

## NEWS IN BRIEF

### TRADITIONS AND TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE RITUAL YEAR

The 11th Annual International Conference<sup>1</sup> of the SIEF (Société Internationale d'Ethnologie et de Folklore) Working Group on the Ritual Year, Traditions and Transformations, took place at the Kazan (Volga Region) Federal University, in Kazan, on June 4–7, 2015. 38 scholars from 11 countries (Austria, Bulgaria, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Lithuania, Netherlands, Poland, Russia, Sweden, and the United Kingdom) participated in the event.

For the first time the Working Group organised its conference in Russia, in the Republic of Tatarstan. One of the reasons was that the numbers of the participants from Russia and especially from Tatarstan and the Volga region had increased significantly. Therefore, rituals and feasts of ethno-local groups of the Volga region were discussed in more detail, and considerable space was given to Islamic rituals and rites in their present form. Another noticeable and important difference from previous conferences of the Working Group was the precise following of the theme of the conference; there were actually no presentations that would not fit into calendric and life cycle customs.

At the official opening ceremony, after the welcoming words of the conference organisers and the members of the Ritual Year Working Group, the audience was invited to a 'musical offering'. In this way the members of the Tatar folk musical group *Zhomga koen* ('Friday'), with Alsou Yenikeyeva as the director, designated their brief performance, which consisted of Tatar folk prayer-songs.

After this kind of symbolic blessing, the plenary session was opened by **Terry Gunnell** (Iceland). He presented the paper titled *The Origin and Evolution of the "Mountain Woman" (Fjallkonan) as a National Emblem in the Icelandic National Day Ceremonies and Other Contexts*, in which he suggested his version of the origin of this image. The so-called "Mountain Woman" (*Fjallkonan*), dressed in Icelandic national costume, gives a speech every year, on the Icelandic National Day (17th June). One may assume that this tradition has a long history, but in fact it was invented in the late 19th century. The image of *Fjallkonan* has its roots in the legends about powerful female spirits of the Old Norse poetry and romantic depictions of the Icelandic nature; it also corresponds with the folktales collected two centuries ago. The author considered the theatrical background of the female figure and the process of formation of this personification of Iceland, which embodies old traditions of the country on the National Day.<sup>2</sup>

**Helena Ruotsala** (Finland) continued with the issues of the modern development of tradition and presented a paper titled *The Role and Meaning of Fictive Rituals in Cultural Tourism*, in which she shared her experience as a researcher and a participant in the rituals performed by the ethnic minorities of the Far North for cruise tourists.

**Ildikó Lehtinen** (Finland) in her paper *Ritual Practices as Representations* shared her ideas on the metamorphosis of the contemporary feasts as elements of continuous tradition. While analysing the case of the spring commemorative rituals of Mari people, the author showed how the ritual meaning moves far away from authentic models, and the very festival develops into an attractive cultural and ethnographic event.

Plenary lectures outlined the main directions in the study of various festive traditions which were presented during the sessions. The presentation *Midwinter Masking: Place and Identity in an Ironwork Community* by **Marlene Hugoson** (Sweden), who used archival as well as field data of her own, demonstrated, on the one hand, the preservation and conservatism of the carnival in the village of Gimo (central Sweden), and, on the other hand, the evolution of new components in it, for instance, images of Swedish or foreign politicians. All the costumes for the event are traditionally made of materials at hand; they are never bought. The gender division is respected during the preparatory process: women and girls sew and knit costumes for themselves and men with their sons use 'male' materials such as iron and boards, and make different masks, mechanisms, and creatures. Thus, the tradition is passed on from one generation to the next and the carnival is still very popular.

**Žilvytis Šaknys** (Lithuania) aimed his paper titled *Ethnic and/or Confessional Aspects of a Holiday? The Lithuanian, Polish, and Russian New Year in Vilnius* at revealing the main characteristics in the perception of this state holiday, which is a day off even in the post-Soviet period. Although the author mentions some peculiarities of the New Year party held by Russians in Lithuania (celebration according to the Moscow time, a greater interest in the very New Year festivity compared to other feasts), there are no pivotal confessional differences of the celebration between three ethnic groups.

