

**NARRATED  
WORLDS OF  
BELIEF**



Estonian Literary Museum, the University of Tartu,  
The Estonian Society for the Study of Religions,  
Academic Folklore Society

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Narrated Worlds of Belief  
Symposium dedicated to the 70th birthday of  
Mihály Hoppál  
16 November 2012  
Vanemuise 42, Tartu, Estonia

The symposium is organized by the Estonian Literary Museum, the University of Tartu, the Estonian Society for the Study of Religions, Academic Folklore Society

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## Narrated Worlds of Belief

The symposium “Narrated Worlds of Belief” is dedicated to the 70th birthday of Hungarian folklorist and ethnologist Mihály Hoppál, eminent scholar of Eurasian shamanism. In Estonia, Mihály Hoppál has many friends among his colleagues studying folk belief, ethnology, linguistics, fenougrists, art, as well as translators. Mihály Hoppál is the founder of 12 professional (some of them international) publication series like *Bibliotheca Shamanistica*, *Shaman*, the grand project *Mythologia Uralica* series, not to mention his latest endeavour – a bilingual series of epcis in Hungarian and the original language. Mihály Hoppál has written about two dozen books, edited even more and written uncountable articles. In addition, he is the author of ethnographic films and an original thesaurus of symbols.

Today we have the opportunity to discuss with our good friend and resourceful researcher some of the timeless problems among all the important and intriguing issues related to narrated worlds of belief.

Symposium home page:

<http://www.folklore.ee/rl/fo/konve/hoppal>

Mihály Hoppál’s bibliography in Estonian can be found as an appendix to his treatise on ethnosemiotics

<http://www.folklore.ee/rl/pubte/ee/sator/sator7/>

## The Eurasia Concept: Myth and Reality

Mihály Hoppál

Mythology, the system of beliefs, religion and value system are equally important subsystems of a culture. There are all can be considered as ideologies which may govern in a clandestine way the everyday behaviour of the common folk. All of these constitute a tacit knowledge which give rules for the everyday practice in life-situations. Therefore today's anthropology (the former ethnology and *Völkerkunde*) is claiming to have the right to become the only discipline, which can play a leading role among the humanities. The new role destined our discipline to reconsider its own place and methodologies.

## The Land of the Dismembered Goddess: Notes on Place-Lore in Assam

Ülo Valk  
University of Tartu

Assam as the homeland of many indigenous peoples of North-Eastern India has been hinduised by stories about the powerful Hindu deities, such as Śiva, Pārvatī and others, who have turned the landscape into their mythic playground. Many temples have established their authority on the basis of these stories, sometimes recorded in ancient literary sources (e.g., *Kālikā purāna*) but often spread in oral forms only. These stories define the sacredness of landscape and destinations of pilgrimage (*tīrthayātrā*), which forms one of the most significant religious practices in contemporary India. The myth about Dakṣa's sacrifice, self-immolation of the goddess Satī and the grief of Śiva is one of the key narratives that builds up the sacred geography of India and the land on Assam. As Satī's body is cut into pieces that fall over the country, these places are turned into salvific sites (Knut Jacobsen), charged with salvational power and controlled by temples as religious institutions. The paper will discuss the variation of this basic myth, its argumentative power to establish the authority of temples and some related ritual practices. It is based on fieldwork in Kamrup, Marigaon, Darrang, Sonitpur and Nagaon districts of Assam, conducted from 2000 until 2012.

## Relations between Brother and Sister in Estonian and Karelian Folk Tales

Merili Metsvahi  
University of Tartu

I am going to have a look at some of the Estonian folktales that tell about the ambivalent relationship between brother and sister: *The Sister's Flight* (313E\*), *The Sister of Nine Brothers* (451A), *The Faithless Sister* (AT 315), *The Devil Leads the Sister Astray* (312D) and *The Girl as Cuckoo* (720A\*). The tales under observation are either specific to Estonia and some neighbouring areas, or are spread in a wider area but contain features that are specific to Baltic Finnish folklore. I am going to pay special attention to parallel motifs in different genres – like the motif of a sister going to look for his brother(s) in both fairy tales and old folksongs.

Little research has been done in the field of family history in Estonia. However, in recent years the Estonian archaeologist Marika Mägi and Swedish historian Nils Blomkvist have made some important contributions to this otherwise unstudied field. According to these two scholars, the position of woman was high before the Christianization of Estonia in the 13th century. Nils Blomkvist has hypothesised that a matrilineal society was dominant before the Christianization and Europeanization of the area.

My aim is to highlight evidence that supports the hypothesis of matrilinearity. Folklore reflecting the strong ties between brother and sister is an example of such evidence, as the brother-sister-folklore is a recurrent topic in various matrilineal societies around the world. In my opinion, the Estonian tales were told in the patrilineal and patriarchal society of the last centuries with the aim to help young women cope with their changed social position.

## Sister's Metamorphoses: Shamanism with Animism

Hasso Krull

In the South Estonian fairy tale “Tamm, üleneq, taivas, alanõq!” (ATU 313E\*: *Sister's Flight*) a dying mother orders her son to marry a girl who looks exactly like his sister. The brother cannot find such a girl and is willing to marry his real sister instead. The sister flees to the sky to escape her brother's incestuous proposal. The following events are focused on the relations between the upper world, where the sister took flight, and the lower world, where the expectations of marriage will finally be fulfilled.

