

**NORTHERN EUROPEAN FOLKLORE AND RELIGION: AN INTERVIEW WITH  
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**FOLCLORE E RELIGIÃO DO NORTE EUROPEU: UMA ENTREVISTA COM THOMAS  
A. DUBOIS**



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1. SCANDIA: Your paper “Rituals, Witnesses and Sagas” published in “Old Norse Religion in Long-Term Perspective: Origins, Changes and Interactions” emphasize the fact that it is not enough for the readers to not only keep in mind that pagan rites in Icelandic sagas are described by Christian lenses, but that it is above all necessary to question what kind of Christianity was practiced in Iceland during the Middle Ages. In this aspect, the analysis of different rites is, in your opinion, always supported by a tripod (Creed, Tradition and Ritual): shouldn't then we analyse these elements also according to different historical realities, actors and institutions? How homogeneous was medieval Iceland in order to draw conclusions over these dynamics?

*Thomas A. DuBois:* On both sides of the imagined Old Norse religion/Christianity divide, there has always been abundant regional, institutional and historical variation. It is important to recognize these variations in belief systems and practices and to accord neither side of the story some sort of purported stasis. The ways creed, tradition and ritual are understood and enacted in any one instance or context must always be understood as unique: it is methodologically difficult to compare elements of Old Norse ritual practices glimpsed in Icelandic sagas, with ones depicted in continental Eddaic poems, or referenced in North German Christian reports, or suggested by archaeological finds as if these somehow sketch a single tradition. The same holds for the Christian side of the story: the life of an Icelandic Benedictine monk was undoubtedly quite different from that of a Swedish Birgittine, or a Danish Dominican, even within the same century, and all of these differed greatly from the life of a lay farmer or slave in any particular part of the Nordic region. Three complicating factors arise alongside this realization, however. First, on the level of scholars' outlook and aims, we can see that scholars will often, understandably, want to regard a given instance of belief or ritual as evidence for a wider reality, perhaps linking together pieces of evidence that span huge distances and multiple centuries in an attempt to reconstruct an enduring or overarching "religious system." Second, on the level of believers within either of those religious traditions, Old Norse non-Christian religious traditions or the various varieties of Christianity, there may be assertions of continuity and consistency that are more a matter of faith than reality. There has been an unfortunate tendency in the study of Old Norse religion to imagine that Old Norse religious traditions faced some singular and unchanging "Christianity" that remained unified and consistent over time and space, in part because Christian clerics argued so vehemently for the continuity and consistency of Christianity since the days Jesus to the present. And third, our evidence, made up of singular instances and references, may never be adequate to truly sense the diversity and variation that existed in reality. These factors should not prevent us from examining the evidence we do have and from making inferences. But we need to accept the idea of diversity in the past just as much as we acknowledge diversity in the present, and formulate our theories as ones that assume inevitable variation rather than underlying uniformity.



2. *SCANDIA*: Regarding the importance of ritualistic religious practices among Nordic peoples in the Viking Age, are there any significant patterns that you consider most relevant to understand people's cosmological worldview and the relationship between deities, humans and sacred spaces? Which sources would you recommend for those who want to delve further into this theme?

*Thomas A. DuBois*: In my own research in the years since writing *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age*, I have become more and more convinced of the importance of place and family in shaping local and individual religious practices. Because a place – a mountain, a bog, a grove, a farm, an island, a shore – perdure over far longer periods than the span of any individual's life, place can serve as an organizer or anchor of local beliefs, often even across periods and processes of religious change. Time and time again, places that were sacred to Nordic communities before Christianity's arrival became augmented through the building of a church or establishment of a Christian graveyard at the site. They are not abandoned but rather "Christianized." And this tendency is not unique to the Nordic region but pervades "Christendom," from the sites of the "Holy Land" through the Mediterranean and also into the colonial contexts of North and South America.

In a similar way, family lines transcend time for the individual and they can exercise stabilizing or unifying effects on individuals' notions of religious practices. Nordic archaeology offers us more and more evidence of both the enduring importance of sacred places and the intergenerational practices of customs like funerary rituals. Often it allows us to glimpse the historical evolution of practices within a locale or community in ways that suggest both continuities and occasional ruptures or reversals. While archaeology proves extremely valuable for sensing the importance of place and family, we should also be attentive to the ways in which place and family are depicted and deployed in Nordic medieval texts. As a scholar who lives far away from the Nordic region, I think I often overlooked the importance of textual clues like placenames or genealogies in the sources I examined, when these may have been very important for understanding a religious tradition as it became instantiated in a given place and time.

