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DANCING THE NUMINOUS: SACRED AND SPIRITUAL TECHNIQUES OF CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN BELLY DANCERS

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I explore how contemporary American practitioners of belly dance (as Middle Eastern dance and its many varieties are often called in the English-speaking world) conceptualise not only the spiritual dimensions of their dance, but also how the very notion of performance affects sacred and spiritual dance practices. Drawing on interviews with members of this community, I describe the techniques of sacred and spiritual belly dancers, how these dancers theorise performance, and how the conflicts inherent to patriarchal mind-body dualism are resolved in these practices. My purpose here is twofold: to document an emergent dance tradition and to analyse its meanings in the relevant social context.

KEYWORDS: dance • belly dance • spirituality • sacred dance • feminism

What is the connection between mind and body, soul and flesh? Different cultures observe differing relationships between these elements and express such relationships in myriad ways, which folklorists and anthropologists have documented in the ethnographic study of bodylore and folk medicine, among other genres, traditions, and forms (Desjarlais 1992; Young 1993). In this paper, I explore how contemporary American practitioners of belly dance (as Middle Eastern dance and its many varieties are often called in the English-speaking world) conceptualise not only the spiritual dimensions of their dance, but also how the very notion of performance affects sacred and spiritual dance practices. Drawing on interviews with members of this community, I describe the techniques of sacred and spiritual belly dancers, how these dancers theorise performance, and how the conflicts inherent to patriarchal mind-body dualism are resolved in these practices. Like Patricia Sawin, I shall argue that “esthetic performance is a central arena in which gender identities and differential social power based on gender are engaged” (2002: 48). My purpose here is twofold: to document an emergent dance tradition and to analyse its meanings in the relevant social context.

Belly dance instruction, performances, and merchandise are widely available in North America as well as all over the world, both physically in terms of dance studios and venues, and conceptually due to how the Internet has made belly dance content accessible: websites for belly dance music, costumes, histories, and ruminations abound, in addition to the hundreds of belly dance performances that can be found on YouTube for free and DVDs that can be purchased. However, I believe it is important

to study belly dance for many reasons, not simply because it has become a ubiquitous fixture in many cultural landscapes. Belly dance carries serious implications for gender identity, as it is a dance mostly done by women but is also highly sexualised in the perceptions of many outsiders – wrongly so, for the most part. Most of the belly dancers who discuss their views in print and online agree that while belly dance *can* be sexy, it is not, in most cases, a seduction or invitation. Additionally, since belly dance has roots in dances from the Middle East, North Africa, the Mediterranean, and India, it raises problematic questions of authenticity and appropriation. Belly dance is still practiced in many parts of the Middle East, selectively depending upon local Islamic laws, and there continues to be discussion of what makes a particular belly dance style, performer, or performance ‘authentic’. There are many sub-styles of belly dance in America, and each is authentic in its own right as an expression of individual and sub-cultural identity.¹ Further, any form of dance, social or solo virtuosic, is capable of giving insights into both individual and cultural beliefs.

My search for numinous body techniques is inspired in part by Marcel Mauss’s (1979: 93) comment in his essay “Body Techniques” that he believes there are biological means of entering into communication with God. Whether one believes one is communicating with God, or invoking an elemental essence, or honouring some other aspect of the divine, I have observed common body techniques within the belly dance community. Belly dance has a history of connection with women’s spirituality and goddess religions (see Stewart 2000). Janice Crosby’s article “The Goddess Dances: Spirituality and American Women’s Interpretations of Middle Eastern Dance” describes some of the links between contemporary American goddess religions and belly dance. Crosby estimates that “one-third or more [belly] dancers associate the idea of a Goddess with Middle Eastern dance in some way” (2000: 180). Crosby’s study, based on fieldwork and participant-observation, documents the connections between women’s experiences of spirituality and belly dance. Yet not every belly dancer worships a/the Goddess. This is seen in Donnalee Dox’s categories of spiritual belly dance: goddess dancing, priestess dancing, birth dancing, and dance meditation. In Dox’s (2005) “Spirit from the Body: Belly Dance as a Spiritual Practice”, she explores how belly dance is constructed spiritually, and how the four categories inform and reflect women’s experiences of the dance. There are varying opinions on whether belly dance has always been constructed as spiritual or sacred, though dance scholar Andrea Deagon notes how “the idea that belly dance has sacred origins, and that it engenders and represents spiritual experience, finds expression in the Western discourse of the dance from the beginnings of its boom period in the late 1960s and early 1970s” (2005: 255). Both Crosby’s and Dox’s articles provide a frame for my own investigation. I am interested in how, religiously or not, belly dancers interact with spiritual, mysterious, or even simply non-physical elements. What roles do these elements play in performative and performance modes? And what do they accomplish?

Linking belly dance with the numinous, I must also discuss embodiment. Anya Royce writes in her paper “Embodying Conscience” of the “potential of dance to speak to or reveal matters that reflect deeply held values” (2007: 1). Yet it is not only dance that can lead to insights about a culture, but also the bodies that perform the dances. Specifically:

The danced body carries within itself the power to comment on, persuade, confront, declare, suggest, present, remind, and resist society's most deeply cherished notions of appropriateness and moral value. This power resides in the shape of the body and of its elaborated movements in dance and in the meanings, implicit and explicit, we assign those forms. (Ibid.: 2)

Belly dance is an especially intriguing dance form to discuss in relation to embodiment, as belly dancers are so often perceived as akin to strippers, due to the dance's connections to Orientalist harem fantasies and to the fact that many belly dance costumes reveal the dancer's midriff in order to show off her muscle control. Belly dancers resist objectification using a number of strategies, some of which include taking a spiritual approach to the dance, or performing for restricted audiences. Sheila Bock's master's thesis "From Harem Fantasy to Female Empowerment: Rhetorical Strategies and Dynamics of Style in American Belly Dance" (2005) discusses many of these methods of managing stigma and achieving subjectivity. There is agency within this dance form, but dancers still face obstacles in expressing visions that do not conform to mainstream ideas about belly dance, women, and gender roles.

DISCOURSES OF DANCE: PERFORMANCE, PERFORMATIVITY, AND BODIES

As Sheila Bock and Katherine Borland demonstrate in their ethnographic exploration of belly dance and salsa in contemporary America: "Dance studies provide valuable theoretical models for thinking about how the experience of the body mediates the complex dynamics between representation and identity" (2011: 29). Dance, especially dance on a stage before an audience, is a cultural performance, and all performances involve identities, ideologies, and risks. According to Richard Bauman in *Verbal Art as Performance*, performance is "responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative competence" (1977: 11). Deborah Kapchan defines performances as "aesthetic practices – patterns of behavior, ways of speaking, manners of bodily comportment – whose repetitions situate actors in time and space, structuring individual and group identities" (1995: 479). Belly dance fits both definitions of performance, with the added dimensions of concerns about embodiment, gender identity, and authenticity. As an aesthetic practice, a display event, artistic communication, and a genre that trains bodies to move in certain ways, belly dance is a site of highly charged individual and cultural tensions.

Because belly dance has the potential to represent or embody the numinous and to engage the dancer in a numinous state of flow, belly dance is thus a performative art in addition to being a performance art: it makes things real. Belly dancers perform strength and beauty, often breaking taboos regarding women's (and sometimes men's) ideal body images, and reclaiming spaces for celebration and worship. As Barbara Sellers-Young points out: "For many women during the second phase of the feminist movement, belly dance became an erotic site of power and transcendence" (2005: 289). The multiplicity of variations found within belly dancing – different styles are prominent in different countries and regions – ensures that many potential meanings can be performed and performatively enacted.

Dance performances are also performative in the sense that they construct and articulate realities, as do the Kaluli seances that Edward Schieffelin studied, naming those performances “emergent social constructions” (1985: 721). Belly dance performances that engage with the numinous are constructions, in that they are grounded in particular worldviews, and they are also emergent, evanescent, creating meaning in the moment. Focusing on performance and performativity provides a useful framework for exploring these issues because these concepts foreground experience: as we shall see, the dancers interviewed talk about the transformative potential of spiritual belly dance as well as how dance experiences feel in their bodies. Here, I follow Bock and Borland in paying special attention to the narrated experiences of dancers in addition to their self-conscious representations while practicing and performing. While issues of cultural representation cannot be ignored, the focus on conscious self-fashioning led Bock and Borland to discover that “the experience of dancing provides a release from restrictive notions of the female body derived from contemporary American popular culture” (2011: 3).

The context in which belly dancers make meaningful choices about their bodies and their art is an oppressive one, as the West is still largely patriarchal (meaning that men hold more power than women do; discussed in Bowden, Mummery 2009: 75). An important feature of most patriarchal societies is dualism, or “the assumption that there are two distinct, mutually exclusive and mutually exhaustive substances, mind and body, each of which inhabits its own self-contained sphere” (Grosz 1994: 6). Dualism is also gendered, aligning women with the body, nature, and emotions/irrationality, while men are aligned with the mind, culture, and reason/rationality (Grosz 1994; Bordo 2003; Lorber, Moore 2007; Bowden, Mummery 2009). Because of the gendering of dualism, it is especially transgressive for women to dance in ways that bring them closer to the immaterial world of spirit and religion.

Further, the history of belly dance in the United States has led to many incorrect assumptions about the sexualisation of the dance. As Andrea Kitta (2009: 46–47) points out:

The crossing of the traditional gender barrier and its exportation led to consideration of belly dance as a disreputable art; it was accorded little prestige in its original countries. In the United States, Victorian mores ruling women’s bodies combined with racist attitudes regarding Western Asian and North African cultures in general essentially condemned belly dancing’s forms and costumes to the vaudeville and burlesque traditions.

These historical factors still figure largely in the experiences of belly dancers who are equated with strippers or asked to perform strip teases for male audiences. Paradoxically, the sentiment that belly dancers should wear less (i.e. act like strippers) is often paired with disgust toward belly dancers who are fleshier than the skinny idealised female body. Belly dancers contest these disrespectful judgments in a couple of ways. Dancing in women-only spaces is one strategy. As for another, Sheila Bock and Katherine Borland (2011: 24) write,

[L]earned movement vocabularies work to challenge disciplinary ideals of femininity produced and circulated within contemporary Western culture. Dancers self-consciously invoke “exotic” cultures in order to create alternative ideals through the experience of dancing, which in turn open up opportunities for alternate embodied forms of self-expression.

Cultural borrowings and embodied experiences are thus one way to defy oppressive norms. Privileging the spiritual is another way. Donnalee Dox (2005: 333) writes:

The concept of femininity constructed in spiritual belly dance reverses western conventions of beauty by engaging the very movements that would otherwise code the female body as a sexual object, privatizing them and giving them new meaning.

Analysing dancers' strategies at the level of their bodies' movement and technique is thus one of the methods I adopt for studying spiritual belly dance in its social context.

METHODOLOGY AND IDENTITIES

In order to gather data for this study, I contacted belly dancers I know in Bloomington, Indiana (where I lived from 2004 until 2011) and posted to online forums to recruit interviewees from around the country. I conducted face-to-face interviews with local dancers and e-mail interviews with dancers who are not local. Most of these interviews were conducted in 2007 and 2008 with some follow-up in 2012. My questions aimed first of all to get a sense of why my collaborators dance and how they identify as dancers, including their training and favoured styles. I then inquired about whether my collaborators experience their dancing as spiritual, and if so, how these experiences connect to the rest of their lives. I asked about specific movements, costumes, and music in these contexts. Where possible, I asked my collaborators to show me movements that they use in their dancing so that I could try to move with them. Additionally, I asked about the role of embodiment, symbols, and audiences, as well as about how the dancers conceive of the messages they express while dancing. I encouraged each dancer to tell me which information to include in their biographical statements, and where possible, I got feedback on the paper in various stages, thus practicing a low-key form of reciprocal ethnography (Lawless 1991).

While I bring in theories from folkloristics, performance studies, and dance anthropology, I prefer to let my collaborators speak for themselves where possible. I respect their requests for confidentiality, so some statements cannot have identifiers attached. Other dancers prefer to be identified by their stage names and partial contextual information, so I will include this information where possible. It is not my intent to make generalising statements about the entire American belly dance population, or all those dancers who engage in numinous phenomena, even if such a thing were possible. Rather, I explore how performing and embodying the numinous allows individual dancers to engage with corporeality, spirituality, and artistry in their lives. The importance of individuals within this study is part of what makes it both important and enjoyable – I find, as have other scholars, that there is a definite pleasure in interacting with performers and artists, as they are so self-aware and energetic. In my other work with belly dancers I observed that they are intelligent and creative people who are more than capable of articulating why they make certain aesthetic choices (Jorgensen 2006: 86). The same is true here.

It must be briefly mentioned that I myself belly dance, and thus my fieldwork is informed by my experiences within this community as well as the analytical frames I bring with me as a scholar. Identifying as an insider certainly helped me gain access

to these people, and with over 15 years of belly dance experience (at the time of publication), I definitely count as an insider. While I do not primarily explore sacred and spiritual themes in my dancing (either in my solo work or group collaborations), I am agnostic enough to be open to the idea that sacred and spiritual dance does something for its practitioners, which has helped me find common ground during our discussions.

A general overview of my collaborators will give a sense of their perspectives. I have conducted interviews over e-mail with nine dancers, and interviews in person with three dancers. The dancers occupy a broad range of professions and positions across the United States. Most fall between the ages of twenty and fifty years old (at the time of interviewing). Some of these dancers are beginners and do not perform the dance in public often or at all, while other dancers are professionals in the sense that they are paid to teach and perform, and in some cases they financially support themselves partially or primarily from dancing. I refer them to by first name or stage name, and in some instances permit a greater degree of anonymity by referring to the dancer only by an initial.

First, I ought to note that belly dance is not spiritual for everyone. Plenty of individuals engage in belly dance for other reasons: to enhance their physical fitness, to express themselves creatively, to connect with other cultures, because they are drawn to the music or costumes, and so on. One of my collaborators, Cheri, is an example of someone who belly dances for “earthier” reasons, as she terms them. At the time of the interview, Cheri had been belly dancing for around five years, and has studied Egyptian and Fusion styles. She characterises her dancing as inspired by great music, a party-like atmosphere, and a desire to have a great time. Cheri is a computer-assisted designer in Florida, and she identifies as a Southern Christian but one who strongly identifies with the Christian Left. She contacted me by e-mail, interested in participating in my study, but wrote that her engagement with belly dance was for

Earthier reasons, [...] (as opposed to loftier, more spiritual reasons, [...]) I think belly dance is beautiful, and asks for precision and control of your body. And sexeh. And it’s about the girliest thing I do with my girlfriends, besides henna (which I also do because it’s fun!). It also makes me a better horseback rider, as it makes for a more flexible and stronger trunk. Plus, it’s pretty unusual, and I like strange. While everyone else was learning to Tango, I wanted to learn belly dance.

For her, belly dance is expressive of “the exuberance of being alive” and she enjoys watching many different kinds of belly dancing. She and her friends sew costumes together and do henna, thus illustrating the community-building appeal that belly dance holds for many of its practitioners.

Margaret is the troupe director of Different Drummer Belly Dancers in Bloomington. She is a college lecturer and webmaster, and she identifies as Unitarian Universalist with a pagan bent. Margaret has belly danced steadily for over 13 years, having been introduced to belly dance as a youngster in the Society for Creative Anachronism (a recreational hobby group in which participants reenact the Middle Ages). She has studied many styles and currently performs a mix of traditional, American Tribal Style,² and tribal fusion belly dance. She dances primarily to “the music of her people”: rock and roll. She characterises herself as a lyrical dancer even as she is drawn to sharper isolations and shimmies. Her troupe combines cabaret, American Tribal Style, and fusion techniques. The other troupe members at the time of the interview were Teri (discussed below) and myself. Margaret believes that belly dance is above all accessible, because it

can be done by anyone, to any music, in any setting. During the course of our conversation on belly dance and the numinous, she stated:

When I say that belly dance is not necessarily strange and mysterious, it's not like it's this bizarre thing that you have to study for twenty years and sit on a mountain, it's not like being a Zen Buddhist monk or anything like that. If you want to dance something that's mysterious and strange and different, well, that's your performance goal, that's what you want to do in your performance, that's what you're thinking and feeling, then that's what you should do.

When I asked her whether belly dance was spiritual for her, she answered: "Sometimes, but not always. It's very Unitarian, well, it can be, or not... whatever you want it to be, okay." She then went on to describe a few dances she had performed that were more oriented toward spirituality, which her audience may or may not have perceived. At the same time, Margaret believes that she has belly danced in past lives, and so belly dance is a temple dance to her, a sacred dance:

To me it is divine, it's divine sensuality, and there's sacredness. It's sensual without being dirty or derogatory or using or degrading. It's very much liberating and joyous. I think some of the most hardcore feminists I know belly dance. It's reclaiming and empowering, and it's really fun to do.

Margaret's views on belly dance and its potential for spirituality are thus flexible and grounded in her personal beliefs.

Ann is another belly dancer for whom the dance is sometimes sacred. At the time of the interview, Ann was a graduate student who was also residing in Bloomington (she has since moved out of Indiana), so I was also able to interview her in person. Ann studies neo-druidry, and has been dancing for eleven years. She started studying cabaret and folkloric styles, and was drawn to American Tribal Style ten years ago. She helped found the troupe Dark Side Tribal and she also does tribal fusion and gothic belly dance. When I asked her whether belly dance was spiritual for her, she answered:

Yes. Just because I think, when it goes well, I, whether I am dancing with other people or solo, when it goes well, we're tapping into something that is bigger than us and that connects us to our audience and helps convey whatever it is we're trying to express. And it just feels good.

In contrast to the dancers whose beliefs I've already discussed, I interviewed a couple of dancers who view belly dance as spiritual, but not necessarily religious. Mahsati Janan is a professional belly dancer in North Carolina. At the time of the interview, Mahsati had been dancing for 11 or 12 years, and she has studied Classical and Modern Egyptian, Turkish, Lebanese, Middle East and North African folkloric styles. She characterises her dancing as graceful, classical, and passionate. She responded to the e-mailed question "Is belly dance spiritual for you?" with:

Not in a religious way. Dance helps me calm my thoughts and integrate into the moment, but I do not feel it is spiritual in a religious way. That could be simply because I am not religious. Dance helps me remove distractions and connect the inner and outer world.

Additionally, when I asked whether she incorporated spiritual, divine, or otherworldly elements into her dancing, she replied:

I don't believe that anything is outside of the natural world, so I don't see it as a connection to anything otherworldly or divine in the traditional sense, but I do see everything as interconnected and all part of the same flowing cycles – in that way I do see it as helping me realize my connection with everything by removing some of the intellectual filters on reality. For me, the mysteries of the universe are all parts of the natural order, so it is all a matter of perception and perspective. Dance helps shift that perspective for me.

Dance is thus spiritual more in the holistic sense than in a hierarchical, religious sense for Mahsati, as it is for Teri, a trained musician, scholar, and performer whom I interviewed here in Indiana. Teri first took a belly dance class in 2000 with Donna Carlton, who teaches folkloric and cabaret belly dance in Bloomington. Because she was working full-time and completing her doctoral coursework, Teri did not return to belly dance until late 2003 or early 2004 when she started taking Margaret's "Belly Dance for Every Body" class at the Ivy Tech John Waldron Arts Center. Teri does standard cabaret, American Tribal Style, and tribal fusion styles. She is a seasonal member of Different Drummer Belly Dancers and runs her own belly dance performance business, T-Kitty Belly Dance. She also has extensive ballroom dance and Latin background. Teri also drew upon holistic language when discussing why dance is spiritual for her:

It is, because you can't reach that Zen space unless you've accepted yourself, and it is very cathartic to reach that Zen space because you get past all of your worldly trappings to get there. And it seems so silly, but sometimes when I'm finished singing or dancing and it's gone really well, I want to say, this is nirvana! And you just don't want to leave it, you don't want to leave that space, it feels so good, and you're so free and comfortable and unjudged. It's so wonderful to be there that you can't get there, you can't get there if you're missing pieces of your spirit.

Interestingly, Teri identifies as Danish Lutheran, and sees no conflicts between her dance spirituality and her religious identity.

Molly is a textile artist who has not disclosed her religious views and she sees dance as spiritual:

The practice of dance often feels akin to a spiritual practice, in that it requires a certain level of devotion and daily discipline in practice to master the movements. I feel like that effort and attention allows me to connect to something outside myself that is larger than me.

Molly had been dancing for over eleven years at the time of the interview, and she describes her training as:

I began with American Cabaret style – my teacher just called it Middle Eastern Dance and taught a mix of movements from around the Middle East, including some folkloric dances. I moved on to American Tribal Style (largely FatChance format), which I still study today.

She studied dark tribal fusion with Ariellah and has since helped found the Standfire Collective, an improvisational dance company. The divine energy that Molly taps into

while dancing feels similar to Reiki, she notes (she wrote to me that she is attuned in Reiki up to the second level).

The remainder of my interviewees view belly dance as spiritual, and connect it to their religious identities. Jenevieve in Northern California is an amateur belly dancer who feels that dance is spiritual and wants to explore more archetypal images in her dancing. At the time of the interview, Jenevieve had been belly dancing for two years, and has studied both cabaret and American Tribal Style, though she noted that she hopes to move more toward tribal fusion. She enjoys watching polished and unique performances, and finds belly dancing to be very expressive. She states:

Religiously, belly dance synchronizes with the 'sacred feminine' for me. I loosely consider myself Pagan for lack of a better term, I like to think of myself as a spiritual person, I draw my beliefs from many traditions as many other Pagans now do.

Though she has yet to experience the numinous through dance, she looks forward to a time when she is prepared to "bring this energy to the forefront of my life".

Isabella is a dancer who identifies as "agnostic pagan" and who views belly dance as sacred. She lives in Indiana as well, though due to the logistics of coordinating an initial meeting, I interviewed her by e-mail and then discussed some points in person (at intercultural dance-oriented events, appropriately enough). At the time of the interview, Isabella had studied belly dance for under one year. She has taken lessons in cabaret and American Tribal Style, and she believes she will continue these lessons while also beginning to explore tribal fusion and Raks Gothique (another name for gothic belly dance). However, she has a much longer dance history. She states: "unbeknown to me, I have been executing various belly dance moves since I was sixteen. The technique for these moves was not correct, but the essence of the move was there all the same." She started dancing as a child and continued for reasons relating to self expression:

From ages two through eight I took a series of tap, jazz and ballet classes. I enjoyed dance from an early age because it took the awkwardness out of being a tall skinny little girl. It gave me grace and helped me become aware of my body. At age eighteen I became an adult entertainer in the form of a stripper. I was inspired to do such a thing because at the time there was no venue, where I lived, for a young woman to go where she could dance. I was an adult entertainer for eight years.

She asserts: "When I dance, it is to either project the essence of my patron deity, Kali or it is to allow my inner fae to show herself to the rest of the world." Dancing connects Isabella to her inner faery soul and to the terrible beauty of Kali, thus aligning her metaphysical life with her dancing body.

K. is a pagan in the San Francisco Bay Area who uses belly dance solely in personal ritual practices, and does not perform it publicly. At the time of the interview, K. had studied belly dance for a year and a half, on and off. While K. never performs in public, "dance on a small scale has become important to my day to day spiritual practice". K. has mainly studied American Tribal Style, noting a preference for belly dance "that is technically sound, but also experimental. My favorite performers are ones who manage through their dancing to create an environment of mystery and glamor. I'm fascinated by those dancers who create a feeling of ritual when they perform." Further: "Dancing is intensely spiritual for me. First of all, I don't often dance in social settings, being a fairly private person." When I asked in an e-mail why, K. responded:

I don't perform in public because I'm self-conscious about both my body image (being overweight) but also because I do tend to view myself as uncoordinated. I've heavily considered being more public with my dancing (taking organised classes, attending workshops, etc.) but in the end, I'm still extraordinarily self-conscious.

K.'s awareness of "the issue of self-image" demonstrates how deeply-rooted body image issues are in contemporary American culture, and thus it is interesting to see how these matters are addressed in dance practices that are explicitly spiritual.

Melissa, also known as Mylitta, is a dancer, choreographer, and owner of the Mystic Lotus Center for the Healing and Performing Arts in Michigan. Mylitta had been belly dancing for 13 years at the time of the interview. The styles she had studied are: "All types, Arabic, Turkish, (Roma), Egyptian Raqs Sharki, Spiritual Belly Dance, American Tribal Style [...]. You name it, I've tried it." We corresponded by e-mail, and she enthusiastically responded to my question about belly dance being spiritual:

My dancing connects so much with the spiritual aspect of my life. I am a second generation witch and practice with my mom and my sister along with other women whom I also dance with. My spiritual work as a priestess evolves around a core of movement meditation, drumming and chanting, all of which I feel are fed by the dance.

Mylitta was able to describe many specific techniques for integrating spirituality and dancing, which I will discuss below.

Anaar is a belly dancer in the San Francisco Bay Area who is also a witch in the Feri tradition. Anaar has been belly dancing for fifteen years, with one year off for back surgery. She has studied American Tribal Style with FatChanceBellyDance and Tribal with Jill Parker. She notes: "Since I started to perform myself I have concentrated on taking numerous workshops that focus on sacred and folkloric styles". She writes that belly dance is very expressive for her: "Of the numinous, of mystery, of the dark matter which lies between the stars. I wish I could describe it to you without the cheesy adjectives, but if I could, I guess I would be a writer instead." We corresponded by e-mail multiple times, as I wished to clarify many of the spiritual concepts central to Anaar's dancing. When asked if belly dance is spiritual for her, Anaar wrote:

I'm Feri and everything I do is fundamentally informed by that. I can't seem to disconnect that with any other aspect of my life [...] I really consider myself a sacred dancer. It's just that my mysticism appears dark, perhaps even morbid to others.

Anaar ritualises her movements, and sometimes enters trance states. Among other pieces, she has performed a dance inspired by Japanese ghost legends, Obake Odori, which can also be found on YouTube.

Tempest collaborated with Anaar on various projects when she lived in California, but at the time of the interview she lived on the East Coast, where she continued to dance professionally. Tempest has been belly dancing since the year 2000, and she describes her training thus:

My first main teacher taught Cabaret – American Cabaret, Folkloric, and Egyptian. At this time, American Tribal Style was becoming visible, and I was very drawn in by the look, feel, and costuming, so when we moved from Rhode Island to California, I began to study Tribal. But I found that the movement quality that really

spoke to me was Cabaret, so I resumed studying that as well, adding Turkish, Modern and Classic Egyptian, Lebanese, and more Folkloric styles.

She is also known for being the “goth-mutha” of the Gothic Belly Dance movement. She writes: “I consider my dancing to be metaphysical – earthy, yet elegant, sensual [...]. Now, as for my performances, sometimes the intent is a spiritual nature, and sometimes it’s more about a physical concept or idea.” She is very aware of how her multiple identities inform her dancing: “I really don’t seem to have separate compartments of my life – being an artist, designer, dancer, wife, Witch – all of these things intertwine, whether I intend them to or not”. Since the original interview, she has immersed herself in North African dance and has led the Tapestry dance retreat, which was focused on sacred dance.

