

# INTERVIEW AS AN ACT OF SEDUCTION: ANALYSING PROBLEMS I HAVE MET DURING MY FIELDWORK ON THE CAMINO DE SANTIAGO AND IN GLASTONBURY

TIINA SEPP

PhD student

Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore

University of Tartu

Ülikooli 18, 50090 Tartu, Estonia

e-mail: tiina.sepp@ut.ee

## ABSTRACT

In this article\* I am going to analyse my experiences of fieldwork and discuss the role of the researcher in the process of data collection. I will approach problems arising during folkloristic fieldwork and the focus will be on researching belief narrative in personal experience stories. A lot has been written about fieldwork and in this article I am going to add my thoughts on topics that have already been discussed in self-critical reflexive style by several scholars: the different roles of the researcher and the problematic interactional relationship between researcher and informant; power relationships in an interview situation; combining emic and etic perspectives in researching; being ambivalent about which reality we really belong to. I am also going to raise some issues that have to date not been discussed much: the effect of the researcher's gender on the process of fieldwork; stigmatisation of the supernatural; using the researcher's own memorates to elicit belief statements from his or her informants; dealing with 'difficult' informants. Against the background of the above-mentioned topics lies the liminality of the researcher – while in the field we are in a state of liminality that Victor Turner described when talking about pilgrims and neophytes.

Apart from discussing fieldwork-related problems, I am also going to describe some expressions of vernacular religion and contemporary spirituality on the Camino de Santiago and in Glastonbury.

**KEYWORDS:** liminality of the researcher • stigmatisation of the supernatural • gendered fieldwork • Camino de Santiago • Glastonbury.

I started doing research on the Camino de Santiago (the Road to Santiago de Compostela) in 2003. Before I undertook my first Camino with the aim of collecting material for my MA thesis in religious anthropology, my supervisor suggested that I write my thesis in the form of a fieldwork diary. That idea sounded almost preposterous – how could a thesis be in the form of something as subjective as a diary? Now I have realised

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that everything I have written – my MA thesis, articles, books and conference papers – have to a considerable extent revolved around myself. It is probably quite natural, as every hermeneutics is “explicitly or implicitly, self-understanding by means of understanding others” (Ricoeur 1974: 17).

Researchers of belief narrative are usually moving between two worldviews – the supernaturalist and the scientific-sceptical. When going on a field trip, we may leave the scientific worldview behind and temporarily enter the realm of magic. Bente Gullveig Alver (1990) has suggested that a fieldworker working in a popular conceptual world may find commuting between the different realities difficult. “This applies both to empathizing with and understanding these realities, and to leaving them behind when the time comes” (ibid.: 157).

This article is based upon my fieldwork – consisting mostly of informal, open-ended interviews with pilgrims as well as local people – on the Camino de Santiago and in Glastonbury, which are both important destinations on the spiritual landscape of European vernacular religion. I have been doing fieldwork in Spain since 2003 and in Glastonbury since 2011. The interviews have been about two wide topics – different aspects of pilgrimage (for example, motives, the pilgrim’s identity and the experience of *communitas*), and pilgrims’ encounters with the supernatural. The connecting link between these topics is best expressed in a quotation by Victor and Edith Turner: “All sites of pilgrimage have this in common: they are believed to be places where miracles once happened, still happen, and may happen again” (1978: 6).

A lot has been written about fieldwork and in this article I am going to add my thoughts on topics that have already been discussed in self-critical reflexive style by several scholars: the different roles of the researcher and the problematic interactional relationship between researcher and informant; power relationships in an interview situation; combining emic and etic perspectives in researching; being ambivalent about which reality we really belong to. I am also going to raise some issues that have to date not been discussed much: the effect of the researcher’s gender on the process of fieldwork; stigmatisation of the supernatural; using the researcher’s own memorates to elicit belief statements from his or her informants; dealing with ‘difficult’ informants. Against the background of the above-mentioned topics lies the liminality of the researcher – while in the field we are in a state of liminality that Victor and Edith Turner described when talking about pilgrims and neophytes:

[L]iminality is not only *transition* but also *potentiality*, not only “going to be” but also “what may be” [...] (ibid.: 3).

I am first going to give an overview of the two pilgrimage places.

## THE CAMINO DE SANTIAGO AND GLASTONBURY

I happened to walk the Camino while I was studying anthropology and needed a subject for my MA thesis. The reason why I decided to extend my research from the Camino to Glastonbury was to get a comparative perspective. Why did I choose Glastonbury and not some other famous pilgrimage destination? In fact, I have also been to the island of Tinos, the most popular Orthodox pilgrimage site in Greece. I spent four days there,



*Photo 1. Pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago, June 2003. Photo by Tiina Sepp.*

and slept in the pilgrims' refuge next to the church. I saw some pilgrims – very few as it was the off-season – but did not even really talk to them, let alone interview them. It just did not feel right to ask about these people's experiences. I had a working knowledge of Greek, so the language barrier was not a problem.