**Ksenija Klimova** (Russia) also touched upon New Year and other celebrations. In her paper *Transformations in Traditional Modern Greek Calendar Rites* she focused on a few festivities of the modern Greek ritual year and their contemporary transformations. According to her observations, New Year celebrations have preserved the obligatory St. Basil's cake baking with a coin and fortune telling, and this rite has its roots in the earlier times. Meanwhile, girls' fortune-telling (the prominent 'klidon', performed in several Balkan countries) during the summer solstice is intentionally reconstructed. Today folk holidays include commercial components often aimed at attracting tourists.

The beginning of the year was investigated by **Maria Vyatchina** (Russia), who presented a paper titled *Holiday without Holiday: Deconstruction of New Year in Modern Islamic Culture*, in which she analysed the transformation of the New Year holiday in the Muslim community. According to the author, during the last two decades, religious people consciously avoid celebration of this holiday because of its strong associations with Soviet and secular calendar.

**Nina Vlaskina** (Russia) in her paper *The Calendar Holiday System in Southern Russia in Motion: The Late 19th – Early 21st Centuries* scrutinised the process of formation and change of the local feasts in the south of Russia, with special attention paid to the inventing of the ritual year customs during the Soviet period and the last two decades.

**Elena Uzeneva** (Russia) (*The Calendar Rites of the Bulgarian Muslims: At the Crossroads of Cultures*) continued the discussion of Islamic traditions and described the specific features of the calendrical circle in an Islamic Bulgarian village located in the Central Rhodopes, with the neighbouring Muslim and Christian population. The analysis of the interrelations between people of two confessions and their tolerant attitude toward differences in celebrations was based on the field data collected by the author.

**Tatiana Titova** and **Vadim Kozlov** (Russia) (*Holiday Framing as Reality: The Case of Pitrau (The Feast of Saints Peter and Paul)*) referred to the rituals of the Kryashens, who are an ethno-religious Christian group of the Tatars. They analysed the process

of creating festivals with the assistance of governmental and other institutions. The presenters took the case of Pitrau (the Feast of Sts. Peter and Paul), which is a patronal feast in one of the Tatar villages, to illustrate its transformation into the national holiday celebrated by the whole Kryashen group.

**Nailja Almeeva** (Russia) had also put the Kryashen tradition into the centre of her study, *Pentecost Ritual Activity of the Kryashens (Based on Ethnomusicological Field Research in 2013 in the Almetyevsk Region of Tatarstan)*. The author analysed archaic pagan rituals that are performed after the church service; these practices include mostly singing calendric songs which are aimed at magic rainmaking.

**Alsu Enikeeva** and **Guzel Stolyarova** (Russia) in their presentation *Modern Folk Festivals: Paths of Development and Their Specific Features* outlined the diversity of the pagan rituals performed by elderly women in Chuvash villages. Part of the rituals had previously been carried out by men, but later on, due to the lack of elderly men in the villages, went to women's competence. Still, male presence is being supported symbolically – women keep men's headwear under the arm. This is a typical way to substitute a person in folk culture, when a part of the clothes symbolises somebody (in healing, life cycle rituals, etc.).

**Sergey Rychkov** (Russia) presented a paper *Transformation of the Festive Culture of the Russian Rural Population: The Regional Dimension*, describing the celebration of *Karavon*, which is now the official festival in Tatarstan and is limited mostly to musical performances and a market presenting folk crafts. A set of funny touristic souvenirs was demonstrated, so as to make the audience acquainted with the local creativity.

**Tatiana Minniyakhmetova** (Austria) made a presentation *Sacred and Calendrical Rituals in the Annual Cycle: A Comparative Study*. Using her personal observations of the calendric festivities of Udmurts, she showed the importance for rituals to be performed in the process of their preservation. In the Soviet period, ideological prohibitions, change of the traditional places and time for the rituals led to the transformation of the traditional meaning, resulting in its full oblivion.

