

This topic arouses interest also in the international arena; this was proved by Linda Kaljundi, who introduced a related project of the Finnish Literature Society, “Letters and Songs”, which is aimed at crossing the borders of modern nations and scholarly traditions, focusing on the materials on the crossroads of different social networks, expressive registers, belief systems, and smaller traditions. The research objects are connections between high and low cultures, ecclesiastical and secular, oral and written. The project is divided into four smaller research topics: social and religious correspondence; hymnals, manuscripts, and networks as linkages between socio-cultural strata; changes in local singing cultures; poetic registers in the junction of oral and written cultures. The idea of the project is to reassess the earlier Finnish poetics as well as social and cultural history.

Peeter Tinitis, Oleg Sobchuk and Artjom Shelaya introduced the cultural evolution seminar, which analyses cultural processes, digital humanities, cognitive research, and their related fields. Liina Lukas and Leena Kurvet-Käosaar introduced the special issue of *Methis: Studia Humaniora Estonica* (17/18), which is dedicated to comparative literature. Kanni Labi, language editor of *Methis*, spoke about the yearbook of the Estonian Literary Museum. Heinike Heinsoo opened an exhibition “Researchers of the Finnic Languages and Cultures I: Enn Ernits”.

Hegely Klaus

SOME THOUGHTS EVOKED BY READING REET HIEMÄE’S DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

On January 4, 2017, Reet Hiemäe defended her doctoral dissertation titled “Folklore as a tool of psychological self-defence: About the pragmatics of belief traditions” at the University of Tartu. The dissertation discussing Estonian folk belief is comprised of a detailed introduction and four articles, the first of which was published already in 2004, and the latest is yet to be published.

Hiemäe boldly integrates tools of different disciplines with folkloristics: various trends in psychology, narrative studies, narrative medicine, human geography, and communication studies. Interdisciplinary attempts may result in a dead end situation in case the approaches used in them cannot be connected due to their too different geneses, objectives, or theoretical baggage. Even one humanitarian discipline has no general matrix for all possible approaches and methods to be systematically arranged, not to mention a common matrix for the humanities and social sciences, in which everything could be combined with everything. It is an arduous process to search for and find compatible approaches, but if it is successful, it may result in the discovery of phenomena and regularities not noticed before, creating through this new and interesting information about the world.

In her articles Hiemäe merges different disciplines, above all, psychology, with folkloristics. The main emphasis of the dissertation is on folkloristics – a field of humanities studying culture and its expressions. Psychology – the basic principle of which is that the psyche is similar for the whole humankind – considers culture (cultural differences)

as second-rate. (Although the fields of psychology also involve cultural psychology, its importance is marginal and its basic principles contradict other trends in psychology.) So Hiimäe has to cope with a difficult task: how to integrate the approaches, one of which deals with a human being whose psyche is seen as universal, and the other with culture different across different regions and ethnoses.

In order to merge different disciplines, Hiimäe has taken into use the terms “mental self-defence” and “belief-based defence mechanisms”. She admits that a psychologist’s interest in these terms is somewhat different than that of a folklorist and a researcher of religion: “in psychology, when describing defence mechanisms, one proceeds from their general validity, yet in the case of belief-based defence mechanisms the main characteristic is rather the fact that they can be inherent in a smaller or bigger group and more or less changing in time by their forms of appearance” (Introduction, p. 42). The use of the term “defence strategy” or “defence mechanism” in a treatment with folkloristic emphasis is novel and necessary for making the dissertation a coherent whole, although my personal opinion is that instead of “defence” the author could have used “management”, which can occasionally also be encountered in the dissertation. Anyway, it is positive that with the help of these concepts Hiimäe is able to point out cross-time parallels in disease lore, which result from the universal traits of the human soul and behaviour. As usually researchers of legend fail to pay attention to the universals resulting from human psyche, but rather focus on cultural and historic features (Metsvahi 2013: 66), Hiimäe’s approach is relevant and eye-opening.

