

Mikel J. Koven continued with filmic folklore, searching for the roots of horror film based on temporary Thai ghostlore, and the film as a model for cinematic storytelling.

It is clear that rumours and legends are closely connected to the political and social situation of a country, vanishing after the end of the conflict, but returning some years later. Nevertheless, some legends and rumors or legend characters are and remain deeply rooted in the memories and oral traditions of the people, as well as in the popular culture.

Mare Kõiva

## **MEDICA 2008: NARRATIVES ABOUT ILLNESSES AND THEIR TREATMENT**

Medica 2008, the fifth international seminar on ethnomedicine was held on 21 October 2008 at the Estonian Agricultural Museum in Ülenurme near Tartu, Estonia. The large number of participants present at the seminar was a proof that narratives about illnesses and their treatment truly interest people. The contemporary society has been successful in mediating to the general public a myth of health being a normal physical condition and illnesses as a threat to it. Thus, health care, healthy lifestyle choices and battling with diseases represent one of the most important themes of human interaction. We hear stories about illnesses and methods of treatment while listening to the radio at breakfast, we read about these in newspapers and magazines and come across them on television and at online websites. Narratives about illnesses and open discussions regarding their treatment form an inseparable part of everyday life.

The seminar was organized by folklorists and therefore there was very little discussion about specific diseases. The main focus of the seminar was on the representations of illnesses and their meaning in different contexts.

Mare Kõiva (Estonian Literary Museum) held the opening speech in which she introduced the online community of people suffering from diabetics at a medical portal [www.kliinik.ee](http://www.kliinik.ee). Eve Annuk from Estonian Culture Historical Archives discussed the different interpretations of the letters, and references to illness in these letters, by Ilmi Kolla, an Estonian poetess who died of tuberculosis at a young age. Piret Paal's (University of Helsinki) paper tackled the sociocultural significance of the concept of cancer in the illness narratives of Finnish cancer patients. Particularly the latter two papers allowed to conclude that for an individual the condition which is perceived as abnormal and which causes suffering is far more important than a specific disease with its official diagnosis and treatments. The suffering caused by illness is not only physical and it also has an effect on people's mental and spiritual condition and the general quality of life. Finding a way to express one's emotions regarding the situation is therefore highly important.



*Participants at the 5th International seminar on ethnomedicine Medica 2008.  
Photo by Alar Madisson, 2008.*

Defining an illness and the culture-specific interpretation of illnesses depends on specific time, circumstances and the social situation. Kristi Salve, senior researcher at the Department of Folkloristics, Estonian Literary Museum, argued in her paper that according to the practical beliefs of Vepsians, the first symptoms of an illness are the sense of ringing in the head and pain in limbs. While Vepsians have been called forest people, they either seek help from a home medicine box, house plants, or the local medical assistant. Airi Pekkola (University of Helsinki) discussed attitudes towards dental diseases in rural Estonia and Finland. According to Estonian and Finnish ethnomedicine people used to regard only pain, inflammations and tooth abscess as dental illnesses, and in healing they used substances which helped to relieve pain and cure inflammation. Kristel Kivari's (Archimedes Foundation) paper about *maa-alused*, elflike creatures in Estonian mythology, sought answers to questions about symptoms of illnesses which are related with a specific time, place and tradition, and with determining their origin. Why is it that modern people no longer catch diseases from the ground? Is it because we lack experience in this area or because we simply do not notice the direct connection between man and nature anymore? It is problematic to reconstruct certain aspects of diagnosis and the cultural meaning of a certain situation by using archive materials about illnesses. Nevertheless, Liina Paales' (doctoral student at the University of Tartu) paper about deafness and hearing diseases clearly demonstrated that deafness has a quite different meaning for the deaf than it has for the hearers and that deafness is regarded as a disease, that is something abnormal, by hearers rather than the deaf themselves.

Relying on archive material and posing modern research questions inevitably leaves a scholar in a complicated situation. The paper by American-born folklore researcher Frog (University of Helsinki, University College London), who explored the use of charms

and narrativity in healing rituals, emphasised that the former selective and context-defying methodology of folklore collection complicates the interpretation and understanding of the collected materials. The archive materials, on which Estonian ethnobotanist Raivo Kalle (Estonian Literary Museum) relied in his presentation, also lack vital information about plants: in order to be able to determine the plant discussed in certain materials, a scholar needs to rely on his or her imagination.

As mentioned above, illness is not only a physical ailment but it affects the state of mind and spirit. The highly informative paper by Ellen Pärn (Estonian Agricultural Museum), which celebrated the International Year of the Potato, discussed the health benefits of potato and busted several myths about the plant. Renata Sõukand (Estonian Literary Museum) introduced the use of herbs in making healing teas. The last seminar session tackled the various stages of medical history in Estonia. Kaarina Rein (University of Tartu) introduced the studies about diseases found in the soils in the surroundings of Tartu and the curative effects of the local water by Johannes Raicus (*ca* 1580?–1631), a Swedish-born Estonian scientist. The last paper was delivered by medical examiner Jaan Käsmel (University of Tartu), who discussed an interesting period in the history of Estonian medicine. The latter two papers emphasised the need for a comparative study of medicine and ethnomedicine, as the fields have developed alongside each other.



*Mr. Frog and Piret Paal at the Medica 2008 seminar. Photo by Alar Madisson, 2008.*

*News in brief*

Mare Kõiva summed up the rich and informative seminar day, noting that numerous narratives about illnesses and their treatment have been heard over the past five years, and expressed the wish of organizers and seminar participants alike that such meetings for scholars of folk medicine, ethnobotany, medical anthropology and medical history would continue in the future.

The Medica 2008 seminar was supported by the Estonian Cultural Endowment. The participants wish to thank Estonian Agricultural Museum and all the people at the Department of Folkloristics, Estonian Literary Museum involved in organizing the seminar.

Piret Paal