

Call for papers for the conference of Belief Narrative Network, Ragusa, Italy 12-16 June 2018.

Human-Animal Relationships in Belief Narratives

Current histories of the relations between humans and other species range from hunting and husbandry to vivisection. They habitually treat humans and animals as two separate bodies, but such a vision is only part of what the human mind has produced. A proper look at the merging between human and animal may yield surprising and intimate insights in human history and culture, with regard to both how we treat animals and how we “think with animals”. The range of human expressions concerning human-animal relationships, and especially animal metamorphoses, encompasses language through to literature, and in particular belief narratives, ritual performance, material culture and art, and should offer promising insights as it centres on the concept of physical and conceptual transformation. Yet our understanding of this fundamental aspect of human culture remains fragmented. Our aim is to at least lift a part of the veil.

Drawing on a variety of sources, conference participants will focus on belief narratives and chart the variety of aspects of human-animal relationships and the range of animal shapes – both wild and domestic – that figure in human to animal shifting or vice versa; consider the means of transformation; and uncover possible underlying concepts about body and soul. One of the most important aspects of the conference will be to explore the importance of context in determining specific expressions of metamorphosis. In this respect, key questions will consider the role of individual identity in and outside of society, the role of ethnic and cultural identity, gender, impacts of religious conversion and the relevance of local ecology. The conference will also explore broader contexts of human-animal relationships in belief narratives, such as animal comparisons in language (proverbs, fables), monstrosity and hybridity in art, animal disguise in ritual and custom, totemism, sexuality, bestiality and the animalisation of deviancy.

More specifically we hope to be able to offer, among other things, sessions on the following topics (these sessions will be organised around polarities; participants are free to explore any position):

Animal belief narratives between fables and mythology: Shape-shifting legends are situated according to genre but also to the media of transmission. To what extent do they influence each other?

Animal versus botanical (or mineral) shapeshifting: In this session, questions will be asked about the particular forms of metamorphosis, where they arrive from, how they matter and what they entail.

Culture or ecology? Specific animal shapes can be offered from natural surroundings but also from available meta-narratives. Are there options for one animal or the other subject to change?

Agency and counter-agency: People can have an animal shape subscribed to them or make their own choice. How is this related to gender? What are the available defence mechanisms?

Animal spirits as opposed to fantastic animals: Today different animal concepts from different cultures are often combined. How do we deal with such combinations?

Please note that you should submit the abstract directly to the ISFNR, when the Call for papers will be officially launched. Merely indicate on your abstract that the submission is meant to be presented as part of the BNN conference.