

“I am a firm believer in the need of an interdisciplinary approach...”

Interview with Véronique Champion-Vincent



Petr Janeček

Please tell our readers about your professional life.

My first academic studies at the Paris Sorbonne from 1954 to 1958 had been earning of a Licence de psychologie (that included four “certificates”: general, pathological, physiological and social psychology), and of a Certificat d’Etudes Supérieures d’ethnologie. The only psychology certificate that I found really interesting was social psychology, which drove me to studies of social anthropology (*ethnologie*).

Later I submitted a Doctorate (de 3^o cycle en sociologie) titled *Images du Dahomey. Un royaume africain vu par la presse française lors de sa conquête* (Paris, EPHE VI^o Section, 1965). Two articles were drawn from this doctorate.¹

During my more productive years, my position in the field was already marginal so that I was not really an academic. I had no teaching obligations and had since 1969 a steady job at CNRS (National Center of Scientific Research) as a technician on documentary problems in social science; CNRS had offered to me a training in the then new field of computer-aided treatment of information which I duly practiced. I maintained automated registers of social science research projects funded by CNRS for some fifteen years. However, I always received the help and sponsorship of benevolent mentors, often former professors: Raymond Boudon, Georges Balandier, and my job was located at the Paris Maison des Sciences de l’Homme, an institution that was built on the idea of interdisciplinarity: Clemens Heller, Maurice Aymard and later Michel Wieviorka.²

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- 1 La belle époque. *Les Temps Modernes* 22, 243, 1966: 317–345; L’image du Dahomey dans la presse française (1890-1895): les sacrifices humains. *Cahiers d’études africaines* 7, 25, 1967: 27–58.
 - 2 Raymond Boudon — in 1993, the first French annotated anthology of urban legends authored by me and Jean-Bruno Renard *Légendes Urbaines. Rumeurs d’aujourd’hui* (1992) received the Prix Dagnan-Bouveret of the French Academy of Moral and Political Sciences thanks to Raymond Boudon’s recommendation; he was a member of this prestigious body. Georges Balandier accepted several of my articles in *Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie*, a quarterly journal that he directed. This journal published the French versions of my papers on the Baby Parts Story, description of sabbaths and satanic rites, and the Tell Tale Eye. *Maison des Sciences de l’Homme* helped me to secure additional training in automated information in the United States. Later Maurice Aymard and Michel Wieviorka gave me administrative support for the organisation and attendance of conferences concerning urban legends.



I was influenced by the seminar organized at the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme by medievalist historians Jacques Berlioz and Marianne Polo de Beaulieu who, in the line of Jean-Claude Schmitt, Jacques Le Goff (both medievalist historians) and Claude Brémont (semiologist) book *L'exemplum*³ studied the folkloric elements in these exempla offered to preachers to alleviate the sermons' tediousness. During the Middle Ages and in some countries up to the 17th century, specialized (mostly Catholic) authors created collections of such exempla, usually arranged by the moral lesson to be drawn from the tale, generally told as "authentic" anecdotes. The kinship with what I called "exemplary stories" was striking.

Another important influence was my meeting with Jean-Bruno Renard, an academic sociologist. His then recent publications on belief in extraterrestrials⁴ created a link and, after he contacted me, we started our collaboration. On January the 3rd 1989 we organized a one-day meeting, sponsored by Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, which resulted in the publication of a special issue of *Communications* whose director was then Edgar Morin. Titled *Rumeurs et légendes contemporaines* the issue presented sixteen articles whose subjects were rumours (4), theoretical approaches (5), meetings with fantastic creatures (4), UFO studies (3). Two important bibliographies — of English language folklore studies (23 pp.) and of French studies (5 pp.) concluded this important issue.⁵ We have also produced three books: indexed and annotated anthologies of urban legends in 1992, 2002, 2014.⁶ We co-directed two issues of *Diogène/Diogenes* in 2006, on rumours and urban legends and in 2015, on conspiracy theories. The English edition is still unpublished for the 2015 issue.

What started your research interest in contemporary legends and rumours?

The answer lies in the early article (1976) whose translation you publish in this issue of *Studia ethnologica pragensia*: the publication of "the elegant dinner and the young robber" written by a well-known journalist, then a moral authority, and my discovery that this story was then told as authentic and recent, with variants, by many persons of different milieus around me. This was then to me a new phenomenon, discussed at length with my husband, a journalist who gave me many ideas and examples. We chose together the designation of "Exemplary Stories", a special class of the *infotainments* (contraction of information and entertainment) published in the media.

