

PREFACE TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE “HYBRID BELIEFS AND IDENTITIES”

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I have thought for a while that we have very little certainty in ethnology, folklore studies or different kinds of anthropology. Sometimes it looks as though our friends in the field, research partners, or informants, hardly ever say something that makes direct sense. On its own terms, this also complicates proposing definite answers to any scholarly research questions. This confusion starts from the field encounter and spreads over our office tables and computer screens.

From different angles, I have touched upon this incomprehensibility in earlier *JEF* editorials, writing about uncertainty, hybridity, bricolage, and metaphors (Leete 2018; 2019; 2020; 2021), and discussed the problem of ethnographic uncertainty in depth elsewhere (Leete and Lipin 2015). Apparently, I am very fond of indistinct topics. Professor Ülo Valk, to whom we dedicate the Inspirational Insights section article in this year’s volumes, has proposed a stimulating notion regarding this problem of cognitive hesitation (Valk 2015). Even if he intends to make sense of seemingly agreeable concepts, for example, ‘vernacular’ (Valk 2014) or ‘belief narrative’ (Valk 2021), there is still a lot of cognitive space for ambivalence (see Bronner 2022 in the current volume).

However, hybridity is a peculiar kind of uncertainty. Therefore, I decided to gather a few papers from my domestic and international colleagues to map the ways they think about things related to hybridity. The Call for Papers was rather general, I tried not to direct potential authors towards strongly connected topics or apparently coherent theoretical frameworks but to embrace potential diversity of understandings and applications of the concept. This collection of papers reflects the spirit of that call.

With the Call for Papers, we intended to encourage our prospective authors to think about social, political, and spiritual processes that occur on diverse frontiers, both in people’s minds and in social scenes, by announcing that hybridity acts on frontiers and facilitates innovation (see Bhabha 1994). I noted that in many regions of the world, we witness an unforeseen growth in ethnic and religious feeling. At the same time, expressions of religious belonging become diversified and connected with changes in the group or ethnic identities. Integrated responses to change on different levels of society emerge in everyday behaviour but also in public politics.

To encourage some coherence in this collection of articles, we proposed a few research questions to the scholarly community. We anticipated that these questions would serve as general guidelines for our authors, and, hopefully, lead to discussion of topics and problems we were not able to imagine in advance. These questions touched upon concepts of experience and sense, ethnicity, and religiosity, as well as postcolo-

nialism and boundaries: How can the process of hybridisation influence people's religious experience and sense of belonging? How are ethnicity and everyday religiosity connected? What happens at the boundaries of ethnicity and religion? How does post-colonial ambivalence trigger the contestation of religious and ethnic differences?

Another, more specific, motivation accompanied this endeavour. When publishing the Call, our research team at the Arctic Studies Centre of the University of Tartu (in collaboration with the Estonian National Museum) was in the middle of preparing an application for the Estonian Research Agency. We decided not to wait to see if the grant would be offered to our team but to move forward by arranging a special issue despite the results of the call. Perhaps that situation of indecision with the project proposal added a certain conceptual vagueness to the current collection.

This ended well for us, and The Finno-Ugric Peoples of Russia: Negotiating Ethnicity and Religiosity project (PRG1584) has begun. The purpose of the project is to investigate the relationship between religiosity and ethnicity in contemporary Finno-Ugric communities in the European North of Russia, Western Siberia, and the Volga-Kama area (the Udmurt, Komi, Forest and Tundra Nenets as well as the Khanty). While the main religion in these areas is officially established Russian Orthodoxy, in many areas animism, Protestantism and Islam structure the local cultural panorama. Our research goals include two main points. We intended to concentrate on an enquiry into religious standards and practices in relation to different scopes of ethnic identity manifested in communications between neighbours, employing ethnographic case studies for this. Furthermore, the project has the ambition to foster a theoretical model of sustained comparison which enables a methodical examination of religious and ethnic features of identity construction. The main conceptions we examine are associated with situational and indistinct borders, cultural intimacy, hybridity as well as the tacit and explicit in everyday religiosity.

Just a year ago, this appeared to be quite a realistic plan. We supposed that the travel restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic would loosen at some point and ethnographic enquiry at our field sites would be possible. Soon after our project started, Russia invaded Ukraine and our field research plans collapsed. Our research team re-orientated our data collection and management plans by concentrating primarily on available digital data.

