lebor Gabála Érenn*, or *The Book of Invasions*, and brilliantly reprised and summarised by such a writer as James Stephens in his "The Story of Tuan Mac Cairill," included within a narrative anthology intriguingly titled *Irish Fairy Tales*). This history begins from the epical defeat suffered by the mythical Túatha Dé Danann against the legendary people, Milesians, and arrives to the author's

present. Rolleston outlines not only the synchronic landscape and the main characters of thousands of stories belonging to the Irish narrative tradition, but also their origins and the diachronic progression and change of a broader historical context. As is well known, this context can be summed up into a four-cycle classification, through which scholars have roughly sorted and catalogued the massive and heterogeneous material of Irish narrative tradition according to a chronological and more widely cultural principle (for a brief but complete overview see Ní Bhrolcháin 2009: 26–77). Therefore, we have a 1) Mythological Cycle, a 2) Heroic or Ulster Cycle, a 3) Fenian Cycle, and a 4) Cycle of the Kings or Historical Cycle. Overall, these cycles sketch a historical sequence – applicable out of Ireland too (I am referring, in particular, to G. B. Vico and his seminal idea of the *Three Ages of humankind*) – in which a mythical age (1), a legendary age (2 and 3), and a historical age (4) follow one another. Each of these cycles, with its own stories, reflects frameworks, worldviews, systems of beliefs and values, so as one might find in them traces, signs, and figures referring to the past, or better, to the pasts that have followed and overlapped, as suggested by Rolleston, one another up to the present. It is exactly in this overlapping, spatial – "there are two Irelands [---] the spiritual and the earthly," in Rolleston's words – and temporal – because the past, instead of disappearing, coexists, in the form of fairies and sacred places, with the present – that the domain of fairy tale can be identified. Consequently, the fairy tale is conceivable as a sort of intermediate or neutral space – real or figurative – whose boundaries act as a wide frontier of transition that makes possible the encounter between the several and varied elements scattered by the ages, contexts, peoples, and societies that, along with their mythological, ideological, philosophical, ethical, and religious paradigms, have given rise to the complex and layered cultural identity of Ireland. Perhaps, a graphic outline could be useful to make clearer my subject (see also Mincu 1978).



By this figure I try to provide a diachronic and synchronic representation of the events evoked by Rolleston and, more generally, a sketch of the historical and cultural configuration that characterises the Irish fairy tales. The three capital Os denote as many 'origins', namely three turning points, in the Irish history and its narrative tradition, entailing a paradigmatic change that caused a new spatial landscape and an ontological evolution in some individuals and peoples. Here one can identify the origins of various forms of otherness, more or less connoted as supernatural: $O_1$ labels the arrival in Ireland of the Túatha Dé Danann, seen as the earliest (though forerun by other peoples that later disappeared) settlers of the country and the founders of its history; $O_2$ labels the aforementioned victory of the Milesians – regarded as the ancestor of modern Irish people – over the Danann, who are compelled to pass into another, parallel and invisible, dimension, and now viewed as deities; $O_3$, finally, labels the coming of Saint Patrick and the subsequent conversion of Ireland to Christianity, which produces the transition of Milesians into a heroic-pagan dimension, the transformation of Danann into fairies, and the triumph of the Christian God along with his related transcendent figures. What we see, therefore, is an increasing set of parallel lines referring to a series of parallel worlds that, far from disappearing, survive (though modified) and set off a dialectic – especially by means of narratives – with the objective and visible world, i.e. the *human* world. This functions as a paradigm of reference, as the *norm* opposed to the *anomalies* which, on certain occasions, come out, in the form of beings or phenomena, from coexisting dimensions of reality that had been, in their turn, the paradigm of reference, that is, before the advent of a new historical-cultural age and of a new species of mankind. What pertains to the past(s) falls into the sphere of subjective and invisible, in a more or less indistinct and ambivalent otherness that yields an increasingly large stock of stories set in the liminal spaces and moments where what exists encounters what existed and/or could still exist. This process is more relevant in Ireland than elsewhere: differently from the rest of Europe, the advent of Christianity and its progressive achievement did not mean the disappearance or the repudiation of the pre-existing pagan-Celtic heritage, but brought about a syncretistic – then stratified and more complex – culture, especially regarding the fairy lore and fairies (see Ó Giolláin 1991: 199–203).

To recognise the co-existence of parallel dimensions leads to a broader and deeper view on reality and life itself, furthering the exploration of unknown or less known horizons, as fragile, fading, and indefinite they may turn out to be. It is precisely such indefiniteness that makes this plurality of alternative dimensions more significant: if, on the one hand, it causes uncertainties, doubts, fears, not to say a perpetual disorientation, then, on the other hand, it debunks

stereotypes and assumptions of any kind and generates a constant and fruitful questioning of the world we live in, giving rise, to use the Bakhtinian terms, to a *dialogic*, *carnivalesque* worldview.

Operating as a sort of bridge linking several dimensions of reality, as a threshold connecting parallel worlds, the fairy tale, in order to make a potential space to contact an actual place of encounter, needs the pragmatic action by individuals or groups of individuals – the hero, according to Kurt Ranke, "is a traveler between the worlds" (quoted in Dégh 1972: 63) – who, crossing their boundaries, leave their own world and undergo the possibility of interacting with someone or something pertaining to an "unbounded" outside (Ó Giolláin 1991: 201). Just as, for instance, Jamie Freel does, willingly going to "an old ruined castle" that "was said to be the abode of the 'wee folk'" (*Jamie Freel and the Young Lady*, Yeats 2002 [1888]: 54), or Jack Dogherty, who boldly dives down to "the bottom of the sea" to know the house of a merrow (*The Soul Cages*, ibid.: 71). The domain and the boundaries of the fairy tale genre are thus unstable and changeable; they depend on the changes in knowledge, beliefs, fantasies, fears, practices, and concern about the supernatural, as well as on the historically and culturally varying conceptions about what should be regarded as radically 'other' in respect to themselves. In other words, a fairy tale can theoretically occur anywhere, provided that there are the *right* actors and the *favourable* circumstances.[12] Of course, the right actors can also be the 'others', whenever they happen to leave the otherworld and come into ours. Think, for instance, of the "little weeshy woman, dressed in a neat red cloak" coming into Paddy Corcoran's house to visit his sick wife (*Paddy Corcoran's Wife*, ibid.: 33), or the *púca* who "came behind" a piper and "flung him on his own back" (*The Piper and the Púca*, ibid.: 102). Obviously, this is only true as long as there are women and men willing and/or able to see these 'others', to accept and recognise their existence, or, at least, to tell stories about them.

## CONCLUSION

To come to an end, I would refer to an old but stirring article by C. Scott Littleton, "A Two-Dimensional Scheme for the Classification of Narratives," whose proposal of a more general and functional classification of narratives has something in common with my attempt to broaden the scope and deepen the meaning of the fairy tale. To be sure, Littleton does not propose a new idea of the genre, but provides a scheme arranging all the traditional genres according to the two criteria he believes to be more important than any other, namely "the relative degree to which a narrative is grounded in fact or fancy," and "the relative

sacredness or secularity of a narrative" (Littleton 1965: 21). These criteria are translated into dichotomies, "two polarities or ideal types," "between absolutely factual (or scientific) and absolutely fabulous (or non-scientific)," and "between absolutely secular and absolutely sacred" (ibid.: 21–22). As Littleton himself admits, indeed, "it is, of course, difficult to quantify the degree of sacredness or secularity of a narrative, let alone the degree to which it is factual or fabulous" (ibid.: 22). In my opinion, to classify the narratives according to their higher or lower degree in a specific quality can be a useful means to avoid the stiff discontinuity generated by the traditional genres, and can give a more flexible view of the boundaries between different narratives. Nevertheless, I find the criteria chosen by Littleton certainly pertinent and significant, but also quite fluid, relative, too much subject to individual attitudes and contextual factors, such as the already discussed criterion of belief/believability. I propose, instead, a structural dichotomy based on the pair fairy tale / tale, where the difference would lie in a more or less stratified and multidimensional worldview, in a higher or lower presence of the supernatural, in a more or less radical otherness of characters and phenomena involved. Thus, the fairy tale would become the narrative pole of the ontological complexity and of the epistemological challenge, finally a *very general* category encompassing all those narratives – be they myths, legends, folktales, wonder tales, sagas, and so on – showing a reality whose several levels are connected by the overtaking of their boundaries.

## NOTES

[1] Intriguingly, fifty years later Linda Dégh (1996: 42) wrote: "The hairsplitting exercise of discriminating between categories and subcategories, assigning names, and determining 'analytical categories' began early and is still going on, as if modern authors would be persuaded to invent new terms for their new collections in line with the fashionable trends of other disciplines. New terms are also a risky business because they often turn out to be the reinvention of the wheel."

[2] Cf. Bascom (1965: 3): "Definitions and classifications are neither particularly interesting nor necessarily fruitful, but if any field of study needs clarification of its basic terminology it is clearly folklore, which has so long been plagued by inconsistent and contradictory definitions."

[3] See, for instance, the entry "Fairy Tale" in *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales* (2008: 322): "Despite its currency and apparent simplicity, the term 'fairy tale' resists a universally accepted or universally satisfying definition. For some, the term denotes a specific narrative form with easily identified characteristics, but for others it suggests not a singular genre but an umbrella category under which a variety of other forms may be grouped." Indeed, I also argue an idea of fairy tale as a sort of 'umbrella category', as I try to prove in this essay.

[4] Cf., e.g., the use of "magic tale" by Linda Dégh (1972: 58) to translate the German *Märchen* and make clear the distinction between this and legend/*Sage*: "Since the historic statement of Jacob Grimm, 'das Märchen ist poetischer, das Sage historischer' (*Deutsche Sagen* 1816), folklorists have accepted the distinction between the magic tale (Märchen) and the legend. The two forms correspond to primary attitudes in human culture and by their very nature merge and blend into each other; the magic tale expresses the escape from reality, and the legend faces the facts of reality." Jack Zipes (2000: xvi), instead, adopts the term 'wonder tale', in which he includes the subgenre fairy tale: "The fairy tale is only one type of literary appropriation of a particular oral storytelling tradition related to the oral wonder tale, often called the *Zaubermärchen* or the *conte merveilleux*, which existed throughout Europe in many different forms during the medieval period."

[5] It would be fitting, perhaps, quoting Linda Dégh (1996: 40–41), to reconsider "the time when practising fieldworkers and comparative text philologists realised that both genres [legend and *Märchen*] are based on a common belief system, a common monotheistic cultural knowledge, as is convincingly documented by Stith Thompson's *Motif Index*. The motifs, the smallest components of traditional narratives [---] can be regarded also as statements of belief, expression of worldview, charged attitudes and oppositions between fantasy and reality, the knowable and unknowable, life and death. It was no absurdity when legend scholars proposed to apply the *Motif Index* numbers for legend classification."

[6] Cf. Zipes (2000: xvi): "During its long evolution, the literary fairy tale distinguished itself as genre by 'appropriating' many motifs, signs, and drawings from folklore, embellishing them and combining them with elements from other literary genres, for it became gradually necessary in the modern world to adapt a certain kind of oral storytelling called the wonder tale to standards of literacy and make it acceptable for diffusion in the public sphere."

[7] About this topic, a passage from Susan Stewart's brilliant analysis of "distressed genres" (and fairy tale is one of these) seems very interesting to me, for it suggests the pre-existence – and the co-existence – of an oral narrative tradition that would allow to recognise a richer and deeper meaning in the term 'fairy tale' before it were absorbed into literature: "[---] considering that there was certainly a tradition of fairy lore within the European oral tradition, the term *fairy tale* is a rather recent literary invention. It dates to the 1698 publication of Madame d'Aulnoy's *Contes de fées* [---] In 1699, d'Aulnoy's book was translated into English as *Tales of the Fairys*. What should draw our attention to this French context is its transformation of an ambivalent and vigorous popular tradition into a literary form inseparable from the world of the antique, the child, the pastoral, the moral, and the fantastic" (Stewart 1991: 19).

[8] The last decade, as a matter of fact, is characterised by a vibrant debate, particularly about the long-standing issue regarding the oral or literary origin of the fairy tale. For instance, the heated dispute raised by the controversial thesis expressed by Ruth Bottigheimer (2002, 2009) is quite significant. Her advocating an exclusively literary and relatively recent origin (16th century) of the fairy tale as a genre has entailed a number of vivid replies, above all, those of such eminent scholars as Jan Ziolkowski (2010), Francisco Vaz da Silva (2010), Dan Ben-Amos (2010) and, in a more biting way, Jack Zipes (2010). For an interesting and pondered point of view on the latest

developments in this debate cf. the "Introduction" to *Folktales and Fairy Tales* (2016: xlvi): "That the oral and the literary need not exist in an oppositional relationship or be the defining terms of fairy-tale studies should be self-evident, especially in the twenty-first century. Folktales and fairy tales have manifested themselves in extraordinarily diverse ways, not just in oral and literary narratives [---]. This diversity of media and genres and the deficiencies in viewing texts as simply oral or literary have been underlined by major scholarship published since 2012 [---]. To be freed from our fixation on the oral-literary dichotomy and to make sense of the latest fairy-tale vogue that has accompanied globalization and the digital age, it is necessary not only to acknowledge the flexibility and adaptability of folktales and fairy tales but also to understand their dynamic intertextuality and intermedial potential [---]. It is also necessary to understand fairy-tale studies as an interdisciplinary effort."

[9] Cf. Jacob Grimm's "Preface" to the second edition of *Deutsche Mythologie*, quoted in Dégh (1972: 72): "The fairy tale flies, the legend walks, knocks at your door; the one can draw freely out of the fullness of poetry, the other has almost the authority of history."

[10] Indeed, the dicothomy folktale / fairy tale appears to be an ideological and/or critical construction more than a thing really existing in the field; cf. *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales* (2008: 363–365): "[---] the folktale was conceived of as oral, whereas – although fairy-tale themes exist in folktales – the 'true' fairy tale was a literary genre [---] the cleavage between the fairy tale and the folktale, seen as the opposition between literary and oral forms, is an artificial aftereffect of the ideological trappings of the Romantic nationalists, a cleavage that is fundamental to the disciplinary niche of folklorists."

[11] Cf. Honti (1936: 39): "A thorough knowledge of Celtic religion of death is at any rate indispensable for the students of folk-tales. Tales are well-known to be the form of literature least marked by the notion of death, and nevertheless their connection with the always present idea of death is undeniable. It is Celtic religion and its attitude towards death which effaces the contrast between the concepts 'death' and 'fairy-tale'."

[12] Over the year, some circumstances appear to be more favourable to the enactment of a fairy tale; cf. Ó Giolláin (1991: 201): "On two festivals, *Bealtaine* or May Day and *Samhain* or Halloween respectively, the boundary days of the summer and winter halves of the year [---] the barrier between the mortal and supernatural worlds came down and otherworld beings moved freely among women and men."

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# GHOSTS, TROUBLES, DIFFICULTIES, AND CHALLENGES: NARRATIVES ABOUT UNEXPLAINABLE PHENOMENA IN CONTEMPORARY DENMARK

***Kirsten Marie Raahauge***

**Abstract**: Many people experience something that they cannot explain, often they hear something that is not there as a visible fact. The sensation of hearing, for example, someone who is walking through your apartment, when no one is there as far as your eyes can see, poses a problem to the witness, especially if he or she does not think that this kind of occurrence is possible. Based on my fieldwork on haunted houses in Denmark today, this article deals with the narratives of people who have experiences that they cannot explain and that they consider to be on the limits of reason. Many of them do not consider 'ghosts' or 'haunting' as a possible explanation. This causes difficulties when they narrate and contextualise their experience, and typically they present ambiguous narratives and stress their disbelief at and bewilderment with the experiences. Still, as I will try to show in my article, their bewilderment and the way they use the notions 'ghost' and 'haunting' point to possible reinterpretations of these notions, so that the narrative mediation shapes not only the experience but also the ways that 'ghosts' and 'haunting' are reinterpreted in contemporary Denmark.

**Keywords:** anthropology, fieldwork, ghost, haunting, limit of reason**,** narrative, residual category, sensation

## INTRODUCTION

> *I had just moved into the old thatched farmhouse. It was situated near a road. When I had gone to bed the first night, I found that the light from the street lamp was shining right in my face. So I jumped out of bed with a sudden move in order to cover the window with a blanket. I think that the ghost was not prepared. I think that it had intended to glide silently through the room. But I jumped right out of bed and bumped into it. That was really a strange feeling.* (A woman in her 60s, narrating about an incidence that happened approximately ten years ago outside Lundby in Denmark)[1]

This article is based on my anthropological fieldwork on haunted houses. People's experiences with haunted houses and ghosts in today's Denmark have been in my research focus since 2007. The project is part of the larger research project, *On the Limits of Reason* (see Jöhncke & Raahauge & Steffen 2015). My interviewees talk about their unexplainable sensations as experiences with ghosts, but usually they do it reluctantly, since they are not sure what it was that caused the particular sensation and since they do not consider a 'ghost' a possible explanation. This poses a challenge as to how to tell the story to others and how to explain it to themselves. Furthermore, this brings up a question about the analytical methods of anthropological and related disciplines, as to how to deal with something that lacks social and cultural frameworks in the everyday life of the ones experiencing it. At the same time, the ambiguous use of the notions 'ghost' and 'haunting' in the narratives points towards a reinterpretation of these notions, questioning the framework of 'supernatural' in novel ways. In the following, I will concentrate on this interactive process of experiencing, interpreting, and narrating in more detail and point to some models and features that are especially characteristic of the contemporary ways of narrating about unexplainable phenomena.

***Figure 1.*** *Ivar Tønsberg: Running Spirit. Copyright Ivar Tønsberg 2008.*

## FROM EXPERIENCE TO NARRATIVE AND BACK AGAIN

Many ghost stories are shaped by recognisable narratives, that is, ghost stories from fiction, from the branding of old castles and manors, from children's stories, films, and historical collections. The narratives about unexplainable experiences dealt with in this article are different. They are difficult to understand through recognisable narrative structures and protagonists, and they do not fit well into everyday life, common sense, or paradigms of reasoning, acknowledged by the ones who had the experience; in fact, in their opinion it might not be possible to call them stories. This article is about such ghost narratives; it is about how the ones who had the experience try to fit them into a narrative and an explanatory framework that they might not actually consider adequate themselves.

Gillian Bennett (1999) points to "traditions of belief in story and discourse" (as the subtitle to her book on this subject goes), when she compares the results of her fieldwork among elderly women in England with supernatural traditions. England and Denmark certainly differ, also when it comes to the position of 'ghosts', but it is still rather striking to find such a large difference in the naturalisation of supernatural cosmologies between these two regions. The same point has been made in Ülo Valk's article, *Ghostly Possession and Real Estate* (2006); here Valk explores the relations between narrations about ghostly experiences, beliefs in ghosts, and the way they are connected to specific sites of real estate and certain family relations. Valk's study builds on the fact that ideas about ghosts can be understood as related to reinterpretations of belief systems in the contemporary society of post-Soviet Estonia, and his material shows that ghosts can be experienced as possessing real estates of families. As Valk writes, his "article illustrates the ability of legends to adapt to history and to provide meaning in a chaotic social environment" (Valk 2006: 33). The reappearance of ghosts is interpreted as their reaction against modern times. Valk writes:

> *Keith Thomas, who has studied popular religion in early modern England, has written that "the main reason for the disappearance of ghosts is that society is no longer responsive to the presumed wishes of the past generations" (1971:723). Amazingly, the* reappearance *of ghosts in Estonian folklore seems to have the same meaning: the discrepancies between the values of modern people and past generations make the dead restless.* (ibid.: 47)

This fascinating analytical point implies that in contemporary legends the dead are taking action according to value shifts, and that these actions are recognised by the living. Valk shows how the dead are understood as related

to traditional ideas about ghosts, family relationships, and ownership of real estate. Both Bennett and Valk display material in which it is possible to understand experiences by way of their context – be it of tradition or of a societal shift. This is rather different from what I encounter in Denmark, since many of the relations that are pointed out in these two studies are not relevant to the Danish interviewees.

Often my interviewees do not know what to do with their experiences; they do not have a stable framework that could induce their sensations with meaning, and their efforts to narrate about them merely accentuate the fact that they cannot fit them into a coherent narrative. Furthermore, this problem is reflected in the analytical process; anthropological perspectives can shed light on the context of the ghost story, but when the narratives point out that there is a gap between context and experience, this gap becomes the main focus of the analysis. The ghost itself slips away, since we only have the story told about the experience. What is at stake here is that the narrative about the experience tends to become ambiguous for the narrator as well as the anthropologist.

## ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORKS

The difficulty with narrating these kinds of experiences is related to the lack of connection between the out of place experience and the common sense explanations and reasoning available, as seen from the narrator's point of view.[2]

This challenge is also reflected on the analytical level of understanding the context in which this field is embedded; when something is easily connected to background perceptions, concepts, social relations, etc., there is no reason to question these background frameworks. On the other hand, if these connections are difficult to establish, the challenge goes beyond the narrated experience, and also involves the very context from which it seems to be isolated. From the 1980s onwards, concepts such as 'culture', 'cosmology', 'society', 'imaginary' and 'religion', as well as 'nature', 'supernatural' and 'belief', for that matter, have been deconstructed and contested, criticised for essentialism and accused of describing academic ways of thinking far more precisely than the empirical field. So what concept might then be used for this background setting? When referring to 'common sense explanations and reasoning', I wonder whether these notions solve the problem of the ill-reputed, criticised, and deconstructed concepts mentioned above. Who knows what is the 'background framework' or 'common sense' or 'reason' of any 'culture'?

This problem is also identifiable in Émile Durkheim's "collective consciousness" (1997 [1893]), a concept that has been criticised for hypostasising frag-

ments of empirical observations to a theoretical assumption that might have more to do with Durkheim's theory than with the empirical field where the fragments were observed. Such notions serve as phantasmagorias of intellectuals, explaining coherencies that might not be there, if it were not for these concepts.

The challenge is immanent in Western philosophy as such: here the stable categories of systematic thinking are flawed by the stability offered by this philosophy, a point that Jaques Derrida has made very strongly. Therefore, the seemingly aimless and nonsensical aspects of the narrations of my field are highly relevant seen from the deconstructive perspective of Derrida. In *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (2006 [1993]) Derrida establishes a 'hauntology', aimed at criticising the ontology of Western philosophy. This rigid definition-ridden monolith is not capable of understanding the phenomena and processes of the world it seeks to describe, so in order to permit the floating, changing world we inhabit into the language of philosophy, Western ontology should be replaced by a 'hauntology'. The ghost is a perfect metaphor for this philosophical problem; it plays the role of the 'Thing'[3] (ibid.) that slips away from theoretical systems. The 'Ghost' of Derrida slips away from the systems of Western philosophy, but empirically it is still there, as the 'Thing' that moves beyond the systems.

In my empirical field the ghost is present as an experience that was really sensed, but the same ghost slips away from the systems of explanation; it is the unexplainable sensation that puzzles the person who sensed it, as well as the anthropologist. Furthermore, this problem is detectable only through the narrative about the experience, labelled as 'ghost', but at the same time this very notion is questioned when the interviewees distance themselves from the fixed category of 'ghost'.

