

## NEWS IN BRIEF

### THE ANNUAL YOUNG RESEARCHERS' CONFERENCE "YOUNG VOICES" 2021

The Young Voices conference is an annual event held in Tartu in spring every year. It is meant for young researchers of all levels of education, including doctoral, undergraduate, graduate, and high school students, whose research interests lie in a broad field of cultural and social studies. In 2021, it took place online. On April 21 and 22, seventeen young researchers shared the results of their own studies. As always, for most of the participants it was a debut in research conferences, where they could give a presentation in front of the experienced, strict, but attentive and welcoming academics. More experienced young cultural researchers, in their turn, gained another great opportunity to present their work. Several academic and student organizations formed an organizing committee of the conference, including the Estonian Literary Museum (the Department of Folkloristics and the Estonian Folklore Archives), the Estonian National Museum, the Tartu NEFA Group, and the Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore of the University of Tartu. Working languages of the Young Voices conference were Estonian and English.

Topics, approaches, and areas of research were so diverse that it was not possible to figure out a single direction that would unite all the presentations. However, the organizers skilfully arranged them into several panels. During these two days, the participants of the conference were discussing such research issues as the second life of folklore, digitalization and contemporary culture, transition of experience, gender, nationalism, community building, division between nature and culture, sport, and health. Many panel sessions created intensive, professional discussions – something that is indeed important for the first probes of making their research public.

The panel presentations were preceded by a fascinating keynote lecture by Professor Kristin Kuutma, titled "A Pilgrim's Progress: A Disciplinary Journey Inside/Outside Academia", and were accompanied by a fruitful roundtable "Kultuuriuuriija kujunemine: kust tulevad ja kuhu lähevad (noored) teadlased?" (The formation of a cultural researcher: Where do the (young) researchers come from and where do they go?). Both events can be considered as a career-orienting guidance. Professor Kuutma chose her personal career history to explain how academic and non-academic professional experiences might be combined in a single, meaningful professional pathway. By her personal example, she showed that academic expertise could be useful outside the academia, while the non-academic skills might and should be applied in the research areas. Similarly,

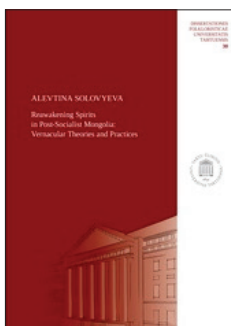
the roundtable provided a number of examples of building a career for young researchers in cultural studies.

Five presentations were recognized by awards from the Centre of Excellence in Estonian Studies (CEES); I would like to name some of them. A paper by Arabella Antons under the heading “Küllalt naiste rikkumisest võistlusspordiga”: Eesti naiste sport 1920–1940 (“Enough of women’s disfigurement in competitive sport”: Estonian women’s sport in 1920–1940) won an award as the best basic school presentation. A nomination for gymnasiums was taken by Valentina Drianichkina and Agnia Andreeva with their presentation of a folklore application that they had developed themselves (Zoomorphisms in the Russian, Estonian and Chinese Languages and the Development of a Thematic Application). The best work by a bachelor’s and a master’s student came from Hildegard Reimann, “Folkloristlik joonistus – alternatiivne viis kogeda ja kirjeldada?” (A folkloristic drawing: An alternative way to learn and describe?) and from Chahal Garg, “Crafting Digital”, respectively.

To conclude, I hope that the 2021 Young Voices conference proved to be a meaningful and useful experience for all the participants, and indeed became the first step towards a successful career as young researchers and professionals.

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## DOCTORAL THESIS ON VERNACULAR THEORIES AND PRACTICES



**Alevtina Solovyeva. *Reawakening Spirits in Post-socialist Mongolia: Vernacular Theories and Practices. Dissertationes Folkloristicae Universitatis Tartuensis 30.* University of Tartu Press, 2021. 203 pp.**

Alevtina Solovyeva’s PhD thesis, defended on 7 May 2021, provides a detailed and insightful depiction of Mongolian people’s relationships with a host of invisible beings nowadays, in the context of a rapidly changing society experiencing intense urbanisation and post-socialist turbulent deregulation policies. As

the end of a Soviet-inspired and controlled repressive regime gave way to a religious renaissance throughout Mongolia at the beginning of the 1990s, all sorts of previously suppressed or silenced entities started to interfere in people’s daily activities, both in

the mushrooming capital-city Ulaanbaatar, where more and more “ghosts” (*chötgör*) are rumoured to appear, and in rural areas where pastoral livelihoods depend on proper relations with irritable spiritual “land masters” (*gazryn ezed, lus savdag*).

