



International society for folk narrative research

# Newsletter

News, Notes and narratives







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# EDITOR'S FOREWORD

*"While I am worried about the human condition, I am optimistic about folklore studies."*

Jason Baird Jackson, Folklorist

At the Belief Narrative Network Conference held recently in Guwahati, Northeast India, 6-8 Feb 2019, in a conversation with ISFNR President, Sadhana Naithani, the topic of the variations between the different conferences of the ISFNR that we had attended together became the focus. I asked Sadhana why it was that each conference of the Society, held in a different place every time was as diverse in its organisation, planning, and execution. Sadhana in response pointed out that every place had its own academic traditions that we could briefly experience and become part of as conference attendees. This point hit home as I began to think in terms of Folkloristics as a discipline itself, that exists as variously as our experiences of the different places that Society meetings take place at.



After a lapse of some years, the executive members of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research have decided to begin again, the bi-annual bulletin (of the ISFNR). This time the bulletin is named "ISFNR: News, Notes, and Narratives".

As editor, in this first issue, I have focused on contributions by young folklorists, including conference reports and news pieces. The contagious enthusiasm that underlies the contributions by our younger folklorists comes through strongly, injecting into the Society, and in general into our discipline a newer perspective: fierce, fun, and as the years go by, perhaps more defiant.

In my personal experience, from the context of Northeast India, I think that more engaged, narrative-oriented stress on the vernacular aspects of political, religious, and social life must necessarily be reflected in scholarship.





This is in order to contest what I think has become a deliberate attempt by multiple political regimes to exterminate the rights of representation of minority ethnicities. Although, this issue of the ISFNR: News, Notes, and Narratives is limited in its inclusiveness of contributions from scholars from all over the world, the next issue hopes to include more opinions, write-ups and in general, news from our ISFNR community.

The main contribution in this issue is by Nimeshika Venkatesan, a PhD candidate from Stella Maris College, and current visiting scholar at the Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore, University of Tartu, Estonia which introduces a new genre-oriented perspective into Bhakti, a concept that very broadly translates to “selfless devotion to the supreme being” and the poetry associated with it.

The focus on NEFA as a Folklore-Ethnology Student Organisation that is active in the University of Tartu reflects how folklore, fun and academics is used to create and foster spaces where students can practice presentations, discuss academics, and proactively organise events that lead to greater community awareness of the discipline and its contributions to understanding societies. A special feature in this issue is the interview with Jason Baird Jackson, Professor of Folklore at Indiana University, where he is also the Director of the Mathers Museum of World Cultures. This conversation takes an in-depth and reflexive look at the current position of folkloristics, folklorists, museums as spaces for ‘distant’ and ‘intimate others,’ “among others”. Prof Jackson engages actively with ongoing issues within the significant foci that folkloristics addresses.

Conference reports were contributed by Tuukka Karrlson, Kikee D. Bhutia, Anastasiya Fiadotova, and Savannah Rivka Powell. News pieces include the biography of the winner of the student paper prize of the Belief Narrative Network, ISFNR, Kikee Doma Bhutia and more information on the upcoming European Society for the Study of Religion (EASR) Annual Meeting in Tartu, 25-29 June 2019 by Indrek Peedu.

This issue, much delayed, would not have been possible without the valuable advice from my friends and mentors Ülo Valk and Sadhana Naithani. I am grateful to all the contributors. But it was the assistance and the relentless motivation from the editorial team – Kikee, Nimeshika, and The’ang – that added up and resulted into this first issue of ‘ISFNR: News, Notes and Narratives’. I welcome your comments, questions and mostly, your contributions for the next issue.

Margaret Lyngdoh  
Editor







# PRESIDENT'S NOTE

Sadhana Naithani

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The ISFNR Newsletter is back after a gap of many years and this time in its digital avatar. Technology has actually defined the field of our study – folk narrative – since its inception. The arrival of the print technology lent a new charm to orality and narratives that had erstwhile circulated orally has now become differently attractive in its printed versions. With this transition into technological distribution, the oral narrative became a matter of academic research and of cultural identity of emerging nations. In the last century the developments in audio and visual technologies caused the folk narrative to experience yet other transitions for scientific research and documentation and also for the emerging culture industry. Today, several folklore archives are not only digitizing their holdings, but also creating new kinds of databases that will create possibilities of new kinds of researches. Most recently a conference on digital archives in Vilnius brought together new ideas and plans. I too presented my ideas for a global digital folklore archive. So, neither folk narrative nor scholars of folk narrative have ever remained untouched by technology. The important thing is that contact with newer technologies has always transformed the very nature of research in unimaginable ways. Let us see how a digital newsletter will change the ways members of our Society communicate with each other. I am truly excited about it.

Our relatively young members have taken the responsibility for the production of this Newsletter. I congratulate the editor Margaret Lyngdoh and her team on the launch of the first issue. Greetings to all ISFNR members in all corners of the world! Please feel free to send your feed back and do contribute information regarding folk narrative researches, publications, conferences etc. in your regions. As you know the News section of our website ([www.isfnr.org](http://www.isfnr.org)) keeps you informed about similar matters, but news from all parts of the world does not reach us equally and we will be happy to represent more widely.

Sadhana Naithani





## NEWS SECTION



### i. Winner of the BNN Prize - Kikee Doma Bhutia

Kikee D Bhutia is a PhD candidate at the Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore, University of Tartu. Before joining Tartu, she worked as a Research Assistant in Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, Gangtok (Sikkim, India). At Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, she was involved in various projects including transcription, translation and transmission of oral histories and proverbs and also assisting in ethnographic documentary film making. Recently, she was a visiting student at the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Toronto in Canada, where she worked under the supervision of Professor Frances Garrett.

Her research focuses on belief narratives regarding yulhagzhibdag (guardian deities), in Sikkim (India), and particularly seeks to draw out the relational principles that connect these deities with villagers in their everyday life. Her PhD research, more broadly, concentrates on belief narratives and is an exercise in the vernacular theorising of Buddhist lifeworld in Sikkim. Her research is an exploration of – the beliefs, values, stories and rituals she grew up with and so she sees her research as both an academic endeavour and a quest for discovering and understanding ‘the self’.

Her first article, which won the 2018 Student Prize for best paper in belief narratives in ISFNR, is titled: “I Exist Therefore You Exist, We Exist Therefore They Exist”: Narratives of Mutuality between Deities (yulhagzhibdag) and lhopo (Bhutia) villagers in Sikkim.” Besides academics, she also acted in a movie called Dhokbu- The Keeper, which is also about the deity and a researcher’s quest for discovering the supernatural world, and is currently shooting for its sequel titled Dhokbu 2 – The Quest for Mayal.

["I EXIST THEREFORE YOU EXIST, WE EXIST THEREFORE THEY EXIST": NARRATIVES OF MUTUALITY BETWEEN DEITIES YUL-LHA GZHI BDAG AND LHOPO \(BHUTIA\) VILLAGERS IN SIKKIM1 - folklore.ee](https://folklore.ee)







## ii. Conference report on the Interim Conference of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research (ISFNR) (Ragusa) by Tuukka Karlsson

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### **Diverse Transformations and Variety of Views in Ragusa**

*The Interim Conference of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research (ISFNR) took place in Ragusa, Italy on 12.6–16.6. 2018. Placed in beautiful settings of Ragusa Ibla, the event was hosted by the University of Catania's Special Didactic Structure of Foreign Languages and Literatures, in cooperation with the Department of Human Sciences. The main theme for the event was "Folk Narrative in Regions of Intensive Cultural Exchange".*

Under the main theme, papers were requested concerning especially the journey of narratives, myths and themes through time and space and studies focusing on building and re- building identities, along with other questions concerning different transformations. The diversity of the subject was well demonstrated in the variety of paper accepted, ranging from linguistic strategies of storytellers to digital folklore.

While the conference received participants from around the world, it was delightful to notice that among experienced scholars also doctoral students from various universities had been accepted to give papers. For example, among the researchers from the University of Helsinki, three doctoral students were participating.

Beginning with a welcome address, the conference proceeded with keynote paper given by Aboubakr Chraïbi in a solemn space: the old Church of Santa Teresa. Conveniently, all the sessions took place in the premises of the old convent, so it was easy to switch between panels.





During the conference, video interviews were conducted by two doctoral students from the University of Helsinki: **Viliina Silvonen** and I. The purpose of these interviews was to explore the diversity of scholars and research subjects they represent and to celebrate the opening of new ISFNR-website. The interviews, a few minutes in length and boasting both experienced scholars of folklore and fresh faces, should be viewable on the site when this report is published.

Along with some extremely interesting presentations showing new perspectives in questions of motifs and genres, to name a few, also the meeting of the Belief Narrative Network took place during the event. Sadly, I myself was not able to attend, although the subjects of the papers given seemed extremely interesting (who wouldn't like to hear about werewolves and vampires!)

While the scientific aspect of the conference was strong, other programmes to relax with were not forgotten. Participants of the conference got to enjoy both traditional puppet theater and a festive conference dinner in beautiful settings. Along with these organized events, roaming in the streets of old Ragusa Ibla provided pleasurable moments and kindled a desire to return someday.

Especially for someone with little experience in events of this size, the experience was simultaneously educating and enjoyable; feelings of thrill when absorbing new aspects of folk narrative research crossed with anticipation and positive nervousness about upcoming presentation. Perhaps one of the best aspects of the event was a chance to establish contacts and receive feedback from prominent folklorists, such as **Terry Gunnell**, **Galit Hasan-Rokem** and **Tok Thompson**, to mention a few amongst many.

