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CONFERENCES

The Relations and Beyond: Biennial Conference of the Finnish Anthropological Society, Rovaniemi, 21–23 March 2023 *Alicja Staniszevska*

The Relations and Beyond: Biennial Conference of the Finnish Anthropological Society 2023 was hosted by the Arctic Anthropology Research Team at the University of Lapland in Rovaniemi, Finland. The conference explored the significance of relations and kinship in anthropology, approaching the concept from diverse perspectives and acknowledging its multifaceted nature and its relevance in the face of recent developments in the field. The conference brought together anthropologists and other scholars from different methodological and theoretical schools to discuss the changing dynamics between humans, animals, spirits, and other beings in 32 panels.

The conference had an impressive group of keynote speakers, all of whom have made significant contributions to the field of anthropology. Piers Vitebsky and Marilyn Strathern, both from the University of Cambridge, and Tim Ingold from the University of Aberdeen were the distinguished keynote speakers who shared their insights and perspectives on the topic of relations during the event. During the plenary round table, a discussion from a postcolonial perspective about the choice of keynote speakers from leading Western universities was raised. It has been critically addressed by the conference organisers and keynote speakers.

Piers Vitebsky's keynote: Why Do Spirits Want Relations with Humans?

In his keynote speech, Piers Vitebsky explored the intriguing concept of how non-human entities are perceived as resembling humans and how these entities desire human-like relations. The focus was on understanding how societies regulate such unstable contacts with intangible realities and what happens to these relations when religious beliefs undergo changes. Vitebsky began by posing thought-provoking questions about the nature of these relations. They delved into the complexities of how mutual desire and neediness between humans and gods or spirits manifest through various forms of communion, such as sacrifice, prayer, and even sexual intercourse.

The impact of religious change on these relations was a significant aspect of the presentation. Vitebsky highlighted that as societies undergo religious

transformations, some relations erode, while new ones are created. Conversion to different belief systems or the imposition of atheism can lead to sudden ontological confusion and emotional derangement as established connections with the divine are disrupted.

The keynote also explored how ancient gods from traditions like ancient Greek mythology have adapted to changing religious landscapes. They have either become obsolete with the rise of new dominant belief systems like Orthodox Christianity or transformed into local folklore. Nevertheless, these gods have endured as literary and psychoanalytic archetypes beyond their original Ancient Greek context.

To conclude his charismatic speech Vitebsky examined the different styles of mutual kinship found in animistic or polytheistic cosmologies compared to monotheism. Vitebsky argued that the diversity of relations between humans and non-human entities seems to be declining globally, reflecting the loss of biodiversity in the natural world.

Marilyn Strathern's keynote: Non-Relations and Disconnections

Marilyn Strathern's keynote explored the intricate concept of relations, it was particularly focused on the boundaries and recent discussions surrounding non-relations and disconnections. Strathern, with an ethnographic twist, took the audience for an oneiric imaginary trip through the stories of Amazonian and Melanesian fieldwork. She questioned whether it is possible to imagine negative forms of relations, and if so, why social relations sometimes take on an anti-relational form.

Strathern discussed how anthropologists have also grappled with the concept of relations, sometimes experimenting with eliminating it from theories entirely or substituting it with other constructs. Strathern pondered whether her aversion to the concept is a reaction to familiarity or overuse of the term in academic discourse. Through ethnographic materials, Strathern highlighted the significance of understanding the various forms of resistance that the concept of relation encounters. The members of the audience were left with a contemplation of the complexities of human connections and attention to the challenges that arise when individuals seek to disengage or deny existing relationships.

Tim Ingold's keynote: Rethinking Intergenerational Relations

Tim Ingold began by addressing the issue of how we perceive generations and their succession. He started by emphasising that the conventional view of generations as layers, one following another, is a relatively recent development in human history. This viewpoint, though commonly accepted, influences numerous discussions on topics such as evolution, life and death, longev-

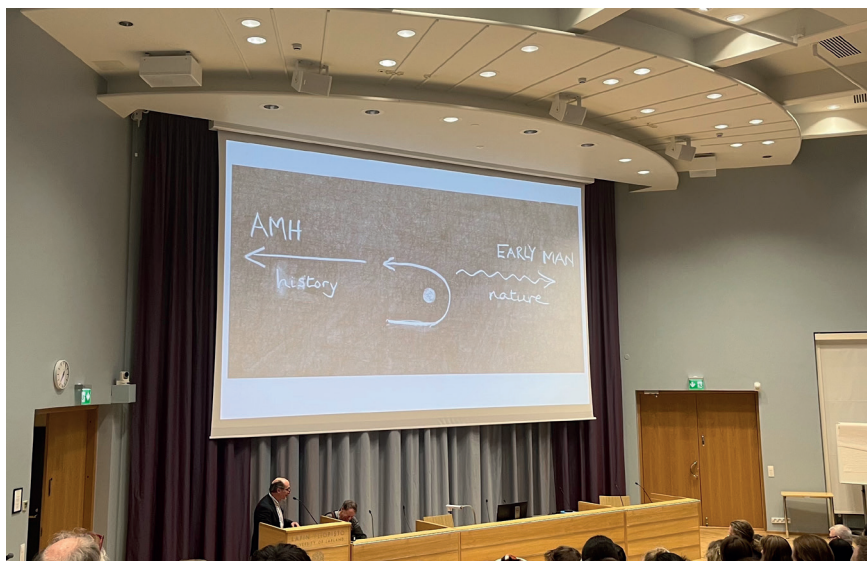


Photo 1: Tim Ingold (on the right) during the discussion following his keynote on 22.3.2023. On the slide, a graph representing the proposed alternative understanding of life as an overlap of generations. (Alicja Staniszewska, 2023)