Documenting the irruption of various entities (called “supernatural”) in Mongolian post-socialist cultural, social, and political landscape, Alevtina Solovyeva’s purpose is to show how a “lived religion” comes to be collectively created by the Mongolian population nowadays. An impressive corpus of narratives collected for no less than fourteen years, between 2006 and 2020, in urban and rural areas across the country, allows the author to account for changing beliefs concerning the nature, powers or modes of actions of these entities (their ontology), but also to describe what kinds of specialists are trusted to act as mediators with them. Alevtina Solovyeva therefore provides a rich description of the proliferating variety of beings that are featured in people’s accounts of encounters with the invisible, showing how they reveal both a decisive continuity in Mongolian ontological traditions, and a porosity of these ideas to the changing contexts of urban and rural society. On the other hand, these narratives testify to changing attitudes towards people trusted to act as intermediaries with these invisible and unpredictable beings: after a period of multiplication in the religious offer, there is a tendency for specialists – both shamans and Buddhist practitioners – towards professionalisation. The population has grown suspicious about their abilities and are more and more prone to evaluate them according to criteria that clearly transpire from narratives collected by the author.

What Alevtina Solovyeva means to show throughout her thesis, in the four published articles reproduced here as well as in the long introduction preceding them, is that Mongolian beliefs and practices concerning “spirits” and “the supernatural” are in constant flux, insofar as they reflect Mongolia’s changing situation and the population’s shifting concerns. In the introduction, the candidate dwells on the recurrent motif of spirits’ “awakening” in Mongolian folktales, which has been employed since the end of the socialist regime to account for the political and economic hardships experienced by the country. The candidate shows that the idea of angered spirits is far from new in Mongolian history, yet has been adapted in different periods to situations where a gap or a sense of mismatch between a community and its “homeland” (*nutag*) became a matter of concern. Similarly, the popular motif of “moving lights” seen in the steppe and associated in the past with the “bone soul” of dead people whose bodies were laid out in the open, according to Mongolian funerary customs, are now associated with remnants of the Russian presence on Mongolian land (they are seen as ghostly headlights of Russian cars). Several examples of such reinterpretations of traditional motifs of Mongolian folklore are provided in the introduction, but it is actually in the four attached articles that the most telling examples are provided.

In the first article, “An immured soul: Contested ritual traditions and demonological narratives in contemporary Mongolia”, Alevtina Solovyeva discusses the motif of *güideltei gazar*, or *gazryn güits*, that is, “haunted” or “restless places”. These places

are characterised by an element of *stuckness*, that is, people unwittingly crossing them become stuck, their horses stopping abruptly, their cars or motorcycles breaking down for no apparent reason. The candidate thus draws a parallel between the state of the interred and immured bones (which are effectively “stuck” in the soil) and the effect of these places on people (who also become stuck), interpreting this narrative as a reaction to the reform of Mongolian funerary rituals. The author argues that while Mongols “traditionally” leave their dead parents’ remains scattered in the open, the socialist government has imposed inhumation, therefore jeopardizing the fate of dead people’s souls. On the other hand, there is a long tradition in Mongolian folkloric traditions of burying demons and other harmful beings in the ground, therefore *sticking* them to prevent their malevolent actions. According to Alevtina Solovyeva, the transposition of demonological stuckness to these “restless places” could therefore be an adaptative reaction to the authoritative intervention on proper funerals.

