

FOLK NARRATIVES IN THE CHANGING WORLD:
THE 19TH CONGRESS OF THE INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY FOR
FOLK NARRATIVE RESEARCH (ISFNR)*

From 17–21 June 2024, researchers of folk narratives from all over the world gathered in Riga, Latvia, for the 19th Congress of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research (ISFNR). The Congress was hosted by the Archives of Latvian Folklore at the Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art at the University of Latvia, a renowned centre for the study of folkloristics in the region. The congregation of established scholars, early career researchers, and young professionals at the Congress created a collaborative forum for discussion and exchange of ideas over the next five days. The opening ceremony took place at the iconic building of the National Library of Latvia, resembling a folkloric glass mountain, and the opening dinner was hosted at the National Railway Museum of Latvia, where the conference was kickstarted with folk music, traditional dance, and a happy opportunity for networking and fostering academic collaboration. All the academic activities of the Congress were held at the House of Nature at the University of Latvia Academic Centre over the next few days.

The Congress had huge success in fostering interdisciplinary dialogue. It facilitated the co-creation of knowledge across a broad range of disciplines, including folklore, literature, anthropology, sociology, ethnology, cultural studies, digital humanities, and psychology. Centring around the theme of “Folk Narratives in the Changing World”, the Congress addressed dynamic genres of folk narrative across media and modalities

of cultural transfer. Presentations reverberated with issues of change in all aspects of life, including geopolitical conflict, climate crisis, and the increasing digitisation of culture. Over the course of the Congress, 131 (solo and joint) papers were presented by 143 presenters in 24 sessions. The sessions were grouped under seven larger categories, out of which five categories were sub-topics of the main congress: Oral vs Online, the Changing Environment, Narratives of Crisis, Digital Approaches, and Theoretical Paradigms. On top of these five general subtopics, committees within the ISFNR also invited presentations under committee sessions for the Belief Narrative Network (BNN), and the Committee for Folk Narrative, Literature and Media (FNLM).

Emphasising the place of folk narratives in the changing world, the five keynotes of the Congress addressed contemporary and pressing topics, ranging from digitality, orality, archiving, queerness, ecology, and environmental activism. Rita Grīnvalde’s keynote opened the conference by reflecting on the evolution of the Archives of Latvian Folklore. Her presentation not only delineated the geopolitical fluctuations that successively reshaped the institution, but also explicated the archive’s approach to collecting and preserving folk materials, moving from a nationalistic framework to a more inclusive, intercultural orientation. Carrying further the thoughts of change, adaptation and evolution, Veronica Strang’s keynote explored the evolving nature of people’s

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belief in elements of nature and its anthropomorphising over time from animism to contemporary belief systems. In this fascinating talk, she carried out an extensive comparative analysis of the representation of water beings in transformational narratives from mythology to folklore to contemporary environmental activism. Her keynote elucidated the versatility of the uses of folk narratives across ages. Departing from Strang's study of water beings in the ancient and contemporary world, Anne Kustritz delved into the virtual world of folk narratives. Her keynote expounded on the avenues and affordances of queerness in the age of digital orality. She examined amateur productions of erotic male-male "slash" fiction produced by women for the consumption of women within the podfic communities. Through her lecture, she made a compelling case for recognising the voice of the folk on modern digital platforms to revitalise the renewed power of orality in the digital age. Sándor Darányi's keynote propelled further contemporary perspectives by tying digital approaches to the methodological rubrics of researching folk narratives. He showcased the potential of using a digital approach to study fairy tales from numerous angles relying on computational analysis of a dynamic database of tale types and motif indices. The last keynote of the Congress, by Sadhana Naithani, brought back nature once again by weaving in folklore with ecology and colonialism. She explored the ways in which colonialism has impacted the lives of non-human animals in the colonies and how it is reflected in folk narratives. Primarily focussing on British colonial rule in India, her presentation substantiated how colonial contact and confrontation between different cultures change existing narratives about non-human animals, thus changing the very ecological fabric of the spaces concerned.

Resounding further the messages of the keynotes against a backdrop of constant change, the Congress brought forth various studies of Narratives of Crisis, including

stories of war, pandemics, natural disasters, and endangered communities. Olesia Naumovska's presentation stood out as one of the most time-relevant topics in this category, in which she examined Ukrainian fairy tales and contemporary war narratives, providing insights on life in the war-torn world of modern Ukraine. Presenters such as Dani Schrire, Alexandra Arkhipova, and Michal Pavlásek further addressed narratives of conflict, displacement, and political unrest, illustrating the profound impact of crisis on the folk as well as folk narratives. Other papers presented under the umbrella of Narratives of Crisis dealt with a wide variety of topics including pandemic narratives, narratives of disease, women's personal narratives, artificial intelligence, industrialisation, narratives of fascism, conspiracy narratives, myths of the apocalypse, the politics of legends, etc. The discussions that emerged out of the assemblage of ideas in this category critiqued oppressive regimes across the world while searching for a way to reconnect people to humanity through narratives of crises.

