

BELIEF NARRATIVES OF SPIRIT-ANIMALS: A CASE STUDY ON ESTONIAN CONTEMPORARY FOLKLORE

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the images, communication modes, and belief narratives connected with spirit-animals in Estonian folklore. Firstly, the older (pre-twentieth-century) concept of the spirit-animal is described. Secondly, contemporary beliefs and experiences related to spirit-animals are highlighted. The paper describes to what extent the old local soul concepts have intermingled with the imported ideas of the spirit-animal and how narratives describing the verbal or non-verbal communication with a spirit-animal sometimes become part of life history narrating, supporting psychological coping with life stress. The author describes repeated elements in the manifestation forms (e.g. bears, wolves) and the behaviour of spirit-animals, contexts where they occur (in the course of rural sweat-lodge rituals as well as in urban settings, experienced and narrated by esoteric practitioners as well as schoolchildren), and tries to find out about their sources.

Keywords: belief narratives, contemporary folklore, new spirituality, spirit-animals

Often it is easier for people to connect with an animal, to have a pet for example – and they connect very well with their pet. It may be that they can connect with a spirit helper or ‘power animal’. Everybody has a power animal, but not everybody is conscious of it.

Shamanistic practitioner and teacher Jonathan Horwitz (2017: 16)

INTRODUCTION

Imagination has become an important research concept in the social and human sciences, and several authors represent the understanding that our societies, with their taken-for-granted presumptions, are socially imagined; also the boundaries between human and non-human realities are culturally established (cf. Traut & Wilke 2015 [2014]; Kouri 2018). In the 1960s the New Age movement ‘discovered’ shamanism and made it a major reference tool for its worldview – the shaman became an indication of a new understanding of humanity’s relation to nature, of the human ability to access spiritual levels of reality, and of leading a respectful life towards the ‘sacred web of creation’ (Stuckrad 2002: 774). Since then, elements of appropriated shamanism have been a steady part of the Western spirituality (cf. Welch 2002; Jenkins 2004). Similarly, a renewed interest in certain traditional or pagan European folk beliefs has emerged, stressing their close relationship with all beings of nature, including animals. According to a poll about religious views of Estonians, conducted in 2014, 61 percent of the respondents considered the local pagan earth religion (*maausk*) to be the proper religion for Estonian people (RSE 2014¹). Besides receptivity towards religious ideas related to nature, there is a wider openness towards various views, object-use, and behaviour related to protective magic (Hiimäe 2016; about views of angels as protectors see Uibu 2012) and esoteric teachings related to one’s inner balance and wellbeing; for example, 46 percent of respondents to a poll about religious views in Estonia expressed their belief in spiritual self-development (Saar Poll 2015).

In the twenty-first century, the concept of power-animals or spirit-animals, which has been shaped by the modern shamanistic imaginations of the previous decades, has started finding resonance in circles much wider than the New Age subculture, offering to the experiencers of this novel animal-human relationship an empowering pillar of identity and life-history narrating. This article provides a discussion on the formation of the concept of spirit-animal in Estonian culture – its perceived parallels with older (pre-twentieth-century) folklore, relationships with the wave of modern shamanism, and the functions of contemporary memorates describing the communication between the narrator and the spirit-animal. The article shows that, among other things, respective narratives are influenced by the simultaneously occurring shift of the status of pet animals in the Western societies – at times pet animals take over the role of spiritual protectors, thus obtaining a new cultural meaning through this imagined, lived, and narrated social interaction.

The theoretical backdrop for the analysis is set by folkloristic theories of narrative and belief, supported by the theories of the therapy value of personal

beliefs from the field of psychology and medicine. The data analysed here consist of topical interviews, questionnaire answers (e.g. from the collecting campaign School Lore 2018, from Estonian university students and their interviews with other respondents), forum posts (mainstream forums as well as more specific esoteric forums), and articles in the mass media collected mainly in 2018 (but to a lesser extent also during the preceding decade), containing approximately 100 personal accounts of spirit-animals. Narrators cover a wide age range (12–60 years old) and spiritual background (from people indifferent towards any religious or spiritual views to the ones frequently attending spiritual courses and having strong personal supernatural beliefs). There were both men and women among narrators, but for various reasons it was easier to find female narrators. As supporting material, some interviews with people who have attended courses of modern shamanism describe their worldview and its connection with the notion of spirit-animals. As for the concept of spirit-animal in older folklore, texts from the Estonian Folklore Archives serve as a basis. The analysis focuses on Northern European context and on the resonance of the spirit-animal concept in Estonia, as so far not much attention has been paid to the analysis of the structure and motives of respective memorates in folkloristics. Although research is available about beliefs related to spirit-animals in historical and current Amerindian communities in North and South America (e.g. Gossen 1996), only some general comparisons are made with this material in the present article.

