

Regulating Customs – the 12th Annual International Conference of the SIEF
Working group “The Ritual Year”, Findhorn (Scotland), 8–12 January 2016.

The 12th annual international conference of the SIEF Working group “The Ritual Year” took place in Findhorn, Morayshire, Scotland, 8–12 January 2016 under the general title “*Regulating Customs*”. The academic event was organized by **Thomas McKean**, with **Frances Wilkins**, **Athanasios Barbalexis** and **Marlene Hugoson** on the committee, under the auspices of the Elphinstone Institute, University of Aberdeen,

Each annual conference of The Ritual Year working group has its own specific features and uniqueness. The Findhorn one was fated to be exceptionally unusual because of several obstacles, including its chronotope. For the first time, the scholars met up in early January (which actually made it impossible for several regular members to attend), in the days ideally fit into the local ritual year. The dates correlate with the main ritual attraction of the region – The Burning of the Clavie at Burghead (<http://www.burghead.com/clavie/>), a nearby fishing village and site of a major first-millennium Pictish fortification. The Clavie is a fire festival marking Aul Eel (Old Yule), 11 January, according to the Julian style before the 1750 shift to the Gregorian in Scotland. A detailed lecture on the Clavie, its history, and recent development, was delivered by Tom McKean on the eve of the event and after the end of the conference, delegates had a wonderful opportunity to see preparations for the festival in the village, to take part in it in the evening, and to celebrate the Old New Year in the local pubs.

The very venue of the conference, The Findhorn Foundation, apart from giving the scholars an opportunity to experience the local Scottish atmosphere, was most interesting from an ethnographic, religious, and folkloric point of view. The Foundation was established in 1964 as a place for spiritual growth; it has its own complex history (<https://www.findhorn.org/>), with many events related to the ritual year integrated into its calendar. We were fortunate to hear an introduction to the Foundation and its history from an associate, **Peter Vallance**.

The conference schedule was very busy, containing some 25 papers encompassing ethnography, cultural anthropology, sociology, history, religious studies, folklore, and linguistics, organized into panels: “Transitions”, “Regulation and Control”, “Adaptations”, “Negotiating Oppositions”, and “Creating Identities, Creating Traditions”. Scholars from England, Scotland, the USA, Israel, France, Slovenia, Croatia, Russia, Romania, Thailand, Estonia, Lithuania, and Greece dealt with field research data from many regions and many time periods, from ancient to modern.

Several papers were dedicated to classical study of the ritual year, like **McKean**’s above-mentioned presentation on the Clavie, with impressive field data and historical evidence. **Fiona-Jane Brown**, in her paper, “The Fisherman’s Luck: The Seaward Clavie and its Variants”, focused on the non-calendrical version of the local fire festival in the center of which is the belief that burning a clavie (or “witch”) is an effective remedy against bad luck. The ritual is accepted to be directly functional, and the very word clavie may be connected with the Gaelic word *cliabh*, possibly meaning “basket” (used for holding fishing lines), or “torch”. The paper contained oral narratives from those who used to take part, and also offered analysis of the negative attitudes of the post-Reformation Church of Scotland towards these activities. **Nancy McEntire**, in “First Footing in the North of Scotland, Past and Present” founded on historical sources and her own experience, showed the wide

„*Revista română de sociologie*”, serie nouă, anul XXVII, nr. 1–2, p. 151–154, București, 2016

and still regulated range of rules, practices, and beliefs associated with the first house visit in the early hours of 1 January in the Orkney Islands. The list of undesirable visitors is still well known in the vicinity, as are the necessary ritual artefacts – a piece of coal, bread, and whiskey are obligatorily brought in the house. **Irina Sedakova**, in “Days of the Week as Regulators: Saturday and Sunday in Slavic and Balkan Rituals and Folklore”, analysed two scenarios of regulation. Being born on a Saturday is thought to determine aspects of the baby’s future life, attitudes to him in the community, and ascribes him a certain character. Another case is St. Nedelya (Sunday, St. Domenica) as a regulator of domestic work, as depicted in the unique poetics of the ballads. She does not punish those who work on “her” day, but instead she suffers herself, thus exploiting the emotion of compassion. Indigenous theoretical insights were discussed in the paper read by **Emily Lyle**, “Controlling the Magic Moment of First Sunrise”. The cosmic vision of the Sun as equal to a God(s) fits into the ritual year and in Scotland marks both 1 May (Beltane) and Easter Sunday. This is an excellent example of how ancient customs are incorporated within a Christian ritual sequence, which leads to debate between practitioners, “the officials of the church” and the “people”. Such interplay was discussed in several other papers, as well.

Elizabeth Warner’s “‘I Love the Russian Birch Tree’: The Troitsa (Trinity/Pentecost) Festival and the Evolution of a Russian National Symbol” made an attempt to discover the roots of the stereotypical connection of the birch tree with Russian identity. Starting from the Christian Orthodox customs of bringing birch trees into the church for Pentecost and simultaneous folk religious girls’ rites with birch branches, Warner underlined the significance of the Trinity as depicted by Andrei Rubliov on the famous icon. To these elements she added poetic images of the birch-tree in the poems of Sergey Esenin and the expanding role of visual representation of this tree on various artefacts, including recent graves.

