

An ecosemiotic dimension of folklore: Reframing the concept of place-lore

Lona Päll¹

Abstract. Place-lore, which has been systematically collected and archived in Estonia since the 19th century, is a part of various national, communal and institutional practices. Until now, Estonian researchers have resorted to conceptualizing place-lore from the perspective of archival texts, and the focus has been on collecting and archiving the material. At the same time, theoretical study of place-lore has remained in the background. In the article I approach place-lore from the perspective of ecosemiotics and suggest a new definition of place-lore that is based on semiotic relations these narratives have with the environment they represent. Outlining different ways of how vernacular tradition and the environment it represents are semiotically related, and analysing the ways in which these relations are expressed in place-related folklore allows seeing how place-lore can be defined through (1) localizability, (2) representation of the characteristics of a place, and (3) manifestation of place experience. Defining place-lore and presenting the preliminary conceptual tools is much needed in practical collection work and archiving and serves as an important prerequisite for studying the place-related folklore in the context of contemporary challenges, such as changing textual practices, cultural disruptions, and environmental crisis. Examples are drawn from folklore associated with mires, specifically from narratives about the Kakerdaja Bog in northern Estonia.

Keywords: ecosemiotics; environmental communication; environmental signs; bio-semiotic criticism; place-lore; folk narratives

Introduction

Bog pools are believed to be bottomless – this internationally spread vernacular belief is also represented in Estonian folk narratives. In one version of the story, a pot suspended by a rope is lowered into a bog pool to fathom its depth, yet the pot never reaches the bottom. However, as it is pulled out, a blood-soaked

¹ Department of Semiotics, University of Tartu, Jakobi 2, 51005 Tartu, Estonia; e-mail: lona.pall@ut.ee.