I think it only fair to say that the interim conference of ISFNR provided something for everyone, no matter what the focus of one's research subject and length of career in the academia. I believe I was not the only one who took unforgettable memories and contacts with new friends and colleagues with them home.







### iii. Conference report on the Young Folklorists Conference (Riga) by Kikee Doma Bhutia

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#### **The Ethics of Folklorists**

How often do we go to a conference and see the theme come alive? This was one such conference. The banana skin pictured in the conference logo was significant in that the “slippery” nature of disciplinary ethics was embodied in a basket of bananas that were placed in front of the presenter’s table every day for participants to eat.

The 8th Conference of Young Folklorists “Reflecting on Disciplinary Ethics in Folkloristics” took place in Riga, September 19-21, 2018 and was organised by the Archives of Latvian Folklore of Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art, University of Latvia. The aim of the Conference was to provide academic communication and collaboration within the field of folkloristics, by inviting students and scholars who consider themselves to be “young folklorists” to participate and share their experience.

Keeping in mind the aim of the conference, the papers accepted were focused and the presentations well chosen. It included folklorists from many different countries, who are researching and are engaged in the field. Many questions of ethics were explored in the conference by different speakers, such as what are the ways of getting a truthful report? What are the researchers’ responsibilities to those being studied (through the eye of the native researchers)? Are there any fields of research too sensitive and ethically too difficult to be addressed at all? What are the principles of ethically correct work with archived material and its representation in the digital tradition archives? What are the new ethical challenges introduced by the Digital Age? How does research affect the lives of informants and should such influence be exerted by the results of the research? Can researchers have too much empathy? Some questions regarding the ethics in folkloristics might never be answered. Nevertheless the conference created a stir among the participants to think of the topics and ethics one faces in their day to day experiences.





For me the most interesting topics addressed the issues of overcoming stereotypes and authority including controversial and sensitive topics: personal information, gender issues, and the ownership of folklore. There were presentation by some of the researchers related to different issues that help me think of similar examples in my field of research and contemplate them further. I found the conference organised efficiently and the program well elucidated. There was enough time for everybody to interact and get to know each other by the end of every conference day. There were city trips, film screenings, and folk music performances in the evening which gave every participant enough time to relax and communicate.

It was a small conference with no parallel panels and therefore there was no need for the worry about missing presentations. There was ample time and space for the participants as well as audience. I especially liked the two keynote speakers' presentations. The first talk was by Anita Vaivade who has been Adjunct Professor at the Latvian Academy of Culture since 2012. She joined the UNESCO global network of facilitators in the field of intangible cultural heritage in 2017. She is currently co-leading the 'Osmosis' research project, an international comparative study on intangible cultural heritage national legislation. Her presentation was about Sensitivities and Consent in Researching Intangible Cultural Heritage where she explored international as well as local intangible cultural heritage law and related ethical principles related to more generic connections, and entanglements between ethical considerations and law. The second keynote speaker, Valdimar Tr. Hafstein is a Professor of Folklore, Ethnology and Museum Studies at the University of Iceland. He spoke on Copyright Tradition: Creative Agency from a Folklorist's Perspectives. The lecture was elaborate and helpful for young folklorists to understand ethical conundrums through case studies of "plagiarism" in the field of research. The main motivation of the paper was to understand the dichotomies of creativity which shape our understanding, and further to undermine and to liberate our imagination from the powerful hold, and to imagine creativity in alternative terms. Therefore, it is very important to understand such liberation, especially now in the digital age, for creativity is still enclosed in categories. It was indeed a great experience to listen to this presentation so that young folklorists understand and improve their own work in the light of the ideas he presented. In the end of the conference, Asta Skujytė-Razmiene, currently PhD Student and Junior Researcher from the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and folklore announced that the next Young Folklorist (2019) Conference will be held in Lithuania.







#### iv. Conference reports on the American Folklore Society (AFS) Annual Meeting 2018 (Buffalo) by Savannah Rivka Powell and Anastasiya Fiadotava

##### **Reflections on the 2018 Annual Meeting of the American Folklore Society**

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Attending the 2018 annual meeting of the American Folklore Society (AFS) was a homecoming of sorts for me as an American who has been studying abroad in Estonia for more than a year. Upon completing my journey from Tartu and arriving at the conference in Buffalo New York, I found that I felt somewhat liminal in my status as I simultaneously fell into the category of “International Student” yet at the same time was returning to my home country. Of course, as a student of folklore, I find myself comfortable at the junction of such intersecting identities. My five colleagues who had joined me from the University of Tartu may have been clearer in their positions considering that I was the only member originating from the United States. The head of our Institute of Cultural Research, Professor Ülo Valk, was in attendance along with Senior Researchers Dr Elo- Hanna Seljamaa and Dr Jonathan Roper. We certainly had a diverse representation of students from our new international program of Folkloristics and Applied Heritage Studies including Anastasiya Fiadotava of Belarus and Denise McKeown of Canada.



As I settled in, I found it to be an exceptional gathering of folklore researchers, professionals, tradition bearers, artists and performers. The city in which the event took place quite evidently has a considerably active art scene. Many of the attendees had the opportunity to tour the city, visit Niagara Falls and learn about the local Indigenous culture of the Hodinöhsö:ni’ (Haudenosaunee) people. There were rather unique opportunities for professional development and creative expression such as the “Culture through Comics” and “Experiments in Exhibition” workshops.





Upon arriving at the conference centre I immediately felt welcomed even as a student and first-time attendee. Although the gathering is rather large it felt much like a reunion, one I look forward to returning to in future years as a more experienced member. The conference was given a proper initiation with a Ganö:nyök or Hodinöhsö:ni' Thanksgiving Address by G. Peter Jemison. This was followed by a welcome address from the president of the society, Dr Dorothy Noyes. The opening ceremonies aided in orienting me as a new student member of the society as the board members were introduced with introductory speeches.

Following the presentations and awards, Bill Crouse and The Allegany Dancers performed traditional Native American dance styles with an explanation of each form. The youngest member of the group was merely six years old, but he had no trouble keeping up with the dances and performed an impressive solo hoop dance. At end of the group's performance, all attendees were invited up for a Friendship Dance with the performers. As I have attended many Powwow Dances in the United States which often begin with a Friendship Round Dance, I was eager to participate.

The feeling of being welcomed into an extended family of folklorists was emphasized by the welcome reception hosted by the executive board which I attended with the other students from the University of Tartu. During the reception, we were greeted by the current president, Dr Noyes, and the former president, Dr Kay Turner, who then introduced us to other board members and showed genuine interest in learning of our backgrounds and research subjects. We also had the opportunity to meet with tradition bearers, performers and artists who had valuable perspectives to share as active community members working to preserve and share traditional arts in the realm of public folklore. As a student participant, I had the good fortune to be paired with Dr Benjamin Gatling through the AFS Mentoring program. I received personalized guidance from him as an experienced scholar who has been working professionally in my field of interest.

The theme of the conference was "No Illusions, No Exclusions" which was addressed, and in some cases challenged, from various angles in panels and presentations. The schedule was densely packed with enticing topics addressing a wide array of subject matters. I was quite fortunate, as the panel to which I was assigned to present, "Perspectives on Indigeneity", was chaired by Dr Dan Ben-Amos who presented on the topic of "Ake N'lsi: The Village Boy Who Defeated the King's Strongmen" based on his fieldwork in Nigeria. His approach to research and analysis was quite enlightening and left me with much to consider in regards to my own work.

Dr Eric César Morales delivered a spirited performance on the intersection of Latino Indigeneity and gang movements in his presentation titled "Gods and Gangsters: Reclaiming Latino Indigeneity through 'Deviancy'". The diction of his speech was potent, something I perceived as in a style and form similar in essence to "Slam Poetry", which in this case could be thought of more as "Academic Slam". His research consisted of cultural elements which he had not only studied but had personal connections with. Thus, through the presentation, he piece by piece came to embody the very form and style of Indigeneity he presented upon. A powerful and impactful approach that I will not soon forget.







The presentation by Dr Joseph Grim Feinberg on “The Paradox of Publicizing Folklore” pertained to concepts of authenticity in Post-Communist Slovakian ensembles. These ideas which are expanded upon in further detail in his recently released book by the same title. This is an exploration of the manners in which folklore and folk music become inauthentic and thus in need of “revival” due to their shifting and intrinsically evanescent state. The brief discussions I had with Dr Feinberg after his presentation provided considerable insights on these subjects which I intend to explore in greater detail as these are topics directly related to the subject of my thesis. I am looking forward to obtaining a copy of his book to examine these topics as based on his fieldwork, analysis and theories.

During an evening reception, Dr Turner introduced me to Dr Rosalind October-Edun of the Brooklyn Arts Council. She and her colleagues from New York City imparted valuable insights on the challenges faced by tradition bearers and cultural advocates who have at times felt neglected, misinterpreted and misrepresented in the efforts to preserve and maintain traditions. Despite being a centre of culture for a vast array of people from immigrant communities which have served to provide rich fieldwork material for many folklorists, the individuals and tradition bearers of these practices have not always felt respected in these interactions. Their talk which was titled “Your Illusions, Our Exclusions: Giving Artists a Voice to Rethink Public Sector Folklore” provided a forum for cultural advocates to express their frustrations in an open dialogue with folklorists working in the public sector. The experiences of these communities were heard and received in a way that I hope will forge new alliances and directions through continued discussion between artists and folklorists on a deeper level.