3. SCANDIA: Your chapter "Taking Place. Place in the Construction of History" in *Nordic Literature the Angel of History* demonstrated how the process of land taking in Scandinavian Literature (and probably History), was also connected to the process of formation of different identity groups as well. It is curious how only in recent decades, the Sámi people through Valkeapää's verses, reached a broader audience, on what someone can hear or read their point of view, which wasn't always the case, of course. So, how can Scandinavian studies pay more attention to the absences of Sámi peoples' culture in historical and literary sources?

Thomas A. DuBois: I always tell my students that "colonization involved us all; decolonization requires us all." The kind of erasure that has made it difficult for a Nordic person, or a scholar of Scandinavian studies, to imagine Sámi presence in Nordic societies—in the past, present, or future—was achieved through processes of unequal attention to Sámi and other Nordic communities in the ways property and ownership were recorded, traditions were documented, or languages were supported or celebrated. The fact that a person living in Sweden—regardless of background—can learn to read, write, and speak Swedish today is the product of a long series of concrete choices of education and policy that have facilitated that learning. The fact that a person living in Sweden—regardless of background—will probably find it difficult to learn to read, write or speak a Sámi language today is likewise the product of a long series of institutional policies and choices. If we want to reverse that erasure, we need to help make ourselves aware that the erasure occurred, and then we need to advocate and act for restoration and restitution. This is the case in all the Nordic countries, but the same can be said for my own home in Teejoop, the place of four lakes in Ho-Chunk country, a place described on maps as "Madison, Wisconsin." If we want to ensure that the seven thousand languages spoken today in the world are still being spoken a century from now, we have to do things differently than people did in the era in which some languages—and cultures—were deemed inferior and destined to disappear.

4. SCANDIA: In the chapter entitled "Achieving Faith" from your book "Nordic religions in the Viking Age" the Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar is mentioned thoroughly because it offers many insights about 13th century, as well as reporting the role of monarchs in the Christianization of the Scandinavian region, on which Snorri Sturluson tells aspects about the life and government of King Óláfr Tryggvason. This

*saga seems to attach great importance of the short reign of King Óláfr as Trondheim becomes the center of Norse Christianity, the Norwegian king seems to be on par even with the god Óðinn. His downfall is portrayed as the martyrdom and work of demonic pagan forces. Do you think these constructions surrounding the figure of King Óláfr Tryggvason and the demonization of pagan practices had any impact on the imaginary of contemporaries Scandinavians regarding this period?*

Thomas A. DuBois: The triumphalist narrative of Óláfr Tryggvason was certainly intended to shape the views and beliefs of readers of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Modelled on hagiographic literature, it depicts Óláfr Tryggvasson, a great grandson of the pagan uniter of Norway Harald Fairhair, battling on both a human and supernatural plane, with the goal of establishing Christianity in Norway but also in the Norse North Atlantic. While avowedly about a past era, the 13<sup>th</sup>-century text is also about the time in which it was likely written, an era in which Iceland had become an integrated part of a farflung Norwegian empire, whose kings traced their lineage (circuitously) back to Óláfr Tryggvason as well as Norway's sainted Óláfr Haraldsson, a purported great great grandson of Harald Fairhair. Óláfr Tryggvason becomes a type for later kings of Norway and Iceland, an assertion that the Norwegian kings had *always* shown deep concern for the souls of their subjects and a counter to a prominent earlier Icelandic belief that Iceland had been settled by Norwegians wishing to flee the unreasonable and power-grasping ways of Harald Fairfair. *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* reminds us that medieval Norse texts are never objective witnesses of the past: they are situated depictions with an agenda informed by the religious and political leaders of their day.