Equally interesting were the presentations under the subtopic of the Changing Environment. The panels in this category contained compelling explorations of environmental issues through folk narratives. Presentations covered narratives pertaining to climate issues, human and non-human entanglements, eco-narratives in the performing arts, weather proverbs, digital environments, preservation of the environment in a changing world, animal tales and many more. Addressing the subtopic of the changing environment, which profoundly resonates with the age we live in, presenters wove together a string of narratives that are not only moulded by the changing environment but also display the potential to generate awareness and reflexivity amongst people for the protection of the environment and averting the ecological crisis.

The presentations for the Oral vs Online subtopic emphasised the changing nature

and forms of folklore and its dissemination in the increasingly digitised world incorporating elements from popular social media platforms. Presentations ranged from studying the circulation of gossip from social life to digital life, to exploring cinematic storytelling from the angle of intersectional subalternity. All in all, the presentations demonstrated the ways in which the very fabrics and building blocks of folk narratives are shifting towards a digital reality as time changes, bringing forth new dimensions not only in the methods of dissemination but also in the modes of creation, co-creation, and re-creation of folk narratives modifying content as well as genre forms.

The Digital Approaches subtopic contained relatively fewer panels than others; however, it contained some of the most innovative presentations considering the increasing role of digitisation in all aspects of society and culture in the ever-changing world. Breaking away from traditional approaches to studying folklore based on ethnographic fieldwork, oral materials, and physical text-based archives, these panels advanced newer approaches to studying digital archives and corpora. Presentations in this panel performed computational comparison and creative explorations of folk songs, corpora of legends, and other folklore genres. The digital approaches showcased in these panels came as a much-needed promise for the future of folkloristics as a discipline as the world experiences digitisation in every facet of life.

The papers presented under the subtopic of Theoretical Paradigms brought together the overarching conversations in all other subtopics while pushing for dialogue between various theoretical paradigms that intersect with the concerns of folklorists. Presentations in these panels commented on and called for shifts in the theoretical paradigms pertaining to colonial legacies, European folkloristics, structuralism, intertextuality, genre theory, narrative theory, and intangible cultural heritage. Theoretical

paradigms discussed in these panels reasserted folklore as a truly postmodern discipline that cuts through disciplinary boundaries with its ubiquitous presence in all areas of life as well as across academic disciplines, which was further supplemented by the multidisciplinary composition of Congress participants. This is precisely how the Congress was able to highlight that folklore not only borrows the theories of other disciplines such as anthropology, history, psychology, linguistics, and literature but also contributes to them by progressively modifying them and recirculating them much like the content it studies for the advancement of its own intrinsic theories.

Parallel to the primary subtopics of the conference, the committee sessions also created a lively space for fostering dialogue on folk narratives in the changing world. Over the last decade, the BNN Committee has been one of the most active sections of the ISFNR regularly releasing newsletters and organising online lectures and other international events. Since the members of this Committee study the many manifestations of belief in narrative and practice, the presentations largely covered belief narratives and practices from various contexts. Papers presented for BNN panels ranged from vernacular Hinduism to interpretations of magic, narratives of the dead, spirit possession, 'traditional' healing practices, and horror narratives on digital media. Topics covered in the presentations and subsequent discussions went beyond the 'traditional' understanding of belief in vernacular culture and encapsulated a broader understanding of belief through uncanny life stories, sleep paralysis, propaganda, false narratives, etc. The discussions that followed these engaging sessions re-established that belief narratives are not only around us but live within us and are constantly changing in tandem with the changing world.

Though the Committee for Charms, Charmers and Charming hosted no presentations in the 2024 Congress, except a report

on the Committee's activities, another Committee made its debut appearance in the 2024 Congress, i.e., the Committee for FNLM. Presentations for FNLM spanned the manifestations of folk narratives in literature and media. Some of the themes these presentations tackled were gender, desire, queerness, adaptations, multispecies relationships, postapocalyptic cultural and ecological landscapes, etc. Presentations not only involved fairy tales and children's literature but also paranormal legends, digital games, films, folk songs, etc. The presenters brought in varying perspectives from different contexts, creating a panorama of diversified folk narratives on print, media, and other platforms, commenting on the intrinsic changes in the form and content of the narratives through the lens of consumerism, social change, the industrial revolution, nationalism, shifting power relations, issues of authenticity, etc. One of the most intriguing presentations, by Charlotte Trinquet du Lys, investigated representation of food in relationship to colonialism in Madame d'Aulnoy's fairy tales in Early Modern France. Anne Duggan's presentation explored the power of storytelling in building awareness of sustainable living in the film *Gwen, or the Book of Sand* (1985), set in a postapocalyptic landscape left barren by consumerist culture.

