

ISFNR COMMITTEE ON *CHARMS*, *CHARMERS*, AND *CHARMING* 16th ANNUAL CONFERENCE: JUNE 12th– 15th, 2024 HELSINKI “CONFLICTS AND CATASTROPHES”

The 16th annual Conference organized by the ISFNR Committee on *Charms, Charmers, and Charming* is an important event in folklore studies and cultural anthropology. This year, it was hosted in Helsinki by the Folklore Studies Department of the University of Helsinki and the Finnish Literature Society. The *Conference* received financial support from the Kalevala Society and the “Materiality, Verbal Art, Mythic Knowledge and the Lived Environment” (ASME) project. After four years of online and blended meetings, the 2024 “ChaChaCha Conference” eventually brought physically together researchers and scholars from fourteen different nations to discuss and share their findings on the use of rituals, charms, and traditional practices in coping with conflicts and catastrophes. The papers presented at the *Conference* revealed a rich variety of research focusing on conflicts and catastrophes and the various ways societies cope with them. Several key research themes emerge, including the role of rituals, charms, and traditional practices in crisis management.

A group of Indian scholars offered one significant thread of the *Conference*. These studies emphasize the vital role of traditional knowledge and cultural practices in contemporary Indian society, demonstrating their adaptability and significance in addressing modern conflicts and environmental challenges. Through rigorous fieldwork and anthropological insight, these researchers have provided a deeper understanding of how Indian culture continues to evolve and respond to crises.

Mir Masudul Hoque (Aligarh Muslim University, India), “Singing to the Trees: Baul’s Revival of Barsha Mangal to Cope with Environmental Crises,” focused on the Bauls’ revival of the Barsha Mangal festival in Bengal. His research examines the socio-cultural significance of this celebration, honouring the monsoon’s agricultural importance and its revitalization to raise awareness about environmental challenges through rituals, cultural performances, and tree planting. Hoque traced its historical roots, Rabindranath Tagore’s contributions, and the Bauls’ contemporary reinterpretation of the festival in response to current environmental crises.

Karuna Kanta Kakati (Anundoram Borooah Institute of Language, India), “Beliefs and superstitions associated with the terrestrial spirits of Assam,” explored the beliefs and superstitions surrounding ghosts and evil spirits in Assam, India, where diverse ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups coexist. Her work shed light on how local narratives and superstitions reflect and address societal fears and uncertainties during times of conflict. Kakati discussed selected narratives from various localities in Assam, emphasizing the persistence of traditional beliefs in contemporary society.

Shantanu Chakraborty and Kishore Kumar Bhattacharjee (Gauhati University, Guwahati, India), “Traditional Herbal Medicine Practices of the Himalayan: A Case Study of the Nomadic Sellers,” investigated conventional herbal medicine practices among the nomadic Bhagoriya community in India. This community is known for its intergenerational dedication to herbal medicine, traveling across the country to sell Himalayan remedies. The researchers documented and analyzed the Bhagoriya’s medicinal plant knowledge, harvesting techniques, and cultural significance. They gathered qualitative and quantitative data using ethnographic interviews, participant observation, and ethnobotanical surveys. The study also explored the socio-economic dynamics of the herbal medicine trade, highlighting the nomadic community’s role in preserving traditional healing practices and cultural heritage.

Nidhi Mathur (Kurukshetra University, India), “Kedarnath: A Personification of Charms in Indian Society,” analyzed the emotional and theological responses to the Kedarnath floods. Her study focused on how disasters challenge religious beliefs and prompt the reuse and invention of charms to cope with the ensuing crises. Although she could not be at the *Conference* in person, only via video, Mathur’s paper

examined floods as sites of emotional crisis, questioning theology and discussing the transmission and circulation of charms during crises. She explored how old charms were reused and new ones invented in response to the disaster.

The following four research papers exemplify the importance of contemporary rituals and coping mechanisms across different cultures and religions. Each scholar, blending ethnographic fieldwork and anthropological knowledge, investigates how traditional practices have adapted to address modern crises. These studies share a common focus on the evolution and revitalization of rituals to maintain harmony, identity, and resilience in the face of environmental, social, and technological challenges.