CONTEMPORARY NARRATIVES ABOUT SPIRIT-ANIMALS: TERMINOLOGY AND PARALLELS TO OLDER FOLKLORE

In contemporary Estonian language use the main term used for a supernatural animal-shaped protector is *hingeloom* (spirit-animal or soul-animal) or *väeloom* (power-animal), in some rare cases also *tootemloom* (totem animal). In the majority of cases it is defined as an animal (or bird, insect) who, beginning from the first contact, will remain the spiritual guide and helper of a person, often for the person's whole lifetime. According to the narratives, the spirit-animal can occur in physical form as well as in an imagination, feeling or dream. In a few cases, however, a differentiation is made between more categories: the spirit-animal as the expression of the current emotional state of a person, which is constantly changing; the power-animal as the embodiment of the nature of a person; and the spirit-animal as a supernatural animal-shaped guide and helper who guides the person continuously. For example, one esoteric forum user writes in his post:

As I have had longer contact with this topic and dealt with it a bit, I first give here a clarification – spirit-animal and power-animal are not one and the same thing. The spirit-animal is inborn and it will remain the same for your whole life. Yet there can be several power-animals who may stay with us long but who may also change. (User 1; <http://pesa.valguseleht.ee>, 2016)

Yet another user in a women's forum stresses that such a distinction cannot be made:

Power-animal, protective angel, spirit-animal – these are actually all one and the same. We are talking about different functions of the same whole that still make up a whole. (User 2; <http://naistekas.delfi.ee/foorum/read.php?79,9496831>, 2009)

Only a couple of specific explanations make a clear distinction of three or four types of topical animal characters, for example, the following Estonian blog post:

The spirit-animal lives on the same physical level as the person – in the shape of a real mortal animal. The protective animal is an animal whose life has already ended and whose task is to guide and protect the person; such an animal may go to the next level in the astral realm and be born again into the physical world. Yet the power-animal is a personified and intelligent energy of the spiritual world and its favorite projection is a certain animal species. (User 3; <http://web.zone.ee/ilvi/nuudveidiloomatarkust.htm>)

However, as in most cases such a differentiation is not made in the vernacular reasoning and narrating, I will focus on the meaning of the supernatural animal-protector and use the terms spirit-animal and power-animal interchangeably.

According to the views of the narrators, the contemporary Estonian concept of spirit-animal or power-animal is mostly connected with the Native American (Amerindian) cultures. Although similar concepts of power animals and animal transformations exist in other cultures (e.g. several European countries; for India, see Lyngdoh 2016, for southeast Russia, see Bulgakova 2018), the majority of the narrators (around 70 percent) expressed the opinion that the concept is related to the Native American culture. Fewer narrators claimed that communicating with a spirit-animal is an ancient Estonian tradition. Only a few narrators added that, to their opinion, the concept is related to shamanism in a broader sense, including also Siberian shamanism.

As for the actual parallels with older folklore, in pre-twentieth-century Estonian folklore texts, flies, butterflies, bees, sometimes also mice or certain birds were called with the same name – spirit-animals (*hingloom*), and they were

perceived as the embodiments or manifestations of a person's soul. According to respective legends and folk belief accounts, these spirit-animals usually do not communicate actively with humans and have no protective function – as is also the case in several other European cultures. Below are some typical Estonian archival texts:

The souls of old maidens go into certain birds. Their souls can't find peace after their death, they have to fly in the shape of birds and scream.

(E 8* 9, 9 (23) < Saaremaa, 1909)

Sometimes the soul comes out of the mouth of a sleeping person in the shape of a mouse. Sometimes you can observe it also in the person's body – the mouse is moving. It is called the "life mouse".

(E 8* 2, 91 (298) < Rakvere, 1909)

There are also wide-spread traditional legend plots about people whose soul goes out of their body during sleep with the aim to bring to the owner certain goods (rye, milk) or to cause harm (e.g. destroy cornfields in the form of a heavy whirlwind) as in the following sample text (belonging by its migratory main plot to the Guntram legend type).

There was a rich farm-owner but nobody knew how he had got his goods and treasures. Someone saw him sleeping and turned his head into another direction. Soon a bee came and started flying around. Some men turned the body into the initial position. Immediately the bee flew into his mouth. The farm-owner woke up. Now they understood that his soul went around in the form of a bee and gathered goods and treasures.

(ERA II 58, 12/3 (2) < Vändra, 1933)

According to some texts, the soul-butterfly flies away before a person dies and comes back after the death of the person to visit relatives and his or her previous home. It is forbidden to kill this insect because otherwise the soul of the person would get lost. Yet, according to some folklore records, the eating of respective insects is advisable in the case of illness or other problems because it is a means for obtaining spiritual power. According to some folklore texts, cranes or certain water birds are depicted as the souls of ancestors but usually no dialogue takes place between them and the living. There are only a few charm texts that aim to send these birds further away, so that they would not spread the harmful energy of the otherworld (Kilp 2000; more about the Estonian traditional soul-concept see Looirts 1949: 289–365).

Since the 1990s, when esoteric teachings and rituals connected with Native American culture reached Estonia, the concept of spirit-animal as a protector, helper, and spiritual guide of a person has spread in Estonia not only in esoteric

groups but (since approx. the 2010s) also in the mainstream internet forums, in quizzes circling in social media, and in children/youth folklore. Although the linguistic term *hingeloom* (spirit-animal) remained the same and a number of narrators referred to the perceived continuity of the tradition of the spirit-animal concept, claiming that it was well known already in pre-twentieth-century folklore or even in the mythical pre-thirteenth-century pagan times, a comparative analysis shows that there are only a few consistent connecting points between the pre-twentieth-century folklore texts and contemporary spirit-animal narratives. Thus, contemporary narratives and beliefs related to spirit-animals can rather be analysed as a phenomenon of modern Western spirituality.