New circumstances are unprecedented in our generation's experience, but we hope for the best for Ukraine and have found new perspectives for our own study. However, from the cognitive perspective, a new layer of indecision has appeared in our scholarly endeavour, and the first outcome of recent developments in international relations has been a complication of relationships with our field partners (see Leete 2022). If we take ambivalence and anxiety (see above) as key characteristics of hybridity, the time is right for such a project, even if we could not foresee the (non-)war. In addition, compilation of this special issue started a year before the war, so neither traces of the tragic fate of many Ukrainians nor the Russian denial of having an ongoing war could make their way into the list of topics. Theoretical discussion is the destination of our project, and we can still quest this objective. This volume takes the first step in this direction, or, at least, fixes the *status quo ante bellum*. It may easily happen that the war changes our understanding of hybridity.

In the following, I attempt to summarise what kind of hybridity is discussed in this volume. I will provide an overview of the modes in which the authors approached the concept. Although the proposed theme was rather broad and the authors were free to decide on their approach, we still had a hope that a detectable pattern of theoretical and methodological frames will emerge from the collection.

As mentioned above, the article by Simon Bronner, "The Problematic Vernacular", in the Inspirational Insights section is dedicated to Professor Valk's 60th birthday. Professor Bronner decided to discuss the concept of 'vernacular', today widely used among folklorists and examined in depth by Professor Valk. Professor Bronner challenges justification of the concept, thus also contesting Professor Valk's approach to this theoretical topic. I find this way of celebrating someone's birthday intriguing and appropriate for a scholarly encounter. We should not just respect prominent theoreticians but must step into a creative dialogue with their legacy. As it appears to me, Professor Bronner's way to celebrate a good colleagues' anniversary is insightful and instructive.

Our special issue dedicated to discussions of hybrid identities and beliefs starts with the article by Eva Toulouze, Liivo Niglas, and Laur Vallikivi "Buying a God in Paris: Cultural Hybridity in the Thinking of Yuri Vella, Forest Nenets Intellectual". In their study, my colleagues explore a meeting of the rather distant religious worlds of France and Western Siberia. The way that Yuri Vella, when visiting Paris, makes an animist god out of a Catholic icon, illuminates the function of a Finno-Ugric belief quite clearly. The article indicates that a close examination of Indigenous worldview and spiritual practices enables researchers to reveal specific modes of understanding and feel the power of animism in a religious contact zone.

Stephan Dudeck analyses the Khanty bear ceremony, contextualising this tradition as one of the most significant and integrated modes of actualising and practicing the Ob-Ugrian worldview. Dudeck concentrates predominantly on one ceremony in which he was lucky enough to participate and document. As it appears, contemporary Khanty bear ceremonialism is very much hybrid, involving various social agents, traditions from different Khanty regions and innovative elements bridging this archaic tradition with the realities of contemporary life. On the bases of his thick and rich field data, Dudeck discusses the concept of hybridity as simultaneously challenging and facilitating authenticity of the Khanty ritual.

My own paper, "Finno-Ugric Indigenous Knowledge, Hybridity and Co-Creation in Research: The Komi Case", touches upon the larger conceptual framework of the concept of 'indigenous knowledge' (or 'traditional ecological knowledge') and involves three micro case studies. Through these cases I analyse ways in which Komi hunters use information found in ethnographic literature and popular journals in their practice. I discuss particular ways that written evidence may enhance traditional knowledge in particular situations and how a scholar may be able to detect these adjustments of indigenous comprehension.

The special issue continues with articles, dedicated to analysis of Finno-Ugric topics, albeit not particularly connected with the research project that inspired this volume. Nikolai Anisimov explores various ways of becoming and acting as a ritual specialist in contemporary Udmurt culture. Apparently, although understandings of the role and proper practice of the initiated as healers circulate, a certain degree of improvisation is also employed by the ones who 'know' when shaping their image and practice. Magical

practices are very flexible and adapt easily to any circumstances, meaning that social change and technological development do not erase this layer of folk knowledge. This style of folk healing constantly absorbs new impulses and is never the same.

From a different angle, Ranus Sadikov together with Tatiana Minniyakhmetova study the Udmurt religion in their joint article "Objectified Values at Udmurt Prayers". Ritual as such has a strong conservative potential, preserving archaic ideas and elements of world perception. At the same time, material objects bring newness to the Udmurt rituals and thus reflect social changes. As it appears, material innovation makes old rituals comfortable for people today.

The dynamics of religious life among Finno-Ugric groups' neighbours in Central Russia is discussed in "Chuvash Village Sacred Spaces in the Samara Trans-Volga Region", by Ekaterina Iagafova and Valeriia Bondareva. The authors map a diverse body of sacred objects and confessional traditions and argue that modernisation of sacred topography brings new mythologies (memories of war) into people's lives and selectively actualises traditional religious practices (emphasising the Russian Orthodox faith). This simplifying policy of the sacred is linked with revitalisation efforts in the other domain of local traditional religious landscape (animistic revival).