Lili Di Puppo (Aleksanteri Institute, Finland), “Preserving the harmony between humans and the environment by caring for Muslim saints in Russia’s Urals,” highlighted the concept of an animate landscape through the experiences of Sufi Muslims and volunteers caring for sacred sites in Bashkortostan, located on the Western slopes of the Southern Ural Mountains. She contributed a new perspective on human-nature relationships by drawing from Muslim ontologies, exploring how the Sufi tradition’s “open heart” and “heart-knowledge” facilitated an experience of oneness with the animate landscape. She examined how the graves of Muslim saints communicated messages to the living, preserving the world’s existence.

Lisa Donovan (Liverpool John Moores University, UK), “Speaking to the New Gods.” Donovan, an artist and PhD candidate, delved into the interplay between technology and magic. Her examination revealed that new rituals and quasi-religious processes could assist humans in navigating their relationship with sophisticated technologies during crises. Donovan’s work included embedding Large Language Model prompts within songs for choir performances, blending traditional and contemporary practices. This innovative approach aimed to express a nuanced human identity in interactions with technology.

Fionnán Mac Gabhann (Indiana University, USA), “An Irish Priest’s Charming Amid Conflict,” illustrated the role of a traditional Irish priest in navigating conflicts between vernacular healing traditions and the institutional beliefs of the Catholic Church, emphasizing the use of charms to manage personal and communal crises. Mac Gabhann illustrated how Father Éamonn Ó Confhaola, a retired

priest, healer, and vernacular historian from the Connemara Gaeltacht in Ireland, believed in the efficacy of charms, contrasting with Post-Tridentine Catholic Church teachings. Mac Gabhann's talk highlighted Fr. Éamonn's role in preserving his community's healing traditions.

Mare Kõiva (Estonian Literary Museum, Estonia), “Do online incantations resemble previous texts?” explored the evolution of Estonian incantations, comparing traditional texts used during crises such as pandemics, wars, and accidents and the texts employed in contemporary rituals. Her research showed that modern incantations have adapted to address contemporary needs while incorporating elements of traditional rituals. Drawing on Tambiah's framework, which defines ritual as structured and sequenced words and actions with varying degrees of formality, stereotypy, and redundancy, she examined how new charms have been created in Estonia since the 1980s Nature and Earth Believers movement. These texts and their accompanying rituals conveyed equality between different beings and spheres, balancing with elements from various religions and integrating techniques such as meditation, incantation, singing, and movement.

These studies collectively underscore the dynamic nature of cultural practices and their critical role in helping communities cope with modern-day challenges. Through meticulous research and fieldwork, the authors provide valuable insights into how ancient traditions are being reinterpreted and revitalized to maintain cultural heritage and address contemporary crises.

The following three papers collectively centre on preserving and reinterpreting traditional cultural practices amid political and ideological challenges. Each study illustrates how modern political ideologies—be it Soviet anti-religion policies, Soviet assimilation efforts in Latvia, or the struggles encountered by Irish immigrants in America—have profoundly impacted the conservation, reinterpretation, and dissemination of these cultural traditions.

Karina Lukin (University of Helsinki, Finland), “Conflicting regimes of openness and prohibition in a 1928 shamanic song,” focused on contextualizing Yadne's shamanic text within the ideological climate of the time. The Soviet Union under Stalin was marked by an intense anti-religious ideology, viewing traditional practices like shamanism sceptically. Lukin's research explored the tension between the scholarly interest in preserving Indigenous knowledge and the state's efforts to suppress religious expression, highlighting the challenges

researchers and Indigenous communities face in navigating these opposing forces.

