

## 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.