By then I did not know the term "urban legend" but when I discovered it (Anthony Oberschall, an American friend of Hungarian origin whom I met at the MSH, who is well known sociologist, specialist on social movements, sent me Jan Brunvand's third

3 Cl. Brémont, J. Le Goff, J. Cl. Schmitt. *L'exemplum*, Turnhout, Brepols (*Typologie des sources du Moyen Age occidental*, 40), 1982.

4 1986 « La croyance aux extraterrestres. Une approche lexicologique » *Revue française de Sociologie*; 1988 *Les Extraterrestres: une nouvelle croyance religieuse*. Paris: Cerf, Fides, collection Bref, n° 7.

5 Special issue *Rumeurs et légendes contemporaines*. *Communications* 52, 1990, Seuil, 386 p.

6 *Légendes urbaines. Rumeurs d'aujourd'hui*. Paris: Payot, 1992; *De source sûre. Nouvelles rumeurs d'aujourd'hui*. Paris: Payot, 2002; *100 % RUMEURS. Codes cachés, objets piégés, aliments contaminés... La vérité sur 50 légendes urbaines extravagantes*. Paris: Payot, 2014.



book *The Mexican Pet* 1986).⁷ I made the link. I then translated the paper “Histoires exemplaires”, sent it to Gary Alan Fine (I had read his *Rumor and Gossip: The Social Psychology of Hearsay*, 1976)⁸ who directed me to the Sheffield conferences on contemporary legend. My first attendance was in 1988, the year of the creation of the ISCLR (International Society for Contemporary Legend Research).

In 1989, a year marked by the fall of the Berlin Wall in November, I attended two conferences. In May one in Budapest (ISFNR, International Society for Folk Narrative Research) then in September the AFS (American Folklore Society) in Philadelphia where I presented (in a session organized by Bill Ellis) what became “The Baby Parts Story”.

Our readers are probably most acquainted with your work on organ theft legends, tragic mistake story, phantom cats rumours and viper release narratives — maybe because all of them have their counterparts here in Central and Eastern Europe. According to you, is there anything specific that connects these subjects? Or are they rather distinctive subjects?

These are four distinctive subjects, but *phantom cats and viper-release narratives* are both folk reactions to new conceptions of nature and man’s place in the world (awakening of ecological sensibility), while *organ-theft stories* react to the new situation caused by the development of new medical technologies — life-saving but scary as they blur anthropological boundaries of identity, life and death etc. *The tragic mistake* belongs to a different “universe”, it is a story of the past but still topical today as proven by its new surges (such as the recent Czech version of the story that you have found and published in your book).⁹

You are one of the first social scientists (and definitely folklorists) who started research on conspiracy theories, which became an important academic subject lately. What brought you to this exciting and novel topic?

It was my research for the chapter “Techno fears” in our second annotated anthology. The apocalyptic tone of the enemies of “electro-magnetic waves” struck me and got me on the trail of those who made a living out of these denunciations (they were often scientists who contested the established facts of science). And from there, to “conspiracy entrepreneurs”.

My English publications on conspiracy theories are “The Enemy Within: From Evil Others to Evil Elites”, published in *Ethnologia Europaea* in 2004, and “From Evil Others to Evil Elites: A Dominant Rumor Pattern in Conspiracy Theories Today”, published in book *Rumor Mills: The Social Impact of Rumor and Legend*, co-edited by Gary Alan Fine, Véronique Campion-Vincent and Chip Heath, in 2005.¹⁰ I also authored a book

7 Jan Harold Brunvand: *The Mexican Pet: More “New” Urban Legends and Some Old Favorites*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1986.

8 Gary Alan Fine: *Rumor and Gossip: The Social Psychology of Hearsay* (With Ralph Rosnow). New York: Elsevier-North Holland, 1976.

9 Petr Janeček: *Černá sanitka: Třikrát a dost. Mytologie pro 21. století*. Praha: Plot, 2008: 24–31.

10 “The Enemy Within: From Evil Others to Evil Elites.” *Sleepers, Moles and Martyrs*, special issue of *Ethnologia Europaea* 33 (2), 2004 [2003]: 23–31; “From Evil Others to Evil Elites:



in French *La société parano. Théories du complot, menaces et incertitudes*, published in Paris in 2005.¹¹

Which topics or thematic fields that you have researched in folklore do you find most important or interesting, and why?

