

NEWS IN BRIEF

MAGIC IN THE RITUAL YEAR

On September 25–27, 2014, the 10th annual international conference of the Société Internationale d’Ethnologie et de Folklore (SIEF) Working Group on The Ritual Year took place in Innsbruck, Austria. It was organised by the University of Innsbruck and the Institute for History and European Ethnology with the Organising Committee consisting of Leander Petzold (chair), Tatiana Minniyahmetova, and Kamila Velkoborská.

The fascinating topic of the conference, “Magic in Ritual and Ritual in Magic”, the hard work of the organisers and, probably, the magic of the location (Innsbruck in the Alps) resulted in 120 paper proposals. For a variety of reasons, not everybody who had submitted a topic were able to participate, but still 72 people from 28 countries came to the conference and delivered their papers. Many of the participants were taking part in the series of annual conferences of the Ritual Year Working Group for the first time. For example, 15 first-time Russian scholars came from different cities of the Russian Federation and spoke on various ethnic traditions, including the archaic traditions of the Russian North. Actually, dozens of traditions were discussed in the conference papers including European, Latin American, North American, Asian, and African ones. The development of magic was also traced from prehistoric times through early Christianity up to the present day.

After the ceremonial opening of the conference and the greetings by the organisers and the hosts, the plenary session started. The first five presenters initiated discussions on various aspects of magic in the ritual year and on magic as such. The first speaker, with a paper titled “The Cosmic Connections of the Eight Key Points in the Indo-European Ritual Year”, was the President of the Ritual Year Working Group, Emily Lyle (Scotland), who shared her views on the division of the year as connected to cosmic structure and reflecting divine and heroic myths, life circle events, and colour semiotics. Marlene Mifsud-Chircop (Msida, Malta) delivered a paper on Good Friday rituals in contemporary Malta, in which she covered the history of religious processions and performances in the capital and other cities, emphasising the changes in the scenario of Maltese Good Friday during the last decades, which she has witnessed herself and studied as a folklorist and ethnologist.

Terry Gunnell (Iceland) introduced the theme of Neo-Pagan and New-Age movements, which have spread widely in recent times. His presentation, “The Background and Nature of the Annual and Occasional Rituals of the Ásatrúarfélag in Iceland”, showed the origin, history, and modern ritual and social activity of a very popular Icelandic group, worshipping ancient Norse gods. Interviews with the priests and analysis of the prayers and activities raised questions regarding the source of decisions: who actually prescribe the magic acts and to what extent they can be regarded as designed by the priesthood and the members of the group. Éva Pócs (Budapest, Hungary) in her lecture “The Living and the Dead at the Time of the Winter Solstice in Central Eastern European Beliefs” analysed the functions of food and fasting during the most sacred periods of the year. According to this scholar, the archaic pre-Christian semantics of restraint from eating is actually an offering to the gods. Finally, the paper by another prominent Hungarian

folklorist, Vilmos Voigt (Budapest), “Rebus – Charms – Evil Force – Magic”, stressed the importance of studying verbal magic acts and their connection with evil spirits.

After the plenary session, parallel panels started. Some of them did not deal with the ritual year, which is at the core of the activity of the Working Group, but concentrated on magic itself and its distinctive features. The following presentations can be listed as examples of classical complex studies of magic in the ritual year: Evy Johanne Håland’s (Greece) “Magical Ceremonies during the Ritual Year of the Greek farmer”; Betea Raluca’s (Germany) “Magic Practices for Stealing the Milk of Animals: A Case Study on the Romanian Villages in Transylvania (18th–19th Centuries)”; Katya Mihaylova’s (Bulgaria) “Andrzejki and Katarzynki in Polish Ritual Year”; Yulia Krashennikova’s (Russia) “Magic of Holy Thursday in the Modern Tradition of Peasant Population of the Russian North”; Ekaterina Iagafova and Valeria Bondareva’s (Russia) “Traditional Rituals in Modern Festive Ceremonial Culture of the Chuvash”. The papers were based on unique personal field material, collected in archaic Slavic and south-east European zones, which show excellent preservation of the rituals. All these papers dealt with reconstructions of old magic acts aimed at fertility, the health of cattle and rich crops, as well as at driving away evil spirits and witches.

Another group of papers followed the initial theoretical guidelines of the Working Group – to study parallelism between calendar and life circle rituals. Iryna Koval-Fuchylo (Ukraine) in her lecture “Ukrainian Calendar Cry: Magic Value and Functional Features of the Tradition” analysed lamentations for the dead carried out on certain calendrical dates, especially on the Saturday before Whitsun. Similar parallelism, but on the basis of other traditions was studied by Rasa Paukštytė-Šaknienė (Lithuania). In her lecture “Ritual Year of Godparents and Godchildren in Contemporary Society in Lithuania” she showed how the traditional roles of the godparents in the calendrical festivals, organised for their godchildren, are growing today and starting to spread to almost all the bigger feasts, not just Easter, as it used to be before. Nadezhda Rychkova (Russia) in her paper “Magic of Communications in Family Rituals of Russians” shed light on the communicative aspects of magic acts in the life cycle and their newest transformations.

