

## NEWS IN BRIEF

### INTERPRETATION, TRUTH, AND FEELINGS: LEGENDS AND RUMORS IN CULTURE: CONFERENCE AT THE ESTONIAN LITERARY MUSEUM, TARTU, ON SEPTEMBER 18, 2023

The conference organized by the Department of Folkloristics under the heading *Interpretation, Truth, and Feelings: Legends and Rumors in Culture*, focusing on the study of modern traditions, was held at the Estonian Literary Museum in Tartu. This one-day conference was dedicated to the 65th birthday of Eda Kalmre, the most recognized expert in contemporary folklore research in Estonia.

Eda Kalmre's main area of research is legends and rumors and their functioning in society. She is equally familiar with traditional legends and contemporary folklore. Therefore, in her analyses, the knowledge of old beliefs and legends creates a bridge between the traditional world and modern people. She has analyzed the ghost story about the Lilac Lady in the modern office, the old heroic myths juxtaposed with narratives about outlaws in the recent past, similar and different stories in connection with the sinking of the Titanic and the ferry Estonia, the dynamics of fact and fiction in popular ballads or in tales about an Afghanistan soldier, as well as in stories about food fraud. Eda's excellent monograph on post-war rumors, *The Human Sausage Factory: A Study of Post-War Rumour in Tartu* (2013), is based on interviews and historical archive documents and photographs. The collection of articles, *What a Wonderful World of Legends! Articles on Rumours and Legends* (2018), includes a selection of interesting approaches. The methods used by Kalmre are characterized by adherence to three principles: the dynamics of the text and context of folkloric phenomena, the rhetoric of truth, and the reliance on the discourse of social history. She regards the legend genre as relevant today, and believes that the source of its vitality lies in its ability to change and express itself in many different forms in culture.

The conference presentations were made by researchers whose topics were related to the aspects of folk culture of interest to Eda.

Semioticians Mari-Liis Madisson and Andreas Ventsel (University of Tartu) addressed the media panic in their short lecture titled "Who is afraid of conspiracy theories?", which in the circumstances of COVID-19, as well as energy and security crises, dealt with the fear of conspiracy that engulfed society. Using media criticism, the speakers found that conspiracy theories are not so pervasive that we could talk about mass psychosis. Based on academic studies, the picture is not so uniform, the popularity of conspiracy narratives on social media does not necessarily mean an epidemic of belief

in them. As social scientists, Madisson and Ventsel presented the descriptive term ‘phobophobia’ – a feeling that the collective fear and helplessness might have a dangerous effect on what is happening in society, as the created fear limits people’s ability to comprehend and makes them manipulable.

Liisi Laineste (Estonian Literary Museum, Tartu) and Anastasiya Fiadotava (Estonian Literary Museum, Tartu; Jagiellonian University, Kraków) analyzed the layers of political humor in their presentation “Opposite, but similar: Russian and Belarusian anti-government and pro-government political humor”. The experienced humor researchers, who in their articles observe the action mechanisms of humor in society, showed how jokes are used to comment on the views of strangers, thereby indicating opinion gaps in public space. The presentation was based on humorous reactions on polarizing conflicts (2020 protests in Belarus and 2022–... war in Ukraine), expressed in different forms. There were overlapping elements in anti-government and pro-government jokes. Pro-government humor had fewer hidden layers, but anti-government humor was more multi-layered and spread more globally.

Mare Kõiva’s (Estonian Literary Museum, Tartu) presentation titled “The Devil in Noah’s Ark (ATU 825): About variation and the search for truth” addressed the diversity of the episode of the villain entering the ship in different cultures and in different eras. The speaker, who is very familiar with the huge variety of legends, etiologies and myths, discussed the stories of the rescue of people and animals and referred to the attempts made at different times to prove the existence of Noah’s ark as a historical fact. At least 18 versions of the story of the devil entering the ship are known in Estonia. The tales have unraveled and interwoven with other motifs – keeping the ship’s construction a secret, the devil’s resourcefulness to enter the ship (e.g., by turning into a mouse), with various insect, fish, bird and animal etiologies unraveling around them. It became evident that in the Estonian tradition, the story of Noah’s ark and the flood myth are expressed in various types of folklore – in riddles, proverbs, legends, spells, humorous stories and in modern forms of folklore.

Alexander Panchenko (University of Tartu) studied a singular demonological legend in his presentation titled “The devil baby legend: Between ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’”. Panchenko, who is a long-term cooperation partner of Tartu folklorists in the field of contemporary legend studies, had already discovered the article “A devil is born (contemporary legend)” by the Russian ethnologist Vasili Smirnov, published in 1923. Smirnov relied on a specific alleged case of the birth of a devil baby but showed the background of the story in European folk tales and legends about the birth of Antichrist. The story about the devil baby circulated internationally already at the beginning of the 20th century and was related to medieval and early modern tales about blasphemy and contextualized in religious polemics of various kinds. The legend is presented in more entertaining contexts in modern times, and so it becomes possible to find both similarities and differences between traditional and contemporary legends.

