

The International Conference „Balkan and Baltic States in United Europe: History, Religion, and Culture V” (Tartu, Estonia, September 18–22, 2022)

The 14th Annual Conference of the Centre of Excellence in Estonian Studies and the 5th international conference “Balkan and Baltic States in United Europe: History, Religion, and Culture V” was held in Tartu, Estonia on September 18–22, 2022. The general topic of the conference was “Nature and Culture in the Rituals, Narratives and Beliefs”. The organizers were: The Center of Excellence in Estonian Studies, The Department of Folkloristics Estonian Literary Museum, The Estonian Academy of Sciences, The Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum, The Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and The International Society of Balkan and Baltic Studies. The conference was held at the Estonian Literary Museum in Tartu, Estonia. The conference was organized in a hybrid format (in person and online).

According to the organizers, the theme “Nature and Culture in the Rituals, Narratives and Beliefs” makes us speculate on the binary opposition of Nature/Culture (formulated by Claude Lévi-Strauss) as it is seen in traditional and modern societies. This opposition finds multiple implementations in many folklore genres, in the beliefs and customs of the calendaric and family life cycles, in folk religion practices, in language etc. However, Nature and Culture are not always opposed; they interrelate and complement each other. In post-modern society due to the increasingly acute challenges of climate change, and correspondingly the cultural attitudes towards nature, actions and debates related to development and sustainability stand at the center of European and world-wide rhetoric. According to the

conference organizers, the study of Nature/Culture dichotomy became a broad interdisciplinary field – where humanities and social sciences cooperate with Earth and environmental sciences, economics, health and food security etc.

Precisely for the above reasons, the conference was targeted at scholars and researchers from diverse disciplines and backgrounds interested in presenting their research related to the general topic of the conference. The themes of the presentations varied, but were generally dedicated to the Balkan-Baltic region in the context of the nature/culture dichotomy: local and traditional ecological knowledge, environmental movements, European mechanisms for nature conservation; Economics/political economy and “human–nature” coexistence; Traditional beliefs and practices and nature/culture correlation; Nature and culture in religion, festive rituals and everyday life; Paganism and neo-paganism: culture or/and nature?; COVID 19 – the revenge of nature?; Arts and Nature; Climate, ecology and climate change in public and individual discourse.

There were 70 presentations at the conference, and the participants were from several countries: Bulgaria, Slovenia, Lithuania, India, Russia, Belarus, Estonia, Finland, Poland, Holland, Hungary, Norway, Latvia, Germany, Serbia, Romania, Greece. My presentation “Folk customs and beliefs in Kosovo and Metohija between the two world wars” was held on September 20 in the section “Customs, belief and rituals”. In addition to the presentations, two workshops were organized. The first workshop was called “Sacred

sites as sites of problems”. This roundtable posed a rhetorical question: what are the problems of sacred sites? How do these problems point to the contexts and motivations of various actors? The convenors of the roundtable offered various case studies from Estonia to illustrate the discussion and expected participants to contribute ideas and examples from their own cultures. The second workshop was called “Art in COVID-19 humor”. Using the material from the International Coronavirus Humor Corpus, this workshop aimed to analyze COVID-19 humor using references to art (e. g. painting or music) and popular culture (e. g. film, TV series, literature, etc.) as the area where the

global and local collide and interweave, including some hybrid forms. In particular, the workshop focused on the Central and Eastern European and Baltic cultural space, looking into how local and regional traditions are mixed with transnational references in order to produce humorous effects. Finally, the participants of this interdisciplinary conference were not only able to discuss various aspects of the main topic, but also had the opportunity to learn about the cultural heritage of the countries from which the participants came, thanks to the inventive organization.

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