In addition to the academic panels, the Congress also organised an interesting workshop for the participants. Joshua Hagedorn's workshop, *Opening the Trilogy: Folklore Taxonomies and Annotated Texts for Reproducible Research*, was one of the most attractive events in the Congress. In this workshop, participants learnt how to use digital tools such as the programming language R, and github, to answer research questions about a given corpus of folk narratives computationally. Participants were allowed to freely join and rejoin at any time. Though four hours may not have been enough to learn how to use digital tools independently, it sparked great interest in

computational folkloristics amongst the participants, generating scope for a shift in the methodological approaches to future research in the field.

Apart from academic activities, the Congress also included extracurricular activities that offered the participants plenty of opportunity to learn about Riga, the city where the Congress was hosted. The first day of the conference featured a guided tour of Riga's picturesque old town. On the third day, an excursion to Gauja National Park with visits to the castles of Sigulda and Turaida was organised, concluding with a cheerful gathering over local delicacies at a campsite. Apart from the main activities of the Congress, the alignment of the event with the week of Midsummer also provided the participants with a chance to attend the *Jāņa sēta* traditional Midsummer celebration event and experience the charms of the traditional Midsummer market in Riga. The conference ended with a festive gathering of all the participants at a local restaurant for the closing dinner, and the ethno disco night Solstice afterwards.

The ISFNR's customary General Assembly was held on the penultimate evening where the outgoing president of ISFNR, Sadhana Naithani, presented a report on the activities carried out by the ISFNR since the 2021 Congress. She also welcomed Mirjam Mencej as the new president of ISFNR. The general assembly proposed that an early career scholar (at the advanced stage of PhD or within two to three years of completing a PhD) be included in the Executive Committee (EC) as an observer, and I am grateful to have been selected for this position. The EC also welcomed its newest members Anne Duggan and Sandis Laime as the Vice Presidents for North America and Europe and Lina Būgienė as the EC Member in charge of the ISFNR online lecture series. Unfortunately, the position of Vice President representing the African continent on the EC remains vacant, which indicates that there is a need to build a stronger relationship with

folklorists from Africa, and other underrepresented regions.

Though the Congress was a major success in terms of fostering dialogue and strengthening the scholarly community of folk narrative researchers, there is much work yet to be done in terms of inclusivity at the global level. Based on institutional affiliation recorded in the programme of the ISFNR 2024 Congress (Laime 2024), most participants came from universities located on the European continent (70% of participants from 22 countries). 18% of the participants represented Asia (China, India, Israel, and Japan), whereas 11% came from North America (USA and Canada; out of the 11%, about 2% are independent scholars based in the USA (source personal interactions)). The representation of South America (Argentina) was limited to only 1%, with no participants from African or Australian institutions. Africa was present, although only amongst the field locations studied.

Though the ISFNR includes members from as many as 80 different countries (ISFNR 2023), only 29 countries (36%) were represented by the Congress participants. Breaking down further the number of participants by country shows that about 14% (highest) of the participants were from Estonia, followed by India (13%), the USA (10%), Latvia (7%), and the UK (7%). Estonia having the high presence could be attributed to geographical closeness and to the fact that the ISFNR is officially registered in Estonia, where the University of Tartu hosts a robust community of folklorists. On the other hand, the relatively high participation of India was perhaps a positive effect of the ISFNR and its members' collaborative activities carried out in North-Eastern India over the last two decades, which established professional relationships that continue to be sustained by the members of the ISFNR's BNN Committee. Financial limitations in the humanities, especially for early career researchers, are yet another recognisable issue. Perhaps offering the possibility of presenting in vir-

tual panels in addition to on-site presentations would attract a more diverse range of participants and audiences in the upcoming Congress, contributing further to the expansion of the ISFNR as an international community of researchers.

Nevertheless, with its significantly low membership fee, the ISFNR remains one of its kind in the field of folk narrative research, encouraging individuals from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds across the world to join as active members. Though this is my second ISFNR Congress, it is the first time I attended in person, which was made possible by the ISFNR travel grant. I had a wonderful experience at the Congress, where I made several new connections and had the opportunity to catch up with old friends and colleagues from around the world. Leaving Riga after the five intense days of the Congress felt both nostalgic and overwhelming, as well as rewarding. I look forward to the next ISFNR interim conference, which will be hosted by the University of Iceland, in Reykjavik in 2026, while we wait for the 20th ISFNR Congress, to be held at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland, in 2028.

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