On the basis of written stories sent to the Estonian Folklore Archives of the Estonian Literary Museum, Astrid Tuisk (Estonian Literary Museum, Tartu) addressed the question of how films shown in cinemas in the middle of the 20th century influenced children at that time and how watching films and games inspired by them were reflected in their later memories. Part of the title of the presentation was a quote from a reminiscent story, “An utterly brighter world’: Foreign films in the childhood memories of those who grew up in the 1950s”. The 1950s appeared to be an unusual time in the Soviet reality, as the so-called trophy films from the United States, Germany and other countries, released in the 1930s, were shown. They were totally different from Soviet films – in terms of topics, portrayal, ideals, characters, and sound. From the films, young viewers found inspiration for their games. Acting in this manner, they both consumed adult culture and shaped their own subculture.

Mare Kalda

## **TRADITIONAL CULTURE THROUGH A CAMERA LENS 2**

The second Estonian-Udmurt webinar titled “Traditional culture through a camera lens” was conducted in cooperation between the folklorists and anthropologists of the Estonian Literary Museum and Udmurt research centres over Microsoft Teams on 21–22 September 2023. The participants continued discussions about visual recording from the perspective of folkloristics and ethnology. Whereas the first seminar brought to the audience, in the course of two days, Udmurt films, video clips and video blogs, the second one started with the introduction of Estonian production; in addition, films about the Udmurt and Forest Nenets customs were also presented. The second seminar focused on small islands with their cultural richness, unique remote areas, viability of customs, sacral rituals, calendric customs, and spokespersons and other interesting personalities of local communities.

Recording of the visual side brings to the fore different aspects of culture, and we gain further information about what is happening around us. Since the cheap video cameras and recording mobile phones were taken into use, the number of recordings has increased considerably and possibilities for producing documentaries have widened, which has opened up new perspectives for research, yet has had rather little influence on folkloristic montages. The reason might be that visual opportunities imply special skills and different ways of visualisation, the existence of a message, yet a scientific system oriented to a specific type of articles is also a possible influencer. Filming helps folklorists to fulfil their tasks and also seek “intimate knowledge: knowledge behind the scenes, behind the masks and roles, behind the generalities and abstractions” (Cohen & Rapport 1995: 9).

Folkloric recordings are important in terms of giving a voice to vernacular views and the observation of the behavioural side, symbolic signs and rituals, which result in an in-depth view of local life. Due to the multiplicity of phenomena and processes worth recording – the core of culture, intersubjective circumstances, dynamics of cultures (different cultures evolving in the same place), smaller and endangered cultural regions and groupings –, it is appropriate to discuss the selection principles of the filmed events, the ideal relation between the objective and non-judgemental documentation and author’s views, and whether it is ever possible to gain objectivity. The roundtable discussion highlighted some issues that have repeatedly been in the centre of attention during decades, yet their revision under new circumstances seems to be relevant – for example, whether and how good a script an anthropological film needs and what is the difference between an anthropological film and a film based on fieldwork. Discussions on both days also focused on involving the film-maker in a ritual activity as a temporary member of the community, which would somehow allow them to be part of intimate events. However, there are situations in which gender issues restrict access (men’s participation in women’s inner circle activities and vice versa, which could be an unsurpassable obstacle,

for instance, in the case of religious events). The issues discussed included rules in sacred places and for filming rituals, access to events prohibited to strangers, camera as a means of making one unnoticeable and justifying participation in inner-circle events, as well as issues related to the sides of life which must not be recorded.

Visual recording of Kihnu culture has a long history, starting with the documental reconstruction *Kihnu pulmad* (Kihnu wedding, 1956), led by Eduard Laugaste and completed in cooperation with the University of Tartu film laboratory. The author wanted to record, as an educational film, the chronology and plot of the traditional wedding, in which the wedding is staged and reconstructed on the basis of older descriptions, whereas the action takes place within the framework of the 1950s' everyday life. The recording creates an illusion of a real ceremony. This visual language is in contrast to Mark Soosaar's film *Kihnu naine* (Kihnu woman, 1974), which was a turning point in Estonian visual anthropology and documentary film. Mark Soosaar's films recording life on Kihnu and other small inlands are definitely gems of our culture, although the philosophical and theoretical interpretation of his work and the Kihnu series still lies ahead. The seminar participants also discussed Mark Soosaar's film *Kihnu mees* (Kihnu man, 1986), which raised acute problems and received critical reception (about ethics and other problems in filming see Rütitel 2000). The film focuses on life on Kihnu Island after the liquidation of a millionaire collective farm and its coercive merger with Pärnu collective farm at the time when sea fishing restrictions slacken, red tape thrives, and the loss of jobs causes emigration. Lack of perspective leads us to ask whether it is possible to preserve our own language and culture amid interventions and coercive changes in the way of life. These issues are topical in Estonia also today, as administrative changes occur, schools and libraries are closed down, and loss of jobs has actualised the survival of remote and less-protected areas. Soosaar's films produced during half a century show to us changes in nearly all the permanent elements: the sea, occupations, folk costumes, singing culture, physical living space (houses, streets, objects), the relationship between nature and humans, and children as the symbol of bright future. The film *Kihnu lapsed* (Kihnu children) produced in 2018 completes the series with optimistic messages. Mark Soosaar's films are characterised by a strong vision, aesthetic language, acute problems, and interesting cinematic narration, on which he also willingly shared his personal views.

