

## CONFERENCE ON FOLK NARRATIVES IN RAGUSA

On 12–16 June 2018, the interim conference of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research (ISFNR), titled “Folk narrative in regions of intensive cultural exchange” took place in Ragusa, Italy. In the globalised era cultural exchange is becoming increasingly intensive in many areas, therefore the title of the conference called participants to discuss comparatively about a multitude of views, methods, and motives relevant in the field of folk narrative research. The transmission and ensuing transformation of narratives over time is subject to processes of selection and assimilation, and these processes fulfil various purposes. The papers of the conference showed that such narratives can help people to maintain or adapt their cultural and religious identities, to protect themselves mentally in the times of crisis, to find ways for overcoming traumas, etc. The conference offered a platform for an interdisciplinary approach, initiating discussions on various theories, models, and definitions, types of storytellers and storytelling events, the role of migration and mass media in cultural exchange, etc.

Within the framework of the ISFNR conference, the Belief Narrative Network (BNN) organised a subconference with the topic “Human-animal relationships in belief narratives”. The overview below focuses on this subconference. It was pointed out in the introduction to the conference that most current histories tend to treat the human and animal realms as separate, but such a vision is only part of what the human mind has produced as a whole. A closer look at respective narratives shows that the human and the animal world may often merge (e.g. in the case of animal metamorphoses, soul-animals), and the symbolic role of animals is much more important in the cultural and societal thinking than many of us may have thought. The conference attempted to include a scope as wide as possible, ranging from the contemporary Western cultures to ancient regional practices, from collective to individual realms, enabling perspectives from folklore, language, literature, art, and sexuality to psychology and psychopathology.

Quite expectably, several papers concentrated on narratives related to werewolves and other wereanimals. **Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir** talked about the double nature of the werewolf in Iceland, which has actually always been a wolf-free country, trying to track the origins of respective tale motifs. **Terry Gunnell** argued in his paper that early settlers of Iceland brought beliefs in shape-shifting with them and were also familiar with the belief of people being born with their protective animal (*fylgjur*) which followed them throughout their lives. According to Gunnell these beliefs continued to be passed on as part of sagas and *rímur* ballads but soon lost their importance in folk legends. Another paper (by **Romina Werth**) exemplified the role of the man-bear (*berserkr*) in the Icelandic context, looking at the texts of medieval Icelandic prose and later fairy tales and concluding that being a *berserkr* referred, first and foremost, to a change in the state of the human mind without an actual shape-shifting, but certain folktales can still also include the bodily metamorphosis.

Based on her recent fieldwork in Bosnia and Herzegovina, **Miriam Mencej** pointed out the social uses of narratives about werewolves. **Margaret Lyngdoh** continued the topic of the social functions of respective beliefs in the context of northeast Indian folklore, using the example of *sangkhini* – certain human-animal shapeshifters that are described as having the body of a snake and the head of a bull. Lyngdoh’s paper was also a reflection of her recent fieldwork. **Dilip Kumar Kalita** proceeded with examples

from northeast Indian folklore, showing how narratives about human transformations into pythons, ducks, tortoises, dogs, and tigers are mostly considered as belonging to the narrative realm, but can sometimes be still taken as facts and thus create social tensions. **Shailesh Kumar Ray** attempted to give a critical historical analysis of human-animal relationships in the Indian epic *Ramayana*, inferring that in this epic context mythological animals were mostly described in a humanised form, and their relationship with humans was depicted in an idealised way. **Kinga Markus Takeshita** focused on the tensions between the perception of snakes as characters with supernatural wisdom, and as the embodiment of evil in the Iranian national epic, in classical mythology, and in Middle Eastern folk narratives. **Lidija Bajuk** added, on the basis of Croatian folk narrative material, that the perceptions of animals were to a great extent based on real-life observations, but were at the same time influenced by folkloric motives and symbolism.