On the Camino and in Glastonbury it has been easy for me to find informants because people are usually willing to share their experiences. I suggest that there are two reasons for this difference between these two places and Tinos. Unlike in Tinos, on the Camino and in Glastonbury most people are searching for the 'Self' rather than God. They are more willing to talk about this search as it is mainly around themselves.

The second reason is very personal – it concerns my own perspective. In Tinos all pilgrims seemed to be so occupied with God that it would have been inappropriate to approach them. When doing research on the Camino and in Glastonbury I can use the emic, insider's perspective. For spiritual and religious reasons that was not possible for me in Tinos.

People from different faiths and denominations can and will go on a pilgrimage to both Santiago de Compostela and Glastonbury. On the homepage of the Glastonbury Pilgrim Reception Centre it is written that they are open to all people on all paths (Glastonbury Pilgrim Reception Centre).

Part of the pilgrim's blessing, read every night at the mass in Roncesvalles, the most popular starting-point of the Camino de Santiago, reads: "The door is open to all, sick or well. Not only Catholics, but Pagans also. To Jews, heretics, idlers, the vain. And, as I shall briefly note, the good and the worldly, too." (FM1)

Camino de Santiago, also known as the Way of St James, is one of the most important modern pilgrimage routes in the Western world. It started in the ninth century as

a pilgrimage route to the tomb of St James. Although the pilgrimage has a religious foundation based in Catholic doctrine, today it is walked for many different reasons: spiritual tourism, the desire for inner transformation; the Camino can also be a vacation, physical adventure or a route of therapy. Doing fieldwork on the Camino meant walking the Way, which is about 780 kilometres long, interviewing my fellow pilgrims, sleeping in pilgrims' refuges. I have also worked as a *hospitalera* (voluntary host) in pilgrim's refuges.

The main value of the Camino is, for many pilgrims, in its long history. Nancy Louise Frey (1998: 15) has written:

In the medieval pilgrimage and pilgrim modern pilgrims find a direct link to the past, an authenticity based on sacrifice, endurance, and austerity imagined to have been lived by the medieval pilgrim, and a community of souls united by the rhythm of their feet as the second millennium comes to a close.

On my first arrival in Santiago de Compostela in 2003, a French pilgrim showed me the rituals that pilgrims perform in the Cathedral, and since then I have told several fellow pilgrims about these traditions. According to the French pilgrim, the most important ritual is touching or giving a hug to the statue of Saint James (Santiago) situated behind the main altar. Another ritual that contemporary pilgrims perform on arriving at the Cathedral is descending into the crypt and standing or kneeling in front of the silver casket that allegedly contains the saint's remains. The ritual of hugging the saint seems to be more popular and has found its way into pilgrims' talk. When someone is going on the Camino, it is fairly common that their friends ask them to "give the Saint a hug". Hugging the saint seems to be the most popular ritual performed at the completion of the Santiago pilgrimage, and it is done by both believers and non-believers. When I was taught by my French fellow pilgrim how to hug the apostle, it did not occur to me that there might be a connection between the contemporary saint-hugging and medieval pilgrim's desire to see and touch the holy relics. That parallel was pointed out to me by my Spanish supervisor. Similarly to the medieval pilgrims who were eager to see and touch the remains of a saint, modern-day pilgrims give a hug to the apostle and whisper their thanks, wishes and prayers into his ear.

Glastonbury is a town of 9,000 inhabitants situated in the south west of England. There has been settlement in the area since prehistoric times, and before the marshes were drained Glastonbury was an island, accessible only by boat. I have rarely been to a place that is more loaded with history, beliefs and legends than Glastonbury. Glastonbury was venerated as the holiest place in Britain before Christianity and was the site of the first Christian community; Joseph of Arimathea is believed to have gone there with the Holy Grail from the Last Supper; it is an ancient centre of Goddess worship and a centre of druidry; Glastonbury has been identified with the Isle of Avalon, where King Arthur was taken wounded after his last battle; Glastonbury is considered to be the heart chakra of the world. Some people claim that Glastonbury was visited by Jesus himself and that he was buried there. According to Marion Bowman (2012b: 12, 21), Glastonbury is one of the most popular and multivalent pilgrimage sites in the UK, it is an example par excellence of a contemporary pilgrimage centre.

At the centre of the town are the ruins of Glastonbury Abbey. Dion Fortune (2000: 38) wrote in her book *Glastonbury: Avalon of the Heart*:



*Photo 2. Glastonbury Abbey, December 2011. Photo by Tiina Sepp.*

Mediaeval piety and learning are in the very air of Glastonbury. The stones of the Abbey are overthrown, but its spirit lives on like a haunting presence, and many have seen its ghost.