In the second article, “*Chötgöriin yaria* in the 21st century: Mongolian demonological beliefs and mass culture in the age of globalization”, Alevtina Solovyeva provides another, more obvious example of the evolving character of Mongolian folkloric motifs under the influence of mass media and globalisation. The paper gives an overview of a new form of demonological narrative, ghost tales, inspired by the success of the supernatural genre in Russian and American pop-culture. They take many forms in many contexts, and this flexibility is key to their success, but they revolve around one main character *chötgör*, that is, “ghosts”. These “ghosts” feature in anecdotes (published as collections), city entertainment, and cinema productions. While they reflect the influence of foreign themes, like the world-wide folkloric blockbuster of the “vanishing hitchhiker”, they also take stock of traditional Mongolian themes, such as the association of ghosts with anything “empty”, and they tap into localised collective memories. One very interesting aspect of “ghosts” and of these “ghost tales” is that they have no problem transposing themselves to the city, while other invisible beings such as spiritual land masters (*lus savdag*) have difficulties to take root in the cities and remain attached to people’s *nutag*.

The third article, “Mythological world of Mongolian charms”, deals with ritual poetry and the manifold contexts of its performance by lay-people, professional or not. The common principle to all these genres of ritual speech is the power of the spoken word, which is derived not only from the semantic content of the formula, but also the quality of its enunciation and the number of times it is uttered. The example of “praises” (*magtaal*) and “wishes” (*yerööl*) shows how these genres are porous to the particular context of their performance, inasmuch as performers are expected to include elements (people, appliances, events) from their immediate surroundings. These instances of ritual poetry thus function as fantastic devices of *integration* of a heterogenous and at times contradictory situation into a skilfully unified utterance. They indeed illustrate perfectly how narrative genres may both reflect changing conditions *and* act to help people adapting themselves to them.

The fourth and last article, co-written with Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz, “From the Tibetan burial ground to the Mongolian steppe: A new life for Buddhist ritual practice in post-socialist Mongolia”, gives an original and extremely interesting account of the *lūijin* ritual, in which adepts offer their body as a feast to deities and demons. Originating from Tibet a thousand years ago or so, this ritual has been known in Mongolian Buddhism (mostly of the “red” faith) since the 14th century at least, but it has encountered a vivid interest on the part of the Mongolian population since the end of the socialist period. One of the reasons for this success is certainly the extraordinary flexibility of this ritual, for the performance of which great latitude is given to adepts (it can be carried out independently or in an assembly, indoors in a monastery or in haunted grounds, for a group of people or for an individual, etc.). But a deeper and more interesting reason for its success may be that, as an exorcism ritual, it answers some of the pressing concerns of the Mongolian population, most of all in Ulaanbaatar. There is indeed a way in which *lūijin* rituals help new city-dwellers find their footing in these environments teeming with various indiscernible and potentially harmful influences: malicious gossip, curses, remnants of former residents, possibly foreign and possibly even associated with a traumatising collective history of colonisation. The *lūijin* ritual, in this kind of situation, bears the promise of a clean slate – not an empty one, but a dwelling space efficaciously “cut off” from all harmful influences, and therefore available for prosperity.

This last chapter, in my opinion one of the best in the thesis, thus helps clarify what the rest of the thesis points toward, and what in my opinion is the most stimulating insight in Alevtina Solovyeva’s research so far. The folkloric motifs and the ritual practices she describes, drawing on the narratives she has been collecting throughout Mongolia over the past fifteen years, are not only an *illustration* of Mongolian culture and people’s faculty to adapt to changing situations – economic, social, politic, or religious. Ghosts, spirits, and protocols designed to enter in relation with them are indeed the very *means* through which Mongolian people change their society; if they are indeed “traditions” (that is, transmitted from one generation to the next), they are also vectors of modernity and the vessels in which Mongolian people, whether in rural or urban areas, travel through time. Thus, they live in cities through *lūijin* rituals, they integrate mass media through ghost tales, they homogenise an heterogenous contemporaneity through ritual poetry, and they deal with changing funerals through their horses’ reactions. What I think should be highlighted in Alevtina Solovyeva’s thesis is the idea and concrete demonstration that folkloric motifs and narratives about the invisible are not only a *reflection* of their social or natural environment, but also a *means of action*. They are, quite literally, a way of efficiently inhabiting an ever-changing world.

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