ity, extinction, sustainability, education, climate change, and other pressing contemporary concerns.

Therefore, Ingold suggested a departure from this entrenched perspective and proposed an alternative understanding of life as an overlap of generations. By embracing the idea that life is forged through interconnected relationships between generations, he argued that it could potentially alleviate some of the anxieties people face when contemplating the future.

Ingold argued that collaboration across generations could offer some solutions for addressing challenges faced by humanity. However, adopting this perspective would require relinquishing certain deeply ingrained beliefs. Among them, Ingold listed the notion of inevitable progress and the unfaltering faith in science and technology's ability to ease environmental impacts. In his optimistic speech, Ingold suggested that while there may be no definitive end to troubles, as long as life persists, there is potential for the well-being and prosperity of future generations.

Conference panels and the cultural programme

Already before the conference, it was obvious that choosing the sessions would be hard and the schedule of the conference was tight. Right after the welcoming words from the organisers the panel "Fluid Realities of the Wild

in Human-Animal Relations” started. Florian Stammer from the University of Lapland in the presentation “Herding Hunters: Inuit animal husbandry in South Greenland” talked about the duality within the Inuit animal husbandry in South Greenland and the dichotomy of wild/domestic and hunter/farmer. During the panel “(Un)relating and (un)learning with more-than-humans during ethnographic practice” Beth A. Conklin from Vanderbilt University in the presentation “Microbiotics: On Hubris & Humbling in Amazonian Ethnography”, talked about the differences between indigenous knowledge and Western knowledge. She focused particularly on how, in regards to microbes, both of those knowledge systems intersect and support each other. Later on, during the “Making “good relations” in more-than-human worlds” panel, Marzia Varutti from the University of Geneva gave the presentation “Ecological grief as a Relationship” where she discussed ecological mourning as a form of community building, emotional solace and activism on examples from glacier funerals in Switzerland. Eemi Nordström from the University of Helsinki gave an interesting presentation with a humorous twist about the social history of mosquitos in Finland entitled “The mosquito swarm: Relating to monstrous abundance in the age of insect decline”. Nordström delved into the portrayal of mosquitoes, examining their representation as symbolical “Finnish demons” and their presence in travel literature as guardians of nature, acting as protectors against human intrusion. One of the biggest panels of the conference was “Pig worlds: Understanding porcine multiplicity in the Anthropocene” and was dedicated to pig-human relations. The panel discussed diverse perspectives – pigs’ roles ranging from food sources to medical surrogates, companions, and even spiritual entities and their symbolical meanings, for example, im/pure, un/desirable, or domestic/wild.

Aside from the academic sessions, the cultural programme of the conference was a memorable experience. The conference dinner was held during the evening of March 22 in Lappia Hall designed by famous Finnish architect Alvar Aalto. The evening concluded with a premiere musical improvisation by the Sardinian group of throat singers, Tenores di Neonelli, in collaboration with Sámi joiker Wimme Saari. The fusion of Sardinian and Sámi musical traditions accompanied by lively anthropological discussions created a unique and unforgettable performance.

The Relations and Beyond: Biennial Conference of the Finnish Anthropological Society 2023 was an excellent opportunity for scholars of all backgrounds to explore relations and their relevance and omnipresence in contemporary anthropology. The conference facilitated a diverse range of perspectives and discussions on the multifaceted nature of relations, considering both its traditional applications and its relevance in the context of “un-relations” or

“post-relations.” The contributions of the keynote speakers, Marilyn Strathern, Tim Ingold, and Piers Vitebsky, elevated the event, and their valuable insights will continue to influence the field of anthropology.

The Arctic Anthropology Research Team from the Arctic Centre of the University of Lapland successfully hosted the conference, which attracted over 300 participants. It was an excellent opportunity to network and reunite with long-no-see colleagues. The decision to stream the three keynotes and the final plenary online allowed those, who could not participate in person to be a part of the experience anyway. To conclude, the Relations and Beyond conference proved to be a major anthropological event during which researchers discussed topical questions and critically pondered the discipline’s history and future.

AUTHOR

Alicja Staniszevska, MA, is a social anthropologist specialising in migration and multi-species research. From 2022 she has been a doctoral researcher at the Department of History and Ethnology at the University of Jyväskylä working on the project *Forest Bites: Immigrants’ Voices on Finnish Forests, Ticks and Climate Change*.