The “Domus” as “Shared breath:” a way to challenge the boundaries between “reality” and belief among indigenous peoples

Meeting the supernatural and engaging with non-human beings is often not perceived as “uncanny” among indigenous peoples. Rather, it is felt as an experience which brings together several aspects of life, including human and non-human beings, and which connects to the environment, and brings back (or not) social order.

With this workshop, we challenge the assumption that there is a strict distinction between “reality” and “magic/belief” through an analysis of verbal art. We are interested in enchantments and other verbal “magic” practices among indigenous groups. More specifically, we inquire how the spoken word along with the intentional breath, is the space through which negotiations with non-human beings take place. Within this space, humans and non-humans demonstrate to have agency and be able to influence the course of life events. The “domus” in which they simultaneously dwell, therefore, surpasses a merely geographical conceptualization, but encompasses also the breath, its intentionality, and the spoken word. By adding a new focus to the concept of “domus,” the workshop links to a contemporary discussion on the relations between the individual, non-humans beings (animals, spirits, etc.), and the territory in which they live.

Reference

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Knowing and Encountering the Otherworld in Nenets Shamanistic Poetry

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Nenets shamanistic poetry consists of sung epic and ritual poetry that both dwell in the same landscape. This scenery is at the same time built on the everyday premises of the Nenets nomadic way of life and on the possibilities of orally projecting images of the otherworld on this quotidian landscape. The images projected, are produced by specialists in oral poetry that master the traditional contents and imagery of the poetry, its structural and linguistic features, and the strategies for the production. Travelling, encounters, and negotiations are central in Nenets shamanistic poetry, as well as the possibilities of misunderstanding, misconduct, and fierce violence following them. The performance of the poetry is governed by poetic and musical conventions that both link the epic and ritual poetry and set them apart in certain respects.

This paper explores the interconnections between Nenets epic and ritual poetry. It will discuss the notions of the song (syo) and the word (wada) as key terms that open up views on the
Nenets understanding of possibilities of knowing about the otherworld, being in contact with it, and transmitting the information about the otherworld. The paper will show that Nenets knowledge about the otherworld is profoundly connected to the ideas of dissemination of this knowledge through interaction, and through the voice and words of those who took part in or witnessed the interaction. Travelling, as a precondition for encounters and interaction, is intertwined in poetry with the notions of singing and word, and travelling connects the mythic landscape with otherworldly beings and the poetics.

The presentation is based on the corpus of Nenets shamanistic poetry collected by Matthias Alexander Castrén in 1840s and Toivo Lehtisalo in 1910s. It will discuss two genres, namely the epic syudbabts and the ritualistic sampadabts.

Keywords: oral poetry, shamanism, Nenets, landscape, Otherworld, knowledge

Where do the shepherd dwell?

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The Finnic/North Russian shepherd as a person and/or social role is a marginal in-between, somebody to whom during the herding season different taboos (moral, behavioural, sexual) may apply. The taboos „are taken” by him according to the magical agreement with the forest spirit who takes then the cattle then under his protection. Even today in the northern parts of Russia that kind of shepherds who have used or are using this kind of magic can be found. Also for the ordinary members of community this kind of relationship between shepherd and forest is nothing too supranormal.

This way the „position” of shepherd remains between the human society and forest/wilderness. He dwells in his own „autistic room”, holding distance with everything human and daily, and assuring this way the forest’s protection over the cattle. The shepherd’s relationship with forest (differently to the hunter or gatherer) is not active or contacting. Nordic shepherd does not dominate over the livestock (differently what Ingold 2002: 72 – 75 states), he is not fully the representative of human community, but rather some kind of „hostage” of forest.

In the herding period shepherd uses to keep silent. Nevertheless, the verbal magic has its role in the herding, especially on the St. George’s day when cattle is let out. This day the ritual is made where the cattle has circled by shepherd using some magical items. The ritual takes place (as expected) somewhere on the border of the village, near forest. The special prayer-like charm is performed by shepherd or by the village sorcerer/healer. Often the same text has been written on the paper (Bobrov & Fintšenko 1986) and if the shepherd was illiterate somebody else might read it in the ritual. I have managed to copy/photograph that kind of texts from my Vepsian informants. As artefacts these texts on paper have been magical proofs about the competence of shepherd. Shepherd had to keep this paper away from other people not to breach the contract with forest and loose the magic protective power – similarly to healer who keeps his charms strictly himself.
Keywords: Finnic peoples, folk magic, forest, North Russia, shepherd, verbal magic, written

References


Co-Creation and Reenactment of the Relationship between St’át’imc Salish People and the Salmon People in the Fraser River Valley

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The St’át’imc Salish communities have thrived in governing their traditional fisheries in the Fraser River Valley of British Columbia, Canada, for centuries. It is said that this is not just because there were laws and social institutions in place but because these laws and institutions are grounded in a particular way of thinking about, communicating with, and honouring fish, fishing and fishing technologies. This system of beliefs includes profound notions of respect and collaboration in co-creating the relationships that sustain ‘life’, ‘body’, ‘mind’, ‘spirit’ and ‘home’ (domus). St’át’imc believe(d) that all living things were once people and they are respected as such. It was believed that the salmon runs were lineages in relations of kinship to human lineages and that as long as the salmon were allowed to return to their home rivers to spawn, then both lineages would thrive. First fish, particularly ‘wild’ salmon, ceremonies before the annual harvest and return of salmon were conducted to welcome the first fish and ensure posterity through respect, friendship and proper treatment. Prayers, songs, speeches and ceremonial actions were conducted to give recognition to the spirits of the salmon and to co-create through reenactment the space and conditions necessary to ensure the possibility of continued life, growth and unity. The primacy of the salmon in this reciprocal relationships sustains the livelihood and wellbeing of the human community which is highly endangered in times of fluctuation in salmon stocks and in destruction of salmon habitat. Drawing on a variety of historical and contemporary ethnographic (mis-)representations of the relationship between the salmon people and their human kin and on the rationale underlying the current efforts to revitalize these practices in the Upper St’át’imc context, this paper will explore explicit notions of the domus that challenge prevalent externally imposed dichotomies such as wild/domesticate and belief/reality by showing how the distinct components of these relationships are inextricably entangled in the simultaneity of the literal and the symbolic in the fishing way of life.
Keywords: St’át’imc Salish; traditional fishery; traditional governance; salmon people; cultural revitalization; traditional ecological knowledge; relational ontologies; domestication; Indigenous law