Throughout the conference, I met with old faces from my time as a folklore student at the University of Oregon and made new acquaintances with individuals holding similar research interests. The participants and attendees represented an internationally diverse crowd. While speaking with soon-to-be Fulbright Scholar Mathilde Frances Lind from Indiana University who is destined for Estonia about my fieldwork in Bulgaria, I was approached by a woman from the very city in which I had been conducting research. Other connections came during lunch following my panel presentation when I unexpectedly met with scholar Dr Cory Thorne from the Memorial University of Newfoundland who is coincidentally chairing the panel to which I had applied to present on “Art, Artists, and Social Justice in Folklore and Ethnography” in the upcoming 2019 Congress of the International Society for Ethnology and Folklore.

Although the conference may have come to a close, for me this feels more like a beginning. Though the communitas which had been generated during the conference may have faded with the closing ceremonies, conversations and connections will surely continue well beyond the bounds of the convention centre in Buffalo New York. Rather than assuming that there are “No Illusions, No Exclusions” I would like to aspire to maintain a critical lens in my folkloric research to ensure not only balance but more ideally equity based in reciprocity and integrity. I look to the forthcoming AFS meeting which will be held in October of 2019 in Baltimore Maryland with eager anticipation. Until then I will aspire to process and integrate the precious grains of wisdom and knowledge which have been gained during my time in Buffalo New York into my own approaches and research.





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The 2018 Annual Meeting of the American Folklore Society took place on October 17-20 in Buffalo, New York. The general theme of the conference was “No Illusions, No Exclusions”. It resonated well with Buffalo’s motto (“The City of No Illusions”), but it also encouraged the reflections on the inclusivity of folklore as an academic discipline and the interaction between folklore studies and the bigger world outside of our ivory tower. The meeting also emphasized the diversity of local cultures. Pre-conference trips allowed the participants to explore Hodinöhsö:ni’ Heritage and get first-hand experience of interactions with some of the First Nations that live in the area as well as enjoy Buffalo’s rich cultural landscape. The opening ceremony

began with G. Peter Jemison’s speech who gave the Ganö:nyökor Hodinöhsö:ni’ thanksgiving address and culminated with a brilliant performance by Bill Crouse and The Allegany Dancers who gave everyone a chance to enjoy some participatory social dances-- luckily, they were easy enough for all the meeting attendees to try.

Throughout the conference the participants could also get a glimpse of New York state traditions. From traditional Turkish Erbu to Eastern European Wycinanki to First Nations beadwork – the traditions showcase was a true magic casket that was a constant source of fascination and admiration.

The most important parts of the conference were the sessions, roundtables and discussions. Due to the large number of participants (AFS president Dorothy Noyes estimated that there were





700 attendees this year) there were always 10+ parallel sessions and most of the time I was truly sorry that I could not be in multiple locations at the same time. The conference covered a broad spectrum of topics and genres: the problems of refugees and migrants, gender aspects of culture, contemporary religions, food ways, digital media, intangible heritage and many other curious and thought-provoking issues. Some of the sessions were sponsored by certain sections of AFS such as the Nordic-Baltic Folklore Section, the Medieval and Early Modern Folklore Section, etc. There was also a set of sessions that celebrated the legacy of Barbro Klein, a distinguished folklorist who passed away this year. Folklore education also received a special attention with a session and a roundtable dedicated to this issue as well as a Folk Arts Education Workshop.

After the sessions ended (normally at 4 p.m.) the conference events went on till late. Evening plenary lectures by Bruce Jackson, Frank de Caro (read by Elliott Oring) and Palagummi Sainath attracted a lot of attention, comments and discussions from a large audience. The evening events also included film screenings, receptions, vocal and instrumental jams – in fact, the choice between evening activities was as tough as between the conference sessions.

Much of a conference's success always depends on practical aspects. This year AFS developed the "Guidelines for Making Your Presentations More Accessible" which encouraged the participants to take into consideration different attendees' needs. There was also an info table where everyone could suggest the ways of making the conference more accessible. Combined with a very friendly atmosphere, such approach really made everyone feel comfortable and welcome – and of course, eager to attend future AFS meetings to meet old friends and make new ones.







v. News: On the European Society for the Study of Religion (EASR) Annual Conference, Tartu, 25- 29 June, 2019 by Indrek Peedu

**Religion – Continuations and Disruptions**

**The Annual Conference of the European Association for the Study of Religions (EASR)**

Indrek Peedu

As part of the EASR conferences, every year European scholars of religion come together at one or another European city to present their research, revisit ongoing debates and look for ways how to collaborate and cooperation in future activities. This year's EASR takes place from June 25 to June 29, 2019 in Tartu, Estonia and the general theme of the conference is "Religion – Continuations and Disruptions". After all, human religiosity is in constant flux, new ideas, doctrines and practices appear time and again, often spreading to many parts of the world. Sometimes these changes are deliberate, sometimes spontaneous, some disappear for good, some reappear in new forms. As time has shown, scholars struggle with studying such a fluid situation and thus many conceptual and methodological problems arise.

EASR 2019 hopes to tackle these and all related questions head on with scholars from all over Europe as well as from many other countries coming together in Tartu. The keynote speakers of the conference will be Zvi Bekerman, an anthropologist of education from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; Timothy Insoll, an archaeologist of religion from the University of Exeter, Sonja Luehrmann, an anthropologist of religion from the Simon Fraser University in Canada, Michael Stausberg, the professor of the study of religion from the University of Bergen, Lotte Tarkka, a folklorist from the University of Helsinki and David Thurfjell, the professor of the study of religion at the Södertörn university.

All in all EASR 2019 received over 100 panel proposals and about 850 paper abstracts from almost 800 people on all sorts of topics. Particularly popular have been all issues related to indigenous religiosity, contemporary religious trends in the Western countries, religious education, religion in India, as well Orthodox Christianity, religion in the Antiquity and contemporary Islam. From more specific topics semiotics of religion, materiality of religion and the evolutionary and cognitive study of religion are also more noticeably present in the list of accepted panels and papers compared to previous years. Moreover, as customary for all major study of religions conferences – analysing one's own methodological, theoretical and historical developments and disputes will be a significant topic during this year's EASR as well.

In addition to the academic programme of lectures and presentations, EASR 2019 also hopes to offer its participants plenty of chances to get to know Tartu and its surroundings more thoroughly as well. For that we have freed the afternoon of the third day of the conference from all academic activities and instead are giving registered participants a chance to choose from a list of cultural activities.





Among these one can find guided tours in the many museums of Tartu, be it the Beer Museum, or the Estonian National Museum with its exhibition on the Finno-Ugric people or Estonian History or instead a whole exhibition devoted to the religious developments in Tartu during the 20th and 21st century in the Tartu City Museum. In addition, the list of options also includes a bus tour to the nearby Old Believers' villages, a bog hike on the Valgesoo nature study trail and a workshop on Estonian cooking! We do hope there is a little something here for everybody.

All in all, the organizers of the EASR 2019 conference are eagerly looking forward to seeing everybody in Tartu and hearing all the intriguing and promising presentations that have been submitted and accepted.





**Detours :**  
**Mystical Speech Genres as Vernacular Expressions of Religion**

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Growing up in the late nineties in Southern India with that peculiar decade feel of Tamil films, the changes wrought on by the gradual opening up of the Indian economy, and the consistent presence of both my grandmothers shaped my upbringing with ideas that would influence my later life. I realised the impact of this in retrospect. My interest in folklore is an outcome of growing up with my grandparents narratives. My paternal grandmother had a quaint dignity to her person. Every morning she woke before the tape recording of “Om Namo Nārāyanā” would fill the audial space of the temple town of Srirangam in the district of Trichy in Tamil Nadu in Southern India. Her intimacy with the reigning Goddess Ranganāyaki Thāyar at the Ranganāthan temple was such that she had a personal relationship with Her. My grandmother would talk about her (my grandmother’s) day and even consult with Her (the goddess) before making major life decisions. My grandmother, with her turmeric tinted skin, her nine yards of *madisar*,<sup>1</sup> and elegant countenance, was a *bhakta*: “a devotee” and her personal relationship with the goddess is exemplified in Bhakti.







My maternal grandmother is also a *bhakta*, but she is an extremely vibrant woman who takes delights talking in proverbs, and narrates scandalous accounts of family history, memorates, and legends. Whenever anybody in the family goes through any sort of difficulty she sends in an ‘application’ to the ‘superior powers’ to facilitate favourable circumstances and strikes deals with a plethora of deities. Both are forms of bhakti and are instances of personal relationships with the divine but their (my maternal and paternal grandmothers) own individual styles of worship and interaction influence their practice of religion. This write-up has two intentions: bhakti as vernacular expression of religion and second the influence of bhakti in the formation of mystical speech genres. To achieve this purpose, I would like to examine the parallels in the thematic concerns of four saints: namely between the 12<sup>th</sup> century Vīraśaiva saint, Akkamahādevi and 16<sup>th</sup> century Vaiṣṇavite saint, Meera; and between the Vīraśaiva saint, Allamāprabhu and the Sufi mystic, Kabīr to see their poetic utterances<sup>3</sup> as genres of mystical expression or mystical speech genres.

Bhakti as a concept whose meaning depends on the context in which it is articulated in. There are varied and differing uses of the term and despite multiple attempts by scholars, it remains an inabsolute term. John Stratton Hawley in his introduction to *A Storm of Songs* confesses that Bhakti is notoriously difficult to pin down or define. The meaning of Bhakti has its roots in the 4<sup>th</sup> century text of the grammarian Panini. Bhakti or devotion is complete when it is shared or other people share this feeling of bhakti with their fellow devotees (Hawley 2015: 5). Another scholar, Indira Peterson describes Bhakti to be, “a popular religion of emotional devotion to a personal God, which eventually permeated the Hindu tradition in all its aspects.” (Peterson 1989: 4). The abstract notion of bhakti then, comprises an overpowering emotion of intoxicated love and complete surrender to the divine and this devotional experience is a shared feeling among devotees. However, the manifestation of Bhakti may vary.

