

**Estonian Folklore Institute  
Department of Folkloristics at the Estonian Literary  
Museum**

**MEDICA IV**

**ETHNOMEDICINE AND ETHNOBOTANY WITHIN  
CULTURAL CONTEXT AND EVERYDAY LIFE**

**INTERNATIONAL COLLOQUIUM**

**ABSTRACTS**

**Koke, March 23–24, 2007**

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## **Friday, March 23**

**9.00** – Departure from Estonian Literary Museum, Vanemuise 42, Tartu

**10.30** – Arrival at Koke, accommodation

**11.00** – Local sights tour

**13.30** – Lunch

**14.30–16.00**

**Symbolic Rituals and magical practice – Mare Kõiva** – Estonian Literary Museum

**Healing Skills as Group Folk Knowledge – Anu Korb** – Estonian Literary Museum

**Ethnomedicine of the Estonians – Ulve Pihlik** – Department of Pharmacy, University of Tartu

**16.00** Coffee break

**16.30 – 18.00**

**What Makes a Medicinal Plant: Analysis of Relations Between the Plant and the Disease – Renata Sõukand** – Estonian Literary Museum

**Can Environmental Conditions Affect the Chemical Composition and Medicinal Properties of Officinal Plant? – Julia Shilina** – Department of Botany, University of Tartu

**Naturalized Plants in Estonian Ethnomedicine – Raivo Kalle** – Estonian Literary Museum

**18.00** Dinner

**19.00** Poster presentations

**Anthropomorphic Figures in the Besermians' Modern Methods of Treating Illnesses – Elena Popova** – Izhevsk, Udmurtia

**The Role of Religion in Coping with the Trauma of Political Persecution: the Case of Estonia – Tõnu Lehtsaar and Heino Noor** – University of Tartu

**19.30** Herb gardener Katrin Luke shares her experience

**20.30** – Sauna

## **Saturday, March 24**

**9.00–10.00** Breakfast

**10.00–11.30**

**Bulgarian Folk Medicine as Common Heritage – Vanya Ivanova Mateeva** – Institute of Folklore Studies, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

**Illnesses and Treatment of a Pet in Komi Traditional Representations – Ljudmila S. Lobanova** – Folklore Department of the Institute of Language, Literature and History of Komi Science Center of Ural Division of Russian Academy of Sciences

**Suppressed Ethnomedicine. The Use of Complementary and Alternative Medicine among the Finnish Cancer Patients during the 20th Century – Piret Paal** – Department of Cultural Studies, Folkloristics, University of Helsinki,

**11.30** – Coffee break

**12.00–13.30**

**Impressions of Questionnaires on Folk Medicine – Ave Tupits** – Department of Folkloristics, University of Tartu,

**Local Traditions in Folk Medicine of Komi – Irina Ilyina** – Institute of Literature and History of Komi Scientific Centre of Ural Division of Russian Academy of Sciences

**Those Healing Iridescent Spring Waters – Marju Torp-Kõivupu** – Tallinn University

**14.00** – Lunch

**15.00–17.00 Discussion panel: Ethnomedicine and Ethnobotany within Cultural Context and Everyday Life**

**17.00** – Departure to Tartu.

## **LOCAL TRADITIONS IN FOLK MEDICINE OF KOMI**

**Irina Ilyina**

There are several local versions identified in Komi folk medicine which have being formed under the influence of various ecological and socio-economic factors. Komi-Izhemtsy, the northernmost subgroup of ethnic Komi, who are engaged in reindeer husbandry, have a distinct assortment of medical ingredients and profound medical knowledge.

In the new ecological environment, the Komi-Izhemtsy have almost lost their traditional practices of using plants in medical treatment. Instead, they have enriched the medical assortment with by-products of reindeer processing, formulas derived from Nenets folk medicine, and also with the widespread use of moss as a medication.