Glastonbury Abbey is said to be the heart of the spiritual energy of the medieval Glastonbury – the site of a Benedictine monastery (Taylor 2010). The graves of King Arthur and his Queen Guinevere were allegedly discovered here in 1191. Glastonbury was an important pilgrimage centre in the Middle Ages but this ceased with the destruction of the Abbey in 1539 (see Carley 1988). The Abbey passed into private hands and fell into ruins. In 1908, the Church of England bought it. As soon as I went to Glastonbury, I heard people talk about the Company of Avalon – a group of souls who have lived as monks at different times during the life of the Abbey. People believe that the first person to communicate with the Company of Avalon was Frederick Bligh Bond, an architect and archaeologist who was appointed as director of excavations in the early 1900s. He was unusually successful in his work because during automatic writing – writing which the writer claims to be produced from a subconscious or an external/spiritual source – he was allegedly told by the long-dead monks where to dig and what to look for. During my field trips to Glastonbury I have talked to people who say they still communicate with these monks and are helped by them.

Many people have said that they were ‘called’ to Glastonbury and have felt the presence of non-material guidance (see Bowman 2012a). According to Barry Taylor, one of

the 'patriarchs' of Glastonbury and the founder of Glastonbury Pilgrim Reception Centre, that energy may have many names – the Angel of Glaston, the Company of Avalon, the Celtic Morgens, the Goddess, the earth spirits, the Archangel Michael, numerous saints and sundry pagan influences (Taylor 2010: 41).

James Carley (1988), a Canadian archaeologist who has studied the history of Glastonbury Abbey, has said that every pilgrim worthy of his scrip returns from Glastonbury with his own small miracle, his own private myth of the place. This holds truth for me as well, and later in this article I am going to describe my own supernatural experience and analyse my informants' interpretations of it.

#### INTERVIEW AS AN ACT OF SEDUCTION?

As I am doing research on belief stories told by pilgrims, interviews play a crucial role in my research. Several anthropologists have argued that ambivalent feelings are always involved in fieldwork. As a place for fieldwork, the Camino de Santiago is special in several ways: people have left their home for weeks or even months; they are often vulnerable, lonely and insecure. Since I started interviewing Santiago pilgrims in 2003, the overwhelming majority (over 90 per cent) of my informants have been male. As the male-female ratio among pilgrims is approximately 55 per cent to 45 per cent, I began to ask myself several questions. Why have I mainly been interviewing males? Should I start interviewing more female pilgrims? How is the fieldwork process affected by the researcher's gender? How big a role do emotions play in fieldwork and how can this influence the outcome – in my case, an article? How much would my 'charm' contribute towards making someone a willing participant? Is it wrong to use this 'charm'? If my intuition tells me that the informant may be falling in love with me, should I stop working with them or should I carry on, pretending not to notice? Do I subconsciously believe that it is men who hold the key to important matters?

I started to seriously ask myself these introspective questions after a discussion I had with Teresa, a Portuguese friend of mine. It was she who drew my attention to the fact that nearly all my informants have been male. She said that arguably the fact that the Grimm Brothers mainly collected fairytales from middle-class women influenced the content of the stories. If these women had told their stories to a female collector, would we have different fairytales? Teresa suggested that I should write an article about my fieldwork methodology, entitled "Interview as an act of seduction". I was struck by her using the word 'seduction' as it implies trying to become intimate with my informants.

Several scholars (Alver 1992; Vasenkari 1999) have argued that the power relationship between fieldworker and informant holds rich and risky potential for control and even manipulation.

Charles Briggs has critically analysed the nature of the interview as a communicative event. He contends that interview techniques contain hidden theoretical and ideological assumptions, and are tied to relationships of power and control (Briggs 1986: 89). Control over the interaction lies in the hands of the interviewer. "It is the interviewer who controls the process of turn-taking, introduces the topics, and decides whether the given response is adequate and then moves on to the next topic" (ibid.).

Arguably, the researcher creates a position of power in several ways. Firstly, she chooses who to interview and which questions to ask. Secondly, she sets the scene to her liking and maintains it. She also has full control of the recorded material and can edit and interpret it as she wishes, to create a final article that she is satisfied with. Will the power she already has be enhanced if we add the dimension of gender? She will probably have even more power if her informant should fall in love with her.

Maria Vasenkari has analysed the roles and problematic interactional relationships between the researcher-interviewer and the informant-respondent. Interviewers are instructed to seek out a 'proper role' in order to maintain a cooperative relationship, and the most popular roles would be those of student (the researcher) and teacher (the informant), even though:

[I]n the established student-teacher relationship it is hardly the student who controls the scene, decides what the topic is and whether the response given to a question is adequate [...] The informant is always, really, to a certain extent a creation of the researcher, and vice versa. (Vasenkari 1999: 66–68)

Analysing my fieldwork experience, my friend Teresa suggested that my role might be that of a 'seducer' with my informants being 'the seduced'. The best example of Teresa's theory would apparently be my collaboration with one of my key informants, Roger.