Post-human theorist Bruno Latour gives another perspective to this discussion. In his *Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?* (2004) Latour addresses the problem related to the methods of social scientists, positioned as critical intellectuals. In that role they point to something behind the phenomenon in question in order to explain it. They point to the phenomenon either as a 'fairy' or as a 'fact'. When the phenomenon in question is seen as a 'fairy', the argument goes as follows: "The role of the critic is then to show that what the naïve believers are doing with objects is simply a projection of their wishes onto a material entity that does nothing at all by itself" (ibid.: 237). If they understand the phenomenon as a 'fact', something else happens, in order to reach the same goal, of course, of being a critic:

> *This time it is the poor bloke, again taken aback, whose behaviour is now 'explained' by the powerful effects of indisputable matters of fact: 'You, ordinary fetishists, believe you are free but, in reality, you are acted on*

> *by forces you are not conscious of. Look at them, look, you blind idiot' (and here you insert whichever pet facts the social scientists fancy to work with, taking them from economic infrastructure, fields of discourse, social domination, race, class, and gender, maybe throwing in some neurobiology, evolutionary psychology, whatever, provided they act as indisputable facts whose origin, fabrication, mode of development are left unexamined).* (ibid.: 238)

In the first case the critical intellectuals neglect the real subject matter in order to search for projections; in the second case they also neglect it, this time in order to explain the factual reality behind what is thought to be something else. This method, Latour argues, leads to a blindness concerned with real phenomena, and he advocates for going from 'matters of fact' to 'matters of concern' in order to grasp the phenomena in their own right. This critique and cure has proven relevant in my field (see Raahauge 2015).[4]

Derrida and Latour both shed light on my problems within the field of ghost narratives. On an empirical level as well as theoretically the ghost escapes out of the narrative, because the focus tends to be on the reasons for, the background of, the connections to, or the representation of something else (Latour), or on possible notions available for describing the idea it represents (Derrida).

In his article titled *An Experience-Centered Approach to Hauntings*, James Hufford points to the challenges arising from this dilemma from quite another angle. His phenomenological approach points at the distance between experience and cultural background. "[I]f the phenomenology of core experience is genuinely independent of cultural background, then these experiences cannot simply *reflect* cultural meanings" (Hufford 2001: 20), he states, thus bringing to the fore the ontological status of the experience. Hufford is also interested in the interplay between the absence and presence of relations between the experience and its background. In the introduction to the anthology, *Haunting Experiences: Ghosts in Contemporary Folklore*, Hufford's position is stated very precisely:

> *Central to this move toward the ethnography of belief is the work of David Hufford, who developed what he termed the "experience-centered" approach. Hufford's work is heavily phenomenological, focused on the relationship between experience and the supernatural, and based on the premise that stable and consistent features in narrative and reported tradition may, in fact, suggest actual experiences, accurately observed and interpreted rationally*. (Goldstein & Grinder & Thomas 2007: 14)

In this line of thought, the real experience tends to escape the analytical gaze, because it is interpreted in an unproductive manner. Hufford thus suggests focusing rather on the experience, not the background, and he does this in

a thorough and methodological manner. He suggests an experience-centred approach for accessing the field. This discussion of a possible distance between the experience and the context (from Derrida through Latour to Hufford) gives me an impetus to start with recognising the sensation referred to in the narratives of my interviewees instead of pointing to projections of a psychological state or some other trope for explaining it away. Something happened to someone.

In spite of Hufford's endeavour, some parts of the experience might be difficult to grasp, precisely because the analyst and the interviewee do not share the experience in focus, as Richard Baxstrom argues. Baxstrom has dealt with similar problems within anthropology in his article *Knowing Primitives, Witches, and the Spirits: Anthropology and the Mastery of Nonsense* (2014). He explores the rationalities behind anthropology, and states:

> *As such, it is my argument that social and cultural anthropology's felicity as a science is predicated on rationally mastering such invisible, irrational forces via the techniques of ethnographic field research* [footnote taken out by the author]. *Or, to use Strauss's term, anthropology developed as a distinct human science via the desire to credibly master* nonsense. (ibid.: 5)

Baxstrom points to the fact that anthropologists are reluctant to explore invisible phenomena or take them seriously. Hereby important parts of the field disappear. Furthermore, anthropologists rely on fieldwork to provide the right empirical pieces of information. In that sense anthropological methods are much like the methods of the witch trials of the 16th century, Baxstrom argues: the system (based on the judgement visible or invisible) decides what is considered real (to the theological experts partaking in the trial at the witch craze, or to the anthropologist today), not the phenomena that surround us (part of the field). Baxstrom writes:

> *This tie between mastering what Strauss has termed 'nonsense' and scientific authority has its roots in transformations that occurred in the course of the so-called 'witch craze' in Europe in the sixteenth century regarding what constituted evidence within the overlapping institutional domains of science and law dominated by an active theology of the real.* (ibid.: 8)

In this light, opening up to the idea that not only phenomena that the anthropologist might see as empirically verifiable facts might be part of the field (an opening that both anthropologists and the people who have experienced haunting have difficulties administering), we will now turn to the question of how narratives shape experiences.[5]

## THE SETTING OF THE SCENE: TIME, SPACE, AND ACTORS

On a weekly basis, steps were heard on the staircase by the inhabitants of a house in Nørresundby. Normally the steps stopped halfway. The staircase was empty every time they checked on it. They also witnessed series of other experiences, but they did not tell anybody, since they knew that they would be looked upon as weird, if they told others about their experiences. Eventually they moved to a larger house, and when they came back, their neighbours said that the new inhabitants were crazy, they heard strange steps on the staircase and other weird stuff.

These kinds of narratives are rather typical of my material. It is common that a person hears somebody walking on the staircase, but cannot see the one who is walking, or a person might see someone standing at the fireside, but cannot hear or touch the person. In other words, my material often contains descriptions of experiences that do not involve all the senses; typically, the experiences are connected with hearing something that seems not to be there, because the person cannot see it.

Extraordinary experiences described in my material are usually of a limited duration; they mainly take place unexpectedly at some point of the day, and only in rare cases they occur repeatedly. The narratives often question the reality of the experience, and in that way the narrator is in a position of suspense, waiting for a possible next experience to confirm the reality of the first one. Thus a new experience, maybe in the form of a repetition of the first one, could help the narrator to recognise that it actually happened for the first time. This does not add to the comprehensibility of the incidence, though.

Space plays a role as a static scene; typically, the narrator points to certain places; in most cases the experience does not transgress one place or follow the narrator around. Instead, it seems that the narrator and the ghost should be at the same place at the same time in order for the experience to occur. In many cases the presence sensed seems to be in a room next to the narrator, typically staircases or corridors, or it has an impact on a virtual channel such as a computer, iPad, TV, or DVD-player. It is not seldom, though, that the narrators have sensed the presence of something that is quite near to them, in the same room. As an example, one might point to the following narrative, told by a woman who had a series of experiences in a house that she and her family had lived in. One of her experiences took place in the cellar, where she was hanging laundry up to dry. Sometimes she sensed the smell of a drunkard. The smell followed her closely as she moved, but she could not see the person. Her husband experienced the same, and he also heard a deep humming sound as if from a person, a loud “Mmmmmm”.

The actors of the narrative involve, on the one hand, the one (or the ones) experiencing the ghost and, on the other hand, the ghost (or the ghosts) – "or whatever it is" – this is a remark put forward by most of my interviewees. Since the ghost is dependent on someone experiencing it, it plays a passive role of becoming visible or audible for someone; it is only present through the person who experiences it. At the same time, this person often thinks of himself or herself as a passive victim of the ghost that appears, and thereby actively intrudes into the life of the person. It feels as if the ghost and the one experiencing it do not share the same context, or, as one interviewee told me, it is as if the ghost suffers from 'contextual autism'. Additionally, the narratives often stress a sensation of suddenly being in the middle of an unknown story or scenery. The narrator has experienced a fragment that needs some kind of framework in order to become understandable; it is as if it is out of context on purpose. Furthermore, because the emanation of the presence of the ghost is perceived by only some of the senses, the witness is restricted in the sense that he or she is blind to something he or she hears, or cannot feel something he or she smells. So, because of the limitations in time, space, and sensations, this kind of narration describes what might be termed Limited Emanation of Presence (LEP) (Raahauge 2015). The point made by Hufford (2001) is near to these observations and also his technique is close to ethnographic methods when interviewing and analysing data.

## NARRATIVE GAP

Most of my interviewees use the notion 'ghost' without believing in ghosts (see also Raahauge 2015). They use the word as a residual category, since no notion seems to cover their experiences. Often they are explicit about the contested nature of the notion. One might say that the residual category shows that there is a system, but also that the ghost experience is not part of it, hence the narrative points to the cracks and fissures of its own premise – that is of 'ghost' as a category. "Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements", anthropologist Mary Douglas explains (1966: 44), thus coining the term 'matter-out-of-place', and pointing to the structural significance of things that one cannot put into a well-established order, be it dirt or ghosts.

Many of my interviewees point to the fact that it is difficult to narrate something that they do not know. This narrative gap is explicit in my material, as many interviewees state that concepts such as 'haunting' or 'ghost' are used in their narrative in order to categorise personal experiences of confusing, uncon-

trollable, inexplicable, and matter-out-of-place phenomena. They are troubled by the lack of correspondence between the experience and its context, and also by the difficulties connected to mediating and thereby forming the experience through a narrative.

Since it is rare, even considered a bit ridiculous, by most of my interviewees to accept other kinds of beings than the ones that a person can empirically observe, the sensation of something that a person cannot explain puts him or her into a position of brief existential confusion and sometimes also a long-lasting social embarrassment.[6]

As touched upon earlier, the matter-out-of-place character found in my material is different from some of the other recent studies in the same field. Some studies point to tradition, as does Bennett, or coherence with societal shifts, as does Valk; others point to a negotiation according to the belief system, as does Cowdell (2011). After having explored several aspects of the belief systems available, the latter writes:

> *We have looked from several angles at the relationship between experiences and the expressive form given them when they are discussed, and how this intersects with belief. This research prompted oral and written stories, allowing an assessment of how these interact, and how oral narrative negotiations of supernatural experiences and belief work today. A straightforward connection between report and belief, or experience and belief, is commonly posited. The evidence points instead to their complicated negotiation*. (Cowdell 2011: 88)

This negotiation might take many forms, but in the process the narrative is used to suggest contexts by the interviewees, and also by the folklorist. Also Jeannie Banks Thomas points to relations between context and experience to be traced in the narrations, not as a matter of belief, but rather as a way that ghost stories are used to make sense of the world. In "The Usefulness of Ghost Stories" (Thomas 2007), a chapter in the anthology titled *Haunting Experiences: Ghosts in Contemporary Folklore*, she writes:

> *In this chapter, I emphasize that there is much more to the realm of the supernatural than questions of belief, and I argue that ghost stories are a useful way to come to a better understanding of the worlds we inhabit. I present several ghost stories and describe a range of ways in which the narratives help us look more closely and analytically at culture, the environment, and the personal*. (ibid.: 26)

Thomas has an important point in stressing this relation between the ghost stories and the world we inhabit, and also in pointing to the aspects that are

not connected to belief. However, in my field, the usefulness of ghost stories is rather a matter of coming to terms with the absence of meaning or relations in the world we inhabit. I only seldom find structures or relations that connect the narrative to the context. Instead I find interviewees who point to a lack of connection. One might say that to a large degree we share method and topic, but the material differs.

## SOMETHING THAT ONE DOES NOT KNOW

The notions 'haunting' and 'ghost' point to ideas about life and death that are not common among my Danish interviewees. The notions are somewhat out of date, and not many of my interviewees believe for real in the possibility of dead people (or animals, for that matter) re-emerging as something one can meet in daily life. This line of thinking is typically considered to be a bit ridiculous, superstitious, and certainly belonging to the past.

Ghosts have been connected to various narratives in Danish folklore: people come again as ghosts after death, because they want to convey a message; people have become 'ghosts' because of the way they died, or the way they lived.[7] These interpretations might have a normative bias, telling the story about how bad things might end up for people if they behave in certain ways. Many ghost stories are connected with old castles and manors (see Benzon 2006, 2007). So, attached to the notion, an outdated but stable narrative and a general set of ideas are at hand. There is normativity, site-specificity, and a cluster of specific imaginaries connected to the notion. Today these ideas of 'ghosts' can mostly be found in global narratives created by entertainment industries, fantasy literature, and films, as well as children's tales, as Bennett also points out (1999).

Despite of this distance towards 'ghosts', many of my interviewees use the word 'ghost' when they narrate about their personal sensations. This gives the narration a direction that opens up for the possibility of dead people rising again, echoes in the wall, and shadows of something that is not there to be seen. Although they use this word for lack of better ones, and although the term 'ghost' has no resonance in their everyday world, in some ways the word 'ghost' does correspond with some of my interviewees' tentative explanations. The use of the word 'ghost' increases the possibility that maybe, in fact, it was a ghost after all – an idea they often point to not having had before their experience, and furthermore, a rather vague idea about the content of a 'ghost'.

Thus, on the one hand, most of the interviewees find it important to point to 'ghost' as a problematic term, and, furthermore, they are not pleased to use an outdated word that represents a way of explaining that they do not find

realistic. On the other hand, they still had the experience, and in some ways it does come close to what used to be known as a 'ghost', and the notion has a suggestive force that might interpret the experience in some direction, although as a starting point they do not believe in ghosts. The situation is ambiguous.

## NARRATIVE BRIDGES

This ambiguity has a destabilising effect, as focused on until now, but it also has a stabilising potential. The narratives produced do not mediate the experience entirely successfully; they rather narrate about their own gaps and cracks. Yet, at the same time, the narratives can also produce bridges. Most of the narratives I have registered are concerned with hearing footsteps or slamming doors or keys in the keyhole or somebody on the staircase; this often happens without any acknowledged connection to the context in which it takes place. In order to discuss how my interviewees have tried to connect their experiences with some framework by way of their narratives and to show varying degrees of elaboration of the ghost experience, I will present some examples of different kinds of ghost narratives from rudimentary over fragmented to almost coherent narratives. These variations of the narrative are connected to the character of the experience, but simultaneously the experience is also shaped by the narrative. The three text examples represent one possible way to discuss narrative strategies; it is not a fixed set of categories that all narratives can fit into.

## RUDIMENTARY, FRAGMENTED, AND ELABORATED NARRATIVES

The first example illustrates what might be thought of as rudimentary narratives.

> *On that spring evening I was alone in my large flat. I was working with some archives in a small room when I heard the sound of footsteps in the passage that runs through the flat. I thought it was a burglar, so I hurried out in order to stop him. No one was there. I sat down in the room again and started working. Once more I heard the sound of footsteps and went out to see who it was. No one was there. The third time I went through all the rooms in the flat, opening and locking all the doors and windows and also the doors of the closets, cabinets, and cupboards – in vain. The fourth time I asked myself if I was in some weird state of mind that could*

> *account for my hearing this – also in vain. When I heard it starting all over again, I hurried out and went to a pub.* (A man in his fifties, now a director of a large company, about an incident that happened to him some thirty years ago in a large old flat in Copenhagen.)

These kinds of narratives are rather frequent in my material. There is a distinct sound that cannot be explained away, but the narrator cannot connect it with other parts of his life either, because he has no reference or clue about how to do it. The narrator of the cited story points to two filters he has used: something outside himself, in the physical world, and something inside himself, a state of mind. After not having succeeded to filter the incident into its right place, he gives up and leaves. His narrative is vague, only pointing to the fact that he had the experience of the sound of steps from a human being in the corridor while being alone. The narrative from Lundby about bumping into a ghost (cited at the beginning of my article) is also an example of a rudimentary narrative, but in this case the experience has at least motivated the narrator to talk to her neighbours about the incident in order to find out whether it should be understood as a ghost, a dead person, or a former resident of the house, and if so, who it might be. The narrator thinks that if it is a former resident, it must be benevolent, and, furthermore, it might be a woman. This is the start of forming a fragmented narrative, in connection with the neighbours' possible evidence.

A fragmented narrative is somewhat more coherent, as in the following example, told by a man in his forties, now a university professor and head of department, about an experience that happened to him approximately 20 years ago.

At a dormitory in Copenhagen a young man had gone to bed after having locked his door as usual. He lay in his bed without being able to sleep and watched the yellow light from the busy street outside the window. Then he heard the door opening and the sound of steps coming towards him. He did not dare to turn around to see who it was, and as he lay in his bed without being able to get away, he felt a coldness surrounding him. He lay there for maybe half an hour before he managed to fall asleep and in that way get away. After his experience the man heard a rumour about a girl who had committed suicide by jumping out of the window of her room many years ago. After having talked to me, he was invited to a gathering at the old dormitory, and there he tried to establish whether the girl had lived in his former room or in another room – but in vain.

This example of a fragmented narrative has similarities with some other narratives in my material; for example, the way that the interviewee tries to make sense of his experience. The fragmented narrative still raises suspense: will the man ever find out what happened and why it happened? This suspense

has intensified due to the interference of the anthropologist making him into an interviewee who starts registering and analysing the incident anew.

The form of an elaborated narrative is extraordinary among my material, because it is seldom that these kinds of narratives can actually be told coherently. The following happened approximately eight years ago in a small town just outside Århus, the second largest city in Denmark.

The woman who told the story started out telling me that it often happened when she was sitting in the TV-room, an extension to the house that they had made. She was sitting in front of the TV and then, out of the corner of her eye, she saw this black smoke. It disappeared when she focused on it. That happened more and more frequently. Her daughter started to receive strange messages on her mobile phone, and as finally it became too much for her, she told her husband that she would try to find some kind of clairvoyant or house cleaning specialist or whatever it is called, in the yellow pages. Her husband said that it was idiotic to pay for that kind of service. It turned out that he had also had a series of experiences, with a man in a tuxedo. And her husband knew who it was; namely, the former resident that they had known. He used to perform as a magician in his tuxedo, and now he was in the TV-room still wearing it. One day, soon after she had said she would get rid of the strange experiences with the help of some professional, her husband went out to his Citroën, called the magician, opened the car door and asked him to get in. Then he closed the door again and drove away. A couple of kilometres away the widow [of the magician] lived; there he stopped the car, told the magician that his wife lived there, and asked him to get out. Afterwards he told his wife what he had done. She did not really believe his story, but a couple of weeks after the car drive, she met her old friend, the widow. The latter told her that her deceased husband had paid a visit to her on that very same day. Only after that did she tell her old friend, the widow, about the car drive. After all this the house had no apparitions, smoke, or malfunctioning mobile phones. (Told to me by a woman in her forties, who currently holds a leading position in the economical administration of a university and is a mother of two, about an incident that had recently happened to her family.)

The interviewee and her family had no prior experiences; only this particular house had caused problems. These experiences were not part of the family's everyday life and ghosts were certainly not part of the way the family would normally explain things. It came as a surprise to the woman that the car ride had an impact, and, furthermore, this opened up possible new horizons of what she might believe to be happening. As it seemed to have an impact, the woman saw herself forced to accept some ideas not acceptable to her normal way of

reasoning. When her husband offered the ghost a car ride, he might have pondered about it already for some time.

This experience is shaped by the actions of the husband, which point to some ideas about the deceased wanting to get into contact with their kin, thereby indicating a connection to the ideas about kin, but in a new and not culturally accepted combination with the dead persons having agency. This stabilises the events into a narrative linked to a background context. Also the story in fact has a beginning, suspense, crescendo, and end, time, space, and actors. The only problem is that the woman does not believe in this narrative: she believes that she and her family experienced something, but she has a hard time believing that the narrative is true. The more extended the narrative becomes, the more there is for the woman to accept it as a fact: the narrative that explains the experience unavoidably also expands the frames of her acceptance.

The narrative is extraordinary in comparison with other narratives in my material, due to its coherency, and also due to the implicit suggestions about life after death and feelings between spouses beyond life and death. It is also outstanding for the reason that the history of the house can be easily associated with the experiences of its inhabitants. To the woman's amazement her strategy of reasoning, to uncover the kin relations formerly linked to the house, seems to work, and in a way the experience can be explained. If one accepts the idea that spouses can meet after the death of one of them and that one can talk to the deceased and take them for a car ride, this is a perfectly logical explanation. If not, the connection to earlier events in the house, to the magician and his widow, might seem even more confusing: in addition to being forced to take seriously the sensations experienced, the narrator now also has to believe in an explanation involving ways of reasoning rather unfamiliar to her.[8]

## MAKING SPACE FOR SOCIAL UNDERSTANDING OR AVOIDING AUDIENCE

In order to transform the matter-out-of-place experience into an in-place experience, one needs a confirming audience. And since ghost stories are often ridiculed, this might be difficult to achieve because the ones who have had the strange experiences perform self-censorship or are laughed at when they break the taboo and tell someone about their experiences.

The following story was narrated by an academic in her late forties, mother of two children, about a woman who often sees an elderly woman here and there in her home. When the Hoover is started, she stands at the top of the stairs and scolds. Her grey hair is bobbed, and her apron and dress can be described

in detail, with patterns, colours, and accessories. She is the former resident of the house and the woman has asked her neighbours what she was like (fuzzy) and what she looked like (grey bob, apron, etc.) in order to silently confirm her suspicions. But she would never tell anyone about her ability to sense dead people and other supernatural experiences: "This is not the visiting card I would throw," she says. Like many others she faces the isolation of not being able to tell anyone about her experiences (or she reveals them only to a few). She has had many contacts with supernatural beings, like ghosts or spirits, and sometimes she also knows their origin.

It is clear that such personal sensations only seldom correspond to the common-sense reasoning or the rationalities that the interviewees consider reasonable. The explanations at hand are the ones that are concerned with projecting the focus from the actual incident to the person experiencing it (like the ones enumerated by Latour). This kind of explanation, be it a 'fact' or a 'fairy', is not accepted by the interviewee in the last example; nor is it by any of those I talked to. They would have liked to project the experience onto something else, yet found it impossible; therefore others who do so cannot convince them either. This last challenge concerns the trouble of telling other people about something that is collectively thought of as a ridiculous superstition from the past. Only on very rare occasions such narrating is done successfully.

## DEATH AS THE IMAGINARY

Most of the narratives are rudimentary or fragmented, and the connections made are shifting and not coherent, although the narrators make an effort trying to find some kind of common sense or rational explanations; however, there is still some resonance with traditional supernatural explanation models. As we saw in Valk's article, the Estonian legends reinterpret belief systems; in my case it is not systems but rather notions that are reinterpreted, and this makes the situation here more fragmented than in Valk's – and Bennett's – material.

To some extent the interviewees derive explanations from narratives connected to scientific rationalities (as, for instance, undiscovered phenomena associated with atmosphere, allusions to past errors concerning phenomena that have later been explained by natural sciences), concrete explorations (such as explorations at municipalities, telephone companies, neighbours, or – in rare cases – even clairvoyants), and collective evidence (by way of telling and listening to stories, finding that they are not alone with their experiences). Furthermore, and as another strategy, a direct connection might be made to the deceased. Inexplicable experiences tend to be called 'ghosts' or 'haunting',

not because the Danes necessarily believe in ghosts[9] – as already mentioned, most of my interviewees do not – but because there is no other notion available. 'Ghost' is a notion used to point to inexplicable experiences and thereby a residual category rather than a category in its own right. However, the notion also frames the incidents in a certain way; it helps to create a background narrative about shadows or imprints of dead people, or maybe the deceased coming to pass a message. The idea of ghosts might have been abandoned by most Danes years ago, but it is still used, albeit in a new framework and with a slightly different and less stable meaning. 'Ghost' is thus not understood as a common notion one can refer to in order to point to an experience so that everybody would know what the narrator means, but it is rather understood as a vague and undecided word for a shadow that is maybe left by a dead person. The word 'ghost' may be still used as a notion with an implicit, albeit vague, narrative, although it is contested in all possible ways, by the person sensing it, by the people hearing about it, and by the narrative used to mediate the experience and fit it into everyday life. In Valk's Estonian material (2006) the reinterpretation of traditional belief systems is much more successful because here ghosts are connected to real estate through elaborate systems of relations; yet, in my field it is often only a matter of some kind of vague idea about life and death.

If there might be some truth in the idea of ghosts after all (you never know!), there is at least an idea, and thereby if not an explanation, a vague narrative to mediate and maybe stabilise the experience. There is narrative glue and some ideas to connect to – only the narrative is still ambiguous. On the other hand, the narrative might have glued it all together precisely where the uncontrollable, invisible part of the experience used to be. In other words, did the nonsensical aspect of the narrative slip away again?