The fairy tale contains a series of different metamorphoses, entwined with the motif of double personalities or *Doppelgängers*. The sister's flight with the help of an oak tree resembles a shaman's journey to the beyond. However, should we define the sister as a shaman? Or should we simply infer that her journeys and metamorphoses are a product of animistic world view? How does shamanism comply with animism?

I am going to compare two different approaches to shamanism and two different reconstructions of the concept of animism. One belongs to the French ethnologist Philippe Descola, who studied Amazonian cosmology, and the other to Mihály Hoppál, who studied Siberian cosmology. Descola's attitude towards the dominating concept of shamanism is negative, while Hoppál makes it a cornerstone of his anthropological survey. However, their differing viewpoints seem to converge around the concept of animism. Would it be possible to build a bridge between Descola and Hoppál? Can we find a conceptual link between them?

## **How to Portrait Votian Nature Spirits?**

Ergo-Hart Västrik

This presentation aims to map beliefs and belief narratives about nature spirits in Votian folklore and mythology. More attention will be paid to texts about supernatural beings localized in the domains of forests and bogs. Analyzed beliefs and narratives come mostly from Paul Ariste's manuscript collection "Votian ethnology" deposited at the Estonian Folklore Archives. The questions to be raised include the problematic nature of the concept of Votian mythology, terminology of supernatural beings, and issues related to the ways of formulating generalizations based on specific belief legends and memorates.

# **Inherited Objects – Hereditary Power. Persistence and Change of a Divinatory Healing Ritual**

Judit Kis-Halas  
University of Pecs

The paper examines the transformation processes in wax-casting, a wide-spread method of divination and healing in vernacular medicine. By means of three case studies, I would like to highlight the changing interpretations and meanings connected to the medical-magical paraphernalia applied in the procedure.

## **Studying Religion Through an Individual: Reflections on Yuri Vella's Spiritual Practice**

Eva Toulouze, Liivo Niglas

There are different ways of envisaging the study of religion, and one of the most extreme and fascinating ones is the study of an individual's worldview. Yuri Vella is a Forest Nenets writer, reindeer herder and activist, who acts according to a cultural utopia he tries to build in his world. Traditional worldview and Nenets values are for him of major importance. On the basis of fieldwork and 14-year-long contact, this presentation is going to attempt presenting some problematic features in his worldview as they manifest in his spiritual practice (which entails elements from the Forest Nenets, Khanty and Russian worlds). I am going to focus on how one individual's experience may enlighten us on wider issues.

## The Witch of Äksi – Portrait of a Witch from Local Impressions

Mare Kõiva  
Estonian Literary Museum

I am going to analyse one of the symbolic fortune teller and healers from 20th century Estonia: Hermiine Elisabet Jürgens (born Blaubrück) (1892 Saint-Petersburg, Russia–1976 Kastre, Estonia).

The role of a witch was voluntarily chosen by H. Jürgens, but there was also the will of the community to remember her as such. The stories telling of the life and actions of the witch of Äksi blend fiction with non-fiction. I am going to look at narrative portraits of the Witch of Äksi as they emerge from local impressions.

Before WW2, she lived in Tartu, earning her living by providing piano accompaniment to mute films, giving piano lessons, also telling fortune. Her partner Harri Lindner was a famous illusionist at the time. In the 1940s, she moved to Äksi village and became known as the witch of Äksi. She earned her living by giving piano lessons and playing the church organ. Her fame for finding lost people originated from the days of WW2, and later widened to include finding stolen goods and healing people. In the 1960s-1970s, she was often visited by artists, Tartu University professors and students, people interested in spiritual phenomena. The strange dialogue between urbanites and scholars resulted in a heritage of how she was seen through their eyes, narratives of meetings with Äksi Witch. Her visits to the cafe Werner in Tartu, legendary for its elite clients had also an impact to the image of Äksi Witch. The witch of Äksi had considerable educational background, much different from the average Soviet village doctors and fortune tellers. She remained a representative of urban culture and synthesised different methods.

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**11.00 opening**

**11.15 I session**

Mihály Hoppál *The Eurasia Concept: Myth and Reality*

Ülo Valk *The Land of the Dismembered Goddess: Notes on  
Place-Lore in Assam*

Merili Metsvahi *Relations between Brother and Sister in  
Estonian and Karelian Folk Tales*

Hasso Krull *Sister's Metamorphoses: Shamanism with  
Animism*

Lunch break

**15.00 II session**

Ergo-Hart Västriik *How to Portrait Votian Nature Spirits?*

Judit Kis-Halas *Inherited Objects – Hereditary Power.  
Persistence and Change of a Divinatory Healing  
Ritual*

Liivo Niglas, Eva Toulouze *Studying Religion through the  
Individual: Reflections on Yuri Vella's Spiritual  
Practice*

Mare Kõiva *The Witch of Äksi – Portrait of a Witch from  
Local Impressions*

Reception, speeches, congratulations, discussion

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