Historically, the bhakti movement originated during the 7<sup>th</sup> century in Tamil Nadu and began as a social reform movement that brought about a paradigm shift in the practice of religion. It challenged caste discrimination, exclusivity and ritualistic practices of institutionalized Hinduism and offered an alternative path to worship. With the emergence of the Bhakti movement there was a change in the relationship that devotees had with the divine. God, who until then was projected to be supreme and hierarchically above all now became, through the mediation of bhakti, a friend, child, or a lover. Bhakti as an emotion driven movement, emphasizes feelings rather than privilege and status (Ramanujan 1973: 54). The emotive nature of this movement makes this genre of speech into a communicative modality of vernacular expression.

Despite prior attempts by scholars to discuss bhakti as a genre, it has not been theorized adequately. Neeti Sadarangani in her work *Medieval Bhakti Movement of India* provides an exhaustive historical account of the bhakti movement and analyses the influence of the bhakti mysticism on Indian English writing in English. When she refers to bhakti as a genre she seems





→ to have used it to imply the similarities in the poetic styles and expressions across mystics across time but she does not specifically qualify the use of the term genre. She does point out that bhakti literature provides an egalitarian world view offering agency to people from marginalized community to express themselves (Sadarangani 2004:240). In her opinion, the contemporary poetry of the Dalits are more rooted to the folk traditions and the lack of translation initiatives on the part of the English literature academics lead to the circulation of such literature 'beneath the blanket of desi' (2004: 242). The use of the phrase 'blanket of desi' implies desi as a binary, a stance I consider problematic.

A more nuanced argument regarding the issue of the regional or bhāṣā literature is presented by G.N Devy<sup>3</sup>. He uses the term bhāṣā to refer to the regional languages that emerged and challenged the the hegemony of Sanskrit. His use of indigenous terminologies such as the *mārga* and the *desī* to discuss the grand tradition and little tradition brings into the discourse a truly Indian way of critical thinking. According to him, traditionally, the mārga tradition established literary criteria and aesthetic values for elitist literature. Desi designated rustic and vulgar literary expressions" (Devy 1992:81). Tradition as used in the western critical discourse approximates to parampara in India which entail two components- the mārga, the metropolitan or the mainstream tradition and desī, regional and sub cultural traditions (1992:81) He also identified a lack of critical tradition in bhakti poetry owing to the power struggle between the mārga and the desī traditions thereby affecting the formulation of a new theory of literature. I am in partial agreement with Devy, however, in my opinion it becomes essential in looking at the categories of mārga and desī not as binaries but as fluid entities that are relative and subject to context. To explore this idea further, I would like to refer to the method in the study of religious folklife proposed by Leonard Norman Primiano. According to him, 'vernacular religion' is lived religion or in other words the various ways in which human beings live religion, understand it and practice it (Primiano 1995:44). Discussing speech genres as vernacular expression of religion would be my response to Devy, a humble attempt at situating bhakti studies in the interstices of literary criticism and folkloristics.

Genre as a theoretical concept is a frequent phenomenon in folkloristics at present. Dorothy Noyes<sup>4</sup>, during her talk at the University of Tartu introduced another variable in addition to genres. In her opinion cultures could be considered as forms, wherein forms are abstract entities which has its own independent influences and effects on cultural phenomenon. Forms could be shared, move through time and space and acquire newer associations in the process. In this article we are going to examine one such form of bhakti which I refer to as the mystical speech genre. In Hawley reference to Sanskritist V Raghavan's lecture<sup>5</sup> we can see how the Tamil Bhakti movement could be looked at as a form in the way Noyes sees it. The movement inspires other bhakti movements in different parts of India.

Bhakti as a cultural form may entail a number of genres, for example beliefs, legends, mystical memorates, poetic utterances in the form of riddles, songs, dance, love poems,





metaphysical poetic prose expressions and so on. Discussing bhakti as a form of vernacular religion provides space to discuss the myriad expressions of mysticism as genre. Noyes's idea of form could be relevant in understanding bhakti. Bhakti as a medium facilitates vernacular expressions. In the next two sections we shall examine the patterns and differences the mystical expressions of aforementioned poet-saints.

## Akkamahādevi and Meera - Bridal Mysticism

Akkamahādevi belongs to the 12<sup>th</sup> century Vīraśaiva Bhakti tradition inspired by the Tamil Śaivite sect of saints referred to as the Nāyanmārs<sup>6</sup> of the 6<sup>th</sup> century. She was a fierce celibate who was one of the most versatile Vīraśaiva poets. Her poetic style entailed passionate, spiritually erotic love poems as well as abstract philosophical riddles referred to as the *bedagina vachanagalu*. This is a concept I will elucidate upon in the following sections. From a tender age, soon after she was initiated<sup>7</sup> into the Vīraśaiva faith she took *Chenna Mallikarjuna* (Lord of jasmine flowers) to be her divine husband. Her disdain towards men came through quite explicitly in her *vachana* poetry especially the then Jain king Kaushika who tirelessly pursued Akkamahādevi but to no avail.

On the other hand we have Meera, the 16<sup>th</sup> century Rajput princess mystic poet. She was an ardent devotee of Krishna known for her fearlessness and utter disregard for societal norms and conventions. She too was prey to an unwanted male gaze of her late husband Bhoj Raj's brother who she refers to as the Rana in her poetry. The utter disgust and disdain towards Rana is palpable in her poetry. According to legend Mira too takes Lord Krishna as her husband when she was a little girl of five or six. Despite belonging to entirely different time periods (13<sup>th</sup> century and 16<sup>th</sup> century) and different mystical traditions where the former belongs to Vīraśaiva while the latter to the Krishna bhakti tradition, they are united in their passionate and unconditional love for their divine husbands exemplifying bridal mysticism.

*Madburya* bhava or bridal mysticism has its origins in the Krishna bhakti tradition. It transcends gender disparities wherein the Supreme Being is looked upon as the lover and all aspects of creation is the feminine equivalent. The divine union with God becomes the consummation of a spiritual marriage where God is the bridegroom and the devotee or the bhakta becomes the bride. (Ramaswamy 2009: 240) Bridal mysticism exemplifies the *shringara* rasa, where shringara means the passionate eroticism and madhurya corresponds to amorous love. Shringara rasa in bhakti signifies the most intimate relationship with the divine being where the devotee completely surrenders to the Supreme Being out of an overwhelming, emotional outburst of spiritual eroticism (Schweig 204: 18). Let's consider the following poems by Akkamahādevi and Meera:

O Sister, listen Sister dear I

dreamt a dream. I saw Rice,

betel and coconut

I saw, O dear







A gorava boy

With short matted locks of hair And

shining teeth

Coming home for alms I went chasing him going beyond all boundaries

And held his hands

Seeing Channamallikarjuna, I opened

My eyes.

(Shivaprakash 2011: 153)

and

Sister, I had a dream that I wed the

Lord of those who live in need:

Five hundred sixty thousand people came

and the Lord of Braj was the groom.

In dream they set up a wedding arch: in

dream he grasped my hand:

In dream he led me around around the wedding fire

and I became unshakably his bride.

Mira's been granted her mountain-lifting Lord:

from living past lives, a prize.

(Hawley 2005: 125)

Both poems articulate the dreams of spiritual marriage. It is interesting to note that Akkamahadevi belongs to the Śaivite tradition and therefore her divine bridegroom is Lord Śiva but Meera belongs to Vaiṣnavite tradition and so her divine bridegroom is Krishna an avatar of Lord Viṣṇu. However there are continuities in their world views and similarities in the thematic aspects of their articulations. For instance the *sakhi* or the sister/friend is a very pan Indian aesthetic device used in love poetry where the lover calls out to their female companions or sometimes to the birds. In the light of this let us consider Bakhtin's notion of the speech genre:

Language is realised in the form of individual concrete utterances (oral and written) by participants in the various areas of human activity. Through the thematic content and linguistic style each utterance articulates a specific goal especially through their compositions' (Bakhtin 1986: 60).





He further characterizes the speech genre as ‘any utterance oral or written, primary or secondary, and in any sphere of communication is individual and therefore can reflect the individuality of the speaker...’ (Bakhtin 1986: 63). The world view exhibited through their poems is that of the romantic feelings of longing and separation expressed between lovers. However despite the continuities, each of them have their own individualistic style that influences their utterance. Akkamahādevi’s mystical utterance is in the form of the *vachana*. *Vachana* which literally translates into the ‘spoken word’ or ‘that which is spoken’ is thus a unique poetic form which typically characteristic of Virāshaiva saints. These verses were essentially articulations of the personal feelings of the speaker. Poets articulated their mystical experiences using common everyday objects as metaphors. (Shivarudruappa 1998: 125).