Similar parallels between the life cycle and the calendar, but in another direction, were discussed in a panel dedicated to calendrical divinations. Certain periods in the ritual year are filled in with mantic magic acts, which are aimed at revealing the future life of a person. Such rituals in Lithuania, Greece and Russia were explored by Žilvytis Šaknys (Lithuania) in his presentation “Magic or Entertainment? Marital Divinations and Ritual Year in Lithuania”, by Ksenia Klimova (Russia) in “Fortune-Telling in Modern Greek Ritual Year”, and Nina Vlaskina (Russia) in “The Types of Divination Used by the Don Cossacks: Highlighting Areas of Distribution”. The presenters showed a mixture of magic and entertainment in all the modern divination acts, with the domination of love mantic rituals. The magic for love, as was argued by Oksana Mykytenko (Ukraine) in her paper “Padlock and Key as Attributes of the Wedding Ceremony: Traditional Symbolism and Contemporary Magic (on the Material of the Slavic Tradition)”, is still present and even developing in quantity and quality in Slavic wedding customs.

Other panels scrutinised various details and components of magic in the ritual year and beyond its frame. Sacrifice or offering as a powerful magic act was investigated in the paper by Aida Rancane on the motifs of sacrifice in the context of present-day search for spiritual experience, in light of traditions and innovations, and in the presentation by Billy Fhloinn (Ireland) on sacrificial magic and the twofold division of the Irish ritual year.

Basic elements, such as water, air, fire and earth are used for magic techniques and were at the core of the investigation of many scholars. A special session was dedicated to fire, which, together with water, dominates in many rituals. Irina Sedakova (Russia) in her paper “Magico-Religious Symbolism of a Candle in the Slavic Calendar Rituals” showed the polysemy and multiple functions of a candle in church and domestic services. She showed the development of a candle into a universal visual symbol of a tragedy, death and commemoration as a result of commemorative acts and performances with the lighting of candles all over the world. Tatiana Minniyakhmetova (Austria) delivered a paper on ritual fire in the annual cycle of Udmurtian calendric customs, in which she provided an in-depth analysis of the magic functions of fire in this tradition, its usage for contacting the gods, cooking the ritual meals, divinations, etc. Urszula Wilk (Poland), who studies Spanish festive culture, devoted her presentation titled “The Valencian Festival of *Las Fallas* as an Example of Symbolic Violence” to an iconic local festival in Valencia, which is performed annually on March 19 and is based primarily on huge fire effects. Georgi Mishev (Bulgaria) provided an interesting lecture titled “Where do you come from, ashes? – I come from a clean place. Healing Magical Practices from the Region of Thracian Cult Centre Starosel, Plovdiv Province, Bulgaria”, which gave the audience insights into the Thracian roots of modern Bulgarian folk medicine based on the magic of fire and its products.

This conference demonstrated the growing interest of scholars of the ritual year in Neo-Paganism, new cults and occult groups. Seasonal magic is at the centre of Neo-Pagan activity and theory. Joanna Malita (Poland) in the paper “Magic in Everyday Life of a Polish Wiccan: Field Study” shared her festive and routine magic experience. Kathrin Fischer (Switzerland) in her lecture “Wicca – Cycle of the Season and Life: Pre-Christian Traditions?” offered a survey of the pre-Christian basis of Wicca. Morgana Sythove (Netherlands), as a practising Wicca witch, in her lecture “The Wheel of the Year – Seasonal Rituals in Wicca” analysed and documented her own and her group’s magical activity aimed at global and individual prosperity.

Arūnas Vaicekauskas (Lithuania) in his presentation “Religion and Imagination: Magic in the Neo-Pagans’ Activity” argued that the creative element is a must in any occult movement. The theme of creativity and religious-cultural issues was continued by Fehlmann Meret (Switzerland) in her presentation “‘The Earth’s Unseen Powers of Growth Need to Be Nourished’: On Images of Seasonal Pagan Rituals in Popular Culture”. Regional forms of Neo-Paganism with archaic forms of animistic and zoomorphic magic were investigated by Graf Franz (Austria) in “Magic Revisited? Contemporary Animistic Rituals within British Neo-Paganisms from an Anthropological Perspective”, and Kamila Velkoborská (Czech Republic) in “Magic as Practiced by the Brotherhood of Wolves”.

Many of the papers alluded to modern innovations in traditional magic practice or were concentrated on the development of new festivals. Mácsai Boglárka (Hungary) in her presentation “I Am a Tractorist – This Is My Feast!?: Sabantuy as Post-Soviet Political Calendar Ritual” analysed the revival and modification of a traditional Muslim holiday in Bashkortostan after the atheistic decades in this former Soviet autonomous republic. Dalia Senvaityte (Lithuania) in her paper “Annual Holidays in Lithuania: Discourse in Press and the Reality of the Daily Life” compared the festive topics which are discussed in families and in the public mass media discourse. The internet as an important source and tool for a survey of modern magic in various Russian regions was the topic of Evgeniya Litvin (Russia) in her paper “The Ways and Conceptions of Internet-Magic Representation”.

