

Introduction

The present volume is the result of long-term collaboration, which has included joint research on folklore, vernacular religion, and school lore, along with mutual fieldwork and participation in IT-related projects, made the compilation of this collection possible. Until 2023, this work was carried out within the framework of the Folklore, Religiosity, Language: Transcultural and Vernacular Aspects project, which analysed religious belief and traditional ideas and their relationship with contemporary global challenges, their mutual influence and the consequences of this symbiosis. The project explored the most popular religious and traditional beliefs and ideas, those who promote them (actors), their place and influence on vital aspects of individual and social life.

We chose the format of a collective monograph to present our results. The main research questions investigate the identification of key themes within the selected topic and, depending on the material, give a comparison of our findings with parallels from neighbouring or culturally related regions. Documenting this highly variability material was essential, as was identifying common motifs that appear across linguistic and cultural boundaries. The methodological framework includes source criticism, comparative folklore studies, ethnolinguistics, and cartographic approaches. Additional methods comprise ecosemiotic readings (examining the human–environment–other-than-human relational landscape), quantitative trend analysis of digital corpora (frequency, co-occurrence, and temporal patterns), and, to a

lesser extent, network-analytical approaches to the movement and transformation of motifs. The studies are based on maximally comprehensive text corpora.

The world's languages carry with them the mythologies that grow out of them; each contains both universal themes and widely shared conceptions, as well as unique and locally specific knowledge that invites further exploration. Mythology and cosmovision explore cultural generalisations about the structure, origin, and development of the world, as well as explanations of the emergence and evolution of humans, other beings, and various other phenomena. They also encompass certain norms and obligations embedded within a given social and spiritual system. It has been assumed that members of specific social groups share mythological knowledge and perspectives (Haverkort & Hiemstra 1999). In the 20th century and thereafter, it has often been argued that a once-coherent mythological system has survived only in a fragmentary form in folklore, customs and language (cf. Tolstoy 1995–2012). Rather than accepting this widespread assumption at face value, we propose a more precise formulation: every language and every culture possesses mythologies that change over time and vary from person to person.

Contemporary mythologies are reflected in books and media productions, as well as in fairy tales, legends, songs, and other folklore genres that have entered these media environments. Certain elements also continue to circulate in short-form expressions such as anecdotes, proverbs, curses, blessings, charms, prohibitions, and prescriptions. Mythological conceptions shape large parts of lifecycle customs, calendrical rituals, magical practices, healing magic and the techniques associated with them. Archaic world-views and corresponding practices remain a vital foundation not only for contemporary media creativity and professional cultural production but also for the continued resonance of older beliefs within today's societies and belief systems.

In recent decades, numerous national mythologies have been published, along with influential reconstructions of the mythological systems of major cultural regions (for example, Greek, Roman or Germanic) and language-family-based syntheses (Slavic mythologies, Finno-Ugric mythologies, Germanic mythologies). There are also large-scale attempts to map mythological motifs globally and to reconstruct their historical movement and diffusion (Berezkin 2025; Tolstaya 2002; Tokarev 1980–1982).

Scholarship on both Estonian and Belarusian mythologies has a long history. Nineteenth-century Baltic German authors produced early interpretations, which were later followed by the innovative synthesis created by Matthias Johann Eisen in the early twentieth century. His multi-volume *Eesti mütooloogia* (Estonian Mythology) combined extensive material sent in by a nationwide network of correspondents with the most current mythological research of his time, especially contemporary German scholarship.

Oskar Loorits, whose monumental work began with the three-volume study of the Livonian vernacular religion in 1926–1928, developed his views on mythology from 1932 onward through a series of individual studies, culminating in his large-scale synthesis published between 1949 and 1957. His work drew on a far more diverse body of material and incorporated newer theoretical perspectives. Intermediate contributions by Ivar Paulson (cf 1971) offered literature-based, phenomenologically oriented overviews, while Uku Masing (1995) produced a printbased synthetic account.

In contrast, the complex process of shaping Belarusian mythology, discussed in Anastassiia Gulak's article in this volume, culminated in the publication of a mythology encyclopaedia (San'ko & Valodzina *et al.* 2004).

One of the chapters in this volume examines the aetiologies of the first humans. Aetiological narratives are closely linked to religious folklore and weave together several important features.

They represent both written and oral traditions, including stories inspired by passages of sacred texts. Like mythological narratives, they address the dualistic or singular creation of the world, various beings, and humankind. Aetiological motifs occur in local and regional cultures in the form of narratives as well as in verse and song. The formal characteristics of tales and songs indicate different periods of creation, yet they consistently reflect the particularities of the local natural environment, featuring local animals characteristic of specific regions.

From a folkloristic perspective, these narratives belong to several genres: primarily fairy tales and legends, dispersed across various story types throughout the international index. Creation stories recount the origins of beings, or phenomena and frequently incorporate humour or coarse comedy.

The international project on the aetiological motifs and themes of European folklore, initiated by G. Kabakova at the Sorbonne in Paris, brought together researchers from nine countries (France, Spain, Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Poland, Slovenia, Hungary, Bulgaria) (see Belova & Kabakova 2014). The project resulted in a collective publication as well as independent volumes and indices of ethnic motifs authored by participating scholars. Among these, we can mention the collection edited by Belova and Kabakova (Belova & Kabakova 2014, Belova 2004), and the contributions of Albena Georgieva, Florentina Badalanova Keller, Ilona Nagy, Elena Boganeva and Magdalena Zovchak, among others.