Meera’s mystical expression on the other hand is through dance and music. Iconography depicts her with closed eyes, lost in a trance playing the *ektara* (a single stringed instrument). Her mystical speech genre could be considered as being performative. Meera’s poetry is performed as songs as a part of staged concerts and as hymns or bhajans during *satsangs* (joint prayers performed by a gathering of devotees). As a princess belonging to a patriarchal household dancing and singing was prohibited. Meera however rebelled against societal rules using bhakti as her agency to express her spiritual eroticism through her songs. In one of the poems Mira refers to her dancing:

I'm colored with the colour of dusk. oh rāṇa  
coloured with the colour of my Lord.  
Drumming out the rhythm on the drums. I danced, dancing in  
the presence of the saints... (Hawley 2005: 36)

Additionally Mira’s feisty personality, her blatant disregard for social norms makes her life and legend to inspire many popular cultural interpretations such as the 1945 film by Ellis Dungan on Meera, the TV serial from 2009-2010 by NDTV Imagine, both of which lay great emphasis on the dance and music. There has been shifts in the definition of genres with the changing times to accommodate new forms of folklore. There is now increasing emphasis on the performative aspects of genre. Moreover there is a transition in definition of genre from a discursive category to a more communicative practice. (Bauman 1992: 53). Therefore Meera and her poetic expression or her mystical speech genre could be situated within the performative context.

In the poetic expressions of Akkamahādevi and Meera, we can see both patterns in the thematic concerns as well as a glimpse into their own individualistic genres of vernacular expression of mystical experiences. Their mystical speech genre is characterised with intimacy with the divine, sensuality and erotic spirituality characteristic of Bridal mysticism. The world view presented is that of the hopes and dreams of a lover. However Akkamahādevi’s individuality manifests through the *vachana* while Meera explores her mysticism through song and dance performance. In the next section we shall look at two other saints who use a different speech genre in their poetic expression.





## Allamāprabhu and Kabír: Mystical Madness

In the poetic expressions of Akkamahādevi and Meera, we can see both patterns in the thematic concerns as well as a glimpse into their own individualistic genres of vernacular expression of mystical experiences. Their mystical speech genre is characterised with intimacy with the divine, sensuality and erotic spirituality characteristic of Bridal mysticism. The world view presented is that of the hopes and dreams of a lover. However Akkamahādevi's individuality manifests through the vachana while Meera explores her mysticism through song and dance performance. In the next section we shall look at two other saints who use a different speech genre in their poetic expression.

Much like Allamāprabhu, most of the biographical information pertaining to Kabír is also speculative. There are multiple versions of his biography, the most common one being that he was born around the beginning of 15<sup>th</sup> century to a community of weavers. Although he was born as a Hindu, he later converted to Islam. Kabír's poetry is revered and sung by an organized community of devotees who refer to themselves as the Kabír Pant. The disciples collected and transmitted Kabir's songs through the oral tradition. (Hess, Singh 2002: 3). In recent times folk and classical musicians today use the poems of Kabír as inspiration for their performances presenting newer interpretations. The most renowned one being the Kabir Project directed by Shabnam Virmani, a venture that explores the spiritual journey of Kabir especially his music through documentaries, films and books and other creative mediums.

Both Allamāprabhu and Kabír are known for mastering the riddle form. In this section I would be looking at the notion of mystical madness using literary nonsense through the use of the genre of riddles by Allamāprabhu and Kabír in their poetry. There is greater sense behind the seemingly absurd notion of nonsense. In bhakti, that which is seemingly nonsensical could be elevated to a state of heightened spiritual and philosophical awakening. In order to examine literary nonsense as mystical madness within the framework of bhakti, it is necessary to understand the meaning of literary nonsense.

Michael Holquist makes a distinction between that which is absurd and that which is nonsense when he says that the "absurd is a contrast between systems of human beliefs, which may lack all logic and the extremes of a logic unfettered by human disorder." However nonsense is a play with order wherein each system is logical within its individual confinement but when contrasted with one another cannot find relevance in the other. (Holquist 1999: 106). Hiding behind seemingly incomprehensible meanings or illogical ideas is a unique system and an alternate logical order that subverts the universal order of things. Literary nonsense features frequently in children's stories, rhymes and folklore. In children's tales and rhymes it delights, in folktales it becomes a means to escape into fantasy and in bhakti it is a vehicle to transcend the material world to the mystical world.

A tradition of incomprehensibly meted through paradox, inversions, negations is no stranger in the ethos of Indian mystical tradition. Allamāprabhu is especially known for his perplexing philosophical riddle poems known as *bedagina vachanagalu*. His riddles scattered with paradoxes, negations and inversions that stirs the soul out of complacency. The meanings of these riddles may baffle us however his images leave a lasting impression. (Shivaprakash 1997: 180).







*Bedagina vachanas* are a series of vachanas whose verbal structure is similar to that of the genre of riddles in folklore. The listener has to breakdown the indirect statements to comprehend the riddle. The Viraśaiva poets believed that mystical experiences could not be communicated in a straightforward manner. Let us consider this following poem:

A wilderness grew

In the sky.

in that wilderness a

hunter

in the hunter's hands a

deer.

the hunter will not die

till the beast is killed

Awareness is not easy,

is it,

O Lord of the Caves<sup>8</sup>?

(Ramanujan 1973: 319)

In this *bedagu* riddle of Allama the relationship between the hunter and the deer is inverted. The death of the deer is generally in the hands of the hunter but in this context the death of the hunter is dependent on the death of the deer. The following riddle poem may not make sense unless one delves into its alternate order steeped in esoteric meanings. The wilderness is a reference to disorder, in this context it signifies enveloping unawareness symbolized by the expansive sky. The deer is life caught in the snares of the hunter's hands, a manifestation of desire. Therefore one continues to desire until the end of life. (Ramanujan 1973: 198).

*Bedagina vachanas* thrive on paradoxes and inversions; as in the case of *sandhya bhasya* (twilight language) in the tantric tradition. Conventional symbolism and numerical symbolism were often used to both communicate and conceal higher truths in the process of transmitting of mystical knowledge. (Shivaprakash 1997: 185-186). Thus in the speech genre of *Bedagina vachanas* one can contextualize the notion of mystical madness.

Running parallel to Allamāprabhu's riddles may be compared, the *ulatbamsi* of Kabir. Linda Hess who has dedicated her life studying various aspects of mystical tradition of Kabir observes that the riddles of Kabir both fascinate and perplex the reader. The images seep into their consciousness even when meaning eludes their mind (Hess, Singh 2002: 14). An extension of the riddle is '*ulat bamsi*' or upside down language. It is born of religious literature as old as 3000 years such as the vedas. The 'cryptic and paradoxical expression' is also inspired from the Sandha bhasa ie: twilight language prevalent in medieval India. (Hess, Singh 2002: 136). Hess after surveying other commentaries on the Bījak of Kabir says that word play is often used to assign alternate meanings. Often *ulat bamsi* is peppered with local proverbs, explanations associated with folk beliefs and practices.





Within paradoxes, rhetoric and enigma lies a plethora of impossibilities concealing a simple truth (Hess, Singh 2002: 14). Let's consider the following poem of Kabír:

It's not a wild beast, brother,

not a wild beast,  
but everyone eats  
the meat.

The beast is a whole world—

unimaginable!

Tear open the belly,  
no liver or guts.  
It's this kind of meat, brother:

every minute sold.  
Bones and hooves on the dump—

fire and smoke

won't eat it.  
No head, no horn,  
and where's a tail?  
All the pandits meet

and fight.  
Kabír sings a marriage song.

(Hess Appendix A: 150)

Hess consolidates her understanding for this poem based on two of the interpretations provided by her informants. The thematic concerns of this riddle either pertains to māya delusion or to Śabda or truth, both of these element exist, however they are not tangible and it's impossible to capture them. The meat which is a continuation of the images, is sold in the market, which could either mean truth or illusion. Kabír anticipates the battle that may ensue between the pandits and refers to it. (Hess, Singh: 136).

From both the examples one can see the continuities in outward appearance of nonsense but thematically they refer to deeper philosophical thoughts on life using the riddle form as the speech genre. Riddle is a form which is reckoned to be one of the most ancient genres of folklore prevalent in Greek Latin Hebrew as well as Sanskrit traditions. Riddles are essentially enigmatic questions framed specifically to confuse and the test the knowledge of the receiver. (Abrahams, Dundes Riddles: 129-130). Creating confusion is crucial in the construction of the riddle wherein the interplay of internal contradictions or 'opposition' is critical for introducing ambiguity and incomprehensibility.





Both Allamāprabhu and Kabīr use the genre of the riddle to present a world view which seemingly absurd and nonsensical but are esoteric and full of symbolism. Both poets use the riddle form in their own individual way, Allamāprabhu through his *Bedagina* vachana and Kabīr, *ulat bamsi* via the form of the riddle for expressing their mysticism, wherein their mystical speech genre they exemplifies mystical madness.

## Conclusion

In this essay I have introduced the concept of the mystical speech genre to examine the poetic utterances of four saints belonging to varying time periods and mystical traditions as vernacular expressions of religion. I have identified two speech genres namely: Bridal mysticism and mystical madness and tried to offer a glimpse into the world views as represented by these genres.

Bhakti is an abstract notion of unconditional love and devotion to the Supreme Being. It provides an inclusive space for the common people to express their individual vernacular religious practices. Institutionalized religion sets benchmarks for saints and tailors their narrative to fit the mould that is socially acceptable. However the one way to break through the homogenizing of the narratives of saints is by emphasizing on the vernacular practices. One such example of vernacular expression is the mystical speech genre as discussed in this piece of writing. My attempt at a reading of a few examples from bhakti literature as a vernacular expression is to challenge the binaries of *mārga* and *desī* as absolute categories and recontextualize the *desī* within literary criticism and folkloristics as a reading method. Mystical speech genres is one of the ways to explore vernacular practices of religion situates bhakti studies within the discourse of the *desī*.