The focus on reindeer husbandry in economy has had a crucial impact on the composition of medical knowledge, healing traumas being its primary area. High risk of trauma from hard work and nomadic life style in remote tundra areas required emergency medical skills from each reindeer herder, whereas routine veterinary practice in settlements facilitated the accumulation of knowledge in anatomy and also stimulated the emergence of new treatment methods.

Komi-Izhemtsy had a rational and pragmatic approach to medical explorations. For example, the magical means of treatment typical of other ethnic Komi groups were, in fact, hardly used in day-to-day practice, although they were known on the Izhma. The term “polas’sys” (“blowing”) which for the rest of the Komi identified a sorcerer, while for the Izhemtsy was a name for a chiropractor. Komi-Izhemtsy were skeptical of Nenets shamans and had critical attitudes towards shamanic rituals of repelling the “angry spirits of diseases”.

Yet, despite the indifferent and diminishing attitudes to the aspect of magic in medical treatment, Komi-Izhemtsy still nurtured traditional beliefs. Even tales about famous healers were constructed according to their ancient belief patterns. The character of a

chiropractor that provides treatment of a specific trauma is simultaneously assigned the features of a sorcerer typical of Komi mythology.

Recently, the cult of a legendary female chiropractor Marya Tandze, who practiced in the early 20th century in the area, has been formed. Such a cult might have common roots with ancestral cult in the Komi beliefs. Still, as it seems, present attempts to create a myth have strong political reasons, i.e. attempts of local intellectuals to find ethnic heroes in the past to validate the ethnic identity of Komi-Izhemtsy today.

Ethnic features can also be traced in the folk medicine of the southernmost group of Komi-of-Priluzje. Relatively highly developed agriculture in the area prompted the use of by-products of livestock husbandry and also crops in folk medicine. Here, we can observe a diversity of magical rituals in medical treatment. In addition, there are local variations in folk medicine related to the peculiarities of environment, local economy, and lifestyle. Over the last five years, a cult of medicine has been practiced in the area.

Owing to political processes, traditional views are used to artificially create a separate ethnicity to exaggerate the role of a specific ethnicity in the region.

## NATURALIZED PLANTS IN ESTONIAN ETHNOMEDICINE

**Raivo Kalle**

The number of species of chromophytes in Estonia varies to some extent. What makes the number so varying is the new species that may run wild, and may, but do not have to, integrate themselves into the local nature. Also, the number of species varies because of changes in the nomenclature and the division of species into a jordanon. It is estimated that by 1998 there were 1,538 indigenous species and 82 naturalized species growing in Estonia. Most naturalized species (51) run wild from cultivation, whereby 26 species are adventive, and the remaining five are known as a combination of the both (Kukk 1999: 64). In database HERBA, 421 species of chromophytes are represented together with 19 genera, which were not distinguishable by lay people, among them some of the biggest genera in Estonia such as *Taraxacum officinale* (165 species), *Carex* (69 species (76 with jordanons)), *Alchemilla vulgaris* (17), *Salix* (16 species). In addition, the list includes ca 20 species of fruits, vegetables and grains. Among them 19 species and 2 genera (2 species from *Spiraea* and 4 species of *Rosa*) of naturalized plants are known, constituting less than 5% of all species represented in HERBA. Most of them are plants that run wild from cultivation. The most popular representatives of naturalized plants are horseradish (*Armoracia rusticana*), pineapple weed (*Chamomilla suaveolence*), wild chamomile (*Chamomilla recutita*), chicory (*Cichorium intubus*), elecampane inula (*Inula helenium*), soapwort (*Saponaria officinalis*) and rose (*Rosa sp*) as well as butterbur (*Petasites hybridus*) and sweet violet (*Viola odorata*) the use of which has already been abandoned in folk medicine.

The paper analyzes the use of older naturalized medicinal plants in Estonian herbal folk medicine.

### **References:**

Kukk, Toomas. 1999. *Eesti taimestik*. Tartu-Tallinn. Teaduste Akadeemia Kirjastus.