The perspectives presented here help articulate the interactions between religion, spirituality, and belly dance. For some dancers, these things overlap substantially and are integral to the belly dance experience, while for other dancers, the overlap between spirituality and dancing is neither essential nor continuously present. However, all dancers were at least aware of the *possibility* of viewing and performing belly dance in a sacred context or in order to explore spiritual themes, which is significant as it demonstrates the ubiquity of these connections in the belly dance community. Further, the dancers interviewed tend to see connections between their personal lives and larger communities: the belly dance community, their religious or spiritual communities, and the global community. Dance is one of the ways of expressing this feeling of connectivity. However, how they choose to embody and express spiritual principles in their dancing varies, and it is these variations that pique my interest as a folklorist. Further, describing these variations in dance provides me with data to illustrate the theoretical claims I make about the connections between embodiment, performance/performativity, and gender in modern America.

TECHNIQUES OF THE NUMINOUS

I love to see a woman with a powerful presence. (Anaar, e-mail interview)

In this section, I discuss some of the techniques belly dancers use to connect with the numinous. Anaar’s use of the term “powerful presence” brings to my mind Robert Plant Armstrong’s distinction between the powers of invocation and the powers of virtuosity in works of affecting presence, that is, “special kinds of things (‘works’) which have significances not primarily conceptual (they are ‘affecting’), and which own certain characteristics that cause them to be treated more like persons than like things (‘presence’)” (1981: 5). Translating this notion from art objects to performance, I believe that dances that approach or engage the numinous are performances of affecting presence. As belly dance is a performance form, it relies upon an aesthetics of virtuosity, yet in dealing with the numinous, these performances must be treated as something other than mere actions, something with the power to connect with and change things, something with power in general (corresponding to Armstrong’s aesthetics of invocation).

Belly dance is constructed as spiritual, Dox writes, using symbol systems that privilege the transformative experience it offers, which, “often described as a process of unveiling truth, recoups this [past, matriarchal] idealized orientation toward valuing women’s bodies and wisdom” (2005: 304). Spiritual belly dance, however it is conceived, has the potential to override Cartesian mind-body dualism by upsetting hierarchies of experience, especially those that attempt to dominate female bodies. Yet belly dance is not the only dance form that holds the potential for participants to interact with the numinous; other examples include spirit possession and trance dances such as those practiced in voodoo. Yvonne Daniel discusses these religious forms of dancing in her book *Dancing Wisdom*, noting that in the communities she studied: “Drumming, singing, and dancing are prayerful acts that feed into a reciprocal relationship between humans and categories of spiritual beings” (2005: 28). Daniel’s close attention to the sensory experiences and practices of ritual dance testifies to the importance of bodily techniques that contribute to – and even cause – numinous experiences while dancing.

I start with one of the most visually recognised aspects of belly dance, the costumes. Costumes can inspire a sense of connection with something greater than oneself, for performers as well as audience members.³ Anaar writes: “Something incredible happens when you put on the right costume. It really awakens that inner self, you *become*.” Mahsati Janan uses costumes, in particular those related to peacocks, to express her holistic sense of connection with all things while dancing: “I have a number of costumes and personal adornments that follow a peacock theme. In my life, the peacock represents the moment of synthesis – the change from multiple states into a new cohesive whole.” Costumes can thus symbolise or effect a transformation for dancers. In her fieldwork with belly dancers, Erin Kenny (2007: 309–310) also found that many of them referred to the costuming process as a transformative one, and some even referenced Goddess religion as an influence on their adornment choices.

Music is another technique of accessing the numinous. Anaar writes that music is her main inspiration to dance, and it triggers her responses to archetypes, folklore, mythology, and personal lore that then inspire her to dance. She studies the music endlessly, meditating on every sound, and finally embodies the music while dancing: “By the time I get to the stage, I simply know what to do, because my *body* has learned the music. I can ‘forget’ and let the music guide my passions.” Margaret told me that she has dedicated at least three dances to the Virgin Mary, whom she views as a manifestation of the Goddess. In each case, the song grabbed Margaret’s attention and inspired her to dance to it, and only later did she realise that the songs seemed to honour the Virgin Mary.

The types of movement that dancers use to be in touch with the numinous can be very general, involving whole sections of the body.⁴ I’ve noticed that general modes of movement tend to suggest the numinous through fluidity or its opposite, abruptness. Cheri, the one dancer in this study who does not dance spiritually, writes:

If I were going to do something more spiritual, I would probably use a lot more hand and head movement [...] a soft arm and a pretty hand seems more ethereal, the tilt of a head or chin more subtle and graceful.

Isabella writes:

When I am drawing on the essence of Kali, I usually try to constantly keep my arms

moving in a fluid manner to represent the beautiful and deadly dance she performed after ridding the world of the demon Raktabija and his hordes of demons.

Both of these statements contrast earthiness and lightness.

In contrast, Ann mentioned some types of movements that she did in an otherworldly duet that I will discuss in greater detail below, such as movements “just to suggest a sort of creepiness or an unearthliness were a lot of broken movements, like broken snake arms, some head slides, some sort of creepy undulations”. The “broken” movements referred to generally look like a movement that has begun, then suddenly stopped, and begun again; it is as though a dancer is freezing in the middle of a movement, which can look very precise or eerie depending on the context. Found less in traditional Middle Eastern dances, the broken mode of moving was likely borrowed from contemporary American dances such as hip hop, breakdance, and modern dance, which have influenced fusion belly dancers in terms of music and costumes as well as movement style. In Ann’s case, the point of moving in a broken mode was to call attention to the unnaturalness of the movements, suggesting an unnatural or perhaps supernatural energy.

Movements are learned through repetition, and repetition is also a key element in ritual, another of the tools facilitating numinous dancing. Yvonne Daniel, analysing ritual structure, notes: “Repetition is critical” (2005: 249).⁵ In the descriptions of rituals that follow, repetition is apparent in the practices for and movements within the rituals. Mylitta describes a ritual dance and its uses to access a trance state: “Women have gone into trance like states through rhythmic movements for centuries”. In cases like this, ritual and trance are inseparable.⁶ Ritual can be a means to access a trance state, but both are tools in the engagement with the numinous.

Trance is an important method that some belly dancers use to access the numinous. The techniques to access trance are culturally specific; from his work with the Yolmo people of Nepal, Robert Desjarlais experienced trance images as “crystallized embodied forms of knowledge” (1992: 26). A few of my collaborators drew on trance techniques from North African rituals like the Guedra and Zar,⁷ while others drew on their own spiritual practices while dancing. Anaar describes her trance experiences thus:

After all the practice, the musical study, drills and technique, when I can let go I find myself in a state akin to possession. In Feri, we call it self possession. I am present, my personality is aware, but I am being moved by some greater being. When it’s good, when I’m what we call ‘on it’, then I enter a truly ecstatic state, a great passion. I feel terribly close to the Divine at this point.⁸

Trance can be seen as both a tool (to reach ecstasy or flow) and a goal in itself; either way, the numinous is directly involved.

Breathing is another tools dancers use to get in touch with the numinous. Specific techniques may be borrowed from Eastern practices like yoga, or from Western practices like opera training. Mylitta writes:

The breath is always at the core for me. From teaching a beginning belly dancer to the more advanced yogic-bellydancing techniques my troupe does, it is all about connecting to the breath. The breath is our connection to the present moment.

For Teri (a trained operatic vocalist), breathing “is the first step for me for getting to that

place, the spiritual place, where I can let go of things and start to express [...] as I channel my energies I get further and further into it”.

The manipulation of “energy” is another technique that emerged in interviews. Many of the dancers I worked with mentioned energy, so I asked some of them to clarify how it fits in with dancing.⁹ Being able to perceive and direct energy is a common theme among dancers who engage with the numinous, and it is usually portrayed as something desirable.¹⁰ These ideas about energy have some grounding in Eastern philosophy and neopagan beliefs; Sabina Magliocco in her book *Witching Culture* defines energy as “a life force [...] that is present in all things in the universe, animate and inanimate alike” (2004: 104). Being able to manipulate energy is a skill that puts dancers and audiences in touch with the numinous by connecting them to each other and to all things.

It is important to note that not every dancer experiences these components of dance in the same way; rather, these are resources that individual dancers can draw upon as they construct dances (both in home practices and in performances) that reflect their relationship to the numinous. As Ray Cashman, Tom Mould, and Pravina Shukla have argued, tradition is both a doing and a thing: “If tradition is a process not unlike recycling, tradition as resource comprises those things available for recycling” (2011: 3). In this sense, the techniques of sacred and spiritual belly dance are resources, elements of tradition, available to individuals as guiding principles of meaning-making. All of these elements of belly dance – costume, music, movements, ritual, trance, breath, and energy – contribute to the “powers of affecting presence” that can create numinous experiences while belly dancing. These experiences can then be discussed in terms of representation, embodiment, and flow, and understanding them is essential to my argument about the interweaving of power and performativity in dance.

TYPES OF NUMINOUS DANCE: REPRESENTATION, EMBODIMENT, AND FLOW

The connections between belly dance and spirituality, which are complicated and numerous, contribute to complex relationships between mimetic and abstract texts, embodied experiences and altered consciousness. In this section, I propose some categories for understanding how belly dancers “dance the numinous”, with emphasis on representation, embodiment, and flow.

Dancing in a representative mode, whether referencing literal or abstract texts, is one way of engaging with the numinous in belly dance. This corresponds with Dox’s discussion of the types of spiritual belly dance she refers to as goddess dancing and priestess dancing, wherein dancers utilise goddess imagery as transformative and drawing on archetypes. An example of belly dancing in a representative mode that uses goddess imagery is Mylitta’s use of cowrie shells and other Goddess symbols in her dancing. In Dox’s category of priestess dancing, instead of belly dancers imitating or embodying deities, they “conceive of themselves as priestesses of and conduits for this universal female spirit, who transmit archetypal femininity into the modern world” (2005: 318).¹¹ One instance of this phenomenon, though not goddess-oriented, is a Cthulhu dance choreographed by Ann and Molly.¹² As Ann describes this dance, which was performed at GenCon (a gaming convention that also includes geek and science fiction culture, which happens annually in Indianapolis) in 2005:

I know of other people that have done things where they're trying to draw down a deity into themselves while they dance [...] but with [this] piece, I think the idea was that it was sort of a summoning of Cthulhu, so it was sort of a ritual dance, but more the idea that maybe we were priestesses or avatars, and not that we were necessarily embodying Cthulhu [...] but there's a moment where that energy sort of possesses us in that choreography.

This description touches on embodiment and ritual, demonstrating how interrelated these categories are. I believe, based on my fieldwork, that representation of the numinous can happen without using the technique of ritual or having the experience of embodiment; however, embodiment and ritual both imply representation to some degree.



Photo 1. Molly and Ann dressed up for the Cthulhu performance. Photo by Lynn.

Embodying the numinous is another way of interacting with it through belly dance. My collaborators tended to discuss embodiment as a positive thing. Isabella strives to embody strength and sensuality in her dancing, while Anaar writes: "I want that experience, to embody some small part of the sacred nature of the world". One can choose to embody entities and connections, among other things. As K. writes, ritualised dancing provides a sense of embodiment, and moreover, "through performing and embodying a sympathetic connection [with spirits], you can attempt to bring out in yourself those traits you most admire or need that you consider the entity in question to possess". In *Sensuous Scholarship*, Paul Stoller (1997: 48–73) discusses the relationship between

Songhay spirit possession as embodiment, and cultural memories. He pays close attention to sensuously incorporated – rather than textually inscribed – performances, and how they produce and reproduce power relations. When embodying the numinous, a person literally incorporates that essence, which can be a powerful transformative tool in the case of belly dancing to experience a connection with the sacred or with spirits.

Flow is a concept that I have imposed upon my data; Victor Turner (1982: 56–58) summarises it as the experience of merging action and awareness, ego-loss balanced with control of activities and environment, with clear demands and rewards for one's attention.¹³ In other words, flow is "that moment when self-consciousness disappears [...] and the actor is wholly absorbed, wholly focused on the doing" (Sawin 2002: 36). The term "flow" was not used by my interviewees in describing this state of heightened awareness and engagement, to the point of feeling "in the moment", "Zen", "letting go", "being present", or "soaring", but I believe that all these terms describe the same phenomenon. It came out most in my in-person interviews with Ann and Teri, and in my e-mail interviews with Anaar and Mylitta. Experiencing the numinous through a state of flow, with its disembodied terms, seems at first to be opposed to experiencing the numinous through embodiment; however, as I argue, embodiment is required for flow. The ways each of these dancers described the process of getting to the flow state followed the same basic patterns: practice, internalising the music and movements, and letting go, allowing the dancer to experience a sense of freedom while dancing. I argue that embodying the numinous in belly dance is necessary to experience the numinous through flow in belly dance, as one cannot dance "in the moment" until one is holistically aligned with one's body, mind, and spirit. To do that, the body cannot be neglected. Perhaps it can in other disciplines, but in dance, the body is always engaged, even in stillness.

In the experiential model that emerged in the interviews, representing, embodying, and flowing with/through/into the numinous were the most important ways of modelling how the dancers conceptualised their experiences of dancing the numinous. I found while processing the data, however, that another important concept emerged, though not explicitly: reflexivity. In this addition to the experiential model, flow is at odds with reflexivity. To be a truly good dancer, one must be reflexive some of the time – when honing one's technique and planning for a performance, for example – but not all of the time. Teri describes learning to silence her "inner critic" by reaching for the "Zen space" where she acknowledges that she may not attain perfection, but she gets closer every time. As Ann describes her experience of flow, "opening to the dance", being present is the most important thing,

[B]ecause the second you start worrying about, oh, shoot, I just messed up, or, I don't know if this looks good, or I'm not really sure I know this dance well enough and I don't think I should be on stage – the second you start being distracted by any of that, you're no longer present.

Being present is thus an important, perhaps essential, element in performing.¹⁴

My reason for venturing into the dancers' relationships with representation, flow, reflexivity, and embodiment is that these are the categories that create the numinous experience for the dancers. The elements or techniques discussed in the previous section are like the building blocks of numinous dance, and these experiential categories are the strategies for assembling them into a meaningful and artistic mode of interact-

ing with or portraying the sacred. As will be seen below, this is actually a powerfully political and sometimes transgressive practice.

PERFORMING AND PERFORMATIVE MODES

Based on my fieldwork, I believe that belly dance, especially when dancing the numinous, is both performance and performative. What constitutes a performance varies according to who you ask (among scholars as well as laypeople). I asked my collaborators what they consider a performance to be, and these are some of answers:

For me, “performance” refers to a dance done for the public, with a certain amount of planning/preparation beforehand. (Molly)

A performance is a dance performed for an audience – generally with a set stage area, timeframe, music, etc. – and the presentation is complete in concept. (Tempest)

I think it is a performance when we get dressed up in a ‘costume’ suitable for the mainstream audience (say at a down town middle America art and craft show) and get paid (hopefully) for a set of dances. I say this is a performance because it is *putting it on* in a way. The performance is the outside of what is going on. (Mylitta)

For me a performance is specifically for the purpose of sharing and communicating with others. When I dance for myself away from others I don’t consider it a performance. I am only performing when I am sharing that dance and my connection with an audience. (Mahsati Janan)

I consider a performance to be a form of entertainment presented in front of spectators. Even if the spectators are pets, fae, or any other manner of being! (Isabella)

There’s the traditional sense of performance, where you have an audience and a set number and you perform, and that is a performance. There is also the performing we do for one another, when we’re working through and showing each other stuff, and that’s also a performance. And then there are the things that I do when I’m teaching belly dance, and that is also a performance [...] And then, there’s the performance that I do for myself [...] when I’m dancing because I’m enjoying it and I don’t give a damn if anybody’s watching, because I’m dancing for me. And then it’s a performance, but it’s for me. (Teri)

Synthesising these answers, I would say they are very close to the Bauman and Kapchan definitions of performance mentioned above. Due to the nature of these performances, which incorporate the numinous, these performances require a broader meaning than simply taking responsibility for a body of tradition.¹⁵

Teri’s answer, however, approaches the notion of performances of the everyday, the idea that we are all always performing. In this sense, too, dancing is performative, regardless of whether it is happening in a traditional performance context. Several of my collaborators also expressed the idea that performance is the external aspect of what is happening when they are putting on a show. The other elements of what is happening at that moment, for the individual dancer and for the interaction between



Photo 2. *Tempest and Anaar*. Photo by Michael Baxter, 2006.

bringing in ritual elements, for example, that rely upon a broader conception of audience. Discussing the ritualistic aspects of her dance performances, Anaar states: “Truly there is no audience in a ritual. All are in some fashion participants.” This notion is similar to Edward Schieffelin’s theorisation of the audience as crucial participants in Kaluli rituals rather than as passive recipients of the performer’s artistic creation (1985; 1996; see also Barber 1997). In a further similarity to the Kaluli *séances* Schieffelin describes, in which the participants view the spirits rather than the human mediums as the performers, numinous and ritualistic belly dance performances have the potential to perform the sacred for human audiences and for non-human audiences alike. An example of the former is Mylitta’s statement: “The most magical times dancing for an audience are when I can see the Divinity in people open up while I am dancing”. Speaking to the latter, K. explains:

I view ritual in and of itself to be a performance, whether its ritual that is designed to be viewed by an outside audience or ritual that is designed to invoke/evoke certain emotional states in the performer and create a certain type of space. Also, from a spiritual point of view, to say that there is no ‘audience’ when dancing alone in a sacred context, undercuts the aspect of communion with the divine.

Earlier, while discussing Ann and Molly’s Cthulhu dance, which was ritualistic yet not a ritual intended to actually raise Cthulhu, I mentioned the indirect relationship

dancers, point to both the different layers of identity involved in performance, and to the potential of dancing to be performative regardless of the audience’s presence or involvement.

It is important to note that my collaborators’ definitions of performance depart from the definitions of performances used in folklore and anthropology scholarship in respect to audience. Since many of my interviewees define themselves as performers, they do take audience into account when planning a piece. Anaar exemplifies this attitude well:

I do try to respect the audience [...] However, I must keep reminding myself to remain authentic. The pull to please and be liked as a performer is intensely strong. I try to maintain a balance between complete authenticity and mutual respect.

At least two layers of identity – authentic self and performer self – are evident in this statement.

At the same time, some of my collaborators expand the notion of performance,

between embodiment, ritual, and representation. In this section, I want to discuss an example of embodiment and ritual that is not a representation of those things – or, at least not to everyone in the audience. This is an instance of keying, which is a strategy some belly dancers use when utilising personally meaningful symbols or associations. Recognising these symbols is not crucial for audience enjoyment of the piece, though familiarity with them can enhance one’s experience of the performance. In our interview, Margaret told me about a performance she did at the Fourth Street Festival of the Arts in Bloomington to “The Mummer’s Dance” by Loreena McKennitt, explaining to me that it is a pagan song with personal meaning to her. Margaret explained: “I really wanted that to be my salute to the pagan religion, and some people noticed it, and some people didn’t, and that’s okay.” She honoured the four elements in her dance, again saying that it did not matter to her whether audience members caught on to this representation of ritual elements. She chose to honour the four elements by doing dance movements that embodied each one for her: “the earth is kinda rolling down, and then water is the hips with the waves, and then fire I did some circles with the chest, and air was with the head, so I moved it all up”. I asked Margaret to demonstrate each of these movements so I could do them with her, and as we danced during our interview, I felt as though I understood the pleasure that can come from embodying meaningful aspects using movements from a familiar dance vocabulary – and because this dance vocabulary is meant to be aesthetically pleasing for the viewer as well, these movements translated so easily into performance that it was not, in this case, essential for the audience to understand the ritualistic significance of the movements.

THE POLITICS OF PERFORMANCE AND PERFORMATIVITY

Given that numinous belly dance is both a performing and a performative act, its implications within larger cultural structures of power and identity must be considered. As Katharine Young writes: “Culture apprentices the body to its style” (2011: 56). The aesthetic systems imposed on bodies are not neutral, and carry many meanings for those who inhabit certain kinds of bodies within these social realms.

Discussing a Christmas cycle ritual dance from a Mexican indigenous community, Joyce M. Bishop suggests that “rituals in certain kinds of small communities are at some level about the very people who enact them” (2009: 400). While the community of her study differs from the larger and more loose-knit community of American belly dancers I describe here, it seems likely that the focus of ritual movements that have become more or less codified will eventually point back to the concerns and needs of the people enacting the ritual movements. Recall that even though not every dancer in my interview sample adhered to a pagan or spiritual belief system (Cheri noted that she did not practice spiritual belly dance at all, but is acquainted with the notion of it), every dancer shares ideas about how such spirituality and belly dance intersect. The interview material demonstrated considerable overlap between their conception of this type of dancing, too, in both themes and techniques. And while I have chosen to focus in-depth on the rich personal data I collected, I can say with certainty based on my involvement with the belly dance community for over a decade that sacred and spiritual themes are a consistent and compelling part of the community as a whole; there are frequently workshops being advertised around the U.S. and there are always at least a handful of

pieces at major performances that address these themes.¹⁶ This overall coherence is why I feel comfortable asserting that ritual and spiritual elements in belly dance are in part a way for the dancers to artistically reframe concerns about themselves.

As discussed above, belly dancers operate within a patriarchal context in which male is privileged over female, mind over body, reason over emotion. These abstract concepts are incorporated into lived reality through a variety of cultural norms and precepts. Patricia Sawin (2002: 37) writes:

The cornerstone of Western patriarchal hegemony, the way it is brought into being in everyday life, is that women are raised to know that they must continually, necessarily, self-consciously perform themselves prior to and simultaneous with any other kind of esthetic performance they undertake.

Due to this constantly performed self-surveillance, Sawin notes, it is especially transgressive when women access flow states while performing, as they transcend the shackles of this double-consciousness.¹⁷ Since belly dance offers avenues by which to access flow, whether it is called a Zen state or thought of a heightened awareness due to ritual means or a simple performer's high, the art form thus can aid in subverting patriarchal norms.

Other scholars of belly dance have, of course, suggested that through the dance, women are able to reject patriarchal constraints on acceptable body images and movement types (Bock 2005). Erin Kenny notes that the women she studied who practice American Tribal Style (ATS) belly dance are engaged in creating an alternative to oppressive structures: "Forging woman-centered community comprises a set of political choices for ATS dancers: like alternative religion it is not a purely self-indulgent avocation to be partitioned off from their 'real' political work" (2007: 318). The ways in which belly dancers contest and construct alternatives to patriarchal and hierarchical domination are myriad, and happen on both conscious and unconscious levels. Sometimes, an act as simple as a woman taking pleasure in the movement of her body can be subversive and liberating, whether or not she mentally frames it that way.

However, I am suggesting that practitioners of sacred and spiritual belly dance in particular challenge patriarchal norms by foregrounding the relationship between body and mind. The mind/body dualism has historically extended to spirit/body, as in Christian formulations of the identity as residing in the immortal soul rather than the mortal (and thus impure) body (Meynell 2009: 2). Additionally, as Sawin points out, it is threatening when "the female performer might take on a role or perform a genre conventionally reserved for men, thus claiming for a woman a role that confers prestige and controls ritual knowledge" (2002: 41). As men have fulfilled many of the important religious and ritual roles in the West, at least on an institutional level, it could be seen as dangerous for women to creatively access traditionally masculine roles, as when Ann and Molly portrayed ritual specialists summoning a spiritual power, or when Margaret did a dance saluting the four elements in her pagan belief system. Women who do sacred and spiritual belly dance can, through their performing and their performativity, demonstrate that they do not require either inaccessible masculine roles or the men who fill them.

Further, by engaging with spiritual themes and representations while simultaneously entering a flow state, the belly dancers I interviewed are participating in discourse that asserts their right to be both a mind and a body: in short, a whole human being who connects with the earth and the universe and possibly also the divine. Erin

Kenny (2007: 319) suggests that along with practices such as yoga and other

[T]ransnationally relevant strategies for attempting to transcend western dichotomies of mind/body and spirituality/materialism, so too do some communities of ATS bellydancers endeavor to creatively work through their critiques of western culture, while ironically seizing upon the material markers of those less powerful in contemporary global political-economies.

Many of my collaborators focused on how the movements, music, and adornment from Middle Eastern cultures gave them a creative space in which to get in touch with the numinous elements they wished to explore in their dance. This borrowing from other cultures is not unproblematic. Borland and Bock (2011: 27) admit:

As folklorists and feminists, we understand that the liberatory intentions of those performing racial or ethnic identities other than their own does not exonerate them or us from acknowledging histories of oppression that have shaped and given meaning to those performances.

Yet as they found, borrowing from other cultures can actually aid in exploring new kinds of embodiment: "Dancers self-consciously invoke 'exotic' cultures in order to create alternative ideals through the experience of dancing, which in turn open up opportunities for alternate embodied forms of self-expression" (ibid.: 24). The need for these alternate conceptions and expressions of self stems from the unequal distribution of power in society, and the attempt to have the power to transform one's bodily identity as desired is itself an exercise in power.

There is an additional dimension of power that is specific to numinous dance and other expressions of religion and spirituality, however. These dances are, literally, an expression of power, whether that power is understood as the ability to manipulate energy or magic, the expression of a connection with the sacred universe or the divine, or simply the power to put on a compelling performance that touches or moves people – starting, of course, with the dancer herself. The rewards of dancing numinously were clear from my interviews, as many of the dancers treated their experiences as positive, desirable, and something to be integrated into their lives as much as possible. Because these types of belief systems regarding energy, trance, and the divine tend to be treated as subcultural and viewed as suspicious in mainstream America, however, most dancers are cautious with context and framing when they dance. This is one reason why I believe that my insider status as a belly dancer helped me gain access to information that might otherwise be a little more protected in order to avoid misunderstandings or negative judgments.

In practicing a dance form that allows them to touch the numinous either representationally (as when portraying a deity or someone worshipping a deity) or implicitly (as when accessing a trance or flow state), my collaborators subverted expressions of mind/body dualism in favour of synthesis and transcendence. As Tempest told me, "Dancing in itself is a very spiritual, metaphysical experience for me. I'm connecting with my body and my spirit at the same time." I believe that representational dances need not even focus on the divine feminine in order to create numinous (and possibly liberating) experiences for the dancers; the Cthulhu dance described by Ann and Molly was not specifically feminine, and Anaar and Tempest performed a ritual duet that was

intended to convey the essence of the Horned God. Rather, I assert that the very act of intertwining spirit and body gives dancers in a culture with oppressive mind/body and gender dualism a sense of freedom, contentment, and interconnection that is otherwise difficult to find and pursue. By performing rituals and ritualising performances, these dancers call into question another boundary – that which exists between religion and art, the sacred and the secular – and manifest their ideals and dreams in reality.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have described a phenomenon in contemporary American belly dance beliefs and practices: engaging with and performing the numinous, whether that is interpreted as representing, embodying, or otherwise engaging with the divine, spiritual, sacred, or a holistic and transcendent state of being. While other scholars have touched on this topic (Crosby 2000; Deagon 2007; Dox 2007), my focus on the experiences of individuals within their social contexts has helped elaborate the lived realities of spiritual belly dance. Thanks to the dancers who generously shared their time and experiences, I was able to assemble enough data on this phenomenon to discuss the techniques available to express and access the numinous. In addition to the concrete categories and tools used to portray or access the numinous while dancing, I found that the dancers very eloquently and ably discussed the role of ritual and performance in their dancing. Many of them spoke with great joy about what they get out of spiritual dancing, and dancing in general.