**Svetlana Suslova** and **Larisa Donina** (Russia) in their paper *Folk Costume Traditions in the Modern Festive Culture of the Volga-Ural Tatars* outlined the main trends in the folk costume making for performing authentic rituals, staged dance performances, fashion industry, and symbolic (identification) purposes. The researchers stressed the point that people who pretend they are making clothes resembling the authentic ones do not often ask the opinions of ethnographers. As a result, in their works, elements of different times and places appear together.

**Rozalinda Musina** (Russia) spoke on *The "Religious" and the "Secular" in Contemporary Family Ceremonies of the Tatars in Conditions of Islamic Renaissance*. She characterised the specifics of the Tatar spiritual revival, which she introduced as "rites and belief" (*obryadoverie*). She said that the naming ceremonies, circumcision (*sunnat*), and *Nikah* (marriage with the participation of the mullahs), which were mandatory in the Tatar villages during the Soviet period, are now even more widespread. The changes the author has investigated are both quantitative (the percentage increase in the performing of such ceremonies) and structural (the system of offering gifts changes, as well as the tradition of inviting guests, and the place for performing rituals, which moves from houses into mosques and other Muslim religious buildings or into public places – cafes and restaurants).

**Matteo Benussi** (United Kingdom) in his paper *From Ritualism to Self-Restraint: Halal Lifestyles and Business among Muslims in Tatarstan* raised the issue of the Muslims' food as one of the most notable characteristics of religious identity. The author analysed the ways in which the concept of 'halal' is being rapidly commercialised: it has been picked up not only by food manufacturers but also advertisers, and 'halal' as a notion now characterises all the positive properties (such as 'pure', 'right', 'own'), extending its lexical compatibility very widely (up to the 'halal' bank).

**Irina Sedakova** (Russia) spoke on the traditional for the conferences of the Ritual Year Working Group topics, which reveal the parallels between annual and family ritual cycles. The scholar presented a paper titled *Sacred Time in Slavic Childbirth Rituals: Traditions and Transformations*, in which she outlined the main trends of the sacred 'ritual year' of pregnancy, and also showed how today the most traditional ideas and practices (concealment of pregnancy, prohibitions and recommendations) change and convert to the open, public sphere. Pregnant women wear tight clothes; on Facebook they announce their pregnancy, etc. They even organise a party (baby shower) with many guests who come with presents for the baby. This custom originates in the USA and has become very popular. In Russia, it is known as minus birthday, before birthday, or stork day.

**Rasa Paukštytė-Šaknienė** (Lithuania) in her paper *Family and the Ritual Year in a Contemporary Lithuanian City* reported the results of her study enquiring into the citizens' perception of traditional customs. According to her field research, people regard as traditional those phenomena and rites that have been transmitted from one generation to another, and they also designate as traditional the festivals they celebrate together with their family rather than with friends.

**Elena Iugai** (Russia) in her presentation "*Therefrom You Cannot Hear Speech. Therefrom You Cannot Receive a Letter*": *The Letter-Message in Russian Funeral Lamentation* carried out a textological analysis of the lamentations performed at funerals and on the days of annual commemoration of the dead.

**Lina Gergova** (Bulgaria) in her paper *Russia and the USSR in the Bulgarian National Calendar* touched upon the complicated problem of celebrating the historical events associated with Russia and the ambiguous attitude towards them in the Bulgarian society. Even the central historical event of the official ritual year, which is the 3rd of March (Day of Liberation from the Ottoman rule), is thoroughly revised today, and is negatively evaluated by some Bulgarians.

**Liisa Vesik** (Estonia) in her presentation *The Evolution of Valentine's Day in Socialist and Post-Socialist Times* investigated the gradual shifts in the meaning and function of this holiday from the day of friendship and close ones to the day of love and romance.

**Arūnas Vaicekauskas** (Lithuania) presented the paper *Aesthetics and Invention of Rituals: Visual Aspects of the Folkloric Ritual Year in Contemporary Lithuania*. He showed that nowadays the trend is not to invent a whole ritual complex, but rather certain elements designed to correspond with the tradition recovery, on the one hand, and the need of society for vibrant festivities, on the other.