## HEALING SKILLS AS GROUP FOLK KNOWLEDGE

Anu Korb

In this paper, I deal with the practical use of folk medical procedures and skills in the Ryzhkovo *Viru* lore group. Ryzhkovo is the mother colony of Lutherans in Western Siberia, and the group was founded around 1803.

I have collected similar material from other Estonian/Lutheran settlements in Siberia and based on this material it may be concluded that folk healing skills are still general group knowledge among Siberian Estonians today, not just the domain of a few individuals.

In Ryzhkovo, as among Siberian Estonians in general, the older folk medical procedures and the knowledge of healing words have survived longer than in their homeland, Estonia. On the one hand, this was necessitated by practical needs, on the other, the community has been in the sphere of influence of neighbours with relatively well preserved word magic skills.

In the *Viru* community in Ryzhkovo it is believed that healing skills and spells are accessible to and can be learned by anyone. Healing words have been passed on orally, but in later periods have also been written down. The multicultural and -lingual environment has facilitated learning the neighbours' healing spells in different languages. Translating words has been common, too.

The healing tradition among the Estonians in Ryzhkovo and in Siberia in general appears to be fading: the number of healers is diminishing, healing procedures are modified, the selection of spell types and texts is narrowing. Factors affecting the fading of the tradition include the long-term sociopolitical pressure on folk healers, forceful development of the national health care system, as well as the attitudes of members of the lore group, who traditionally found only healers of advanced age acceptable. The young people did not consider it necessary to learn healing words before they themselves had reached a respectable age. But by then, one part of the lore had been irrevocably lost.



## **SYMBOLIC RITUALS AND PRACTICAL TREATMENT**

**Mare Kõiva**

The paper discusses the popular methods of folk medicine and its applications, or healing with symbolic rituals. Symbolic rituals are strictly linked with temporal prescriptions and integrate formulae of verbal magic. These rituals were performed in specific situations, and the absence of them or their abandoning from use was interpreted as intentional malice and violation of norms, which may have caused the imposing of sanctions. Their sphere of use is clearly delineated: the aim is to ensure economic success and prevent natural objects or diseases. The prevention rituals include the magical cutting of cabbage rhizomes, grinding flies at St. Matthew's Day, binding the wolf's muzzle on St. George's Day or Good Friday, numerous rituals for repelling household parasites, but also keeping wild animals away from herds, especially young animals, chicks, or puppies. Numerous symbolic rituals were also used for preventing diseases, from acute pains and seizures to congenital children's diseases. The rituals' simple structure, ability to adapt, and psychologically convincing performance complemented practical treatment methods (treating with herbs, massage, etc.). It could also be noted that symbolic rituals follow the tripartite division of social rules: moral rules, legal rules and rules of practice. These are to be taken as major categories of the generic social norm, and their function is to help the realisation of basic norms.

# **THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN COPING WITH THE TRAUMA OF POLITICAL PERSECUTION: THE CASE OF ESTONIA**

**Tõnu Lehtsaar and Heino Noor**

The aim of the current article is to give an overview of the ways in which people survive trauma and cope with themselves. Among the ways of coping with oneself and one's life, faith was a very significant factor for religious people enabling them to bear suffering. The experience of the small group of respondents, who have suffered from political repression and violence, could be of instructional and supportive value to both the survivors and their families. It remains to believe and hope that God would keep us from further sufferings that put humanity and survival of the nation to the test.

## **ILLNESSES AND TREATMENT OF PETS IN KOMI TRADITIONAL REPRESENTATIONS**

**Ljudmila S. Lobanova**

The paper is based on archival and fieldwork materials. The treatment of an animal depends of the type of illness. At the first stage the cause of illness is determined. If a given illness has been caused by a trauma or a bruise, rational methods of treatment such as, for example, grass broths and ointments are applied. Special healing qualities were attributed to grasses by the sorcerer. Illness of an animal could be explained by the negative influence of a mythological creature – the spirit of a shed. In such cases, the following rituals were carried out: feeding a demonological character, coaxing/placating, adjustment of contact, in rare cases also expelling. In most cases illness is a result of malice or causing damage. The basic ways to revert malice are rituals involving smoke and water. The treatment/removal/expelling of damage was performed by people possessing supernatural abilities. The given ways of treatment are described as magic actions.