By examining patterns in the themes of the poetry of saints ranging from varied mystical traditions, one can identify continuities and variations in the mystical speech genres. Bhakti as a form opens gateways for interdisciplinary engagements and inspire perspectives in the realm of folkloristics by offering scope to understand the similarities and differences in the vernacular expression of religion transcending religious and cultural boundaries across mystical traditions. The following write up which utilises folkloristics tools within a literary framework, could serve as a small instance of an interdisciplinary engagement where bhakti could be considered as a 'form' of vernacular expression of religion. The discussion of genre not merely as a category but as a critical tool within the discourse of Bhakti is essential in my opinion towards developing a body of critical work of bhakti literatures as a serious academic discipline. Positing bhakti as a vernacular expression of religion and examination of the mystical speech genres is an attempt to situate bhakti criticism within the discourse of the *desi*, not entirely path breaking but a much needed detour.

Scholarly works on translation, interpretation of the poetry of bhakti saints have been a consistent academic preoccupation in recent times. It is an ongoing process opening up venues for interdisciplinary discussions. My attempt at situating Bhakti criticism in the interstitial space of literary criticism and folkloristics is a detour in the well-lit, well-trodden path of current anthropological discourse. It is in the context of this statement that I use the term *desī* detours in the title of this write up. Examining bhakti as a vernacular expression, rerouting it through a folkloristic methodology facilitates the 'desi detour' and helps expand the term *desī* from being just a 'blanket' perhaps.





1. Saree is a drape that varies from six to nine yards and is the ethnic clothing of women of India. Madisar or kosavam refers to the nine yards drape worn by south Indian women after marriage. Although this style of saree was popular among women in Ancient Tamil Nadu, today the drape is associated with the Iyengar and Iyer women who belong to the Tamil Brahmin community.
2. I use mystical as an adjective to qualify the poetic expressions of the saints. Utterance is used in the Bakhtinian sense of utterance to develop the idea of the mystical speech genre which would be elaborated upon in the following sections. To know more about speech genre see, Bakhtin, M.M., Michael Holquist, Vern McGee, and Caryl Emerson, "The Problem with Speech Genres" in *Speech Genre and other Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 61-77.
3. G. N. Devy's work *After Amnesia* explores the idea of cultural amnesia that permeates the Indian literary tradition. What Devy attempts to do is to create an alternative to the false frameworks of criticism that is categorized as superior (western) and inferior (Indian) by drawing evidence from literature in modern Indian languages or in other words the bāsa literatures. (3) He introduces mārṅa and deśī to talk about the grand and little traditions within the framework of post-colonial discourse.
4. President of American folklore Society and newly awarded honorary doctorate at the University of Tartu.
5. Raghavan outlines the movement of the bhakti movement from Tamil Nadu from 6<sup>th</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> century, moving towards Maharashtra, Gujarat, Sindh from the 13<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> century and then into Kashmir with the poetry of the 14<sup>th</sup> century woman poet Lal Ded, moving on to Guru Nanak and other Sikh gurus of Punjab in the 16<sup>th</sup> century as well Śaṅkaradeva of Assam, century and then into West Bengal with the 18<sup>th</sup> century Shakta saint Rāṁprāsad and then back to Tamil Nadu with Jayadeva's *Gitagovindam* inspiring a number of commentary in the Dravidian languages. (Hawley 2015: 20).
6. Nayanmars the plural form of Nayanar were saints who belonged to the Śaiva sect of the Tamil bhakti movement that took the world by a storm during the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Tirunanacampantar (Campantarar), Tirunavukkaracar (Appar), and Cuntaramurti (Cuntarar) were three important saints who served as leaders and were referred to as the Muvar. For more on the Nayanmars see Peterson (1989) The Nayanmars were sixty three in number including one woman saint who had a radically different expression of bhakti, Karaikal Ammaiyar. Lord Shiva bestowed upon her the boon of haunting the cremation grounds as *pei* a ghoulish or a ghost. Her poetic landscape is peculiar is morbid with vivid descriptions of death and decay. For more on Karaikal Ammaiyar see Elaine, Craddock. *Siva's Demon Devotee* Craddock (New York: SUNY Press, 2010)
7. Although the Vīraśaiva as a community of devotees did not believe in ritualistic worship they had created an alternate set of beliefs and practices practiced by the *śharanas* or devotees. As a community they were strictly against idol worship and carried a small version of the *linga* (the symbol of Lord Shiva) known as the *īsta linga*. The initiation is the first step in the devotee's life where a spiritual mentor or guru initiates the devotee into the Vīraśaiva community by presenting the *īstalinga*. For more on the philosophy and the belief of the Vīraśaivas see Michael, Blake R. "Introduction: the Vīraśaivas and their Context" in *the Origins of Vīraśaiva Sect* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1992), 1-24.
8. The vachana poets of the virasaiva tradition use a specific signature at the end of the poem known as the *ankitha*. For Akkamahādevi it is *Chennamallikarjuna* or Lord of the Jasmine flowers, For another saint Basavanna it is *Kudlasangamahadeva* or Lord of meeting rivers (Ramnujan 1979). Allamāprabhu uses *Gubeśvara* or lord of the caves. According to legend it is said that Allamāprabhu or formerly known as Prabulingadeva roamed the streets as a mad man after losing his wife to a fatal illness. He is said to have received his initiation into the Vīraśaiva faith in the a cave from a mysterious being Animesa (Shivaprakash 2010)







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*Special Feature: Student Organization in Focus: NEFA – What Folklorists Do!*



## TARTU NEFA GROUP

### HISTORY

The history of NEFA can be traced back to the 1960s. Abbreviated from Nordisk Etnologisk Folkloristisk Arbetsgrupp (Nordic Working Group on Ethnology and Folklore), the first working group, Nordic Student Committee in Ethnology and Folklore that would change their name to NEFA two years later, was established in Denmark in 1963, soon followed by local departments in various universities in the Nordic region. The society was created to promote communication between ethnologists and folklorists in Scandinavia, and to provide a platform for active research, teaching and debate.

The branch of Nefa Group in Tartu was established on 12.12.1990 and with the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, closer contacts with international groups became possible. With guided visits to Swedish universities, Nefa Tartu quickly became an important forum for those Estonians who wanted to rejuvenate ethnology and folklore in both professional and student levels.

Due to changes in university structures and arrangements in subjects, international contact and cooperation between the Nordic Nefa groups has been decreasing since 2000s, although occasional visits still occur. This change in focus is not necessarily bad, as exchange students have always been





welcome to join Tartu Nefa Group. In 2017, an official international study programme of folkloristics and applied heritage was introduced in the institute of cultural research, bringing Nefa new members from Belarus, Czech Republic, India, Italy, USA. Indeed, one does not have to look further from Tartu to establish international connections. Currently Tartu Nefa Group is looking for ways to collaborate with the Estonian Anthropology Association NGO based in Tallinn.

## MEMBERS

The main idea behind of what its members simply refer to 'Nefa', is to unite young scholars and enthusiasts of ethnology, folkloristics and nearby disciplines through informal learning and extracurricular activities. Students from all levels, disciplines and backgrounds are encouraged to join. As is common in most student organisations, the face of the group changes each year. Membership is divided to four main degrees: the core is board of Nefa, usually 3-5 people, and active members, complimented by the still hesitant participant-observers, and supportive members.

A special status among honorary members is granted to those formerly active members who have continued to support Nefa. Many of them have become professors at the University, contributing to the organisation with mental guidance, but also financial donations, and even space for gatherings. Such members carry a broader significance as they mark the transgenerational continuity in the organisation.

Nevertheless, hierarchy in the non-formal organisation is relatively flat, with roles taken up voluntarily. Everyone is encouraged to propose ideas, but only active members are eligible to vote on relevant matters, and match their skills to various tasks that need to be delivered.

The board is elected annually. This fall Nefa welcomed yet another set of new leaders -- an all-female board consisting of two folklorists and three ethnology students, all five girls of Estonian origin. There is no single chairperson, but as leaders of the group, all board members have the obligation to guide information, communicate resources and delegate responsibility if necessary, to make sure that everything is running smoothly. They are the core that also takes care of the official PR of the organisation. A designated board member is responsible for the finances.

The dynamic and empowering organisation of a student association gives all its members a possibility to try out different roles and responsibilities, that might come handy in their future academic and other endeavours.

## ACTIVITIES

The structure of Tartu Nefa Group still follows the logic of the initial organisation, with students meeting informally to intensively discuss common topics. Although an important part of Nefa's activities should be publications touching upon its members research interests and thoughts on their respective disciplines, Tartu Nefa Group has concentrated its efforts on interactive media, such as scientific conferences, seminars, workshops, and an annual autumn school. Instead of a newsletter, e-mailing lists and facebook are used to share contacts and distribute relevant news, internship and job offers, fieldwork proposals, and invitations to events. Looking at the activities of Nefa, a cyclic pattern emerges. Most of the traditional events with a certain structure and a set of rituals are meant for members only.







An example of the traditional events is the **Ancestor's Night**, a memorial gathering in honour of a deceased Estonian folklorist or ethnologist. It is a calm dinner party, with a photograph of the person as centrepiece on the candlelit table and conversations surrounding the scholar's work in their lifetime. In accordance with Estonian funeral culture, a shot of vodka is raised as a sign of respect. However, last year the all-embracing Tartu Nefa Group welcomed the initiative by some of its members to perform live folk music and enjoy Indian cuisine instead of typical Estonian food. In this way, the meaning of the event was maintained, with slight alterations making the occasion more special.