Based on what the dancers shared with me, I elaborated upon some differences between the representation and embodiment of the numinous, and the ability to enter a flow or trance-like state, which most often happens through the use of repetitive movement, embodied practice, and ritual meanings. I asserted that belly dancing the numinous is both performance and performative, and that belly dancers who engage with the numinous also engage with complex notions of audience, ranging from audience as divine entities to audience as ritual participants. Finally, I explained why these performances are so complex and powerful: they place performers in the un-feminine position of displaying transformative power on stage in a way that flaunts patriarchal norms and challenges mind/body dualism. The complex relationships between performing traditions, spirituality, gender roles, and aestheticised bodies deserve further investigation, ideally a combination of ethnographic methods with theoretical analysis. As I have demonstrated, placing the voices of individual practitioners in dialogue with larger cultural elements is an effective and rewarding way of exploring how and why folklore forms are practiced and performed.

NOTES

1 One of the sub-cultures that many belly dancers interact with is Gothic sub-culture. Of my collaborators, Anaar and Isabella each listed Gothic influences upon their movement vocabularies, and Tempest promotes the Gothic-belly dance fusion in her dancing and costuming.

2 As of 2011, the term American Tribal Style® (and its abbreviation, ATS®) became a registered trademark of FatChanceBellyDance, the troupe that created ATS. I have chosen to omit the ®

symbol because my research was conducted before this occurred, though I note it here in order to acknowledge the troupe's claim to their intellectual property. For more on this, see Legal Policy.

3 Iris Stewart (2000) devotes a chapter of *Sacred Woman, Sacred Dance* to describing the symbolism and power of women's garments, focusing especially on belly dance attire. Sheer and shimmering fabrics are among the costume components recognised to contribute to a numinous feel; one example is the popularity of the Dance of the Seven Veils, which over time has utilised veils physically as fabric props and metaphorically as layers of identity or gates of initiation (see Deagon 2005 for a discussion of Orientalist and feminist constructions of the Dance of the Seven Veils).

4 At times, dancers employ specific movements to key into numinous engagement. Mylitta, speaking for her troupe, says: "We do specific moves to build up our individual and group energy and then we send it out like a wave in a wave pool. We do a lot of work with the chakras and balancing our energy as we dance." Teri relates how she has a "default move" – snake arms or arm undulations – which she uses in choreographies because it feels good and it looks good. Additionally, she uses her default move to get closer to her spiritual space because it is such a part of her muscle memory that her mind is free to think of other movements to do. When movements begin to come more easily, she gets excited, and closer to her "Zen space" where she is invigorated by the energy of the performance.

5 In fact, the entire paragraph from which I drew that quote could be describing a numinous belly dance rather than a dance for Oyá:

Repetition is critical. It is necessary to build and intensify each body part's involvement. It is through repetition that dancing worshipers harness and display all the energy possible in a given set of movements. At first the pattern is consciously discernable, but with maximum repetition, the dancing worshiper is fully confident, engrossed in the muscular movement, articulating every nuance in every part of the body. The mind is submerged in the dancing and the music, discerning mysteries. Both the body and the mind transcend. (Daniel 2005: 249)

6 Similarly, Anaar intertwines ritual and trance in her dancing, stating: "I like to ritualize my movement. In fact, I love to create small 5-7 min. rituals for the stage. I have a few movements I use regularly and I think it's working. What I mean by that is I believe I am creating triggers for myself. Triggers that allow me to enter that small trance state."

7 See Shira in Richards 2000 for information on these rituals written by belly dancers for belly dancers.

8 I asked Anaar for clarification of the terms trance and possession, and she sent me an excerpt of her 2004 book, titled *The White Wand: Toward a Feri Aesthetic*. In it, she describes how Feri traditions utilise ritual and trance as ecstatic tools. Some quotes that caught my eye, and that seem relevant to pursuits in performance studies and dance anthropology, include:

Ritual is not theater but a dynamic source of power. There is no passive audience, all members of the ritual circle actively participate. The lending of mana to a working is the primary motivation. Ritual is never done to you, it is done with you. That inclusiveness is extended to create and sustain mana in a dramatic and indissoluble way. In public ritual, the achievement of shared meanings and shared emotions is the goal, not private individual goals [...]. A full ritual working is not complete without trance. Repetition is vital to trance. One of the keys to magic is the ability to entrance as well as become entranced. True trance states are founded upon a profound state of relaxation, no matter how vigorous the rhythm. It is the long (this often takes hours in many cultures) repetition of that rhythm that produces the relaxed state.

9 My clarification question to Mylitta was: "Is this related to chi or aura-like concepts of energy, or do you mean energy as in what you're communicating to the audience?" She responded:

Yes and yes. The yogi's refer to it as Prana, further East it is referred to as Chi or Ki. This energy, Universal Energy, flows through the dancer (more so if she is conscious of her breath). The energy of the dance, the music and the individual dancer add a level of emotion, a flavor,

if you will. We try to be conscious of our connection to all of these energies as they play out in our dance. We then utilize this energy and direct it with our intention.

10 Anaar writes: "I enjoy dancers who obviously work energetically, those who can raise and move energy." Teri refers to energy as a tangible thing passing between her and the audience:

When I'm performing, I'm not just putting energy out, I'm getting energy back. And the more it bounces back from people, the more they watch, the more they get excited about it, the more they feed me, the higher I go. And the higher I go, the closer I am to that space... You get high, it's so euphoric.

11 Mylitta provides a good example of a priestess-dancing attitude when she writes of performing for an audience: "I know that I am there to be of service. The gift of the dance will be received by those in the audience open to receiving it and those not interested will at least have a good time 'watching the show'."

12 Cthulhu is an Elder God in the mythology of H. P. Lovecraft's work in the horror genre. Cthulhu enjoys much prominence in contemporary American subcultures, such as geeks and gamers, and hence was deemed appropriate for a performance at GenCon, a gaming convention that occurs annually in Indianapolis. The troupe Different Drummer Belly Dancers, of which both Ann and Molly were once a part, has danced at GenCon since 2004 as the pre-show to the costume contest.

13 While on the subject of Victor Turner's *From Ritual to Theatre*, I might add that he distinguishes between liminal and liminoid phenomena, characterising the former as prevalent in tribal and agrarian societies to promote wholeness and solidarity, and the latter as common in contractual and industrial societies to fulfill functions of leisure. Turner (1982: 43) states: "Optation pervades the liminoid phenomena, obligation the liminal. One is all play and choice, an entertainment, the other is a matter of deep seriousness, even dread, it is demanding, compulsory, thorough." Belly dance might appear to be liminoid rather than liminal, but I argue that especially for the dancers who approach it as sacred and/or ritualistic, dancing is a necessary form of expression and reintegration with the universe. More than one interviewee expressed to me the importance of dancing in her life – dancing does not simply pervade one's life, it invades it, unbalancing everything if not given enough attention!

14 I asked Ann specifically about whether performance and flow are mutually exclusive, and she replied:

I think they can both happen, and I think you can sort of tap into a trance state with that too, and that can still be performance [...] this is one of the reasons we practice, right, so all the technique, and even things like the projection of stage presence, you practice that, so that all goes on autopilot, and you're not having to consciously worry about every little detail. And that way, you can do the dance, you can go through the physical motions, and you can do whatever gestures you're trying to do to get stage presence, but you're also deeply connected to the music and to the audience and to that moment of expression without having to worry about it all. That's why we practice – If you've got it all physically internalised, then you can open up to other things.

As Ann says (and in my experience), that "opening up to other things" part is unique about belly dancing the numinous and informs its relationships to performing power.

15 Which is not to imply that any performance is simple!

16 The fact that spiritual belly dance has already been the topic of three academic essays (Crosby 2000; Deagon 2007; Dox 2007) also indicates that it is a fairly widespread phenomenon.

17 As Sawin (2002: 147) phrases it:

The woman who slips into the flow state and transcends self-consciousness, forgetting that she is being evaluated both for the skill and effectiveness of her display of esthetic competence and for her performance of self, is supremely dangerous. She potentially wields the power of persuasion and erotic allure and receives reinforcing approbation, uncontrolled by hegemonic forces that insist she employ these capacities to reinstantiate her own subordination.

SOURCES

Face-to-face and e-mail interviews with belly dancers in Bloomington, Indiana, conducted in 2007 and 2008 with some follow-up in 2012. Of the interviews I conducted in person, I maintain the tapes and transcripts in my personal files (I transcribed the interviews myself). I also keep files of the interviews that were conducted via e-mail. These files have not yet been archived.

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

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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 archetypical 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)

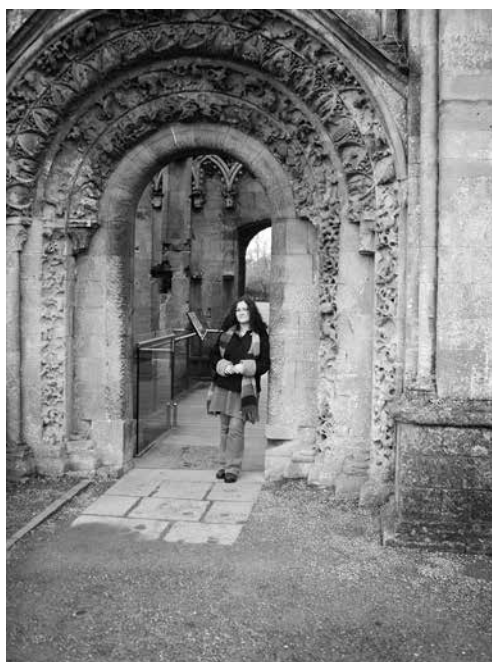


Photo 4. Author at St Mary's Chapel, Glastonbury Abbey, December 2011. Photo by Mano Mannaz.

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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ENERGY AS THE MEDIATOR BETWEEN NATURAL AND SUPERNATURAL REALMS

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ABSTRACT

This article* discusses contemporary vernacular theory about the elusive energies that emanate from the ground. These energies are reported to be the ultimate reason for different remarkable occurrences, both natural and supernatural. The hypothesis of special energies is expressed in local tourism, in ecological debates and healing practises, driving the curiosity of amateur science. In these expressions knowledge as a form of engagement with the supernatural plays an integrating role between the individual and the forces beyond.

Dowsing reveals the 'energetic' nature of reality, which will be discussed using three examples. Tuhala Nõiakaev (the Witch's Well) as a peculiar natural sight in the north of Estonia has drawn together many reports of energy columns that are linked to underground rivers and cultic stones. Another place under discussion is also famous for healing energy points: Kirna Manor works as a centre for spreading knowledge of the interdependence of physical health and the search for a spiritual path with the help of energies that the next example, the Society of Dowsers, attempts to discover using scientific methods. In these examples 'energy' designates the position of the individual, in which the participative relationship with the environment works as a form of folk epistemology within the limits of cultural understanding.

KEYWORDS: energy • folk beliefs • place-lore • dowsing • healing

THE THEORY OF ENERGIES AS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL AND ENVIRONMENT

Since 1992 when the first of a new type of monument – an energy pillar – was erected in the south Estonian town Otepää, the Estonian landscape has gained several such destinations. Invisible energy columns heal people at Kirna manor park; a natural fountain occurring during flood periods, Nõiakaev (the Witches' Well) in Tuhala, has revealed its special energy and therefore attracts people during the dry season; the limestone

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museum at Porkuni has an 'energy path' that stresses the invisible influence of limestone on human health and well-being. All these projects, contributing inevitably to local tourism, embody a variety of beliefs that centre around the invisible waves and radiations that affect the human physical as well as spiritual condition. In addition to the list above, people who share these ideas would add tens of examples, and even more, the concept of a uniting network of waves (Hartmann, Curry, etc.¹) binding different places and different times, explaining facts on the global as well as individual level. Along with it, a huge amount of training courses are offered to educate people to detect and use the invisible energies in their homes and places of work. Specific interest in earth rays and "anomalous zones" has brought people together in clubs and societies (for example, Club Energo and the Estonian Geopathic Society in Tallinn; see Energo klubi; Influence of Geopathic Fields on Life and Environment) although they share their principles and methods with wider esoteric knowledge.

Doing fieldwork at the popular sites of 'energies' or among the dowisers and healers, often the question of my intention arises. What is a folklorist doing examining the very promising field of natural science, or examining the medicine that helps people? This surprise reflects the conflict in the understandings of belief and truth, and also the conflict within folkloristics, which is supposed to deal with stories of the past and 'folk poetry'. In a secular society that values scientific rationality, the social designations of belief and truth are in opposition. Despite this confrontation of understanding, which could be a topic for analysis by itself, in the subject of earth energies expressions of belief start from a certain modality which begins from the assumption that there is something beyond our conscious understanding and is sometimes elaborated as detailed visions and comprehensive theories of this 'realm beyond'.

In the following article I introduce my research material, which consists of different realisations of the idea of earth energies. Ideas that are shared in various contexts, by various viewpoints and authorities are difficult to analyse as a whole. In this problem I have found it fruitful to look at the material with an eye for vernacular dispute, whereas the 'energetic' explanation always offers an alternative view of reality. From this viewpoint, belief legends get an epistemological quality in the contest of worldviews. In this article, the theoretical discussion of these points is followed by the empirical material.

Leonard Primiano's (1995: 44) central statement for scholars of religion and belief is to look at their subject as "religion as it is lived". In this he does justice to lived tradition and belief, in order to start analysis from the emic point of view, to value vernacular expressions and not the dogmatic frameworks of scholarship or official religions. According to this view belief grounds every aspect of expression within tradition. Researching the mechanisms between expression and belief would justify this goal in its fullest sense. Expressing, verifying or negotiating beliefs in situations and practices unites these two sides to a new analytical unit when the result is neither a pure ideology nor a utilitarian knowledge of the world, but the process of believing, which has the impact of both.

An inductive approach does more than simply extrapolate general principles from particular data. It generates a theory of and method for the study of religion based on criteria of religious validity established by the inner experience and perception of the believer. Scholarship on lived religion is, however, never a purely objective position, but rather a subjective composite of various analytical vantage points. A

presentation of the beliefs of others occurs always through the filter of the empathetic perception and interpretation of the scholar. (Primiano 1995: 40)

A warning statement from one of my informants, a successful 'life-coach' and *feng shui* specialist stresses the very point of Primiano's thought:

I am often asked if I really BELIEVE in this [the existence of invisible energies]. I always answer, it does not make sense if I believe in it or not. All that matters is whether I decide to USE it or not. (FM Trainer)²

The appropriation of the terms 'religion' and 'believing' in secular society is a designation in itself. It is not something that can be associated with the critical thought and sober common sense. Even the existence of supernatural, definitive characteristics of the reality of belief would be problematic in the case of dowsing as vernacular science. Many aspects of the material collected for my study refer to it as a practice rather than a structured body of principles; it is similarly recognised by informants who avoid associating it with the realm of beliefs or religion. Even worse, the conclusions that the informants reach too often contradict each other. The precise detection of earth rays or the interpretation of the scales of a pendulum operate within certain limits of confusion; the appropriation of a positive or negative designation to trees or places is highly debatable among the interpreters themselves. Looking at the variety of expressions, in which the basic cosmological principle that there are invisible and imperceptible rays and waves emanating from the surface and that their influence defines the reality, could lead to total confusion. In a "religion as it is lived" analysis, focus should not only be on ways of expression but also on the motivation of the tellers.

Seppo Knuuttila (2012: 370) has written about the epistemological qualities of different vernacular expressions. The problem he raises is that of the logic of the generalisations in folklore material. From which side should we read the generalisations from of our material in order that an understanding of the dynamics of vernacular belief would reveal itself in an accurate way? Are the stories examples of something? Seppo Knuuttila elaborates this viewpoint by scrutinising of the concept of supernatural.

The supernatural can, however, be understood in at least two different ways: usually it is considered to be an aspect of religion, whereas references to supernatural in the sense of the inexplicable can be interpreted as intellectual contemplation without the framework of belief. Naturally it is not necessary, or wise, to deny the mental category of belief as such, but it can be bracketed when the question asked is not if people in times past used to, for example, believe in guardian spirits. Belief stories can thus be used to exemplify the vernacular interest in knowledge and epistemology. (Ibid.: 371)

Knowledge that has both magical and intellectual power is well expressed in contemporary popular understanding of the term 'information'. The activities performed in esoteric circles consist of rituals as well as of group or private meditations, in which the expression and perception of the sacred is clearly marked with decorations, food, music, etc. But many of the social activities of people with the same interests focus around the getting and sharing, even the 'taking', of information. Self-help books, the wide business of life-training courses in human relations, *feng shui*, and balanced food show the intimate, even inseparable relation between intellectual and religious settings

in people's lives. Is the information about earth energies that is shared at the conferences of dowsers and radiesthesists, in the form of slides with technical data given in figures and scales, the same information that they detect during conference excursions as an information field at a particular place in cultural history? Probably yes and no. The desire to seek an explanation, a reason or a narrative above and beyond daily experience that would explain and order this experience, is the feature that keeps different ideas together and also sustains these ideas in practise. Information as an esoteric experience, though gained through intellectual mechanisms, is religious in the sense that it does not reach further than already established myth. Religious information can widen the central idea; it can attach the proper elements, keywords to it, or seek different manifestations or formulations. As characteristic to myth, information organises the worldview for those who adopt it, unifying and explaining the differences. In this sense information could be understood as myth. But actualisation of this myth at conferences and at formal and informal training events, associates the religious perception of information (as the vernacular category) with the current of gnosticism as known in the history of religion.

Gnosticism, or gnosis as a set of religious ideas of revealed knowledge, which Antoine Faivre (1987a: 158) has named the masculine part of esotericism (in partnership with feminine mysticism), focuses on the myth according to which ultimate divine wisdom is gained only through the human self, which is itself of divine origin. This myth, as a compilation of different sources, tells of the human self that has direct contact with divinity. Knowledge of the divine, which the self is able to reveal, has releasing power. To know is to be released (Hanegraaff 2006: 790–798). Estonian historian of religion, Jaan Lahe, has raised several definitions of Gnosticism, stressing the fact that it is difficult to analyse as a definite ideology because it has always been a part of religious and intellectual history from the multi-religious Roman Empire up to contemporary new spirituality (Lahe 2009: 44). According to Kurt Rudolph, a peculiarity of the gnostic tradition lies in the fact that it frequently draws its material from the most varied existing traditions, attaches itself to this material and at the same time sets it in a new frame by which it takes on a new character and a completely new significance. Since gnostic myths are built together out of other mythological material they give the impression of artificiality as compared with the old developed myths of primeval times. It is not at all the case of artificial and fundamentally unimportant compilation, but of illustration of existential situations of the gnostic view of the world. Since this view of the world attaches itself in the main to the older imagery almost as a parasite prospers on the body of a host, it can also be described as parasitic. (Rudolph 1998: 53–55) Gnostic ideas usually have polemical relations with the prevailing tradition because, to use Kurt Rudolph's words, they re-write the existing socially established philosophy. In this, gnosis in particular gives us a typical example of the close interweaving of ideology and sociology. (Ibid.: 58)

German theologian Friedrich Christoph Oetinger (1702–1782), who had been inspired by theosophical ideas, developed the view of *physica sacra* or physicotheology from his experiments with the electricity, which might be considered the chronological link between cosmosophical views of the Renaissance and the German *Naturphilosophie* of pre-Romanticism and Romanticism (Faivre 1987b: 333). He interprets the Genesis story of creation, the primeval light ("In the beginning God created heaven and earth including the waters.

Darkness was upon the deep and God created the light”) before the Sun as the creation of an electrical fire that spreads over chaos as a stimulating, warming and form-giving life-principle. This constitutes a new view of the relationship between life and matter of spirit, soul, and physical properties that differs most strongly from the traditional Aristotelian concept of matter. From the beginning of the world a living life element has been added to matter, which contains the cause of all future natural creation, an element that Oetinger calls “the electrical fire concealed in all things” (Benz 2009: 45–47). This idea emphasises that intelligences and souls do not emerge from the substance of God and are, therefore, not to be considered a direct emanation of the divine being, while, on the other hand they are placed in the immediate proximity of the divine being as emanations of His originative potentialities (ibid.: 53). Oetinger reflects the positional shift between human world and a sacrality that was introduced by the development of the natural sciences during the Enlightenment. In this way knowledge uses the principle of salvation to change the personality from inside by positioning the sacred near the mundane. Although this engages the method of rational reasoning it sheds light on illuminating knowledge, which itself provides access to divinity.

Illuminated gnostic knowledge itself involves many types of perception, as well as many operations to make the acquired information intelligible. The sources of truths as well as the methods of gaining it are both socially determined (for example, academic science versus New Age science). In vernacular practices the methods, channels and skills of adopting knowledge are not rigidly imposed, although they reflect those values that form the authority. Many scholars of Renaissance magic, esotericism and contemporary spirituality see magic and belief as being intensively in dialogue with rationality, with empirical and causal reasoning (Tambiah 1990; Luhrmann 1991; Hammer 2007). Those scholars see magic as a highly adaptive form of involvement in the world. In this, rather than content, purpose and instruments of certain magical practise, the type of ordering of the cosmos in relation to the subject is under scrutiny.

Since the Enlightenment the legitimate method of gaining knowledge about the world has favoured empirical proof and logical reasoning of facts. However the separation of science from magic has reordered the view of a person’s participation in the process of gaining an active relationship between the human self and the outer world in the terms of knowledge. Since the 18th century the main complaint against people who dowse has been that their methods contain no sufficient scientific proof. Thus the moral aspect has replaced what was formerly sinful, i.e. the relationship with demons and the devil. For example, Martin Luther, in his book of sermons *Decem praecepta Vuittembergensi predicata populo*, printed in 1518, mentioned dowsing as being against the first commandment. (Barrett, Bestermann 1926: 17)

Here we can see conflict between the different moralities and ideologies built upon different categories of human thought. The categories of *participation* and *causality* designate the different cognitive orientations in the process of analysis. The first of them, the “law of participation”, as phrased by its author Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, is the association between people and things in primitive thought to the point of identity and substantiality. (Tambiah 1990: 86) Lévy-Bruhl contested the evolutionary view of culture by setting the participative sense at the very centre of human perception; this can be met not only in traditional mentalities but is rather a question of two types of knowledge in any society that touches upon the levels of thought and experience (Hanegraaff 2003: 373). The principle of participation, based on existential immediacy, contact and

a relationship of contiguity (Tambiah 1990: 107) takes on an even more literary sense in the current theme, which has the central idea that humankind is related to the environment through waves and elusive energies that are now the subject of 'advanced perception' (only people with special abilities can properly perceive these charges) but will be one of the future sciences. The first indications of reciprocity in the participatory relationship between humans and the environment are seen in quantum theory. Thus, the desire to be aware of the laws of nature, and not just to be aware but to be an active and conscious participant in these forces, is what drives the dowser. This goal to overcome the existential separation that the natural laws inherently involve is part of the religious desire to be in a *participative* relationship with reality.

If people define reality by the special energies that fluctuate between cosmos and earth, then all natural (for example the shapes of trees) and supernatural occurrences (for example, areas of high UFO activity, folkloric references to ghosts and to legends about buried treasure the location of which is revealed with flashing lights) are explained by this energy, and the position of a person telling these stories is expressed as a reaction to existing knowledge. But the detection of earth rays or veins of water as part of finding a solution to various illnesses, tiredness or bad dreams, shows the possibility of overcoming these troubles. Even more, going into the countryside to perceive the harmonising energy of nature, the healing energies of trees, or just to entertain yourself with a tickle of the supernatural coming from sensations at the energy column is an expression of the direct relationship with the meta-rules of nature.

Although the principle of logical or causal reasoning that has established itself as a socially dominant ideology in Western thought could also be seen as complementary to the participative orientation towards reality. "Like participation, it is a spontaneous tendency of the human mind: the tendency to suspect things that happen in the world to be the result of material causation, and to explain events in this manner" (Hanegraaff 2003: 375).

The appeal of quantum theory to 'spiritual science' is in that existential unity of human perception that it seems to support, and which academic science does not seem to take into account. The use of scientific terms in the context of belief is supported by those developments within natural sciences that produce the knowledge of the world in a literally esoteric sense. Both perception and understanding is hard to achieve in terms of up-to-date scientific knowledge. Physicist Jaak Kikas has drawn attention to metaphoric usage of the concept of physical field.

Developments of physics where the exposition of static and magnetic fields as carriers of interactions between charges and currents have reached to descriptions of quantum and non-linear effects may viewed as "dematerialization" of electromagnetic fields in sense that more and more subtle and distant from our everyday experience effects have been taken under consideration. The physical concepts of fields, however, always assume rigorous mathematical models, no matter how weak the field may be. Quite a different usage of the same word is given by the examples like "biofields", "morphic fields" etc., where the elusiveness of field seems to be its basic characteristic in order to make it responsible for effects (real or imaginary) otherwise unexplainable. A noteworthy historical example is that with the term of "animal magnetism", which lost its popularity when rigorous physical theory of magnetism was developed. (Kikas 2000: 19)

The idea of uniting energies that help to overcome the existential separation has two functions within the frame of rational epistemology. At first, energy itself is that medium through which the participative relationship with the environment or other people is possible. At the same time, its explanations in physical terms allows the possibility of crediting it to the scientific worldview. And secondly, at the level of thinking the goal of gaining the active position towards the 'forces beyond' involves the associative, direct and face-to-face relationship, which at the same time is connected with the conscious and analytical will. Thus both causality and participation are in principle inescapable ways of making sense of natural environment involving both the religious as well as rational epistemology.

Regarding this view, rationalising different sensations as well as existential positioning does not cause a separation between practical or metaphysical issues, but rather is the way to create a coherent narrative upon the different facts. Despite this, the participative or otherwise direct position of the human to natural laws is what makes the science of radiesthesia and the art of dowsing an 'alternative' to the dominant ideology of scientific rationality.

THE COLUMNS OF ENERGY IN TUHALA

The 'energetic' layer of place-lore is first and foremost concentrated around the concept of certain places that embody an unexplainable power that has strong impact on human mental and physical wellness, and on the growth of plants and trees. Energy columns are reported to be situated at geological breaks (meaning they occur due to peculiarities of the earth's surface) or in churches and other sacred places (meaning they have impact on people's sense of the sacred). Energy as an elusive vernacular concept can be attributed to many different natural formations. Thus, some stones, sandstone walls or trees can in fact work similarly to energy columns. The forces that can be detected around the columns are often related to magnetism, electricity or just 'fields'.