THE SECOND COMING OF SPIRIT-ANIMALS: MODERN WESTERN SHAMANISM AND CONTEMPORARY APPROPRIATED SPIRITUALITY

In the 1960s, when the New Age movement became fascinated with shamanism, the phenomenon soon became known in academic parlance as ‘neo-shamanism’, or ‘modern Western shamanism’, although most shamanic practitioners today do not see themselves as followers of ‘core shamanism’ or neo-shamanism (the latter being used as a scholarly umbrella term for a multitude of contemporary shamanist philosophies and activities) but of shamanism that they perceive as genuine (cf. Stuckrad 2002: 774). ‘Core shamanism’ that formed the foundations for most contemporary Western shamanism was founded by American anthropologist and shamanic practitioner Michael Harner (1929–2018) who, according to his own explanation, elaborated – based on participant observation and literature – what he felt to be the cross-cultural common denominators of shamanism. Thus, core shamanism comprises an eclectic range of beliefs and practices that involve methods for attaining altered states of consciousness and communication with the spirit world, stressing that every human has helping spirits, the most important of them being the power-animal (see DuBois 2009). Among other things, Harner (1982 [1980]: 42–43, 68) describes ways of detecting one’s power-animal (e.g. a shaman takes a journey to the Lowerworld, brings back the power-animal the patient has lost, informs the patient about his or her power-animal and blows it into the chest and to the fontanelle in the top rear of the head of the patient; a couple of such rituals were also mentioned by Estonian informants). According to modern shamanistic teachings, when a power-animal is restored to a person, they feel better immediately, and then gradually experience power flowing into their body over the next few days. The main techniques for creating contact with one’s power-animals are part of the

basic course of core shamanism that is regularly taught also in Estonia. For example, two influential shamanic teachers in Northern Europe, Jonathan Horwitz and Annette Host, have contacts with Estonian as well as other Nordic shamanistic circles, and attending Horwitz's courses was also mentioned in a couple of personal experience stories that came up during my interviews. Additionally, various Amerindian ritual masters who have visited Estonia and conducted rituals here have influenced the general understanding of shamanistic and Native Indian traditions in Estonia.

Further, it became clear from the narratives that after attending core shamanism courses or camps of Native Indian teachings (e.g. sweat-lodge rituals)², individual elaborations of the cooperation with the power-animal may follow – the initial contact with the power-animal may be a starting point for a long spiritual connection between the experiencer and the spirit-animal. Yet in other cases the connection can take place spontaneously, without the mediation of a shaman but triggered by an impulse derived from a reading or attending some other type of esoteric course or camp, which can lead to an unexpected and powerful first contact that in several cases has been called 'life-changing'. Some researchers point out that the results of the mythic imagination, such as mythic images, are 'true experientially' (Doty 1986: 15) or 'considered and experienced as real' (Siikala 2002: 52). Central to such a view is an understanding of knowledge, sociality, and culture as a form of imagination, acting and communication that includes human as well as non-human and supernatural actors (cf. Latour 2005: 64–65).

EXPERIENCES WITH AND NARRATIVES OF SPIRIT-ANIMALS IN A WIDER PUBLIC

In the Estonian national census of 2011, only 62 people defined themselves as shamanists. Yet the knowledge of the concept of spirit-animals has reached far beyond these circles of practitioners. There are increasingly many people who have attended a basic shamanistic course or a sweat-lodge ritual once or twice or just happened to read information about spirit-animals, thus obtaining at least a passive comprehension set of the phenomenon. At times advertisements circulate (e.g. in Facebook, mailing lists) that invite interested individuals to participate in lectures and workshops dedicated to learning how to communicate with spirit-animals. Additionally, topical books, magazine articles, and other sources of information bring the understanding of spirit-animals to even wider groups of recipients.

Parallely, mostly on specific esoteric forums, more detailed debates about the true understanding of spirit-animals take place (i.e., about how to get such an animal intentionally and what is the right way of establishing such a contact). In these discussions certain repeated models of competing for the authority of having information can be observed. For example, the author of one post on a dedicated esoteric forum claims that actually no contact-making with spirit-animals is needed at all:

THERE IS NO NEED TO GO AND GET YOU POWER-ANIMALS ON A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY!!!!!!! Every person has already 96 of them. But the connection with them has been destroyed – because of the shitheads of this planet. We need to recreate the connection with the side of antireality, and all these 96 will be available. Of course, it is easier to make a stupid ritual and bring you ONE power-animal. But why??????? (User 4; vaimumaailm.ee, 2008)

Another esoteric forum that mainly focuses on keeping contact with angels offers precise instructions for initiating communication with spirit-animals:

When you wish to get more closely acquainted with your power-animal, you need to invite it to you. You need to meditate and see what is shown to you. Often the animals that we like are not necessarily our power-animals. Imagine yourself in your heart to be in a beautiful place that is dear to you and ask the animal to come to you. (User 5; <http://pesa.valguseleht.ee>, 2010)