Aigars Lielbārdis (University of Latvia, Latvia), “Revitalization of healing traditions as part of the Latvian folk revival,” sheds light on the revitalization of healing traditions within the context of the Latvian folk revival. The 1980s marked a socio-political transformation in Latvia, known as the *Atmoda* (Awakening), paralleling the Soviet Union’s *Perestroika*. During this time, the reconstruction of Latvia’s political and economic system was underway. Lielbārdis emphasizes how the Awakening provided the backdrop for Latvia’s eventual independence, regained in 1991. Central to this era was the folk revival movement, initiated in 1978. Its primary focus was the rediscovery of national cultural heritage and traditional practices, countering the Soviet ideology that normalized social activities and stage culture. Healing traditions, preserved for centuries, became a focal point. These practices, shielded from foreign influences, were integral to the movement. Lielbārdis meticulously analyses their revitalization during the 1980s and early 1990s, considering historical context, socio-political processes, and the movement’s ideological basis.

Nicholas Wolf (New York University, USA), “Irish Charms in Transatlantic Print, 1800-1920,” presented a study on Irish charms in transatlantic print from 1800 to 1920. Wolf utilized recently digitized resources, including the Irish American newspaper “*An Gaodhal*” and the Royal Irish Academy’s “*Corpas na Gaeilge*”, to uncover examples of Irish-language charms. One such charm, discovered by Pennsylvania-based folklorist J. J Lyons in 1890 and originating from Donegal, was published in *An Gaodhal*. The study highlighted conflicts inherent in publishing charm texts in the modern era, where they were removed from their original contexts and presented in newspapers or books. Wolf discussed how nineteenth- and twentieth-century Irish-language publishing contexts influenced the dissemination and interpretation of charm texts. He argued that despite being extracted from their traditional oral contexts, charms continued to be valued within the broader framework of Irish folk customs, perpetuated by the global Irish diaspora through publications like “*An Gaodhal*”, which catered to Irish American readerships.

These four papers collectively investigate the significant influence of the Church in shaping the narratives and perceptions of supernatural

entities—saints, angels, and malefic agents—in folklore and religious traditions. Emphasizing the Church’s role in the demonization and sanctification processes, the studies explore how figures like the Devil, angels like Saint Michael, and saints like Judas Thaddeus are depicted and evolved over time. By examining the interplay between religious authority and cultural narratives, these papers highlight the enduring impact of ecclesiastical influence on folklore, spiritual beliefs, and the portrayal of good versus evil across different societies and historical periods.

Emanuela Timotin (Institute of Linguistics of the Romanian Academy, Romania), “A Stereotyped Enemy: Describing Malefic Agents in Romanian Charms,” examined the portrayal of malefic agents in Romanian charms. These agents were depicted with a range of harmful abilities, such as inflicting diseases, causing harm to individuals, families, communities, or cattle, and inciting strong emotions like love and anger. Despite their varied roles, their depiction in oral tradition charms was quite stereotyped. Conversely, charms from 17th to 19th-century manuscripts depicted these agents with more distinct features. Timotin aimed to identify the primary rhetorical devices used to describe malefic agents and to analyze their presence in Romanian charms from the 17th to the 20th century. She sought to determine the consistency of these devices across different periods and charm types. The Church played a crucial role in shaping the perception of these malefic agents, often associating them with the Devil to reinforce their malevolence. This association helped maintain a consistent image of the agents as embodiments of evil. Timotin’s analysis provided insights into the evolution of Romanian charm traditions and the changing perceptions of malefic agents over the centuries.

Daiva Vaitkevičiene (Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore, Lithuania), “Wise men or sorcerers? The demonization of charmers in Lithuanian legends,” discussed the categorization of individuals with supernatural abilities in Lithuanian folklore, as initially outlined by folklorist Norbert Vélius in 1977. Vaitkevičiene discussed Vélius’ typology, which includes witches, wizards, charmers, and others, highlighting overlaps and distinctions among these groups. Drawing from historical sources from the 16th to 18th centuries, including church documents and witch trial records, she examined how priests and priestesses of ancient Lithuanian religion, once regarded as wise helpers, were stigmatized as sorcerers and witches by the Christian Church. This process of demonization, influenced by ecclesiastical per-

spectives, reshaped legends and terminology, increasingly associating charmers and similar figures with malevolent forces.

