

INTRODUCTION: THE HUMAN-ANIMAL RELATIONSHIP IN BELIEF NARRATIVES

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Since time immemorial, humans have lived in a mutual relationship with animals, and have, indeed, been dependent on them, that is, their help with domestic work, protection, the food and clothing they provide. The close link between animals and humans throughout history has been reflected in various forms of expressive culture such as ritual, dance, religious practices, art, and so forth, as well as in material culture and other everyday practices. Folklore around the world also reflects the close interrelation between humans and animals in various ways. In cosmogonic myths, animals are sometimes ascribed the role of the creators of the universe; in tales of magic they often figure as supernatural helpers to heroes and heroines on their journey towards a happy ending; they can mimic and mock human characters in animal tales; animals are sometimes addressed with requests in incantations, etc.

Legends in particular often address the close animal-human relationship: humans and animals can have sexual intercourse, which can result in offspring; humans can be temporarily, or even permanently, transformed into animals; a person's soul, when they are asleep or in a trance, can, according to belief narratives, temporarily detach from the human body, in a shape of a small animal, such as a fly, a butterfly, a mouse, etc.; strangers and foreigners, who come from beyond the boundaries of the community, can be perceived in terms of animals and ascribed animalistic attributes, and so on and so forth. Moreover, animals leave their traces not only in narratives that stem from the rural way of life which would foster human-animal contacts, but also in legends that spread in urban environments. One only needs to recall the "urban" or "contemporary" legends about albino alligators thriving in the New York City's sewer system, spiders that nest in people's dreadlocks, mice that people find in Coca-Cola, Kentucky fried rats, and so on.

The continuous significance of animals, and their relationships with humans in folklore, and more specifically in belief narratives, led the Belief Narrative Network (BNN) Committee to select it as the general topic of the BNN conference that was held as part of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research (ISFNR) interim conference in Ragusa in 2018. While we initially expected the BNN members to focus especially on human-animal transformations, the proposals we received were much more varied than we had anticipated. In eight sessions, the participants discussed not only werewolves and other were-animals, but also narrative expressions of sameness and otherness through the images and notions of animals, respectful inter-species cooperation, and many other roles that animals fulfil in belief narratives and folklore in general (see Koski 2018: 316–319). The papers presented at the conference covered a huge geographical scope and time-span. From those discussing ancient mythical texts to those that focused on contemporary narratives, the authors unravelled the underlying symbolism and connotations of the animals in the narratives, discussed the messages these narratives convey and their meanings within a wider social context, but also problematized Western attitudes towards animals in the past and present, and offered new ways of looking at and treating animal cultures in the future. The enthusiastic responses of the BNN members, and the ample number of submissions to the conference titled “Human-Animal Relationship in Belief Narratives” have proved that the Committee obviously made the right decision in dedicating the BNN conference to this particular theme.

This issue of *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore* therefore features seven papers that were presented at the BNN conference in Ragusa. They approach the topic of human-animal relationships from very different perspectives and angles, and within various genres of folklore.

Argentinian folklorist **María Inés Palleiro** focuses on Argentinian animal tales and argues that animal tales, in their local transformations, are often intertwined with belief narratives as well as with ritual discourse. Based on an analysis of several animal tales she demonstrates that it is precisely through this intertwinement that the narrators are able to express their local identity. Moreover, in order to make the role of local beliefs in the transformation of narrative patterns and their expression of vernacular identities visible, Palleiro even suggests that the classification of Argentinean folktales in a catalogue of tale types should not (only) follow ATU tale types, but should be carried out within narrative matrices, i.e., “sets of thematic, structural, and stylistic features which serve as a pre-text to be transformed in different contexts”.

Japanese folklorist **Fumihiko Kobayashi** discusses the ambivalent views of mice and rats in Japanese history. While on the one hand they were detested and killed in daily life, they have had a favourable reputation in the folk tradi-

tion, as revealed at least since the eighth century's mythological chronicle *Kojiki*. Kobayashi argues that the positive view of vermin stems from the notion of a hidden fantasy world where they were believed to keep treasures, including a limitless supply of foodstuffs that they had hoarded. While covering various oral and written genres as well as visual forms throughout a long span of Japanese history in which the favourable attitude towards mice and rats has been expressed, he particularly focuses on toys, which he considers a "three-dimensional form of narrative". Based on the examination of toys in the form of rats and mice within their socio-historical context, he argues that they have provided people with a means to play out their elaborate fantasies of the kind of utopia of abundance and wealth that usually contrast with their real lives.