**Skaidrė Urbonienė** (Lithuania) (*The Visual Aspect of Sacral Monuments' Consecration Festivals in the 20th – 21st Centuries*) described in detail the main stages of consecration of new Christian monuments and their decoration with flowers. The lecturer paid special attention to the recent aesthetic innovations in Lithuanian culture of veneration.

**Bożena Gierek** (Poland) (*Transformation in the Polish Festival of Harvest*) examined harvest celebrations in towns, where the event may acquire a religious (Catholic) or secular (institutional) accent. She stressed that these events do not receive decent responsiveness from the mass media, except for the local newspapers.

A number of presentations demonstrated new directions in the studies of the Ritual Year Working Group participants.

**Andres Kuperjanov** (Estonia) in his paper *The Relationship between the Folk Calendar and the Folk Astronomy Heritage* used vast archive material to talk about the role of stars in the vernacular time definition and weather forecasting.

**Alexandra Ippolitova** (Russia) in her paper *Rituals of Herb-Gathering in M. Veljiakov's Manuscript of the 1890s: Transformation of Tradition* characterised her valuable archival findings. She interpreted the detailed instructions of when, who, and how can approach the herbs, how to dig and pick them up, and indicated prayers and charms that follow these actions.

**Mare Kõiva** (Estonia) gave her presentation on *The Ritual Year of Domestic Pets: Zoo-Folkloristics*. The scholar revealed the significant role of pets in modern society. People treat them equally to their family members, and congratulate their pets on calendar and family holidays, giving them special presents.

**Nadezhda Rychkova** (Russia) in her presentation *The Festive Component in Work-Related Activities of the Russians and the Tatars* made an attempt to compare her research materials of the traditional working customs and practices in the Russian villages of the Volga region and the new data on the modern corporate professional holidays. The comparison of these materials showed obvious change in perceiving the notions of labour and holiday, and, correspondingly, the whole system of values.

**Svetlana Amosova** (Russia) presented a paper titled *Narratives about Blood Libel in Latgale: Traditions and Transformations*. She introduced new field data and showed the spatial distribution of the narratives, describing the idea of furnishing blood for baking the unleavened bread (matzo) and other accusations against Jews for the ritual murder mainly for medical purposes.

For the first time, the conference on the Ritual Year arranged a Skype-session, so that those who did not come to Kazan could deliver papers and partake in the discussions. The session included two presentations on the Muslim folk traditions in Bulgaria: **Evgenia Troeva's** *The Tyurbe (Tomb) of Enihan Baba – Ritual Locus of Muslim Bulgarians in the Central Rhodopes*, and **Margarita Karamihova's** *Dynamics of the Muslim Ritual Year in Post-Socialist Bulgaria*.

**Petko Hristov** (Bulgaria) presented a paper *Celebrating the Deserted Village: The Constructing of Local Identity and the Ritual Process in Post-Socialist Bulgaria and the Republic of Macedonia*, in which he analysed the most recent data on the performing of the typical Balkan rite of Kurban. **Ekaterina Anastasova** (*“Return” to the “Traditions”: Identity and The Ritual Year in Bulgaria*) spoke on the complicated construction and modern modification of certain annual festivities such as March 8, Annunciation, and Mother's Day.

In the same Skype-session, **Morgana Sythove** (Netherlands), who presents herself as a practising priestess of Wicca, shared her views of *Neo-Paganism as a Cultural Phenomenon in Europe*. She provided the participants with the data on the distribution and variety of Neo-Paganism in contemporary Europe.

All the presentations were followed by lively discussions. The participants were particularly interested in the research methodologies (usage of Internet data, importance of virtual communication for the research purposes, etc.). At the closing ceremony of the conference, Terry Gunnell summarised the basic theoretical assumptions of the papers presented. The renaissance of the traditional ritual year is closely connected with the designation of identity, which is often implemented through the reconstructed (or even invented) costumes, performances, singing and dancing. Commercialisation and ethno-cultural tourism support the revitalisation and spreading of folk culture and often take the form of officially organised festivals. Professor Gunnell particularly stressed that at the same time, unfortunately, the knowledge of experts in different fields (historians, ethnographers, folklorists, linguists, musicologists, museum workers, etc.) often remains unexploited.

