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PREFACE TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE:

LIVING ANIMISMS AND MONOTHEISMS IN THE FINNO-UGRIC WORLD

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This special issue addresses the religion of the Finno-Ugric peoples, with a specific focus on animist religiosity and its contemporary expression in Finno-Ugric societies.* This is a subject that has recently featured prominently in significant forums, and this collection of papers is particularly influenced by discussions at two major conferences: the Congress of the European Association for the Study of Religions (EASR) in Cork in June 2022, and the Finno-Ugric Congress (CIFU XIII) in Vienna in August 2022. The contributions are based on reports presented at these events, in panels organised by the editors.

Why did we feel the need to encourage scholarly discussion on animisms and monotheism in the Finno-Ugric world? One key reason is that the field of religious studies in this part of the world contains notable gaps. Anthropological research on religion in Russia has often focused on shamanism, scholarship that while exciting and diverse, often overlooks regions where Christianity had long been the prevalent religion. This oversight is particularly evident in areas of Central Russia inhabited by Finno-Ugric peoples, whose original religious practices, prior to Russian conquest, were neither Orthodox nor Muslim. These practices, which straddle the line between vernacular Christianity and animism, represent a significant gap in this research field.

Evidence of the limited activity in this field can be seen at the recent EASR congresses, held in Pisa in 2021 and in Cork in 2022. We organised one panel in Pisa and another in Cork yet found no other presentations that engaged with this area and topic of interest. The Finno-Ugric Congress in Vienna in 2022, which was primarily aimed at gathering scholars interested in Finno-Ugric topics, had two panels addressing religion.

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Another compelling reason for this special issue is our own field research in northwestern Bashkortostan, where animist religious practices are not only surviving but thriving and experiencing a remarkable revitalisation. Many villages where these practices had dwindled in the Soviet period, are now rediscovering their motivation to revive annual calendar ceremonies, with the support of active, young sacrificial priests. This first-hand experience prompted us to explore similar trends across other Finno-Ugric communities. We tried to understand how many of these communities have managed to preserve their traditional ceremonies and how resilient these practices are, even in areas that have officially adopted other religions. Often dismissed as relics of the past or merely as neo-paganism in modern guise, our observations confirm that these practices are very much alive and relevant today.

Before introducing the contributions of this journal issue, it is crucial to discuss some of the relevant terminology. The primary challenge lies in appropriately naming what we are studying. Our current toolkit, usually well-equipped to handle concepts related to monotheistic religions, falls short when addressing different local ontologies of the animist kind. This deficiency is compounded by the local adoption of terms introduced by missionaries, which have sometimes been accepted by the communities, even if the Indigenous meanings are filled with different assumptions and sensitivities. It is therefore essential to approach our study with a critical awareness of the limitations and implications of the language we inherit and use.

The religious forms we study, which are neither monotheistic nor traditionally Christian, are often referred to as "pagan" by both local communities and researchers. The Russian term *yazychestvo* is widely used without hesitation (cf. Simpson and Filip 2014). However, it is not a neutral term, as it carries various connotations, primarily signifying a rejection of Christianity. Labelling the followers of animist or agrarian religious practices in such a way seems unjustified. There is a need for terms that are more neutral and which positively define these practices, rather than defining these phenomena by what they are not. Furthermore, "paganism" can encompass diverse realities from polytheistic systems reminiscent of classical antiquity's detailed mythologies to the more fluid and situational cosmologies of the communities we study. Unlike the relatively fixed system of Greek and Roman polytheisms, these cosmologies are adaptable and influenced by surrounding monotheisms like Christianity and Islam. Although many Finno-Ugric communities have not fully embraced these dominant religions, the concept of a supreme deity – sometimes seen as a *deus otiosus* – has permeated their cosmologies, leading to widespread references to a singular "God".

Given these complexities, what terminology should we use if we move beyond "paganism"? We can approach the question by focusing instead on "religion". However, this term, while largely neutral, lacks specificity and does not fully capture the wider ontological and cosmological assumptions we meet in the field. It reveals little about the actual nature of local practices, providing insufficient detail. The term "religion" itself is charged with its specific Western Christian history (Asad 1993). Usually, "religion" implies a well-defined set of doctrines and rules that may inaccurately describe the more fluid and nuanced realities of Indigenous non-Christian practices. Terms like "Udmurt religious practice" or "Mari religious practice" might be more appropriate, capturing the dynamic and living nature of sets of practices and ideologies without confining them within the rigid framework typically associated with "religion".