Work on national mythologies has inevitably led to the study of aetiologies as one of the expressions of cosmovision. For example, the cosmovisions and aetiologies of the small Livonian community were analysed by Oskar Loorits in 1926–1927. A significant contribution was made by the Lithuanian scholar Norbertas Vėlius, whose collections (1974) appeared both in Lithuanian and in English translation. Komi aetiological narratives have been published partly in Russian, but also in an excellent Komi-language edition

(Limerov 2005, 2012). In many traditions, aetiological materials have been copied into card catalogues and preliminarily organised.

The articles in this volume examine mythical characters, aetiologies, mythological perceptions of illness and healing, and the formation of mythological systems in great detail.

Katre Kikas examines an unusual media debate that unfolded in Estonia in 1890 around a folktale titled *Majaussi kasvandikud* (The Boys Brought up by the House Snake). The discussion began when schoolteacher Mihkel Kampmann published the tale in the newspaper *Sakala* and suggested that the names of its three protagonists – Rahurikkuja, Siniuss and Truuvaar – resembled those of the legendary founders of the Russian state (Rurik, Sineus, Truvor) mentioned in the *Primary Chronicle*. This resemblance triggered a lively exchange in several Estonian and Russianlanguage newspapers about whether the folktale might preserve historical information relevant to imperial origins. The debate illustrates how folklore, identity politics, and imperial ideology intersected.

Anastassia Gulak provides a comprehensive overview of the development of Belarusian mythology studies from the mid 19th to early 20th century, tracing the methodological shifts, key personalities and academic contexts that shaped the field. Hulak identifies three major phases – romantic mythologisation, empirical documentation, and positivist systematisation – and emphasises how Belarusian scholarship evolved in dialogue with broader European intellectual trends.

Elena Boganeva and Mare Kõiva examine Estonian and Belarusian aetiological narratives about the first people (Adam and Eve) and demonstrate that the two traditions share a striking number of common motifs. The article outlines the perception of aetiological stories among tradition bearers, the most prominent shared motifs and three major structural parts commonly merged into a single folk macronarrative: 1) the creation of the first people; 2) the fall and transformation of the world; and 3) life after expulsion from

paradise. Although these narratives paraphrase Genesis, they expand biblical episodes with local detail, humour, concrete explanations, and naturalistic imagery not found in the canonical text.

Nikolay Antropov, Timofey Avilin and Alena Boganeva examine the multi-layered and highly polymorphic portrayal of mermaids (*rusalka*) in Belarusian folklore, focusing primarily on their appearance and the strategies used to conceptualise them. Mermaids are depicted in highly diverse ways: as anthropomorphic beings, often longhaired, naked, and with disproportionately large breasts; b) as zoomorphic creatures, including beings with fish tails, wings, bird heads, as well as monkey, cat, rat or snakelike forms; and c) infernal figures with iron breasts, hands, claws, or even an entirely iron body, emphasising their connection to the otherworld or to folk notions of the undead.

Mare Kõiva provides a comprehensive overview of Moonrelated mythology and folklore among BalticFinnic, Baltic and Slavic peoples. Drawing primarily on linguistic, folkloric, and mythological corpora, her article examines conceptions of the Moon's origin, its role as a living or inhabited entity, and interpretations of Moon spots. The article compares numerous cosmogonic myths, including creation from a cosmic egg, astral marriage songs, and mythic genealogies linking the Sun, Moon and stars. It highlights both IndoEuropean and FinnoUgric parallels, showing how communities integrated Christian figures, local deities, and natural phenomena into their cosmologies.

Reet Hiimäe explores Estonian plague lore as a cultural formation shaped by Estonia's position between Western and Eastern European traditions. The study shows how mythological concepts, religious interpretations, and early medical theories – especially the influential miasma theory – interacted to shape local understandings of plague. In Estonian and broader BalticFinnic folklore, plague commonly appears as a mythical disease spirit,

a humanlike figure, animal (notably the plague goat), or moving object reflecting Western European patterns.

Tatjana Valodzina examines Belarusian ethnomedical rituals through the theoretical lens of rites of passage, emphasising illness as a liminal state in which a person's biological condition no longer aligns with their social status. Ritual healing therefore aims to restore harmony between the human body, community and cosmos. Many treatments imitate ritual death, using symbolic burial, isolation, silence or contact with items linked to the underworld (fur coats, straw, thresholds, grave sand). These acts temporarily strip the sufferer of their social markers and situate them at the border between worlds, enabling symbolic regeneration. The postliminal stage focuses on rebirth and spatial movement crossing thresholds, bridges, crossroads, or being carried along roads, encoding the journey between worlds.

Pavel Limerov examines the religious manuscript tradition of the Upper Vychegda region and the mystical Komi sect known as the Burs'ylys'ians or Singers of the Good News, active from the late 19th century into the Soviet period. Founded by Stefan Ermolin, a charismatic peasant preacher, the movement combined elements of Orthodox piety with Russian mystical sectarian practices such as ecstatic prayer, visions, and prophetic trance. Ermolin's success stemmed partly from his preaching in the Komi language at a time when many Orthodox priests no longer spoke it. Central to the sect were *burkyvzöm* (good listening) gatherings, daylong spiritual meetings that included prayer, biblical interpretation and singing. Ecstatic states, visions, and later the ritual of 'dying and resurrection' became important features. Women played a prominent role, especially as prophetesses after Ermolin's death. The article presents and analyses the *Söbiraitchöm rad* (Soborny Chin) manuscript, a liturgical text probably authored or shaped by Ermolin. Written in the Upper Vychegda Komi dialect, it outlines core theological principles: receiving direct knowledge from

God, inner mystical sight, spiritual hearing, and the centrality of the cross. Its 37 songs describe the believer's path from earthly conversation to direct communion with God.

We hope that the studies of Estonian and Belarusian vernacular religion presented here will be both engaging to read and a source of new knowledge, and that our respective approaches will offer fresh perspectives.

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On behalf of the authors, Mare Kõiva

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