Iryna Koval-Fuchylo discusses, as though with a presentiment, hybridity of death in Ukraine. She investigates the transformations of Ukrainian folk beliefs about the after-life under the influence of enforced relocation because of the construction of hydroelectric power plants and the subsequent creation of reservoirs. As it appears, the communist propaganda about progress and heroism enabled some conciliation, but only until the collapse of the Soviet Union. After that, existential sadness and anguish regarding the dead came to the fore. The article was written some time ago but the ongoing war in Ukraine reveals new dimensions of experiential value that have become significant factors in military action. Thus, this paper has new connotations in the current moment of history.

In the article "Jewish Stereotypes in the Samogitian Dialect Worldview", Asta Balčiūnienė, Vaida Drukteinytė, Laima Kuprienė, and Daiva Pagojienė explore the linguistic and folklore evidence of Lithuanian perception of Jews, primarily focussing on the pre-WWII period when the local Jewish community was still a prominent part of Lithuanian society and the Holocaust had not changed the picture completely. Their idea on hybridity appears here in the form of controversial image construction where immediate experience is shaped by widely circulating narratives but still maintains a certain independence from political and ideological pressure.

The next article, "Displaying Exotic Otherness: Does the Space Matter?", is written by Ilze Boldāne-Zeļenkova. The author discusses shows that presented "exotic otherness" in the Latvian capital Riga during the second half of the 19th and early 20th centuries. These shows involve various displays and attractions categorised as freak shows (such as a giant woman or Siamese twins) and demonstrations of exotic peoples from Africa, Asia, Polynesia, North America, and northern Europe. This colonial amusement is analysed in combination with the symbolic spatial and cultural borderlines that divided the urban environment of Riga during the period under study.

The article by Christian Rosales, "Territories of Fire: Indigenous Communities, Land, and Anarchy among a Highland People in Mindoro", was not initially submitted for the special issue but after considering the content and method of analysis, and consultation

with the author we decided that it should be included as it fits a collection of papers discussing negotiations between various worldviews and ethnicities. Rosales claims that to Indigenous peoples of the Philippines, the notion of territoriality facilitates collective land ownership, allocation, subjugation, and deployment. The Philippine government aims to control Indigenous practices of land use in the highlands but is unable to implement such a regulation because of Indigenous modes of insubordination.

In addition to papers touching upon concepts of ethnicity and hybridity, the current collection also includes a couple of other articles that reveal local perspectives on globally relevant issues. The problems reflected in these studies make us think of problems people encounter everywhere in the world, as global pandemics may threaten humankind in the future, and our connection to the natural environment is always a topic of concern.

In her article ““The Beach Is Closed, but Not to Us”: Pandemic Experience and Social Boundaries in Rural Okinawa” Jamila Rodrigues explores local responses to COVID-19 restrictions in the initial stage of the virus. Employing Marshall Sahlins’ concept of kinship as ‘social mutuality’, Rodrigues examines the effect of the pandemic on social interactions as well as on negotiating and remodelling public frontiers in the crisis. The author argues that people foster distinctive notions of social mutuality, solidarity, and interconnection, but that they also reconstruct borderlines between insiders and outsiders.

Panu Itkonen discusses the Skolt Sami relationship with the environment through the Indigenous notion of obligation that is related to understanding the mechanisms of sustainability. Employing different Sami sources as well as the concepts of environmental anthropology, the article explores Skolt Sami ideas of the rationality of natural resource management and respect for environment. The Sami aim to facilitate environmental sustainability means the Sami people have dilemmas when dealing with natural resources.

Although the strategy of assembling the current special issue was partly opportunistic, it is still possible to summarise a couple of qualities of hybridity as a product of ethnic and religious encounter. Our authors articulate how animism and indigenous knowledge empower people’s identities as well as political and ritual actions in an ethnic and colonial contact zone. Another shared trope appears in the analysis of pressure from government agents or dominant social groups on local communities and how this is met by hybrid resistance that enables a blurring of the boundaries of ideologically proper public arrangements.

Finally, I want to express my gratitude to all the authors of this volume of articles. These papers reflect adaptive potential of traditional knowledge, cultural dimension of political action as well as fragments of the variety of people’s thoughts, feelings, and practices in the world. I think that it is important to continue exploring the different kinds of complexities and uncertainties that surround us.

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