Sometimes, local interlocutors utilise the term "faith" with an ethnic marker, attributing specific meanings to it. For instance, among Finno-Ugrians in the Volga region "Russian faith" refers to Orthodoxy, "Tatar faith" to Islam; similarly, each group defines its own vernacular "faith" (such as *marij jyla* "Mari faith"; *jyla* means "custom", "way of living", "belief"). This terminology is interesting because it originates from the way missionaries historically contrasted different practices, thereby introducing a particular understanding of relationality with gods and spirits. It implies that each ethnic group has a legitimate and distinct faith, as if all religions functioned in a similar way. Dominated by Christian contexts, the term "faith" suggests that belief is a fundamental component of all religious systems (Pouillon 1982; Smith 1998 [1977]). While this notion fits well within the Abrahamic religions (though its applicability to Judaism can be debated), not all religious systems are based on the demonstration of loyalty to a supreme being, especially animistic ones which are often of a negotiatory nature and rely more on first-hand experience and situational acts of relation-making with spirits. So, our semantic toolkit does not adequately capture all the subtle nuances of religiosity without imposing some Christian bias.

Moreover, the boundaries within the religious field are often blurred in many communities' experiences. How do we distinguish between religious practice, ideology, cosmology and ontology? Where are their boundaries? These questions are empirical and resist easy theorisation.

Diverse approaches are present in this collection of papers. Some articles describe the interactions between different religions, showcasing contacts between varied cultural worlds. Elena Danilko, who has conducted extensive fieldwork with various groups of Old Believers, examines the mutual sympathy between Old Believers and Indigenous peoples, a relationship shaped by their marginalised statuses. Eva Toulouze and Aleksandr Chernykh each focus on an ethnic group and its diasporas, the Udmurt, observing the range of religious systems adopted by different groups within these communities. Toulouze primarily works in Bashkortostan, where Islam is the dominant monotheism, but she also extends her research to Udmurtia and Tatarstan. Chernykh concentrates on the Udmurts living in the Perm Krai, and are surrounded by Orthodox Russians. Their research highlights a continuum from the foreign religion introduced by newcomers – Christianity in its Eastern form – to the animist religious practices of the Udmurt before evangelisation. Both extremes are actively represented across different territories, yet numerous intermediate forms exist where the "new" religion has been adopted but has not fully assimilated into the Udmurt worldview.

We encounter the notion of syncretism, central to several articles that focus on the vernacular religion of communities long influenced by Christianity. Interestingly, nearly all the authors delve into experiences of death, highlighting how these critical moments reflect fundamental life values. In continuity with the previous two articles, Nikolai Anisimov explores Udmurt funerary and commemorative rites in regions where Orthodoxy's dominance varies. Sergei Minvaleev examines the funerary traditions of Karelians, revealing the persistence of certain non-Christian elements within predominantly Christian practices. Madis Arukask and Eva Saar, focusing on a single respondent's reflections on near-death experiences, discuss how Veps have integrated strong features of Orthodoxy into their worldview. On another part of the spectrum, Ranus Sadikov and Eva Toulouze study the sacred places of Udmurts in Bashkortostan,

a group that has steadfastly maintained its earlier practices despite the erosive effects of time and the Soviet era. Despite many challenges, a vigorous revival has infused these traditions with new vitality.

Of course, this collection of papers represents only a glimpse of the complexity of living animism in the Finno-Ugric world. It spans a wide array of issues and serves as a logical continuation of discussions from our previous special issue of the *Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics* (Anisimov 2022; Dudeck 2022; Iagafova and Bondareva 2022; Leete 2022a; 2022b; Sadikov and Minniyakhmetova 2022; Toulouze et al. 2022), which focused on hybridisation. We hope this current issue sparks interest in and deepens understanding of topics that resonate with those earlier discussions, particularly as they include five articles about Finno-Ugric examples.

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