In longer narratives circulating in a wider public the first contact with the spirit-animal typically happens unintentionally, although the experiencers have previously had at least basic information about the concept. Thus the contrast between the – usually unhappy and hopeless – previous life of the experiencer and the life-changing contact with the spirit-animal builds the most powerful narrative axis (more about narrating of supernatural experiences see Valk 2015). Spiritual meaning-making of the contact with spirit-animals (or birds, insects) goes far beyond their physical appearance and the behaviour of respective animals that is observable in real nature. On spiritual contact level they often obtain human-like or even god-like characteristics, partly influenced by stereotypical features traditionally ascribed to animals, for example, in local paroemiological usage (strong as a horse, clever as a wolf, etc.; cf. similar thoughts regarding other animal lore in Voolaid 2008). Preferred are physically powerful animals that are related to heroic images of strength, smartness, wisdom (e.g., no rats as they do not carry positive associations) and animals that can actually occur in Estonian nature. In the available material just a

couple of foreign species were mentioned; for example, one coyote and one lion, and almost no mythical species, although there are some courses available in Estonia that teach also communication with mythical creatures, for example, unicorns (cf. Mahlamäki 2018). However, meeting unicorns was mentioned in a couple of Estonian blog posts and forum discussions, and an esoteric website mediates a prayer that contains power-animals and unicorns:

Dear spiritual guides, teachers, protective angels, Mother Earth, the Primal Source, archangels, karma angels, and my power-animals and unicorns, and all beings of light who support me – I ask you for support, help, and guidance. (<http://valguseleht.ee/valguselaegas>)

There were also combinations of spirit-animals and pet animals. As in welfare society the status and importance of pet animals more and more resembles to that of humans, a new mythological dimension can be observed – supernaturally protective pets (dead or alive) as in the following text:

Sometimes when I feel that something is going wrong, I talk with my dead cat in my bed in the evening, asking the cat to protect me and keep me safe. (KP, ID2006, girl, 14, Tartu, 2018)

In a couple of texts pet animals as protectors were mentioned side by side with deceased relatives, for example:

I know that in heaven my deceased relatives and my pet animals keep a protective eye on me. (KP, ID717, girl, b. 2005, Saue, 2018)

In the next text two pets – a cat and a fish – are attributed supernatural powers and protective abilities and they are interpreted as life-savers of certain family members.

I have a protector – a real animal, a cat. Just a year ago we still had this cat but nobody could believe that it was just a cat. It acted as if it was more than superhuman – it was very majestic, it cared for us a lot, hugged us, was the first to run to pick up the phone. When someone was ill, it jumped onto the ill spot on the body. It never carried its kittens with its teeth – it would have been too undignified... It looked like the mythical Egyptian cat Mau – in black and golden colour. My daughter was having complicated times in her life and then something strange took place in our garden; it seems that the cat energetically turned this stroke of destiny on itself. Around a week earlier we had found a dead rat in front of our gate – for me mice symbolize someone's death. I looked at this rat and mentioned the name of our cat. Later it turned out that it was a sign of

its departure – the cat lost its life in a fight close to our house – we don't know exactly with whom.

One more protector – a live fish. When my grandchild was ill and dying when she was two months old, I kept her in my arms and prayed and finally I felt that there was a turning moment; her breathing became better and she started to recover. Then I put the baby into bed. But in the morning I discovered that the goldfish was dead in the aquarium. There is a saying that when death comes to get someone, it would not go away with empty hands and our animals quite often sacrifice themselves. (Woman, 58, 2017)

Narratives describing contacts with spirit-animals may contain an active mutual dialogue, but they can also be limited to simply describing the appearance of the spirit-animal. The experiencer interprets the contact as the spirit-animal's willingness and ability to protect or support, based on non-verbal signs decoded, at least partly, on the backdrop of prior folkloric background-knowledge (cf. Hiiemäe 2016: 51–52). In the following sample text, the experiencer ponders about the species of her soul-animal and the impressive appearance of a male swan is interpreted as an answer to this non-verbalized question:

I have an experience related to this topic that really warms my soul.

I read a thread about soul-animals last week and started pondering about the topic. I didn't have a very urgent desire to find out which animal is my spirit-animal... I rather wished to read and explore more. Next day we and the children were by a lake close to home, where we went on a longer hike, and then we got some rest on a more remote part of the sandy lakeshore. And there it came – directly across the lake – a majestic male swan, so unbelievably beautiful. Directly towards us. Then it stopped a metre away from us and for a long while it looked me in the eye with its one eye, then it turned its head and looked with the other eye. I have never before had the honour of watching this bird so closely; it was a soul-warming feeling. Well, is it really so simple that you just ask and get the information immediately!? (User 6, woman; <http://pesa.valguseleht.ee/mittemateriaalsed-olendid>, 2013)

In the next account the lynx is described as a spiritual protector and the experience of sighting lynxes in nature and seeing a lynx who looks the narrator in the eye in a dream is interpreted as an evidence of their support:

M. – a female friend of mine – has always had a very strong connection with animals and she believes that the lynx is her protective animal. Several times has she met lynxes in nature, which is quite rare, and she

has also seen them in her dreams. For M., the lynx symbolizes keeping the mental borders stable, as well as self-confidence and being and remaining herself. In difficult times the lynx has often looked M. deep in the eye in her dreams, supporting her. (Woman, student, 20, 2018)

Thus, the experience is mediated in a narrative form but for the experiencer the core of the symbolic contact lies in direct experiencing of the imaginative, affective, sensory, and kinesthetic aspect of it (cf. a similar thought by Lusebrink (1990) regarding the therapeutic approaches using animal symbols).