The first insight into Aado Lintrop's films was given through *Maarjapäev Petseris* (Assumption Day in Pechory), completed in 2018. Lintrop has made 29 filming expeditions to Finno-Ugrians and Estonians, and he is one of the most productive film-makers-researchers. The presented film is a rare document of the renovated and restored Petseri (Pechersky) Monastery and Setos' relationship with their religious centre. During the recorded celebrations of the Feast of Dormition of the Mother of God, we can see, through the camera lens, the monastery's preparations for the holiday: making a path of flowers on the eve, followed by carrying the icon from the Church of Dormition of the Mother of God to St Michael's Church, and the procession led by a cross around the Pechersky

Monastery. The camera observes how Setos participate in the church holiday, how they meet the new archimandrite Tikhon (Georgi Shevkunov), which is followed by the Setos' festival *Perride kokkotulõk* (Family reunion, Rus. Semeinye vstrechi) in Radaja village. The film ends with visits to the fading centres of Seto culture in Petseri County: Kulye Church, graveyard, and Jatsmani school, which back in the day was an important educational centre in the neighbourhood.

The introduction to the documentary trend was followed by Eva Toulouze and Liivo Niglas's film *Jumala tegemine Pariisis* (Making of God in Paris, 2013), which records Forest Nenets reindeer breeder, poet and activist Juri Vella's (1948–2013) journey to Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris and an order given to him in his dream to return there. Vella performs a ritual with the icon bought to his wife from Notre Dame, wishing to turn the icon into God. The film is special due to Vella's visit to Notre Dame and the following ritual, in which he also involves the filmmaker Liivo Niglas.

The tandem's second film from 2013 demonstrates the common prayer *Элен вöсь* of Trans-Kama Udmurts in Kirga village, Kueda region, Perm Krai. The prayer was restored in 2008 and today Trans-Kama Udmurts from many villages gather there. The film has recorded the cooking of sacrificial food, dressing of priests and preparations for the prayer, the prayer itself and other stages of the crowded ritual connecting generations. This is a documentary striving for ethnographic precision.

Anastasia Shumilova introduced some films made by the Izhevsk video school Tamga and by the Udmurt clip design lab PUS. These are modern innovative short films from 2022 and 2023, emphasising the aesthetic side. Novel techniques are used to introduce tradition – customs, folk costumes, jewellery, singing culture – and the target group of the films is the city youth.

Mare Kõiva and Andres Kuperjanov spoke about how folklorists used the simple VHS-camera in everyday fieldwork in the 1980s and at the beginning of the 1990s and what kind of films they produced. Despite poor technical opportunities, the camera enabled folklorists to speed-record both the current situation of older customs and new phenomena, including new-religion practices. The first of the amateur films – *Sügisloits* (Autumn spell) – introduces the main features of the solstice ritual performed by the followers of *maausk* (faith of the earth) and the well-known healer Vigala Sass, which took place in the ritual place in Triigi village, Kaarma municipality, Saaremaa Island.

*Kadripäev Tartus* (St Catherine's Day in Tartu) follows the preparations of sixth-grade girls for St Catherine's Day, their visits to homes in different districts of the city and their dialogues with the members of the households. In November darkness of the then closed city with a military airfield, the mummers and their singing are accompanied by the noise of military aircraft. Both films were produced by Mare Kõiva and Paul Vesik.

The film *Täheonu* (Uncle Starman, 1997) by Andres Kuperjanov and Mare Kõiva follows the everyday life of Hugo Raudsaar, whose 100th birth anniversary was in January 2023. The legendary populariser of astronomy, who carried out astronomical

observations, continued this work in Petzval Tower in Tartu even 20 years after the Tartu Observatory had moved to Tõravere. As an enthusiastic populariser, he built a village observatory next to his home farm in Võru County and a model of the universe in its vicinity.

Based on films and clips of different genres, problems were studied both from the inside and outside. The filming and observation experience of the webinar participants opened up and explained nuances of the cultural context, helped to find answers to controversial issues and/or identify new ones, illustrate the current state of heritage culture, and determine the limits and resources of visual recording.

It is planned to publish the discussions of roundtables and overviews of the history of anthropological films as articles.

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Mare Kõiva

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