An even larger time-span, from pre-history up until the present day, is covered in the paper on the symbolism of the frog/toad by Croatian ethnologist **Jelka Vince Pallua**. Based on a comparative perspective of not only folklore, but also archaeological, ethnological, and linguistic data stemming from various parts of Europe, and occasionally even from other parts of the world, yet with a primary focus on Croatia, the author argues for their "female" connotations, i.e., fertility, fecundity, regeneration, renewal of life and resurrection, pregnancy, etc. The longevity of the connotations associated with these animals in traditional cultures is further attested in Christianity, within the framework of which their image has been replaced by the Virgin Mary, the author argues.

In contrast to the previous two authors, the scope of **Mirjam Mencej's** paper is quite narrow. It focuses on one particular legend about a wrestling match between a human and a werewolf that the author recently recorded while doing fieldwork in rural Herzegovina. Based on an analysis of the belief narrative, narrated by her Croat interlocutor as the "pure truth", she aims to demonstrate the latent inter-ethnic and inter-religious tensions between Catholics (Croats) and Muslims (Bosniaks) in Bosnia and Herzegovina as revealed in the story.

The next paper, by Estonian folklorist **Reet Hiimäe**, discusses the notion of the spirit-animal, which is rather popular in contemporary Estonian culture. The lack of points of commonality between contemporary notions of spirit-animal and the notion of a soul in the shape of an animal (although often known under the same name) in Estonian (and other European) pre-twentieth-century folklore suggests that contemporary Estonian narratives and beliefs related to spirit-animals are not a continued tradition, but rather an innovation, an influence of modern Western spirituality. The notion of spirit-animal as supernatural protector and guide has come to Estonia mainly from neo-shamanism, based on Native American shamanism, the author argues. As spiritual protectors and means of self-empowerment, spirit-animals are important in contemporary Estonian culture insofar as they have a therapeutic value, especially for individuals who are overcoming psychological traumas.

Finally, the last two papers follow a radical new development in animal studies and posthumanist scholarly perception of animals, which, in contrast to traditional Western discourse and practices, treats animals as equal to human beings. Folklorist and well-known Croatian animal rights activist **Suzana Marjanić** combines a zoofolkloristic and ethnozoological approach with the perspective of contemporary critical animal studies. By showing that cockroaches can have different value and connotations in the folklore of different cultures, she demonstrates how the negative attitude towards them in Croatian folklore found its continued expression in contemporary aggressive use of insecticides and their advertising strategies based on militant language. Moreover, by demonstrating scientific educational projects and contemporary art performances in which cockroaches are subjected to torture and killing, she is able to shrewdly point out and condemn speciesist attitudes and practices towards insects in contemporary Western society.

In the final article, U.S. folklorist **Tok Thompson** argues that we can expand our understanding of animals by referencing the ways in which mythology has shaped our views, with a comparative case study contrasting Abrahamic and Native American mythologies and worldviews. After offering a brief overview of current movements and the contributions of posthumanism, he seeks, by exploring cosmogonic myths, to further connect the posthumanist and post-colonial perspectives with those in mythological theoretical studies that are re-appraising the role of non-human agency. Mythology – as ideology – has had a continuing and profound impact on Western society and culture, and has to a large extent affected our thinking about animals, Thompson argues. While Western anthropocentric ontology is largely influenced by Abrahamic mythic traditions, in which the universe is created by a male human god, non-Western cultures have often been informed by cosmogonic myths and other mythic traditions in which it was non-human actors, i.e., animals that played the main role in the creation, as is the case with Native American mythological traditions. Like the previous author, Thompson too points to the groundlessness and inadmissibility of the anthropocentric Western perspective and its superior attitude towards animals, or rather “other-than-human-cultures” in general. Moreover, he believes that postcolonial philosophy and posthumanism will help the West learn from previously overlooked systems of knowledge and thus better understand the close interconnections between humans and animals.

REFERENCES

- Koski, Kaarina 2018. Human-Animal Relationships in Belief Narratives, BNN conference in the ISFNR interim conference Ragusa, June 2018. *Fabula*, Vol. 59, No. 3–4, pp. 316–319. <https://doi.org/10.1515/fabula-2018-0108>.