In addition to discussing a wide range of topics related to the innovation, change, adaption, and adoption, with regard to the traditional and modern ritual year, the participants of the conference gained some valuable insights into the unique customs of the Tatars and other ethnic groups who live near Volga. Scholars also learned the ways in which different religious groups manage to live together peacefully, with mutual respect for each others' world views and cultural backgrounds. Besides the conference itself, they participated in a memorable excursion to Russian Orthodox churches and monasteries (one of them a former Gulag labour camp) on Volga and an authentic Sabantuy festival, which took place in a Tatar village in the countryside.

The conference papers will be published in the 11th volume of the Working Group series, *The Ritual Year*.

The conference in Kazan was followed by the next one in Findhorn (Scotland) in January 2016.<sup>3</sup> The forthcoming academic meeting of the SIEF Working Group on The Ritual Year is included in the programme of the 13th SIEF Congress, *Ways of Dwelling: Crisis, Craft, Creativity*, expected to be held in Göttingen, Germany, in March 2017.

Irina Sedakova

## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> The presentation was very interesting and full of inspiring ideas. It has been translated into Russian and will appear in *Zhivaya Starina*, Vol. 4, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> See the review: McKean, Thomas & Sedakova, Irina 2016. Regulating Customs: The 12th Annual International Conference of the SIEF Working Group “The Ritual Year”, Findhorn (Scotland), 8–12 January 2016. *Revista română de sociologie*, serie nouă, anul XXVII, Nos. 1–2, pp. 151–154.

## DOCTORAL DISSERTATION EMITTING POSITIVE ENERGY

### **Kristel Kivari's dissertation *Dowsing as a link between natural and supernatural: Folkloristic reflections on water veins, Earth radiation and dowsing practice***

On June 10, 2016, Kristel Kivari defended her doctoral dissertation titled *Dowsing as a link between natural and supernatural: Folkloristic reflections on water veins, Earth radiation and dowsing practice* at the University of Tartu.

The dissertation includes five studies from the period 2012–2016. The first two introductory chapters explain the structure and objectives of the dissertation, give an overview of the practice of dowsing, and refer to research done so far. The structure of the dissertation is well organised and logical and the introductory part unites the following five research articles into a consistent whole.

The author gives an overview of dowsing for mining purposes and for discovering water veins. A relevant question is asked about to what extent this topic could be placed in the context of religious tradition. In this respect a special role is given to legends as carriers of this tradition. It is positive that the author has noticed the role of legends in spreading knowledge. This offers a possibility to continue studies, as stories related to dowsing keep emerging, and besides, such stories themselves also deserve examining, either within scientific or folk religious discourse.

This subject is highly topical at the moment. Kivari has discussed today's practices reverberating in people's activities, as well as attention from the media. Besides, detecting energies and using the dowsing rod and the pendulum are popular also in the sphere of business: tourism, training courses (identifying positive and negative energies, quests for improving personal welfare, etc.). Today the observation of water veins and earth radiation – as many other spheres – is a hybrid phenomenon, attracting the knowledge and performance of several levels of different fields. The author has noted and highlighted in the dissertation how peculiar approach complexes emerge simultaneously: folkloric, vernacular, and deliberately science-based. This is intervened by people's knowledge of folklore, their self-perceptions, and subjective interpretations, which people try to market through their authority or charm or promote otherwise. Their activity always finds response and followers, but also opponents and sceptics. These discussions, performances, and stories deserve an analytical approach and examination. It is explicable that the author emphasises that her research focuses mainly on verbal expressions – most probably due to her respect for folkloristic research tradition. And yet the dissertation clearly reveals a competent approach to the research object as a specific practice.