By using the words 'ghost' or 'haunting', the interviewees keep the backdoor open: they might not be understood as 'ghosts' in the way we imagine that people once believed in ghosts, but as a potential. Thus the concepts are both empty (a residual category) and in resonance with possible ideas about life and death and the idea that there might be 'more between heaven and earth' than one can explain through acknowledged ways of reasoning. In this way the narrative contains an open-endedness.

## BACK AGAIN

When a person lives in a society that seeks empirically proven facts, it might be scary for him or her to perceive a crack in this habitual way of reasoning and only be able to establish a fragmented or broken narrative that one is uncertain of, instead of a stable narrative that would fix and add to one's common repertoire of explanations. Yet, on the other hand, it might also give an intense sensation to conceive in a glimpse that we cannot explain everything and that the world might be much larger than we can possibly ever imagine.

Thus the narratives connected to 'ghosts' tend to function as a resort of possibilities and potentials – and the inexplicable phenomena might be thought of as a door into new and puzzling, yet powerful worlds. This is related to the double nature of both presence and absence they manifest – an absence of explanation, of cohesion, of meaning, and of control, combined with a presence of intense, personal sensations and possible new horizons.

The narrative stabilisation of ambiguous matter-out-of-place experiences might not be successful. However, this very lack of stabilising forces has some other effects: for the anthropologist it points to the blind spots of the analytical gaze: as Baxstrom stresses, it is a biased gaze that is reluctant to explore the field on its own premises. This is an important insight that is part of a movement towards ontological discussions within the humanities rising in these years. Furthermore, these non-stabilising narratives point to the fact that the world is not stable: when trying to explore a part of it, one may realise that one's perspectives on the world are not capable of establishing an explanation of everything. If you find that something is beyond your stable categories and not accessible to your analytical gaze, and if you find that this challenge is also very much present for your interviewees, making it difficult for them to establish a narrative that would explain their experience, this is certainly a challenge. However, it is also a way to open up for new and less controllable perspectives. For the interviewees it has to do with reinterpreting the notions 'ghost' and 'haunting' on contemporary premises, allowing them to signify something more remote and vague than they used to do. In my material the reference to a specific idea about ghosts being normatively, culturally, socially, and existentially categorised is replaced by a notion of the ghost as just another word for sensing something that one is not sure of, a sign that the world is larger than one would have expected. For the analyst it is related to reinterpreting the stable understanding of science, allowing it to let something remain beyond the limits of reason.

One might say that the imagination does not give rise to ghosts, it is the other way round: ghosts have an impact on the imagination.

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## NOTES

[1] Due to the length of transcriptions I have found it necessary to make summaries in the third person of some of the narratives. This, of course, is problematic since it distances the reader from the narrative; it has been done only in cases where the point to make did not rely on the 1st person representation. The example texts are from the author's archive.

[2] In order to overcome this difficulty, I have also tried to use the notion 'cultural imaginaries' both in this article and elsewhere in order to explore the relevance I found it had, after a session at an EASA-conference in Tallinn in 2014, where I gave a paper at a session called *The Edgy Northern European Imaginaries*. I tried to use this concept, since at that session I realised that it might be of relevance: in anthropological thinking, however deconstructed, there is a background hypothesis of a shared set of ideas. Sometimes language is stressed; it might also be culture, norms, identities, or values, or it might be shared life worlds that are pointed to, in order to be able to have a point from where you analyse your field. This is unavoidable, so it might be more honest to suggest a position. This, however, has caused more confusion than clarity, so I refrain from using such notions. The point inherent in the background logic could be exemplified through the (rather Saussurean) hypothesis that there is a kind of connectedness between people that is not empirically visible, and that this connectedness is floating and changing. It is detectable only through its effect: it being possible for us to understand each other. This is not the conclusion but rather a condition for being able to interpret the empirical phenomena as something that is shaped in this or that specific way. In this specific context, what is today understood as unexplainable phenomena has been easier to understand through a common background or connectedness of a sort in the not so remote past. For some people at least, a 'ghost' has been a possible explanation for strange incidents. Science as a new system (admittedly, also aging) of belief, or technology (especially the development of electric light) as a force that has the dissolution of creatures of the shade as a side effect of course add to this change.

[3] The 'Thing' is one of Derrida's notions for 'Ghost', i.e. for the phenomena that the Western ontology cannot grasp.

[4] I am grateful to Steven Shapiro for suggesting that I considered Latour's take on this problem in connection with ghosts.

[5] In this article I will not go further into this discussion. The references to Latour, Derrida, and Baxstrom serve to point to a possible theoretical opening that lies in critical, reflexive anthropology, such as Baxstrom's, and in deconstruction and post-human theory (see Raahauge 2015 for a further discussion of, among others, Derrida and Latour, in connection with ghosts). I wish to thank Richard Baxstrom for inviting me to a seminar on 'the invisible' at the Department of Social Anthropology at Edinburgh University in 2015.

[6] I ask about ghosts in all kinds of settings, and in the Danish context my estimate would be that one in every five to ten persons can point to an extraordinary experience, while at the same time only few believe in ghosts.

[7] In Danish a 'ghost' is called *spøgelse*, 'haunting' is called *hjemsøgelse*. Other Danish words for a ghost are *genganger* and *genfærd*, which mean "he who walks by again" and "he, who travels again", respectively.

[8] The idea of the stabilising effect of the narrative is congruent to Lévi-Strauss' idea of the house as a transfixer and stabilisator. Carsten and Hugh-Jones discuss this Lévi-Straussian argument of houses, stating: "'Transfixing' an unstable union, transcending the opposition between wife-givers and wife-takers and between descent and alliance, the house as institution is an illusory objectification of the unstable relation of alliance to which it lends solidity (1987: 155)" (Carsten & Hugh Jones 1995: 8, see also Raahauge 2007).

[9] To talk about 'Danish ghosts' is a difficult way of conceptualising the field, since it essentialises the topic by pretending that you can, in fact, point to a difference between ghosts of different countries, for example, Danish and Estonian ghosts, as though they were well known entities that stay behind the borders of the countries and as though they haunted and behaved in ways that you can foresee. This is of course problematic, but it arises from another problem, namely the even larger impossibility of studying 'the global ghost'. Furthermore, it touches upon the problem of essentialising people and places at large, beyond ghosts.

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# MEDIUMSHIP AND THE ECONOMY OF LUCK AND FATE: CONTEMPORARY CHINESE BELIEF TRENDS BEHIND THE FILMIC FOLKLORE

*Huai Bao*

**Abstract:** This study explores the pen spirit, a mediumistic game simplified out of *fuji*, which is shown in a number of popular horror films in the People's Republic of China (PRC). While Chinese literary works in the past often made reference to *fuji* as an ancient Chinese mediumistic ritual, the communist government has suppressed expressions on the supernatural in publications and official media, but not in films – at least not in the popular pen spirit series. What is a pen spirit? Why is it so popular in China, especially among Chinese youngsters? Is there a 'cultural obsession' among the Chinese with fate, luck, and divination? This study seeks to discover the evolution of the pen spirit and the socio-cultural psychological dimensions behind the phenomenon.

**Keywords**: divination, economy of luck and fate, filmic folklore, *fuji*, mediumship, supernatural

## INTRODUCTION

In the past few years, a number of low-budget pen spirit thrillers have been released in the PRC with great box office outcome. These films may be classified as filmic folklore, a term coined by Juwen Zhang, which is defined as "a folklore or folklore-like performance that is represented, created, or hybridized in fictional film" (2005: 267). These films have been released and publicized by the media in the PRC largely due to their filmic folkloric nature. A 2014 news report on the lawsuit between some Beijing-based film production companies brought attention to the popularity of horror films featuring the pen spirit – a popular form of mediumship in China similar to the Ouija board in the West (more on Ouija board see Brunvand 1998 [1996]: 534). While both the plaintiff and the defendants have produced horror films featuring the pen spirit, the former sued the latter for engaging in an unfair competition, in which the latter used the Chinese word, 笔仙 (*bixian*, pen spirit), in its Chinese language title for the series titled *Death Is Here* (《笔仙惊魂》), following the success of the plaintiff's South Korean film (2004), which also used the same words in the Chinese

language title of its pen spirit horror franchise, *Bunshinsaba* (분신사바). The news report claims:

> *Though this is not the first case of a company being accused of producing a film that shares a similar title of a more successful one to attract audiences* [---] *this is the first time such a case has been brought to court*. (Ma 2014)

Notably, the latter did become successful, as it ranked number ten on the top ten Chinese box office records in 2012.[1] The success of such films – at least in terms of frequent media coverage – has triggered my interest in examining how popular culture reflects the contemporary Chinese society through the lens of its past and present belief traditions and trends.


***Figure 1.*** *Poster of the film "Death is Here 3", 2014 (PRC public domain http://www.publicdomainpictures.net).*


***Figure 2.*** *Poster of the film "Bushinsaba", 2004 (PRC public domain http://www.publicdomainpictures.net).*

## MEDIUMSHIP, LAWS, AND FILMS: THE CONTEXT OF THE PEN SPIRIT

Since 2010, when I began to write my second book, *Change Destiny* (《改命》), which was subsequently published by the New World Press in Beijing in 2012, I have interviewed about 200 individuals[2] in the PRC regarding divination and mediumship, which have traditionally been very common topics in Chinese folklore (more on mediumship traditions in China see Clart 2003). I examined the connection between the increasing popularity of the pen spirit among youngsters and the successful cinematic representation of the pen spirit. While pre-modern Chinese literary works often refer to *fuji* (扶乩)[3] as an ancient

Chinese mediumistic ritual, in which a human being receives guidance from spirits and conveys messages from above, the government of the PRC has suppressed expressions of mediumship in publications and mainstream media. In fact, according to the editors, my most recent book, *Change Destiny*, was banned shortly after its launch in mainland China because certain chapters reviewed the historical facts and testimonials of *fuji*, the pen spirit, and the Ouija board, as well as paranormal phenomena in religious scenes. I was informed that these topics were taboo in the predominantly atheist social environment governed by the Communist Party of China (CPC). Cinema and fiction receive much less restriction on the governmental level, largely because the folkloric representation of mediumship reduces their realistic implications. Many 'hidden rules', which are not written on paper, have been instrumental in governing, scrutinizing and orientating ideological production in an attempt to maintain social stability. To avoid such hidden rules means restriction on one's creativity. The government of the PRC has green-lighted the horror film genre in the recent years, although with certain restrictions on the horror elements and content (there is a motion picture rating system in the PRC). Consequently, this genre appears to be not only a place "where the magical worldview [---] could exist without being questioned in a secular context" (Koven 2003: 182), but also a place where there are fewer political risks.

## PEN SPIRIT AS A GAME AND A RITUAL

Traditionally, *fuji* has been a popular topic in Chinese folklore (more about the tradition of *fuji* beliefs see Wei-pang 1942). Treated as a simplified version of *fuji*, the pen spirit is a modern popular game-like ritual in China, especially among youngsters. It is believed that through this ritual spirits can be invited to answer questions posed by the players. Compared to *fuji*, the pen spirit is widely known among the youngsters largely because this simplified form has abandoned the use of complicated tools, such as the suspended sieve and tray, stick, sand or incense ashes, and knowledge of the Five Elements of the *yin*-and-*yang* philosophical system,[4] as well as the Chinese sexagenary cycle known as Stems-and-Branches, a cycle of sixty terms used for recording days or years. Moreover, the game does not require the players to possess abilities of extrasensory perception. Of the 30 students and recent university graduates that I randomly chose online and interviewed in the PRC, all had heard of the pen spirit and many had seen or heard about pen spirit films. All the interviewees had played or had friends who had played or observed others play the game.

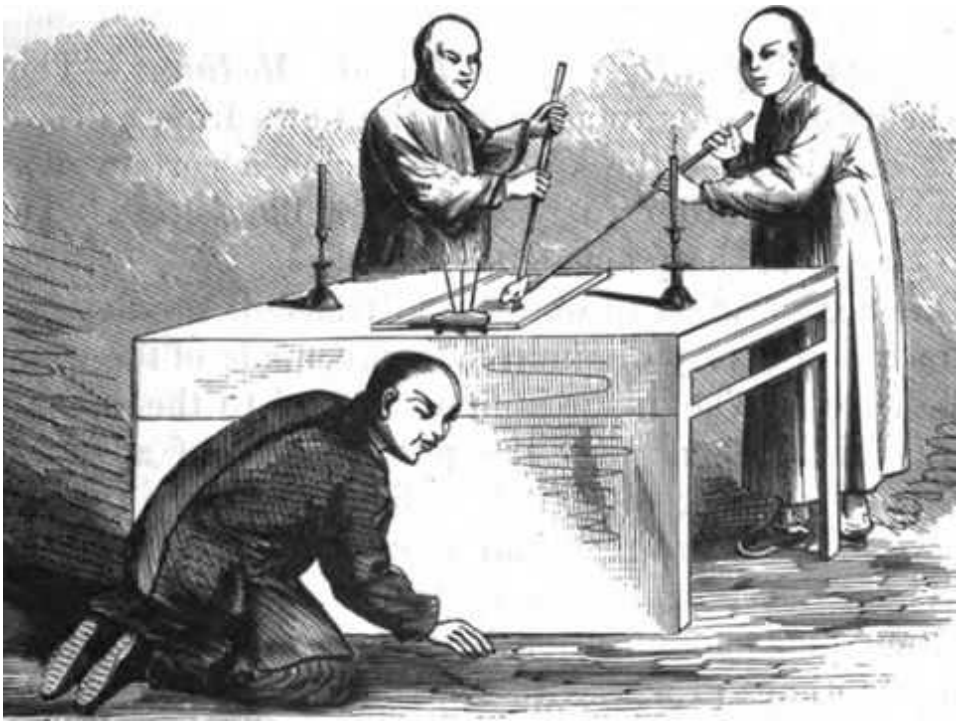

***Figure 3.*** *Fuji, an ancient Chinese mediumistic ritual (PRC public domain http://www.publicdomainpictures.net).*

The game is played in a quiet and dark room with only dim candlelight on, usually around midnight, in order to keep the noise of outdoor traffic to a minimum. The candlelight helps to create a hypnotic atmosphere, which may bring the game players into a concentrated state of mind. Oftentimes, the players will also burn incense to reduce the oxygen in the air. The wispy smoke arising from the burning incense and the fragrant odor are believed to be contributive to developing a hypnotic state. To play the pen spirit game, the players will first write down on a large piece of paper numbers from 0 to 9, as well as 'yes' and 'no', 'male' and 'female', and such descriptive words as 'wealthy', 'impoverished', 'famous', 'healthy', 'powerful', or any prepared short answers. Given the logographic nature of the Chinese language and the large number of Chinese characters, the prepared answers are unable to offer more information than the Ouija board, which can create any words, phrases, or even sentences using the 26 alphabetic letters. This has made the 'talking board' of the pen spirit look more complicated than the Ouija board, but in nature there is not much difference between the two.

***Figure 4.*** *Hand position for the pen spirit game (PRC public domain http://www.publicdomainpictures.net).*

For the pen spirit two players will hook their right hands together, with fingers crossed with each other, holding a pen gently in between the two hands perpendicular to the table surface. The players try not to touch the table surface with their elbows throughout the game. When the players are ready, they will chant, "Pen spirit, pen spirit, please come now and we need your advice!" There are different versions of the chant; some sound more formal than others. It normally takes a few minutes before the hands begin to move, and while the hands are moving, the pen being held in between will move on the piece of paper. To begin the session, the players will ask, "Are you here, pen spirit? If yes, please answer us." Then the players may find that their hands as well as the pen will slowly move to 'yes', around which character the pen will draw a circle. In most cases, the players are astonished, as both parties deny that it is his or her hand that is taking the lead in the movement; rather, they both think that they are simply following the other party. By following this ritual, they may ask anything they want to know about, and the pen spirit will provide an answer. The players

will have to keep their questions simple. Usually a yes-no question is the best. When they decide to stop the game, they will send the 'spirit' away politely. During the course of my interviews, I have collected a mélange of 'miracle' stories, but I am not able to verify those allegedly 'accurate' predictions by the pen spirit. As for the credibility of the answers, most of these young players are not skeptical, emphasizing that the more faith one has in the existence of 'spirits', the more accurate responses one may receive. There are also rumors about pen spirit game addiction as well as players being possessed by an evil pen spirit after performing it. Many of the descriptions of their own practices are identical with the depictions in the pen spirit horror films.

Similar to the pen spirit, the equally popular dish spirit replaces the pen with a bowl or a small dish placed upside down on a large piece of paper spread out on a table, with numbers and characters written on it. Like the Ouija board, it has to involve more than two players. The bowl or a small dish, with an arrow marked on one side, functions as a planchette, and the paper as the board.[5]

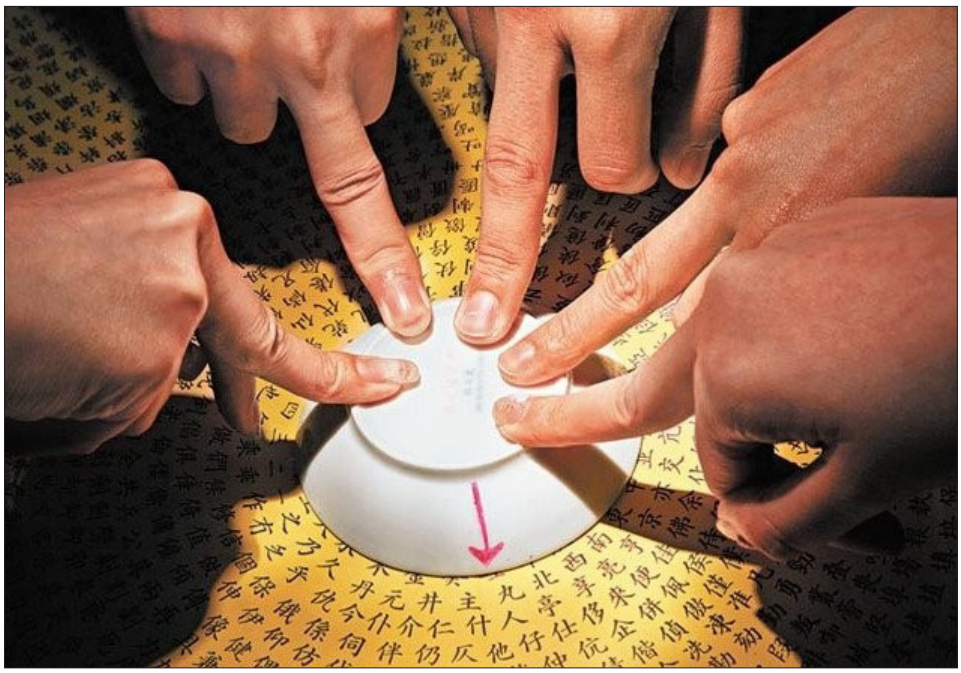

***Figure 5.*** *The dish spirit game*
*(PRC public domain http://www.publicdomainpictures.net).*

## FATE, LUCK, AND MEDIUMSHIP IN CHINA: CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND

Psychologists have concluded that the Ouija board response, as well as table turning, dowsing, and pendulum use, may be explained in terms of ideomotor actions – movements or behaviours that are unconsciously initiated (Gauchou & Rensinka & Fels 2012: 976–982). Similar to the Ouija game, in the pen spirit game, the pen serves as the movable indicator – the planchette. Players ask a question, holding the pen with crossed hands, and then follow the pen as it moves about on a piece of paper with prepared answers. Small hand movements are transferred to the pen. When one player lifts up his/her arm in mid-air, blindfolded in particular, he/she can hardly keep his/her arm steady without slightly moving. Thus, the small movements seem autonomous. When one person moves unconsciously, the other player is convinced that it is the other player or the pen spirit that is moving. In this sense, each party becomes an accomplice of the other. In this study, I do not intend to focus on how the game players move. What I find more interesting in this popular game among youngsters in the PRC, and the cinematic representations of this game, is why so many people believe and engage in the game. In addition, as I have observed over the years, average Chinese people seem to have a long-time cultural 'obsession' with divination, which is associated with their "obsession with fate and luck" (Sangren 2012: 117ff.). When I was working on *Change Destiny* between 2010 and 2012, I interviewed approximately 200 individuals of different age groups in the PRC regarding divination and mediumship. Most teenager respondents knew about or had practiced the pen spirit game in order to learn about their future, yet 90% of the adult respondents had been involved in at least one form of various divinations (typically, they would visit an *I-Ching* master, a Tibetan lama, or a psychic). Their oral accounts have been recorded in the book (Bao 2012).

The discourse surrounding fate had existed in the Chinese thought long before Buddhism spread to China, yet Buddhism once again introduced the concept of fatalism to the Chinese (Eberhard 1966: 149). Although orthodox Buddhist doctrines discourage divination, the concept of fatalism based on the principle of cause and effect, which has profoundly shaped the collective unconscious of the Chinese, provides a theoretically legitimate and practically necessary basis for divination, especially under the circumstance where the subject feels that 'God plays dice' and that fate is out of control. In the course of my research, my informants who have cross-cultural and/or transnational experiences have reaffirmed this observation: While a large percentage of their associates in the PRC and/or in the Chinese communities in Canada have

been to a psychic or involved in self-service divination at least once in the past year, Westerners are more likely to be skeptical about divination or claim that they do not believe in it, or do not feel the need to go for it. One informant of Chinese origin who lives in Toronto, Canada, says, "I've been to this psychic medium regularly every year for the past seven years. She is Iranian, and lives in a White neighborhood, but most of her clients I have seen at her house are Chinese; only a few are White Canadians." Here, I do not intend to enter into an argument on statistical truths, but I want to reaffirm that, compared to average Chinese people, Westerners more typically value rational thinking and reject superstition.

And yet I do not deny a human universal in desiring to know the future. In Canada, according to a news report, when the future seems unpredictable and when people are "at their wit's end", those who are usually skeptical may seek psychic guidance, especially when "their job securities and retirement savings are disappearing" (TorStar 2008). I want to emphasize that the degree of the engagement in divination of the entire population differs cross-culturally. As I observed in previous fieldwork (2012), the divination industry in the PRC is far more prosperous than the 'psychic reading' business in Canada. The national obsession with luck and fate, which is "a distinguishing characteristic of Chinese culture" (Sangren 2012: 117), has boosted the divination industry, and formed the 'economy of luck and fate'. In the alley south of the Lama Temple in Beijing, there are *I-Ching* and *Feng Shui* consultation offices on both sides of the alley. According to one *I-Ching* expert, who was running his own fortune-telling business in that alley and whom I interviewed in 2009, most of his clients were young people in their twenties or thirties. He charged about $18 for a reading, while more advanced *I-Ching* experts' rates could be up to $400. While most of his female clients ask for a reading about their relationship or marriage, men are usually more concerned about the prospect of their career, business, and investment.

As for high school teenagers, who can barely afford a reading, they are likely to turn to the pen spirit, since it is simple and cost-free. As some of my interviewees have informed me, the popular horror films about the pen spirit have reinforced their belief in spirits, for they think that the cinematic representation may be a true reflection of reality. Many of them have no doubts about the accuracy of the spirit's response. Leo, one of my informants in Beijing, in his early twenties, told me during a lengthy interview that he and his pals had increasingly believed in the accuracy of the pen spirit's response. He said, "I'm more serious about [the pen spirit] than ever, as an answer I got [from the pen spirit] in 2011 has been validated this year [2015]." The 'answer', according to him, was a prediction that within the next five years following 2011, he would


***Figure 6.*** *Fortune-telling street in Beijing.*
*Photograph credit: Beijing Times, November 3, 2015.*

not be able to go abroad to study. After several unsuccessful attempts between 2011 and 2015, he finally secured sufficient funding for overseas education in October 2015, and was very likely to study at a college in Canada in 2016. He added, "The pen spirit is not always bullshit. That's why we love pen spirit movies." He also believed that most of his peers believed in pre-determined destiny more than in free will.