Roger was a 38-year-old Belgian pilgrim I met during my field trip to the Camino de Santiago in April 2008. This is how I later described him:

He first caught my attention with his looks – his unusual hat and recumbent bike decorated with multicoloured flags reminded me of a circus artist rather than a pilgrim. [...] In the evening we went out for dinner with a group of pilgrims, and Roger told us two stories that he called 'Camino legends' [...] From the day we met until the day he arrived home more than a month later, Roger sent me text messages from his mobile phone, and also various emails and postcards. [...] After reaching home from his pilgrimage, Roger travelled to Estonia to tell me some more stories. (Sepp 2012: 303)

In the article that I have just quoted, I tried to shed light on the question of why Roger decided to tell me his 'Camino legends'. For entertainment, for pastime, or maybe because he knew I was collecting stories? I did not include his possible romantic feelings for me as one of the reasons for travelling to Estonia. This possibility was first pointed out by my supervisor after reading the draft of my article. One of his remarks was, "Don't de-gender yourself!"

Roger admitted to having invented some of the stories he told me. I suggested that the underlying reason for that was his wish to create and reinforce his identity as an 'authentic' pilgrim:

Being a devout Catholic, Roger was not at all happy to discover that the Camino was full of 'fake pilgrims'. By telling his stories Roger may have wanted to recreate the past – a time when there were real pilgrims on the road to Santiago. Could we see Roger as a preacher whose task is to remind us that the Camino de Santiago is, above all, a pilgrimage to venerate the remains of a Christian saint? (Ibid.: 325)

In retrospect, I am tempted to suggest that he may have invented some of his stories because he was interested in me and wanted to help me with my research. I do not think



*Photo 2. Roger and the author of the article in front of the pilgrims' refuge in Burgos, April 2008.*

that the content of Roger's 'Camino legends' would necessarily have been different if he had been interviewed by a male researcher. However, I do believe that his enthusiasm to collaborate would have been lower if he had not been affectionate towards me.

The question of sexuality has been discussed by several authors. Pat Caplan (1993: 23–24) says:

The question of sexuality is a complex one and needs to be considered both separately and in articulation with sex and gender. For all ethnographers, it is an area of vulnerability not merely in the physical sense, but in the sense that in the field we are even less free than elsewhere to construct our own sexuality – it is largely constructed for us and sometimes in spite of us.

Did I seduce Roger? The meaning of 'seduce' has a sexual undertone to it, as opposed to the use of personality and openness – charm, if you like. Until meeting Teresa, I had never consciously attached importance to the gender of my informants. On another note, my informant John pointed out that an interview can be an act of seduction in another meaning as well. He said: "If someone, regardless of their gender, wants to interview me, I feel flattered, important" (FM1).

Male-female relationships can be extremely complex, so I may be under a false impression of having seduced Roger while in fact it was he who seduced me. Another interesting issue in his case was the boundary between field and non-field. I first met Roger on the Camino de Santiago, but he then came over to visit me in my home.



I will not own up to trying to seduce any of my informants. However, I think it is important to consider the role of emotions in the process of fieldwork and their influence on my informants, myself, and also on my article. I believe that gender, personality and intuition are some of the most important tools used in research. Gender does make a difference. The issue of equality between informants and researchers is important. Hopefully insights into gender and power will enable me to carry out fieldwork with greater sensitivity and caution in the future.

#### COMBINING EMIC AND ETIC PERSPECTIVES IN MY RESEARCH

While doing fieldwork on the Camino de Santiago, I lived the life of a pilgrim and interviewed my fellow pilgrims. One of the aims of my MA research was to define a Santiago pilgrim. As a *peregrina* (pilgrim) I would say that a pilgrim is a person who thinks of him- or herself as a pilgrim. There is no reason why we should not regard everybody who claims to be a pilgrim, as such. I was using an emic, insider's, perspective. However, as an anthropologist I used an etic approach to define a pilgrim. I suggested that the main feature that distinguishes a Santiago pilgrim from a tourist, hiker, etc., is the fact that a pilgrim experiences *communitas* (as defined by Victor Turner 1979). I thus combined the two perspectives, etic and emic. I applied etic terms to determine a group of people. On the other hand, in order to claim that a pilgrim is someone who has experienced *communitas*, one needs to have had this experience and that means using the emic perspective.

I defended my MA thesis in religious anthropology in 2005 and in retrospect I can say that combining emic and etic perspectives in my research gave me the result that I was trying to reach. I am now writing my PhD thesis in folklore, specialising in vernacular religion, and my research topic is belief narrative.

Doing research on the subject of the supernatural has led me to the following questions: If I should experience something supernatural myself, could I use these data in a similar way to using my experiences of being a pilgrim while doing fieldwork for my MA thesis? Could I analyse my own memorates in the way I analysed my experience of *communitas*? How does combining emic and etic perspectives depend on the subject I am researching? What are the advantages and disadvantages of presenting my own memorates to elicit various interpretations from my informants? Bente Gullveig Alver (1990) has pointed out that since the qualitative method requires that researchers should come close to and empathise with forms of understanding other than their own, certain subjects will be more difficult to work with than the others.