A story of energy columns near Tuhala Nöiakaev (the Witch's Well) is told by the owner of the well, Ants Talioja. Below I refer an interview with him (recorded in September 2011) and also his letters, in which he explains the energetic methods of gaining knowledge about local history.

In 2001 a geobiologist Rein Hanstein re-discovered the energy columns here. At first one and later four. The energy columns were measured in ångströms³ by a Swedish researcher using a pendulum. The Finns are working similarly; recently a group of them was here, researchers of energy columns. Four columns are of 18,000 ångströms and one is 19,000; the Otepää one is 14 and those of Kirna manor are not more than 14. (FM Tuhala 1)

Tuhala well is famous by its ability to 'boil': during early spring and with the heavy rain, water gushes out of the well. In old photos, the place is a lake with a small spurt of water in the middle. A wooden construction hold the spring and temporary lake in the form of a well. This makes the well, with its erupting water, a strange spectacle during the flood period. The phenomenon of the well is connected with the karst topography of the region where the acidic water from the bog erodes parts of the mineral ground



Photo 1. Tuhala Nõiakaev is a spectacular sight during the early spring. The sign guides the drivers by the well and the “strongest energy-column of Estonia”. Photo by Kristel Kivari.

creating a sensitive ecosystem for all kinds of interventions. Tuhala has come to have meaning not only as an interesting sight, but also as an anchor of identity for the local family and the region. Nõiakaev as a well-known sight is relatively ‘young’. It was introduced as an interesting phenomenon by journalist Ülo Tootsen through a popular TV program titled *Kodukandi lood* (Homestead Stories) at the beginning of the 1980s. Some years before, in 1976, a project started to study, protect and popularise the karst landscape of the area in the fear of extensive amelioration. As Ants recounts in his letter, the name Nõiakaev “was revealed” in about 1980. These were the years of discovering archaeological remains, marking and bringing them under protection, erecting memorial stones for the local intellectuals and founding the Tuhala Nature Centre (see Tuhala Maastikukaitseala). Paradoxically, the source of the fear was a state farm (sovkhoz)⁴ whose aid was kindly provided to fund activities that supported the popularisation of local culture and history. Since that time the story and fame of Nõiakaev has increased with the help of the mass media, and the fight against the excavation of peat and limestone form the background to local activism.

One reason is why I have come to promote those [columns] is that people usually do not want to talk about it, because they are looked at awry. I purposely do not care about it.

I built a new house. I did not know anything about the water veins. And for twenty years I crawled out of bed in terrible pain and did not know what was the

reason. In 2001, when the energy column was discovered, Rein Hanstein said that he also detects the location of water veins inside buildings. I invited him to check my house as well. It occurred to me that a huge water vein was flowing diagonally under the house. Although I made a strong basement full of iron and ironstones, nothing helped, still the crack is there. The sleeping places of all my family had to be removed from above the water veins and me, I was sleeping at the dead point! And what is this? The dead point is the place of still water, a column of negative energy, invisible geomagnetic radiation, there could not be a place of more negative influence. I was told to move my bed half a meter, the head to the north, the foot to the south, and my backpain has been gone now for ten years. Therefore I tell this on purpose. (FM Tuhala 1)

Despite the fact that Ants says he perceives the energy columns with his body as “frying me on the pan”, he often mentions the existential turn of getting to know about invisible energies.

The region of Tuhala is rich in archaeological monuments. Archaeologists have detected 11 ancient settlement places, 30 cup-marked stones and 3 stone graves, and there are many toponyms related to the name sacred grove (Hiiekadakas, Hiieotsa talu) (Kink 2011: 9). Ants himself, being an enthusiast of local history, has been a contact person between the workers of the local sovkhos and the state authorities who were in charge of taking the archaeological monuments under protection. Thus he often mentions his exclusive local identity together with the long history of the Tuhala region. The cultural particularity got a new meaning at the beginning of the new millennium when Ants was introduced with the ‘energetic’ nature of his environment. In addition to his acquaintanceship with Rein Hanstein, who detected the strongest energy columns at his front garden, Ants passed the pendulum course held by Rein Weber, who imported the idea from France. The impact of Rein Weber’s activity on Estonian dowzers and esoteric circles has been enormous: his followers have created a professional movement of geobiologists, as well as Club Energo.

The thing is that some people can apprehend those energies. For example, a man was here who said that he has seen a map in 1980 that was brought from Novosibirsk where all the strongest energy columns of the Soviet Union were located in addition to ours. We didn’t know a thing about it, meaning only certain people knew about it. We at our home didn’t know. But something drew us there, we wanted to play at this hole, me and my brother and sister. [The energy columns is situate by the edge of a hole in the ground.] How we wanted to play with that mud, but we were playing between the strongest energy columns! We just didn’t know. (FM Tuhala 1)

The revealing knowledge that illuminates the distant as well as immediate past is just beyond the reach of a sensitive person’s⁵ hand. Through this illumination the knowledge of the energies of the region is like a story that finds the expressions in certain values. The aspects of health and peaceful sleep already mentioned above in connection with skilful building techniques concern the most intimate sphere of everyday concerns. From the communal side, the mythic or sacral past that this method detects not only sacralises the environment but through references of national history makes them a powerful argument in local debates. For an explanation of this we must remembered



Photo 2. Oak pillar at Tuhala Nõiaakaev marks the location of energy column. Photo by Kristel Kivari.

the continuous struggles that have preceded the activities of Ants and his supporters. He speaks in the name of 'us', not 'me' and does not hide his teachers, guides and their discoveries. It is quite a different position from that of the authority that I have encountered during my fieldwork among dowzers and other energy-enthusiasts who rarely speak with the words of someone else. In addition, the literature of dowsing and other esoteric techniques seldom mentions any references, except to the general body of scientists. In the case of Tuhala, the line between 'us' and 'them' is overtly drawn for the sake of preserving local nature as well as cultural history. In my field visit to Nõiaakaev Ants kindly offered to be a guide on the Tuhala hiking trail that passes several natural sights as well as sites of cultural interest. The discussion about our common interest in the unseen level of reality and about the question of energies continued in correspondence. As his letters were written to support my research, which he saw as also contributing to his interests, I quote some thoughts from them concerning matters that were touched in the earlier interview.

It is such a disadvantage that scientists usually do not want to cooperate with sensitive people. Sensitive people are skilful people who can indicate something that scientists could research further.

Formerly the threat for sacred groves was from the amelioration, while today these places are damaged by clear-cutting.

Recently a person with sensitive abilities discovered an ancient sacred grove. He detected a presence of strong energy there. It was a place for village feasts dur-

ing past times. At this moment he did not know the presence of strong energy columns there like those beside Tuhala Nõiakaev. Four big birches grow at the place of one energy column under which we found a cultic stone from the first millennium before our era. Of course this sacred grove is not thoroughly researched yet.

I tried to introduce this sacred place to the two archaeologists who were staying nearby at this time. First I asked what they thought of sensitive people. The answer was: they are sorcerers. Thus there was no reason to bring them to the sacred grove. The next day we discovered the cultic stone there. (FM Tuhala 2)

The layer of energetic explanation in Tuhala region offers an intimate relationship with powers that are behind the natural and historical formations. The relationship is gained with the help of a psychic who introduced the achievable living presence of some aspects of the past, such as feasts and cults. The myth of the energies binds together bodily health, history and community in front of the economic and ecological threat. At the same time it is an act of symbolic construction of a particular environment relying on the hardly achievable grounds of the distant past as well as that of physics. Relating cultic stones at the fields of Tuhala with the natural peculiarities of the surface is a creation of local narrative. This is an active process that is mainly done by Ants Talioja with the help of the mass media, the groups of tourists, the schoolchildren, and the Tuhala Nature Centre. Richard Bauman has noted that the traditional begins with the personal and the immediate here, not with some objective quality of pastness that inheres in a cultural object but with the active construction of connections that link the present with a meaningful past. When examined, this process of traditionalisation in text manifests itself as a species of contextualisation. (Bauman 2004: 26–27) The stories of the Tuhala energy columns are related, as previously noted, with the wider tradition of energetic explanations, while they are also part of an intensive place-making process that highlights the local peculiarities and uses them in local debates.

THE ENERGIES OF KIRNA MANOR

In central Estonia Kirna manor works as a healing and spiritual centre that holds courses and meetings, hosts excursions, and provides healing services through forces and energies of special kinds. Beams that were saved from a broken roof are put on the places of energy columns that heal different parts of the body. These benches work to improve heart problems, problems with fertility, cancer, different pains, etc. Patients are guided to move from bench to bench and sit for some time at each depending on their problems. Parts of the garden are associated with angels, parts with UFOs. The imaginary realm of visions is loosely connected with the organisation of the benches. The mistress of the manor, Helle Anniko, found the manor accidentally and saw in a vision the great potential of this place for spiritual work due to the special energy field that she perceived. She finds support for her arguments in the fact that Kirna is situated on the border of the karst area where gaps between limestone layers exhale special forces. In addition, characters of the traditional place-lore, monks from the monastery that preceded the present location of the manor house, play an important role in her experiences and spiritual work.



Photo 3. People recuperate by sitting and meditating on the bench. Photo by Kristel Kivari.

I conducted fieldwork in Kirna manor during the summer 2010. Apart from friendly contact with mistress Helle and her colleague Henn Hunt I was introduced to several 'loyal customers' of the manor who had overcome their illnesses with the help of Helle and Kirna's energies. Below I refer to interviews with two people who say that they were cured of cancer, and thus for them the manor park has become a regular destination for spiritual as well as physical self-care.

I have understood that in fact there is nothing new, because the old Estonians also believed, they practised the tree religion. If we are moving around, we lose energy, and if we get the right energy from below it puts our organs to work in a proper way. For example at the kidney seat, those organs get new energy. There is a circle of Michael, up in the garden, with a very strong effect. It is so: if you sit there at the edge of the bench of Eternal Peace, you will see something like a vortex going up into the sky. It seems like an electric bulb is down there and its light shines up, and looking through it, all seems misty. It is such a strong column of energy. And always if we finish, we take this energy with our hands you feel how the warmth comes, the hands start to tingle. You physically feel that something comes inside you, we take this energy with us. It gives us good strength. (FM Kirna 1)

The physical interdependence of the individual with the place shows the possibility for religious immediacy with the powers of support and strength. The context of communication are marked with natural forms, such as old and tall trees that grow

in close circles, the open view down the hill from the Angel's Stone, the feminine form of trees which is called Department of Women. Although the garden at Kirna manor is not ordinary nature because of the authority of healer Helle and her activities, its ways of symbolising natural forms illustrate the ideas of *Naturphilosophie* in New Age thought (Hanegraaff 1996: 64). As Antoine Faivre has formulated,

[*Naturphilosophie*] is a continuation of Paracelsianism and pansophy, but it benefits from the acquisition of the experimental sciences and places emphasis on the figurative systems [...]. Nature is a text to be deciphered with the aid of correspondences and symbolic implications; as a consequence, rigorous experimental science is never more than an obligatory point of departure in the movement toward a gnostic apprehension of invisible processes. (Faivre 1987b: 334)



Photo 4. A bench that relieves curses. Photo by Kristel Kivari.

Kirna manor park is marked by benches located at the special points of energy. Benches from ships are reported in healing stories as places of ultimate visions and sensations. The ship designates spiritual creatures, in the form of aliens, in Helle's healing visions.

Look, at this bench from a ship, there have strange things happened. All is concentrated there. It is like a meditation. I really can say that I saw how my veins were cleaned. No there weren't any people, but I saw my pulsing veins and how they were cleared. I sat there and said to M. [his wife]: "Jesus Christ! Look what is happening! [You saw yourself aside?] Yes, yes." The eyes were closed like this and first time I did not feel anything. The next time... It does not always happen. You have to sit for as long as it takes for some kind of pain or problem that you have to disappear. It is so that you have to believe, you have to concentrate on it. If you sit there, ho-hoo, this is nonsense, nothing happens to you. (FM Kirna 2)

Visions are like the translators of the bodily impulses into culturally accepted figures. Look into your own anatomy from outside is not possible without education on human physiology. The stressed power of concentration as a final and reliable tool for recovery supports the idea of spiritual supremacy over physical reality. At the same time, 'cosmic operations', as such visions are called among Kirna's patients, are the culminations of initiation and the religious turns from crisis to illuminated life. The empirical proof in the form of health and spiritual self-consciousness that are translated into the concept of energy binds together the inner and outer realm. In this process the bodily impulses hold the value of intimacy, genuineness, proof and ultimate knowledge. A mythical

participative relationship with sacred that brings religious coherence into lived reality could be achieved in different bodily attributions, through the places, roles or institutions. In Western secular society that which carries the values of individuality, bodily fitness, mental health as well as spiritual consciousness are closely intertwined (Shilling 2003: 101). The tingling of hands and feet or dizzy feelings are conditions that are determined by physiology but are filled with the power of evidence and proof. At the same time, cultural norms and values play themselves out in these expressions: the divisions between group and individual, or organisation of space in terms of secular and sacral, frame representations of bodily impulses. Leonard Primiano has noted that the process of religious belief refers to the complex linkage of acquisition and formation of beliefs, which is always accomplished by the conscious and unconscious negotiations of and between believers. This process acknowledges the presence of bidirectional influences of environments upon individuals and of individuals upon environments in the process of believing. (Primiano 1995: 44) The bodily basis of the experiences in Kirna in terms of illnesses and different impulses receive a unifying explanation that not only pays attention to certain sentiments, but connects those sentiments with the wider existential story of recovery and spiritual development.

THE DOWSERS' ASSOCIATION AND THE SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF EARTH FIELDS

The societies of dowsers are the active social grounds for the interpretations of bodily impulses in contact with the environment. The method, which I have referred to here as detecting the invisible elusive forces that would influence or reveal the nature of phenomena, stands on the idea of organisation of the universe in accordance with undescribed energies.

Societies use such concepts as geobiology, radiesthesia or geopathic stress to describe their work. Geobiology as a vernacular term differs from the academic meaning of the research field, which investigates the relationships between the biosphere and the lithosphere. Vernacular enquiry is driven by the intention to gain knowledge that it is possible to use on the unseen level of reality for the benefit of every aspect of life. Geobiology involves a more practical outcome of knowledge of the field: specialists and their knowledge are mainly concerned with successful building techniques and the arrangement of plants in gardens. The term radiesthesia covers a wider idea of this field, proposing that all bodies and substances give off certain waves that can be detected by those with paranormal abilities.

The term geopathy relates through the syllable *pathos* (feeling, suffering) to the hypothesis of geopathic stress, by which it designates nature-forming force. However, geopathic stress is just a different naming of the concept that grounds the Tuhala columns as well as the Kirna vortices, referring to the academic aspect of society. An international delegate from the Earth's Fields and Their Influence on Organisms conference, held in June 2012, explained his position when I asked about his engagement with his local dowsers' association: "They are esotericists. I teach them because what I do is a pure science and is nothing to do with esotericism."

The associations of dowsers', which can be found in most Western countries, usually hold the authority to regulate and accredit, within certain limits, the professional activities of geobiologists. The client-supplier relationship encourages some kind of officiality in the relationship of trust, thus many dowsers have a certificate that is issued either by the association or the distinguished trainer.

A dowser Roy Riggs explains the professional challenges and character of the geobiologist:

A Geo-biologist (also referred to as a building biologist) is a researcher, architect, engineer, and doctor, all in one. He or she offers a preventive and healing medicine and a creative and unifying influence. A geobiologist is a worker in the global effort to solve the problems that come from modern ways of building and settlement planning – ways that disregard nature and human culture. To work for a better and more beautiful world in any respect or form is a necessary and satisfying job. The goal of geobiology is to regain order and harmony in our surroundings: to restore the balance between nature, our buildings and ourselves and to help build bridges for the realisation of a world that is ecologically oriented. This goal calls for dynamic, idealistic, and creative people. It calls for people who appreciate deeper meanings and hold higher aspirations in life. (Riggs n.d.)

This formulation points to the essential characteristic of the dowser: it is a personal as well as professional challenge with an idealistic and humanistic goal. Criticism of profit-oriented contemporary culture relates these traits, and many others, to ideas of a romantic anti-positivistic way of thinking that also seeks unifying knowledge of different episodes of perception. The ecological orientation, which indeed has political, economic, and rhetorical weight, brings forth this goal for an individual intimate relationship with the environment.

The Estonian Geopathic Society, officially a sub-organisation of the Baltic Dowsers' Association, unites people with different opinions as well as different opinions about the "weak earth fields and their influence on organisms" (the formulation of the phenomena in the Association's charter). Meeting once in a month the Society offers the possibility to share and discuss issues connected with contact between the natural and the supernatural. According to Internet material the activities appear to be relatively similar to those taken up by sympathisers in other countries, involving enthusiastic curiosity towards the explanation of the supernatural in mundane terms. By following this line of enquiry the societies operate at the fringe of esoteric activities with some connections to academic research. The Estonian Society, once initiated by a group of scholars, has organisationally moved towards independence by being part of the Institute of Geology and a sub-section of the Estonian Naturalists' Society. In addition to monthly meetings the Society organises a series of conferences titled *Earth's Fields and Their Influence on Organisms*. Collections of abstracts and articles from these conferences comprise a body of elaborated statements, discussions and examples of the 'geopathic' view on the issue.

The rationalising arguments in the conference proceedings of the Dowsers' Association come mainly from the field of natural sciences. In the forewords of the volumes academic Anto Raukas warns readers not to overestimate the results of experiments with

earth energies, because there is still too little reliable evidence from physics, although his note is also an encouraging call for future work.

The conference articles, as the title tells, discuss different aspects of reactions in the human body towards the environment. In following example the bodily reaction is given the name "information".

There are electromagnetic means elaborated in the human body in the wake of evolution that are capable to percept weak electromagnetic signals from the environment. The human body is not only accommodated itself to these fields but it is also making use of them as a source of information. There is an electromagnetic homeostasis in [the] human body, i.e. the aggregate of adaption reactions developed to eliminate or restrict maximally the action of various external or internal factors striving to derange the dynamic stability of the internal structure of the body. The animate nature of Earth is subjected to the influence of various external factors [such] as gravitation and electromagnetic fields, temperature, barometrical pressure, air humidity, light etc. Each factor plays a peculiar role in the human body and it has developed a set of defence reactions against each one. (Krishbergs, Ulmanis 2006: 114)

The information is a reaction that a skilled dowser is able to perceive.

An experienced dowser has developed the response on specific weak natural signals. It is significant to note that the external field does not serve as source of energy or force that moves the rod but it serves as source of information causing the response of the dowser's body. (Ibid.: 117)

Despite the signal being unclear in terms of physics, its intensity compared to dowsers' body is the indication of reciprocal interaction:

When the signal energy is less than that of response then the exchange of information between the body and environment takes place. When this energy is comparable to that in the energetic process of the body then the energetic or force interaction between the body and environment takes place. (Ibid.: 118)

Information that the body is able to perceive is a linking concept, a metaphor that is uniting the spheres of the natural sciences (information as a signal) and vernacular explanations (information as knowledge). Enthusiasts with different educations and professional backgrounds meet mostly at the level of examples and explanations. Intrigue between the supernatural and natural is attributed to bodily signals which open the opportunity to discuss supernatural experiences as well as peculiar natural formations.

Another author from the collection of articles has applied the historical-geographical method to reports of the supernatural. He has marked on a map the UFO and poltergeist reports, visions of St. Mary and birth places of famous Lithuanians. The density of the entries on the map is higher at the banks of two rivers in the Central Lithuania. He concludes:

I have collected these statistical data [over] the course of 20 years, but only recently I have noticed the correlation between four groups of phenomena. The statistics [are] not comprehensive and a lot of phenomena we didn't know about and not all active places were noticed. We know that Earth's radiation activizes people.

These conclusions were reached already by our ancestors when they gave the name “Šventoji” (Holy) to two rivers in Lithuania. The Earth’s radiation carries information. This interaction can interact in the [r]esonator lithosphere-ionosphere and build an informatic field of humanity. (Gikys 1996: 11)

Discussions about supernatural experiences in the context of science carries a deconstructive purpose – poltergeists, diseases, and peculiar natural phenomena receive mundane meaning in the literal sense. At the same time the supernatural is integrated into everyday reality. Through the supernatural, visions and hallucinations are given legitimate explanations and the causes of illnesses can be eliminated after its detection.

The charter of the Estonian Geopathic Society focuses on scientific and technical inquiry towards the dowsing phenomenon. Its central purposes are

[T]o foster co-ordinated resolutions of the problems arising in the area of study of weak Earth fields, to share research of the Earth’s radiation fields by means, to study their influence on organisms, application of dowser methods in geology, ecology, architecture and medicine, development of mathematical and physical models of dowser’s response and working out new methods and equipment for the study of geophysical anomalies and peculiarities of psychophysical structure of humans and animals. (Charter of the Dowsters’ Association of the Baltic States)

No belief position is mentioned in the charter of the Estonian society, however the application of the hypothesis of earth rays itself involves seeking a unified theory that would surpass the different worldviews of religion and science. This position was already clearly formulated in the objectives of the Theosophical Society in 1875. Apart from working towards universal humanity their aim was “to encourage the study of Comparative Religion, Philosophy and Science” and “to investigate unexplained laws of Nature and powers latent in man” (The Theosophical Society). In these goals belief is expressed in the form of revealing knowledge that would explain different supernatural episodes and thus provide the possibility to participate in them and receive some benefit in issues of trouble, health, good sleep, and problems with technology. This position is illustrated by Rein Koha, chairman of the Society at this time, in the foreword to the seminar’s article collection in 2006:

As far as I know, the seminars have not touched upon the so-called different reality: this, however, is what we come across on a daily basis, but unfortunately seldom become aware of. We should make this as clear to ourselves as possible, I hope that the seminar will create a lively discussion on this subject. (Koha 2006: 4)

CONCLUSION

The scholarly concept of belief is expressed in the vernacular through various communicative contexts. In this article I have introduced a contemporary master-plot by which reality is shaped by the elusive energies expressed in three ways that represent the different applications of the idea of reality. The desire to bridge the natural and supernatural spheres of life is an empowering tool for the local activist against ecological threat (and in gaining certain symbolic power). A healer uses the well-known concept

of natural energies in awaking other supernatural arguments and visions (and applies them together in her work). A group of enthusiasts and specialists in dowsing mix the methods of magic and science in order to find proper and legitimate knowledge of the supernatural in life (and use their position as the last word about the supernatural). In the flow of the described ideas the position of the teller reflects that of a participant, a person who is in contact with those energies. At the same time, energies provide access to the source of the supernatural. Thus knowledge of it can make the art of magic into a science.

Leonard Primiano's objective for the study of "religion as it is lived" includes a two-sided call. Firstly it draws attention to the immediate level of any expression. However, any expression, especially within the non-normative frameworks of secular society that were introduced here, will not describe all the functions of vernacular belief. The specific theory and method of lived religion that Primiano was highlighting must set the research question so that the dynamics of content and context are noticed. That is why it is important to look at the communicative aspects of the teller, his or her aims for reflecting his or her experiences or positions. I have favoured Seppo Knuutila's view of expressions of belief as "stories for something". He makes his view clear with an example:

When philosophers conduct various experiments with thought and reasoning with the help of a 'myth' or 'science fiction', they usually aim to illustrate an abstruse or controversial theory or to point out the weaknesses of competing views. The aim of this text has been to show that it is also productive to examine the myths, fairy tales and legends inherent in folklore from an epistemological viewpoint. In folkloristics, on the other hand, the stories under scrutiny have been interpreted as parts of the worldview they portray and construct. Whenever this has been the explicit aim, the worldview has not been identified with the stories of which the study material consists. (Knuutila 2012: 379–380)

Getting and sharing knowledge sets the natural and supernatural beside each other. Both sides of this position have functions that are finalised somewhere else: in promotion of local culture and nature, in spiritual self-help and healing or in social expressions of curiosity. The content of belief in such situations is shaped by the communicative contexts and rhetoric. But a view of the sustaining framework of these motives, to the continuous struggle of different viewpoints, can add an extra understanding of religion as it is lived.

NOTES

1 Hartmann grid: ground concept for dowsers, first described by German physician Ernest Hartmann (1915–1992). According to this theory, naturally charged lines form a grid around the earth causing different occurrences such as illnesses or dead vegetation along the lines. The worst place to be for a long time is at the crossing of two lines. A similar concept with lines at different angles is named for its describer, Manfred Curry (1899–1953).

2 All citations without references have been taken from transcriptions of interviews with people introduced in the text (see Sources). Translations from Estonian to English are by the author.

3 Ångström is a unit of length equal to 10^{-10} metre (0,1 nm). It is named after Swedish researcher in spectroscopy Anders Jonas Ångström (1814–1874). Although internationally recognised, the ångström is not formally a part of the International System of Units, the closest unit being the nanometre.

4 Soviet agriculture was managed on the basis of two similar types of economical units: state farms, sovkhozes, and collective farms, kolkhozes, which were both operating within the framework of planned industry but had some economic independence depending on their success of production.

5 The Estonian term *sensitiiv* refers to a person with increased sensuous abilities. It could also be translated into English as psychic or clairvoyant.

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FM Kirna 2 – Interview with male informant on 8th of October 2010.
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CREATING MEANINGS AND SUPPORTIVE NETWORKS ON THE SPIRITUAL INTERNET FORUM "THE NEST OF ANGELS"

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ABSTRACT

Based on the ethnographic study of Estonian spiritual Internet forum The Nest of Angels, the article observes the process of sharing virtual social support and creating-confirming spiritual meanings. The forum, explicitly opposing the consumeristic side of new spirituality, has become popular and demonstrates the nature and various roles of contemporary spiritual angels. The study identifies two main modes in which the Nest and the presence of angels might be useful for users. Firstly, emotional support is shared, either by fellow users directly or by confirmations that angels will definitely help. Secondly, the Nest allows people to acquire knowledge both on spiritual and practical issues. As the Nest is dialogical, users can pose questions and find confirmations for their otherwise deviant experiences. Discussions in the Nest encourage everybody to interpret some situations and objects (like feathers) as signs from angels. This interpreting process might change people's perceptions of the world by adding a layer of positive emotions. The study demonstrates how the angelic presence (or at least endeavour towards the presence) helps to establish and keep the tonality of benevolence which functions as the cornerstone of this virtual space. The Nest supports a specific epistemological stance manifested in the angelic, traditional 'feminine' values of empathy, softness, and caring. Angels and the idea of angelic presence is the main factor helping to keep the 'high-vibrational' and benevolent atmosphere of the forum and empowering the users inside the traditional understanding of 'feminine softness'.