# **BULGARIAN FOLK MEDICINE AS COMMON HERITAGE**

**Vanya Ivanova Mateeva**

The aim of the reports is the specification and systematization of the data about Bulgarian folk medicine available in the archive collections of the Institute of Folklore Studies, the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. The paper interprets the models and collections of knowledge and skills of healing gained and passed down traditionally. This specific common heritage is modeled for an appropriate visual demonstration.

## **SUPPRESSED ETHNOMEDICINE. THE USE OF COMPLEMENTARY AND ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE AMONG THE FINNISH CANCER PATIENTS DURING THE 20TH CENTURY**

**Piret Paal**

My presentation demonstrates the use of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) among cancer patients in the second half of the 20th century in Finland. Complementary and alternative medicine refers to a group of diverse medical and health care systems, therapies, and products that are not presently considered to be part of conventional medicine (CDC 2004). Conventional treatment means that the diagnosed illness is treated according to the present understanding of Evidence Based Medicine (EBM). EBM is the strong argument for social health care in the debate with alternative medicine. Still, some methods used in conventional medicine have not been scientifically proved. These methods are based mostly on historical expertise and have been abandoned when new more effective methods become available. It is important to note that the historical expertise used by conventional medicine, as well as the methods of alternative medicine, originate in ethnomedicine or folk medicine.

Cancer prevention and treatment has improved rapidly in recent years. However, the reason why people at some stage of their lives develop these mutant cells is still out there to be discovered. In order to explain the occurrence of cancer, various theories have been developed by common people and also scientists and doctors. Some of these theories have proved to be true, while others still wait for more accurate research results. The need to explain things is characteristic of human nature. Cancer patients, who have written about their experiences, have given a grand selection of reasons why they might have fallen ill. I suggest that all these reasons are part of contemporary cancer mythology.

Among cancer patients there appears to be group of people who prefer to have power over their rehabilitation process. According to my evaluation, this group is most eager to use all kind of help available to defeat the illness. In my paper I will present the variety of CAM used by Finnish cancer patients. I will provide examples on how these treatments are strongly linked with contemporary understanding of cancer and its reasons.

## **ETHNOMEDICINE OF THE ESTONIANS**

**Ulve Pihlik**

A survey of the customs connected with the use of plants by prehistoric Estonians is observed on the basis of written information held in the Estonian Literary Museum in Tartu. About 140 species have been employed for medicinal purpose. The plants are arranged into ecological habitat groups, while the preparation and administrating a drug was described according to data available in the index files. An attempt is made to systematize the data according to the symptoms and diseases of specific organs into 54 groups.

Only a few species are referred to in the index files as poisonous. The list of poisonous species formed on the basis of contemporary knowledge includes a considerably large number of species that were used as medicinal plants by the Estonians. The aspect of magic also played an important role in folk medicine. The colour of flowers, the shape of plant leaves, the growing habitats of plants or plant names was considered during treatment.

It is likely that people sought help and relief from diseases by making use of various plants. Moreover, we suppose that a great number of plants were used against disorders that were especially widespread in earlier times. Therefore, the paper aims to compare the number of plants used to treat different diseases. It may be concluded that people had knowledge of both the local flora and possibilities of its medicinal use. Some of the plants used in the past are also recognized today, but several have lost their significance. It may be concluded that Estonians suffered mostly from the disorders of respiratory and digestive organs, rheumatic disorders, as well as from various traumas and pains. This may be accounted for by the effect of maritime and changeable climate, hard physical labour, and the low standard of economy and sanitation.