The magic of food and eating was the object of several presentations. Katarina Ek-Nilsson (Sweden) spoke on the folk belief and rituals related to bread in Sweden in the past. She was concerned with the historical transformation of sacred food, especially bread, in the Swedish folk tradition. Elena Popova (Russia) dealt with the topic “The Role of Ritual Meals in Modern Christmastide Customs of the Besermyans”. Her investigation showed that the culinary and entertainment inspirations remain the most significant parts of Christmastide and other celebrations, even if the magic function has waned away. Apart from eating, drinking has also manifold magic functions. Sergey Rychkov (Russia) dwelt on the magic of toast, a verbal festive genre, which has not been investigated fully, neither in Russian, nor in other traditions. Mojca Ramšak (Slovenia) in her colourful presentation “Wine Queens’ Rituals in the Service of Wine Marketing” demonstrated the transformation of magic activity into commercialism.

Masking and ritual dresses, theatrical performance and figurines also have magical purposes, as the scholars Konrad Kuhn (Switzerland) (“Wooden Carnival Masks between Magic Objects and Collective Representations”), Alessandro Testa (Czech Republic) (“The Re-Enchantment of Europe: Traditional Carnivals and the Belief in Propitiatory Magic (Two Ethnographic Cases from Italy and the Czech Republic)”) and Celia Sánchez Natalías (Spain) (“Magical Puppets in the Western Roman Empire”) showed in their papers. Laurent Sébastien Fournier (France) investigated another important component of festive life in his presentation “The Magic of Traditional Games: From Anthropological Theory to Contemporary Case Studies”.

Different parameters of the magic acts and rituals, such as space, have also been central to the interests of scholars. Nadezhda Shutova (Russia) discussed ritual as a way of organising the sacred space in the Kama-Viatka region at the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries on the example of Udmurts. Cozette Griffin-Kremer (France) in her lecture “Is Doing Things Right, and the Right Number of Times, Magical? May Day and Maying Customs” reflected on the direction of movement as a magic technique in festive and everyday contexts. Andrey Khudyaev (Russia) (“Magic Ritual and Its Spatial Structure in Archaic Cultures of the North”) and Jurij Fikfak (Slovenia) (“Magic – Sacred Chronotopes of Ritual Practices”) touched upon theoretical issues of sacred space and its magic semantic.

Magic acts and a search for miracles based on folk religion were analysed in the paper by Irina Stahl (Romania) (“The Nine Miraculous Graves: Seeking Help from Beyond”), while Aigars Lielbārdis (Latvia) was concerned with the topic “Catholic Saints in the Latvian Calendar”.

Folk astrology was investigated in the papers by Mare Kõiva and Andres Kuperjanov (Estonia), titled “The Moon, Astronomic Objects and Symbolic Rites in 20th-Century Healing Strategies”, and Oksana Tchoekha’s (Russia) presentation “Lunar Folk Magic in the Balkan Region”.

A special panel was dedicated to plant lore and herbal magic. Aleksandra Ippolitova (Moscow, Russia) described rituals for picking plants in Russian herbal manuscripts of the 17th–20th centuries, and Svetlana Sidneva (Moscow) spoke on the magic herbs in modern Greek and Italian calendar customs.

The conference gave the floor to many scholars, including those who did not touch upon the ritual year and calendrical magic. History, folklore texts, literature, arts, and theology have all been investigated from the point of view of magic acts, reflecting and implementing pre-Christian pagan beliefs. Scholars dwelt on the image of the sorcerer



Conference participants at Lake Achensee. Photograph by Andres Kuperjanov 2014.

and the witch, on Shamanic traditions, on gender aspects of magic, and many other academic issues.

The Innsbruck conference celebrated the tenth jubilee of the Working Group on The Ritual Year. The founder and president of the group, Emily Lyle, asked to step down and retire from her position. The members of the group voted to apply to the SIEF administration for permission to grant to this outstanding scholar the title of honorary president of the Working Group on The Ritual Year. In accordance with the new SIEF bylaws, for the next two years the Working Group on The Ritual Year has elected two co-chairs (Irina Sedakova, Russia, and Terry Gunnell, Iceland), a secretary (Irina Stahl, Romania) and a liaison person with the SIEF administration (Laurent Sébastien Fournier, France).

The next (11th) conference of the Working Group on The Ritual Year will be held in Kazan, Russia, on June 4–7, 2015, and will be dedicated to the general topic “Traditions and Transformation”. At the 12th SIEF Congress (Zagreb, June 21–25, 2015) the group will be represented by two panels, convened by Nina Vlaskina and Irina Sedakova (<http://www.nomadit.co.uk/sief/sief2015/panels.php5?PanelID=3462>) and Irina Stahl (<http://www.nomadit.co.uk/sief/sief2015/panels.php5?PanelID=3409>).

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