5. SCANDIA: *Many comparative works approaching the possibility of shamanic elements in Viking Age/Medieval Scandinavia magic tend to draw their conclusions mainly by comparing Scandinavian and Saami materials. Although this comparison is clearly important, Balto-Finnic materials tend to be neglected. What do you think is the reason for this, and how is it possible to bring the elements of Balto-Finnic mythology and religion under Scandinavists' attention?*

Thomas A. DuBois: The causes for the unfortunate but persistent lack of attention to Balto-Finnic materials in examining questions of shamanism in Norse tradition can be traced to at least two factors. First, quizzically, archaeologists of the nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries were often convinced that Balto-Finnic populations (as well as Sámi) had migrated into the Baltic region very late (perhaps as late as the eighth century CE), and that the Norse were the original inhabitants of the Nordic region. A real dismantling of this curious notion occurred only in the 1980s, when the accumulated evidence made it clear that Balto-Finns and Sámi had lived in the Nordic region for millennia rather than only centuries. So many earlier scholars thought that Balto-Finnic materials could furnish no insights into Norse pre-Christian traditions because the Balto-Finns were late interlopers that only begin to figure in the history of Sweden in the 1100s. Secondly, because much of the evidence concerning Balto-Finnic shamanism was based on the analysis of folk songs collected in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Scandinavian medievalists rejected the evidence as post-medieval. Meanwhile, in Finland as well as Estonia, nineteenth-century scholars became intent not on inserting their peoples into the medieval Nordic region known from Norse Eddaic poems and sagas, but rather, in establishing a purported distinctive history of their own. In a certain sense the nationalism of both Scandinavian and Finnish scholars led to more myopic approaches to the histories of the Nordic region than was ideal. It was only in the twentieth century that Scandinavian scholars began to explore more the Balto-Finnic materials and Finnish and Estonian scholars began to explore more the Norse.

6. *SCANDIA*: In your article on the martyred saints Sunniva and Henrik, the construction of the sacred through the real and symbolic discourse linked to the saints is elaborated in an instigating way. However, the question remained about the use of the profane in the process of consolidating sanctity. Did you find at some point during your research a process of sacralization through the opposition of a discursive element external to the sacred community?

*Thomas A. DuBois*: In medieval Europe prior to the Reformation, the sacred and the secular were not easily disentangled. The cult of the saints had clear liturgical backing, with saints' feasts celebrated in the calendar and church art depicting saints in a manner aimed at making them easily recognizable to an illiterate viewer. At the same time, the saints became fully embraced in the day-to-day lives of Christians. In the Nordic region, people named their children after Sunniva and Henrik; they appealed to them in those church-authorized moments of customized observance, but they also prayed to them for help in times of crisis.

They went on pilgrimages to the sites of Sunniva's or Henrik's martyrdoms and to the cathedrals where their relics were eventually transferred ("translated"). They timed their yearly labor activities in accord with their feast days in the calendar. Down to the present, Finns will recite the proverb "Heikinpäivänä talven selkä katkeaa" (on Henry's Day [January 19] winter's back is broken), meaning that the worse of winter has passed. So the saints became part of the fabric of everyday life at the same time that they ensured the Christian peasant that God took great interest in the needs and interests of ordinary people, even in the remote northern periphery of Europe. It is clear that earlier seasonal and sacral traditions became swept into medieval observances of the cult of the saints, in the Nordic region as in other parts of Europe.

7. SCANDIA: *How can the creation and perception of Sámi art/aesthetics help in the process of forging more or less stable categories of identity which develop acknowledgement of past colonial experiences that - from an asymmetrical relationship - ended up creating a specific cultural memory concerning the indigenous peoples?*

Thomas A. DuBois: This is something I have written about in my book *Sacred to the Touch*, in particular reference to the great artist Lars Levi Sunna. What Sunna tries to do in his art is recover past Sámi aesthetics and ideas of the sacred as an act of decolonization: not, in his case, to reject Christianity or reestablish prior Sámi religious traditions (although there are some Sámi artists and activists who wish to do so) but rather, to underscore the fact that these prior traditions are part of the heritage of Sámi people and one that they can be proud of. Nearly all aspects of Sámi culture became stigmatized in colonization, and artists, musicians, and other culture workers have been valiant in trying to rekindle pride in past stigmatized traditions, be it the *joik* musical genre, *duodji* handicraft arts that use materials harvested from the reindeer, or films that depict ancient Sámi legends and beliefs. Together with Coppélie Cocq I have written about Sámi decolonizing media in a book that came out in 2020, *Sámi Media and Indigenous Agency in the Arctic North*. The audiences for all such works, we argue, are two-fold: on the one hand, people who do not identify as Sámi but who can come to learn and appreciate Sámi culture (and Sámi rights to self-determination), and on the other hand, people who are Sámi in background but who have been worn down or estranged from their heritage by the

stigmatizing discourse of the colonizers. Both audiences are crucial in the work of decolonization.