## **ANTHROPOMORPHIC FIGURES IN THE BESERMIANS' MODERN TREATMENT METHODS OF ILLNESSES**

**Elena Popova**

The article is based on fieldwork conducted in 1995–2006 among the Besermians (a small ethnic group in North-East Udmurtia, the districts of Jukamensk, Jar, Balezino and Glazov, and the Cheptsas watershed).

Among the methods of modern popular treatment of illnesses connected with infringement of existential taboos, some archaic notions and ways have been preserved by the Besermians, such as, for example, making special anthropomorphic figures called *babaj* 'baby/doll'. The tradition of sacrificing anthropomorphic figures is connected with some objects of a landscape in the vicinity of the village (e.g. a broad gully, a spring, crossroads). The Besermians believed that spirits "dwell" there and they have appeared after someone's tragic death or premature babies have been buried there. These places are well known to the local villagers. The spirits inflicted illnesses on everybody who dared to tread on their dwelling or was not far from that at noon, sunset, or night. Infringement of interdictions was considered the cause of heavy mental frustration and skin diseases. One or two anthropomorphic figures (the man and the woman) were used to treat an illness. Each figure was made of three new rags and was approximately 5–6 centimeters in height. It was forbidden to use a needle; fabrics were tied up only by white thread. The figures had no faces. These anthropomorphic figures were accompanied with food-stuff (e.g. bread, cereals, flour) and objects of everyday life (e.g. wool, fabric, a coin) which put in a white rag or a paper. It was believed that "the spirits" demand food in that way. The figures were made in the presence of the patient and were to the place where he "had found the illness". According to folk beliefs, having received a victim the spirits left the person in peace from then on. During fieldwork, material about several local features and different kinds of such anthropomorphic figures has been collected.

The materials associated with this cult practice reflect the system of traditional beliefs about the person and some illnesses resulting from the infringement of spatial and time taboos.

## **WHAT MAKES A MEDICINAL PLANT: ANALYSIS OF RELATIONS BETWEEN THE PLANT AND THE DISEASE**

**Renata Sõukand**

Potential medicinal plants of Estonian ethnomedicine make one third of all local flora. What makes a plant a medicinal plant? The source of this analysis is material collected at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that came as response to folklorist Jakob Hurt's appeal from 1888 to collect local folklore. In the interpretation of 833 texts there are an infinite number of possible variations. It is particularly evident while trying to link any folk plant name with a particular species, as there are several, often tens of possible botanical "representatives" of a given popular name. So there is some data, according to which every unit corresponds to several unknown ones; furthermore, the other aspect, the disease, is also unknown (as it may have several interpretations, owing to inadequate medical diagnoses at that time). Indeed, it is quite difficult to analyse the material according to pharmacognostical or ethnobotanical methods as either of them require correspondence with the botanical nomenclature.

In the paper, the data will be first analysed according to the division proposed by Finnish folklorist Ilmari Manninen, who suggests that Estonian folk medicine is based on three principles: the similarity of the plant to the disease, the relation between the origin of the plant and disease, and the potency of medicine. Indeed, these principles do cover only less than half of the texts on Estonian herbal folk medicine. However, the first two categories of I. Manninen strongly overlap with the first two sign categories of American semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce (e.g. origin of plant = index and similarity = icon) and the third category fits in the concept of symbol of Ch. S. Peirce.

Does this division cover all the material and which category is larger? What does it tell us? These are the main questions that the paper is addressing.



## **CAN ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS AFFECT THE CHEMICAL COMPOSITION AND MEDICINAL PROPERTIES OF OFFICIAL PLANT?**

**Julia Shilina**

The chemical composition of officinal plant depends on genotype and upon the season. New scientific results show that environmental conditions are important as well. Synthesis of all chemical compounds of officinal plant is determined by genotype, but their quantitative composition varies according to the stress to ensure the plant survival. Any environmental factor which prevents maximum plant production such as water regime, temperature, virus diseases, insects, light intensity, soil pH, soil mineral content, and higher natural radiation – can alter quantitative chemical composition of plants.