*Ancestor's Night 2017: in memoriam the Estonian folklorist Walter Anderson.*

An example of an unstructured annual member-only event is the **closing of the academic year**. Usually taking place at the summer home of one of the members, this salute includes relaxing and reflecting, often during sauna sessions.

In contrast, the yearly **Welcome Reception** that is held in September is aimed to everyone. With a presentation of Tartu Nefa Group, icebreaker games, music and snacks, the aim is to introduce the organization and attract new members. An old ritual is performed to inaugurate the members who joined the group in spring semester. After they explain their reason to join, the sign of the cross is made above their head with a copy of the organisation's former journal *VanaVaraVedaja*, which is then given to them as a welcome present.





No doubt the most festive, and also the most popular event of the year is the **Christmas Party**. Current members and alumni, curious passerbys and even the least active members find their way to the celebration, making it a chance to meet old friends and get to know new people. Candle lights, gingerbread and tangerines are essential, all other commercial or religious symbols are optional, as Estonia is known to be one of the least religious country in terms of declared attitudes.



*Christmas Party 2017: a festive atmosphere where to meet current and former (and possible future) members and friends of Nefa.*

In addition to educating and entertaining its steady membership, Tartu Nefa Group is dedicated on popularizing the disciplines of ethnology and folkloristics among a broader audience, to attract future collaborations and students by stressing the relevance and possible benefits of the disciplines. Therefore Nefa occasionally also organizes public screenings and discussions of **anthropological films**.







Movie night 2018:  
screening “Shadows of  
Forgotten  
Ancestors” (1965) by  
Sergei Parajanov in the  
lounge at Ülikooli 16  
on April 4th.

One of the most recent innovations is **Nefa Autumn School** that grew out of a spontaneous idea proposed in the beginning of the year 2017. On a weekend in October 2018, more than 30 students from universities in Tartu and Tallinn gathered in a rural dwelling in Southeast Estonia near Lake Peipus, to participate in the second edition of the event. Arranged in the form of a seminar, but held in a comfortable atmosphere, the autumn school gives students the chance to present their current and often ongoing research to get feedback and suggestions from their peers in the audience. It is a good way to acquire both much-needed presentation experience, and new ideas. In addition, the autumn school also includes simple workshops, social and leisure activities.



*Autumn School 2018:  
open discussion on doing  
fieldwork.*





*Autumn School 2018: happy participants.*







*Autumn School 2018:  
picking apples after  
lectures, for the upcoming  
workshop on making  
apple juice.*

Another highlight of the year 2018 was the recent **“Door to Door, from Time to Time” conference** on masked carnival customs around the world. On November 10th, which is celebrated as the Day of St. Martin in the Estonian folk calendar, local presenters and

representatives from Belarus, India, Italy, Latvia and Russia talked about the mumming traditions in their respective countries. The one-time event gave a good overview and a lasting impression of the variety of these customs.

To conclude on a lighter note: not every get-together needs an official excuse. Studying and working side by side also strengthens personal connections, therefore it is no wonder, that members of Nefa can be often seen and heard having an impromptu party at someone's place.

Easter, resurrection, passover or pagan festival? Spring 2018. Members of Nefa leaving all religious disagreements and discussions behind to paint eggs and welcome spring, hoping that the ancient symbol of the universe, of creation, of new life and rebirth, fertility and growth will bring good luck, health and strength for the rest of the year. Among the things used for such practice of magic were beeswax, crayons, onion peels, gauze bandage, plant leaves and many many eggs, of course.





## Special Feature: An interview exclusive with Professor Jason Baird Jackson

### The Past, Present, and Future of Folklore Studies - An interview with Jason Baird Jackson, Department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology, Indiana University, USA

by Nimeshika Venkatesan



*In light of his seminal visit in Autumn 2018, to the Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore at the University of Tartu, Nimeshika Venkatesan, posed some questions about the state of folklore studies to Jason Baird Jackson. Jackson is Professor of Folklore at Indiana University, where he is also the Director of the Mathers Museum of World Cultures. Nimeshika Venkatesan is a doctoral student at Stella Maris College and a visiting scholar at the University of Tartu.*

(Picture Courtesy:  
Department of Anthropology - Indiana University Bloomington)

**Nimeshika Venkatesan:** Folklore studies seems to be a peripheral discipline in the humanities. Folklorists are not new to questions challenging the credibility of folklore as a serious academic discipline. In the light of this statement why do you think students should choose to pursue research in folklore?

**Jason Baird Jackson:** Thank you Nimeshika for your interest in my reflections. It is a pleasure to have this chance to chat about our shared field. I think that folklore studies (folkloristics) appeals to smart, socially engaged students for the same reason that it is sometimes marginalized within the humanities and within scholarship more broadly. Those fields of the humanities that possess a kind of demographic and institutional dominance were, to a significant degree, founded on the study of elite cultural expressions and they served patrons and students from elite backgrounds. Folklore studies has long attracted students and scholars who wish for a broader perspective, one attuned to a wider span of everyday cultural practices and expressive genres, a greater diversity of social settings, and a broader range of human experiences manifest in all of their complexity and localized diversity. That said, we are now many decades into an era in which the dominant humanities disciplines, which were founded on studying privileged forms of cultural production, have adopted an openness to engaging a







vast array of cultural forms and scholars in these field often proclaim (and manifest) a desire to engage with the breadth of humanity, subaltern as well as elite. This makes explaining the distinctive history of, present strengths of, and unique contributions of folklore studies more difficult. But anyone who engages with the best work in our field with an open mind will see that it comes from a different place and it achieves different, worthwhile things than what one might find in the work of literature or history scholars, even ones interested in vernacular or popular culture among specific non-elite populations. Some of this difference is just cultural variation, but some of it is long-term disciplinary habitus. Students should choose to pursue research in folklore studies if they find the field's research findings, community collaborations, and ethos inspiring and useful and if they recognize in it a platform for the kinds of inquiry and social engagement that they want to pursue. We live in vexing and interesting times and there is much that is worth understanding and worth trying to do. We need a diversity of frameworks and perspectives and disciplines to address the past, present, and future.

National, regional, and local circumstances differ, but in the United States one thing that is appealing and powerful about folklore studies is the manner in which it long ago addressed, in a fruitful way, the issues that other fields are only now exploring. I refer to the question of how a scholarly field can do more than replicate itself in the academy, how scholars trained at the graduate (including PhD) level can play a decisive and positive role working in a way that draws upon their advanced training for meaningful careers outside the academy. This discussion happens under many banners, including the so called "alt-ac" (alternative academic) discussion. One huge advantage that folklore studies (not only in the U.S., I think) possesses is the success that folklorists have already demonstrated in pursuing impactful cultural work outside university settings. Public and applied folklorists are a large share of the membership of the American Folklore Society and they do important work. For students interested in engaging with humanities work in local communities or in policy contexts, folklore studies has a great deal to offer.

Deeper inside your question is the matter of whether folklore studies is a humanities discipline. In most places, this positioning is accepted and for understandable reasons. But I should note that it is not the only way of parsing the matter. I am increasingly uncomfortable when I am forced, by administrative structures, for instance, into confederation with other humanities fields. My biography, my training, my reading habits, my ethics, and my networks align me with the social sciences more than they do to the humanities. This observation holds true even when I am, for instance, studying the poetics of oral narrative or when I am researching the visual arts. I cannot speak for anyone else on this point and I respect my colleagues steeped in the humanities tradition, but it is a tradition-in-practice that increasingly alienates me more than it inspires me. Many fields are uncomfortably positioned with respect to these broad categories. Folklore studies shares this condition with linguistics, ethnology, and some would say even history. One huge advantage of our ties to the humanities is that we can serve as a kind of train station where different kinds of scholars and approaches converge. Our status in the humanities, even if marginal, for instance, helps us recruit, engage with, learn from, and welcome talented students of literature such as yourself. For a folklorist who finds the actual lived-humanities troubling or discouraging, the question is whether to try to shift, or compensate for, them or to try to disavow them and avoid being swept into situations in which the dominant disciplines and practices of the humanities play a defining role. It is not clear that the dominant social sciences are a particularly eager to count folklorists among their number. Folklore studies will thus remain interstitial. We are probably stronger in that position anyway.

That train of thought points to another reason for students to embrace folklore studies. As the field actually exists, it is small enough to foster a sense and a practice of community and of shared purpose and large enough to accomplish worthwhile things and to have organizational structures (AFS, SIEF, ISFNR, archives, journals, museums, university programs, etc.) to support its work.





**Nimeshika Venkatesan:** Thank you Jason, for your reflections on possible opportunities for students interested in researching folklore. It is indeed true that folklore, being in the interstitial space, offers a wider scope for inter-disciplinary engagements. You had mentioned that museums and archives are organizational structures that support work in folklore. As the Director of Mathers Museum of World Cultures, what shifts in archival practices do you see considering the fact that Museums were once a space created for displaying collections of exotic people and their 'strange' cultures?

**Jason Baird Jackson:** Museums of ethnography come in many forms, from locally run community museums and ecomuseums, which center on the life of single group, to world cultures museums that aim to provide a window on lifeways around the globe. The rise of ethnographic museums, and of multidisciplinary museums with programs in ethnography, is certainly bound up closely with larger disciplinary histories on the one hand and with the global story of European colonization on the other. Your question is at the heart of much exciting work-- sometimes inspiring, sometimes deeply painful--going on in the world of contemporary ethnographic museums. But I would also stress that the legacy of collecting objects among, studying, and representing exotic "others" is only part of the long history and present circumstances of museum-centered ethnography. In many instances, it is not actually the main story.