During the years that I have carried out fieldwork on the Camino de Santiago, I have often asked myself why people decide to tell me their stories. I have also tried to observe what the trigger for a story is. What is it that makes pilgrims want to share their stories about supernatural experiences with a researcher? A Dutch pilgrim who had heard St James's voice in a snowstorm told me his story after I had told him about the Czech pilgrim who felt he had protection on the Camino, even though he too was not a believer.

Since I started doing fieldwork on the Camino de Santiago, I have been asked by my informants as well as other people if I have experienced anything supernatural. Why do

people ask me these questions? Would they ask it only out of curiosity or could there be something more behind these questions?

Kirsi Hänninen has written about the stigmatisation of the supernatural in Finnish first-person narratives. She points out that modernity promotes the idea of a subject who is capable of self-regulation, self-surveillance and self-control; having supernatural experiences shows a lack of these capabilities: "It carries a set of stigmas which make it a dangerous thing to experience and tell about. Nevertheless, we hear personal experience stories about people encountering beings such as angels, extraterrestrials, guardian spirits and ghosts." (Hänninen 2009: 3) Hänninen says that the fear of being labelled in a negative way may prevent people talking about their experience:

If a person has an out of the ordinary experience, others cannot tell it by the outward experience. Thus, as long as the person conceals the stigma, that is, does not tell about his/her experience, (s)he can pass as normal. If (s)he decides to tell about the experience, (s)he has three options: Stay quiet about the stigmatisation, contest it, or celebrate the stigmatisation. (Hänninen 2011)

Hänninen suggests that narrators either deny the stigma or emphasise the attributes of normalcy.

Analysing Internet discussions about an alleged poltergeist case in Estonia, Ülo Valk (2012a: 363) brings out a list of different interpretations that ranged from psychiatric to alcohol- and drug-related causes; attention-seeking and low education were also mentioned.

According to Hänninen, one important avenue for future research would involve examining if there are narrators who conform to the stigmatisation of the supernatural, and it would be even more intriguing to look at the narrators who "celebrate the supernatural and turn the negative mark into a positive one; inverting the supernatural into normal and ideal" (Hänninen 2011). To take Kirsi Hänninen's suggestion further, I would pose the question about researchers' openness about their own beliefs and supernatural experiences.

Until very recently I had always replied to my informants that I had never experienced anything supernatural. This changed during my first field trip to Glastonbury in June 2011. Here is what happened to me. I have told or emailed this story to my friends and informants, asking them for their thoughts and interpretations.

#### MY GLASTONBURY EXPERIENCE

From the first moment I entered the Glastonbury Abbey grounds, I was filled with a strong sense of serenity and happiness. I got that feeling every time I went back, I really enjoyed walking in the ancient ruins of the Abbey and in the park, talking to the enactors of the past or just reading a book and having a picnic. Towards the end of my stay, just two days before my departure, a strange thing happened. As several times before, I took my book and a cup of tea and sat down under a tree next to the ruins. It was an amazing sunny day, the birds were singing and I spent a few hours in that little paradise of mine reading, drinking tea, just looking at the people passing by. I was lying on my green scarf and when I stood up to leave

I noticed that the scarf was covered with dark red stains. The stains looked like blood and I immediately checked my body to see if I was bleeding. I wasn't. I also checked the grass under the tree, but there was nothing there. I didn't feel anxious, just surprised and curious to find out what this all may have been about. I went back to my B&B and washed my scarf. (FM3)

Below are the interpretations that my informants offered. One woman offered a poetic explanation: "Since you really loved that place and you knew you were about to leave soon, the red stains may have symbolised your heart blood – your reluctance to leave" (ibid.).

Barry Taylor is one of the people who communicates with the Company of Avalon. Once, when walking in the Abbey, he heard Gregorian chanting and the voices of the monks who called him "brother" and told him: "It is your task to work with others to recreate the lost spiritual heart of this town – to recreate the Abbey, but this time in a form suitable for today" (Taylor 2010: 39). Barry thinks he might have had a past life as Richard Whiting, the last Abbot of Glastonbury. He admits that he is not the only person who has felt they had a life as the last abbot, in fact he has met a number of others.

My personal theory of incarnation is that many people may have had a similar experience of life as an archetypal figure. What one chooses to believe hardly matters; what does matter is the feeling that it is possible to understand the experiences of that figure. Whatever the facts of past lives and guidance, I found that I knew a great deal about how to run a great Abbey – in fact I seemed to know how to be an abbot of Glaston. Maybe all this was a hallucination helped by my having been on retreats in a number of Benedictine abbeys. (Ibid.: 47)

Barry gave a long and thorough analysis of what may have happened to me:

Blood is sometimes taken as being an intermediate state between the solid physical body and the truly spiritual nature of man and so is an agent of union between the two. Blood is closely associated with the Holy Grail. The Grail was the vehicle for death to be turned into life, where inanimate wine was turned to living blood. In the legend, the Grail was the cup used by Christ at his last supper where he identified his own life with the wine that was drunk thereby identifying the one life with all its many manifestations. Symbolism for the eternal One of which we are all a part.