Yet, we should ask if such an approach to the subject matter does not diminish the depth of analysis. In order for the worldview basis of the approach not to diverge from that dominant among psychologists, Hiimäe cannot apply the most innovative approaches in the humanities and social sciences, but has to resort to the more traditional ones. So she postulates, as the starting point of her work, the objective world outside the experiencer’s consciousness, which is common for everyone. I consider the clear split between the objective and subjective worlds as a factor inhibiting in-depth analysis. This approach reveals in several places that one thing (the objective one) is real life, and the other (the subjective one) is the belief world. These two as if do not originally and intrinsically belong together but rather meet at certain points and in certain ways. This is similar to Lauri Honko’s approach in the introduction to his classical work *Geisterglaube in Ingermanland* (1962); he has also made an attempt to merge psychology (more exactly, social and perceptual psychology) with folkloristics and religious studies. (As a negative point, it could be mentioned here that Hiimäe, when presenting ideas similar to Honko’s, in most cases fails to refer to his works.) So Hiimäe’s approach ensues from the worldview similar to that of a medical worker or an acting psychologist rather than emerges from contemplating ontological questions or the newest theories of religious studies.

From this starting point, Hiimäe’s ambitions to improve the world become more understandable. It is a correct and significant observation that human fears are channelled into narratives; yet, it remains unsolved how, knowing these channelling processes, it is possible to predict people’s and groups’ future behaviour and decrease social stress (see Introduction, p. 9; Article 1, p. 79). The possibility to predict the future is also eliminated by Hiimäe’s own observation that individual’s belief images are not stable and change when new circumstances and experiences occur (see Introduction,



*Reet Hiimäe at autumn doctoral school “Dialogues with Subcultures” at Jäneda in 2016.
Photograph by Astrid Tuisk.*

pp. 34, 31, 14; Article 4), whereas often the individual fails to formulate all the religious concepts in words (see pp. 42–43). Instead of thinking about immediate usefulness (see Pärn 2014: 30), scholars in the humanities should focus their attention on the analysis of verbal expressions in the multi-layered relationship between the individual and the environment (see Kivari 2016: 70).

I certainly cannot claim that Hiimäe has failed to do the latter in her dissertation. On the contrary, most of her work is imbued with it, and her valiance in attempting and combining different approaches is remarkable. However, the author deserves to be reproached for adapting the theory in case it is incompatible with her subject matter, sometimes also exaggerating with it. So, for example, the communication theory initially taken as the basis for analysis in the third article, has been distorted into a theory of “nonverbal event”, and in places it is difficult for the reader to understand whether this theory is applied in the story world or world of narration. Excessive adaptation of the subject matter could be mentioned in connection with the second article, in which problems in the analytical part result from the fact that there is a too wide temporal distance between the spread of the plague and the collection of plague legends, so that in the case of these narratives one could hardly speak about mental danger maps in the literal meaning (see Article 2, p. 32ff.).

Hiimäe is not interested in how a certain belief image emerged; nor does she make attempts to reduce to elements the relations between a human being, his or her psyche, narratives, and the environment. In her research she postulates a ready-made world with action mechanisms explained by scholars, which from the very beginning involves

something negative that one needs to be protected from. Where did this negative come from and how? Have belief images and narratives or even warning legends played a certain role in the formation of fears? Do fears constitute, independently of culture, an intrinsic part of each society and individual? These are the questions that remain unanswered in Hiimäe's work. From her point of view, narratives do not create worlds or define who we are and what we feel and experience, but rather merely influence our emotions and us as we are.

In order not to deviate too much from the content of Hiimäe's thesis, I would like to highlight the strong points of her research. One of them is definitely the usage of relevant and diverse source material. It can be clearly seen that Hiimäe has good knowledge of both the old archival materials and today's ordinary and social media texts. She herself has also created new sources, conducting face-to-face interviews and using questionnaires. The latter has also yielded surprisingly good results, as due to the sensitivity of the topic, Hiimäe has preserved the respondents' anonymity. The fourth article reveals that in the cases when the topic is clearly related to the respondent's experience, which so far has not been sufficiently formulated, the respondent may open up even in such an impersonal manner, writing down long and fascinating answers.

In summary, I would like to say that Hiimäe has made some brave combining attempts and written a thought-provoking dissertation. She has convincingly explained how belief-based behaviour and belief narratives help people manage in the world. In an exciting way the research also highlights the continuity of old and new folk stories and past and present belief-based behaviour. A parallel approach to the past and present material has enabled the author to make interesting juxtapositions and place today's phenomena in a wider context. It is most welcome that the author has not contradistinguished Christianity with folk belief, and that she has highlighted the common features of belief-based and non-belief-based behaviour. Although the expression 'defence mechanisms' made me think in different directions, several of which remain outside the borders of Hiimäe's dissertation, it is actually a resourceful term which in this research successfully connects the domains of psychology and folkloristics.

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