To investigate the divination culture in China, I would first look at the discursive production on fate and destiny in the Chinese language. Before the Buddhist teaching of *karma* or cause and effect and dependent origination were widely taken over by the Chinese, Chinese philosophers had reverenced fate as "the order of Heaven" (Schwartz 2000: 149), which should be understood as an early concept of pre-determinism, rather than fatalism. Thus, Confucian philosophers believe that, as the command of the deity of Heaven, fate cannot be altered or controlled (ibid.: 136–149). The Confucian thought has long recognized the impossibility of controlling certain aspects in destiny, such as fame, ranks, material wealth, and life expectancy. As a result, the Chinese language has accumulated over the centuries a rich collection of expressions

around fate and destiny, including such idioms as "生死有命，富, 在天" (To live or to die is destined; riches and honors depend on heaven); "一, 一啄，莫非前定" (Every bite and every sip are preordained); and "穷通有定" (Success and failure are destined). With Buddhist doctrine widely accepted by the Chinese elite, the concept of fatalism gradually integrated into the Chinese indigenous thought on destiny, becoming an integral part of the collective unconscious of the Chinese. The teaching of *karma* does not only acknowledge the pre-determinedness of one's destiny, but also believes that one's current status is the outcome of previously accomplished deeds, especially from past lives, and hence, the Chinese Buddhist proverb, "欲知前世因，今生受者是" (If you want to know your past, look into your present conditions). Ironically, while the original teaching of *karma* is meant to teach the Buddha's followers to be more proactive for self-improvement, by taking action to revise the cause in order to avoid or alter any negative effects, it has been interpreted and perceived by many as the negation of free will in all circumstances. As I have observed, a non-doing attitude to the material world is pervasive among lay Buddhists in China, which is often interpreted as a habitual acceptance of whatever situation the subject is currently in and whatever fate comes along.

As for China in general, it is ideologically, in terms of the core belief system in mainstream society, primarily an officially atheist country but it has still a long-lasting Buddhist culture integrated with the indigenous Daoism and Confucianism, which are marginalized and regulated under the Communist rule. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976)[6], these religions along with Christianity were banned, as they were classified as part of the 'Four Olds' with feudal or bourgeois harm. In present-day mainland China, among other religions, Buddhism is not only revived but also thriving, while the revival started as early as in the modern Buddhist movement in Republican China (Wang 2013: 3–5). This means that though Buddhism was suppressed for a short period of time under the Ultra Leftist ideological regulation, it has not been eradicated from the collective memory of the people. Modern Chinese Buddhists, however, "engage in dialogues with materialism, idealism, Marxism, and other philosophical schools from the West" (ibid.: 5). The Buddhist doctrines integrated with secular values have established a new dichotomous belief: on the one hand, Chinese lay Buddhists (or simply Buddhist ritual practitioners) have accepted pre-determinism and/or fatalism as one major concept in Buddhist doctrines and the core of their personal belief system; on the other hand, the attachment to materialism, capitalism, and consumerism, which results in secular pursuits and/or engagement in divination, is suggestive of an adherence to 'doing' rather than 'non-doing', with an instinctual resistance to the pre-determined. This typical attitude is different from both free will and fatalism, in that it is seeking

a short-cut to securing the expected and preferred trajectory of one's destiny. As a matter of fact, the popularity of mediumship such as the pen spirit or dish spirit among Chinese youth reflects that attitude in a larger picture – while the players believe that their future is pre-determined, they hope to know about the outcome of their acts in advance, in order to alter this outcome or the process leading to it. This appears particularly strong when the future seems out of reach, even though they may as well realize that there is no realistic meaning whatsoever in whether the pre-knowledge is accurate or not. As indicated in the interviews, the obsession with divination and mediumship reveals a widespread discontent about current societal and personal status quo, especially insecurities and fears generated by the vulnerability and unpredictability of employment and social security system. Social problems in contemporary Chinese society, which include "corruption, land grabs, income inequality, quality of life, and cost of living issues, local government debt, and an expanding urban-rural divide", have increased to "the point of crisis" (Sullivan 2014: 10–13). And yet, voices that address concerns and criticism are suppressed, while no realistic resolutions have met expectations year after year.

## THE TRANSFORMING SOCIETY AND FAITH IN MEDIUMSHIP IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA: SOME CASE ANALYSES

Particularly the young generation born in the 1990s face unprecedented pressure caused by increasingly expensive housing, intense competition in university admissions and academic performance as well as in the job market. One of my young interviewees by the name of Lucy Guo tells me:

> *I have been job-hopping all the time these past two years. It's not because I want to change my job; it's because no job can keep me for more than half a year. Too many have been laid off for no reasons. Oftentimes when you are rushing to work you get a phone call telling you that you don't have to come to work anymore. Too bad we don't have employment insurance, which means once you are laid off, you will have to look for another job before you need to pay your next month's rent. This is Beijing. Take it or leave it. No one must hire you, as there are way too many talented folks in this city.*

Lucy is a fan of mediumship. She particularly likes drawing oracles online, though occasionally she plays the dish spirit with her pals. For the past year, she has tried to 'channel' the spirits into using a smartphone application more

than fifty times. Whenever she is invited to a job interview, she will draw an oracle to see how the interview will go. She says, "If the oracle is negative, then probably I won't go [to the job interview], for it will be a waste of time, energy, and emotions." This attitude is not uncommon among individuals of her age in the PRC. Another interviewee by the name of William Mao, however, is more concerned about his father's health. As the only child of the family and a member of the 4+2+1 family structure (parents and parents-in-law, husband and wife, and their only child) due to the one child policy, he has an overwhelming financial burden. His personal narrative is typical:

> *These days everyone is talking about the old age pension scheme and the medical care system, but in the small village where I grew up, my parents and my wife's parents basically have nothing. My parents have poor health and seriously, if they become ill, we will have to spend all our savings. We can't rely on anyone else. Nor should we expect the government of the county to do anything for us. All we can do is to pray that nothing unfortunate will happen to us.*

A firm believer in the supernatural and a fan of the supernatural in folklore, sometimes he is involved in different types of mediumship for a reading for himself and his entire family, including but not limited to the pen spirit, *I-Ching* consultation, and psychic séances. His case is not uncommon either, among the many interviews that I have conducted, since a lack of a well-funded social security system contributes to the widespread insecure feeling of the large group of low-to-medium income civilians.

Kaiwen Cao is a young actor who is well connected with psychic mediums, Tibetan lamas, and fortune-tellers in Beijing. He himself is also an occasional medium for pleasure, and sounds like an expert when talking about the pen spirit. His friends have informed me that sometimes he is amazingly accurate in his reading in a mediumistic state. During the interview I asked him to give me a reading and I can assure that much of his reading on my current situation made a great deal of sense (it should be added that he was aware of many details of my life already before and therefore his success was more or less granted). In recent years, he has been involved not only in the pen spirit and dish spirit, but also in the family constellations technique, which he says is extremely powerful in "developing one's potential of rediscovering the unknown past and foreseeing one's future". He interprets it as a new kind of mediumship. He informed me that there is a large family constellation community in Beijing, on which I have yet to conduct further research. When I asked him why he was so passionate about the supernatural, he said the following:

> *People say no pain, no gain, and hard work pays off, but in the entertainment circle it is always luck that matters. It does seem like rolling a dice or buying lottery tickets. There are many talented actors and singers out there, but only few can become stars. It's not because they are talented, but because they have the perfect timing, and they meet the right person in the right place and at the right time. There may be hundreds or even thousands of actors auditioning for a leading role in a blockbuster, but only one will be picked. Do you think the selection is 100% fair? No! I have great training, a university degree, and great looks, but luck has seldom befallen me. Other than a male lead and a number of supporting roles and extras, I have never had any good luck. I know lots of actors turn to mediums for help because they are not sure about where they are getting at, and the future is totally unpredictable.*

The glamour industry mentioned in this text may be perceived as an epitome of society at large. Firstly, the interest in the supernatural reflects an increasing fear of the instability, unpredictability, and insecurities of personal and society's future associated with economic, social, and institutional change, as the PRC – the least religious country in the world according to Gallop International (2015) – is experiencing a crisis of faith after the communist ideology collapsed, which is believed by Liu Peng of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences to be the result of "rapid economic growth" and the absence in the PRC of a "shared belief system" (D'avolio 2014). In 2011, the CPC-run newspaper *People's Daily* warned Beijing about the popular crisis of faith among its people, which may threaten and jeopardize the harmony and stability of society and the state's power. Secondly, the more rule of man is executed within the institutional and societal systems, the more unpredictability and insecurities an individual may feel, and thus, he or she will more likely turn to the supernatural for solace. In the glamour industry, for example, luck oftentimes plays a key role in determining one's trajectory, and for that reason, individuals such as Kaiwen firmly believe that God plays dice, and may get involved in divination and mediumship for guidance. Yet my most recent phone interview with Kaiwen in October 2015 indicated a dramatic turning point, as he informed me of his reaffirmed discovery through aging: turning to the supernatural is useless, as the origin of suffering lies in placing oneself in endless comparisons with one's peers in an unfair, man-ruled social competition, and it needs to be removed as much as possible.

## CONCLUSION

With film being the dominant medium for transmitting cultural beliefs, divination, and mediumship, which used to be common folkloric motifs in the past but are now presented as filmic folklore in popular horror films, it reflects contemporary belief trends consistent with the changing social context. Although the ideological regime in mainland China has been predominated by materialistic atheism, the revival of religions and supernatural rituals, which were perceived as feudal superstition during the Cultural Revolution, is the outcome of the crash of the Maoist and Communist faith, which has occurred during the social, economic, and institutional transformation since the establishment of the market economy. Besides, that revival also indicates a common feeling of insecurities in the population with regard to personal and familial future and the social security system. The popularity of the cinematic representation of the supernatural is not accidental; rather, it reflects the common attitude among the civilians, and culturally embodies a rich source of referential particularities and discourses of luck and fate, which preserve fragments of real data for the individuals.

## NOTES

[1] See more at http://yule.sohu.com/20120627/n346632159.shtml, last accessed on April 27, 2016.

[2] The interviewees were selected during the course of writing *Gai Ming* (Change Destiny) (《改命》) (Beijing: New World Press, 2012), and were categorized into three groups. The first group contained friends, relatives, and associates, who claimed that they had experience with divination. The second group consisted of readers of my previous book, *Ci Chang* (Vibrations) (《磁场》) (Beijing: New World Press, 2010). The third group included some of the followers of my *sina* blog, who had demonstrated interest in the occult and who had exchanged views with me on divination and mediumship. In this article, I have only cited three typical interviews.

[3] With a long history in Chinese folk religion, *fuji* (扶乩) is a Chinese Daoist ritual of 'spirit writing', where practitioners use a suspended sieve or tray to guide a stick to write Chinese characters in sand or incense ashes. It became popular during the Song Dynasty (960–1279), flourished during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), and was prohibited during the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912). Currently, it is practiced at Daoist temples in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and in mainland China.

[4] A dominant concept in traditional Chinese philosophy, *yin* and *yang* represent the two opposite and yet complimentary and interconnected principles of nature. The Five Elements – Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, and Water – constitute a fivefold conceptual scheme abstracting from natural phenomena an order of mutual generation and mutual overcoming sequences.

[5] In 2012, when I conducted research on the history of the Ouija board, I found various versions regarding its inception. Although as a Daoist ritual, *fuji* is much older than the Ouija board, and pen spirit and dish spirit games are highly similar to the Ouija board, I have not found abundantly sufficient evidence to support the assumption that there may have been an early East-West communication on mediumship. In fact, during the Cultural Revolution, when the PRC was closed to the outside world, pen spirit and dish spirit games had already become very popular, especially in the rural areas, but soon they were condemned and banned by the government as feudal superstition.

[6] The Cultural Revolution was a social-political movement in the PRC from 1966 to 1976, led by Mao Zedong, then Chairman of the Communist Party of China. While the stated goal was to protect communist ideology from capitalism and feudalism, it brought a national disaster to the country politically, economically, and socially.

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# FAME AFTER LIFE: THE MYSTERY OF EDGAR ALLAN POE'S DEATH

*Kirsten Møllegaard*

**Abstract:** Although contemporary legends often deal with the trials and anxieties of everyday life, a considerable body of folk narratives deals with famous historical people and the mysteries, rumors, and anecdotes ascribed to them. American author Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849) was a trend-setting author of gothic horror and dark mysteries. His short, difficult life and strange death have fueled both academic and folkloristic narratives. Where the academic narratives often analyze his fiction biographically as reflections of his life such as his impoverishment, alcoholism, and frustrated ambition, the folk narratives typically focus on his death at the age of forty. By straddling literary and popular fame, Poe-lore occupies a dynamic *Spielraum* in contemporary folklore because his haunted life and mysterious death, similar to the literary conventions for the gothic in literature, collapse 'high' and 'low' culture. The folklore of famous people is intimately – perhaps even mysteriously – tied to the perception of individual identity and the social experience of city crowds, strangers, and alienation. In Poe's case, the intertwining of his fiction with his real-life struggles has made Poe scholarship the most biographically centered of any American writer, past or present, and produced Poe not only as a towering legend in American literature, but also as a legendary figure in the popular imagination.

**Keywords:** biography, contemporary legends, death, Edgar Allan Poe, fame, gothic literature, Poe Toaster

*The boundaries which divide Life from Death*
*are at best shadowy and vague.*
*Who shall say where the one ends,*
*and where the other begins?*
Edgar Allan Poe (2004c: 357)

## SITUATING EDGAR ALLAN POE'S FAME IN ACADEMIC AND POPULAR IMAGINATION

The death, in particular the violent or sudden death, of famous people can produce a new 'life' for them in the popular imagination. They become legendary in the cultural landscape: their lives and accomplishments are sentimentalized or aggrandized; their homes are reverted to shrines and become sites for pilgrimages; their personal effects are prized by collectors and exhibited in museums; their inner lives are continuously analyzed, demonized, embellished, or scrutinized in many types of expressive media (film, books, performances) ranging from scholarly studies to blogs; and their portraits, signature artifacts, and photographic poses are visually branded onto objects of material culture through the endless process of copying, printing, and re-printing images on commercial merchandise and souvenirs. In *Celebrity*, sociologist Chris Rojek observes, "The fact that media representation is the basis of celebrity is at the heart of both the question of the mysterious tenacity of celebrity power and the peculiar fragility of celebrity presence" (2001: 16). Media-driven post-mortem fame may in fact overshadow the level of fame, or popular celebrity, the person achieved while alive. This is certainly the case for the American author Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849), whose afterlife in both academia and popular culture includes an impressive corpus of belief narratives surrounding his death, which overshadow the level of his fame in real life. Today Poe is considered the founder of the detective genre, the master of gothic horror, and the most influential American writer of the Romantic Movement. His works include the classics *The Raven*, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, the Dupin murder mysteries, *The Pit and the Pendulum*, *The Premature Burial*, *The Tell-Tale Heart*, *The Black Cat*, *The Gold Bug*, *The Cask of Amontillado*, *The Masque of Red Death*, and many other gothic tales of dark mysteries, horror, madness, and spectacular violence.

No other American writer has had as enduring and pervasive an influence on popular culture as Poe has. To claim that "everybody knows Poe", as J. W. Ocker does in *Poe-Land: The Hallowed Haunts of Edgar Allan Poe* (2015: 10), is hyperbole, but not entirely false either. Poe's fame uniquely spans from the ivory tower of academia to the gutters of B horror movies. To mention a few

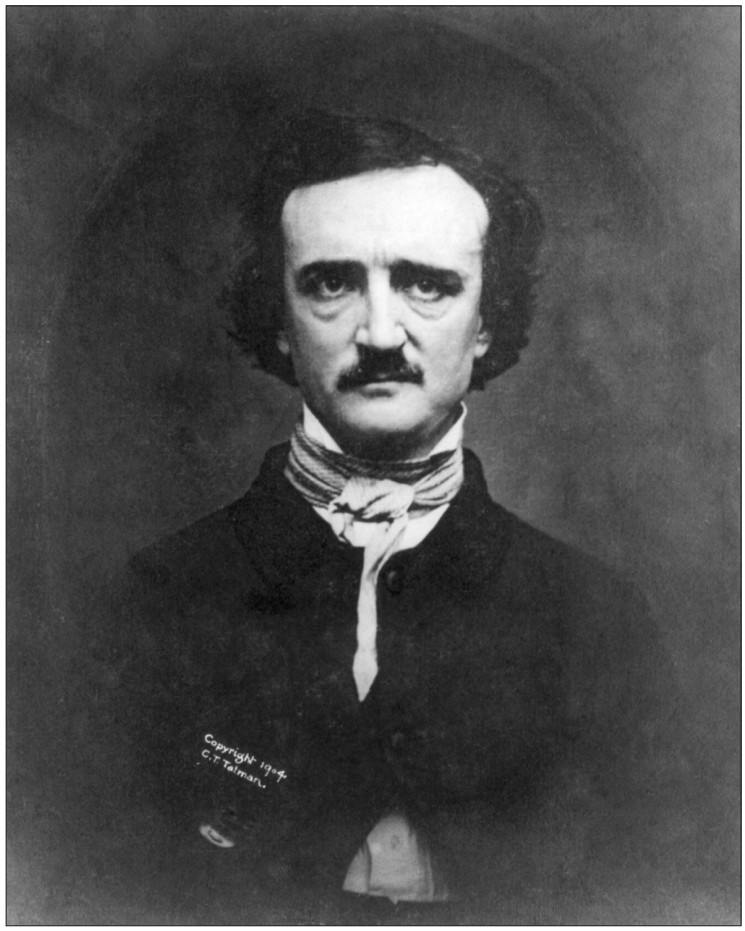


***Figure 1.*** *Edgar Allan Poe, 1848. Photograph by W. S. Hartshorn (http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2004672796/).*

examples that illustrate "Poe's ambiguous position between highbrow and lowbrow culture" (Neimeyer 2002: 208): busts and statues of Poe alongside other canonized literati adorn learned institutions and libraries across the US, but out of all those celebrated writers only his image appears on the cover of The Beatles' 1967 album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*; a National Football League team, the Baltimore Ravens, takes its name and logo from Poe's poem *The Raven*; cartoon characters like Garfield and Bart Simpson have recited Poe's works; many horror films, including B-movie cult classics starring Vincent Price, draw their inspiration from Poe's works; the US postal service has issued

two commemorative stamps of Poe in 1949 and 2009; women's magazines like *Better Homes and Gardens* give seasonal advice on how to make a Poe-inspired Halloween dinner; original Poe memorabilia, letters, and manuscripts fetch six- and seven-digit prices at auctions, while mass-produced souvenirs like coffee mugs, refrigerator magnets, baby bibs, and mouse pads sell for considerably less. The list goes on, and so does Poe's afterlife, as expressed by a devoted fan: "Never RIP, Edgar Allan Poe" (Ocker 2015: 360).

Poe's dynamic afterlife is fueled by two seemingly incongruous, yet mutually influential forces: Poe's tenacious popularity and visual presence in pop culture, and his canonized influence on literary genre, which ensures that every American high school student will have read some of his works, most commonly *The Raven* and *The Fall of the House of Usher*. Since the focus of this article is on Poe as a haunting presence in the popular imagination, there will be no attempt to separate the "academic Poe and the pop-culture Poe" (Peeples 2004: 125). Rather, this article will investigate the overlap between the folkloric and the academic in the narratives surrounding Poe's death and, broadly speaking, consider how popular fascination with fame contributes to the production of contemporary folklore. Poe-lore is invested with social fears of death and desires for fame; it hovers precariously between actual events and the signifying practices of storytelling; and, when seen as an example of Michel de Certeau's outline of discourse formation, Poe-lore authorizes a *Spielraum* (room for free play) in the popular imagination for negotiating the knowable, the mysterious, and the poetic in everyday life (Certeau 1984: 91–114).

As Jan Bondeson argues in *Buried Alive: The Terrifying History of Our Most Primal Fear*, Poe drew generously on folktales and legends in his horror stories. Bondeson even declares that the theme of premature burial was an 'unwholesome fascination' and 'obsession' for Poe (2001: 208, 214). In general, writers do of course draw on material from everyday life for their literary endeavors, but Bondeson's remarks serve as an important reminder that Poe's fame is intertwined with a perceived image of him in the public sphere as mentally deranged, mysteriously dark, unwholesome, and obsessed with morbid themes, while he is celebrated in scholarly circles for his originality and generic innovations.

Poe's fame is thus situated in the dynamic realm of the popular (including popular literature), where there is "contestation between various cultural forces in which hegemony *and* resistance, conformity *and* subversion, may be produced" (original emphasis, Blanco & Peeren 2010: xii). The tension between those contesting cultural forces energizes both Poe scholarship and Poe's continuing presence in popular urban legends, rituals, and performances. However, scholars primarily see celebrity as "a *modern* phenomenon, a phenomenon of mass-circulation newspapers, TV, radio and film" (Rojek 2001: 16). Norbert

Ruebsaat contends, "Celebrity, as we know it today, was created by modern mass media" (2007: 9). However, today's media-driven celebrity cult is historically related to the production of rumors, legends, tall tales, and similar folk narratives. Like contemporary legends, narratives about famous people "are told as true, or at best plausible, and ... are mirrors of cultural values" (Møllegaard 2005: 41). The social production of Poe's fame is thus intimately related to the folkloric aspect of urban and contemporary legends because fame hinges on the telling of stories that, for better or worse, are "too good to be true" (Brunvand 1999: 19). Fame as well as ill fame is associated with narrative processes in general and with telling stories in particular. In Roman mythology, the goddess Fama (Pheme in Greek mythology) personified rumor, gossip, and endless curiosity about the lives of others. In *The Aeneid*, book IV, Vergil describes Fama as a winged creature with many eyes, ears, and wagging tongues. Fama is not concerned with what is true or false: "Her claws hold both true news and evil lies. / She filled the realms now with her tangled talk, / chanting in glee a mix of fact and fiction" (Vergil 2008, lines 188–190). According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the root words for the Greek name Pheme and the Latin Fama relate to the derivative colloquial word for 'speak' or 'talk', *fabulare* (*OED* 1989: 703–704). This etymology suggests that fame is a multifaceted concept, which includes, on the positive side, public renown, good reputation, and celebrity as means to achieve high social status and, on the negative side, ill fame, scandal, and bad reputation, and consequently the expulsion from 'good' society.

Poe's posthumous fame is not only media-driven; it is also performative and informed by vernacular expressions of folk beliefs and folklife (chiefly in the form of tourism). Although Poe lived in an era far removed from contemporary reputation generators like the tabloid press, blogs, Twitter, Facebook, etc., rumors and anecdotes that related facts or fiction about a person's good or bad reputation – either in print or by word of mouth – were powerful social tools of control in antebellum USA. In his lifetime, Poe was considered a controversial figure in literary circles. He was not uniformly recognized as a literary genius although he actively tried to become a famous writer. As Mark Neimeyer points out, Poe "clearly, though largely unsuccessfully, sought popular success during his lifetime" (2002: 207). Scott Peeples acknowledges that "certainly Poe was alert to the way reputations are manufactured" (2004: 25), but he also notes that Poe's irrational, confrontational behavior often undermined his own best interests. Suggestive as these remarks are about Poe's own agency in fabricating a public reputation, it is important to recognize that Poe's public persona and his astounding posthumous fame as the *enfant terrible* of American letters were produced, and continue to be produced, by a combination of scholarly and lay interest in his life and works.