8. SCANDIA: *When looking for names of Saami's deities one usually faces the problem of regional and cultural variation and the tendency of some sources (like in Schefferus' Lapponia) to take Saami cultures and mythologies as a unified and coherent whole. Taking the names for Saami's thunder god(s) as a case example (Dierpmis/Tiermis, Aijeke, Hovrenaarja/Hovrenskodje, Horagalles/Hovrengaellies and Addjá) should we regard them as regional variations of a thunder god's names, or as being various thunder gods from their respective cultures/regions? How do you think this question might be approached?*

Thomas A. DuBois: This is an excellent example of the kinds of regional and probably historical variation that exists in Nordic religious traditions and that we should embrace as expectable and normal. When we see the many different names for a thunder god in Sámi, it should help us remember the multiple names for gods that we today talk about as a singular "Thor" or "Óðinn" in the Norse tradition but which, Snorri tells us, went by many competing names in the various locales and eras of the Norse world prior to Christianization. The Sámi example should help wean us away from projecting modern views of a well-defined "Norse pantheon" back onto pre-Christian religious contexts that were undoubtedly lots more locally varied and inconsistent than nineteenth- and early twentieth-century mythologists liked to imagine. There is a sort of parallel in what often gets called "Thunderers" or "Thunder Birds" in various North American mythologies. These sacred beings are associated with the thunder and they have great importance in various Native American traditions, but their stories and roles are also often very different from one Native American community to the next. It's hard to imagine people *not* finding the thunder a cause of wonder and fear, and that shared human experience is undoubtedly at the heart of many of the names and narratives we have of Nordic thunder beings.

9. SCANDIA: *The manipulation of väiki, luonto and other types of forces is a crucial characteristic of the Finnish tietäjä. Is it possible to identify parallels of a similar manipulation of forces and an analogous mode of understanding their agency over bodies in the magical techniques used by the völvur?*





Thomas A. DuBois: Undoubtedly there must have been. The concept of *väki*, or the inherent power of things, has parallels in many other belief systems around the world. When we turn to the question of the *völva* however, we have to contend with the fact that our textual accounts “other” the tradition – presenting it as an exotic, dangerous, or curious oddity rather than as a respected professional identity and set of accepted and functional procedures. In this othering, Norse writers sometimes described healing or magic traditions to some extent, but they also frequently felt the need to distance themselves in their texts from the traditions they were describing, so as to underscore that they did not *approve* of the traditions in any way. This is an interesting aspect of the Norse texts in itself, but it means that we are probably pretty distant in those texts from the kinds of understandings that a *völva* might have provided firsthand. I think it’s fascinating that in Finnish, nearly all the terms having to do with magical practices (apart from *noita*, an ancient Finno-Ugric term for a shamanic practitioner with the modern meaning “witch”), derive from Old Norse or continental sources in some way. *Taika*, *magia*, *loitsia*, *lumota* – all are terms used to describe Finnish magic traditions, and all come into Finnish from Old Norse or Swedish. But alongside these “othering” terms that reflect clerical disapproval and attempts to control or punish Finnish magic, there are a whole set of Finnish terms that are so familiar and commonplace in Finnish that they pass almost unnoticed as magic terminology today: *väki* (power, spirit, essence), *luonto* (nature), *onni* (luck, fortune, success), *lempi* (ardor, attractiveness), *kirous* (curse). If we had a *völva*’s testimony of how magic worked in the Norse context, it would perhaps be startling in how much a part of everyday knowledge and activities it was: the tendency to set magic and magic practitioners apart from the “ordinary” or “reputable” was part of the stigmatization that occurred in pursuit of ensuring a complete reliance on the Christian God and saints for all assistance. So, if one looks at classic descriptions of *völva* activities, such as the famous account in *Eiriks saga rauða*, I think it’s valuable to notice how much the event is described as familiar and customary, even if the writer also wants to depict it as exotic. We see the whole community participating in the activity in various ways and benefitting from the divination that occurs, even if the description itself exoticizes the main practitioner and presents her work as mysterious.