Edina Eszenyi (HEI Pegaso International, Malta), “Shifting Hagiographies: St. Michael the Archangel in Supplication and Exorcism Formulas,” explored the historical and socio-cultural evolution of Saint Michael’s image within the Catholic Church. The study focused on how the Church shaped the Archangel’s attributes, influenced by various Popes. Pope Francis’ 2018 endorsement of the supplication for Saint Michael’s protection stemmed from a tradition initiated by Pope Leo XIII in response to a vision. Initially part of the ‘Leonine Prayers’ from 1886, this supplication addressed threats to the Holy See. Over time, different prayers emerged, reflecting Saint Michael’s evolving role from protector to warrior in times of spiritual and political turmoil. Eszenyi’s presentation underscored the Church’s role in defining Saint Michael’s attributes through these prayers and exorcism formulas.

Haralampos Passalis (Department of Medieval Lexicography in Thessaloniki, Greece) “Production and Reproduction of Religious Legends and Words of Power in Our Modern, Globalized, and Digitized Era: The Case of the Healing Prayer to Saint Judas Thaddeus,” explored the evolving veneration of Saint Judas Thaddeus, initially linked to Judas Iscariot but later rehabilitated through religious legends. These legends transformed Thaddeus into a highly venerated apostle known as the «patron saint of impossible causes». Passalis analyzed a specific prayer dedicated to Thaddeus, examining its structure and performative context to highlight distinctions between charm and prayer and official versus non-official practices. He traced the dissemination and adaptation of Thaddeus’s veneration in modern Greece, illustrating its global influence and proposing future international research opportunities. This study revealed the dynamic adaptability of religious legends in contemporary society.

The following papers delve into diverse aspects of charm studies across different cultural and temporal contexts, employing various methodologies rooted in historical analysis and textual interpretation. These studies highlight charm research’s interdisciplinary nature, combining historical inquiry, linguistic and philological analysis, and literature interpretation to deepen our understanding of charms’ roles in past societies.

Karolina Kouvola (University of Oulu, Finland) “Healing of a mental health crisis.”

Kouvola discussed *modersjukan*, also known as “mother illness”, a condition characterized by anxiety or depression within the charm tradition of Swedish-speaking Finland in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The presentation examined both vernacular and biomedical diagnostics of *modersjukan*, as described in charms and textual records from that period. It was noted that despite its name, *modersjukan* could affect both men and women and was often attributed to sorrow, hard work, or misfortunes. The analysis, which utilized written sources and a linguistic method, focused on healing these illnesses with *dyra ord* “precious words” and explored their cultural context, highlighting how the understanding of mental illnesses evolved into the early 20th century and influenced the collection of charms.

Katherine Hindley (Nanyang Technological University, Singapore) “How to Win Friends and Influence People: Interpersonal Charms in Medieval England.”

Hindley discussed how, while most surviving medieval charms were intended to cure injuries or wounds, some aimed to influence personal relationships. Her presentation provided an overview of English charms designed to manage interactions between people, ranging from protection against false witnesses to love, legal success, and ensuring favour from a lord. Hindley examined the language of these charms to explore how they utilized interpersonal relationships to coax or compel favourable outcomes. She highlighted the evolution of charms in manuscripts from different periods, such as London BL MS Sloane 475 (11th century), Cotton Titus D XXVII (11th-12th century), and Digby 86 (13th century). These examples demonstrated how an old charm against theft transformed into a means of protecting people and their social status.

Eleonora Cianci (University of Chieti-Pescara, Italy) “Medieval German charms against wind and storms.” The discussion focused on the 15th-century German text *Contra auram et tempestatem*, which specifically aims to ward off potential storms. Deities from Greco-Roman and Germanic mythology are often linked to meteorological phenomena like lightning and thunder. The Old and New Testaments depict God using floods, droughts, and famines as punishment, countered by blessings and prayers. Thus, Christian liturgy includes responses for weather control. This charm is found in a single manuscript (Munich, clm. 26693) and traces its origins to biblical episodes. This text includes a near-verbatim dialogue from the Gospel of John and uses a typical

Blutsegen formula to repel storms. Blessings and prayers against bad weather, relying on faith, entered Christian liturgy in the Middle Ages and continue today.