Some scholars attribute Poe's posthumous fame to his proverbial self-destructiveness, that is, his self-identified "imp of the perverse", which is the urge to "do wrong for wrong's sake only" (Poe 2004b [1840]: 350). J. Gerald Kennedy captures the essence of Poe's reputation when stating that Poe's "sheer perverseness, his urge to locate and confront enemies, to offend and disgust, to mock and mystify, ensured that Poe would remain (as on some level he desired) the obnoxious misfit of American letters, the bad boy of the antebellum literary world" (Kennedy 1996: 535). Virtually all Poe scholars agree that Poe's successor as editor of *Graham's Magazine*, Rufus Griswold, committed character assassination against Poe immediately after his death by writing a scathing, vindictive obituary describing Poe as dishonest, alcoholic, immoral, mentally deranged, conceited, decadent, and without friends (Peeples 2004: 2). Ironically, it seems, Griswold's defamation of Poe launched the so-called 'Poe Legend' and thus contributed to Poe's posthumous fame in significant ways (Ljungquist 2002: 7).

## A BRIEF OUTLINE OF POE'S LIFE

In order to situate the legends about Poe's death in a biographical context, a brief synopsis of his life and literary themes is in order. Edgar Poe was born in Boston, MA, to itinerant actors on January 19, 1809. In 1811, his father David Poe abandoned the family and died a year later, leaving wife Elizabeth Arnold Poe destitute with three young children: Henry, Edgar, and Rosalie. Elizabeth died of tuberculosis in Richmond, VA, just before Christmas in 1811, when Edgar was two years old. The children were divided up amongst foster families. Edgar was taken in by a wealthy tobacco merchant, John Allan and his wife Frances, and his name was legally changed to Edgar Allan Poe. Poe grew up in relative affluence, but as he grew into manhood, he and John Allan developed an increasingly contentious relationship and fought over money. In 1827 Poe's foster mother Frances died of tuberculosis. At the age of twenty, Poe was completely estranged from his foster family and virtually penniless. He had to quit University of Virginia after one semester, and after a two-year stint in the army at West Point, he became an editor and literary critic and tried to make a living as a writer. When he was twenty-seven, he married his thirteen-year-old cousin Virginia Clemm. She died of tuberculosis twelve years later, in 1847. They had no children. Although Poe had difficulty getting his work published and never made much of a profit from it – for example, he only earned $9.00 from his masterpiece poem *The Raven* – his poetry and short stories were

in fact well received during his lifetime. The death of the three women closest to him from tuberculosis – his mother, foster mother, and wife – is a vital part of the tragic aura of his biography; but it is also an essential element of his philosophy of composition and underlies his famous dictum, "the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world" (Poe 2004e [1845]: 680).

Poe's life was emotionally difficult, financially turbulent, and marked by periods of sobriety alternating with periods of excessive drinking, manic behavior, and possible drug use. He fought with editors and had trouble keeping a job. The Poe household included Edgar, Virginia, and her mother Maria Clemm. They moved frequently. Their living quarters have been traced to several addresses in Baltimore, Richmond, Philadelphia, and New York. Poe was very much an urbanite, and many of his most haunting short stories – for example, *The Man of the Crowd*, *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, and *The Imp of the Perverse* – evoke the social experience of urban space and crowds, menacing strangers, and existential alienation in the city.

Poe's fictional cityscapes are fraught with existential chasms of *Angst*, conjuring ghostly shadows and imaginary geographies haunted by death. In *The Imp of the Perverse*, for example, the narrator, who is basking in felicity over having committed a cruel murder and gotten away with it, is walking down a busy street when he is suddenly overcome by paranoia. He thinks he sees the ghost of the man he murdered. Terrified, he starts running: "I bounded like a madman through the crowded thoroughfares. But now the populace took alarm and pursued" (Poe 2004d [1845]: 406). He is roughly detained by the crowd and hysterically blurts out his confession. Similarly, the claustrophobic squeeze of crowds upsets the narrator in *The Man of the Crowd*, who observes how "dense and continuous tides of population were rushing past the door" (Poe 2004a [1845]: 233). He spends the night obsessively following an old man through filthy labyrinthine streets, in the rain, in a nightmarish attempt to escape the crowds by becoming swallowed up in the whirlpool of humanity. Poe's fiction in general is haunted by images of death, madness, and violence, but his dark cityscapes loom large over the legends and theories that attempt to explain how Poe died. Fatefully, Poe's own death in Baltimore appears to have been framed exactly as he envisioned in his fiction by a maelstrom of busy, dirty streets, rough-handed struggle, and mental torment.

Poe's death at the age of forty, in 1849, has been the subject of intense debate and speculation, spawning not only a large number of scholarly books and papers, but also inspiring an annual nocturnal ritual by a disguised agent known as the Poe Toaster.

## POE'S DEATH: FACTS AND THEORIES

The elusive search for what caused Poe's death has generated many types of narratives and a great deal of media interest. Some narratives build on thorough archival investigations, others attempt to glean a medical diagnosis from the fragmentary documents describing Poe's final days, and some are mainly speculative. While the scholarly production of narratives pertaining to Poe's death is both ingenious and in many instances very well argued, to this day it remains inconclusive what exactly Poe died of.

What is known for a fact is that Poe had left Richmond, VA, for Philadelphia, PA, on September 27, 1849. There is no verifiable evidence about his whereabouts or activities between September 27 and October 3, 1849, when he was found semiconscious and delirious in front of a voting poll in Baltimore, MD, dressed in ill-fitting clothes not his own. An urgent note from a printer named Joseph Walker to Dr. Joseph Evan Snodgrass at Washington College Hospital states, "There is a gentleman rather the worse for wear, at Ryan's 4th ward polls, who goes under the cognomen of Edgar A. Poe, and who appears in great distress & says he is acquainted with you, he is in need of immediate assistance" (Thomas & Jackson 1987: 844). Four days later, on October 7, 1849, Poe died at the hospital.

There are several accounts about what transpired between Poe being found at Ryan's tavern and his death at the hospital, but they are not entirely clear. Dr. Snodgrass went to the polling station and immediately recognized Poe's face, "although it wore an aspect of vacant stupidity that made me shudder" (Thomas & Jackson 1987: 844). Dr. Snodgrass tried to procure a room for Poe at the tavern, but the innkeeper refused to accommodate him due to Poe's "abusive and ungrateful" behavior (ibid.). Poe was sent to the Washington College Hospital. Dr. Snodgrass relates, "So insensible was he, that we had to carry him to the carriage as if a corpse. The muscles of articulation seemed paralyzed to speechlessness, and mere incoherent mutterings were all that were heard" (Thomas & Jackson 1987: 845). Dr. Snodgrass' testimony comes from his article *Death and Burial of Edgar A. Poe*, which was published in May 1856, seven years after Poe's death. Dr. Snodgrass appears to have muddied the clarity of what transpired at the hospital. Robert Hopkins explains that Dr. Snodgrass was a strong proponent of temperance and "a religious zealot who, from the early 1850s, preached the gospel of Poe's death as a result of the sin of a dissolute life as a drunkard" (2007: 43). To warn against the ill effects of alcohol, he even falsified the content of Walker's emergency note in order to present Poe's condition as the result of overconsumption of alcohol: "whereas Walker spoke of a 'Gentleman, rather the worse for wear,' Snodgrass substituted 'in a state of beastly intoxication'" (Brandy 1987).

At the hospital, Poe was erratic and had to be restrained. Dr. John J. Moran, the resident physician, reported that on the fourth day Poe called out for someone named Reynolds, the identity of whom is not known, though some scholars believe that Poe alluded to Jeremiah N. Reynolds, the South Sea explorer, whose travel accounts had inspired Poe to write his only novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838), (Walsh 1999: 122). On October 7, Poe said a short prayer – "Lord, help my poor soul" – before he died. Dr. Moran related this account in a letter dated November 15, 1849, to Poe's mother-in-law Maria Clemm. He concluded that Poe died from delirium tremens. According to Dr. Moran, Poe was beset by violent deliriums, at one point saying that "the best thing his friends could do would be to blow out his brains with a pistol" (Thomas & Jackson 1987: 846). However, W. T. Brandy questions Dr. Moran's trustworthiness (Brandy 1987). Dr. Moran later went on speaking tours and published articles, in which he changed and embellished many of the statements he had initially made in the letter to Mrs. Clemms. Kenneth Silverman sums up:

> *The cause of Poe's death remains in doubt. Moran's account of his profuse perspiration, trembling, and hallucinations indicates delirium tremens, mania à potu. Many others who had known Poe, including the professionally trained Dr. Snodgrass, also attributed his death to a lethal amount of alcohol. Moran later vigorously disputed this explanation, however, and some Baltimore newspapers gave the cause of death as "congestion of the brain" or "cerebral inflammation." Although the terms were sometimes used euphemistically in public announcements of deaths from disgraceful causes, such as alcoholism, they may in this case have come from the hospital staff itself. According to Moran, one of its senior physicians diagnosed Poe's condition as encephalitis, a brain inflammation, brought on by exposure.* (1991: 435–436)

No autopsy was performed, and Poe was buried in an unmarked grave at Westminster Hall and Burying Ground in Baltimore two days later, on October 9, 1849. Today, a headstone marks this spot. Twenty-six years later, in 1875, Poe's remains were moved to a new prominent grave in front of the church. Ten years after that, in 1885, the remains of his wife Virginia, who had been buried in New York, and mother-in-law Maria, who had died in 1871, were also placed in the new grave. The imposing monument that marks this grave is where the so-called Poe Toaster, who will be discussed below, for fifty years placed three red roses and an opened bottle of cognac on Poe's birthday, January 19.

Poe's pauper burial and the cryptic death diagnosis, congestion of the brain, have given rise to considerable speculation about what actually caused Poe's death. The Edgar Alan Poe Museum in Richmond offers a comprehensive, though not exhaustive, chronological list of proposed theories of Poe's death

cause and the year they were proposed: beating (1857), epilepsy (1875), dipsomania (1921), heart disease (1926), toxic disorder (1970), diabetes (1977), hypoglycemia (1979), alcohol dehydrogenase (1984), porphyria (1989), delirium tremens (1992), rabies (1996), heart attack (1997), murder (1998), epilepsy (1999), carbon monoxide poisoning (1999), and brain tumor (2007) (Museum 2014). Considering the rather long-term progression of some of these diseases and conditions, it is remarkable that Poe wrote in a letter the year before his death: "My health is better – best. I have never been so well" (cited in Kennedy 2001: 55).

An Internet search produces multiple websites speculating on the possible causes of Poe's death in both scholarly databases and popular websites. The scholarly sources tend to include detective work in Poe's papers and letters, along with examination of his contemporaries' letters. However, even in the scholarly sources there happens to be a rather *laissez-faire* use of medical terminology, resulting in some bizarre diagnoses of what caused Poe's death. Hopkins, for example, refers to the possibility that Poe suffered from "sclerosis of the liver" (2007: 42), possibly confusing sclerosis with cirrhosis. Beyond aca-


***Figure 2.*** *Poe's original grave. Westminster Hall and Burying Ground, Baltimore, MD (https://transplantedtatar.com/2013/04/01/poe-amontillado-wine-tasting-201/).*

demic databases, in more accessible venues like Wikipedia and Open Culture, for example, speculations about Poe's death include – in addition to the causes just mentioned – suicide, murder, cholera, influenza, and cooping as possible causes for his death. Cooping refers to the 19th century practice in American politics of forcing a person to vote, under the threat of violence or the effects of drugs or alcohol, often several times, for the same candidate. Since cooping often involved changing the cooped person's clothes so that he might pass for someone else, this theory addresses the mystery of why Poe was wearing someone else's clothes when he was found at the tavern polling station.

All these speculations over the last 150 years have contributed to the scholarly lore of American literary biography. From a folklore perspective the circulation and consumption of these theories provide a case study of the mysteries and anxieties associated with the confluence of famous people and the urban gothic in everyday culture. "Poe's death is one of the biggest literary mysteries, period," argues Matthew Pearl in an interview with *The Observer*. "People don't grow tired of it. It's sort of like the J.F.K. assassination" (Neyfakh 2007). Pearl, by the way, believes that Poe died from a brain tumor.

Pearl's reference to the 1963 assassination of President John F. Kennedy is an important clue to understanding why Poe's death continues to fascinate scholars. The violent death of famous people elevates them to emblems of tragedy in the public imagination. In a study on the popular deification of Princess Diana by Gillian Bennett and Anne Rowbottom (2009), the authors identify the dual forces of news media and folk sentiments as driving the modern-day hagiography of figures like Grace Kelly, Elvis Presley, Eva Peron, James Dean, Marilyn Monroe, and Jimi Hendrix. In Poe's case, however, the news media tend to play a secondary role compared to the power of sentimental scholarly, perhaps pseudo-scholarly, investment in mystifying Poe's death. For example, while his death at the age of forty is often seen as suspicious and tragic, life expectancy for white American males in 1850 was actually only 38.3 years (Life Expectancy 2007). The sensationalism with which these death theories are launched, complete with morbid details, tends to fuel and romanticize rather than solve the mystery of Poe's death. For example, Pearl's theory that Poe died of a cancerous brain tumor is based on newspaper articles printed one to three years after Poe's remains had been reburied, that is, twenty-seven to twenty-nine years after he died. The state of his remains would likely have deteriorated considerably, but witnesses to the reburial stated that Poe's brain was still visible inside the skull and looked "dried and hardened" (Harris 2007). Pearl relates that "one account described the brain as almost rattling around inside Poe's head" (ibid.). After consulting a friend whose wife is a doctor, Pearl concludes that Poe died from a brain tumor that had calcified after his death.

It needs mentioning that scholars who launch sensational theories about Poe's death may be motivated by pecuniary interests. Pearl's novel, *The Poe Shadow* (2007), received mediocre reviews, but because of the popular interest in anything pertaining to Poe's melodramatic life, Pearl was interviewed in leading newspapers in the United Kingdom and the United States and thus able to promote his book.

More in the vein of occultism, in the years after Poe's death there were rumors claiming that the author's spirit posthumously tried to contact Sarah Helen Whitman, a woman with whom he was romantically involved in the last couple of years of his life. Whitman supposedly hired a psychic medium, Lizzie Doten, who published poetry she claimed Poe's ghost had dictated to her fourteen years after his death. More recently, efforts to vindicate Poe's reputation as an alcoholic have prevailed. In addition to wooing Whitman, Poe had a romantic liaison with the wealthy widow Sarah Elmira Royster Shelton, with whom he purportedly was engaged to be married in 1849 (Walsh 1999: 106–123). Based on rumors that Shelton's family opposed her plans to marry Poe, historian John Evangelist Walsh proposes that Shelton's three brothers went to Baltimore, restrained and plied a sober Poe with alcohol, dressed him in someone else's clothes to make him look like a victim of cooping, and left him in dire condition at the tavern, where Dr. Snodgrass later recovered him.

## THE POE TOASTER

Scott Peeples observes:

> *Scholars in recent years have been paying more attention to what might be called 'the Poe effect', the creation and maintenance of Poe's image, the various ways this image interacts with popular culture and with Poe's writing. As Mark Neimeyer puts it, 'the popular exploitation of Poe can be seen as adding another dimension to the element of the uncanny already present in the author's writings since these productions are all strangely Poe and not Poe at the same time' (222).* (2004: 126)

The mysterious Poe Toaster is one the most dynamic and performative aspects of the Poe Legend (the corpus of narratives pertaining to his life and works) and its effect on popular culture. The Poe Toaster began a ritual of toasting Poe at his grave on the night of January 19, Poe's birthday, and leaving an open bottle of cognac along with three roses. This ceremony has been recorded with some uncertainty back to 1949, the centennial of Poe's death (Society n.d.). It ended

in 2009, the 150th anniversary of Poe's death. Although there are numerous Poe performers (Ocker 2015: 25), who dress up as Poe and read his works or who act in Poe-inspired performances, such enacted performances are different from the spectrum of folklore dynamism surrounding the media-named Poe Toaster (Toelken 1996: 40–43). The Poe Toaster's annual ritual draws on the traditional perception of Poe as a man of mystery, death, and horror, by adding another layer of mystery to his name and death. The ritual's site is clearly significant: Poe's grave contains not only the great poet's earthly remains, but also his aura. Weirdly uncanny to modern sensibilities, he rests there with his wife/cousin and mother-in-law/aunt. As a cultural marker, the Poe monument is a tourist attraction and a highly visual landmark in Baltimore. A wooden engraving depicting its unveiling in 1875 shows a woman placing a wreath adorned with a raven on top of the monument, a rite that establishes a clear symbolic connection between the black raven, a bird often associated with wisdom, death, and graveyards in popular culture, and Poe, whose most famous poem is, of course, *The Raven* (Society n.d.).


***Figure 3.*** *Poe monument. Westminster Hall and Burying Ground, Baltimore, MD (https://transplantedtatar.com/2013/04/01/poe-amontillado-wine-tasting-201/).*

To this day, Poe's grave inspires feelings of eeriness and the occult in visitors. Blogs on the TripAdvisor website contain visitors' statements illustrating how the belief narratives about Poe, his fame, and the mystery surrounding his name are continuously reproduced and retold by visitors who do not have a scholarly interest in Poe's works, but who nevertheless make the pilgrimage to his gravesite. One person advises that "the best evening to visit is on Poes Birthday [*sic*]. Yes, spirits do come alive and yes, spirits do return!! The catacomb is the most unique, erie [*sic*] and spiritual realm where both Poe and Annabel are buried. Your emotions will be on Edge [*sic*]!" (TripAdvisor 2015). This writer confuses Poe's burial place with the nearby church catacomb, and Poe's wife Virginia with the titular character in his love poem *Annabel Lee*. Another visitor feels overwhelmed with the amount of information displayed on plaques: "Is it a grave? Is it a monument? Is it a memorial? There are several signs with way too much info about the site, which made it confusing. It's interesting though" (ibid.). Despite this apparent confusion, the visitor had reason to conclude that the gravesite is interesting and worth the effort to see. Confusion as to where Poe is buried is also part of the visitor experience:

> *There are 2 cemetery stones for Poe, one is memorial and* [the] *other is his grave site* [sic]. *The huge memorial stone is made from fan* [sic] *and community to honor him. If you want to check his actual grave site, it at* [sic] *around the building and his grave stone is old and normal. It was cool to see these*. (ibid.)

"Why is Poe so cool?" asks Ocker (2015: 30). The mystery surrounding Poe's name and his prominent position in both academics and pop culture make it both 'cool' and 'interesting' for visitors to revere his grave in Baltimore as one of the city's greatest tourist sites. The Poe Toaster, however, has not received much academic attention, but this shadowy figure is without doubt a central element in the Poe Legend's folkloristic appeal.

The stealthy, shrouded Poe Toaster has the characteristics of a sly folk hero, partly a trickster to the adoring crowds of Poe devotees, and partly a loyal fan to Poe's memory. The melodramatic performance of toasting Poe and leaving three red roses and the rest of the cognac at the monument has quasi-religious overtones that suggest a parallel to the symbolic role of sacramental wine in liturgical rites with the number three mirroring the holy trinity. The persistence of the ritual over fifty years contributes to its perceived authenticity. The anonymity of the Toaster has spawned its own set of rumors, including the suggestion that the identity is known by the Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore, and even that the Toaster ritual is enacted by a member of the Poe

Society. The Society vehemently denies these allegations, but nevertheless appears to be certain that the Toaster is a man, though not necessarily the same man over the years. The website explains:

> *A note left for Jeff Jerome* [curator of the Poe Society of Baltimore] *in 1993 stated somewhat cryptically that "the torch will be passed," and another note left in 1999 indicated that the original "Toaster" had died within a few months before the annual event. After 1993, sightings of the visitor suggested two younger persons were exchanging the obligation between themselves, presumably in honor of their father.* (Society n.d.)

Interestingly, the Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore seems to endorse this apparent family tradition of toasting Poe. In contrast, it regards recent Toasters, i.e. those appearing after 2009, as "faux Toasters":

> *As there is no authoritative body other than the person who appears to have originated the tradition, and those he has designated, and no such transfer of authority has occurred, all such attempts to restart a new tradition must be taken purely on their own merits.* (ibid.)

Numerous attempts have been made over the years to detain or photograph the Toaster. *Life Magazine* published a blurry picture of a male figure kneeling by the Poe monument in July 1990, but whether it actually depicts the Toaster has never been fully verified.

These activities and performances have become immersed in Baltimore's public profile as a unique tradition. Maryland Public Television has devoted a website titled *Knowing Poe* to the Poe Legend, complete with resources on Poe for schoolteachers and the general public. Here we learn:

> *One of Baltimore's spookiest traditions occurs every year on January 19, Poe's birthday, at the cemetery where the famous author is buried. A mysterious man steps out of the shadows at the Westminster Church Yard, wearing a black coat and hat, with a scarf covering his face. He stops at Poe's grave, and leaves a half-full bottle of cognac and three roses. Then he steals away into the darkness. No one knows who the man is or why he enacts this tribute to Poe year after year. Over time, he has simply become known as "the Poe Toaster," a reference to the toast (of cognac) that he seems to be offering Poe. The roses he leaves are believed to be in memory of the three persons buried at the site of the Poe Monument: Poe, Maria Clemm, and Virginia Poe.* (Knowing Poe 2002)

To put a broader perspective on the Poe Legend, the lionizing of Poe has a mythical structure in the sense that Michel de Certeau employs the term 'myth' to mean "a discourse relative to the place/nowhere of concrete existence" (1984: 102). The Toaster's symbolic ritual has become known for its media effect rather than for its ceremonial significance. It exoticizes a monument over a dead writer by charging it with mystery. As de Certeau points out, "stories … carry out a labor that constantly transforms places into spaces or spaces into places" (ibid.: 118). The Poe monument in Baltimore has become such a charged space. For Poe fans and tourists, it is a pilgrimage site. It is haunted not only by its own history, but also by the cultural imaginary surrounding Poe's name and legacy as a tragic figure, a brilliant writer who struggled against his own vices, his foes and demons, while the women he loved the most – his mother Eliza, his foster mother Frances Allan, and his young wife Virginia – died slow, painful deaths from tuberculosis.

## BELIEF NARRATIVES IN A NATIONAL CONTEXT

Poe's short, turbulent life and the strange circumstances of his death have fueled both academic and folkloristic narratives. Where the academic narratives mainly analyze his fiction biographically, as reflections of his life experiences, such as his upbringing as a foster child, life-long impoverishment, bouts of substance abuse, literary brilliance, and frustrated ambition, the folk narratives typically focus on dark romantic mysteries, especially his fascination with pale, dying women, and the personal losses he suffered. The academic studies and folkloristic belief narratives surrounding Poe's demise have many belief elements in common, which validate Linda Dégh's observation that "the legend is a legend once it entertains debate about belief. Short or long, complete or rudimentary, local or global, supernatural, horrible, mysterious, or grotesque, about one's own or someone else's experience, the sounding of contrary opinions is what makes a legend a legend" (Dégh 2001: 97).

Dégh's definition of a legend as a debatable narrative, one in which opposing beliefs and contrary points of view come into play in the dynamic *Spielraum* identified by Certeau, provides a meaningful framework for considering narratives about Poe's death. Other concepts from folklore studies are also helpful for understanding the Poe phenomenon. 'Urban legend' is a popular term, though really a misnomer, for the types of informal stories told as true about strange occurrences that happen in everyday situations. Folklore scholars refer to them as 'contemporary' rather than 'urban' legends because they do not always take place in an urban setting; however, since narratives about Poe's death in fact are situated in cities and specifically are reflective of the anxieties and desires

associated with urban living, the terms 'contemporary' and 'urban' are used interchangeably here. Diane E. Goldstein sums up the main tenants of contemporary legends:

> *They are told as true, factual, or plausible and therefore assume a level of authority; they provoke dialogue about the narrative events, their interpretation, and their plausibility; they both articulate and influence beliefs and attitudes towards the subject matter; and they have the capability of affecting the actions and behavior of the listening audience*. (2004: 28)

It is often assumed that only so-called ordinary people produce and believe in contemporary legends. This assumption leans on the romantic idea of the common *Volk* as generating a rich repertoire of oral narratives, which the discerning minds of scholars presumably are exempted from believing to be true. In reality, scholars partake in the folklore process by producing narratives, predominantly in writing, that are imaginative and legendary in nature, though often parading as erudite fact, or, at best, arguing an interpretative point.

