
CONFERENCES

RE:22

35th Nordic Ethnology and Folklore Conference in Reykjavík 13–16 June 2022

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As a prelude to midsummer, 450 scholars and students in ethnology, folklore, and related fields gathered from 13 to 16 June at the 35th Nordic Ethnology and Folklore Conference in Reykjavik. The University of Iceland celebrated the 100th anniversary of this triennial encounter relayed among universities in the Nordic region.

This edition was sparked by a theme provided by the first syllable of the northernmost capital in the world, “RE”. The hosts invited participants to present topics “integral to the ethnographic/folkloristic touch” through re-verbs and re-nouns. This resulted in a myriad of expressions and gave chance to discuss current research that revives the past through tales, crafts, and folk songs; makes us rethink the once familiar everyday life in this strange present; and seeks our reaction to future uncertainties. To suggest a common thread to all possible (re)configurations, Aleida Assmann has given much attention to this prefix in conjunction with cultural memory (e.g. 2008, 2020). For her, “re” is a performative agent that brings the past into the present by an act of remembrance, affecting greatly what survives into the future. Memory works through selective mechanisms that inevitably induce its opposite: forgetting. We can use this to remember that through our interpretations, certain subjectivities and perspectives are represented, reconfigured or renewed, while we should be mindful and seek those that remain silent.

Reflecting the broad internationalisation of this conference, the authors of this report are immigrants in Nordic culture, ethnology, and folklore. Even if our projects are tied to these disciplines, and we are based in this region, our (research) identities lay elsewhere. Subsequently, this report does not attempt to be representative. Our “picks” and “reads” were inspired by the keynotes and the panels we visited, which we sorted in the temporalities that converge in Assmann’s mechanisms of memory, and in the phenomena we study: the past, the present, and the future.

The multinational collaborative work, *Grimm Ripples: The Immediate Legacy of the Grimms’ Deutsche Sagen in Northern Europe* (2022), was the starting point of folklorist Terry Gunnell’s keynote lecture. In it, he sketched the extensive history of the northward “cultural tsunami” of *Deutsche Sagen* [German Leg-

ends] (1816–1818) by the Brothers Grimm, emphasising on the revolutionised aesthetics and illustrations in those folklore books and other media in a small period of time, especially by the young artists.

Gunnell noted that movements of collecting and publishing the folklore suggested “new forms of national art replacing the earlier stress on Mediterranean neoclassical imagery,” though some collections were not intended to be used as national images. As the nineteenth century saw the rise of nation-states and self-enlightened imperial colonial expansions, there is no doubt that fairy tales, legends and myths evoked a strong nostalgia and romanticism, which were used to construct idealised local/national identities breaking away from the simple narrative of the ancient Greek origin of European cultures. Those folklore tales were also accompanied by illustrations and artworks, making the imaginary into powerful, tangible visual language. Some were further adapted to music, drama and other types of performances.

I (Shiraiwa) participated in sessions that related to my research on (re)construction of collective identity and nation in museums, as well as (re)examining the system of producing knowledge-decolonising universities and knowledge. Out of many intellectually stimulating presentations, two were perhaps the most related to my research objectives. Siria Kohonen from the University of Helsinki presented “Magical thinking within us and them”, which challenged the common assumption that magical thinking is “primitive” and “rationally low”. She presented magical thinking as intuitive and reflecting, which is a human’s fundamental process of thinking and a natural way of producing knowledge, supported by the view of cognitive psychology (Nemeroff & Rozin 2012). Kohonen continued, ‘magical thinking is a universal mode of thinking despite culture’, which made me reflect on Yuval Noah Harari in *Sapiens* (2011) about humans’ “ability to speak about fiction” as “the most unique feature of Sapiens language” (2011, 27), allowing humans to mobilise the masses. Here, I am not framing magical thinking as creating fiction solely but connecting it to the human’s creation/imagination of religions, myths, and legends that ultimately constructed the powerful social, political and cultural identities and borders, such as nation-states. Magical/intuitive/reflective thinking is perhaps a natural way of producing knowledge and identity, making it uniquely ‘us’.