KEYWORDS: Angels • new spirituality • Internet •online ethnography

Estonia can be seen as one of the most secular countries in the world. With only 6 per cent of people attending church at least once a month (Jõks 2012: 301) it is not surprising that several comparative surveys about the importance of religion show the Estonian results to be the lowest in Europe or even in the world.¹ Furthermore, as Estonian national discourse holds a myth of 'free pagans' before Christianisation, Christianity has often been referred to as foreign and enforced (Altnurme 2005). In the context of overall indifference or even hostility towards the church, angels can be seen both out-

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dated as well as the symbols of oppression. Therefore, the following evaluation by an Estonian theologian, Prof. Anne Kull, may have sounded plausible: "There is no place for angels in our modern world-views. If at all, we see them as blubber-cheeked putos among other Christmas decorations" (2004: 112).² At least several years ago in Estonia, the time for angels to be meaningful and to play an important role for a significant number of people seemed to be over.

However, in a nationwide poll in 2011, 48.2 per cent of Estonians agreed that "there are angels who help and support us", with only 37.1 per cent disagreeing (Jõks 2012: 296).³ In an allegedly non-religious country like Estonia this result is surprisingly high, considering that the number of respondents who agreed that there is a God was almost 20 per cent lower (*ibid.*). This discrepancy can be seen as a sign that a new era for angels has begun. Fuelled by pop culture, new spirituality has revitalised angels in new contexts and roles. In the US, we can see the rise of the importance of angels from 1990s (Gardella 2007). The increasing popularity and the intriguing symbiosis between the ideas of new spirituality and traditional religious agents like angels has brought the topic into the focus of academic interest, as seen in numerous recent studies on angels and angel-practices (Gardella 2007; Draper, Baker 2011; Gilhus 2012; Utriainen, forthcoming).

Angels are adopted in different forms and roles in contemporary lived religion. The patterns of private religiosity in Estonia are based mainly on the ideas of new spirituality with only some Christian elements (Altnurme 2012). Angels are one of the most salient symbols bridging Christianity and new spirituality. Angels and angel practices demonstrate both the convergence and conflict between different religious discourses in everyday lived religions (for example, see White 2005). The 'official' religious institutions like the Lutheran church lack the capability to guide contemporary religious-spiritual beliefs and practices; new spirituality as an "open source religion" (Cowan 2005: 30) offers people better opportunities to develop their own understanding of religious-spiritual matters that can be seen as vernacular or folk religion.⁴

Spiritual angels are emptier symbols in Estonia than in the West: angels have not been very prominent in the Lutheran church (Paul 2008) and are also less represented in Estonian folk-tradition compared to some other mythological beings (see Valk 2007). Therefore, the discussions about angels in spiritual seminars or virtual spaces like popular Internet forum The Nest of Angels are significant. These places can be seen as religious-spiritual incubators where people can conceptualise and create the meaningfulness of angels (and other concepts) drawing on the teachings of spiritual books and (international) gurus.

This article observes such a virtual space – an Estonian Internet forum the Nest of Angels – where people actively discuss both spiritual and mundane issues. Based on ethnographic study of the forum, the article explores why and how angels become meaningful and significant for some Estonians. In analysing the remarkably benevolent atmosphere of the forum, the study demonstrates how the angelic presence (or at least the endeavour towards the presence) supports the functioning of the forum and helps to keep such a virtual space.

METHODOLOGICAL CONCERNS

The Site of Research

The Nest of Angels (the Forum of Enlightenment) – Inglipesa (Valgustumise foorum) in Estonian – was established in November 2009. Today,⁵ there are more than 1,300 registered members and 34,000 posts on 2,450 topics. It has been visited more than 4.3 million times (50 users and 37 posts per day as an average). The founder and the main administrator of the forum – Kaledon (here and henceforth, all the names I refer to are people’s registered usernames in the Nest) – says that his mission was to create a “High-Vibrational” place to allow people to be who they really are. One central principle is to enable people to get self-help, to purify themselves without expensive therapies. Therefore, the Nest distances itself from the consumeristic side of the spiritual milieu, described as the “spiritual service industry” (Bowman 1999: 188); or at least, while still following the same principles, the creators of the forum try to offer an opportunity for free exchange outside the consumer-spiritual therapist role model.

Although there are some other Estonian-language spiritual Internet forums, Kaledon explains that “those places I found did not give me ‘a heroic feeling of being a bearer of light’ [*kangelaslikku valguskandja tunnet*]”.⁶ At least retrospectively, it was his intention to establish a web site to celebrate the good side in humans and to empower its users. Kaledon uses sublime language to describe the forum’s founding process:

I felt that I have found my right way and myself, who I am, what I do, who I am meant to be. It is difficult to explain. [...] Suddenly, I felt the present, the future and the past at the same time; it was like a wide field around me. And then, all three became one – the field of my aura.

This description belongs to the discourse of new spirituality. The Nest can be seen as Kaledon’s self-realisation project.

When analysing an online phenomenon, the background of a wider usage of the Internet is relevant. According to Eurostat (Seybert 2011) survey results, 20 per cent of Estonians have never used the Internet; almost all the other 80 per cent are frequent users. Around 60 per cent of people aged 16–74 use the Internet daily and more than 10 per cent at least once a week. Previous studies conclude that the person’s age is the main criterion for assessing the approachability of the Internet (Runnel 2008): although people’s socio-economic status influences usage patterns (such as computers and broadband connections available at home), it is not so crucial when it comes to access itself.

The Internet has become an important religious-spiritual channel which has also changed people’s expectations towards the church: religious institutions are expected to use contemporary online communication channels to establish a dialogue. Churches have a poor ability to create web pages that would meet people’s expectations of dialogical communication; however, it is important because there are millions of people searching for God on the Internet (Waters, Tindall 2010). Holistic spirituality does not have problems of authority and control characteristic to churches or sects and takes the Internet as its natural habitat for virtual sharing, connecting and creating (Noomen, Aupers, Houtman 2011). Several studies conclude that modern people seek information

and support online (Burrows et al. 2000), so it is not surprising that the online discussion forum dedicated to angels has become popular in Estonia.

Online Ethnography?

Interactions that take place online have intrigued scholars since the Internet as a virtual space appeared. However, there is still a wide variety of views, ranging from enthusiasm to scepticism when considering virtual space as a legitimate (and necessary) realm for ethnographic fieldwork (Beaulieu 2004). As the possibilities offered by the online world are methodologically intriguing, there are several approaches and even separate terms to name (anthropological) research on the Internet: online ethnography (for example, Markham 2005), Internet ethnography, or virtual ethnography (Hine 2000); netnography (Kozinets 2010); or cyberanthropology (Budka, Kremser 2004). The discussion about methodological aspects of Internet ethnography is not exhaustively addressed in this article as it needs more elaborate attention.

However, the analysis of online communication can be rewarding: the Internet and especially discussion forums like the Nest of Angels allow the researcher to observe people's conversations, the meaning-making in its original form without any extra translation or recollection. Of course, online interactions occupy only a limited share of people's lives as participation in the Internet cannot be total. Roles and identities taken are probably even more volatile (see Suler 2007) than in people's real lives. It is methodologically problematic to locate the place of the online world in people's offline world (of course, in some studies it might not be even necessary). The sense of community and its boundaries is difficult to defy. However, the understanding of perceived communities that do not require direct contact has been accepted much before the appearance of Internet communities (most notably in Benedict Anderson's work on imagined communities of nations). As Wilson and Peterson (2002) suggest, there is no need to distinguish real and virtual communities in anthropological analysis. An analysis of Internet materials and communications brings anthropology closer to linguistics: the language is becoming more important and furthermore, specific communicative practices are emerging (ibid.). The Nest of Angels can be also seen as a speech community with its own rules and standards.

Another crucial aspect on which scholarly consensus has yet to be reached is online research ethics. On the one hand, the text is publicly available. On the other, people have not given their permission for the anthropologist to systematically examine their published material. When I started my research and collected the majority of the online material, all the texts in the Nest were open to everybody. However, to motivate people to register as users and to make the page unavailable for curious by-passers, the main site is now available only for registered users. Registering is, however, not a complicated process; even the real name or other personal information is not required. Users are not unveiling their identity and people refer to each other using their avatars. I have talked to several people, including the main moderator. They have been open for collaboration. My username in the Nest is 'researcher' which should give a hint of my true identity; in conversations I have been open about my aims and my intentions.

ANALYSIS

The study identifies two main modes in which the Nest supports its users. Firstly, emotional support is shared, either by fellow users directly or by confirmations that angels will definitely help. Secondly, the Nest allows people to acquire knowledge both on spiritual and practical issues. As the Nest is dialogical, users can pose questions, and find confirmations for their otherwise deviant experiences. Special attention must be paid to the tonality of benevolence which functions as the cornerstone of this Internet forum. The analysis points out the specific epistemological stance the Nest supports that is manifested in the angelic, traditional 'feminine' values of empathy, softness, and caring.

Virtual Community Care

One of the most eminent aspects of the Nest is the supportive relationship between users. The problems revealed in the Nest in a very open and trustful manner demonstrate deep emotional, social and financial insecurity and deprivation. The discovery of the Nest is giving new hope. For example, Sūdameke [diminutive of the word 'heart' in Estonian]⁷ writes in the "Let's say hello" section of the forum:

Somehow I managed to arrive here, through tears and with my heart and soul broken ... I hope that I came to the right place. I need to pull myself together and to restore my vitality – to direct the thoughts towards the right direction again.

This post gets several answers from different users who all encourage the newcomer by sharing similar experiences and expressing their gratitude that she found her way to the Nest: "So many of us have come here broken. There is no coincidence; it means that it was the right time to arrive here." Sūdameke rejoices after comments like this: "I am so full of happiness... I found so much sincere goodness here☺."

The idea of sharing good emotions despite physical distance is seen most clearly in the topic "hugging" where users virtually hug and caress each other, using both words and, mainly, special emoticons. It is visually impressive – pages after pages of similar moving figures, hearts, pictures of angels, etc., which together look like a children's playground. However, the emotions are deep and heartfelt: for example, people describe how they cry while reading the comments and seeing this "pure goodness". The emotional support and sense of belonging in the Nest can be seen as 'virtual community care'⁸ where support from fellow users and the support of the angels are intertwined. There are some users complaining about more mundane issues like how to repel moles from your garden. However, even the problem with moles is presented in a grave modality suggesting that the emotional support is really needed. People seeking help or trying to share their worries admit that they do not have many other and better alternatives for getting help.

The sense of emotional commitment is visible even with topics that are not explicitly crying for help. Formulas like "angels are taking care of you!" or "with hugs from angels and me" function as constant reassurance that there are both good-hearted and caring people as well as angels around who do everything to make things better. In the Nest, people both seek support, and want to give support to others, who get the feeling

of being needed. Users often comfort each other by saying that angels will definitely help, which is itself a performative utterance and points to a rich and reliable source of support – the world of superhuman spiritual beings. As Terhi Utrainen (forthcoming) states: “Angels, as imaginary figures, are always present and ready to provide recognition and companionship. Their total promise to protect from loneliness makes them more reliable than any human companion or social worker could ever be.”

Compared to the Finnish study about the modern usage of angels in everyday contexts⁹ (ibid.), angels seem to be superior creatures in the Nest. For the users of the Nest, angels are rather guides in spiritual journeys and offer consolatory support during hard times. The relationship is not equal; angels seem to be more beyond reach in the Nest than for Finns who participated in Utrainen’s study. Estonians writing in the Nest project angels as much higher beings than mortals; their help is extremely valuable but not always available. For instance, there is an explicit forum discussion on issues about which it is suitable to ask for angelic help. Most probably, angels in the Nest have more therapeutic aims due to higher insecurity in Estonia compared to Finland. In Estonian society there are socio-economic groups whose well-being cannot be taken for granted. This is visible from as the descriptions show that many Nest users are single mothers, unemployed, with emotional difficulties and low self-esteem – “being broken” is a common metaphor. Therefore, angels are often the “last hope” as users express; they are usually addressed with admiration and humility.

Meaning Creation

Participation in the Nest gives users not only emotional support but also an opportunity to discuss their spiritual-religious ideas and to find people to confirm their seemingly abnormal experiences. For example, 24-year-old female Elessandra found the forum and registered herself only to share her experience:

It was a beautiful summer evening, already quite dark outside and the sky was coloured by the sunset. I opened a window and took pictures with my phone [...] noticed, like what... like a violet bird or a small angel is on the picture. I became so excited and hurried to tell everybody. And this is how I made a fool of myself, everybody laughed at me [...] It might be caused by my phone but it is so real. Could it be an angel?

Gardemea, a senior member, comments on Elessandra’s post emphasising the richness of the world that includes spiritual beings. According to her, ordinary people occupied with everyday troubles just cannot recognise these high-vibrational creatures. Elessandra’s example demonstrates how people who are ridiculed by their peers may find members in the Nest who appreciate their experiences (like visions) and confirm that they are not crazy but on the contrary, special in a very positive way. There are other explicit discussions about angel experiences and indications of the perceived threat of being considered mad. Young member AngelicBunny asks:

How to establish a connection to angels? How to know if it is madness or a real angel’s voice that you hear when you ask for something from the angels?

Tanya Luhmann (2012) concludes in her study about charismatic Christians that the process of learning to hear God's voice and recognising his presence requires social support and guidance. It is crucial to know how to distinguish 'real' signs and learn to 'see', 'hear' and 'feel' the presence of the supernatural, which is regulated and supported. Compared to Christian churches, the Nest does not give such a strong platform; the guidance is rather subjective and often reflects an advisor's personal experiences. However, these discussions aim to accomplish the same function as sermons and materials that talk about experiencing God in charismatic churches.

In the Nest, the angels' major – and even absolute – attribute is their benevolence. However, more detailed and practical understandings about their characteristics or nature vary considerably. This is seen, for example, from several different experiences and ideas answering Teresa's question if angels are real or symbolic. Rainbow-Colored Little Ball writes that she does not see angels "as concretely as ordinary objects. It is not that I'm looking beside me and the Angel is smiling back at me:-D." Angels are "rather the perceived feeling of somebody's presence and warmth, and energetic sensations as well" for her. Representing a different position, Ruth recalls that she has seen an actual angel flying. She stresses that her senses were open and this experience filled her with a powerful and wonderful feeling (there are memorates in another discussions as well that describe the act of witnessing a physical angel but these stories do not necessarily follow the same pattern). Based on these experiences and opinions, Teresa concludes, expressing a more abstract understanding:

This presence and warmth, yes, it may be this well-being that I just feel very very well with myself, you are extremely thankful and full of love and you sense it with every cell of your body – I have felt this huge warmth myself as well. Your heart is full of good emotions and gratitude. [...] This comes from within ourselves, our soul – which means, this (Soul) is an Angel or a Fairy? :) Or the meeting with an Angel or a Fairy☺.

This discussion exemplifies a considerable variety of experiences and representations of angels, which is also present in the wider milieu of new spirituality.¹⁰ Descriptions by Little Ball and Ruth follow the most common understandings in the Nest: angels do exist in reality either as shapeless figures constituting positive energy or with a real physical body familiar to the ones from the picture-books. Angels can also be symbols of positivity (Teresa's view) or just a language, formulas and patterns on the most abstract level (similar approaches are described by Walter 2011).

Compared to Terje Potter's analysis (2002) of angel stories that Estonians told in a Christian radio show, there is not such a prevailing structure of memorates in the Nest. Shared experiences are different: angels do not appear so much as defenders in dangerous situations (as was shown by Potter 2002) but rather giving hints of comfort in complicated life moments. In the discussions of how to see angels and to recognise real angelic signs, there is surprisingly high tolerance towards diverging views,¹¹ which makes it a friendly place to share ideas and experiences.

The question of recognising signs sent by angels is essential for users and with some signs consensus is more easily achieved. For example, it is believed that feathers are a clear indication of the presence of angels: there are many stories about people having noticed feathers at 'meaningful' moments (and some of the story tellers still keep the feathers they have found). Muusa describes:

I constantly find white feathers everywhere; I still carry my awakening angel-feather [Est. *teadlik inglisulg*] in a certain place. I believe that it brings me luck. [...] I believe that you start to see signs when the right moment comes in your life.

Keeping feathers as talismans is common practice as seen in a story by a user called Miracle, who describes how she found a white feather stuck in her child's hair when she went to collect her child from kindergarten:

I was so happy and my child was happy. The feeling that I would like to cheer aloud. Probably the kindergarten teachers would have thought that I am insane ☺. But the feeling was really great and still is, actually. We keep this feather near the child's bed now.

Some other angelic signs seem to have no reference to angels; so, drawing these meaningful connections requires much creativity. For example, Mereliilia (Sea Lily) writes how she doubted that angels could give her answers but found 20 cents in her washing machine. She describes this "unbelievable" occasion with great gratitude and enthusiasm, emphasising how happy she feels now. Despite commenting on these interpretations sceptically, other users accept and confirm the validity of the explanation, for example, by calling this "wonderful news". One user doing this – Naida – gives her 'Angel-hugs' to Mereliilia and expresses a hope that she "will notice and get those messages even more in the future".

The Nest, where concepts and connections like these are created and confirmed, can be seen as a modern laboratory for folk-religious meaning-creation. For example, the main criterion to identify the presence of angel is a feeling of warmth and goodness. It is a central element that recurs in many different stories that was also clearly visible in previous memorates about feathers. Melodia explains:

The signs from angels are miraculous and they leave the soul full of love. E.g. I cleaned the cupboard where my relatives keep their dishes and utensils. And suddenly, there are wonderful golden wings, certainly broken off from a Christmas decoration... But when I looked at them I felt such a miraculous feeling of love, with praise and gratitude. Such feeling that angels are caressing and saying that you are good.

The wings themselves might be ordinary and profane (Melodia's explanation of them being certainly a part of a broken decoration) but it is the inner feeling that gives the confirmation of angelic presence. The feelings of warmth and goodness are both the result of an angel being there and also further proof of its existence.

How is this 'Atmosphere of Benevolence' Upheld?

The discussions about the nature of angels or the signs of angels point towards a rather high tolerance of dissent. The likelihood of negative comments and feedback is low – an exceptional characteristic for online forums where 'flaming' and extreme criticism are commonly perceived by users as a threat (Burrows et al. 2000). The Nest has several mechanisms that uphold this 'atmosphere of benevolence': angels are the perfect symbols, guardians of this social space – their presence keeps the positive tone. This,

spiritual dimension, has a practical value as well because moderators have more freedom to delete comments that distract from the “high-vibrational environment” as the creator of the Nest, Kaledon, expresses it. Therefore, the need to keep the forum worthy of angels is a strong incentive for members to follow rules and is justification for heavy moderation.

Angels also have an important function in the Nest as guardians of trust between strangers. There are some examples of similar web pages even in Estonia; sites for confessions that have become collections of funny, and most probably made-up stories of people’s ‘ultimate’ embarrassing or just difficult moments, which other visitors comment on mockingly (the best example in Estonia is the portal Pihid.net where “pihid” means “you confess”). Virtual relationships are more volatile than in real life and encourage a lack of responsibility for one’s behaviour. As shown in an analysis of spiritual-esoteric forums, users usually do not have off-line contacts and the aim of participation is mainly to demonstrate one’s expertise (Hiimäe, forthcoming). Therefore, the discussions become easily offensive and the overall climate rather hostile.

The relationships created and held in the Nest are emphatically supportive. Besides the presence of angels, there are several visible tactics used to create and support this special ‘vibe of positivity’. The style of communication as the endorsement of others’ ideas and dulcet tonality verges on the ridiculous. In a section where new users can say ‘hi’ and introduce themselves (often only “hello” or few words like “hi everybody, I’m new here”) there are tens of comments expressing gratitude that this person has arrived in the forum. The welcome sign at the top of the page says “Hello wonderful [username]!”, and similarly in discussions the adjective wonderful is used heavily.

The importance of keeping this atmosphere (described by Kaledon as “good-hearted” and “high-vibrational”) is explicitly emphasised. For this, powerful metaphoric language is used: everybody should keep ‘the cleanliness of our nest’, ‘send light to our Nest’ or ‘purify it with Light’. This creates parallels to home: cleaning and keeping the place clean is necessary, it is done both physically (pointing out posts that violate the overall tone) but more importantly, symbolically when everybody is asked to send light to the Nest. The term nest denotes a place shared by a family – in the Nest constituted by all the users and angels together. Due to these efforts, users may perceive an atmosphere that emphatically rises beyond everyday troubled reality like an oasis of good emotion in the desert of ordinary competition and conflict.

The language of angels – the discourse of goodness, benevolence – has a visual dimension as well. Bright colours, romantic New Age-style pictures, and specific emoticons are used heavily, visible also in the virtual identities of the users. For example, one of the most active members and my informant calls herself Rainbow-Colored Little Ball – this name just appeared to her when she had to find an avatar.¹² There are many users with names symbolising something good. Furthermore, the official rules even forbid users from taking a name that has ‘negative energy’: users are not allowed to call themselves Satan, for example, or to use an offensive or violent picture. Therefore, profiles presenting soft and feminine angels or colours and lights dominate.

The Nest gives a strong impression of a very feminine space. Firstly, there are only a few men among the users. According to the official statistics the male-female ratio is 1:5.8.¹³ However, users have generally not marked their gender and in the list of users, overly feminine names as well as profile pictures dominate. Previous studies have similarly demonstrated that spiritual angels are popular especially among women (see Gilhus 2012; Utriainen, forthcoming). Women also pray more to angels (Cerulo, Barra 2008); Utriainen (forthcoming) even calls angel practices “women’s therapeutic religion”.

There could be several reasons for this tendency. Angels have cultural associations that resonate with a stereotypical understanding of women’s nature: New Age angels are empathic guardians. Angels are also pictured as cute blubber-cheeked children. There are physical symbols like the softness of an angel’s feathers, light when angels appear, etc. In the spiritual contexts, we can see angels often as a depiction and an essence of the pure goodness in humanity.¹⁴

Studies about prayer objects demonstrate that people with high social status typically pray directly to a supreme entity; people with lower status and self-esteem (often women) prefer more anthropomorphic beings (Cerulo, Barra 2008). The explanation might be an expected reciprocity: figures similar to you are more likely to hear your prayer and understand your problems. Angels, especially in the new spirituality, are relatively close to humans. Most of the users of this Internet forum do not belong to the highest status groups on the socio-economic scale, which is visible from their problems, the discussions about money, etc. Therefore, angels are easily appropriated by the users of the Nest.

Secondly, the impression of the Nest as a feminine place comes from the style and tone of the discussions. Several elements pointed out in previous studies as part of feminine rhetoric are prominently present in the Nest, for example genderlect, described by Hoar (1992: 127), or rapport talk (versus the masculine option – report talk). The aim of this article is not to (and my methodology does not allow me to) link specific communication patterns to different genders, however, previous studies like Lövheim (2004) point out the tendency in the Internet that male users appreciate the opportunity to debate with opponents whereas female users aim for mutual support and consensus of opinion. Angel values constructed in the Nest follow the stereotypically ‘feminine’ – soft, empathic, intuitive; masculine stereotypes, on the contrary, would be energetic, rational, active (see Greenwood 2000). Obviously, the concept of femininity is a vague construction that cannot be applied universally. However, the Nest is an interesting example of a creative space where these values are strongly reproduced.

In the wider family of new spiritual or religious movements, there are cults that address gender issues much more explicitly. For example, Goddess worshippers are advancing femininity in a rather straightforward way. For the Wiccan cult of Goddess, the woman’s body contains and symbolises powerful feminine sexual force (ibid.). Similarly, feminist witchcraft holds a wider ideology of cyclic transformation (birth, growth and decay) which constitutes more a “woman’s spirituality” (Luhmann 1989: 52). Although, even in these movements, as Greenwood (2000) notes, the power dynamics and women’s role depends on the particular group and situation; only feminist witchcraft gives a more practical political model for women’s socio-economic empowerment. In addition, feminist covens might be slightly more egalitarian (Luhmann 1989).

Different Kinds of Empowerment

Angel practices have few similarities to the 'women's spirituality' seen in the Goddess cults. In the Nest, different gender stereotypes are re-generated prioritising softness and empathy. Therefore, angel practices empower its users in a very different way. Angels are important symbols and channelers here. From discussions and references to angels, it is clear that angels do not represent an ideal of the authoritative husband/father but rather one of pure and unconditional friendship; or perhaps even more, they constitute the user's perfect self in a more divine, absolutely perfect form. Creating a role model, this soft, empathic and ready-to-help, better-than-ordinary self is the image according to which people behave in the Nest while helping and comforting others. Indeed, there are many explicit references by users themselves that some especially well-written posts must be beyond our world, coming directly from angels: "your post exudes such tenderness and love, like it would have been from Angels, and I guess it is ☺ I felt so wonderful and light after reading this."

It has been pointed out in previous studies that spirituality could open up "possibilities for them [practitioners, followers] to become *other* than who they had believed themselves to be, allowing them to move beyond their sense of despair" (Collett 2003: 84). In this sense the Nest enables people to play with roles and meanings beyond the everyday reality that can be full of problems and suffering. In that way, it points to a soft empowerment supported by the ideas of new spirituality.

Firstly, specific confidence might come from New Age ideas that declare the principles of empowerment and everybody's inherent right to achieve his/her goals. In practitioner's approaches these convictions can be even stronger. For example, in one discussion about Karma, user La Luna's concern that "MAYBE I won't get rid of it [Karma] ☹"¹⁵ gets a quick reply from another user Mari: "Of course you will get rid of it, there is no chance that you cannot. It is written in the laws of the Universe that it will be given to those who ask." In the wider ideology of new spirituality it is all about asking. We all have a right to get what we want, which is an appealing understanding of the laws of the universe.

A second source of confidence comes from the principle of overall equality, which is an important value in the new spirituality. Despite a rather strict policy to keep the "high-vibrational" nature in the Nest, it is still open to everybody to start a new topic, to write about one's concerns, etc., which is part of the ideology of the forum. For example, user Erala chose to emphasise the principle of equality in her signature, which appears at the end of every forum post she makes:

We all have the same ability to communicate with angels because spiritually we are all equally 'talented'. If somebody seems to be more talented, he or she has just believed and trusted her consciousness at the right moment.

Erala's idea is that all people are (at least declaratively) given the same amount of expertise. She perceives the Nest and angel practices as very egalitarian, although there are clearly power relations appearing in the Nest as well.¹⁶ However, the quote gives a hint about how personal experiences and especially the ability to trust your inner voice and consciousness are seen as the source of talent.

A popular picture-book of angels (Astell 2006: 9) brings out a motto by Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) that illustrates the normative frame of interpreting sources of knowledge:

I am well aware that many will say that no one can possibly speak with spirits and angels as long as he lives in the body... But by all this I am not deterred, for I have seen, I have heard, I have felt.

This quote characterises well the importance of people's own experiences and illustrates wider tendencies to trust more individual, subjective knowledge, even if it conflicts with well-known or respected principles. This tendency has been pointed out by Olav Hammer (2010: 57) in the context of the teachings in new spirituality:

Ideally, knowledge and truth are construed as coming from immediate personal experience. In reality, however, much of the mental map is constructed by trusting the experience of others, especially other women. Subjectivists have shifted authorities: they rely not on the threatening, negative knowledge of institutional experts, but on the insights of close female kin and friends.