Consequently, the environmental conditions that determine maximum yield in plant production and environmental conditions which determine the content and quality of the active compounds are different.

Changes in chemical composition of officinal plants can occur on local and on global scales. For instance, the content of active compounds in plants in southern regions may be up to 8 times lower than in the north. Higher natural radiation leads to higher concentration of antioxidants. Fertilizing or sprinkling usually causes lower concentrations of secondary metabolites.

As it is not possible to affect the chemical composition of active compounds of collected plants, we can only choose a proper area for collection. But it is possible to optimize the environmental conditions for cultivated species of officinal plants to get the maximum amount of active compounds per cultivated area.

## THOSE HEALING IRIDESCENT SPRING WATERS

Marju Torp-Kõivupuu

In folk beliefs and healing practices related to springs, creeks, rivers and wells the belief expresses itself through the healing power of pure flowing water for which sacrifices of salt and/or silver have been made. In Estonian context we tend to talk about the holy springs or rivers and the related customs in the past tense, which shows a relation to M.J. Eisen's book *Esivanemate ohverdused*. However, beliefs about the healing power of water collected from special places have not died during the past, but show a tendency to rise. Nowadays, the causes are socio-economical and also ecological, as people try to lead an ecological lifestyle. At least in theory, considering the different types of drinking water which come in different sizes and can be bought from any grocery store and are introduced as having a special and unique source. Holy springs are closely connected with holy groves (or forests), which, especially during the last decade, have been in the center of attention due to the activities of earth-believers and the requests to protect natural sanctums (holy forest or a tree, holy spring ...). In the Orthodox cultural space, where Christian folk belief is common, icons or relics have been found near holy springs (or the spring has been declared holy after finding a *pühane* on the site) and churches or chapels have been built near them (Pühtitsa nunnery in Estonia), where during special feast days of the church calendar or folk calendar healing rituals were performed or people gathered large quantities of special and powerful water, which according to folk beliefs will stay fresh for months and from which healthy food could be made. Curiously, in today's society of Estonia ancient beliefs are also being used in politics – before the elections politicians spend money to arrange tours or trips to Kuremäe or to other holy places, which allow us to find similarities with other known pilgrimages. The report will specify the role of holy bodies of water in the healing practices in the past and nowadays, using the Estonian traditions compared to the healing practices of the past and the present among Estonia's neighbouring nations.

## **IMPRESSIONS OF QUESTIONNAIRES ON FOLK MEDICINE**

**Ave Tupits**

The establishment of the Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore (1919) and the Estonian Folklore Archives (1927) has given us the chance to take a look at questionnaires, based on archival collecting principles and within academical framework, drawn up to collect either specifically, or as a smaller part of a whole, material on folk medicine. Compared to the general number of questionnaires used by folklorists, the number of those focusing solely on folk medicine is rather limited but there are always occasional questions concerning folk medical issues coming up in questionnaires of other areas of folkloristics.

Even though folk medicine has not been the most popular research area in Estonian folkloristics in the 20th century, the amount of archive material on folk medicine is sufficient enough to make it an appealing research subject: it has been studied at various times by researchers of various fields, from various viewpoints, and with variable intensity. In the last few decades, folk medicine and alternative medicine have started to intermingle, which makes understanding and analyzing folk medicine rather difficult. It is my general impression, however, that most folklorists studying folk medicine largely hold on to the “old” pattern, and try to find out how the rapidly changing society has preserved or altered previous local knowledge passed down from one generation to another.

This presentation tries to give an overview of the questionnaires on folk medicine held in the Estonian Folklore Archives since it was founded. Questions raised in the framework of this subject are: What have been the general priorities of an archive to collect this data? What are the main emphases in various topics within the field of folk medicine in any given questionnaire – that is, what has interested researchers/fieldworkers when they put together their lists of questions? What has been the outcome? Electronic questionnaires have been posted online for interested parties by the Estonian Folklore Archives and the Department of Folkloristics, but is anyone clicking on them?