Water – without water there is no life so water is a symbol of life. The Water of Life and living waters have always been related to other vital fluids such as soma, wine and blood. These are symbols for the search for the libido, the feeling of being alive, the continuous flow of vital interest to and from the unconscious. There is also the interesting pattern of staining on the Omphalos stone, or egg stone in the Abbey. This stone is behind the southern wall of the Abbot's Kitchen. The stone is about 75 cm high with a saucer shaped depression in the top which has red stains. These stains are either ochre or blood and symbolise the menstrual blood of the goddess... Without wanting to interpret your vision it does seem to be something to do with honouring your present real life link with the eternal spiritual energy of the Abbey. (FM3)

Barry Taylor also talked about the phenomenon:

There is an overlighting energy in Glastonbury, call it what you will, which has a clear idea of what it is trying to help come into being in the place... This energy finds the people with the skills needed and invites them to come and work in Glastonbury. The inviting process is essentially esoteric and may be achieved through telepathy, intuition, synchronicity or phenomena. In your case I think that a phenomenon was used. (Ibid.)

Many people believe that Glastonbury was once a significant site of Goddess worship and is now first and foremost a centre of Goddess spirituality. When I told the manager of the Pilgrim Reception Centre, a Wiccan practitioner Morgana West, about my experience, she said that the Goddess aspect seemed obvious there. The woman, menstrual blood. She told me to see the positive side of it (menstrual blood – woman), not the negative (blood – wound). She also asked me where exactly I had been sitting when it happened. She suggested that it might have been on the Mary line (earth energy line) that runs through the Abbey. The kind of tree that I was sitting under may also have been significant. Different trees have different energies, explained Morgana. We studied the map of the Abbey grounds together and I located the exact spot. It was indeed very close to the ley-line, and the tree was a holly tree (holly means holy).

Ulrika, a volunteer at the Pilgrim Reception Centre, has a Christian background. She was trained as a nurse and for many years practised as a healing therapist (massage, reflexology). She has also studied Jungian psychotherapy and has in her work mixed psychotherapy and massage. She said: “It is important to find out what happened” (FM3). Talking about her career, she said that she has moved from body-work to body-mind and then the spiritual world. She has sometimes been called a witch. Ulrika said that because of the “wicked witch” from fairy-tales she is afraid of the occult and feels uncomfortable about certain witchcraft shops in Glastonbury. When I asked Ulrika to interpret my experience in the Abbey, she said that her first thought was “stigmata”. Some people who are strongly affected by the story of the crucifixion, get stigmata around Easter. When I told Roger, a Catholic Santiago pilgrim about my scarf story, his first thought was stigmata as well. One pilgrim suggested that I could have been transformed during my fieldwork in Glastonbury into some figure, either from the Bible or some legend.

Apparently the text that I told my informants had several spiritual meanings. All my informants suggested that the stains appearing on my scarf were there to convey a message to me. What kind of message and who it was from, differed according to the background of the informants. Barry, who communicates with the Company of Avalon, suggested that I had tapped in to the eternal energy of the Abbey. The Wiccan practitioner said it was a sign of the Goddess. A Christian ‘witch’ and a Catholic pilgrim saw a parallel between the stains on my scarf and ‘stigmata’. It is worth pointing out that no hierarchy of opinion and interpretation emerged as none of my informants suggested that their interpretation was in any way better. Even more, they all said that in the end it was me who would know the true meaning of that message. Barry said: “One has to be very careful about interpreting the dreams and visions and experiences of other people – this symbolism was specifically meant for you and you are the one who will most fully understand it” (FM3).

The different interpretations that my informants offered and their openness to other ideas seem to illustrate Glastonbury’s ‘multivalence’ and its capacity for meaning dif-

ferent things to different people (see Bowman 2012b: 12–13).

Richard Bauman stresses that the texts, performances and knowledge that are emergent out of the encounters between researcher and informant “are not simply the co-creation of anthropologist and informant, for other participants and other dialogues are already implicated in the performer’s discourse” (Bauman 2004: 160). He says that in the Bakhtinian metaphor of polyphony, the chorus of voices in these encounters includes the projected voice of the ethnographer relaying the performers’ texts to an ultimate target audience (ibid.).

Alan Dundes (1975: 51) emphasised the importance of the folklorists actively seeking to elicit the meaning of folklore from the folk. He proposed “oral literary criticism” as a term for the collection of meaning. Just as written literature is interpreted by literary criticism, “for each item of folklore there is a variety of oral literary criticism” (ibid.). Dundes introduced the concept of metafolklore to refer to folkloristic statements about folklore. He referred to metafolklore as a kind of “oral literary criticism” which would help elucidate the meaning of other folklore, and he encouraged its collection as part of the context of this other lore. This is also what I was doing – I was getting belief statements from my informants about my personal experience story or memorate.