Fiorella Di Fonte (University of Chieti-Pescara, Italy), “Outsider antagonism and cursing dynamics in Old Norse Sagas.” The author examined how Old Norse sagas establish conflicts through interactions with characters considered outsiders, who are individuals from different communities, cultures, or social groups within the narrative context. Conflicts were shown to intensify when these outsiders were magicians using magic for hostile purposes. The presentation highlighted how the representation of cursers transformed and worsened over time in Norse prose literature. Early sagas from the 13th century depicted the curser as a sorcerer whose magical competence enjoyed social credit. In contrast, later sagas from the 14th to 15th centuries increasingly portrayed the curser as an outsider, often aligning with female Sami characters or supernatural beings such as giants or trolls. This shift highlights the increasing otherness associated with magical practitioners and their practices.

The last two papers in our report contribute to the interdisciplinary field of charm studies, each offering unique insights into the methodologies and theoretical frameworks used to understand these cultural phenomena. Together, these studies expand our understanding of charms as cultural artefacts, demonstrating innovative approaches to methodological inquiry and theoretical analysis within the field of folklore and cultural studies. They offer complementary perspectives on the study of charms, exploring their temporal and cultural dimensions while addressing the scholarly complexities inherent in their interpretation and classifications.

Frog (Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, Finland), “Temporal Ideologies and Positioning: Charming Encounters and Outcomes,” explored beliefs about time in Finno-Karelian and Germanic charms. He introduced «fractal recursivity» to analyze healing rituals, showing how rituals mirrored larger cosmological conflicts. Frog examined *historiolae* using past events in present rituals, discussing how performers positioned themselves relative to these events and addressed banishments and bindings. He highlighted disjunctions between the temporal ideologies of performers and researchers, tracing

traditional models back to ancient practices and emphasizing ritual continuity across time and cultures.

Davor Nikolić (University of Zagreb, Croatia) “Where There is Strife, there is Pride: Conflicts among Scholars of Charms.” This paper, a team effort with Evelina Rudan and Josipa Tomašić Jurić, explored conflicts among scholars studying verbal charms. Nikolić focused on methodological approaches, highlighting conflicts between the practice of charms and academic interpretations, particularly discrepancies between emic (insider) and etic (outsider) perspectives. He discussed the complexity of classifying charms, debates about influences on charm structures, and the interplay between magical and religious beliefs, providing theoretical insights and a comparative perspective.

All the papers, conducted using various research methodologies, underscore the importance of integrating traditional knowledge, cultural practices, and innovative approaches to cope with conflicts and catastrophes. By examining various cultural, religious, and technological responses, the studies contribute to a broader understanding of how societies navigate and mitigate the impact of crises. The 2024 Helsinki *Conference* was a unique platform for sharing and discussing research. The lively debates and insightful questions that followed each presentation underscored the *Conference* importance, fostering a collaborative and intellectually stimulating environment. These interactions highlighted the diversity of approaches and perspectives within the field, revealing common themes and concerns across cultural and geographical boundaries. The dynamic exchange pushed the boundaries of existing knowledge and identified new research avenues, emphasizing the need for interdisciplinary studies that bridge cultural practices and technological advancements. Questions raised after each presentation underscored the complexities of studying rituals and charms, highlighting the importance of preserving intangible cultural heritage while navigating modern challenges.

Leisure activities and cultural moments offered by our marvellous Finnish hosts significantly enriched the *Conference*. Snacks and drinks at the *Laterna Magica* bookshop provided an intimate and charming setting for informal discussions amidst a treasure trove of literary works. The conference dinner on the *Royal Line Dinner Cruise* offered a stunning maritime experience, cruising through Helsinki’s picturesque archipelago. This delightful evening of fine dining and scenic views facilitated relaxed networking and deepened professional connections.

Additionally, the visit to the *Finnish Literature Society Archives* was a highlight, offering insights into Finland's rich folklore heritage and the meticulous preservation of its cultural history. These convivial and cultural moments were essential in creating a memorable conference experience.

A vital aspect of the *Conference* was the Committee meeting, where it was decided that the next one would be held in Bucharest in 2025. We look forward to being together again and extend our heartfelt thanks to the organizers for their outstanding efforts in making this event so remarkable.

Eleonora Cianci