



newsletter

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Front cover: old market in Shillong.

Photo by Ergo-Hart Västrik

Back cover: boys in Nartiang, the village with the biggest cluster of megaliths in the Jaintia Hills, Meghalaya.

Photo by Ülo Valk



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Beliefs and Narratives in Shillong, India

by María Ines Palléiro,

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The Interim Conference of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research, "Telling Identities: Individuals and Communities in Folk Narratives", which took place in Shillong, the capital city of the state of Meghalaya, India, from February 22 to February 25, 2011, offered an excellent frame within which to further the discussions of the Belief Narrative Network (BNN). Around this main topic, other subjects have also been proposed, such as ethnicity and cultural identity; identity and transnational settings; identity in the history of folkloristics; places and borders; revisiting colonial constructs of folklore; the mapping of urban folklore in North-East India and South-East Asia: intercultural dialogue, and "Critiquing the Paradigm of Folklorists' Paradise: A North-East Indian Perspective". Prof. Desmond Kharmawphlang, in charge of the organisation committee of this conference, inaugurated the event in a touching ceremony. This ceremony included a wonderful performance connected with vernacular traditions. Both this performance and the inauguration discourse held by the governor of the state of Meghalaya highlighted

the dynamics and richness of North-Eastern Indian Khasi culture.

This Conference, organised by the Department of Cultural and Creative Studies of the North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU), incorporated a symposium on "Belief Narratives and Social Reality", focusing in the discussion on the narrative organisation of beliefs in very different parts of the world. Folktales, legends and other narrative genres were considered in this symposium as expressions of social identity, which explore the boundaries of historic experience. Topics such as flying churches, vanishing hitchhikers, haunting ladies wandering around urban graveyards and other 'incredible' subjects were analysed as different ways of telling cultural traditions.

The believability of these narratives, dealing as it did with the traditional backgrounds of different cultures, was one of the main aspects of discussion in this symposium. The relevance of such narratives in local contexts was wisely stated by Professor Handoo in the press conference on the first day of the meeting. Regarding North-Eastern Indian culture, Handoo stressed that "the North-East is an ancient society and an oral society", in which the old tradition of passing wisdom and knowledge orally from one generation to the next is still practised. Such oral culture mentioned by Handoo has a counterpart in the detrimental effects of technology, which, according to Margaret Lyngdoh, offer a favourable context to the genesis of urban legends.

In her presentation, Lyngdoh stated that in fact the uncontrollable traffic situation in Shillong city, due to industrialisation, has engendered an urban legend about a female vanishing hitchhiker. This female ghost can be seen in a taxi, which can be considered as a metaphoric expression



María Ines Palléiro has authored several books on Argentinean folk narrative, including *Fue una historia real* ('It Has Been a Real Case', 2004).

Photo by Pihla Siim.

of contemporary cultural spaces. According to Lyngdoh, this urban legend contains a tension between what the Khasi community believe and what actually occurred in a tragic accident, which caused revenant visitations to taxi drivers. The urban legend of the vanishing hitchhiker creates in this way local meanings, as seen in different variants of the plot collected by American folklorists.

Other variants can easily be found in different parts of the world. I dealt with other versions of the same narrative pattern registered in oral and virtual channels. In oral versions collected in Argentina, this narrative pattern, centring on the lady ghost', deals with the supernatural appearance of a vanishing young woman whose untimely death took place on the same day as her wedding. I also focused attention on virtual versions circulating in the internet. In such versions, I examined the rhetorical resources used by the narrators, and those used by the receivers whose comments in virtual forums dealt with the believability of



Margaret Lyngdoh giving her paper on urban legends in Shillong.