Thanks to telling them about my personal experience I got to hear several belief statements that I otherwise may not have heard. What I described in my “green scarf story” was my informants’ reality becoming my own reality. I must admit to having been slightly hesitant about using my own memorate to elicit interpretations from my informants – the common practice is that informants tell stories to researchers, not the other way round – and I have started to discuss this matter with my folklorist friends and searched for relevant articles. Bente Gullveig Alver (1990: 158–159) describes how she was caught up in a perception of reality other than her own, and how she only got out of it by the skin of her teeth. During her fieldwork in Africa she had her fortune told, in order to get to know a particular ritual. “I had always thought of myself as a rational person, who could allow my fortune to be told in the name of professional duty, without taking what came out of it too seriously” (ibid.). However, when a death in her close family was prophesied, she became rather anxious and thought that her child might die. Shortly after the ritual, she had a dream about her sister-in-law’s father dying. Soon after her return home that person actually died. Alver had a similar experience, when after being taught the blood staunching formula she had a terrible nightmare. (Ibid.: 94)



*Photo 4. Author at St Mary’s Chapel, Glastonbury Abbey, December 2011. Photo by Mano Mannaz.*

I have started to ask my folklorist friends and fellow researchers about their personal experiences with the supernatural and how they feel about expressing their own thoughts on it.

An Italian anthropologist friend of mine researched Santo Manolo, a Spanish saint and magic healer. She believed that this saint had performed miracles and expressed her beliefs in the draft of her MA thesis. Her supervisor asked her to leave these parts out of her paper. For example, "In this place miracles happened" had to be replaced with "People told me that in this place miracles happened" and "This person was healed by Santo Manolo" with "People say that this person was healed by Santo Manolo". Her supervisor told her that as an anthropologist she cannot express that she believed in these things. The supervisor was an atheist. My friend said that if the supervisor had been Catholic, it would have been even worse because Santo Manolo was not a proper Catholic saint, he was what you would call a 'people's saint'.

Combining emic and etic perspectives can be complicated. It is not always considered scientific if a researcher expresses his or her own beliefs and convictions. I consider this a little misleading and even hypocritical as it implies that not being explicit about one's beliefs makes the research more objective and unbiased. It is similar to what Briggs (1993: 414) said about recorded material being supposedly more objective than written notes taken by the researcher. He emphasised that in fact it is the opposite as people get the illusion of greater objectivity.

How much did my friend's thesis gain or lose after omitting the parts expressing her own beliefs? Did it become more objective? Did leaving out her own beliefs make her paper more valuable? If yes, in what way? I think it is only an illusion.

I hesitated before talking publicly about my Glastonbury experience but I think people, including researchers, should go against the norm as much as possible and talk whatever they see fit without fear of ridicule.

When trying to answer the question about advantages and disadvantages of using my own personal experience story the way I did, I would say that the main advantage was that I was considerably decreasing the hierarchy between my informants and I – tearing down the barrier between researcher and informant. The main disadvantage would probably be making myself vulnerable to ridicule.

#### 'PROBLEMATIC' INFORMANTS

During my fieldwork I have sometimes interviewed so-called 'problematic' informants – alcoholics, the mentally unstable, incoherent people. When doing fieldwork in Santiago de Compostela in spring 2010, I once got into trouble with the municipal police because according to them I was in "undesirable" company. The police strongly recommended me to find myself better and more appropriate informants than "those drunkards and fake pilgrims".

I am now going to write about the two street artists I met during my stay in Santiago de Compostela. On my first day in Santiago I met John, a British photographer and street artist who by that time had been walking on pilgrimage routes around Spain for 18 months. He was working as an itinerant artist, raising money for different charities. I met him on the Praza Quintana, where he was sketching the Cathedral. The follow-



Photo 5. John sketching the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, March 2010. Photo by Tiina Sepp.

ing text was written on his sketch: “I’m a British artist walking around Spain following lesser known pilgrimage routes to Santiago de Compostela, raising money for charities in Spain and the UK” (FM2). John is opposed to religion, particularly Catholicism. He spent all his days working in front of the cathedral, drawing or painting it and selling his pictures, yet he had never stepped inside. He hates the oppressive atmosphere there and described the church activities with the expression “drumming the fear of God into you”. The following quote shows John’s scepticism about the Camino de Santiago:

I’ve finally worked out why they built a cathedral here and made up some story to get the cash from the Church. It’s simply because it’s the farthest corner of Spain. Thus, all pilgrims had to walk as far as possible. Thus, spending more money and being milked for every possible penny. Simple really. (Ibid.)

Occasionally John had to face hostility from the people of Santiago as well as from the municipal police. That, and also the fact that there are extremely few black people in Santiago, led him to call Santiago a fascist city. We were discussing this matter with a young French pilgrim, Frederic. He suggested that the reason behind Santiago de Compostela’s being a slightly closed and allegedly racist city is the image of Santiago Matamoros (St James the Moorslayer). His images (paintings and sculptures) can be seen at different places in and outside the Cathedral. The iconography of Santiago Matamoros played an important role during the Reconquest. Frederic suggested that it is the Moorslayer who keeps black people away from the city.