Kivari has also questioned the analytic distinction between the outsider's and insider's point of view. The author defines the etic and emic perspectives, drawing on the book *Text, Context and Performance: Gagauz Folk Religion in Discourse and Practice* by religion researcher James Kapalo, published in 2011. However, these approaches can boast a long history. After these terms had been coined by Kenneth Pike, a behavioural psychologist and linguist (Chapman & Routledge 2005: 206–207), distinguishing between the emic and etic perspectives has been part of cultural studies to a smaller or larger extent. In folkloristics these types of research models took root in the 1970s–



*Kristel Kivari.  
Photograph from private collection.*

1980s, above all, through the works of Lauri Honko and Dan Ben-Amos.

Highlighting this aspect means, among other things, also self-positioning of the researcher. The reader can easily find an answer to the question about how Kivari in the role of a researcher is related to the scholars interested in the topic as well as practitioners. Both the opponents of the dissertation had also prepared relevant questions, which were answered by Kivari in an honest yet academic vein.

I am of the opinion that the researcher's personal engagement in the material under study enlivens and even animates the writing. The advantage of the dissertation for the reader is that the author has been able to express in academic language the perception and body-related feelings experienced by people while dowsing or coming into contact with Earth energies, etc.

Kivari's approach is likable, emphatic towards her informants and respectful, yet objective towards the studied material. In places, however, she seems to turn into an advocate of described events: the third article in the dissertation, titled "Esoteric lore in Kirna Manor and magical epistemologies" seems to be nearing the borderline.

The dissertation presents an observation significant in terms of folkloristics (and also of vital importance), concerned with the developments and changes in legend content. Kivari maintains that "the need to interpret and re-interpret one's environment" (in the second article of the dissertation, titled "Water veins, energy columns and health issues: Expressions of vernacular religion") creates new stories associated with the places charged with special energies. While speaking about water veins and bringing examples of their impact on human beings, discussing the possible effect of Earth radiation and the use of the dowsing rod and pendulum both by specialists and laymen, the environment is made meaningful in various ways. When creating local stories people want to include significant places and events in the narratives they tell. Finding and experiencing water veins and energies provides new material for it. The fact that the explored processes have been placed in vernacular religion instead of coherent religious ideology yields conceptual sustainability to folk belief studies.



Opponents are always tempted to speak about things missing in the dissertation, not those dealt with. Maybe the materials in the Estonian Folklore Archives would have deserved more detailed discussion? And although the significant works in the European tradition, for instance, in the context of the 17th century, are presented in detail, the older tradition of dowsing with its own peculiarities has been left rather invisible. Some of the treatments of Estonian material from the past would have deserved a synopsis of at least a few sentences but Kivari has only mentioned them passingly. Although special literature has been thoroughly and probably sufficiently elaborated, diligent browsing of bibliographies (not only those of folklore) would have yielded salient addition namely in terms of local tradition.

The dissertation published as the 24th issue of *Dissertationes Folkloristicae* is a salient research enriching folkloristic analysis. Due to the approach considering different aspects, the use of suitable analytical tools, and the unique interaction of the researcher and the research object, the dissertation *Dowsing as a link between natural and supernatural: Folkloristic reflections on water veins, Earth radiation and dowsing practice* has added essential and necessary new knowledge to cultural studies.

Mare Kalda

## References

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## CONFERENCE OF THE INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY FOR CONTEMPORARY LEGEND RESEARCH, Tallinn, June 28 – July 2, 2016

Amsterdam in 2010, Harrisburg in 2011, Gottingen in 2012, Lexington in 2013, Prague in 2014, San Antonio in 2015, and Tallinn in 2016 – these are the cities that have recently hosted researchers of contemporary legends, who persistently continue the tradition of annual meetings. This year researchers in this field from the Estonian Literary Museum were given the honour of organising the 34th conference of the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research (ISCLR). Eda Kalmre and Mare Kalda along with an efficient conference team had chosen as the venue to discuss contemporary legends a place in Pühavaimu Street, in the Old Town of Tallinn.

