

## NEWS IN BRIEF

### COLLECTING ACTION “SCHOOL LORE 2018” EXCEEDED ALL EXPECTATIONS

The all-Estonian school lore collecting action took place from 24 February to 24 May 2018, with a record number of participants: answers to questionnaires were sent by 3717 respondents and additionally material was collected in the form of ‘pupil to pupil’ interviews. Answers were expected from the pupils of the 4th to 12th grades (incl. those from vocational schools), and most of them answered electronically. In addition to Estonian- and Russian-language schools in Estonia, some answers were also sent from Estonian schools abroad (mainly Finland).

The patron of the project, initiated by the Department of Folkloristics of the Estonian Literary Museum, was the Tartu City Writer Mika Keränen, and “School lore 2018” was recognised as an event of the European Year of Cultural Heritage. The pilot phase in December 2017 yielded over 300 filled questionnaires. The main stage was geared up in March 2018 with a training day for schoolteachers, under the heading “Killer clowns, protective angels, and YouTubers: School lore 2018”, which gave an overview of the current situation and discussed why and how school lore should be collected.



*School lore collectors at the Estonian Literary Museum. Photograph by Alar Madisson 2018.*

In both the pilot and main phases, schoolchildren were more prone to answer questions about names (nicknames, pets' names), leisure time, fandom, as well as fears and protective beliefs. Questions about celebrating various holidays yielded shorter answers. The main phase offered a good overview of today's humour use (e.g. through materials from meme creators and -fans). Several traditional joke models were revised in somewhat updated format (e.g. the blonde jokes, three-nation jokes, etc.).

As could be expected, the most popular holidays in Estonian homes are Midsummer Day and Christmas; birthday celebrations tend to decline in importance. The descriptions of school traditions involved fascinating local traditions and intertwining with older lore.

In the answers about games played, many past favourites were highlighted; however, in comparison to the previous collection action in 2007, the importance of computer games had considerably increased. As a new form of play, imitating the plots of computer games or TV-series was mentioned.

The fears brought out were a mixture of psychological, real life, and supernatural fears, with strong media influence as could be expected, involving killer clowns, darkness, spiders, UFOs/aliens, and ghosts. Additionally, a number of respondents admitted they believed in the existence of aliens, yet did not express fear for them.

The general atmosphere of the material was friendly and positive. Although pupils described several fears, they were also aware of either realistic or supernatural ways for fighting them (with the help of protective spirits and items, charms, positive auto-suggestion, supportive kin). So the obtained material yielded a vivid picture of today's youngsters' thoughts, feelings, and beliefs, resulting in an expressive document of the era, offering valuable material also to future researchers.

Reet Hiimäe

## **POLAR READINGS 2018 ON BOARD THE KRASIN ICEBREAKER**

On 27 and 28 April 2018, an international conference under the heading "Polar Readings 2018: Technology in the history of the Arctic development" was held aboard the icebreaker Krasin. The conference was held for the sixth year, before the annual Icebreakers Festival on the River Neva, organized by the Museum and Exhibition Center for Technical and Technological Development of the Arctic (Arctic Museum and Exhibition Center) and the department of the Museum of the World Ocean at Saint Petersburg, "The Krasin Icebreaker". Scholars representing different scientific disciplines, museums, and archives, as well as public figures and any concerned participants gathered in the historical interior of the famous ship.

The exact subject of Polar Readings changes every year; in 2018 it was titled "Practices and equipment in Arctic exploration". The aim of the conference was to summarize the historical experience concerning the topic. The organizers declared a wide range of

scientific directions from the history of technological thought of different times to the mechanisms of environmental management and survival in the Arctic regions. The conference program included 50 reports, not divided into sections, so there were busy schedules on both days. Thanks to this, representatives of different disciplines (archaeologists, historians, museum experts, geographers, biologists, engineers) were able to listen to each other's presentations and join in fruitful discussions within certain directions, which was one of the organizers' aims.

Polar Readings discussed the technical features of the organization of research expeditions and the development of the Arctic region in the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. Considerable attention was paid to the analysis of various types of equipment (icebreakers, research ships, polar aircrafts, all-terrain vehicles, submarines, etc.) used in the history of the complex development of the Soviet Arctic. A whole set of presentations focused on the problems of searching, preservation, and restoration of the objects concerned with the technical development of the Arctic.