SOCIETAL VISIBILITY AND ACCESSIBILITY OF THE CONCEPT OF SPIRIT-ANIMALS

As already mentioned, the narrators often describe their contact with a spirit-animal as unexpected but they are usually not totally unaware of the concept as in the recent decade it has become well visible in the Estonian media, having become part of the contemporary 'spiritual milieu' (about the term see Campbell 2002). Comparisons of Estonians and Native Indians as shamanic nations, spirited nature-lovers, and otherwise similar groups have repeatedly occurred in media interviews. Musicians Tarmo and Toomas Urb, who have been called the 'importers' of Native American culture to Estonia (e.g. Saagim 2008), because they were the ones who started organizing shamanistic camps and sweat lodges in Estonia in the 1990s, conclude in an interview: 'Estonians are genetically very closely related to Native Americans. In fact, we, Estonians, indeed are like European Native Americans.' Thus, according to them, the reason why Estonians should be interested in Native American customs lies in the need 'to revive our genetic memory' (Saagim 2008).

In a parallel manner, a (partly) idealized view of the Estonian traditional (pagan) folk belief stresses its close relationship with all beings of nature, including animals, giving a reason to call Estonia a post-shamanistic country and to still depict modern urbanized Estonians as 'forest people' who have lived in harmony with their animistic worldview since ancient times. These imaginations are probably one of the factors that have motivated the interest in spirit-animals in the form of appropriated sacred traditions derived and mixed from various cultures. As a matter of fact, there exist many pre-twentieth-century folk narratives that describe dialogues between humans and animals but they are quite far from the motives characteristic of contemporary narratives about the encounters of spirit-animals as protectors.

Anyhow, there are plentiful contemporary sources and models for the spirit-animal concept. First of all, esoteric literature often makes references to spirit-animals. Already in 2007 the book titled *Personal Power Animals: For Guidance, Protection and Healing* by Madonna Gauding was published in Estonian. The following interview text shows how the spread of respective information triggers individuals to experiment with finding one's own spirit-animal:

Woman: *I have tried to get in contact with my spirit-animal but I haven't succeeded.*

Interviewer: *But how do you know that such a contact is possible at all?*

Woman: *I read a book about voodoo magic and there was a description of making this contact but for some reason I haven't got in contact with my spirit-animal. However, I managed to get in contact with my protective angel.* (Woman, 29, 2018)

In a forum thread about spirit-animals one user comments on the experiences that another user has narrated about his spirit-animal, and mentions that he notices certain influences from Harry Potter books (see <http://www.para-web.org/showthread.php?tid=1043>, 2006). It is very likely that these popular books have indeed had an impact on the imagery of spirit-animals also in Estonian contemporary folklore.

Besides books there are numerous other media representations that have influenced these images. In media interviews it is not only healers or alternative therapists that talk about spirit-animals but also singers and artists; for example, at the opening of an art exhibition an interview was made with the artist Relska (Reelika Laks), who has depicted wolves in her pictures and commented that the wolf is her power-animal that she has been seeing in her dreams since her childhood (Keskpalu 2017). Online quizzes titled "Who is your astrological spirit-animal?" or similar (in English or in Estonian), which promise to reveal one's spirit-animal after having answered a few (rather random) questions, occur frequently in the social media and respondents comment on the results that they get from such quizzes, commenting in addition, for example, whether they agree with the result or imagine that they have some other spirit-animal. The combination with astrology is yet another evidence of the free-floatingness of elements from various spiritualities in contemporary globalized spiritual offer. Esoteric shops sell a plentitude of various goods related to the concept of spirit-animal, such as talismans and incenses; for example, an incense called "Protector" with the description of its effect: "Through the smoke of chamomile the ancient power-animal of women – the wolf – comes to protect you". Workshops for making spirit-animal talismans take place in some esoteric shops (for example, in January 2018, an esoteric teacher in Pärnu taught the participants

how to make a power object from bones, skins or feathers of animals/birds in order to obtain energy from spirit-animals). In addition to the esoteric workshops that offer to establish contact with spirit-animals,³ there is, for example, the company Hingeloom OÜ (Spirit-animal LLC) that advertises itself as an Estonian company offering funeral services, overarching the old soul concept and new spirit-animal traditions. In addition, due to modern mobility trends people bring souvenirs with spirit-animal symbolism from their travels; for example, one respondent describes:

This armlet that is adorned with figures of animals and the text saying that their spirits protect me is a gift from my husband bought from a workshop of Native Americans that is located in the mountains on the Canadian-American border. Already twenty years I have strongly felt the support of these animals on my armlet. (Woman, 61, 2017)

There are channels that also speak to the very young generation; for example, Great Eagle in the popular children's TV animated series *Yakari* is the totem bird and protector of the Native American boy Yakari, whom it aids with wisdom and advice. The Estonian version of this French series has been broadcasted on the Estonian state channel approximately a decade.