The task of identifying the beliefs behind Poe's posthumous fame, however, is complex. Folk beliefs do not exist in a socio-cultural vacuum. Rather, they reflect social values and traditions over time. Alan Dundes reminds us that "the term 'folk' can refer to *any group of people whatsoever* who share at least one common factor…. A member of the group may not know all other members, but he will probably know the common core of traditions belonging to the group, traditions which help the group have a sense of group identity" (1965: 2, original emphasis). The folk groups (which include the academics that study Poe's works) invested in uncovering the cause of Poe's death are a motley crew; this article does not attempt to profile them other than to make two general observations: one, that they typically draw their inspiration from older traditions of Poe-lore (ostensibly in order to revise them, thus engaging in a dialogue with tradition) and, two, that they perceive Poe to be an emblematic figure in defining the American experience.

Concerns about national identity play a significant role in mapping the folk traditions surrounding Poe. In an insightful analysis of Poe's place in American letters, Scott Peeples traces how American critics have attempted to appropriate Poe as a national writer since the influential symbolist poet Charles Baudelaire's translations made Poe's works popular in France in the 1840s. Peeples explains that "by the 1870s it would become a truism among American critics and textbook writers that Poe was more appreciated in Europe than 'at home'" (2004: 10). Since then, efforts to Americanize Poe have been largely successful, for as J. W. Ocker records in his travelogue, *Poe-Land: The Hallowed Haunts of*

*Edgar Allan Poe*, Poe has become part of the urban literary landscape of every major American East-Coast city he ever set foot in, with statues, plaques, and busts of Poe prominently featured alongside other famous 19th century American writers like Washington Irving, Emily Dickenson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Herman Melville, Henry Thoreau, and Walt Whitman. Since Poe's literary works are rarely set in an American location and generally do not deal with specific American topics or characters identified specifically as American, the appropriation of Poe for the national literary canon suggests an 'invented tradition', a term developed by historian Eric Hobsbawn to describe practices "which seek to inculcate certain values and norms…, which automatically implies continuity with the past" (1983: 1). Poe never received such national recognition for his work in his own lifetime. His prominent place today in the libraries, educational institutions, and public places in major American cities alludes to a created 'deep' literary national tradition, which is essentially retrospective. Poe's biographer J. Gerald Kennedy believes that "part of the difficulty of situating Poe within an American tradition derives from the obstinate fact that his writing resists assimilation into the broad interpretive paradigms constructed to define our national literature" (1996: 534). Some critics see such resistance as uniquely American, "a shining example of American individualism" (Peeples 2004: 18). Others see Poe as an overrated eccentric on the literary scene. Renowned Anglo-American critic T. S. Eliot complained: "The variety and ardor of [Poe's] curiosity delight and dazzle; yet in the end the eccentricity and lack of coherence of his interests tire. There is just that lacking which gives dignity to the mature man: a consistent view of life" (1965: 35). The many interpretations of Poe's relative literary merit allow folklorists to identify a schism between high and low culture, and academic and popular culture, and to detect the tension it creates. Poe-lore draws its energy from this tension and from the continuous debates about Poe's place in American letters.

## CONCLUSION

From a folklore studies perspective, the posthumous appropriation of Poe as one of the greatest national writers reflects the way tradition (invented or otherwise) provides a national conceptual lens through which to view Poe. Simon J. Bonner observes:

> *Traditions do not carry the deep sense of a localized past as much as broad structural and aesthetic concepts that transcend group and national*

> *limits. In all the perspectives taken to envision American culture, folklore has been an instrument of grounding. It has consistently provided extra depth to the nation's shallow roots*. (2002: 63)

Bonner's analysis of tradition as providing a structural and aesthetic framework within which to filter the American experience can also be applied to understanding the way Poe has become appropriated by popular culture to signify something profound, deep, and unique about the nation. The Poe Legend may also reflect American anxiety about identity and place.

The legends revolving around Poe's death must take into account the emergence of the urban, industrialized mass society with its dizzying pace and alienating social spaces. Today, the folklore of famous people is intimately tied to the proliferation of mass media in virtual space and the social experience of urban space. Poe's literary works reveal great anxiety about the haunting experience of crowds, strangers, and alienation in the city. Significantly, belief narratives illuminate his death within the context of urban space and the gothic themes of his literary works. During his lifetime, Poe strove desperately for literary fame and economic success. Nevertheless, while achieving relative literary fame, in particular the widely circulated poem *The Raven*, and his short stories, Poe was haunted by ill fame and rumors about his personal conduct and addiction to drugs and alcohol.

Although contemporary legends often deal with the anxieties and desires of everyday life, a considerable body of folk narratives deals with famous historical people and the mysteries, rumors, and anecdotes ascribed to them. Such narratives often draw on the thematic and stylistic conventions of tales of the occult. Contemporary legends reflect the experience, anxieties, and mysteries of urban living, revealing psychosocial and sociological perspectives on gender, identity, and social status within specific urban environments. Poe's short, difficult life and mysterious death have fueled both academic and folkloristic narratives. By straddling literary and popular fame, Poe occupies a dynamic *Spielraum* in contemporary folklore because his haunted life and mysterious death, similar to the literary conventions for the gothic in literature, collapse 'high' and 'low' culture. The hegemonic boundaries separating literary scholarship and pop culture are contested in Poe-lore, which fuses everyday life with the mysterious and the uncanny. The folklore of famous people is intimately – perhaps even mysteriously – tied to the social experience of urban space, death, disappearance, and the haunting experience of city crowds, strangers, and alienation. In Poe's case, the intertwining of his fiction with his real-life struggles has made Poe scholarship the most biographically centered of any American writer, past or present, and produced Poe not only as a towering legend in American literature, but also as a legendary figure in the popular imagination.

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# FIELD NOTES

# IT IS A LIVING THING: AN ESTONIAN TRADITION BEARER AND SUPERNATURAL BEINGS CALLED *HALDJAD*

***Elizabeth Ann Berton-Reilly***

**Abstract:** A living example of Estonian traditional ways is a seventy-something Estonian-American woman who has kept alive the beliefs of her ancestors – all living things have a spirit, and their spirits are part of the Creator. This includes believing in the *haldjad*, or Little People. This ethnographic study demonstrates that many traditional beliefs with pre-Christian elements continue to be a way of living, even in modern America. The subject was born in Estonia during World War II, and later lived as a refugee in one of the American-run camps with her mother and three siblings from August 1945 to May 1950. Even though she was very young when she left Estonia, she inherited the traditional beliefs of her ancestors through her mother, beliefs that sustained her through the harsh displaced persons' camps and on to America. Her belief system includes the *haldjad*, whom she sees as her guardians and guides, who often manifest themselves as the Little People. Believing in the Little People is interwoven with the traditional Estonian belief system that everything is alive and sentient. She discusses the major differences in life philosophies between the conquering Germans and the Estonians, mainly how the German invaders emphasized domination over the land, as opposed to the Estonian peasants who worked with the land. She sees her worldview as being universal, especially in indigenous cultures, saying: "What we call the old religion is not a religion at all. It is simply a way of seeing life and living."

**Keywords**: Estonian, ethnography, *haldjad*, Little People, oral history, pre-Christian, tradition bearer, World War II

## INTRODUCTION

Johanna Keenan was born in Narva, Estonia, on June 14, 1941, the day that the Soviet regime deported ten thousand two hundred Estonians from their homes (Deportations). Keenan is a tradition bearer who came into a world of fear but has managed to retain her strong faith in the 'old ways'. (According to folklorist Peter Bartis, tradition bearers are people who "by virtue of their good memories, long lives, performance skills, or particular roles within a community, are often especially well qualified to provide information" (Bartis 2002 [1979]: 7).

Despite World War II, the subsequent displaced persons' camps she lived in as a child, and the assimilation process in the United States, Keenan has held onto a traditional way of life most of us have never heard of. This paper will address that way of life and how Keenan has kept it alive.

Integrated into the Estonian old ways are the *haldjad* or the Little People. Through extensive interviews and additional sources, I will demonstrate how this belief in the Little People, along with animism, is still an integral part of the life of at least part of the Estonian population. I interviewed Keenan on September 26, 2014, using Skype as our medium. I have had subsequent communications with her, via email, which are also included.

I have chosen Keenan as my interviewee because her case illustrates well how practicing a certain belief system can constitute a significant part of identity-building. Her experiences and insights shed light on her understanding of the traditional Estonian way of life along with Estonian World War II history.

Knowledge of the Little People in Estonia is common and the word *haldjad* (plural, *haldjas* singular) means guardian or tutelary spirit, or fairy, elf, etc. in Estonian. In their tradition, the *haldjad* can also change from corporeal to non-corporeal beings. The narratives about the *haldjad* are considered 'teaching tales'. Keenan states, "Everyone knows that they, the *haldjad*, are around us all of the time."[1]

## JOHANNA KEENAN

Keenan is a seventy-something-year-old Estonian American woman who follows the Estonian old ways. She was born in Estonia during World War II, and later lived as a refugee in one of the American-run camps (the Pond Barracks in Amberg, Germany) with her mother and three siblings from August 1945 to May 1950.

Prior to living in the camp, Keenan's father went missing in action. Her memories of this time are vivid, and despite the sadness and despair she faced, there was hope.

***Figure 1.*** *Johanna Keenan in 2008. Photograph from private collection.*

> *My father went missing in action in World War II, when I was three. I never really knew him, and so mother brought us up in her tradition. So that's why I know so much of this stuff. And she and I talked. I know that she talked about the old ways to all of us; I think I am the only one it took with.* (J. K.)

## ESTONIA: A FEW FACTS

Estonia is situated on the coast of the Baltic Sea, bordering Russia in the east, Finland (across the Gulf of Finland) in the north, and Latvia in the south. In the past, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, and Russia conquered this country countless times. The country stretches roughly 120 miles from north to south and is 150 miles wide, with forests still covering about 60 percent of the land. According to the viewpoint held by Keenan her people originally migrated from the northeast area of Siberia approximately eight to ten thousand years ago.

## ORAL HISTORY IN ESTONIA

Estonian culture has oral history and folklore deeply embedded in it. The documentation of oral history in Estonia began in 1888, when Estonian folklorist Jakob Hurt published the material he received from his public appeal, requesting all kinds of folklore and oral history. Thousands of pages of handwritten material were sent to him and Matthias Johann Eisen in the following years. Later on, as of 1909, the Estonian Literary Museum started organizing such material in a more systematic way. Unlike most museums, the archives contained Estonian oral and written histories (Hinrikus 2009). It is a museum, continuing to this day, storing archival material on folk traditions and oral history.

> *Throughout the Soviet occupation, it was safer for a memory institution to bear the name 'museum' rather than 'archive,' since archives were closed (or at least half-closed) institutions, where access and use of materials was subject to closer surveillance. Furthermore, people never completely trusted any Soviet institutions. During the Soviet era, efforts to collect memoirs – if they were at all successful – yielded texts with the 'proper' ideological slant. Conversely, the regime did not trust the people, and archives were closed even to those who wished to research family trees.* (Hinrikus 2009: VII)

After 1989, when the Soviet occupation had ended, it was once again safe to publish life stories. In the years 1988–1992, the Estonian Heritage Society, in collaboration with the museum, sponsored a heritage collection campaign drawing in about 2,000 manuscripts (Hinrikus 2009: VIII).

As can be seen by the amount of oral histories that have been and continue to be archived, this culture values oral history and folklore. Johanna Keenan, a tradition bearer in her own right, carries on this oral tradition by translating and eventually publishing her mother's memoirs.

## BIOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

Keenan comes from a long line of healers and tradition bearers. Her mother's family came from Hiiumaa, the second largest island in Estonia. Keenan explained the significance of the word Hiiu: "Hiiumaa simply means Hiiu Land, or land of Hiiu. One theory about the name is that it's a corruption of Hiie [hiis], which means sacred [forest]. Like the forest Mother grew up around which was called the Hiiemets or Hiie forest."

This was a sacred place and, at the time, a rather isolated island. The idea is that because her family originated in Hiiumaa, it was easier to become a tradition bearer. This could be in part because Hiiumaa is more isolated than the rest of Estonia. "People from Hiiumaa seem much stronger in their traditional ways than other areas. They were more isolated from outside knowledge and influence" (J. K.).

Keenan points out how her great-great-grandfather was a tradition bearer, and it had been passed down in the family to her great-grandmother, her grandfather, then her mother, and then herself. She states:

> *Mother's family was always considered outside the norm in the farm community they settled in. My grandfather was once described by a neighbor as having an incredible brightness of intelligence and soul / spirit. That's the only way I know how to translate the Estonian term.*

Although Keenan and her family originated from Hiiumaa, she was actually born in Narva, Estonia, very close to the Russian border. Her parents came from very different backgrounds. Her ethnically German father came from a family who were part of the landowning class. Her mother's family were Estonian peasants – *maa inimesed* – she explains, which means land people.

Keenan pointed out that her father's family viewed Estonians as no better than livestock. Consequently, when he wanted to marry an Estonian, his family disinherited him. Although Keenan's father's parents were nice to her mother, they never did reinstate his inheritance.

Keenan spoke affectionately about her mother throughout our interview. She mentioned how her mother was a sickly child, so instead of being brought up to be a farmer's wife she was sent to school to get an education. While in the city, her mother found that she could not fit into city life. However, when she returned to the country, the farm people no longer accepted her. Keenan feels that she has inherited this peculiarity from her mother. "I think I have always been with mother in that mindset, and I got the outlook of a person who has come from the land" (J. K.).

This inability to 'fit in' has affected Keenan most of her life. She explains that through her passion for reading, as she searched for other like-minded people in books. She found it through some writings such as those by the late Lakota writer, Vine Deloria Jr. Keenan states that "all of a sudden, reading his books, I found his was the same attitude toward the land, toward the spirits, toward everything else. It was like a parallel world, it was like wow, I am not the only one."

She mentions how a few years ago, her sister-in-law told her that the older she got, the more she was like her mother. She meant it as a compliment, and Keenan took it as one. She laughed out loud during our interview, when she explained that neither she nor her mother was 'civilized'. Keenan also said that her sister Mare, however, took after their father's family. Like siding with the victor, her sister "found her safety among the rich and the powerful. I find my safety as far away from the rich and powerful as possible. And mother was the same" (J. K.).

## THE WAR YEARS

The year before Keenan was born, in 1940, during World War II, the Soviets took over Estonia and the republic fell. By July 1941, Nazi Germany had re-conquered Estonia. By the end of 1941, the Soviets had deported some 11,102 Estonians to Siberia (Laar 2006). The Nazi regime forced Keenan's father to fight for them. The Germans finally fled in September 1944.

As noted before, Keenan was born on one of the largest deportation days in Estonian history – June 14, 1941. This day is considered a day of mourning for the Estonian people (Deportation). Keenan says:

> *In fact, my birth probably saved the family. The Russian soldiers came all across Eastern Europe on the night of June 14th, and they knocked on the door and you had time to get on some clothes and people were put into cattle cars and taken to Siberia. Anyway, mother went into labor early*

> *because of the rumors. And so we were in the hospital instead of home, where we were supposed to be. So that's what saved our lives at that time. My father didn't think we would be so lucky when they came back in 1944, and that's when we fled.*

In 1944, the Soviets started an offensive against the Germans. By then, there was much understandable fear of the Soviets, which continued throughout their presence. "After the return of the Soviet regime in 1944, those left in Soviet Estonia lived on with fear-complexes instilled by what had been lived through and (up to Stalin's death in 1953) the continued anticipation of terror and repressions" (Hinrikus 2009). It was from this environment that Keenan and her family fled. In fact, she states in the interview, "When the Russians came in '44 we had to flee. Both my parents were under death sentence from Stalin, because Stalin killed or sent to Siberia almost everybody who had an education or was any kind of position of leadership or power." Keenan further mentions that before World War II, her father was "the equivalent of an executive vice president in charge of personnel in a textile factory, in today's parlance. ... Mother graduated the top of her class from Tallinn's art academy [Estonian Academy of Arts]. His position was more important to the Soviets as a danger to be eliminated. I never saw my father again."

Keenan and her family fled to Wiesenthal, Czechoslovakia, then known as Sudetenland or Germany's East Window, a small town about 280 miles west of the Czech border. She elaborates:

> *We fled by ship from Estonia to some port in Poland, went from there by train to Czechoslovakia where they had some higher mountains, partly because of me. I had TB* [tuberculosis] *and the higher, dryer air was better for me. We lived there in a town named Wiesenthal (I don't think it exists any more) till early August 1945, when the war was over and we again fled the Russians to the American sector of Germany. A train took us to Amberg where we were placed in the DP camps.*

## 1945: POND BARRACKS CAMP

At the end of World War II, there were probably over eleven million refugees (displaced persons or DPs) from all over Europe. Due to fears of the Soviet regime returning, 70,000 Estonians fled to the United States, Canada, Australia, Germany, and Sweden (Hinrikus 2009).

The allies established refugee camps, which were mostly set up to give the refugees a place to live until relocation. These camps were places that offered food and shelter. (Despite this, sometimes there was not enough food to go around.) The conditions in camps were far from ideal and appeared to vary from camp to camp (Haukanõmm 2010).

In August of 1945, Keenan, her mother, and her three siblings reached the American-run Pond Barracks camp, an old German military camp located near Amberg, Germany. Keenan, who is an artist, describes the camp as follows:

> *Inside the DP camps everything was gray. It is the color of hopelessness and depression, probably very commonly seen that way. Apparently most all the people felt it though nobody talked about it. It was like living in a black and white movie. When we were allowed out of the camp, there was color; and more sharply so perhaps because inside it was so all-consuming.*

While in this camp, Keenan's mother did her best to provide a semi-normal existence for her children. When allowed, they would often take walks in the nearby woods, and while on these walks, Keenan would feel that the spirits there were calling her. She recalls a time where she found a cave in the woods:

> *One time, we walked to a different place and it was almost like a wide arroyo. There was a cave and I wanted to go into it because it was calling me. I wanted it so bad and they tried to explain to me that I couldn't go in because it was dangerous, and I said, 'No it isn't dangerous! I need to go in!' I don't know what was there but I needed to go in. And I still remember that mother had one of the men pick me up and throw me over his shoulder, and I'm going, 'Let me down! Let me down! I need to go in!' . . . I was probably five or six at most.* [Laughter] *Mother said I was always very stubborn. Ah man, I threw a temper tantrum like you wouldn't believe* [Laughter].

The story she tells demonstrates her faith: in the woods she always feels safe and protected.

Throughout her time at the camp, she mentioned that although she did not consciously think about the *haldjad*, she nonetheless felt protected. To emphasize this point, Keenan laughingly mentions how her mother used to say that it took two angels or guardian spirits to protect her daughter – it would be too difficult a job for just one.

## 1950: IMMIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES

In late May of 1950, through sponsorship of a Lutheran welfare organization, Keenan and her family immigrated to the United States – to Fargo, North Dakota. Prior to their arrival, her mother had taken the job of a cleaning woman in Minot, North Dakota. Unfortunately, while on board a ship en route, the man who would have been Keenan's mother's boss had an argument with a Latvian woman, and he exclaimed that he wanted "no more God-damned refugees" (J. K.). This of course led to a predicament – the Lutheran welfare people had no idea what to do with Keenan's family. In addition, since Keenan's mother spoke only Estonian, a little German, and some Russian, finding a job was difficult. Luckily, by January 1951, her mother landed a job as a stock clerk at Woolworths. Also fortunately, her boss spoke some German so they were able to communicate.

I enquired in the interview if her family was at all part of a larger Estonian community. Keenan mentioned that when they first arrived in Fargo, there were about sixty Estonians and that they would socialize with them. However, things went sour very quickly. Keenan speculates that as her mother was a widow raising four children, they were looking for excuses for not feeling any sense of responsibility for helping them. Hence, some of the Estonians in Fargo started a rumor that her mother was a "lady of the evening". She states, "You know when you are nine years old and you hear these things and realize that your own people reject you. You don't have the feeling that you really want very much to do with them. And I am afraid that I am still that way a lot."

The rejection did not end there, unfortunately. Keenan's mother applied for a job in New York State, but in order to take the job, she would have needed to borrow money, and she let the prospective employer know this via a letter and application. They waited over a year to hear back. Finally, after over a year (in which time the ad was still being posted) Keenan's mother found out that the woman whose desk her application had been on for over a year, had stated, "We're not in charity business" (J. K.).

This sense of isolation that her and her family felt in the United States was exacerbated by the fact that Keenan's mother was threatened several times by the welfare office that she would lose custody of her children if they were caught speaking Estonian, even at home. Her mother, who was in her forties when they immigrated to the United States, never mastered English. In fact, out of the three siblings, Keenan and her sister Mare are the only ones to have maintained fluency in Estonian. Keenan also mentions how none of their children (her son and her nieces and nephews) speak Estonian. She explains that after her mother died, she and her sister talked about translating her mother's diaries and memoirs:

> *I told my sister, 'Mare, you're older, your Estonian is much better than mine, you translate them.' But a few months later, I got the whole thing in the mail (she lived in Topeka and I lived in Denver), and I called her up and said, 'Why are you sending me this?' She says, 'You're going to have to translate. You and mother lived in the same world. I know about your world, but can never enter it.' So that was very good practice translating from the Estonian into English. And I have learned a lot out of it for myself. It's kept the language alive. And I do still read and write it.*

This living "in the same world" speaks volumes about the connections between Keenan and her mother. I asked Keenan if her sister was referring to the traditional beliefs here, and Keenan said yes, but it also included their life philosophy.

## ANIMISM AND KEENAN'S BELIEFS

"Mother's joke always was that Estonians go to church four times in their lives: to get baptized, confirmed, married, and buried. The rest of the time they live the old ways" (J. K.). A large part of Keenan's beliefs stems from instinct – she says she knows when she is safe and when she is not. Despite the dangers of living in the camps as a child, she would wander off in post-war Germany on occasion and scare her mother. "Mother said, 'Where have you been? I've been worried sick!' I said, 'But Mother, why were you worried? I knew I was safe.' And this is kind of a feeling that I have always had. I know when I am safe and when I am not" (J. K.). Part of her sense of safety in the woods stems from her seeing the sacred in everything and everyone.

> *There are no actual rituals that we practice, but it is that we try to do everything in a sacred manner. This to me means doing thoughtfully and thankfully, whether it is talking to you, walking in nature, turning a piece of wood, doing taxes, washing dishes, or taking out the garbage. All is sacred. There is no separation to sacred and profane. That means even us.* (J. K.)

Keenan describes her understanding of the overall philosophy of Estonian traditionalism. She states emphatically:

> *The old ways are simply a way of thinking and living life. Very like the Amerindians, the spirits are all around us and it is that which we honor. Essentially to walk your talk and have reverence for all life and try to keep in balance with all that surrounds you, that we as humans are the same as all other life, which, for us, includes what is usually considered inanimate life.*

Everything is alive, everything sentient is the crux of her belief system. She makes sure to note that not only the rocks and grasses are alive, but this belief system extends to machines as well. She elaborates by telling of her experiences of seeing when a machine does not like someone. "I have had experiences with machines that have liked somebody or don't like other people. You take the same machine and give it to somebody else and the reaction of the machine is totally different" (J. K.).

## A GENERATIONAL ELEMENT

Because Keenan comes from a family of healers and tradition bearers, I asked if she thought that this belief system was generational; i.e. do certain generations follow the old ways more than others do. She responded in the negative, and made sure that I knew that she was only talking about herself and her experiences: "No, I don't think the beliefs are generational. I was talking about how I learned. I do think they are more familial or regional. While every farm family probably believes/knows about the ways, some beliefs are much stronger than others."