The Nest supports a special epistemological stance that has been described in the analysis of American women as subjectivism and connected knowing. Connected knowers are subjectivists who believe that truth is "personal, particular, and grounded in firsthand experience" (Belenky et al. 1997: 113). Acknowledging the limitations of this approach and without any universalistic claim (for example, that women mostly use this type of cognition) it seems to be a very accurate description of the mode cultivated and supported in the Nest. Subjectivists as described by Blythe McVicker Clinchy (1994: 34):

[L]ook inside themselves for knowledge. They are their own authorities. For them, truth is internal, in the heart or in the gut. [...] truth is personal: You have your truths, and I have mine. The subjectivist relies on the knowledge she has gleaned from personal experience. She carries the residue of that experience in her gut in the form of intuition and trusts her intuitions. She does not trust what she calls the "so-called authorities" who pretend to "know it all" and try to "inflict their ideas" on her. The subjectivist makes judgments in terms of feelings: an idea is right if it feels right.

Angels give people the strength to find solutions in themselves, rather than whispering answers in their ears. Several members of the Nest are rather intuitive. The correctness of inner subjective feeling is confirmed spiritually: the sense of inner confidence is seen as a sign from the angels. Similar tendencies are also shown in other contexts – women who feel 'deaf' and 'dumb' can paradoxically develop strong subjective authority by themselves (Belenky et al. 1997).

The atmosphere and rules of the Nest endorse the pattern of connected knowing. The empathic way to relate to others' ideas and personal problems is the cornerstone of the place: this specific "high-vibrational" goodness. Blythe McVicker Clinchy (1994: 39) points out the importance of narratives, as connected knowers are "looking for the story behind the idea. The voice of separate knowing is argument; the voice of connected knowing is narration. Women spend a lot of time sharing stories of their experience." The folk religious transfer of meanings is largely anecdotal (Draper, Baker 2011) and

finds Internet forums as highly efficient channels to share personal stories and memorates. In the Nest, it is common to answer with your own stories both to comfort and to give hope or guidance (for example, how to see and recognise angels, as seen in previous examples). Narratives, especially those from your peers, help to make sense of the world and give it a meaning (Besecke 2001).

There are similar tendencies demonstrated on a wider social level. For example, Anthony Giddens argues in his approach to modernity that through “‘filter-back’ processes [...] technical knowledge, in one shape or another, is re-appropriated by lay persons and routinely applied in the course of their day-to-day activities” (1991: 146). People tend to trust ‘lay’ knowledge that comes from people similar to themselves, so much that it may come to take over ‘expert’ knowledge (doctors, scientists, analytics etc.). For example, Burrows et al. (2000) point out that web sites have great importance in people’s decision making on health-related issues. Virtual community care and lay knowledge shared in the Nest supports individual’s authority and may lead to distrust of official institutions – a tendency that is institutionally supported and amplified by new spiritual ideas, as pointed out by Hammer (2010). Participants in the spiritual milieu tend to trust stories by ordinary people. The validity of first-hand experience or experiences of others who are similar to you (transmitted in narrative forms) may take over the position of authority from official institutions like medicine, science or government.

Indeed, in the Nest, people demonstrate their distrust towards official institutions. For example, in a discussion about the Estonian 2011 national census, many users, including the initiator, were protesting suspiciously against its mandatory form. The originator of the topic wrote: “And it is an imperative for everybody. For some reason it was so vexing for me that I felt sick only because of this idea.” The obligatory nature of the process is problematic for many users as it conflicts with the basic principle of everybody’s freedom to choose – one of the central values of new spirituality. “‘Mandatory’ means that you cannot argue [...] no free choice for us...” as one disappointed user states. This example shows that the high appreciation of individual decision-making creates hesitation even with a relatively standard procedure like the national census.

The idea of freedom to choose is expressed in discussions but also explicitly in Kaledon’s manifesto of the forum, which emphasises that “we appreciate the gift given to Humankind – Free Choice”. The angels and social support by other members reinforce the idea that everybody’s personality and free will are valuable. This constitutes a solid ground on which to build one’s self-confidence.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

While keeping in mind the limitations of online ethnographic study, the Internet discussion forum the Nest of Angels provides an opportunity to observe the dynamics of a virtual support group and follow the process of spiritual meaning creation. As the plurality of narratives about angels suggests, spiritual angels are seen and described in various forms. Apart from some consensus with the signs from angels (for example, feathers), new spiritual discourse accommodates different memorates and conceptualisations of angels. The common and even absolute characteristic, however, is their good intentionality and benevolence. The stories told by the members of the Nest encourage

everybody to notice the signs sent by angels – mainly recognisable by the feeling of warmth, pure goodness, and happy emotions. The interpretation of signs and situations as angelic concomitantly means rejoicing at their presence. Of course, the Nest is a virtual space, and the overly positive communication means mainly just playing with happy emotions in a particular and presumably safe online environment. However, at one point, a feather falling from the sky could really make your day. When you smile constantly you finally feel at least slightly happier.

The Nest gives an opportunity to feel the presence of angels on many levels. People get constant confirmations in the discussions but also either by getting the social support needed or behaving themselves angelically when giving help and supporting others. Angels add a very special dimension of contingency, transcendence, the feeling of being removed from everyday problems. Of course, with online communities that seem to be better than real life, there is always the danger of unhealthy escapism, the desire to become absorbed in this utopian world. Although not the focus of the present paper, the problem of users spending “maybe too much time” in the Nest came from interviews with more active members of the Nest. The temptation of escapism to virtual reality should be analysed using more complex methodology – the example of the Nest could be applicable here.

The overwhelmingly supportive atmosphere suggests that a special mode of relating to the world is promoted in the Nest. People do not criticise others’ ideas but rather express their gratitude if they think the same or consider some postings especially valuable. The ideology of the Nest and the community interactions support “connected knowing”: being empathic, intuitive, and individualistic. As a rule, commentators do not aim to challenge diverging views (common elsewhere in Internet communication) but attempt to understand and support each other. The Nest as an Internet forum is a very suitable environment for sharing narratives and values. The trustful virtual relationships actualise the influence and the authority of people similar to users themselves and increase distrust towards traditional authorities, especially that which does not accept people’s free choice and subjectivism. Therefore, although rather opposite to a feminist empowerment ideology, new spirituality and angels support a subjective feeling of self-confidence that is framed with ‘feminine’ softness.

Online communication in the Nest creates a multi-layered virtual network between the members and angels. In addition to active moderation and the strongly perceived normativity of keeping the place “high-vibrational”, the angels themselves are guardians and guarantors of this intimacy, so knowledge and emotional support can be shared. Therefore, the success of the Nest to create a trustful atmosphere is not surprising. Angels are such desirable creatures that you really want to become similar with them. Angels’ divine nature both supports people directly, but more importantly, gives a language of goodness and guarantees that fellow users, although not real angels, are trying to be at least slightly angel-like.

NOTES

1 Some examples from questionnaires measuring the role of religion in Estonia: according to a world-wide Gallup poll (2007–2008) 86 per cent of Estonians reported insignificance of religion in their daily lives (Crabtree, Pelham 2009) and a Eurobarometer survey showed that only 16 per cent of Estonians express the belief that a god is still there (Eurostat 2005).

2 All the translations from Estonian to English are by the author.

3 Still, Estonian results demonstrating the importance of angels are low compared to other questionnaires. For example, 78 per cent of Americans express an opinion that angels are actively influencing their social interactions (Cerulo, Barra 2008: 378).

4 Angels are (and have been) important figures in folk-religious/vernacular practices. However, 'folk religion' is today a problematic concept (see the review in Bowman, Valk 2012: 4–5): the common "two-tiered model of 'folk' and 'official' religion" is losing its relevance.

5 These numbers characterising the Nest of Angels are taken from the official statistics of the web page and demonstrate the situation at the end of December 2012.

6 The quotes are taken from the Internet forum The Nest of Angels (see Sources) and translated from Estonian to English by the author.

7 In Estonian the diminutive is easy to formulate by adding the suffix "-kene" (or its shortened form "-ke") to the word. Diminutive forms can be used with every noun and even double and triple options are grammatically correct.

8 The term is mainly used in the analyses of health related web sites, see Burrows et al. 2000.

9 Angels themselves are popular subject for requests for help in everyday matters. Utraiainen (forthcoming) describes angel practices as a "practical religion": like a woman's handbag which contains helpful tools for different occasions. In this sense, utilitarian values prevail; religion becomes very mundane, divine creatures like angels show available parking slots, offer fashion advice when buying clothes, etc. The changing meaning of angels is pointed out in other studies as well, from the messengers of God to "heavenly service providers" (see, for example, Walter 2011: 30).

10 The plurality of views is characteristic to the new spiritual milieu, where a wide variety of concepts of angels can be found. Angels in popular spiritual books are depicted either as born into humankind and living with us, some people might be angels themselves, or more traditionally, angels can be guardians, real agents, abstract spiritual energy, etc.

11 These views must be still "high-vibrational". Angels can never be bad or do harm – this is a strong norm in the Nest.

12 The name Rainbow-Colored Little Ball (author's translation) is in the Estonian original Vikerkaarevärvi Pallike where *pallike* is a diminutive of *pall* 'ball'. It is an interesting combination without any explicit connotations in popular culture either in books or movies. As the user described, it was a free association of her own, just something that she felt would characterise her well.

13 As at the end of December 2012.

14 There is very rich material for cultural analysis, from the long history of religious symbolism to the huge amount of angel images in modern pop culture (see the study by Gardella 2007, in Estonian context Hiimäe 2012).

15 In the Nest, the prevailing opinion is that our problems are caused by Karma – previous-life misdeeds that are the burden we have to carry.

16 For example, some members have a greater skill in finding the right words. This is considered very valuable – the ability to express yourself in this overly happy and supportive language. Certain specific skills can be valued and give special expert power inside a group. Tanya Luhrmann (2012) demonstrates how among charismatic Christians the ability to experience vivid mental imaginary may become the source of authority. In addition, the main moderator and

some other users (who are mainly men) in the Nest have an aura of more intellectual experts; they use slightly more sophisticated language, quoting the Bible or other sources. There have also been serious conflicts with users who have violated the “high-vibrational” atmosphere of the Nest.

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THE LOCAL IMPACT OF MIGRATORY LEGENDS: THE PROCESS AND FUNCTION OF LOCALISATION

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ABSTRACT

Folk narratives are one of the mechanisms by which humans form their cultural reality; and space is an important part of this reality. In the majority of examples, contemporary legends do not explicitly refer to individual elements of the local space, however the messages that they convey are always placed in the local environment, i.e. the space that the legend-bearers directly perceive and evaluate. This placement of the folklore material is enabled by the process of the localisation of motifs. Legends that are treated as migratory due to their general geographical extensiveness can convey their message, and thus fulfil their role, only by the inclusion of an element occurring in actuality of the given space. On the level of content, in contemporary legends the local space is presented primarily as the backdrop of the events, and the fact that it is stated at all creates the impression of the apparent closeness of the events described, which enables an even stronger effect. Thus, the contemporary legends about foreigners in Velenje, which at their core are stories about the Other, are also characterised by their experiential backdrop.

KEYWORDS: Localisation • contemporary legends • migratory motifs • appropriation • the Other

INTRODUCTION

Apart from being a physical reality, space is first and foremost a social or cultural construct created and perpetuated through various mechanisms, one of which, no doubt, is narrative folklore in all its plethora of forms that circulate among people: "Landscape is experienced through the process of 'imaginative reconstruction'" (Aitchison et al. 2002: 78). And vice-versa: the proper role of narrative folklore can only be understood by the researcher through the environment in which it dwells, i.e. the context of a general societal and cultural state.

There is not much exaggeration in the statement that folklore texts as such, be they proverbs, legends, or folktales, tend to be empty and meaningless unless they are provided with contextual information and placed in their own social and cultural environment. (Bauman et al. 1980: 33)

Thus contemporary folklore, namely contemporary legends, the topic of my research interest and of this article, can be talked about and analysed precisely because of the fact that its content is deeply rooted in the contemporary world (Marks 2001: 227).

Folklore's ability to adapt – in content as well as in form – is the feature that keeps the forms and motifs of folklore alive and grants them access to new contextual situations. And localisation of content is one of the most important modes of this adaptation process. Localisation ascribes local attributes to a migratory (i.e. spatially and chronologically widely distributed) motif, mainly by incorporating real or concrete features from a physical environment. The localised variants of migratory tales bring a general confirmation that a certain presented issue is relevant for the narrators and their audience here and now. And more – the stories localised through content play a decisive role in answering the questions of the construction of space and subsequently the construction of cultural identity, which not only speaks of who we are, but also who we are not, by communicating who the Others are. "No community exists that has not known these legends in the past, and there is no community that does not know them today" (Dégh 2001: 158).

CONTEMPORARY LEGENDS

Contemporary legend, amidst all the forms receiving the attention of folkloristics after having recognised the presence and significance of folklore in modernity, is the only one to reflect 'contemporaneity' in its name. Contemporary legends are mainly defined as reports of unusual, incredible, even bizarre or horrifying events entering people's everyday routine, which neither the listener nor the narrator were a part of, and yet the events are presented as at least probable if not real. They depict a social reality, an environment that can be perceived in modernity, and their existence has a significant impact on emergence in the media and the worldwide web. Stewart Sanderson wrote in 1981:

The modern legend constitutes one of the most, may indeed even constitute *the* most widespread, popular, and vital folklore form of the present day; and what strikes me as perhaps its most outstanding feature is the creativity, imagination, and virtuosity brought to its performance by all kinds of people (cited in Brunvand 2001: XXVII).

Contemporary legend is a folklore form (genre) that has a very strong connection with the context¹ in which it dwells. In the pragmatic sense this means that the analysis of these narratives, accompanied by a correct and justified interpretation, can lead the researcher to a certain insight into this context, which is a very valuable contribution to the interdisciplinary analysis of modern human society as well as of culture as a whole. Research into the human way of life and worldview has become, through various paradigmatic frameworks, a certain maxim of folklore research in the past three decades, especially by the interpretative analysis of data gathered in the field (cf. Bronner 2007).

In respect to this statement contemporary legends are – like every other form of folklore – much more than just texts. The messages they communicate are enhanced by their contextual framework, which ascribes them with a specific meaning and a specific function. Thus in order to truly understand and interpret them one must, alongside

the narratives themselves, also collect comprehensive information about the context in which they exist and spread: "A consideration of these texts alone is insufficient; they would not spread unless people found their core ideas credible. To understand the worldwide popularity of these stories, we need to consider their grounding in real life." (Campion-Vincent 2002: 33)

The messages conveyed by contemporary legends can manifest on many levels. Mainly they are direct and concrete, thus fulfilling the educational function by illustrating (negative) examples. Other narratives are subtler, thus being a means by which topics, otherwise non-presentable due to outward pressures and limitations, can be conveyed. To put it another way, contemporary legends are the lens through which one can distinguish a general critical view of the events and changes in a social environment. On the other hand, they carry a strong symbolism as well as more intricate secondary messages that can only be discerned by employing a detailed knowledge of the symbolic context and human psychology.

APPROPRIATION AND LOCALISATION OF MIGRATORY MOTIFS

Questions of credibility and veracity of contemporary legendry – the core notions about its definition – draw attention to one more aspect of these narratives. One of Brunvand's definitions of contemporary legends, for example, states that these stories *must* be fictional, because the same bizarre incidents could never have happened "in so many localities to so many aunts, cousins, neighbors, in-laws, and classmates of a hundred and thousand of individual tellers of the tales" (1981: XII). The simultaneous emergence of identical motifs in geographically very distant areas as well as the continuity of their content through a longer period of time point to the fact that contemporary legends are actually migratory. This means that their basic ideas are not only limited to one social or language group or political body, but are a part of a broader tradition. Contemporary legends are, more than any of the narrative forms, an international or a transnational narrative genre, whose emergence and proliferation know no geographical or social boundaries (Hobbs, McCulloch 2007: 117). According to Ulrike Wolf-Knuts the 'migratory legend' is the only valid description of these narratives, for they contain the geographical (synchronic axis) as well as the temporal (diachronic axis) dimension of continuity in their content (1987: 173).

However, the fact that these migratory narratives tend to localise can be of a larger importance from the perspective of understanding their concrete context, the narrative's placement in that context, and its relation to the general social environment. Migratory tales are distributed by means of selective appropriation (Bird 2002: 522), i.e. by (conscious) instilling, acceptance (cf. Muršič 2000: 308) or selection of facts, descriptions and the like by potential narrators. And yet it is only by localisation, reformation and adaptation of motifs that migratory legend or any other form of narrative folklore can settle in the new environment. Localisation is thus one of the most important processes of creating certain (new) cultural constructs to fulfil certain functions demanded by the new context. And so the appropriation of migratory folklore as well as its localisation most commonly unfold directly in the folkloric event and are mostly influenced by performance details of narration such as the narrator's style or knowledge, and the

structure of the audience. They are thus always arbitrary and subjective, and the motifs that form the final version of the narrative are emotionally charged (Bird 2002: 528). An important aspect to understanding these two processes is also the fact that narrative communication, at least in the case of legends, is always reciprocal and bidirectional, i.e. dialogic (Dégh 2001: 45).

The main characteristic of localised narratives is that they present a physical, visible element from an environment that their bearers are acquainted with (buildings, material goods, technology, natural qualities, as well as real people), around which the narrative's content oscillates. Legends can thus be directly linked to that particular element and can, for example, try to explain or justify its existence (like legends that accompany individual toponyms), physical appearance, or its relationship to the environment (cf. Hrobat 2008). But more frequently, these parts of visual experiential space, which are always named (!) (Frake 1996: 235), play the role of a backdrop wherein the events of the legends take place. In contemporary legendry, space, or rather its 'use', takes this role more often, and with that it brings evidence that the events described did in fact happen. Even more – they happened in 'my' (i.e. the narrator's) immediate vicinity. The addition of the illusory proximity of the event, which is a direct result of motif localisation, increases the possibility that the story will achieve its intent or fulfil its function. Edmund Leach wrote in 1984:

Without [...] anchoring into concrete details of the landscape, the fictional nature of stories becomes obvious. They may still have value but of quite a different kind. More generally, it is only when stories have a material reference that we ourselves can see and touch that we are prepared to suspend our faculty for disbelief. (Cited in Bird 2002: 539)

And so it is the localisation itself that enables the legends to convey the message and achieve the desired effect with its audience anytime and anywhere. "[L]ocal legends² do not develop randomly but according to particular concerns and fears" (Bird 2002: 532).

Although the localisation of a specific migratory legend can limit the number of its variants, acquired in a particular geographical area or in a particular society, the empirical data demonstrating their absence may also be very informative and insightful.

LOCALISED CONTEMPORARY LEGENDS ABOUT FOREIGNERS

To illustrate the process of localisation I will present some examples of contemporary legendry that I collected in Velenje, an industrial town and the fifth largest urban centre in Slovenia. Velenje has been marked by rapid development since the nineteen-sixties – when coal-mining and parallel industries took off – and by the following waves of immigration from all the republics of former Yugoslavia and from Albania. This created a sort of a melting pot disabling prevalent nationalistic tendencies (eliminating real conflicts), and opening ways to all kinds of architectural, economic, developmental, social, and other (sometimes rushed) projects, resulting in Velenje being set forth as a 'bright' example of development under socialism by the governing establishment of the time (up until the year 1990, just before Slovenia claimed its independence, it even bore the name of the late Yugoslavian leader, Titovo Velenje). Today Velenje is in slight

developmental stagnation as the economic focus shifted from industry onto trade, but it is still a very important energetic and political centre. All these specific historic and ethnographic development brought about a unique cultural context that can be truly insightful and interesting for a folklore researcher.

Collecting folklore material in this town took place between the years of 2009 and 2010. The majority of material was gathered by me organising storytelling sessions, where a group of people, aged 18–30, were presented with a couple of narrative examples, triggering mental connections to the stories they already knew or had heard of. This un-structured mass interview proved to be a very good method of gathering folklore material that is in circulation today, because it evoked strong reactions, vivid dialogue – participants were sending me stories even long after the session was over. The other method of collecting was by inciting a couple of discussions on the internet forum that connects inhabitants of Velenje in discussing local and national matters (Velenje.com 2009–2010). In order to get a further comparative perspective on the localised folklore material I also shuffled through a significant amount of local and regional press, but much to my surprise no journal has ever picked up these particular narratives and made a story of them. This is interesting information, which can be interpreted as an indicator that despite their significant distribution, these narratives are not regarded by their realistic value, but are rather fun and ridiculous slants, not worthy of journalistic application. This assumption was confirmed by the informants during the live interviews as well.

All of the examples that I use in this article to illustrate the topic on legend-localisation were localised into Velenje using a single spatial landmark and symbolic element of the town – a popular fast food restaurant called Mladost ('Youth'). Established in May of 1987, before Slovenia claimed its independence, this restaurant stands in the vicinity of important public buildings, an education centre, and public recreational areas and is open twenty-four hours a day, making it a popular overnight eating place. The owners and employees at Mladost are Albanian immigrants from the western-most part of the Republic of Macedonia. Roughly one third of legends I collected in the town of Velenje use Mladost as the point of localisation of their content.

All legends that are attributed to this particular fast food joint are migratory – I have not only found the same motifs throughout the rest of Slovenia,³ they are also collected and analysed by contemporary folklore researchers worldwide (see, for example, Brunvand 1981; af Klintberg 1986; Brednich 1990, etc.). In the case of Mladost its attributed motifs are migratory on the diachronic axis as well, since their initial inception is unclear but there is some narrative evidence showing that the same plots existed even before the establishment of this particular fast food joint in the same geographical area.

Interpretative analysis of contemporary folklore material has shown that all of the narratives, localised through Mladost, are legends about the Other – a social category, required by the majority of the population to identify itself through comparison and exclusion. "We" are the measure of the good life which "they" are threatening to undermine, and this is so because "they" are foreigners and culturally "different" (Stolcke 1995: 2). The Other is a quintessential social category and can be covered by various kinds of marginal social groups, i.e. homosexuals, women, the unemployed, etc. The representations of this Us/Others discourse make "foreign characteristics, different from ours, more visible. Because of the attention, directed at foreign and unusual, their

representations are keen on satire and tendentious depiction of 'foreignness.'" (Jezernik 1987: 29) And among these representations, folklore is one the most important (cf. Kvideland, Sehmsdorf 1988: 379–382).

The first important platform for differentiating between Us and Others is language and communication, whether oral or written down. Legends convey modes of language-discrimination by emphasising incoherencies and nonsense in communication, attributed to foreigner's inability to make the switch to the 'right' language. Furthermore, if the foreigners are 'granted' the ability to learn the language of their new environment, it is clearly stated that they will never be able to pull it off completely – even though they can learn grammar and vocabulary, they will never be able to grasp the metaphors, phrases or the proper accent. All of this perpetuates the notion of their in-adaptability and, subsequently, enhances the division between Us and Them:

In Mladost, this one guy ordered a kebab, and the vendor said to him: "Are you eating here or are you eating by walk?"⁴

I know of a story that once, people came to Mladost and there was a message on the door, saying: "No burek today, oven broken at all." [Laughter]

Once the vendor wasn't in the shop, so he put an inscription on the door that said: "I'll be back all of a sudden!"

This one guy came to Mladost to have a kebab and asked for a kebab without onions. And the guy said to him: "I don't have onions – do you want your kebab without something else?"

The most prominent corpus of legends oscillating around Mladost is that dealing with the contamination of food. In narratives this contamination is manifested through parts of human or animal bodies, and various inedible objects allegedly found in hamburgers, kebabs, and other food Mladost serves. The motif of food contamination can be found throughout the Western world (and beyond) and is thus without a doubt migratory (cf. Brunvand 1981; Brednich 1990; Buchan 1992). In worldwide legends, accidental or conscious contamination is attributed to different kinds of social actors, from big corporations (Fine 1992: 141–163) to immigrants. In the latter case, legends directly or indirectly accuse the foreign owners of fast food shops of poor hygiene, of being plainly ignorant, and even of being evil, malevolent, or spoiling the food on purpose. It is within these attributed (alleged) characteristics where their general role in society – as the Other – is most recognisable.

When Mladost was still a kiosk,⁵ when you placed an order, he opened this hole in the wall, called the order in and closed it again, so you could not see into the kitchen, how everything was being done. Because god knows, what was happening with your food in that kitchen!

When we were still in high school, everybody was saying that in Mladost the cheese was not the best quality – well they had the best cheese burek, but, so they said, the vendors and cooks never washed their hands when preparing the food. And so once they found semen from one of the cooks on the food. Now, I don't know if that's true or not, but that's how it was.

Do you remember, when once in high school our teacher – we were late or something, because we went to Mladost to eat. And we came back and our teacher was like: “Where were you?” And we said that we were in Mladost, and she said: “You go there and eat their burgers? But they are contaminated with sperm!”

And they were doing this – when Mladost was still that orange kiosk – they were making burgers out of rats. That’s what I heard, they were using rat meat.

Yes, and they kill pigeons with a shovel and they make hamburgers out of them!

There are other tangible elements of Velenje’s physical reality used to localise these same and similar legends (for example immigrant-owned sweet- and ice-cream shops), but Mladost is a proper lightning rod for the stories, proving to be the key element for the migratory legends to localise in this town. This probably has to do with the fact that it is the biggest, central and most popular fast food joint among the inhabitants of Velenje. This is what Gary Alan Fine (1992: 141–143) described as the Goliath effect, that is to say that being the most prominent also burdens you with the biggest symbolic potential. And it is that exact symbolic potential that is being employed every time Mladost is mentioned in legends by the inhabitants of Velenje.

CONCLUSION

The folklore genre system in general as well as specific examples of (contemporary) folklore are one of the most important mechanisms with which people form their own cultural reality, an integral part of which is space. In the majority of examples, contemporary legends do not explicitly refer to individual elements of the local space, however the messages that they convey are always placed in the local environment, i.e. the space that the legend-bearers directly perceive and evaluate. These communicated messages are thus always spatially fixed, which is enabled by the process of motif localisation – legends that can be treated as migratory due to their universal appeal and appearance can only transfer the message and fulfil their function if they employ a real, visible element from the physical, tangible space of a particular community. Even more, only after a migratory element of folklore, present at many different independent geographical locations, has undergone the process of localisation, can it situate and label the bearers (the narrator and his or her audience) as a member of a community and thus creates the cultural identity of individuals and the community as a whole. The same goes for contemporary legends about foreigners, localised in Velenje, Slovenia, that use one element of the town’s physical space – the fast food restaurant Mladost. From them, one can distinguish the locals’ attitude towards foreigners/immigrants (the Other), their perception, fear and the general consequences of the clash of two or more ethnic communities in a town historically characterised by processes of mass immigration.