Lidija Nikocec’s paper, “The Bellmen of the North Adriatic Area: Local Tradition as World Heritage”, brought in very important theoretical and practical issues. What happens to a traditional festival after it has been put inscribed in UNESCO’s representative list of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, as happened with the Croatian Carnival of Bellmen in 2009. The performers themselves stand in the face of pressure from outsiders who offer innovations and social diversification of the festival. Will it stay “authentic” or will it be commercialized by officials and used for various new purposes (*e.g.*, tourism), a question facing most of the examples of intangible cultural heritage on the list.

Cozette Griffin-Kremer, in “Regulating Lily-of-the-Valley Festivals on National and Local Levels”, investigated the development of the May festival in local communities under the regulation of city administrators. A survey carried out in Rambouillet resulted in a brochure, which advises on exactly how to celebrate the May floral festival, so as to meet the festive needs of citizens along with commercial and touristic needs. According to Griffin-Kremer, such regulation is part of the interplay between the town administration and the performers.

Kobi Peled focused on a detailed analysis of a Palestinian wedding ritual conducted on the so-called “Brides’ Stone”, near a village well. The young bride was seated on the stone surrounded by elder women who sang songs and drew water for her. This rite was examined in light of van Gennep’s rites of passage between girl and married woman. The original stone being no longer in existence, it was reconstructed as part of a project honouring the cultural memory of local inhabitants. Similar processes of re-establishing rituals were depicted as taking place in other cultures. In “Traditional Ritual Responses to Contemporary Misfortune: ‘Youth Kurban’ and the Regulation of Social Life in the Post-Socialist Bulgarian Village”, **Petko Hristov** acquainted the audience with one renovated Balkan tradition. The Kurban is a ritual, including the sacrifice of a sheep and a common meal, which aims to bring fortune and well-being to the whole village, but in its renewed form it has developed into three separate feasts with different purposes and actors. Hristov examined this “invented tradition” in Eric Hobsbawm’s terms, a perspective frequently drawn upon in the papers dealing with innovations and transformations of tradition.

Suzy Harrison talked about “The Development and Management of Transnational Tradition: The Case of Diwali in Leicester”, a multilevel study which covered the issues of migration and economics, multiculturalism and urban studies, as well as an ethnographic analysis of the Diwali festival and its growth in Leicester, with three official sources of regulation. It seems that the theme of “a foreign festival in new surroundings” is very relevant for the modern humanities, as demonstrated by **Flore Muguet**’s paper “Bhakti Fest to Burning Man: The Will of Deconditioning from Customary Practices” used field research from two huge American festivals, which are perceived by participants as the start for a new year, as a ritual which purifies them, and brings in spiritual enlightenment via individual seminars combining esoteric practice, psychotherapeutic methods, and traditional Eastern rituals.

The Church(es) and evolving ecclesiastical, folk religious festivals were studied in several papers. **Cristina Clopot**, in “Regimenting Change in Rituals for Russian Old Believers in Romania”, undertook a brief comparison of modern life-circle church rituals with old-time ones. The contemporary rhythm of life, migration and inter-confessional, international (Russian-Romanian) weddings have led to a great deal of change in the firmly-regulated Old-Believers’ practices. The rituals lose some of their components, reduce the significance of some ritual acts and are less strict regarding the time of their performance. **Skaidrė Urbonienė**, in the paper “Religious Feasts and the Soviet Regime: The Case of Cross-Days and May Devotions”, investigated the religious practice of Lithuanian Catholics, who have lived through rigid regulation during the Soviet atheistic period. Due to bans, the May devotional feasts changed the venue and the character of the performance, turning it from a public event to home altar celebrations, while the days dedicated to the Crosses have almost faded, since they can be performed only in the open air near the established crosses. **Marion Bowman** discussed “Roman Catholic Pilgrimage to Glastonbury, 1895–2015: Contestation and (Re)negotiation”, offering a well-structured account of historical changes in the forms, routes, and modes of pilgrimage, as well as in the very objects of glorification in Glastonbury. Multiculturalism, healing agendas, and being in motion are at the core of Catholic pilgrimage as observed by Bowman in 2015.

An invented fire feast, “The Night of Ancient Bonfires/Ancient Lights – Muinastulede”, in its development after its establishment in 1992 in Estonia and neighbouring countries, was scrutinized by **Mare Kõiva** and **Andres Kuperjanov**. The need to celebrate, to create visual effects, and to pay respect to pre-Christian traditions are the internal sources of regulation of the now very popular summer fire festival.