## LOCALITY

I questioned Keenan about the *haldjad* narratives, asking if the narratives were found only in certain areas of Estonia. She answered that often they differed by areas, and then discussed the Estonian sacrificial stones, which are stones where offerings are sometimes left for the *haldjad* or Little People, and/or which are used for healing purposes (Tvauri 1999).

"There is one old way what is called the 'sacrifice stone', which sounds horrible, but it's a stone, usually natural, that has a slight indentation in the center. And there you always give food as a thank you. There are hundreds of them all over Estonia" (J. K.). As a fascinating side to this, students at one of the Estonian universities now burn their lecture notes on one of these stones after their exams (Bousfield 2011 [2004]).

## THE *HALDJAD*, ESTONIAN LITTLE PEOPLE

According to Keenan, the Estonians do not see the *haldjad* or Little People as good or bad per se; the emphasis is on how we treat them, what is in our hearts. This is in contrast to the Irish who (like many other cultures) distinguish between good and bad Little People.

> *To me there was just the certain knowledge that* [is how] *these things* [the haldjad] *were – the little spirits / people who could change their appearance and would often test you to see if you were of good heart or not. This usually happened in the forest. There were also stories of darker little people who tempted you to great riches in their underground kingdoms, but even there it became a test as to whether you were greedy or not, and how far you would go.* (J. K.)

This Estonian animist tradition ties directly into the Little People. They are spirits who many Estonians consider as teachers and guides. According to the Estonian traditional belief system the *haldjad* help people, especially children, to distinguish right from wrong. In addition to that, the Little People – the *haldjad* – test people to see if they are living in a traditional, respectful manner, "in the old ways; having respect, being helpful, willing to share what we have" (J. K.). She also mentions that when she does speak to the *haldjad*, she talks to them in either Estonian or English, depending upon what she is thinking about at the time.

In other cultural narratives, the Little People oftentimes wear the traditional clothing of that culture, and in some instances speak the traditional language. However, Keenan points out that as to Estonian culture, she does not know if this is the case. Instead of traditional clothing, the Estonians see the *haldjad* as "ragged and often dirty" (J. K.).

In order to gain insight into the Little People in Estonian lore, it is important to know that the word *haldjas* has a dual meaning. Keenan explains to me that the word *haldjas* means both a spirit and Little People. She explains that "there is no differentiation between the spirit world and the world of the fairies or the Little People. And this is just such common knowledge that you don't even think about it".

## NARRATIVES OF *HALDJAD*

Keenan mentions how there are many stories that have a similar theme. Belief in the Little People is interwoven with the Estonian belief system, not something seen as separate. According to Keenan, Estonians see the Little People as alive and real. Nature in its entirety is seen as sentient, and the *haldjad* are part of it.

> *As Mother told us, the spirits / Little People responded to whoever was there. They could change form and often tested people who entered their realm. If you were found wanting you came to harm; if not, they opened their coffers and powers to you.* (J. K.)

Not much has been written about the Estonian old ways until very recently. Keenan states as an explanation, "Mother used to say, 'What Estonians hold most dear, they are most quiet about'." There is the fear of someone taking their beliefs and using them against them. Their very soul would be robbed.

She goes on to emphasize that the narratives of the *haldjad* are teaching tales passed down from one generation to another. They are tales of how to conduct oneself and of what happens if one is not respectful of others or nature. To emphasize, Keenan tells the story of the three brothers:

> *Two brothers are highly intelligent, aggressive, and the father sends them on an errand where they have to go through the forest. The oldest one goes and there is a man lying down and he's hurt. The first son walks past without ever looking at him. A little bit later, he comes across a woman who asks for a crust of bread because she's starving. (These are actually Little People in disguise). He says, 'Oh, you old hag, why don't you go and earn your own bread?' and goes on. Well, he gets stuck in the forest somewhere and he never can get done what he is supposed to do. The second brother has basically the same experience. When neither one comes home everybody gets worried. The third brother, who is considered a simpleton, is different from the others; he is not aggressive. He keeps asking his father to go and finally the father says 'go, go, go!' And so he comes to the hurt man, and helps the man. And makes sure that he is ok, and he takes some of his food and gives it to the man and then he goes on and meets the woman. And he gives her not only a crust of bread but the rest of the bread that he has. And everything goes well for him. They both bless him, and whatever he needs is given to him almost before he thinks to even ask for it. And he is able to accomplish the deed, and he is usually able to free his brothers. And they all can go home.*

A significant theme in this narrative, which reflects traditional Estonian views, is that the family sees the sensitive brother as a simpleton and usually dismisses him. However, he is inevitably the one who has the deepest connection to the *haldjad*. "He is the one who is in touch with the real, with the gentle, the caring side of us" (J. K.). This dichotomy illustrates the division between the old ways (as being simple-minded) and the new ways as being more sophisticated and aggressive.

## WHAT *HALDJAD* MEAN TO KEENAN

Keenan sees the *haldjad* as being her guides as well as her guardians. "As guiding spirits, the Little People play an integral part of my life" (J. K.). To her, it does not matter if they are spirits or corporeal beings; what matters is treating them with respect. I asked her about having set rituals – such as putting out a bowl of cream like the Irish do – and she responded in the negative. "I'm not required to do exacting rituals to appease them. They understand my heart and ritual is usually a dead thing" (J. K.).

She goes on to emphasize how she views ritual as a product of trying to duplicate a numinous experience:

> *For example, someone has a numinous experience, finds it wonderful and wants to repeat it. So he tries to remember exactly what he did before the experience, and keeps duplicating it, thinking that will get him there. After a time, the ritual of trying to relive the numinous experience becomes standardized and that is eventually all that remains. The experience itself becomes a miraculous happening which is impossible to attain by mortal man and so mostly forgotten.*

Instead of formal rituals, her experiences are much more spontaneous when she least expects them.

> *Sometimes it's the incredible beauty of the color of the sky, or… seeing a hawk driven off by a sparrow, when I had just been defeated by the system and needed courage. These times are as clear to me as the day it happened; there is a tightening of my chest to the point that it almost hurts and tears in my eyes from the wonder of it.* (J. K.)

Along with a lack of set rituals, Keenan also emphasizes that she does not have personal experiences with the *haldjad* in the traditional sense of the word. Instead of seeing the Little People, as others have in other traditions, it is more

of a feeling of safety in nature. This feeling has continued throughout her life. She mentions that when she lived in Denver a few years back, she used to hike in the mountains and never felt afraid. "I have always felt that I was being watched over and cared for. And that I wasn't afraid of the animals, that I knew that I was ok. And this is from the time I can remember" (J. K.).

Keenan said that the Estonian farmers do have rituals that demonstrate the traditional belief system, especially that of giving back to nature. They had special days of the year, like when the first crops would come in. Estonian farmers treated these crops differently than others, and it was expected that some of it would be returned to the land. "The whole idea was you normally planted three times what you expected to harvest. 1/3 was for you, 1/3 probably wouldn't grow, and 1/3 would be for the birds and the other animals, the wild" (J. K.).

Giving back to nature is also an important value passed down to Keenan. She mentions that whenever her grandfather needed to cut a tree down, he would talk to the tree, thanking it, and make sure that he planted three trees for each one he had cut down.

Another strong aspect of her belief system is being flexible in life. She gives a tale of an oak tree and a blade of grass, which her mother had told to her as a child. This story illuminates the importance of not only flexibility, but also that size does not matter.

> *The oak tree was always looking down at the blade of grass and saying, 'You down there, look how weak you are, look how insignificant you are. When the wind blows, you get blown down, and when it rains you almost drown with the water,' and this went on for a long time. Then one night there was a storm, and the wind blew and the rain came; it was an incredible storm. The oak tree got blown around, the blade of grass got totally mashed into the soil, and the oak tree kept laughing. 'Look at you!!! Look at you, look at you ha-ha!' Then came a tremendously strong gust, and the oak tree broke and went down. After that rain and the storm went over, the blade of grass stood up, but the tree never did. And I think that this is kind of an attitude that you live with, you know you're little; you're insignificant, that you have to bend, you have to accept the thing that comes and not try to fight always. Because fighting you're going to break, and bending you will survive to live again.* (J. K.)

This narrative also illustrates the Estonians' survival of 700 years of slavery, and both Nazi and Soviet regimes. According to Keenan, the Estonian people, by sheer determination and flexibility in the circumstances, were able to outlive the 'oak' of tyranny.

## THE ROLE OF LITTLE PEOPLE IN KEENAN'S ART

One of the roles that the *haldjad* play in Keenan's life is manifest in her art. Keenan is an amateur sculptor and also uses other artistic mediums. She finds that the *haldjad* play a definitive role in her inspiration. When she begins work at a sculpture, she has no idea what she will create, she simply feels guided by the *haldjad*. "Nothing exists at this point except my hands and the clay. I feel the sculpture comes through me rather than from me. After the initial forming, I come back to myself and it is a matter of eye and hands/tools to refine the form" (J. K.).

## KEENAN'S BELIEFS AND HER CONNECTION TO HER PAST

Keenan's beliefs connect her to her Estonian past as well as tie into her family's future. "Absolutely, the belief system connects me to the land and my ancestors. Remember, the old ways are simply a way of thinking and living. It is not a religion" (J. K.). Keenan mentioned that when her son, niece, nephew, and great-nephew went to Estonia last summer, her son, niece, and her great-nephew felt very connected to the people and the land. They were home. However, her nephew seemed not to connect at all, nor did he seem to feel anything other than a superior stranger's interest, especially in the old churches; he wore T-shirts with Christian logos. Keenan stated, "He was and remained an outsider, even to the family there."

Keenan went on to discuss how these old ways have been passed down to a new generation, even though there was no conscious teaching of that knowledge. "I think I taught much like Mother taught me, just by the way I loved and related to others" (J. K.). Keenan's ex-husband took her son Bear from her when he was a little boy. According to Keenan, his father tried to bring him up as a Catholic, but never succeeded. When her son was in his teens, a Southern Ute elder adopted him, and he is practicing their ways, which is a parallel tradition to the Estonian old ways.

Keenan's niece, in learning touch healing, is also learning the old ways on her own, often talking to Keenan, trying to find answers to the questions she has. Once when Keenan talked to her nephew about there being much more in the world other than just the narrow vision of Christianity, he answered that he had chosen the box of being a minister and did not want to think outside of that.

## KEENAN AND ESTONIANS TODAY

To answer the question about with whom Keenan discusses her belief system, she says that she does not talk much to others about what she believes. In fact, it is rare that she shares her beliefs with anyone. She recalls that when she did in past talk to people about it, she got a look that said she was ready for the loony bin.

> *This is not an acceptable idea in today's culture, though I wish it were. I think then elders would be much more respected and not written off as just old people who need to be put in places where they are not seen or heard; when quality of life becomes more important than its length.* (J. K.)

She explains further:

> *I tried very hard to believe* [in Christianity] *but it did not take, I was too old when I came to it. And so my outlook on life – it's about like a city slicker and a farm hand trying to have them have a conversation, to understand each other. They really speak a different language. There is no communication.*

However, recently she spoke about her beliefs to a young man who was her client (she works as a tax accountant):

> *It's like today; a young man (mid- to late 40s) came to get some tax things done and as often happens with him we started talking. I shared, not necessarily talking about Little People, but ideas that I live by. He surprised me several times by telling me that I'd given him definite ideas as to how he should direct his energy and thinking, of how he also was afraid of sharing his thinking with others as he'd gotten ridiculed so often. I do believe that I helped him, gave him courage and some new ideas to think about. I feel very good about that. I think this is what I need to do – share some ideas and listen to whether there is a receptive spirit. I think there are many people searching for something, but don't even know what it is they search for. I can remember when too rarely someone was a light for me; how important it was that they trusted me enough to share their thoughts.* (J. K.)

When asked if her interactions with the *haldjad* are the same as those of other Estonians, she stated that she has no idea how other Estonians relate to them. She said her mother and grandfather had raised her this way. However, her siblings wanted to become Americanized completely and ignored the old ways. When she did try to discuss the old ways with her siblings, she found that their viewpoints were radically different.

However, by talking to one of her cousins in Estonia in 1988, Keenan was able to see her belief system as a way of life.

> *One of my first cousins said, 'You know, we wanted rid of the Russians, not for political reasons,' (because Estonians are very apolitical)… 'We want rid of them because they are destroying the land. Without the land there is no life.' All of the sudden I knew: what we call the old religion, is not a religion at all. It is simply a way of seeing life and living.* (J. K.)

## GERMANY AND ESTONIA

Keenan discussed the major differences in life philosophies between the conquering Germans and the conquered Estonians. She said the German Teutonic Knights came to Estonia in 1209 and it took 75 years to conquer the land. They never did Christianize it. She said that the Roman senator and historian Tacitus, in the first century CE, wrote about the Estonians (he called them the Fenni), explaining the Romans' fear of going into those barbaric woods containing wild animals and people who were astonishingly savage and disgustingly poor, and were wearing animal skins:

> *They have no proper weapons, no horses, no homes. When they went hunting, they pulled their children and old people in slings up into the trees, and the women hunted right alongside of the men. I mean, can you imagine that? And he says that the people are so content that they do not need to pray for anything.* (J. K.)

The Germans, Keenan states, also fear the deep forests. This is because Germanic peoples originated from the Russian steppes with no forests. In the interview, she recalls:

> *It really was brought home to me by my great-nephew's story. He went with his mother, my niece, and my son to Estonia. When they went to the islands where my family originated, Hiiu Island, there was a road and there were solid trees, 75–80 feet tall on both sides. He got so scared that he was claustrophobic, because he'd grown up in North Dakota, on the plains. He could not handle the forests.*

Keenan explains that some Estonians, instead of embracing the old traditional ways, tend to relate to their victors. Plenty of this has to do with the environment an Estonian comes from. "It is the farm people mostly that pass the stories down. The people who moved into the city tried, we call it, to become Germanified.

Because when you have a people above ruling you, you try to emulate them" (J. K.). A large part of this behavior is based on survival, Keenan explains, and continues that as parents give their children more Germanic names, the children are more likely to blend in and have a better chance in life.

## KEENAN'S COMMENTS ON OTHER WORLDVIEWS

Keenan discusses how the most profound difference between the Estonian old ways and Christianity reflects in people's view of the land. She mentions how Estonians traditionally work with the land, and in Western societies (mostly in Christianity) there is an attitude of dominating the land. This idea of domination also extends to what they view as lesser beings than them, be it other people or animals. Her way, she explains, is profoundly different.

> *In my ways I have to try to understand the land and respect it, and share the gifts of the earth with those around me, whether human or animal. The 'new' way says that I don't have to bother understanding anything and that I have the right to take whatever I feel I want, no matter how it affects everything around me.*

Keenan makes further connections between belief systems and how we treat the earth. For instance, in the traditional ways, the biggest sin is not a matter of not properly following a dogma, but that of waste. Her belief system is about harmony – living with the earth and living in balance with nature. She explains how in Estonia today wild animals still live in the woods – bears, wolves, deer, elk, bobcats (i.e. lynx) – in harmony with people. Very rarely are there any confrontations.

> *Now, part of what is being done is, on every road that cuts through the country, there are wilderness copses on either side, every kilometer one is on one side and one is on the other side, so it's almost like a corridor for the animals to go from one place to another.* (J. K.)

Her younger brother, Karl, was a preacher who wanted to 'save' the Mandan Native people of North Dakota. He once said to Keenan, "I know that you have done a lot of studying of the old ways… How did the Estonians learn to live with Christianity and the old ways together?" And Keenan responded, "Well, you can't. The two ways are irreconcilable. One says to live over the land and the other says to live with the land. We have the veneer of Christianity but live the old ways." Keenan then emphasizes her point by saying, "I think that this is all to do with the spirit world and the fairies and all that. It's a living thing."

She also mentions an article she read in 1997, which said that despite such wild animals as bears and wolves in the forest, very rarely is there a problem with people and these animals in Estonia. She describes how an American visiting Europe did a study of wolves killing people in Finland. According to his study, there have been seventy-five instances of wolves killing people in a hundred years. "And in every case there was a man with a gun. Every one! A man with a gun! There were no children, no women, just men with guns, hunting" (J. K.). This could be seen as an example, like the *haldjad*, of the fact that by respecting the creatures in the forest you will be okay, but if you do not, you could be killed.

## VISITING ESTONIA IN 1988

In 1988, Keenan and her older sister, Mare, visited Estonia. It was 44 years since they had fled. There was some trepidation from family members, who were worried that the Russians would keep them there. Russia did not recognize expatriation, even though they were both American citizens. However, Keenan was not worried. She explains, "Our family was so scared, what if they kept us? And I figured two middle-aged women who weren't of any importance at all; why would Russia create an international incident over somebody like us?" This statement she made is another example of her deep sense of safety – she knew intuitively that they would be safe in Estonia.

While in Estonia, she visited her grandfather's farm with her cousins, which at the time was illegal. She explains that her sister did not go for that very reason, but she did, and she was glad she did.

> *My sister didn't dare go, but I did.* [Laughter] *And it was nice, it was really nice. I didn't remember any of it* [the farm]*, because I blocked my memory of the first four years of my life. But it all felt right. My body remembers, even though my mind does not.* (J. K.)

## KEENAN'S COMMENTS ON OTHER ESTONIAN PRACTICES

Keenan gives a cultural context to the Estonian traditional belief system. She sees her worldview as being universal, especially in so-called primitive societies. She emphasizes this point by mentioning meeting a woman from England recently, who shared some of her beliefs regarding the land "and its manifestations" (J. K.).

> *I think this is very alive in most all 'primitive' cultures, no matter if it's in the Americas or Asia or Africa. Where life is simpler and technology has not intruded as much. Of course there are always people from these cultures who see the possibilities for power in the new and attempt to use that to gain power for themselves. Maybe that is the difference between the two. Our old ways discourage power over others, whereas the newer ways encourage it. We had the equivalent of the Lakota peace chiefs. We called them village elders. The only real power they had was that of persuasion. It was more a place of responsibility where the elder must find ways of helping all the people of the village/community, mostly by his own example, but often out of his own pocket.* (J. K.)

## ANIMISM IN ESTONIA TODAY

Keenan is not alone in her beliefs. According to the article, "Some Estonians Return to Pre-Christian Animist Traditions", by Ellen Barry, there is a resurgence of the traditional belief system in Estonia. Barry explains that in 2008 a group of people visited the famous Witch's Well (a sinkhole) in Tuhala, Estonia, when it erupted. "Geologists believe that after flooding rains, underground water pressure builds to the point that water shoots up out of the ground, usually for a few days" (Barry 2008). This transpired after three years of being silent (ibid.).

The Witch's Well of Tuhala got its name from a legend, according to which the Tuhala witches were taking a sauna underground. By whisking themselves with birch branches (which is a traditional practice), they caused quite a commotion. Every few years, this sinkhole erupts. When it does, it lasts a few days and people from all over Estonia travel to see it (ibid.).

Regardless of the reason, it demonstrates that some of these beliefs are still very much alive in Estonia. One woman, who was interviewed for that article, put it succinctly (and not unlike Keenan): "'Estonia is full of natural magic,' said Mari-Liis Roos, 37, a translator who had come to Tuhala with her husband and son. 'It's hard to describe. Sometimes you don't want to explain these things, because it is so personal'" (ibid.).

According to Kathryn Rountree, in her article, "Neo-Paganism, Native Faith and Indigenous Religion: A Case Study of Malta within the European Context", *Maausk* (the traditional pre-Christian Estonian religion) is making a comeback. "Embracing Maausk is a strategy for asserting a locally distinct ethnic identity alongside a fairly new pan-regional identity as a member of the European Union, to which Estonia was admitted in 2004" (Rountree 2014).

## CONCLUSION

Through the world war, camps, immigration to the United States, and finally settling in a small town in New Mexico, Keenan has held steady to her traditional beliefs. She sees them as a way of life and a way of being. Her faith, and the faith of the Estonian tradition bearers, has taken them through one dictatorial regime after another into the 21st century.

Today, Keenan is much happier and there is a community of people who love her. Instead of simply being told that she is 'weird', the people in her life today celebrate her wisdom. In the past, she explains, she felt that she had to be silent. "My mother said that she has never known a human being as silent as I was. I learned to be silent because, hey! It gets old being told you're weird" (J. K.). Thankfully, for the rest of us, she no longer has to be silent.

> *Maybe the most important thing that's happening here is that I am actively thinking and feeling the ways of my people and the spirits. That it feels safe and good to share them. I tended to live as a hermit much of the time, thinking that I am very alone. It was scary to talk of my past and my ideas. But as the old saying goes, if not me, then who?* (J. K.)

Very significantly, many elements of this belief system survived centuries of the onslaught of various tyrannies. The Estonian traditional people, like Keenan, have gone through one political and religious metamorphosis after another, and yet are still able to hold true to their beliefs. Despite all the other outside influences, there is still a deep reverence and respect for the land, as well as these ancient beliefs. Perhaps, in the end, the Little People still prevail.

## NOTE

[1] Hereinafter, all the citations originate from personal communication with Johanna Keenan and are given word for word, including slips of the tongue. Her initials are added only where not explicitly understood from the text that these are her words.

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# NEWS IN BRIEF

## ABOUT THE LINKS BETWEEN PHRASEOLOGY AND PSYCHOLOGY AT AN INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF LINGUISTICS

On April 7–10, an international conference of linguistics, Slavofraz 2016: Phraseologie und (naive) Psychologie, took place in Austria.

The conference venue was Graz, the second largest town in Austria and also a university town. The second oldest of the universities, Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz, currently enrols about 30,000 students, making it the second largest in Austria after the University of Vienna.

The organiser of the conference was the Institute of Slavic Studies, established in 1811, which makes it one of the oldest of the kind in German-language cultural space. Besides Russian, mainly South Slavic languages are taught, above all, for historical and geographical reasons.

It was the first time that scholars from different countries assembled under the name of Slavofraz. The idea was born in Ljubljana a few years ago, as a kind of equivalent to Europhras, the international society of phraseology. It was decided to organise the first Slavophraz in Graz as Agnieszka Bedkowska-Kopczyk and Heinrich Pfandl from the Institute of Slavic Studies agreed to take it upon themselves.

Slavofraz 2016 opened with a round table discussion, moderated by Peter Grzybek (Graz), with scholars from different countries as participants: Agnieszka Bedkowska-Kopczyk (Graz), Natalya Bragina (Moscow), Wolfgang Eismann (Graz), Valery Mokienko (St Petersburg), and Alexei Shmelev (Moscow). The main topics focused on the concepts and theories announced as keywords of the conference: how are psychology and cognitive processes connected in phraseology; what is the role of popular naïve theories and is this approach justified; where is the line between naïve and scientific etymology; relations between physiology and psychology on the example of figurative language, etc.

I would like to highlight the topic discussed by Wolfgang Eismann, professor emeritus from the University of Graz, who, on the basis of German cultural space, explained the contradictions that appear when trying to find equivalents to terms; so, for example, it is difficult to translate the German term *Völkerpsychologie*, as the English term *folk psychology* is misleading. The research object of *Völkerpsychologie* is Hegelian *Volksgeist* (another German term for which is *Volksseele*). In terms of phraseology it is supposed to mean that the psychological motivation of idioms and proverbs in different languages is common, yet the imagery is individual. Eismann also pointed to the opposing viewpoints from different periods (e.g. Kleinpaul), according to which people as such cannot understand the existence of *psyche*, and actually everything is included in the deep structures of the language, which finds the most expressive manifestation in proverbs and idioms.