Photo 6. José in Santiago de Compostela, April 2010. Photo by Tiina Sepp.

José is a Catalan painter who started the pilgrimage from Barcelona in order to pray for his mother who was terminally ill with cancer. When he reached Santiago de Compostela, he decided to stay there for a while and earn his living as a street artist, painting the cathedral. I usually talked to him while he was painting.

While painting the cathedral, José often took a break to smoke a cigarette and have some red wine. Once I saw him open the bottle he had just bought. After opening the bottle, he made a cross with it in the air, and then spilled some wine on the ground – the pavement of Quintana Square. I asked him why he was doing it. He said:

*Siempre hago cruz con la botella de vino y tiro un poco para dios y los muertos.* (I always make a cross with a bottle of wine and spill some for God and the dead.) (FM2)

The lower part of Quintana Square is called Praza de los Muertos – the Square of the Dead. There used to be a cemetery at that place. I asked José whether this ritual was related to the fact that we were at that square. He said that there was no connection – he always does these things before starting to drink from a bottle.

I later discussed this ritual with the English artist John, and also with my Spanish supervisor. John said:

It's very common among drunkards to spill the first part of wine. It's done in the memory of the dead, but it's also believed that the most dangerous part of wine is in the first sip, so it's better to get rid of it. (Ibid.)





Photo 7. Botafumeiro in the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, March 2010. Photo by Tiina Sepp.

According to my Spanish supervisor, José was mixing different religions. Offerings to gods go back to ancient times. Being a representative of learned Catholic discourse, my supervisor suggested that I should speak to proper Catholic pilgrims.

José also told me about the function of the *botafumeiro* (the incense burner) that is swung during the mass at the Cathedral of Santiago. According to him it is very good that they use *botafumeiro* in the Cathedral:

*Gracias al botafumeiro no han bloqueado la cruz en la catedral – Botafumeiro salva el cruz. (Thanks to the botafumeiro they haven't blocked the cross in the cathedral. Botafumeiro saves the cross.)*

He explained that thanks to using the *botafumeiro* they keep the cross-part of the cathedral unblocked:

*En muchas catedrales han destruido la cruz con obstaculos – sillas o con organo, y Satan puede entrar. (In many churches they have destroyed the cross by putting an organ or chairs in that part, thus the devil may come in.) (Ibid.)*

When I discussed this with my Spanish supervisor, he said that José sounded as if he was mentally disturbed, most probably an alcoholic and thus not reliable as an informant. Ülo Valk (2012a: 363) has pointed out that medical discourse represents the authority of science and offers strong arguments against a supernaturalist worldview. In the case I am discussing, not only was a psychiatric interpretation of my informant's

beliefs offered but also a critique of that person's non-Catholic views – my Spanish supervisor added that José's beliefs do not reflect Catholic belief system and suggested again that I should interview proper Catholic pilgrims. Ülo Valk reminds us that "Uncontrolled folklore process often becomes disturbing to the institutions of power because it undermines and erodes official truths, systematised worldviews and moral teachings imposed by them" (Valk 2012b: 25–26).

I have noticed that it is quite common to meet Catholic pilgrims who have considerably stretched the limits of their belief system, to an extent that strict Catholics would strongly disapprove of.

All this has led me to ask the following question: Is the data gathered from 'problematic' informants somehow less valuable and had I better avoid these people? I have met two kinds of approaches to this problem. There are people who say that informants who seem mentally unbalanced or are alcoholics, are unsuitable to be interviewed.

The other approach would be that I am not a psychiatrist and I am therefore unable to diagnose possible mental illness in my informants. The advocates of this approach say that as long as there is no threat to the health of either my informants or myself, I should not worry about the mental wellbeing of my informants. I prefer the latter approach.

## CONCLUSION

In this article I tried to analyse how the personality, gender, worldview and personal experiences of a researcher can influence their work. As researchers, we always try to get as much context and background information about our informants as possible. I feel similarly when reading an academic article: I am interested in the author's background and worldview and also in their personal experiences because I believe that all this influences their work. What makes it difficult for the researcher to talk about his or her worldview and unusual experiences is the (possible) duality of their worldviews, the need to play different roles and use different identities. When I return home from my field trips to Santiago de Compostela or Glastonbury, I take off my pilgrim's hat and put on the folklorist's one.

I think it is important to create broader understanding of the liminality of the researcher doing anthropological or folkloristic fieldwork. In this article I have probably raised more questions than I could answer. My aim was not to end the discussion but carry on reflecting on the problematic aspects of fieldwork.

## SOURCES

FM1 – Fieldwork material collected on the Camino de Santiago, April 2008.

FM2 – Fieldwork material collected in Santiago de Compostela, March–June 2010.

FM3 – Fieldwork material among Glastonbury Pilgrim Reception Centre workers and volunteers, June–July and December 2011.

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