Year in, year out, the first call for papers has been similar in form: Proposals for papers on all aspects of legend research are sought, as are those on any legend-like tradition that circulates actively at present or has circulated in an earlier historical period. Extensive understanding of the sphere and its resulting interpretation have

taken shape during the years the society has operated. Some thirty years have passed since the innovative Sheffield meetings in the 1980s; during these years group identity and disciplinary history have been established. One of the founder members of the society, Sandy Hobbs, was also supposed to come to the conference, yet had to give up his plans. His and David Main's co-authored presentation, "The Vanishing Hitchhiker: Then and Now", was read by Véronique Campion-Vincent. The versatile and buoyant French colleague herself discussed how Native Americans serve as a source of wisdom in the context of alternative spiritual beliefs (New Age). Bill Ellis joined the conference via Skype, to be informed about his nomination as a recipient of the Linda Dégh Lifetime Achievement Award for Legend Scholarship.<sup>1</sup> The nominee greeted the conference participants in his characteristic witty style. The award has been handed out since 2015, and the first one was given to Gillian Bennett and Paul Smith, who were also involved in the establishment of the society and the Sheffield seminars. So far all the laureates, as well as Linda Dégh (1920–2014) herself, were and are researchers who have made an inestimable contribution to the study of contemporary legends, and whose works serve as the basis in discussions about these legends.

As a rule, conference presentations can roughly be divided into two: some of them deal with folklore related to famous personalities or major events concerned with many people, as well as variegated fusions of folklore and media news; some others focus on the activity of marginal groups or proceed from symbolic places. Narratives channel the main human fears and emotions, which surface in urban legends and are related to human existence, ethical choices, prohibitions and punishments, pleasures and disgusts, as well as dangers emanating from their own species.

Patricia Turner and Anastasiya Astapova, researchers in the field of political folklore, talked about popular interpretations of great things and personalities. Turner introduced the image of Michelle Obama and compared it with those associated with other symbolically charged females in politics. Astapova, based on her fieldwork in Belarus and on the Belarusian mass media, showed the interplay between the genres of rumours and jokes about presidential elections in non-democratic societies. Aurore Van de Winkel from Brussels explained the construction of French popular imagination created around the disappearance of the Malaysian Airlines flight MH 370. Rosemary Hathaway's presentation was induced by personal experience narratives about protest against the Vietnam War. Power relations, images of the enemy, conspiracy theories – these were the keywords of Zuzana Panczová's presentation about utilising the "West" and "East" dichotomy in the conspiratorial discourse in Slovakia, Alexander Panchenko's presentation about organ theft legends in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia, and Daria Radchenko's presentation about war folklore with a sensitive topicality in the context of the political crisis in Ukraine. Jeanmarie Rouhier-Willoughby's observations were concerned with the relationships between power and sacredness: based on interviews, she discussed GULAG trauma narratives, in which the massacre venue became sanctified.

A number of processes viewed in the context of contemporary legend studies manifest a symbiosis between the media (especially digital media) and the physical world. Websites present material shared and consumed therein, but which has intertextual connections with pre-digital era texts. Radvilė Racėnaitė had collected Internet memes that talked about Christian saints and God. Gail de Vos examined the image of the Norse god Bragi in contemporary popular culture. Carolyn Ware introduced the sentimental 'true' story

of a dog named Tank, which had circulated on the Internet, and brought out similarities and differences between the online versions of the story. Another 'pet presentation' by Mare Kõiva and Rahel Laura Vesik discussed the well-known Japanese story about a faithful dog and its later spread in the media. David Clarke ("The Role of Soldiers, Spies and Journalists in the Dissemination of WWI Rumour-Legends") and Filip Graliński ("Fortean, Urban Legends or Journalistic Copy Paste? Weird Stories in the Interwar Polish Press") analysed fabricated or rumour-news specially transformed into legends.