During the three conference days, about 60 scholars from 16 countries took the floor. Most of the presentations took place in parallel sections. The presentations can generally be divided into two: the linguistic expression of, on the one hand, the concepts such as *psyche* (*soul*, *dusha*) or physiological processes related to feelings and emotions, and,

*Round table discussion: (from the left) Peter Grzybek, Valery Mokienko, Wolfgang Eismann, Agnieszka Bedkowska-Kopczyk, Natalya Bragina, and Alexei Shmelev. Photograph Anneli Baran 2016.*

on the other hand, that of intellectual ability, including the opposites clever/stupid, in phraseological units. An attempt was made, by drawing on linguistic corpora and other linguistic collections, to analyse, above all, the proportion of naïve psychology in figurative language units. It was repeatedly mentioned, though, that dictionaries and everyday language use are two different things. Most of today's people know nothing about the etymology of set expressions and therefore use them as everyday linguistic forms. It has been found that in different languages expressions based on emotions are interpreted quite differently, depending on age, education, gender, etc. The scholars who up to now have been studying mainly literary sources and dictionaries repeatedly stated that more attention should be paid to the usage of phraseology in everyday speech, including communication in the internet environment. Those interested in the topic can find the conference programme with abstracts at http://slavofraz.uni-graz.at/de/konferenz/.

The conference in Graz provided a good opportunity for the assembling and a joint seminar of the new working group, *Meteo-Prognostic Paroemias*, established last autumn. The seminar brought together researchers from Austria, Slovenia, and Estonia, whose field of studies covers weather sayings, which have their role in different languages even today. Unfortunately, there is no systematic approach to this kind of paroemias today, and terminology creation and classification are especially confusing.

The working group is aimed, above all, at advancing the studies, by assembling scholars investigating this field, organising seminars and conferences, publishing research results, etc. The next meeting of the working group will take place at the Estonian Literary Museum in Tartu, Estonia.

Anneli Baran

## INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ABOUT THE POWER OF WORD IN TARTU

On April 25–27, 2016, the Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore of the University of Tartu and the Department of Folkloristics of the University of Helsinki organised an international symposium under the heading *Word Power*, which focused on the aspects related to magic word and, more extensively, study of word use. Traditions related to word magic and the power attributed to the word have, for many years, been in the centre of interest of several disciplines, such as folkloristics, ethnology, anthropology, theology, and linguistics. In the course of time, research focuses have changed and shifted; for example, approaches concentrating on structural elements, performativity, and more general usage context have been applied.

The symposium organised in Tartu, Estonia, was remarkable for its interdisciplinarity and comprehensiveness. The speakers were aware of the fact that, when discussing the magic word, it is pointless and also impossible to view its supernatural, empirical, social, poetic, and rhetoric facets separately, as they are closely intertwined. So the presentations highlighted the mutual impact of language, folklore, mentality, emotions, and literature in the evolution of oral traditions.

Lotte Tarkka's keynote speech about Karelian incantations and songs was convincing and well presented. Tarkka noted that in order to better understand incantations, it does not suffice to read the preserved texts but knowledge of a wider context is needed; for example, the reasons that made people use them as such. The uttering of incantations was usually caused by a concrete situation, and the incantation in turn influenced the further progress of the given situation. Curses, for instance, were used to contact supernatural forces in order to gain magical power, while on the other hand they worked as a rhetorical weapon against the listener. Tarkka pointed out that, according to belief, aggressive incantation might have exerted adverse influence even on an occasional listener. Therefore, in the case of word magic, belief, models of social intercourse, and presentation practices intertwined (and still do), and poetic speech can be both a means for organising human relationships and for channelling problems arising inside the community. Tarkka's ideas about words as influencers of the world's operating systems were linked to Eva Toulouse's presentation about the speech of Yuri Vella, a Nenets reindeer herder and poet. The speaker described how Vella, a representative of the traditionally quiet Nenets, acquired eloquence not inherent in this ethnos, and polished it to perfection, in order to forward his message as effectively as possible, in different non-traditional contexts (e.g. in communication with oil magnates or folklorists).

Two more presentations were dedicated to Nenets culture. Karina Lukin introduced Nenets narration strategies, the alteration of the third-person speech and narrating from the viewpoint of the experiencer as a means of achieving poetic convincingness. Laur Vallikivi described the changes that occurred in the Nenets' language use after their conversion to Christianity, illustrating how religious reformation often inevitably brings along the acquisition of new speaking manners.

Quite a few discussions concerned the role of silence in language use – sometimes lack of words can be rather eloquent. This topic was linked with the keyword speech of James Kapaló about hidden words. Traditionally, plenty of magic and religious knowledge has been regarded as secret; also, throughout times, states have had their secret services,

secret files, and other hidden information. In order to navigate in today's virtual world, each of us needs a secret personal password. The speaker also discussed, in light of the ideas of Focault, Bourdieu, and other theoreticians, some critical problems associated with the communicative power of secret words.

The relationships between secret words and rituals were also discussed by Ergo-Hart Västrik on the example of the cult of Setos' Peko, and by Margaret Lyngdoh on the basis of name taboo beliefs in Khasi belief narratives in India. Elo-Hanna Seljamaa's presentation about forbidden love and child killing, based on an Estonian folksong *Mareta's Child*, is also connected with taboos and popular ways of their verbalisation.

Several speakers referred, while discussing the representative and ideological nuances of language, to the theory of speech acts. Laura Siragusa showed, on the example of Vepsian folklore, how spatial and temporal perceptions are combined with specific ways of speaking. Jonathan Roper in his keynote speech discussed vernacular theories about right and wrong name forms in traditional songs (e.g. the dilemma lord Donald *versus* lord Roland) on the basis of material collected on Newfoundland. The speaker maintained that even in the same language words do not denote the same things for all people; they can be related to different experiences; for example, words of the same domain can be connected with establishing the truth, hiding, or distorting it.

The first day ended by a film screening by Rajat Nayyar about an initiation rite in India. Once again the audience had to declare that, without explanations, what is self-evident in one culture is often incomprehensible for someone from another culture.

The second day continued with more presentations. Aleksi Moine's paper about Finnish charms was interlarded with a number of fascinating examples. Moine pointed out that healers, in order to add authority to their words, often ascribe them to supernatural beings, saying, for example, "I do not speak with my own mouth, I speak with the Creator's mouth!" In the same way, incantations might describe the accompanying activity, claiming that the healing ritual is performed with the hands of the Creator. On the one hand, such use of words adds to the power of the charm; yet, on the other, the healer evades the responsibility in case of failed treatment, referring to the Creator's will not fathomable for human beings. Kati Kallio's presentation also drew on Finnish material, dealing, based on the theories of linguistic anthropology, with the role of poetic language as carrier of ideologies, identities, and beliefs, both among the elite and common people. Kallio referred to the Lutheran reformers of the 16th century, who, in the beginning, tried to avoid the use of Kalevala-meter in hymns; yet, by the early 17th century some of its elements had already been introduced. Therefore, the verse itself was not regarded as condemnable and 'pagan' anymore; rather, it was inacceptable to use it in charms.

Frog's research explored, on the basis of Finno-Karelian long incantations, words as material objects, often described not as means of communication but rather as a tool. Also, some lore texts indicate that an incantation can be owned by only one person – as if it is a physical object. A certain transition from a word to an object can also be seen in rituals, in which the healer utters the incantation above water and the patient drinks the water as a substance enriched by the power of charm.

In conclusion it can be said that the conference achieved its purpose, enabling substantial discussions about the power of word and suitable theoretical research frameworks, comparison of research results, and outlining new perspectives.

Reet Hiiemäe

## CONFERENCE ON CULINARY CULTURE AT THE ESTONIAN LITERARY MUSEUM

The project titled *Communication Styles: Developing a Cross-Cultural Theoretical and Methodological Framework*, signed between Estonian and Polish Academies of Sciences, aims at an in-depth investigation of the subtopic of folkloric creativity, namely its expression in language, and intends to describe, comparatively, the elements of communication styles in different cultures. The launch to the three-year project, lasting from 2016 until 2018, was given by a small conference on culinary culture, which took place at the Estonian Literary Museum on May 2, 2016. The conference organised within the project between Estonian and Polish Academies of Sciences and in cooperation with the Bulgarian and Belarusian Academies of Sciences focused on foodways and their expressions in communication.

The conference brought together researchers from Poland, Bulgaria, Belarus, and Estonia, who presented interdisciplinary accounts on the topic. Linguists, experts in cultural studies and folklore, ethnographers and philologists got engaged in a discussion about how food affects meaning and vice versa.

The inherent untranslatability of food-related terms was the topic of the presentation given by Dr Władysław Chłopicki, who pointed at the (often unintentional) humour in restaurant menu translation. Cognitive linguist Dr Ene Vainik followed up on a similar topic and analysed insightfully how taste terms are used in relation to emotion, in particular to describe emotions (bitter for anger, sweet for love). Tracing the etymologies of these words in Estonian, she confirmed that these are examples of metaphorical mapping from the cognitive domain of taste to that of emotion. Two papers addressed cookbooks as ideological literature: Drs Ester Bardone and Anu Kannike talked about vegetarian diet in the early 20th-century Estonia, and Liisi Laineste examined more recent cookbooks where former first ladies of the state presented Estonian cuisine to the foreign readers – complete with its fascination with mushrooming, berry picking, and other deeply rooted traditions. Dr Dorota Brzozowska's presentation touched upon the cultural meaning of food consumption, and the discussion of her paper reached an important point about the use of food in magic practices in the East and West. The Bulgarian and Belarusian presentations (by Drs Ivanka Petrova, Lidia Bohan, and Natalia Bunkevich) focused on the lived traditions and their role in present-day societies and among different immigrant groups.

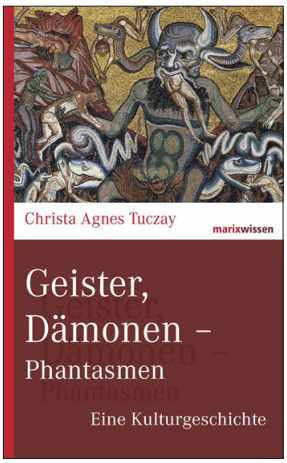
The conference was supported by the European Union through the European Regional Development Fund (the Centre of Excellence in Estonian Studies (CEES) and it is related to the institutional research funding project IUT 22-5.

For more details on the conference programme see http://www.folklore.ee/rl/fo/koostoo/poola/abstracts.pdf.

Liisi Laineste

# BOOK REVIEWS

## A COMPACT OVERVIEW OF THE WORLD OF GHOSTS AND DEMONS




**Christa Agnes Tuczay. *Geister, Dämonen – Phantasmen. Eine Kulturgeschichte.* Wiesbaden: Marixverlag, 2015. 252 pp.**

The new book by Christa Agnes Tuczay presents a cultural-historic overview of the lore related to ghosts, with an emphasis on German cultural space. When picking up the book, the reader can wonder, for a moment, whether we would need yet another lexicon of ghosts, as many of the kind have already been published, also in German. Nevertheless, the world of ghosts has never ceased to excite people and although many belief creatures (e.g. dragons accumulating treasures) have lost their topicality in today's world, the readership interested in these topics is still large. The author, when writing her book, seems to have born in mind as vast an audience as possible. On the one hand, the text is easy to read for an ordinary reader and the terms have been explained in detail (for example, the author mentions at least on three occasions the connection between the term 'demon' and the verb 'share'). However, on the other hand, at the end of each keyword article researches published about the corresponding creature have been enumerated. This way the book is also helpful for the scholars who need more detailed information about a concrete creature. It is somewhat confusing, though, that there are no references in the text – it is hard to understand whether the presented conclusions come from the author herself or from some source she has cited.

More often than not, the author uses the historic-geographical method, trying to find the place of origin and spread of the beliefs connected with a certain creature. However, in the case of some beliefs it is quite probable that they have emerged simultaneously in several places, which could be due to similar sources of subsistence and social environments – as the author herself also admits (p. 237) when speaking about the development of ghost beliefs.

In some cases the reader is left with a wish that the author had defined more clearly which era she was talking about; for example, on page 74 she discusses, in the present tense, money spirits who in most cases have been deprived of their traditional shape in today's lore. On the other hand, when talking about a belief related to switched children, the author, referring to a lawsuit in 1690, mentions that in the period under discussion they were still viable (p. 89). As there are plenty of belief records and legends about the motif of a switched child dating from even the end of the 19th century, I would dare to assume that this kind of idea was somewhat topical even two centuries later.

In the case of review books covering voluminous material there is always the question of the extent to which a phenomenon is discussed. I would have liked to read more about the plague spirit as plague lore has had a considerable impact on European culture and beliefs in a wider sense; yet, the book mentions the plague spirit only in a few words (p. 104). However, it is most appreciated that the author has also discussed several more recent beliefs (e.g. those related to vanished hitchhikers or aliens) as well as the current features of the still topical creatures (e.g. ghosts, poltergeists, and their depiction in movies). Another advantage of the book is that it focuses not only on belief creatures but also on human beings, describing communication practices used to come into contact with the inhabitants of the afterworld.

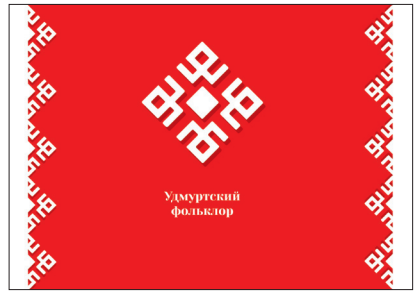
As concerns the structure of the book, it is somewhat questionable why the rubric dealing with people's love affairs with demons is placed under the chapter speaking about disease spirits.

In general, however, the book makes a spirited read, suggesting how multifaceted and colourful Europe's religious worldview was in the past times, building a background also to contemporary beliefs. The author's thorough detective work in the world of belief creatures and the extensive research on the topic has brought to light exciting and even surprising cultural connections – for example, a fine network of linkages between Saint Nicholas, water spirits, Santa Claus, and even a crocodile.

Reet Hiiemäe

## YET ANOTHER COLLECTION OF UDMURT FOLKSONGS

**Irina Pchelovodova & Nikolai Anisimov. *Lymshor pal udmurt"eslen kyrʒan gur"essy / Pesni iuzhnykh udmurtov / Songs of southern Udmurts*. Izhevsk & Tartu, 2015. 374 pp.**




Since the 1990s, Udmurt ethnomusicologists have been deeply engaged in the publication of Udmurt musical folklore. They have mainly drawn on the material collected so far; yet, fieldwork has also been ongoing. Even today Udmurtia and its diasporas preserve their folkloric diversity of genres, including in the sphere of folksongs and other folk music; however, the survival of traditional culture cannot be guaranteed for years to come. The influence of mass media can be especially fast and devastating in the case of songs as novel ways of self-expression and registers steamroller in different forms of media and therefore generation exchange can bring about also change of culture, which cannot be hindered even by the reproduction of song repertoire by specially founded singing groups at festivals and other events.

This edition is the fourth one in the series *Udmurt Folklore*. The ones published formerly include songs of southern and central Udmurts (1992, 1999, 2014), northern Udmurts (1996), and those residing in the Vyatsko-Polyansky district of the Kirov region (1995, 2004). Udmurt playing and dance songs have been published separately (1999).

The authors of the current collection also contributed to the publication of a collection of songs from Kiyasovsky district, titled *Melodies of Tygyrmen* (2011). The materials of this region in southern Udmurtia have also been used in this collection, which covers non-ritual repertoire. The collection contains 137 songs and, besides original texts, also translations into Russian and English. A great part of the material was collected during fieldwork in the years 2009–2013, but other recordings have also been published. The introduction to the collection in Russian, English, and Estonian provides an overview of the region, sub-genres, and publication principles. The collection would have deserved an introduction also in the Udmurt language and definitely in the first position. Most of the footnotes, captions for photographs, as well as data about the performers and collectors at the end of the book are presented only in Russian. The language policy followed in the publication could have been somewhat more consistent.

It seems to be ordinary that the repertoire more directly related to calendar and life cycle customs gains the prevalent position in the study and publication of more traditional folklore. It is the collectively more crystallised custom side that creates as if an argument about the presumably greater traditionality of the pertaining folklore. The occasional component in the more individual or entertaining folklore has not added value to it. The more gratifying is the fact that this collection is dedicated to non-ritual repertoire. This gives the reader a better idea about what people have sung (or still sing) in the period between holidays, which constitutes a major part of their lives.

The material originates in six villages of this region, which belong to different kin groups. This creates a different traditional background, which is also pointed out by the authors in the introductory part; however, in non-ritual repertoire it is less noticeable. However, it is namely the context that should be emphasised; ethnomusicology today is far from recording folk melodies and verses only.

The introduction provides clues as to the contextual background of one or another genre or performance, be it personalised manner of performance, some situative details, or the singer's biographical facts. The collection would be richer and more interesting if the published songs were supplemented by relevant excerpts of interviews, researchers' observations, or materials visually enhancing performances. The audio CD accompanying the book does not fully compensate for this shortcoming. The more comprehensive contextual material collected during fieldwork would have turned the book into an anthropological document. It catches the eye that many of the songs (incl. those connected with individuals) have been recorded from ensembles, that is, most probably from secondary tradition. It would have been interesting to learn about the nature and role of local ensembles in upholding tradition nowadays, etc. Hopefully, these remarks could be taken into account in future collection and publication activity.

In the introduction, the songs published in the collection are divided into five groups, considering the popular emic classification:

- lyrical songs;
- chastushkas, dance songs;

- playing songs;
- songs-teasers;
- borrowed songs (Tatar, Russian, Mari).

The introduction provides a more detailed characterisation of these groups and subgroups; further on in the book the groups can be identified, above all, by the headings, and in some cases just surmised. I hereby hold that it is the lyrical songs that include the most interesting functions and features of non-ritual songs, connected with the meaning of songs in an individual's life or his/her personal identity. These songs are often related to personal harrowing experiences. They are functionally close to occasional laments, yet they are still songs. Highlighting this subgroup might be essential also in a comparative perspective: today we can only make assumptions about the performance function of several Estonian (both newer and older) folksongs, especially from the personal point of view.

Another interesting subgroup (quite numerous one) represented in the collection is so-called nominal songs. In these cases songs have come into close contact with the performer and become his/her 'property'. An already existing song might acquire some personal features, and other people are denied the right to perform them at the presence of the 'owner'. Although it is not the same phenomenon, we could draw parallels with personal songs of the Nordic peoples. However, also in Estonia, especially in Setomaa, singers are known by their unique repertoire. Among nominal songs we can also find material borrowed from neighbouring peoples.

A separate subgroup is formed by songs related to local identity, i.e. those that define one or another settlement. At Kiyasovsky Udmurts they can be performed as non-ritual polyfunctional folklore in different situations, above all, at community events.

As might be expected, chastushkas and dance songs represented in the collection are connected with folk dance. Whereas chastushkas are loosely connected with melodies, each dance song has its own melody, which refers to its distribution area or choreography. As compared to other groups, playing songs are less numerous in the given region. A prominent role in the repertoire of Kiyasovsky Udmurts is performed by songs-teasers, which are often accompanied by the melody of a dance or playing song. However, this is an individual situative and improvisational genre.

It is noteworthy that both in collection work and publication attention has been paid to multiethnic relationships and their expression in the song repertoire. Kiyasovsky district is a region on ethnic borders and therefore loans from Russian, Tatar, and Mari traditions can be anticipated. This has been one of the ways to enrich the repertoire, and loans include both melodies and verses, the latter of course in translation. Earlier on, the Udmurts' language skills are said to have been more versatile.

The non-ritual songs under discussion are in most cases strophic. Usually it is the quatrain, more seldom there are two lines in a strophe. Verses occasionally have additional syllables, and the poetics of songs features characteristic poetic means: dual form word pairs, epithets, different kinds of parallelism. The songs are based on anhemitonic and hemitonic scales. The former prevails due to closeness of Tatar music culture; the newer repertoire also features some Russian intonations. When an ensemble performs, the first verse is sung by the leading singer – the one who sings better than the others or knows the melody and words.

The collection is compiled by the repertoire of different villages; so, it can include different versions of the same song, which contributes to the observation of variability and enhances the general idea. As a rule, only one strophe is notated. Text transcriptions try to preserve the dialectal peculiarities and therefore the norms of the Udmurt literary language have not been followed. As mentioned above, information about the collection process and the performers is presented in Russian at the end of the book. Maybe it would have been a good idea to put it together with the songs to avoid undue leafing.

Despite all the remarks, the Udmurt ethnomusicologists who have collected the songs as well as the compilers of the collection deserve high praise. A published edition is much more than the material in the archives or private collections, both for research and singing. This collection was published with the support of the Kindred Peoples' Programme. It is good to know that we have been able to contribute to the recording, preservation, and research of the culture of our eastern kindred peoples.

Madis Arukask

## OUR AUTHORS

**Kaarina Koski** is a folklore researcher and lecturer at the University of Turku, Finland. Her main research topics include folk belief, supernatural experiences, and narrative traditions, especially on death, burial, and the Lutheran Church; she is also interested in internet cultures. Furthermore, Koski focuses on the intersubjective and social characteristics (e.g. the social meaning-making capacity) of human mind and its interaction with the supernatural.

kaakos@utu.fi

**Reet Hiiemäe** is a folklore researcher at the Department of Folkloristics of the Estonian Literary Museum in Tartu, Estonia. Her main research interests include the psychological aspect of folklore, supernatural experiences, magic, belief narratives, and mental protection mechanisms in folklore. She has written several books about magic.

reet@folklore.ee

**Victoria Chervaneva** works as Associate Professor at the Voronezh State Pedagogical University and carried out her postdoctoral research at the Centre for Typological and Semiotic Folklore Studies at the Russian State University for the Humanities (Moscow). Her research interests are related to East Slavic demonology, language of Russian folklore, and semiotics of tales. In particular, she studies problems of representation of 'naïve' knowledge in oral tradition.

viktoriya.chervaneva@gmail.com

**Vito Carrassi**, PhD in Literary Sciences (Modern Comparative Literatures), SIEF and EFACIS member, has held university courses on folkloristics and collaborated with the Chair of Cultural Anthropology at the University of Bari. His research focuses chiefly on the intersection and interference between folklore and literature and on the history and theory of folk narrative genres. His main work, *Il fairy tale nella tradizione narrativa irlandese* (2008), has been translated and published in English as *The Irish Fairy Tale: A Narrative Tradition from the Middle Ages to Yeats and Stephens* (2012). He is also a translator of historical, anthropological, and sociological monographs, as well as author of novels and short stories.

vito1976@interfree.it

**Kirsten Marie Raahauge** is Associate Professor at The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, School of Design. Her main research focus is on supernatural experiences and narratives as well as space perception (e.g. narratives about haunted houses).

kmr@kadk.dk

**Huai Bao** received his PhD from Simon Fraser University in Canada, and is currently a SSHRC (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council) Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Toronto. As of April 2016, he has published two books and numerous journal articles in the USA, Canada, Europe, and China. His research interests include gender and sexuality in popular culture, gender politics, religions in East Asia, the supernatural in Chinese folklore, and the much anticipated reconstruction of a new belief system in contemporary Chinese society.

hbao@sfu.ca

**Kirsten Møllegaard** is Chair and Associate Professor at the English Department, the University of Hawai'i at Hilo, USA, where she teaches courses in literature, film, folklore, and mythology. Her research and publications focus on folklore, oral and visual narratives, the representation of gender and social spatialities in film and literature; tourism and contemporary legends in Hawaii; and haunting and history in contemporary literature of the American West.

mollegaa@hawaii.edu

**Elizabeth Ann Berton-Reilly** received her MEd in Heritage Studies from Plymouth State University in 2015 and a BA in Liberal Arts from Governors State University in 2001. Her research includes indigenous foodways, language revitalisation, genealogy, family stories, and folklore. While in graduate school, Elizabeth took part in multiple oral history projects, including interviewing indigenous veterans as part of her graduate internship at the Mt. Kearsarge Indian Museum in Warner, New Hampshire.

emberfaye@gmail.com

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