Photo by Ülo Valk.

the narratives, with the aim of showing how new channels of discourse contribute to spread them in different contexts. The protagonist of all these versions is a lady ghost who takes the names of historic young ladies who did exist in local environments. One of her names is Clementine, whose tragic death took place in the residence of Maria Luisa Auvert Arnaud, the owner of an urban palace in Buenos Aires at the beginning of the 20th century. The lady ghost also appears in the Estonian context, connected with the historic tragedy of the young lady Frederike von Grottes, also known as the Lilac Lady. Frederike was an aristocratic young woman of German origin who died tragically as the result of unrequited love in an ancient building, which is today Tartu Literary Museum, in the same period in which Rufina's death took place in Buenos Aires. The Estonian ghost is said to be seen in a lilac dress in the haunted building. Another lady ghost is the Italian Beatrice di Canossa, who also died tragically on the day of her wedding during the Middle Ages. I analysed some virtual

versions of her haunting appearance in the Italian castle of Livorno, also circulating in internet forums. Such forums discuss the believability of this virtual legend, and some participants include metapragmatic reflections on the argumentative resources of constructing social beliefs. The constructive process of all these narratives is based on a poetic reconstruction of history. Such poetic reconstructions can also be recognized in oral and virtual versions of stories about other Argentinean lady ghosts, such as the young Rufina Cambaceres, who died the day after her nineteenth birthday, the victim of a catalepsy attack; and Felicitas Guerrero, who was murdered the day before her engagement and whose ghost is said to be seen once a year in the tower of an ancient Argentinean church.

Haunted churches and lady ghosts are in fact metaphoric expressions for the supernatural in different living cultures. That is how the presentation of the Serbian scholar Zoja Karanović examined belief tales about

miraculous churches moving from one place to another in Serbia and other regions once inhabited by the Serbs, like Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Slovenia-Croatia and Macedonia. The author stated that these tales are based not only on social beliefs but also on the real existence of an orthodox church in certain places. According to such beliefs, these churches moved by themselves in a sort of self-dislocation. The rhetoric of believing can be recognised in these Serbian narratives, in which individual sacred places become symbols of collective religious belief.

In all these belief tales, as well as in others analysed in the symposium, names, colours and places are changing details of narrative frameworks stored in a latent state in each narrator's memory. Such general frameworks serve to express diverse world models with a spatial and time orientation, as well as expressing social contextualisation of similar sequences of events located in the most distant places. Every narrator,



A group of the conference participants visiting the sacred grove in Mawphlang, Meghalaya.

Photo by Damang Syngkon.

whether in Shillong or in the United States of America, in Italy, in Serbia, Estonia or Argentina, recreates similar narrative patterns in different contexts and channels of discourse, using argumentative resources oriented to convince the audience of the believability of their tales.

The fictional recreation of history and the argumentative orientation can be considered discursive strategies dealing with the rhetoric of believing. Aristotle characterises rhetoric as

ment. Legends and other belief tales are also narrative expressions of differential identities, the study of which contributes to understanding social realities of different parts of the world, from Eastern India to Western Europe and North and South America.

The Shillong conference gave the participants a good opportunity to study such belief tales, and also to discuss different aspects of folk narrative. The Estonian scholars made excellent contributions to this discus-

an excellent scholar and a charming narrator. "The Beatles Night" also showed how English pop music can be recreated in the fascinating atmosphere of Shillong. The atmosphere of Khasi culture of the North-East of India, shown in another evening gathering dedicated to artistic performances, was a challenging context in which to discuss belief narratives.

The success of this Symposium encouraged Zoja Karanović to propose another meeting of the Belief Narrative



The sacred grove in Mawphlang, Meghalaya.
Photo by Pihla Siim.

the art of persuasion, and he points out that the aim of rhetoric is not to reason but to convince, appealing to belief. The narratives examined in the Symposium have shown the relevance of belief, whose true value depends not on reasoning, but in a collective agreement. Belief can be considered as modal expressions of the certainty whose truth depends on a subjective or intersubjective agree-

sion, both in a theoretical and in a pragmatic dimension. In fact, not only the academic sessions but also other activities such as a visit to a haunted forest, whose participants were Ülo Valk, Merili Metsvahi, Jeana Jorgensen and other dear friends, were a very important parts of the meeting. This visit also gave us the occasion to listen to Khasi belief tales, told by Margaret Lyngdoh, who is both

Network (BNN) of the ISFNR, organised by the Department for Serbian Literature of the Faculty of Philosophy at Novi Sad, Serbia, from August 28 to 30, 2012. Members of the BNN warmly accepted this proposal, which will give an important opportunity to develop the academic research on belief narratives.