We would like to address in greater detail the reports of the anthropological block. All of them studied the problem of functioning of the system of traditional environment interactions and life support of the indigenous peoples of the North in the context of new social and economic processes in modern Russia. V.N. Davydov (Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (the *Kunstkamera*)) explored the modern technologies for the mastering of environment, performed by the indigenous peoples of the Arctic through the rational use of ambient resources and new energy regimes. A.Y. Chistyakov and S.B. Kiselev (EthnoExpert company) focused on the interaction of the Yamal LNG with the Nenets reindeer herders of the Yamal Peninsula. A.N. Terekhina (Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (*Kunstkamera*)) and A.I. Volkovitskiy (Centre of Arctic and Siberian Exploration of the Sociological Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences) examined the problem of using the term 'snowmobile revolution' in different Arctic regions, and various practices of using snowmobiles in the modern culture of the Yamal Nenets. E.A. Davydova (Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (*Kunstkamera*)) introduced the transformations of technologies for storing and cooking food in Chukchi culture. O.B. Stepanova (Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (the *Kunstkamera*)) presented the study of modern northern Selkup camp as an element of anthropogenic landscape. Y.M. Plyusnin (Higher School of Economics) summarized his explorations of life support strategies and people's crafts of the Russian North population in the 20th – beginning of the 21st centuries.

On the second day, the participants of the Polar Readings 2018 discussed and worked out a resolution containing recommendations and appeals to authorities, research organizations, and other stakeholders.

The successful work of the conference, and its schedule in particular, forms a certain direction for analysis. We understand that the theme of these Polar Readings implied a bias towards the history of polar technology and the technological development of the North, but we were primarily interested in the context focusing on the indigenous peoples of the Arctic. The correlation of the report topics and a further discussion between the participants demonstrated, of course unwittingly, the general model of representations of the Arctic in modern Russia: key directions of development, priorities, and statuses of various actors.

In addition to six specialized anthropological approaches described above, only three papers addressed the 'aboriginal' theme. Archaeologists V.V. Pitulko (Institute for the History of Material Culture of the Russian Academy of Sciences) and S.V. Gusev (Russian Institute for Cultural and Natural Heritage named after D.S. Likhachev) described the Stone Age technologies in the archaeological sites of the Arctic. M.V. Titova (Museum of Art Development of the Arctic named after A.A. Borisov, Arkhangelsk) presented archival data concerned with the artistic expedition of A.A. Borisov to Novaya Zemlya, with a reference to the local Nenets depicted on his canvases.

It is well known that the success of Arctic expeditions, starting from the 18th century, was significantly connected with the fact that travelers and explorers used technologies of adaptation of indigenous peoples of the northern latitudes: clothes, food, transport, etc. Local people were hired as guides, carriers, interpreters. During the Soviet period, the indigenous peoples were also irreplaceable participants in the social and technical development of the North. Unfortunately, such a view was not presented in any speech at the conference. Thus, the culture of the indigenous peoples stagnates within the frames of 'prehistoric antiquities' or 'exotic culture' against the background of the conquest of Arctic vastness by pioneers, or industrial development, the achievements of polar technology, which are inherent in the colonial approach, that acquired new forms in the 21st century. We have seen many times that in Russian federal media the Arctic topic arises, as a rule, only in connection with the building of a new industrial facility, or pumping of hydrocarbons, launching a new icebreaker or constructing a military base – strategic projects of high priority for Russia. Indigenous peoples appear in the context of supporting the 'traditional lifestyles' by industrial companies, similar to the conservation of the population of polar bears.

Moreover, at the interdisciplinary conference, once again we witnessed how the approaches of different scientific disciplines are far from the approaches, methods, and discourses of each other and especially from ours – anthropological. Presentations focusing on the Nenets' use of snowmobiles or the modern nutrition of Chukchi provoked non-anthropologists to criticize technical and technological innovations as interventions destroying the 'traditional' culture of indigenous peoples. We claim that such a reaction only supplements the 'colonial' image of an aborigine and also denies the possibility of partnerships and the equality of human capabilities.

No doubt such conferences are of great importance for the cross-disciplinary interaction and, if we may say, for the popularization of the anthropological view of the problems of the indigenous peoples of the North.

## **Acknowledgements**

This review was supported by the Russian Science Foundation (project № 18-18-00309).

Olga Stepanova, Alexandra Terekhina

Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (the Kunstkamera)

## 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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