As in previous Ritual Year conferences, Wicca, Neo-Paganism and New Age practices were tackled in several papers. **Arunas Vaicekaskas** presented on the Lithuanian Neo-Pagan, “Ramuva Movement and the Revival of the ‘Pre-Christian’ Ritual Year: Precedent, Motives, and Regulations”, examining the role of one person, Jonas Trinkūnas, in turning the Neo-Pagan folklore movement into a confessional community of native religion. **Nicolle Sturdevant**, in “The Marriage Ritual”, also looked into the individual role of the neo-pagan celebrant, who leads the bride and groom through the rituals necessary to becoming a married couple. **Athanasios Barbalexis** read the paper “Sweeping the Worlds Clean in Modern Scotland: The Celebration of the Wild Hunt” which was based on his own participation in a new year ceremony under personal spiritual regulation of a local shamanic practitioner, Andrew Steed. **Morgana Sythove** in her lecture “Wicca – A Modern Religion in an Old Robe” gave a detailed insight into the historical sources of the famous world pagan movement, developed in the 1950s by Gerald B. Gardner. She defines this newly established movement as drawing on archaic traditions of witchcraft, but regulated by modernity.

Daša Ličen and **Jurij Fikfak** delivered a lecture on “Communitas and Rituals: Networks and Mediations: The Ljubljana Reading Society (1861–1941)”, in which they focused on “beginning” as a ritual, which in turn gives birth to other rituals and a chain of feasts. They draw attention to the organization of intellectual societies as an important form of regulating the process of nation-building and of shaping Slovenian identity. **James Deutsch** presented a paper, “From the ‘Great Race’ to ‘Shopping Alone’: Thanksgiving Customs of Consumption on Black Friday and Cyber Monday”, in which he regards consumers’ activity as a ritual and as part of a tradition. The will to socialize, belief

in supernatural powers, joyful emotions, connections between generations, and continuity all are present in the ritual practice in Black Friday shopping, in spite of the fact that it has begun only recently, in the twentieth century.

Teri Brewer's closing paper, "Stepping Back from the Ritual Year: Time, Tide and Tradition in Rural and Urban Rites and Their Study", brought together many of the themes emerging from the conference, discussing rural ritual year practices that have been transferred to urban settings. As local knowledge, narrative, and social structure entwine, we encounter micro-perspectives which enrich our understanding of both the local picture and larger patterns.

All the papers were followed by questions and discussions, which continued during coffee breaks and other gatherings. Apart from those mentioned above, issues included the role of the shift from Julian to Gregorian calendars in different countries and churches, the validity and relevance of Eric Hobsbawm's ideas of invented tradition, the methodologies of contemporary study of rituals, etc.

The second night of the conference, we heard four papers delivered by Elphinstone Institute's MLitt students, all of them linked to the conference theme. **Wirujana Prasansaph** discussed "The Adaptation of Loy Krathong Festival in Aberdeen" and offered an analysis of a local Aberdeen version of this celebration, a traditional Thai event showing gratitude to the Goddess Ganga. Prasansaph drew attention to adaptations relating to the chosen day of the event, to higher levels of visual expression of Thai identity, and to awareness of supernatural issues. Finally, she outlined reasons for these transformations ranging from local circumstances to urban "outsider" regulations which inform the practice in Aberdeen. **Maia Daniel**, in "Sugar Skulls in Scotland: The Cultural Appropriation of *Dia de los Muertos*", spoke on innovations in Halloween guising related to the Mexican Day of the Dead; **Jennifer Porath** analysed "The Witches of November", comparing the mythologies of the two weather phenomena, in Michigan, USA, and in Scotland; **Tallen Sloane**, in "Pilgrimage in a Bottle: Understanding Contemporary Healing Pilgrimages to Lady Well", discussed local awareness (or lack of it) around the ancient holy well, along with new practices and healing powers attributed to water from it.

The students also performed the folk play "Galoshins" traditionally performed in Scotland on Hagmonay, the New Year, using a text collected in Selkirk in the Scottish Borders by American collector James Madison Carpenter in the 1930s.

On the final night, conference participants had an opportunity to listen to traditional Scottish storytelling and a selection of Gaelic and Scots from songs from Peter and Sue Vallance, along with Elphinstone MLitt student, Anne Greig, and Tom McKean.

Following the formal conclusion of the conference, our day-long excursion around Morayshire left members with a wide range of impressions – natural and cultural – breath-taking in their beauty. Our first stop was Burghead, where we met with Dan Ralph, the Clavie King, and visited his workshop and the ancient village well, surrounded by the sea and the dramatic Scottish landscape. Then it was onward to Pluscarden Abbey and Elgin cathedral, with its ornately carved Pictish stone, in company of former Elphinstone Institute student, Richard Bennett. Our penultimate stop was Glen Moray distillery where we were chilled by a visit to the warehouse and warmed by a whisky tasting. Our final stop was the Burning of the Clavie as it processed through the streets of Burghead, finishing off in its traditional conflagration atop Doorie Hill, led by Dan Ralph and the Clavie Crew – a night never to be forgotten.

The next meeting of the SIEF Working group on "The Ritual Year" is scheduled for March 2017, in Göttingen, Germany, at the 13th SIEF Congress, where several panels on Ritual Year topics will be organised.

*Thomas McKean,
Irina Sedakova*