Ethnographic museums arose, in part, as a response to different kinds of social change that some have glossed as modernization. Your question centers on distant or exotic others, but there are also what we might call intimate others. Colonialism is the backdrop for much museum ethnography, but so too is nationalism and so-called modernization. You and I met in Tartu and the Estonian National Museum (ENM) there can provide an illustration. The ENM is now a vast and ambitious museum with a forward-looking program founded on a robust history and sizable collections. The core collections were largely assembled by educated Estonians seeking to document "traditional" Estonian ways of life. As among the other nations of Northern Europe without projects of overseas colonialism, the ENM's contexts relate to national identity, the transformation of peasantries into modern citizens, and questions of cultural similarities and differences within a state. I had not heard it for years, but this past week I reheard an old quip that circulates in the United States, if not elsewhere. It goes like this: anthropologists [meaning cultural anthropologists in the U.S. mode] study other people's relatives. Folklorists study their own relatives. The difference that was once easiest to evoke with the German distinction between *volkskunde* and *volkerkunde* is at issue in museums of ethnography as it is in folklore studies, European ethnology, and social/cultural anthropology more generally. (This is not to deny the important place that colonialism, and not just nationalism, had in the broader formation of folklore studies, as Sadhana Naithani's work has been particularly effective at illustrating.)

These dynamics shape my response to your question. A vast physical and cultural distance may separate the present staff at the British Museum from the citizens of a small and remote village in India. Physical and cultural distance exists also between the ENM staff and a rural village in Estonia, but it is much less. There is almost no distance at all separating the Osage Nation Museum (the oldest Native American community museum in the United States) and the members of Osage communities. It is run by Osage people for Osage people. None of the museum positionalities here are categorically better, but they are significantly different. Each context is shaped by different histories of colonialism and nationalism and doing meaningful, ethical, useful work in the present and the future will require of each museum somewhat different strategies. Each kind of museum can learn from the work and experiences of the other kinds, but they will each also need to develop situationally appropriate strategies attuned to their histories, circumstances, and mission.







Much influential work in museum ethnography right now arises from the colonial/decolonizing context. These efforts are important, but as a folklorist I wish that the field as a whole was more attentive to the challenges of, and opportunities inherent in, constructively confronting the other side of the colonialism/nationalism continuum that I have evoked. This was a tension present in the recent International Committee for Museums and Collections of Ethnography conference held at the ENM in Tartu. Most attendees were working in ethnographic museums centred on rural life in local and national contexts, while the keynote speakers channeled innovations centred in cosmopolitan museums concerned with colonial collections and legacies. The number of museums where both themes are equally in play and are being tended to concurrently, and in an integrated way, is small and the disciplinary conversations are not integrated particularly well. A project at the Pitt-Rivers Museum called "The Other Within: An Anthropology of Englishness" worked at this interface. The museum that I direct, the Mathers Museum of World Cultures, is unusual in that it serves equally two significant academic programs (anthropology on the one hand, folklore studies on the other) located on both sides of this history and is the home for both local and distant ethnographic research and collections.

That is a lot of framing for too few shifts noted, I fear. But I would highlight some of the following as developments of the sort that you are asking about. Among museums, museums of ethnography probably take the wider drive to "decolonize museums" more seriously than other kinds of institutions. A lot of innovations and interventions gather under this call and warrant our consideration and engagement.

Digital tools and practices figure prominently in the changing work of museum ethnography, a matter that folklorist Marsha MacDowell and I tried to survey in a contribution to *Folklife and Museums: Twenty-First Century Perspectives* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2017).

A prominent set of practices and engagements are associated with the keywords "source communities" or "originating communities." At issue here are projects and practices that reconnect communities with collections derived from those communities. Here the forms and norms of work are advancing quickly, with what were felt to be (and were) positive steps forward ten years ago seeming insufficient now. But the kinds of consultative work that I am evoking is intentionally slow and thus requires patience. It does not scale up easily and relationships born out of collaboration and consultation demand ongoing tending.

As in folklore studies as a whole, issues of cultural heritage and cultural property are fundamental in museum ethnography. One cannot advance the work without tracking and engaging them. Thankfully, ethnographic museums are in a position to contribute to such wider discussions from a unique perspective.

Greater attention right now is going to questions of training in and for museum ethnography. New kinds of graduate programs are being developed and extra-circular initiatives such as the Summer Institute in Museum Anthropology (held at the Smithsonian Institution) have been developed in recent years. These efforts aim to better train students for sophisticated work with museum collections and the communities that value them.

**Nimeshika Venkatesan:** Your insights on insights on museum ethnography and the notion of the intimate other definitely offers a fresh perspective. In context then, we do see that in recent times there are a number of venues for application-oriented engagements of cultural heritage. Would you see this as the way forward for the folklore discipline? Also how do you see the future of folklore





**Jason Baird Jackson:** I think that cultural heritage policies and practices will continue to be a major theme for the work of folklorists around the world. Not everyone will or should focus their attention there, but heritage is a logical topic for us to engage. The work of our discipline helped shape current heritage regimes and thus we have a kind of obligation to stay with it. At the same time, as a widely-shared topic of concern, heritage work is means by which folklorists can connect with one another across national and regional contexts and it also offers a zone of engagement in which folklorists can engage with scholars in other heritage-minded fields. My own sense--and there is some bibliographic data to support this view--is that heritage studies is an area where folklorists are recognized beyond the field as leading thinkers and contributors. We should maintain a leadership role in this field. So, I do think that heritage will remain one of the matters that we attend to going forward.

At the same time, I certainly do not think that folklore studies should be collapsed into interdisciplinary heritage studies. Not every folklorist is, first and foremost, interested in heritage and our field has much to offer on many fronts. We need to steward our strengths in the wide range of areas where we have cultivated expertise and pioneered distinctive methods and concepts. From folk narrative research to vernacular architecture studies, from children's folklore to creative aging research, folklorists have a broad discipline that they can be proud of and that provides a platform for addressing new questions and new global challenges.

Those two thoughts converge in my view that the next period of work in international folkloristics will likely see us taking up new issues that seem to us to be global in scope and pressing in their human significance. I do not know exactly what those issues will be, but I think of our work on heritage over the past two decades as a kind of prelude to whatever the next big issues are likely to be. There is still much to do in the areas of cultural heritage and cultural property, but we now have a strong body scholarship born out of our engagements with these questions. No one national tradition of work in folklore studies is hegemonic in that literature. Important work has arisen from many different disciplinary contexts and the best work takes that international richness into account. I cannot help but anticipate that our new work will link to issues already in full view--anthropogenic climate change, large scale population movements, inequality, environmental degradation, corporate power, resurgent authoritarianism, and similar matters. Unlike with heritage, folklore studies is not in a position to claim a privileged position in engagements with such issues but, drawing on our history of work and our engagements with diverse lived experiences, we will have unique contributions to make to understanding and, I still hope, addressing the problems that we face. A key challenge though is the one that Dorothy Noyes (*Humble Theory: Folklore's Grasp on Social Life*, Indiana University Press, 2016, 412-416) has discussed under the heading of what she calls "slogan concepts." The challenges raised are many, but they include the ways that slogan concepts such as "intangible cultural heritage" address symptoms (rather than the causes) of larger structural problems that go unexamined and unattended to. Folklorists will surely engage "new" slogan concepts in Noyes' sense, but I hope that we can learn from our experience engaging and critiquing heritage so as to engage more deeply with the issues that underpin new concerns-to-come.

While I am worried about the human condition, I am optimistic about folklore studies. Folklorists make beauty and pattern more legible, they ally themselves with communities who need and deserve allies, and they take diverse forms of everyday life, past and present, seriously. In doing so, they gain the perspective by which overly simple, often ethnocentric, elitist, hegemonic, accounts of the world can be contested and complexified.





**Nimeshika Venkatesan:** Jason, it has been wonderful conversing with you about our shared field in folklore studies and I am very confident that the future is bright for us aspiring scholars of folklore and hopefully adventurous in a pleasant way. Thank you very much for sharing your thoughts! I do hope that in the future we find an opportunity to work together!

**Jason Baird Jackson:** Thank you very much for this opportunity to reflect on the state of folklore studies today. It was a pleasure contemplating your ambitious and substantive questions. I hope to have a chance soon to interview you about your own research and your reflections on our field!



## LIST OF EXECUTIVE MEMBERS OF THE INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY FOR FOLK NARRATIVE RESEARCH (ISFNR)

The Executive Committee of the ISFNR is elected by the General Assembly and consists of the President, Vice-Presidents representing different continents, Treasurer, and three ordinary members. Along with the President the Vice-Presidents form the Membership Committee of the Society, under a Chair to be elected from their own number.

## CURRENT MEMBERS OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE:

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## EDITORS NOTE

*Miringrang*, the header of each page of this Newsletter as the Karbi symbol of life and death is focused upon in this Issue of the Newsletter because the graphic design and layout is done by Karbi MA Student in Folkloristics, Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore, University of Tartu, The'ang Teron. The art, also by The'ang, on the cover page symbolises the orality of the Karbi indigenous community of Northeast India. What is spoken is sacred and what is said is transmitted through tradition. The triangles of red, white, and black symbolise the gateway of life and death and the liminalities in between. Each page has a total of nine miringrang; nine - *sirkep* - being the sacred number in the community. The red, white, and black, artfully rendered lines at the end of each page are traditional Karbi colours.

(Photo courtesy: The miringrang emblem is taken from the CKS- Centre for Karbi Studies)



DESIGN & LAYOUT - THE'ANG TERON