Veronika Groke, an independent researcher, also (re)examined what counts as knowledge, questioning the separation of human and nature in her presentation, “Hybrids in literature and literary hybrids: writing ‘nature’ in the anthropocene”. Academia has long undermined (and is still largely undermining) oral history and storytelling as scientific knowledge, including literature about relationships between humans and non-humans, a type of narrative that Groke pointed out as a “different mode of thinking”.

Both presentations echoed current decolonial discussions on challenging the naturalised notion of knowledge and how it is (re)produced through the western/white/male/heterosexual/Christian centric dichotomy (e.g. Grosfoguel 2011, Mignolo 2018, Mbembe 2018, Atalay 2008) as universal ‘truth’ and ‘good’ (Brameld 1950, Curtis 2012, Tlostanova 2017).

Contrary, the discussion also touched on the more complex nature of how those ‘magical’ imaginaries and identities were appropriated into some indigenous cultures to further self-othering. Indeed, such identities of cultures, nation-states and religions, among others, are socially constructed and continue to be reconstructed through ‘magical’ imaginary for the present time, amplified by further romanticized narratives and histories. Borrowing Kohonen’s presentation title, magical thinking is indeed “within us and them”, and it is a crucial element of constructing and legitimizing identities and the national frameworks.

Without leaving collective imaginaries completely, Ethnologist Tine Damsholt gave her keynote lecture “Re-assembling everyday temporalities”. While she disclaimed that borrowing Latour’s famous re-verb was playfully meant, Damsholt honoured her long-term interest in the destabilizing factors of everyday life and probed the agency of an essential actor in our lives: time. Parting from diaries written during the COVID-19 pandemic, she illustrated how the choreographies of our everyday lives became disrupted by these exceptional times. More importantly, that the pandemic has made the complexity of time perceivable and susceptible to cultural investigation. Those attempting to organise new messy routines remind of Wacjman’s *industrial time* (2014), while Löfgren’s *throwntogetherness* (2014) helps imagine how the micro-temporalities of chores, work, leisure, family, plans and worries about the future literally converged at home in March 2020. Damsholt’s final aim was to call upon those of us who research the mundane everyday life not to leave 2020 hastily, because “what the conclusions are”, as one audience member asked, are not yet in sight.

The present with a strong sense of “passing on” was common in panels on children’s perspectives, kinship in the digital age, and relations to learning. After years in Finland, and as participant observer of children and youth’s everyday practices, *I (Matres)* have come to understand Minna Canth’s involvement in the “lasten asema” (or childrens’ position) as a near folkloric trait to consider the youngest (and vulnerable) in all earnest for all matter of business. This compass still guides research in Finland and was implicitly shared in many presentations.

Like adults, children produce meanings from their own experiences. These meanings were the focus of Maria Reimann from the University of Warsaw in her presentation: “Sometimes it’s a problem, when people ask”. The meanings that children give to their home when they live in shared custody situations collide with that of the surrounding adults, and this is the source of many con-

flicts. Reimann's insisting on the children's (not parents') voluntary participation and adopting a method chosen by her young participants, procured a productive exchange, and a chance for parents to realise about tacit norms that (we) unconsciously extend to (our) children.

Discussions followed on how social norms, as Horst and Miller recognised, are rapidly incorporated to the digital realm (2012). Mary Cane from the University of Aberdeen made a memorable inventory of her peer-informants' historical, biological, affective and technological tools in her presentation "What resources do grandmothers call upon to reach out to distant family and read-just to the digital world". Digitally or clinging to old-ways, faraway grandmothers are reclaiming their tradition-bearing role in families while generating new forms of folklore.

Rewinding to adolescence, Maria Zackariasson from the University of Söderstrom in her presentation "Youth involvement in a school context" suggests that cultural analysis can help including youth's activisms in school, or from school activating youth to such forms of democracy. To mitigate overheated discussions, out-of-hand situations, or empty classes gone to FridaysForFuture strikes, Ehn & Löfgren's concepts of perspectivization, contrastation and dramatisation (2012) can foster a productive dialogue with young people on matters that move their time.

With the typical Icelandic pride in its remoteness and a rather Mediterranean sense of celebration left in our memories, these and other discussions can be (for the time being) found on the conference website ethnofolk.org. The usual ethnographic/folkloristic thematic streams, and the newly founded "Feminist Approaches", will be reprised on the 36th conference edition in Turku 2025.

AUTHORS

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