Two papers (**Vita Dzekcioriute** and **Jelka Vince Pallua**) concentrated specifically on the role of the frog in belief narratives, giving an overview of the female symbolism of this creature and exemplifying how in some cases a small and harmless animal can obtain significant narrative power, attracting a wide and abstract complex of beliefs. Similarly, rich folklore has centred around cockroaches. **Suzana Marjanić** gave an overview of the exhibition “Cockroaches – A Lingering World” in the Croatian Natural History Museum, but also described how these insects have been depicted in belief narratives and art, their role fluctuating between hated parasites and heroic animals that can bring prosperity and survive even the nuclear war. **Nidhi Mathur** added a literary perspective, attempting to critically analyse the relationship between humans and animals in Hermann Hesse’s *Tales* with a theoretical perspective of human-animal studies, storytelling, and conflict theory. **Laura Jiga Iliescu** offered an outlook on apocryphal texts that describe the dream of the Mother of God. Iliescu analysed the relationship between the content of these texts and their oral performance as a source of intertextual interferences between oral and literary cultural expressions; she also pointed to the role of the oracular sheep in these texts.

**Fumihiko Kobayashi**’s paper offered a glimpse of pre-modern Japanese views of animal societies and their abstraction into an unattainable dream-world or paradise, using the narrative motives related to the underground mouse paradise (*nezumi jōdo*) as a point of departure. Kobayashi showed how such narratives can serve as an expression of unfulfilled desires for wealth and prosperity. **Reet Hiemäe** looked at a very spiritual and symbolic type of animal-human relationships, describing how contemporary Estonian narratives about contacts with soul-animals are used as a mechanism of self-help and positive life history narrating. **Tok Thompson** talked about Native American myths, seeking to connect the current theoretical movements in post-humanism with those in mythology. He pointed out that many of these new scholarly concepts about animal agency and culture actually have their vernacular counterparts in the Native American traditional narratives. **Andres Kuperjanov** gave an overview of the Estonian rich belief narrative tradition about trees.

The conference also offered some general papers about classification, genre, and novel theoretical approaches. **Maria Ines Palleiro** described problems concerned with classifying Argentinian animal tales, for sometimes internationally known animal tales transform locally into belief narratives. Thus, she showed how in some cases local beliefs transform universal tale types into expressions of local cultural identities. **Desmond**

**L. Kharmawphlang** analysed the supernatural beliefs of a northeast Indian modern urban community, exemplifying the rhetoric and other techniques through which those beliefs are presented. Focusing on narratives about the relationship of beautiful water spirits (*puri*) and men, he attempted to trace an ecocritical discourse in this phenomenon. **Kristel Kivari** focused on the role of senses in narrating belief narratives, using the example of contemporary Estonian dowsing lore. **Mare Kõiva** exemplified, on the basis of a cycle of narratives, political disruptions of 1905, and showed how fear and shame find their expression through repeated narrating. **Anoop Vellani** talked about beliefs and belief narratives related to certain South-Indian female vampires (*Yakshis*). Vellani viewed respective narratives as an example of constructing local and political histories out of the imprinted memories and imageries of the magical world.

**Sandis Laime** offered a glimpse of the popular motives of the northeast Latvian *raganas* tradition – a supernatural tradition that today has almost entirely vanished. Laime tried to find out about possible migration routes of the two main versions of this tradition. **Rahmonov Ravshan** gave his paper about mythological stories of Tajik people and pointed to the problem that often rich supernatural traditions are not sufficiently documented in their active phase, which makes their historical research difficult. However, he could still present some fieldwork materials and documentaries of storytelling. **JoAnn Conrad** gave an overview of her project that aims to review the data on trolls in Scandinavia, using collections, children’s magazines, and also archival material (e.g. special interactive maps) in order to update the typology of trolls, but also to investigate the interplay between the written and oral sources. Finally, **Ülo Valk** talked about the relationship of the supernatural and laughter, using the concept of “appropriate incongruity” while analysing the role of laughter and humour in telling legends.

As a conclusion, it can be said that the conference widened the possibilities of viewing and understanding culture and society through numerous examples pointing to the importance of the animal perspective. Thus, the conference surely fulfilled its original objectives.

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