Special landmarks in the development of folkloristics as a field of science were dwelt upon by Christine Shojaei Kawan (methodological innovation in the folklore research by Walter Anderson), Eda Kalmre (urban legends and their collecting process in Estonia in the 1990s), and Carme Oriol and Emili Samper in their co-authored presentation about the strategies of collecting, archiving, and studying contemporary legends in Catalonia. Mare Kalda gave an overview of the more universal ideas of giving and receiving, based on traditional Estonian treasure tales. Elena Iugai discussed Russian beliefs, legends, and practices concerning money, and showed how the balance of good and evil was established in belief stories. The presentation by Rita Repšienė and Odeta Žukauskienė dealt with visual and narrative power of cinematic legends influencing life in so-called 'dead cities'. Mikel J. Koven explored how the figure of the antiquarian scholar in the film adaptations of M. R. James's ghost stories faces the situation where the past haunts the present. Theo Meder shared his experience of having followed the narrative riddle game of kwispel during the last ten years (see also Burger & Meder 2006), which has turned into a card game called Black Stories, in which the players are given hints by which they have to guess different urban legends.

For some time already, rumours featuring fear, anxiety, and suspicion, accompanied by manifestations of ostension and peculiar behaviour, have constituted popular spheres of contemporary legends. Peter Burger analysed legends about strangers abducting children in white vans, and compared news items, discussion on the web, and statements by officials. The paper by Anna Kirzyuk, however, focused on the Soviet variation of the persistent urban legend about dangerous black cars, circulating in the Soviet Union in the 1960s–1980s, and was based on the data collected in the course of the corresponding research project. J. J. Dias Marques talked about the reappearance of a legend known as "The Grateful Terrorist" in two different occasions in Portugal in 2015, after its last circulation some ten years ago. Andrea Kitta observed the development of Slender Sickness,<sup>2</sup> spreading from its initial virtual location to the physical reality of people (teenagers). Eleanor Hasken demonstrated the narratives posted on Alien Abduction Help Forum and Unexplained Mysteries Forum – places for people who have had some experience with aliens. The board of the society recognised her presentation as the best student presentation at the Tallinn conference. Reet Hiiemäe also explored a sensitive topic: she focused on contemporary beliefs about childlessness in Estonia and showed how childless people try to overcome their personal crisis. John Bodner's paper "Pot Labourers' Communication Ecologies: Rumour, Legend and Occupational Narratives among Marijuana Growers" was based on five years' fieldwork and showed narratives in a broader judicial context. Rae Muhlstock had studied the contemporary implications of the mythological labyrinth, especially the maze built in the Catskill Mountains, and showed how local people, rather than to be interested in the myth, were interested in merely the existence of the maze. Jan Pohunek in his paper on the phenomenology



**Figure 1.** Urban legend researchers with historian Ott Sandrak at Tammisspea erratic boulder.  
Photograph by Jan Pohunek 2016.



**Figure 2.** Theo Meder in the dual role of a presenter and game leader.  
Photograph by Meelis Roll 2016.

of haunted places presented examples of areas frequently mentioned in supernatural stories (abandoned houses, castle ruins, haunted forests, etc.) His attention was paid to the role of sensory experiences and different kinds of interpretations of space, which help to create stories worth telling.

The conference was supported by the Estonian Literary Museum and the Cultural Endowment of Estonia, and it took place within the framework of the research funding project IUT 22-5 (Narrative and belief aspects of folklore studies) and partly the Centre of Excellence in Estonian Studies (CEES). The 34th conference of the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research in Tallinn presented a valuable intermediate summary of the current state in this research field in the second decade of the 21st century. The abstracts of the presentations are available at <http://www.folklore.ee/rl/fo/konve/2016/legend/abstracts.pdf>.

In the late autumn of 2016, the next conference in 2017 was announced, which will take place at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, on June 6–10.

Mare Kalda

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See <https://contemporarylegend.org/prizes-and-awards/linda-degh-lifetime-achievement-award/receipient-1/>, last accessed on November 10, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> A special issue of the society's journal, titled *The Slender Man. Contemporary Legend: The Journal of the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research*, 2015, was published recently, and it includes five longer articles by Trevor Blank & Lynne McNeill, Andrew Peck, Jeffrey Tolbert, and Andrea Kitta, five shorter discussion points, and a book review.

## References

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