A significant marker in the visibility of the concept of spirit-animal was the Eurovision Song Contest's song "Spirit-animal" (2016), authored and sung by the Estonian singer Kerli, who repeatedly emphasized in media interviews that the song was inspired by her own spirit-animal who is the white tiger. In a newspaper interview Kerli compares Native Americans with Estonians, concluding that they are very similar in believing in the energy of animals and in the possibility of inviting animal souls in order to get access to their energies (Metsküla 2017). Further, she describes her own powerful contact with her spirit-animal in a dream:

It came to me in a dream where I stood on a balcony and invited it by singing. Then the white tiger came to me from the snow and jumped on me and embraced me. It was quite frightening but at the same time I knew that it was not dangerous. (Metsküla 2017)

Such a constant flow of background information suggests a potential possibility for supernatural experience and thus prepares ground for encounters with spirit-animals also for persons who otherwise describe themselves as sceptics. Narrative texts form an effective axis along which the polarised movement from total scepticism to the experiencing of the supernatural encounter takes place – comparable with similar introductions in many other legends – whereby the truth value of the experience is increased by the contrast between the previous

scepticism and the new physical reality (i.e., the person physically feeling, seeing, hearing the spirit-animal). Such sceptic introductions occur rather typically in legends depicting various supernatural phenomena. For example, in a blog an experiencer describes herself at the beginning of the narrative as follows: 'I'm very sceptical of the stories of magic and the zumba-mumba of healers-clairvoyants and prophets'. The narrative goes on, describing a short stretching massage sample that the experiencer received from a Thai massage specialist, which brought along an unexpected turn on experiential level:

And then... an interesting part started. As if bees were crawling out from below tree bark, something crawled in my back and on my hand and foot ...how to describe something that is indescribable – I got a vision (feeling at the same time how it was fondling my left leg) of a red-orange-coloured hairy cat. At the same moment I knew, just knew: see, it's my spirit-animal. Such a story. Weird but somehow very deliberating was this experience (?). I actually don't know what to do next with this information :) But at least I know – I saw my spirit-animal. Whatever it would mean :) (Blogger 1; <https://veraprima.wordpress.com/?s=hingeloom>, 2011)

Another experiencer similarly describes the strong physical sensuality of the experience, narrating how she went to a well-known Estonian shaman in order to get clarity in her life and during the opening of chakras and meditation suddenly her power-animals – the deer and the lynx – appeared:

First it was the deer and it left the feeling in my palms as if it had touched them with its nose. This feeling remained in my palms for long. The second meeting was with a lynx; I remember that I caressed it, it was nice. It was many years ago. (User 7; <http://naistekas.delfi.ee/foorum>, 2009)

Thus, a bright personal experience can turn general cultural information into personal knowledge and further into an experience-based memorate that can have a longer- or shorter-lasting influence on the experiencer.

BELIEF NARRATIVES OF SPIRIT-ANIMALS AND THEIR FUNCTIONS

In the collected material there are two main types of belief narratives regarding spirit-animals – narratives that mention the spirit-animal as having a general preventive and protective function, and narratives as part of life-history narrating and meaning-making of traumas, providing a more elaborated 'frame of reference for interpreting reality' (Luckmann 1967). It deserves attention

that memorate-type longer narratives of spirit-animals dealing with meaning-making of traumas and life stress are mostly narrated by not very young people. Similarly, they often originate from people who have a deeper interest in esoteric traditions and who have tried to practice at least some of them.

In the 2018 school-lore collecting campaign around 30 young people out of 3,717 described their personal spirit-animals. However, among these texts there were no stories connected with overcoming of particular traumas; the narratives were rather short accounts of getting the spirit-animal or becoming aware of it (in dreams, or just getting the right feeling after reading something about the topic, not specific rituals). The ‘finding’ of their soul-animal gave them the feeling of being protected and potentially helped in the case of difficult situations. Here are some examples:

I believe that every person has a soul-animal who gives them best orders what to do. (KP, ID1268, boy, 15, Võru, 2018)

Because my soul-animal is the wolf who is the symbol of courage and independence, I believe that through garnering support from the wolf I can cope better in life than with no support at all. (KP, ID1335, girl, 14, Võru, 2018)

Similar narratives were collected from a dozen students of the University of Tartu Viljandi Culture Academy.

The experience of getting or finding one’s spirit-animal is one-time, yet the narrative describing this event can be repeated endless times, stressing elements that are necessary or important namely in the given context or moment (e.g. identity, consolation). Thus I agree with the conclusion of Arnold Arluke and Clinton Sanders, who point out regarding the functions of mythic narratives: ‘Shoring up the normative order in any culture are attitudes and institutions that provide ways out of the culture’s contradictions by supplying myths to bridge them and techniques to assuage troubled feelings’ (Arluke & Sanders 1996: 82).

Some experiencers said that after the initial unplanned contact they developed methods for more controlled and directed communication or described spontaneous as well as directed contacts occurring parallelly. For example, one woman mentioned visualizations and shamanic journeys for intentionally contacting her spirit animals but added that the animals can appear also spontaneously during her meditations (woman, 58, 2017). In a few cases the narrators mentioned that they have a tattoo depicting their spirit-animal on their skin, reminding them constantly of its positive presence.

Below are some longer sample narratives (used with the permission of experiencers), followed by their short analysis. The first two examples show

how meeting with a spirit-animal is integrated into narratives describing the overcoming of a serious life crisis. In sample texts 1 and 2, characteristic elements contributing to narrative tension occur – an extremely critical personal situation as a starting point in case 1, and a relatively critical personal situation in case 2. The narrators have had previous contact with spiritual teachings: in case 1, the first contact with the spirit-animal was initiated by a shamanic teacher, in case 2 the contact occurred at the time of attending an esoteric school. Certain liquidity of tradition elements can be observed: in case 1 the shamanistic traditions of Native Navajos are combined with chakras (in yet another narrative a yoga breathing course was described as a starting point for the communication with the spirit-animal). Both narratives describe a movement from the situation of lack and unbalance to balance. First, there is clear manifestation of qualities that are missing (in the first case – love, change, movement towards personal security; in the second case – joy). The contact with the spirit-animal becomes a turning point towards a better life. By the end of the narrative the initial problem has been solved and the experiencers have a clearer life vision. In case 2, more meaning-making and identity-strengthening elements followed later in the course of the interview – after depicting the direct encounter with the spirit-animal memories of having been a Native American woman in a previous life came up, a close connection with Native American culture was described, leading to further participation in respective courses (e.g. camps dedicated to Native American culture).