NOTES

¹ It should be noted at this point that when I am talking about a context or contextual data, I am describing a broad (yet somewhat enclosed) cultural landscape – a dynamic socio-cultural

situation functioning as the platform where stories are in circulation – and its subcategory; the narrative context wherein individual motifs are put when they are being localised (i.e. contextualised). Where the context is meant to be understood as the context of performance by which folklore material is transmitted and collected, this is emphasised separately.

2 My emphasis.

3 My collection of Slovenian contemporary legendry is one of the very first in this country, meaning that there is a general lack of comparative narrative material.

4 Sample texts here and below are approximate translations of the transcripts of folklore material, which is sometimes untranslatable verbatim, but the general idea is preserved. In this and some other examples the translation is grammatically wrong on purpose.

5 Mladost was a rather small plastic kiosk up until 2007, when a more permanent building was erected.

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CONTEMPORARY JOKES ABOUT STUDENTS: THE BODY OF TEXTS AND THEIR GENETIC RELATIONS

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ABSTRACT

In spite of the fact that so many papers in folklore scholarship have been dedicated to the question of the genesis of the joke as a genre (mainly speculating on its origin from the fairy tale) almost none of them attempts to reach beyond theoretical discussion on the problem. The aim of this article is to broaden the scope of existing research by analysing the genetic relations of contemporary jokes in a sample of Russian-language jokes about students collected from different sources (written, oral, Internet). Jokes about students are compared to jokes from other cycles and other genres with the help of statistical investigation. The types of genetic (and typological) relations between them are elucidated as well as the possible aspects of the origin of jokes.

KEYWORDS: joke • genetic relations • fairy tale • anecdote • statistical methods

The research into jokes has become quite abundant recently. American and European joke scholarship blossomed with the names of Alan Dundes, Arvo Krikmann, Elliott Oring, Christie Davies and many other researchers, while the Russian tradition experienced an outbreak of joke research only at the end of the 20th century, as before (especially starting from the 1930s) not just joke research, but even joke telling was punishable.

Later in the second part of the century it became occasionally possible for Russian scholars to mention jokes in their work. The speculation on jokes was rather theoretical, seldom based on texts, and focused on the position of jokes among the other genres of folklore. Logically enough the joke was associated primarily with the tale (Yudin 1978; 1989; Blazhes 1989; Blazhes, Matveyev 1989; Meletinsky 1989; 1995). In one of his later works Vladimir Propp (1964) did not even make the difference, saying that the joke is not a separate genre, but just a kind of tale. Later several scholars put forward a hypothesis that the folk joke originated from the anecdote: the latter descended from the elite noble culture to the lower folk one (Khimik 2002). Both in the case of the comparison to the tale, and to the anecdote, the studies lack solid evidence and therefore their conclusions are doubtful.

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In spite of the fact that in American and European folkloristics jokes were seldom openly compared to fairy-tales, they were often mentioned within tale indexes (Uther 2004, under numbers 1200–1999). There was even an attempt to compile an index for Shaggy Dog Story jokes modelled after the Aarne-Thompson index (Brunvand 1963). On the other hand, jokes can be related to anecdotes as reports of humorous events (Bronner 1995), or riddles, in the latter case the similarity in form of the two genres led to the compilation of the joke index based on the structural peculiarities of the joke – mainly, its dialogical basis (Abrahams 1964). Another structural index based on the cruel joke cycle was compiled according to the opening of the jokes (Sutton-Smith 1960). Finally, jokes were categorised according to their frequency (Krikmann 2004). Nevertheless, the most wide-spread categorisation is related to the main themes of the jokes (Legman 1975; Banc, Dundes 1986; Arkhipova, Melnichenko 2010), which brings us back to the methods of categorisation invented for fairy tale research, and tale indexes.

Even though the variety of methods of joke research and categorisation is obvious, as I said, they were rarely applied to student joke research. In spite of the fact that some scholars turned to other genres of student lore (Krasikov 2009; 2011; Shumov 2003), student jokes are still ignored for some unknown reason (except for several works, such as Bronner 1995; Shumov 2003).

The goal of this paper is to present an analysis of Russian-language student jokes from the point of view of their genetic relations. By genetic relations I mean their relationship with other genres of folklore. This research will help to prove or refute the hypotheses mentioned earlier concerning the genesis of these jokes as well as give some other results valuable for the research into student subculture. It is important to note that the aim of the paper is to examine the genetic relations, not just the origin, as two jokes (for example, one about a schoolboy, the other about the student) with the same plot are obviously related to each other, although this does not mean that student jokes loaned plots from school jokes, or vice versa. Each case is unique and demands further investigation, and it is virtually impossible to answer which one was first. Nevertheless the repetition of the plot in contemporary jokes and traditional tales will almost certainly mean that the former originated from the latter. As it is not always possible to define which text appeared first, I will refer to the connections between student jokes and other texts as genetic relations rather than referring to their origin.

Since there is still no professional index of student jokes, in order to reach the goal my first task was to collect jokes. I chose three sources for the joke collecting: oral – interviews; written – amateur collections of jokes published for entertainment; and the Internet. As I aimed to analyse Russian-language student jokes, these three resources were also in Russian: the fieldwork was conducted in Belarus and Russia between 2003 and 2012, the books published were in Russian, and the Internet research was also conducted in Russian.

The first difficulty I encountered concerned the question of what a student joke actually is both from the point of view of its form and plot. For example, one and the same plot may be used in different variants of the joke about a student, a pupil, a doctor, etc. Another problem is that student jokes dedicated to student life about professors, lectures, etc., are told not only by students, but also by other subcultures. Naturally, students themselves do not only tell jokes about student life, for example, I have recently noticed the active telling of political jokes that have nothing to do with student subcul-

ture itself. There are some forms that cannot be considered merely jokes: they resemble aphorisms or humorous poems. Finally, there are jokes that may be regarded as belonging to two cycles at the same time: for instance, to which cycle should we attribute the joke about the famous protagonist Chapaev, who according to the plot, studies at university and passes exams.

My solution was the following: when I had to decide if the text told or published is a student joke, I considered the emic perspective. If the interviewee told the joke when I asked him or her to tell a *student* joke, the editor of the collection of jokes or the website admin published the joke under the rubric *student* jokes, I regarded it as a student joke and included it in my collection. It obviously influenced the material I received, as the texts sometimes cannot be regarded as pure jokes, especially from the academic perspective: they may acquire the form of the poem, or a riddle. However, previous studies (especially joke categorisation) showed that I am not the first researcher who encountered the ambiguous nature of jokes, and that these difficulties do not mean that I have to exclude this material. On the contrary, the emic perspective shows how wide the vernacular understanding of jokes is.

After collecting the material I had to sort and categorise it; this is how I compiled the student joke index (it has not been published yet and exists as part of the PhD thesis that is still in progress) embracing the *corpus I* of material – *student jokes*. However, since the aim of the study is to find the relationships between student jokes and other texts, I also collected texts for the *corpus II* – comparative materials (later incorporated into the index). Further on I will concentrate on the sources and quantity of the material in these two corpora and compare them in order to reveal the genetic relationships between student jokes and other texts.

CORPUS I. STUDENT JOKES

The Sources of the Material

1. Oral interviews

Most often the jokes from oral interviews were recorded from students and teachers in Vitebsk, Belarus (where this research started as a student essay), and later in Saint Petersburg, Moscow, Minsk and other smaller Russian and Belarusian cities. The choice of the territory frame is based on the aim of the research – to analyse Russian-language student jokes. The length of the research (2003–2012) among the students of the two countries allowed me to collect a lot of material.

2. Written sources:

- The collection of jokes by Roman Trachtenberg *333 1/3 anekdotov pro studentov* (333 1/3 Student Jokes) (Trachtenberg 2005);
- The collection of jokes entitled *Studencheskiy yumor* (Student Humor) by Aron Kantorovich (1992);
(These two sources were obviously chosen because of the main theme of their joke collections);
- The *Anekdoty nashikh chitateley* by Irina Repina and Yury Rostovtsev (Jokes of Our

Readers) collection (28 issues). The choice of this source is not random: it includes the jokes sent to the editors of the *Studencheskiy meridian* (Student Meridian) newspaper by its readers, not just copied from the Internet (the collections were published in 1993), meaning that they might have been told orally (Repina, Rostovtsev 1993).

The latter collection also became the source for the comparative research of the genetic relationships – for *Corpus II* about which I will write in detail later.

3. Internet publications

The search for Internet publications was undertaken with the search query *studencheskie anekdoty* (student jokes) in the Google.ru search engine (the first 100 links found were used to collect the material). Moreover, when I got the whole corpus of texts from the oral sources and from sources published in joke collections, I checked jokes from these two sources, searching for punch lines in the same search engine. (Here and hereafter I use *punch line* to mean the conclusion of the joke, which carries the maximum comic effect). The aim of this particular part of the research was to find out whether the Internet may be considered to be an exhaustive and comprehensive source for student joke research; in other words, whether it includes all the jokes that also exist in oral and published materials.

All in all I tried to take into account the three sources (oral, published and Internet jokes) in order to see the actual situation with existing student jokes: we cannot say that today the joke is exclusively an oral genre – its nature changed a lot especially with the advent of the Internet era (Alekseevsky 2010: 5).

The Structure of the Student Joke Corpus: Some Explications

In this part I would like to dwell on the quantity of student jokes, collected from different sources. Table 1 shows the quantity of the collected material.

Table 1. The quantity of student jokes in Corpus I.

| Number of types (plots) | Number of versions | Number of variants (texts) |
|-------------------------|--------------------|----------------------------|
| 1332 | 1409 | 1896 |

The terms *type*, *version*, and *variant* mentioned in Table 1 are essential for the understanding of this research. *Type* means number of motifs, combined according to certain rules. They may be also called plots. Plots or types are rather ideal scholarly constructions. *Versions* are the variations or subtypes, where, for instance, the characters, circumstances, punch line, one or several motifs of the joke are changed, rearranged or added, while the plot or the type itself is more or less permanent (invariable). Finally, *variants* are practically identical copies of the versions, or the texts that are encountered in more than one source. Previously, we have been able to say that there is no such thing as identical texts of jokes: each variant was supposed to be at least a little bit different from the others, but now, with the development of the Internet and the publishing and republishing of joke collections, identical variants do exist. However, in some cases, variants

are similar texts with a rearranged word order, or, for instance, changes of name (neither of which make the protagonist different or the joke belong to another joke cycle).¹

I will give an example for each of the three columns of the table – the *type* or a *plot*:

II. 5. 5. The eyes are in front of the ears

Represented by the two *versions*:

II. 5. 5A.

The professor holds an exam. He decides to ask one and the same question to everybody:

– What is faster: sound or light?

The first student comes in and answers:

– Sound.

When asked why he answers:

– When I switch on the TV, first I hear a sound, and then the image appears.

– Two;² next one, please!

The second student answers the same question:

– Light: when I switch on the radio, its bulb turns on first, and then the sound comes.

– Two; next one.

The professor meditated: is it that the question is so difficult or the students are so stupid? The third one comes in. The question from the professor is:

– Student, imagine that a cannon shoots on the top of a mountain. Will you see the flash or hear the sound of the shot first?

– Of course, I will see the flash!

– Why?

– Because the eyes are in front of the ears.³

(Anekdoty: studenty, prepody, sessiya; Trachtenberg 2005: 73)

II. 5. 5B.

– Why do we first see the lightning, and then hear the thunder?

– Is it because the eyes are in front of the ears?⁴

(Kantorovich 1992: 23)

As the inscription under the versions show, the joke was found in three sources; it means, that it was represented in the three *variants* (two variants for the first version and one for the second). In this way the following data for this type was recorded in the table: 1 type, 2 versions, 3 variants.

As I mentioned before, the jokes were collected from three sources: oral, written and Internet. The variants (or specifically the collected texts, represented with the number 1896 in the third column of the table) are distributed according to the sources in the following way (this table touches only on the texts, the distribution of the types will be represented in later tables):

Table 2. The distribution of the texts according to source.

| | | |
|-------------|-----------------|----------------|
| Oral source | Internet source | Written source |
| 218 | 1144 | 534 |

It is obvious that most of the texts are from the Internet, although this cannot be representative: as I mentioned, I searched for every punch line of the jokes I had in the oral and written sources on the Internet as well.

The distribution of the types according to the sources is different: it is obvious that the variants of one type may be represented in different sources. The tables 3 and 4 show the types that were found *only* in one source or in several sources.

Table 3. Distribution of types according to source.

| | | | |
|---------------|--------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| Oral+Internet | Oral+Written | Internet+Written | Oral+Internet+Written |
| 62 | 8 | 290 | 58 |

Table 4. Types represented in only one kind of the source.

| | | |
|-----------|---------------|--------------|
| Only oral | Only Internet | Only written |
| 73 | 692 | 149 |
| 5.48% | 51.95% | 11.19% |

Table 4 shows that some jokes were found in only one source. This proves the necessity to take into account different sources for the collection and further analysis of the jokes, as none of them separately is exhaustive.

Accordingly, the third column of Table 4 may be divided in the following way:

Table 5. Types found only in written sources.

| | | | |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Written source | | | |
| Only one written source (146) | | | Two or more written sources |
| Only Trachtenberg 2005 | Only Kantorovich 1992 | Only Repina, Rostovtsev 1993 | 3 |
| 22 | 121 | 3 | |

It is important that this table includes the high number of 121 jokes, represented only in the collection *Studencheskiy yumor* and nowhere else. As I mentioned before, the punch lines of all the jokes collected from the written and oral sources were searched for on the Internet. Accordingly, none of 121 (as well as 22 and 3 for the other columns) jokes mentioned in Table 5 was found, even though the search was held with a varying inquiry. The fact that in spite of the purposeful search these jokes were not found on the Internet and were never encountered in oral communication brings us to the idea of fakelore. It is less likely for the first and the third column, as there is the possibility that I simply did not find several jokes, while for the second column it is more likely: too many jokes (121) were not found. There might be the possibility, that those jokes were made up by the editor of the collection or, for instance, translated from a foreign language and incorporated into the collection.

Finally, the student jokes do not often possess several versions within a type. 1269 jokes have only one version, 53 – two versions, 6 – three versions, 4 – four versions.

CORPUS II. THE COMPARATIVE MATERIAL FOR THE ANALYSIS OF THE GENETIC RELATIONS OF STUDENT JOKES

In order to identify the genetic relations of student jokes I had to sort out the corpus of texts related to them. The search for such texts was held in different ways from different sources, on which I will concentrate further. I will also focus on the reason for the choice of these sources.

1. Anecdotes.

As I mentioned at the beginning of the article, there is the opinion that anecdotes descended from the environment of the elite intelligentsia into the lower, folk environment, providing the origin of folk jokes. I decided to test this hypothesis on the example of student jokes. In order to do so, I chose both the classical sources and separate texts about the university or college environment.

- Literary anecdotes from the *Staraya zapisnaya knizhka* (The Notebook) by Petr Vyazemskiy (1883) – the most authoritative source on the anecdotes of the first half of the 19th century.
- Literary anecdotes from the collection *Russkiy literaturnyy anekdot* (The Russian Literary Anecdote) compiled by anecdote researcher Yefim Kurganov and Nikita Okhotin (1990).
- Anecdotes about the university or college environment.
- To be sure that the two phenomena are compared properly I took more than 200 student anecdotes from the first half of the 19th century from biographies, memoirs, and anecdote collections.
- English anecdotes: the search for analogues among the jokes and anecdotes was also conducted in *The Faber Book of Anecdotes* (Fadiman 1985), which contains a large amount of comic stories about well-known people sorted in alphabetical order according to the family names of these people.
- Anecdotes about Nasreddin, Afandi, 'Persian anecdotes', tales and jokes collected by Nikolay Sumtsov (Sumtsov 1899; Permyakov 1972; Kharitonov 1978). These sources are interesting from the point of view of this paper as their authors were among the first to collect and systemise the plots. Moreover the protagonist of most of these plots is a trickster, who is also the main type of hero in the student-joke. On the basis of the same hero the tale types could have been inherited by the student jokes.

2. Contemporary jokes from other joke cycles.

As I mentioned at the beginning of the article, the joke (as well as other folklore genres) is not a phenomenon constrained within certain frames: it changes its characters and thematic groups easily; sometimes it may be transformed into a different genre. For this reason I decided to check how many jokes have versions in other joke cycles. I paid attention to oral communication in order to notice such jokes, also during the research of some other joke cycles (for example, political jokes). Moreover the following sources became the backdrop for the investigation:

- The *Anekdoty nashikh chitateley* (Jokes of Our Readers) collection, 28 issues (Repina, Rostovtsev 1993).
- The *100 000 anekdotov* (100 000 Jokes) collection (2009).
- The *Yevreiskoye ostroumiye* (Jewish Wit) collection (Ladman 2006), containing a lot of Jewish jokes.

The first source mentioned was also used for the Corpus I.

3. Tale types from ATU (Uther 2004), and *Sravnitelnyy ukazatel syuzhetov* (Comparative Tale Type Index: The East-Slavic Tale) (Barag et al. 1979). As I studied Russian jokes, I considered it important to take into account this source, especially because some of the included tale types cannot be found in ATU.

4. Student jokes of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century from the periodicals of that time. I have also carried out a search of the 19th century student jokes and cartoons in the entertainment magazines and newspapers in order to make a comparison with contemporary student jokes. These texts might have been called folk texts, but we cannot be sure that they were really popular and were narrated by people as there is also the possibility that they were made up by journalists.

Moreover all the texts (to be precise, their punch lines) were searched for on the Internet using the Google search engine in order to find additional variants from other genres and thematic groups. All the variants of the punch lines were included. This allowed me to discover the facts about the genetic relationships between student jokes and forms or genres in which I had not expected to find them: in literature, speech genres, cartoons.

As a result, I compiled Corpus II to define the genetic relationships between contemporary student jokes. All in all Corpus II may be subdivided into the following groups of texts:

1. Folk jokes (as the division between the following joke cycles is not strict, I will mention the peculiarities of each joke cycle):

- School jokes (jokes about school life without mentioning Vovochka as the hero);
- Jokes about Vovochka (with the hero Vovochka – analogous to Greek Bobos, American Little Johnny, etc.);
- Jewish jokes (jokes mentioned in the collection of Jewish jokes, the main hero of which is a rabbi, or someone with a name typical to Jewish jokes – Moritz, Rabinovich, etc.);⁵
- Medical jokes (about doctors and medicine);
- Family jokes (mentioning the kin relation between husband, wife, children, mother-in-law, etc.);
- Jokes about Chapayev;
- Jokes about the army and military service;
- Political jokes;
- Other jokes (which were not included in the previous groups, as they are without specific themes, or representing the only joke from a certain joke cycle: about Harry Potter, Agent 007, mental hospital, etc.).

2. Anecdotes:

- Russian literary anecdotes not connected with student life;
- Russian literary anecdotes about student life;
- English literary anecdotes;
- Traditional anecdotes and jokes (Persian anecdotes about Nasreddin, Afandi, and from the collection by Sumtsov).

3. Tale types from ATU (Uther 2004), and *Sravnitelnyy ukazatel syuzhetov* (Barag et al. 1979).

4. Minor speech genres:⁶

- Aphorisms, statuses;⁷
- Rhetorical questions;
- Riddles;
- Quotes attributed to famous people;
- Titles, mottoes.

5. Toasts.

6. Cartoons.

The joke index was compiled from the collected material and includes the material of Corpus II – so if the joke type has a version, for instance, in the genre of toasts, the toast is also published in the index.

The Types of Relationship between the Contemporary Student Joke and Jokes from other Joke Cycles/Genres

I inserted the data from Corpus I into the Excel program to compare it with Corpus II and reveal the genetic relationships.

At first sight the results of the calculation should have had the following division: those that have and those that do not have the same plot in another text. However, while working with the data I encountered the following difficulties. Student folklore is not an ideal construction with a definite percentage of plots repeated in the other genres or joke cycles. There are also some other types of relationships and I consider the following division of these types to be reasonable:

1. Plot similarities.

In this case the plots of the student jokes are repeated, for instance, in school jokes or anecdotes: only the protagonists and the circumstances of the story change, although the plots themselves remain stable. Here is the example of plot similarities:

The university invited a well-known lecturer asking him to read three lectures.
A crowd of people came to the first lecture. Lecturer:
– Do you know what I am going to tell you about?
– Yes!
– So why should I tell it to you?
And he leaves.

The second lecture:

– Do you know what I am going to tell you about?

– No!

– So why should I tell it to you if you don't know anything?

And [he] leaves again.

Before the third lecture the audience decided that one half will say "no", and the other – "yes". Lecturer:

– Do you know what I am going to tell you about?

The first half of the audience:

– Yes!

The other half:

– No!

The lecturer:

– So those who know must tell it to those who don't know.

And [he] leaves again.⁸

(Anekdoty pro studentov. b)

Sermon

Once, being on the minbar, Afandi addressed the people praying with a question:

– Do you know about what I am going to preach?

– No, we don't know!

– Then there is no reason for me to talk to you.

The parishioners wanted to listen to Afandi very much, and the next Friday he asked them:

– Do you know about what I am going to preach?

They answered all together:

– We know, we know!

– Then, if you know, why should I talk about it.

The next Friday Afandi again asked from the minbar:

– Do you know about what I am going to preach?

Then the parishioners decided to outwit Afandi, and half of them answered "We know", and the other half "No, we don't know".

– Very well, Afandi rejoiced, and added: So those who know tell those who don't know!⁹

(Permyakov 1972: 377)

2. Motif connections.

In cases where the student joke and the other text have motif connections, their similarities are only on the motif level – a minimal element of the plot but not the whole plot. For instance, 14 plots within the collected student jokes may be united around the motif of inversion: the comparison of the professor with an animal, fool, or bad person. All of these jokes correspond more or less to the following form: the professor calls the student a donkey (or other animal), most often implying that the student is stupid, although, due to the wordplay in the process of the dialogue, the student exchanges his status with the professor, and the latter finds himself in the position of the fool. I will give the examples of two student jokes corresponding to this motif:

During an exam the student cannot answer either of the questions. The professor loses his patience and starts crying:

– You are a donkey!

And addressing to one of the assistants:

– Bring the pile of hay to me!

Student:

– And a cup of coffee for me, please!¹⁰

(Trachtenberg 2005: 90)

The student comes into the canteen and there is the only one vacant seat, next to the teacher. Student:

– May I sit next to you to eat?

– The goose is not a friend to the pig.¹¹

Student:

– Ok, then I'll fly away!

After half a year the student takes the same professor's exam.

Professor:

– What would you choose: a million of dollars or intellect?

– And you?

– Intellect.

Student:

– I would choose a million of dollars: everybody chooses what he lacks.

The professor gets angry and writes in the student's index:

– Fool.

The student comes back in five minutes:

– I am sorry, you mentioned your surname, but what is the mark?¹²

(Trachtenberg 2005: 98–99)

On the other hand, the same motif may be also found in a student anecdote of the 19th century:

Once on the embankment of the Fontanka where Krylov¹³ usually walked to the house of Olenin, three students caught up with him. One of them, who probably didn't know Krylov, said loudly:

– Look, there is the black cloud walking.

– And the frogs started to croak, the fabulist answered equally calmly.¹⁴

(Yeryomina 1998: 74)

It is obvious that in spite of the fact that the plots are very different the motif is repeated.

3. Punch line repetition.

I suggest this term for the cases in which the punch line of a joke is used in genres of speech without the main part of the joke, for instance, in an advertising slogan:

During student practical training in the culinary college: "Ready, steady... Stuffing!"¹⁵ (Sluzhba rassylok gorodskogo kota)

Advertising slogan for a meat chopper: "Ready, steady... Stuffing!"¹⁶ (Androsova n.d.)
(The comic effect of the joke and slogan is created through the consonance of the word

'go' (marsh) which was originally in the phrase meaning 'Ready, steady, go' and the word *farsh* meaning 'stuffing'.)

One and the same punch line may also be used for two jokes with different plots.

One joke may have a plot version, for instance, in the tale, as well as motif relations and punch line repetition. A joke may also have several plot similarities, for instance, its plot may be repeated not just in a Jewish joke, but in a toast as well. The same is true for motif relations or punch line repetitions: each type of the connection may be represented in several texts.

As the aim of the paper is to find genetic relationships with contemporary student jokes, I will focus only on the two types of relationship: plot similarities and punch line repetition. The reason is that the motif relationships, due to the fact that the motifs may originate independently in different texts, are rather typological than genetic as they often appear in similar types of situations independently (for example, the motif of poverty may appear both in personal narratives about the war or in student jokes without the motif being loaned from one type to the other (although genetic relationships for motifs are also possible)). Moreover, the study of motif relationships is quite complicated as the existing motif indices are far from perfect, and if there is no good material for the comparison, the comparison may hardly be considered successful. Motif is a too broad category and the search of the motif relationships of the jokes deserves another paper. This is why I am going to dwell on the plot similarities and punch line repetition – shedding light merely on the genetic relationships of jokes.

The Degree of Connection Between Student Jokes and Jokes from Other Joke Cycles and Genres

Let me reiterate here that Corpus I, containing the student jokes, includes 1332 joke types. If we imagine the plots of student jokes that are related to other genres or joke cycles, compared to the general quantity of joke types, the result will look as follows:

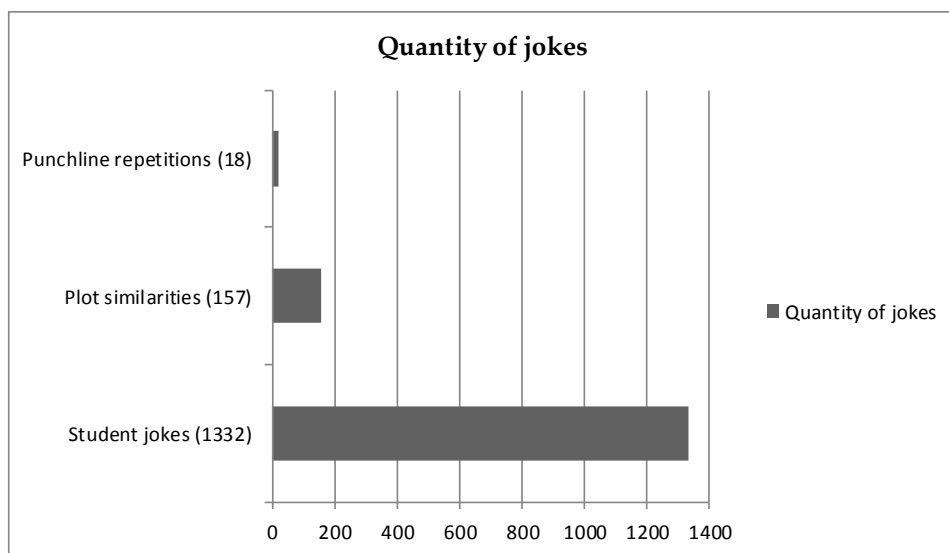


Figure 1. Plot similarities and punchline repetition of student jokes.

