

VLADIMÍR BAHNA

**NADPRIRODZENÉ SKÚSENOSTI  
A NARATÍVNA MYSEL**

**Sociálna nákazlivosť spomienok**

**[Supernatural experience and the narrative mind  
The social contagion of memories]**

*Bratislava: Veda,  
Institute of ethnology and social anthropology SAS, 207 p.*

This publication by the social anthropologist Vladimír Bahna “Supernatural experience and the narrative mind: the social contagion of memories” is devoted to the subject of supernatural beliefs which the author surveys from the perspective of the cognitive theories of religion and cognitive narratology. The ethnographic material analysed in the book was collected primarily in the upper Kysuce region. Bahna himself says, however, that the objective of the book is not to map out the repertoire of narratives of the region concerned. Its objective is “to examine by using this specific material the mechanisms of the spread of narrative traditions concerning supernatural beliefs. On the one hand, it probes the process of the creation of new narratives on personal experiences influenced by local tradition, and on the other hand, it studies the process of their transmission in society” (Bahna, 2019, p. 6).

The book is unusual in that the author has focused on the narrative of personal experiences in which the narrator himself or herself is also a character in the story, reflecting on his or her memories. At the centre of the ethnographic research lie narratives on meetings with supernatural beings which were presented as personal experiences (Bahna, 2019, p. 16). The author looks at the studied phenomena from the perspective of the evolutionary and cognitive sciences.

At the end of the 1990s, cognitive science became established in our academic setting (for example Gál & Kelemen, 1992; Beňušková, Kvasnička, &

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Pospíchal, 2000; Rybár, Beňušková, & Kvasnička, 2002; Rybár, Kvasnička, & Farkaš, 2005). At the same time, cognitive anthropology began to be taken up by a small group of anthropologists in Slovakia.

Martin Kanovský was the first anthropologist to work systematically with insights from cognitive theories in his study of religion (Kanovský, 1999; 2002; 2011). Other academics who followed on from Kanovský used in their research the cognitive theories of religion, focusing on their explanatory potential. They studied subjects such as magic and supernatural harm (e.g. Jerotijević, 2011; 2013; 2015), criteria of traditional discourse in Boyer's theory (Tužinská, 2006), ideas on witchcraft and superstition (Bahna, 2008; Bužeková, 2003; 2004; 2005; 2009; see also Hrustič, 2003; Jerotijević & Maňo, 2014), neo-shamanism – urban shamanism (Bužeková, 2011; 2015). These academics pay systematic attention to the cognitive aspects of cultural transmission and learning which are intrinsically linked to the function of memory (Bužeková, 2018). They equally pay attention to the laws and mechanisms of how human mind works as well as to the pressures of selection which shaped them during the evolution of the human race, finding inspiration in the latest findings of evolutionary and cognitive sciences. In his publication, Bahna not only follows on from his previous work, but also from the works of the above-mentioned academics (e.g. Bahna, 2008; 2011; 2015a; 2015b).

Bahna focuses on supernatural ideas which co-exist with the “official” established religion. In addition to the introduction and conclusion, the contents of the publication itself are divided into six chapters. The first chapter defines the theoretical framework of the book. The author connects the theoretical postulates of cognitive narratology with the cognitive theories of religion. He also defines terms such as narrative, narration, memorates and story. Bahna sees memorabilia as they are understood in the context of Scandinavian – or world – folk studies, as narration about a personal experience with the supernatural (Bahna, 2019, p. 46). The second chapter deals with the analysis of personal experiences as part of culture and tradition and their role in the formation of the latter. According to Bahna, the relation between personal experiences and culturally shared narratives is reciprocal and works in both directions (Bahna, 2019, p. 48). The third chapter follows on from the second. It presents and critically evaluates the findings of cognitive and evolutionary psychology on how human perception works. The fourth chapter deals with how human memory works, as a mechanism which takes part in the storage and creation of memories, stories and narratives. The conceptual ethnographic core of the publication can be found in chapter five. Here Bahna analyses in the context of the theories presented in the previous chapter, 22 memorates, that is narrations of personal experiences with supernatural beings, which he analyses in the context of other similar narratives widespread among people who have had a personal experience. The sixth chapter deals with the analysis of the social dynamics of memorates. Bahna says that the spread of narratives of personal experiences with

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supernatural actors takes place within the boundaries of the closest personal relations (Bahna, 2019, p. 18-21).

On the basis of an analysis of ethnographic material, Bahna argues that the spread of memorates on meetings with supernatural beings is limited to a large extent to small communities, defined by relations of blood, neighbourhood and friendship. In addition, it takes place immediately. Narrations about life, such as memorates, are one of the forms in which personal representations themselves are spread. According to Bahna, they are testimonies of personal experiences, as well as creating the cultural models of experiences which others include in interpretations of their own experiences (Bahna, 2019, pp. 172-173).

Although the cognitive and evolutionary approaches are not dominant movements in ethnology in Slovakia, they represent one of the directions which research in our academic environment is taking. This publication by Vladimír Bahna follows on from previous works examining religions and supernatural beliefs from the evolutionary and cognitive perspectives. The objective of the book is not to map out the repertoire of the given region, but to examine a particular cultural phenomenon in the context of knowledge of how the human mind works. In addition, by focusing attention on the subject of personal experiences and unexpected encounters with the supernatural, he fills a gap, since until now no systematic attention has been paid to them from the perspective of cognitive and evolutionary science. This publication is an important contribution to the field of cognitive science of religion.

*Michal Uhrin*

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