Case 1: Stork as spirit-animal

As a rule, one shouldn't talk about one's soul-animal because with talking you dissolve your experience and its power will vanish. But I can still tell it to you because I know that you are a good person. In 1992, I was totally broken, I had had sexual violence experience in my childhood, I had had physical violence experience because I had landed in a violent partner relationship. I had two children. An Estonian artist invited me to a shamanistic course led by Jonathan Horwitz. My husband didn't allow me to go, thus the fact that I still went was my first act of confrontation. The shaman chose one person to whom to bring his/her soul-animal and also mediate to this person the spirit-animal's messages. At this time, I had many hypogastric problems, I had also had surgical operations – obviously these were related to my traumas. I had very weak self-confidence. And then all this group went to the underworld in a canoe in a vision and the shaman blew my spirit-animal into me through my heart chakra.

Then he told me about its meaning and about the meaning of nature, insects, living beings in general. This was according to the tradition of Native Navajos but it is surely also not unknown to Estonians. Thus, this journey went along a river and I saw a stork on the riverbank; it greeted me by the name and said: 'I have been waiting for you so long and I love you.' After hearing that I burst into tears, even in the night I woke up weeping, weeping my pain out of me. Until then I had been so broken both spiritually and physically – and then suddenly such an experience! This was a real experience of love. Thenceforth my life started to change. I didn't continue with this shamanic training but until today I have had this special relationship with birds, I admire them. In 1994, I put an end to my partner relationship, but this experience was the first turning point. Later I have brought spirit-animals also to other people myself. (Woman, 50, Estonia, 2018)

Case 2: Horse as spirit-animal

I have had a very close connection with the topic of the Native American culture – I realized later that I had been a Native American woman in my previous life! This summer I will also go to the camp in Estonia that is organized by real Native Americans. I have been in these camps several times and they are life-changing.

But already years ago, at the time when I attended a school of hypnotherapy, I got my soul-animal; it appeared to me in the form of a white horse whose name was Maximus. It was the time when I had a very difficult period; somehow I had lost all my cheerfulness. And then this horse helped me to find it again. It was so joyful itself, jumping around all the time, and think what a name it has!

Interviewer: Who is this animal then more particularly, a protector or rather a part of yourself or...?

Narrator: It is like a protector but it is also like a part of me. (Woman, 49, Estonia, 2018)

Case 3: Wolf, deer, and salmon as spirit-animals

Most narrators described just one spirit-animal, in fewer cases two or three were mentioned. The third sample text touches upon four spirit-animals, although one of them is mentioned very briefly. The experiencer is a frequent

participant in various esoteric courses – tantra camps, shamanistic courses and rituals, courses of massage techniques, workshops of ancient Estonian wisdom. He uses a respective vocabulary (e.g. ‘showing the path’, ‘consciousness of an eagle’) and symbols (e.g. interpretation of the wolf’s behaviour), knows ways for intentionally establishing contact with some of his spirit-animals. Thus, here the narrative is not built around a sudden and surprising first occurrence of the spirit animal (as in cases 1 and 2). Although in case 3 the contact with spirit animals is also related to coping with crises, here the presence and help of spirit animals is rather expected.

I have more than one spirit-animal... according to my understanding they are the ones who show me my Path. They have come to me through some journey (a shamanistic journey) or they have shown themselves in real physical shape, giving me a very strong spiritual-emotional contact. The wolf is the one who sits in my blood... I have met it in real life, on a forest path, and it always ‘shows’ itself when there is a conflict ahead – as if it is trying to say ‘fight as a wolf and I will protect you’.

The animal that gives me wisdom is a mixture of a deer and a maral. It appears when there are some unsolved problems or problems that I’m trying to solve at the moment. Yes, I think that it is actually subconsciousness that shows itself in a pictorial form. The one who shows itself quite seldom is the salmon. It shows that I have to swim with the current or swim against the current – depending on the situation. On a peyote-ritual there was – or I was – also the consciousness of an eagle but this bird has not shown itself any more. But yes, I can call them myself – on a longer journey in case I need longer guidance, or quickly when I need protection, a secure feeling, wisdom. My inner crises that are usually related to the splitting of my partner relationships somehow seem to hurt the wolf... it hesitantly stands on one spot and looks wounded. But yes, in these moments I’m more in contact with the wolf. (Man, 50, Estonia, 2018)

The third narrative does not have the same structure as in the previous two cases (i.e., moving from the ‘occurrence of a specific problem’ to ‘problem solved’) but is a continuum, equipping the experiencer with spiritual tools for the current and future life crises. Similarly, a young respondent describes her various protective animals having various functions. Unlike many other narratives that depict the strong physicalness of the appearance of their spirit-animal, the experiencer of the following case points to the role of conscious imagination:

I imagine two animals as my protectors: the butterfly and the tortoise. They are so-called ‘passive’ protective animals, it means that it is generally not

possible to communicate with them and they watch over you during the whole life. I also have an 'imaginary friend', a protective animal who is active – it is possible to communicate with it and it appears in situations when you need it (or you just want to communicate). (KP, ID1369, girl, 18, Tallinn, 2018)

CONCLUSIONS: MAINSTREAMING OF THE CONCEPT OF SPIRIT-ANIMAL

Belief in and narratives about spirit-animals are an example of contemporary vernacular lived religion. The aim of this article was to analyse the ways of talking about spirit-animal experiences. It became clear during the analysis that beginning in the 2010s, when the concept of spirit-animal as a protector, helper, and spiritual guide started reaching a broader audience in Estonia, certain characteristics of respective beliefs and images can be observed that are typical for many modern so-called 'liquid' belief phenomena (see more about the concept of liquidity of traditions in Bauman 2000, about appropriation of native/aboriginal beliefs in Welch 2002); for example, limited knowledge of the historical or cultural background of spirit-animal beliefs, stereotypization of characters, mixing of elements from different cultures.

It became clear that regarding biological (i.e. behaviour and habitat of respective animal species) or cultural details, the Estonian spirit-animals are relatively context-free – narrators often perceived their connection with Native Indian culture in general, without taking into consideration that there is no single homogenous Native American culture (in a few cases, though, the soul-animal tradition was brought into connection with a certain tribe, e.g. the Hopi Indians) or that there have been changes in these beliefs in various historical periods. There were only a few debates about the sources and cultural authenticity as in most cases the personal experience itself was already perceived as validating the narrative built around it (cf. a similar conclusion by Belenky et al. (1997 [1986]: 113) about the importance of special subjective experiences in the argumentations related to sources of knowledge).

The variety of animals occurring in the narratives was rather limited. The most popular was the wolf (around 75 percent), who was followed by the bear, deer, horse, and eagle. Still in a few cases butterflies were mentioned – maybe derivatives of the soul concept of the traditional Estonian folk belief. The natural characteristics and lifestyle of respective animals were not described (often probably even not much known) as these were not perceived as important in

this experiential and narrative context. The selection of narrative motifs was also limited. The main focus was on the interaction between the experiencer and the spirit-animal and on the positive outcome that followed. Shorter narratives only mentioned the species of the animal and the fact that it had the function of a protector. Longer memorates usually focused on describing the first contact with the soul-animal, the crisis situation that preceded the contact, and the powerful spiritual/psychological transformation that came along with this contact. Most experiences were situated in Estonian contexts.

As it followed from the interviews, the social or belief background of the experiencers and narrators can be quite different; however, more elaborated stories usually came from people with a history of at least some forms of spiritual seeking or practicing. Several authors have stressed that the majority of vernacular belief forms attract particularly women (Utriainen & Salmesvuori 2014), but there were also a number of male narrators who shared their stories about beliefs related to spirit-animals.

In accordance with the tendencies of hybridity and liquidity of traditions, summed up in the term ‘pick-and-mix religion’ (Hamilton 2000), it leaps to the eye that spirit-animals are often freely combined with other protective magic that derives from various cultural and religious traditions, as in the following text: “I wear a chain with a cross around my neck and I’m also baptized, and I have a protective angel who protects me but my soul-animals are surely the horse and the dog” (KP, ID1621, girl, 16, Võru, 2018).

An interesting feature was the functioning of the spirit-animal narratives as a tool of vernacular psychological and spiritual self-therapy (cf., e.g., with the studies of Al-Krenawi 1999; Eason & Colmant & Winterrowd 2009). It became clear from the narratives that colorful descriptions depicting the powerful experience enabled the narrators to identify with their ideals and to feel themselves as a more spiritually empowered person. Thus, respective experiences and narratives helped the experiencer tell themselves and significant others the story of overcoming a trauma that could sometimes become the axis of life-history narrating or a tool for future reference in problematic situations, working as a reminder and anchor of personal identity. However, testing in how far the mechanisms of respective beliefs could provide added value in official psychotherapy (e.g. through testing in how far self-reported improvements in the physical, spiritual, emotional, and cognitive dimensions have a lasting effect) remains the topic for another study.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research is related to the research project “Narrative and belief aspects of folklore studies” (IUT 22-5) (Estonian Ministry of Education and Research, Estonian Research Council) and was supported by the European Union through the European Regional Development Fund (Centre of Excellence in Estonian Studies).

NOTES

- ¹ See <https://www.ut.ee/et/uudised/uuring-eestlased-usuvad-vaimsesse-enesearengusse-maavalisesse-ellu>, last accessed on 4 October 2019.
- ² A group ceremony conducted in a small heated tent for healing and prayers, usually guided by a spiritual leader (e.g. a shaman).
- ³ To mention just a few examples: in February 2018, a workshop took place, which taught the participants how to get in contact with their power-animals in dreams and during spiritual journeys; in December 2018, a finalist of the popular TV-show “The Ordeal of Clairvoyants” gave a public lecture on how to get acquainted with one’s spirit-animal, teaching the participants how to communicate with the spirit-animal as one aspect of their subconsciousness.

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Interview materials in possession of the author

ARCHIVAL SOURCES

E = Matthias Johann Eisen’s manuscript collection at the Estonian Folklore Archives

ERA = Estonian Folklore Archives

KP = collection of school folklore of the archives EFITA (archives of the Department of Folkloristics, Estonian Literary Museum)

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