When compared to the general quantity of the student joke types I collected, a minimum of 174 types of jokes relate in some way to the jokes from other joke cycles or other genres (each of the 174 jokes having at least one connection – either plot or punch line). I say minimum because in spite of a thorough search of the material forming Corpus II I cannot be absolutely sure that I found everything.

Table 6. The quantity of student joke types with plot similarities and/or punch line repetitions.

| | Quantity | % |
|--|----------|-------|
| The quantity of student joke types | 1332 | 100% |
| Quantity of jokes with plot similarities and/or punch line repetitions | 174 | 13.1% |
| The quantity of jokes without genetic relationships to other texts | 1158 | 86.9% |

If we imagine the division of the relationships of student jokes vertically, it will appear as follows (note that one joke type may have more than one connection in different cycles of jokes and other genres):

Table 7. Plot similarities between student jokes and jokes from the other joke cycles or genres.

| | | Quantity |
|--|--|----------|
| Contemporary folk jokes from other joke cycles | School jokes | 17 |
| | Jokes about Vovochka | 15 |
| | Jewish jokes | 16 |
| | Medical jokes | 4 |
| | Family jokes | 9 |
| | Jokes about Chapayev | 6 |
| | Jokes about the army and military service | 4 |
| | Political jokes | 9 |
| | Jokes from other joke cycles | 62 |
| Tale type indices | ATU | 4 |
| | Comparative type index. The East-Slavic tale | 1 |
| Traditional anecdotes | About Nasreddin | 4 |
| | Persian | 1 |
| | About Afandi | 1 |
| | Jokes from the Sumtsov collection | 1 |
| Literary anecdotes | English language | 13 |
| | Russian language student anecdotes | 1 |
| Toasts | | 10 |
| Cartoons | | 3 |

Table 8. Punch line repetitions in student jokes and jokes from other joke cycles or texts from other genres.

| | | Quantity |
|-------------------------|--|----------|
| Contemporary folk jokes | Other | 1 |
| Minor speech genres | Titles | 5 |
| | Aphorisms, statuses | 7 |
| | Quotations attributed to famous people | 2 |
| | Rhetorical questions | 3 |
| | Riddles | 2 |

Tables 7 and 8 show that plot similarities and punch line repetitions usually depend on the genre of the compared texts: while similar plots are mainly found among contemporary folk jokes from other cycles or toasts (less often among anecdotes), punch lines are usually repeated in some minor speech genres: aphorisms or statuses.

The student joke is mainly genetically related to jokes from other cycles, especially to Jewish jokes, school jokes, and jokes about Vovochka. Strangely enough the interrelation with medical jokes is less usual than it may seem (quite many contemporary student jokes themselves are about students studying medicine or practicing it in hospital during their studies).

The tables show that the genetic relations of the tales and jokes (at least in the case of student jokes) suggested by some scholars seems to be exaggerated. It is important that the results of the comparison between tales are quite precise as the calculation was made with the help of the international tale indices containing many tales from various countries, as well as the East-Slavic tale index (Barag et al. 1979).

In addition, the theory of the joke originating from the anecdote seems to be questionable. The connections of contemporary student jokes and anecdotes are very few.

Ten joke types have the same plots as the toasts; usually these toasts have the text of the joke itself included, after which there is a conclusion from the joke in the form of the toast exclamation, "Let's drink to...":

A month before the examination God sends an angel to Earth to see how the students are preparing for their exams. The angel comes back and says:

– I have seen the following: the medical university students study, the pedagogical university students study, but at USURT¹⁷ they drink.

Three days before the exams God sends the angel again; he comes back and reports:

– All the same: the medical university studies, the pedagogical university studies, but USURT drinks.

The examinations start; God sends the angel:

– Go, and tell me what the students do.

He goes and then reports:

– The medical university passes the exams, the pedagogical university passes the exams..."

– And what about USURT?

– They pray to God.

– Then we will help them!¹⁸

At the beginning of the semester God addresses one of the angels:

- So how are the students?
- VSU¹⁹ studies, VSTU²⁰ hangs out.

In the middle of the semester the same story is repeated; at the end of the semester:

- Everybody studies, only VSTU plays computer games.

The night before the exams:

- Everybody studies, VSTU prays to God.
- Prays... Ok, we'll help, answered God.

So, let's drink as it possible to pray anytime!²¹

Finally, the punch line repetition is also reflected in the relationship between student jokes and some minor speech genres: rhetorical questions, titles, etc.: the punch line is extracted from the jokes and is used in these texts.

CONCLUSION

After the comparison of Corpus I and Corpus II, in other words, the types of student jokes with other texts, taking into account several approaches to joke research in Russian, European and American scholarship, I came to the following conclusions:

1. Student jokes can be collected from three different sources: the Internet, oral and written sources. None of them is sufficient individually, and all the three sources have to be taken into account in order to research jokes.
2. The intertextual relationships between the student joke and other texts exist on three different levels: on the basis of plot, motif and punch line. A genetic relationship definitely exists on the level of the plot and punch line, while the motif level may include not only genetic, but also typological relationships.
3. Every level of the genetic relationship is characteristic for the connection with certain types of text: plot similarities are found between student jokes and jokes from other joke cycles, as well as toasts, while the punch line is usually repeated in the minor speech genres.
4. In the sample student jokes, the connection between jokes and tales turns out to be exaggerated.
5. The same may be said of the connection between the student joke and the anecdote. The argument that the anecdote descended from elite noble culture to lower folk culture and turned into the joke does not really work, at least with student jokes.
6. Student jokes are mainly related to jokes from other joke cycles. This is especially true of plot similarities. The versions of the student jokes are most often found among school, Jewish jokes, and jokes about Vovochka.
7. Even though a student joke has stable themes (exams, poverty, etc.), it seems that it is a very flexible phenomenon, subject to change. None of the student jokes from the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century I collected from periodicals was found in contemporary folklore. Moreover, the comparison to Goliards' student poetry showed the same results: while the themes are the same the plots and texts have totally changed. Although apart from the conclusion that student jokes are apt

to change with time, there is also the possibility (at least for the student jokes of the end of the 19th and beginning of 20th century) that the comparative material I collected belongs to fakelore as it could have been made up by the editors of the periodicals or translated from foreign languages. The question of which conclusion to choose remains unclear, and needs further elaboration, although it seems to be more likely that the texts indeed change with time as the circumstances of life in general as well as of student life were too versatile and might have influenced the jokes.

8. The student joke is an original and distinctive phenomenon not closely related to other texts. Its main themes are quite unique and independent. They must have mainly originated in the student environment itself, rather than being loaned. This might be caused by the specifics of student subculture, which has traditionally been quite closed and liminal.

NOTES

1 Quite abundant research has been conducted on the topic of types and variants. For instance, in the classical work on fairy tales by Vladimir Propp it is reported that it is often impossible to distinguish between plots and their variants, and generally the whole body of fairy tales has to be considered as a chain of variants. That is why fairy tales have to be studied together, in their unity (Propp 1969). Other researchers made a clearer distinction between the type, version and variant (though underlying that this division is different for different texts). The term *variant* was advised to label two or more acts of performance within a local group (interestingly, there is the term 'synonymous variants' for the cases in which only personal or geographic names are changed), while the term *version* was provided for the texts performed in different localities, with the further marking of the versions as regional, ethnic, national (Chistov 1986). It is the term *invariant*, introduced by Kirill Chistov, that became a key notion for my definition of a type as a certain structure used to define several motifs remaining unchanged in all the texts collected (ibid.).

2 The lowest possible mark.

3 Принимает профессор экзамен. Решает всем задавать один и тот же вопрос:

– Что быстрее: звук или свет?

Заходит первый студент и отвечает:

– Звук.

На вопрос «Почему?» отвечает:

– Когда я включаю телевизор, то сначала слышу звук, а потом появляется изображение.

– Двойка, следующий!

Второй студент на тот же вопрос отвечает:

– Свет: когда я включаю радиоприемник, то сначала загорается лампочка, а потом появляется звук.

– Двойка, следующий!

Призадумался профессор, то ли вопрос сложный, то ли студенты тупые. Заходит третий. Вопрос профессора:

– Студент, представьте себе, на вершине горы выстреливает пушка. Вы сначала увидите огонь из ствола или услышите звук выстрела?

Студент:

– Конечно, увижу огонь!

– А почему?

– Ну, типа, глаза впереди ушей!

4 – Почему мы сначала видим молнию, а потом слышим гром?

– Потому что глаза находятся впереди ушей?

5 There are three cases in which jokes with the same plot as the student ones are told about the Jewish boy Moritz at school. These jokes are counted as both school and Jewish.

6 I do not claim to introduce the new term “minor speech genres”: I just use it to embrace the smaller forms used in oral or quasi-oral speech.

7 A status is quite a novel genre which appeared with the development of social networks on the Internet. It is a short statement reflecting the mood of the person, containing some humorous phrase or aphorism.

8 Институт заказал известного лектора, чтобы тот прочитал три лекции. На первую лекцию собралась толпа народу. Лектор:

– Вы знаете, о чем я вам сейчас расскажу?

– Да!

– Ну, зачем я вам тогда буду рассказывать?

И уходит.

На второй лекции:

– Вы знаете, о чем я вам буду рассказывать?

– Нет!

– Ну, зачем же я вам буду рассказывать, если вы ничего не знаете?

И опять уходит.

На третьей лекции народ уже договорился, что половина зала будет кричать «да», а другая – «нет». Лектор:

– Знаете, о чем я вам сейчас расскажу?

Первая половина:

– Да!

Вторая половина:

– Нет!

– Ну, пусть те, кто знают, расскажут тем, кто не знает, – и опять уходит...

9 Однажды, поднявшись на минбар, Афанди обратился к молящимся с вопросом: «Знаете ли вы, о чем я нынче собираюсь читать проповедь?» – «Нет, не знаем!» – ответили прихожане. «Ну, тогда мне с вами не о чем толковать!» – заявил Афанди.

Прихожанам захотелось послушать Афанди, и, когда в следующую пятницу он спросил их: «Знаете ли вы, о чем я хочу говорить в проповеди?» - они хором ответили: «Знаем, знаем!» – «Ну, если знаете, зачем я буду говорить об этом», – сказал Афанди.

В следующую пятницу Афанди опять спросил с высоты минбара: «Знаете ли вы, о чем я собираюсь сказать вам?» Тогда прихожане решили перехитрить Афанди, и половина верующих ответила: «Знаем!» – а другая половина: «Нет, не знаем!» – «Очень хорошо, – обрадовался Афанди и добавил: – Пусть те, кто знает, расскажут тем, кто не знает!»

10 На экзамене студент не знает ответа на один вопрос. Потерявший терпение профессор начинает орать:

– Да вы же осел!

Обращаясь к одному из ассистентов:

– Принесите мне охапку сена!

Студент:

– А мне чашечку кофе, пожалуйста.

11 The proverb used in the joke is synonymous with the English “Oil and water don’t mix”.

12 Приходит студент в столовую, мест нет, только около преподавателя стул свободный. Студент:

– Можно я с вами поесть присяду?

Профессор:

– Гусь свинье не товарищ!

Студент:

– Ну ладно, я тогда полетел!

Через полгода сдает студент тому же профессору экзамен. Профессор:

– А вы бы выбрали миллион долларов или ум?

– А вы?

– Я – ум.

Студент:

– А я – миллион долларов, ведь каждый выбирает то, чего ему не хватает.

Преподаватель злится и пишет в зачетке: «Дебил». Студент возвращается через пять минут:

– Извините, Вы фамилию свою написали, а оценка-то какая?

13 Ivan Andreyevich Krylov (1769–1844) is Russian best known fabulist.

14 Однажды на набережной Фонтанки, по которой он (Крылов) обыкновенно ходил в дом Оленина, его нагнали три студента, из коих один, вероятно не зная Крылова, почти поравнявшись с ним, громко сказал товарищ:

– Смотри, туча идет.

– И лягушки заквакали, – спокойно отвечал баснописец в тот же тон студенту.

15 На практике в кулинарном техникуме:

– На старт! Внимание! Фарш!

16 Рекламный заголовок: Мясорубка: На старт, внимание – фарш!

17 Urals State University of Railway Transport.

18 За месяц до сессии посылает Бог ангела на землю посмотреть, как студенты к экзаменам готовятся. Ангел возвращается и говорит:

– Видел я такое дело: Мед учит, Пед учит, а УЭМИИТ бухает.

За три дня до сессии посылает Бог снова ангела, тот возвращается и говорит:

– Опять то же: Мед учит, Пед учит, а УЭМИИТ бухает.

Ну, началась сессия, Бог посылает ангела:

– Поди посмотри, чего студенты делают.

Тот посмотрел и докладывает:

– Мед сдает, Пед сдает...

– А УЭМИИТ?

– Богу молятся!

– Ну, вот им-то Мы и поможем!

19 Vitebsk State University.

20 Vitebsk State Technological University.

21 – Ну как студенты проживают?

– ВГУ учится, ВГТУ гуляет.

В середине семестра та же история, под конец семестра:

– Все учат, один ВГТУ на компьютерах геймится.

В ночь перед экзаменами все учат, ВГТУ Богу молится.

– Молятся... Значит, поможем, – ответил Бог.

Так выпьем же, а помолиться мы всегда успеем.

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NOTES AND REVIEWS

EXTENDED BEYOND THE BODIES

A Companion to the Anthropology of the Body and Embodiment. Edited by Frances E. Mascia-Lees. Blackwell Companions to Anthropology, 19. Chichester; Malden, MA; Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011. xxv+529 pages.

This wonderful companion to embodiment and body-studies covers twenty nine different aspects from our daily embodied lives. With its solid hard-cover binding and more than 500 pages of full, thick and tight text it made me a little bit frightened at the beginning – how embodied can life be, anyway? I can say it has been probably one of the broadest books I have read about bodies and embodiment for its broad variation of themes: from created embodied aesthetics to virtual created selves and everything between, themes I had not even heard about more than briefly in the news, or had not paid attention to before as an important part of surrounding embodied culture.

Some people say collections of essays cannot be read as a novel or fiction, that these are not even meant to be read so. Collections quite often are read as a Bible or ‘grasshopper-style’, starting with the chapters one likes most and then moving on as interest flows. As a linear reader I used to start from first chapter and just read myself through the text to the very last one, which is not always perhaps the easiest way. It was interesting to follow the structure of this book – how themes are linked to each other and how the placing of some chapters made full sense in context after reading neighbouring chapters. Yet when I think about the whole text I do feel I need to gather different aspects under some umbrella headings.

As a novice lecturer I could not help myself reading this book from a ‘how to make my students-to-be read this, too, and read the

whole book’ perspective. So I read with my hypothetical students of ‘cultural conceptions of the human body’ as co-readers and my laptop with search engines at hand to find out more about one or another embodied phenomena, to see it and get a better picture-based understanding instead of reading vivid descriptions. (I must say although I do understand it is uncommon and probably considered unnecessary, when we talk about bodies and embodied phenomena, one picture can say more than several paragraphs. The lack of visual material was what I missed a lot when reading, hence I had the Internet for assistance.)

The basic text and introduction to the body and embodiment for me has been Marcel Mauss’s “Techniques of the Body”. I am still surprised how enlightening, good, introductory and yet very basic a text it is. Even now, more than 75 years later and after the many phenomenological, structural and poststructural texts, its clarity is refreshing. Just like seeing for the very first time what techniques actually are and how habits are formed. Mauss has been mentioned in this collection by 2 or 3 authors, although he is not mentioned in the index; yet he and his ideas of techniques of the body and construction of habits kept haunting me when reading.

“How many bodies do we have?” is one of the first questions I have asked in my lectures or presentations. As the body always belongs somewhere, is ‘deeply sited’ in the lived world and lived experience, the number of bodies one has or is capable of operating with varies. It is related to one’s own embodied history and development of personhood.

So to lead my students to the theme and introduce them to embodiment after Mauss I would have started with the chapters titled

"Bodiliness", "Biopower", "Cultural Phenomenology", "Personhood" and "The Senses". The article "The Body Beyond the Body: Social, Material and Spiritual Dimensions of Bodiliness" by Terence Turner describes what the culturally constructed or cultural body means. The idea of "social skin" (p. 106) is something that one could keep in mind. (Elaborately decorated skin as one version of it was something I hoped to read more about. I assume Kayapo body art it is done with the juice of the jagua or jenipapo fruit (*Genipa Americana*), which is one of body-altering techniques now with an independent life in Western mass-consumption.) "Embodiment: Agency, Sexual Difference, and Illness" by Thomas J. Csordas is good basic text for a methodological overview of the authors whose ideas are most used in the anthology: Merleau-Ponty, Bourdieu, Foucault, Kristeva and the theoretical basis for the phenomena of pain or deep physical discomfort (phantom limb, chronic syndromes, environmental influences). "Embodiment and Personhood" by Andrew J. Strathern and Pamela J. Stewart introduces the discussion about embodiment in the bodily senses while participating in ritual processes and of the ritual efficacy of creating personhood. So I would agree "that embodiment theory is not the same as theory about the body (although it can encompass that). Embodiment is precisely about what can be in the body, or around the body, and can use the idea of the body as a locus of personhood" (p. 398). "Polysensoriality" by David Howes explains why the body cannot be taken for granted and gives an overview of the history of anthropology: what has been the role of the senses? The question asked above: "How many bodies do we have?" can be linked to the cultural idea of how many senses we have. The article titled "Biopower and Cyberpower in Online News" by Dominic Boyer shows how Foucault's biopower concept as a tool of modern governance and statecraft has become 'cyberpower' carried out by digital publicity.

The problem of racism and embodying race is something people living in a rather mono-racial society do not think about a lot, as the problem of ethnicity is more contextually relevant. So the chapters "Affect" and "Racialization" could be enlightening reading. The article "How to Do Races with Bodies" by Didier Fassin explains why associating 'body' and 'race' is not self-evident but rather bodies are racialised while race is an embodied, experienced reality. "Learning Affect/Embodying Race" by Ana Yolanda Ramos-Zayas explains evaluations of racial difference and on-going processes of "racial learning" which is understood as a behaviour-contingent aspect of social action and a phenomenological experience (p. 25).

What it means to be gendered and the whole idea of the construction of sex and gender can be read from different angles in the chapters "Autoethnography", "(Trans) Gender", "Kinship" and "Masculinities". The article "When I was a Girl (Notes on Contrivance)" by Roger N. Lancaster and with the introduction by Frances E. Mascia-Lees gives an autoethnographic and intimate insight into the embodied experience of gender, sexuality and belonging through the prism of camp. "Tomboi Embodiment" by Evelyn Blackwood makes one think about the relevancy of the "orthodoxy of bodily truth" (p. 207). "The Western idealized concept of self as an autonomous, cohesive and integrated entity that distinguishes one from all others differs from notions of personhood in Indonesia, where one is defined by one's kin ties and community of origin, as well as age, social status and rank" (p. 219). The gender defined by kin and tombois switching between different gendered roles while belonging to different kins in Indonesia is rather different from the gender that *warias* have. "Bodily Betrayal: Love and Anger in the Time of Epigenetics" by Emily Yates-Doerr shows changes in the whole phenomena of food, feeding and eating in the role of kinship, belonging and traditions in the lives of women in Guate-

mala. "The Male Reproductive Body" by Emily Wentzell and Marcia C. Inhorn analyses how sexuality and reproductivity can be important aspects in cultural mechanisms and what is considered important for creating manliness and framing stereotypes of manly behaviour in different cultures.

Questions of ethics, life and death rise painfully in the chapters "Bioethics", "Dead Bodies", "Dissection" and "Pain" but also in "Sensorial Memory" and "Tasting Food". The article "Embodied Ethics: From the Body as Specimen and Spectacle to the Body as Patient" by Nora L. Jones asks why in medicine has the body somehow becomes dehumanised and a specimen, embodying something of plain medical record? What has happened to the viewpoint that the body of marvels has become a body with errors? "Pain and Bodies" by Jean E. Jackson explains the phenomena of pain as experienced (mind), and produced through neurological structures and processes (brain). "Embodied Legacies of Genocide" by Carol A. Kidron opens the experienced horror of pain that becomes a traumatic legacy for descendants. "Tasting between the Laboratory and the Clinic" by Annemarie Mol shows how senses can be formed and how important they are in everyday life. What effort does it take to keep the senses of taste and smell active and life-supporting, what are the limits of the ability to taste and how do we tolerate loss, lack and inabilities (p. 477).

"The Deadly Display of Mexican Border Politics" by Rocío Magaña describes how "political life takes place with and through death" and what the political 'afterlife' of the body is (p. 160). From "The Body in Tatters: Dismemberment, Dissection and the Return of the Repressed" by Nancy Scheper-Hughes a question of body love rises – intact bodies, dismemberment and silent absent organs. This leads the reader to the consumption of bodies, which can be also called recycling, and the religious or political afterlife of bodies as relics or as recyclable material for organ donation.

The question of power over bodies and in a way dehumanisation arises interestingly in the chapters titled "Colonialism", "Modification", "Post-Socialism" and from a different angle in "Impairment" and "Transnationalism". "Bodies under Colonialism" by Janice Boddy analyses womanhood and control over women's bodies as illustrated by Anglo-Egyptian Sudan in the first half of the 20th century. Questions of female genital mutilation, infibulation and the Western-minded interpretation of it combined with sexual education as an expression of colonial power can be paralleled with the situation of today. If we leave aside the problem of colonial power and politics, changes in this topic are rather limited and problems remain. A rather similar question about women and their reproductivity is brought up in "Troubling the Reproduction of the Nation" by Michele Rivkin-Fish. The choice of abortion or birth as a socially forced choice is something that was faced during the Soviet period in Estonia, too. The generation of women in aged 40+ probably remembers rather well times when abortion really was among the family planning methods, although tabooed and not spoken of in public it was for decades more easily available than the pill or condoms. The chapter titled "Mediated Bodies" generally echoes the theme of reproduction control. "Fetal Bodies, Undone" by Lynn M. Morgan analyses the creation of the "public fetus" (p. 324) and how reproductive family values become part of the greenwash and, once again, biopower. How ethical can the construction of an independent living fetus be as a biopolitical metaphor and icon of fetal life when it is constructed partly by computer-animated images, by silicon models and photographs of dead fetuses? "Blurring the Divide: Human and Animal Body Modification", by Margo de Mello, analyses body modification amongst different species and makes the reader question cultural norms and the construction of personhood, the capacity to make culture

and also the construction of the other: what being treated like a human actually means when “The very act of body modification is a centrally human act. No other animal can change its body in the ways that we can, and there is no evidence to suggest that animals want to change their bodies” (p. 345). Where and how do the rights and exceptions of ‘being treated humanely’ expand and what does this mean to others? “Sporting Bodies: Sensuous, Lived and Impaired” by P. David Howe allows us to think about “who owns and creates the body” from a different angle and analyse, asking how the “material environment helps physically shape my body but the embodied actions in which I engage also transform both the physical environment and the interpretative social environment” (p. 278). “Bodies-in-Motion: Experiences of Momentum in Transnational Surgery” by Emily McDonald gives an analytical insight into the world of beauty surgery, medical tourism and ‘bodies-in-momentum’ as the process of change.

The body as a business and field of consumption is a question that arises every now and then in many texts. It can appear explicitly as a theme of corrupt organ donation in the chapter titled “Dissection”, the sporting body as a billboard in the chapter titled “Impairment”, or beauty surgery as a trend within new tourism. Consumption of self as change in a gendered role is raised in the chapter titled “Kinship”, and has become a way of living in the chapter titled “Neoliberalism”. In her article “Embodying and Affecting Neoliberalism” Carla Freeman analyses how the “individual is defined as self-propelled, autonomous economic actor ever-responsive to dynamic marketplace” (p. 356), and how this has changed and is changing the role of womanhood in Barbados.

For those who are not very aware of bio-sciences (like me) the chapters titled “Genomics” and “Haptics” can once again be a point of rethinking. “Embodying Molecular Genomics” by Margaret Lock can provoke thoughts of when and how that shift

in thinking happened, when “the location of agency and morality (shifts) away from individuals and onto genes themselves” (p. 225). “Haptic Creativity and the Mid-embodiments of Experimental Life” by Natasha Myers and Joe (Joseph) Dumit reflects the communicating of science, interpretation of data and problematic of mid-embodiment, switching between lived (active) body and the objective (passive) body.

Last but not least we can also think and rethink about the (re)creation of bodies. Chapters titled “Hybridity”, “Virtuality” and “Aesthetics” give various insights into the theme of crafting bodies. The opening article “Aesthetic Embodiment and Commodity Capitalism” by Frances E. Mascia-Lees opens a discussion on embodied aesthetics as “all aesthetic experiences are embodied, not all embodied experiences are aesthetic; thus invoking ‘embodiment’ alone does not signal the particular nature of the experience I seek to understand” (p. 7). The Arts and Crafts movement as a form of embodied aestheticised life is in focus as is consumerism of those crafted bodies and aesthetic embodiment as a matter of conscious choice. “Hybrid Bodies of the Scientific Imaginary” by Lesley Sharp opens up a problematic of hybridity and is in a way a development and extension of the problematic of organ donation and replacement that was also discussed in the chapter titled “Dissection”. The economics and body business in xenotransplantation is an important aspect, as it was with ‘recycled’ human bodies – there is strong price and demand pressure. Organs and tissue from pigs as cheaper and more easily produced material than primate material for xenotransplantation raises questions not only about bioethics but also the morality of biocapital and may be problem with religious aspects. The very last article of the book “Placing the Virtual Body: Avatar, Chora, Cypherg” by Tom Boellstorff leads embodiment into the virtual world and thus to creating pluralisation of place body and embodiment locate.

Avatars or virtually created creatures can be seen as a new embodiment but also as extensions of the self and self-crafting. So creating avatar as an act of creation can be compared with human crafts and skill in general. And then we are in a way back in the beginning of a book – creative people embodying their aesthetic values. Choosing, crafting, consuming. (In this moment I really enjoyed my linear-way of reading, it felt like finishing a nice well crafted chain, well linked together and complete.)

I realised after reading this book that I took these texts as wonderful material for education. They provide a good structure or backbone for a whole seminar yet must be accompanied by rich visual material and video clips. This would extend the embodied knowledge of my hypothetical students-to-be and lead them beyond the body to

extended and personally undiscovered bodies. For my hypothetical students' sake, and because I love books, books in use, I sincerely hope this book will also have a soft-cover copy, a cheaper version in paperback that would be a valuable companion on the study table of every student interested in bodies and embodiment. So I was happily surprised to find out that some of my students had already discovered these texts, in a file format available on the web, and already use this knowledge for their research work. Embodied knowledge, active, in use.

Katrin Alekand

NOTES FOR CONTRIBUTORS

Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics (JEF), the journal of the University of Tartu, the Estonian National Museum and the Estonian Literary Museum, welcomes articles in the research areas of ethnology, folkloristics, museology, cultural and social anthropology. *JEF* is a peer-reviewed journal, issued two times per year.

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