Animal-release. An important subject because, through narratives are apparently factual, doubts are expressed as to the unwanted and negative outcome of the new conceptions of man's place in nature. I have published several articles and a book chapter — and edited a collective book — on the legends surrounding wild animals traditionally perceived negatively; these legends asserted their surge — hidden or caused by authorities.¹²

Organ-Theft. The narratives are no longer there but many still believe that organised organ theft are a reality. This erroneous belief is based on the existence of a real traffic in kidneys, based on the international exploitation of poor people, and the preference for transplantations made with living donors. This set of narratives has strong links with the subjects of children and of conspiracy theories which I've studied. I have published several English articles. My 1997 French book on the subject has been published in the United States and its paperback edition is still in print.¹³

A Dominant Rumor Pattern in Conspiracy Theories Today." *Rumor Mills: The Social Impact of Rumor and Legend*, edited by Gary Fine, Veronique Campion-Vincent, and Chip Heath, Piscataway NJ, 2005: 103–22.

- 11 *La société parano. Théories du complot, menaces et incertitudes*. Paris, Payot, 2005 (Introduction « Mégacomplots », Ch 1. *X-Files, Da Vinci Code* : Mégacomplots et fictions, Ch 2. Le complot des élites, Ch 3. Assiégés ! Du contrôle mental à la science maléfique, Ch 4. Qu'en disent les spécialistes ?, Conclusion « Accepter la complexité de notre monde »).
- 12 "Viper-Release Stories: a Contemporary French Legend" in Bennett, Gillian & Paul Smith (eds) *A Nest of Vipers. Perspectives on Contemporary Legend V*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990: 11–40; "Contemporary Legends about Animal-Releases in Rural France" *Fabula* 31, 1990: 242–253; "Appearances of Beasts and Mystery Cats in France" *Folklore* 103 (2): 160–183; "The Restoration of Wolves in France: Story, Conflicts and Uses of Rumor" in Ann Herda-Rapp and Theresa L. Goedeke (eds) *Mad about Wildlife. Looking at social conflict over wildlife* [Human-Animal Studies] Leiden & Boston, Brill, 2005: 99–122; *Des fauves dans nos campagnes. Légendes, rumeurs et apparitions* Paris, Imago, 1992, 156 p. This collective book, Véronique Campion-Vincent (ed), included 6 papers: « Apparitions de fauves et félins-mystères en France » (Véronique Campion-Vincent) pp. 13–54; « Observations de félins d'ailleurs en Grande-Bretagne: un panorama » (Michael Goss) pp. 55–80; « Apparitions de félins dans l'Occident médiéval: essai de typologie » (Michel Pastoureau) pp. 81–90; « Les animalités contagieuses: enragés et lycanthropes » (Philippe Goergen) pp. 91–114; « Le Loup-garou dans les Alpes françaises ou les degrés du fantastique » (Alice Joisten et Robert Chanaud) pp. 115–130; « Loups et félins dans le cinéma fantastique » (Jean-Bruno Renard) pp. 131–156.
- 13 "The Baby-Parts Story. A New Latin American Legend". *Western Folklore* 49, 1990 [special issue edited by Bill Ellis *Contemporary Legends in Emergence*]: 9–25; "Demonologies in Contemporary Legends and Panics. Satanism and Baby Parts Stories" *Fabula* 34, 1993: 238–251.; "Organ Theft Narratives" *Western Folklore* 56, 1997: 1–37; "Organ Theft Narratives Since the Late Eighties" *Journal of Indian Folkloristics* II, 1 2000: 19–28; "The Diffusion of



Children. Many rumours and urban legends concern children. One of my first articles discussed the growing sensitivity in society to the ill-treatment and sexual abuse of children and to the linked interest in the fate of missing children, always uncertain but about which developed the preoccupation with paedophilia. This subject is linked to conspiracy theories when the sexual abuse of children is presented as a conspiracy of elites. I have published two articles in French (1990, 2006) and in our first two commented anthologies there were chapters on these subjects. There were also two English articles and a book in French.¹⁴

What are your research plans?

I do not have research plans for the future. However, I still try to follow the publications concerning conspiracy narratives. Meaning the folklore part of that field, that is the informal spread and exchanges of conspiracy tales and interpretations amongst the folk. Perhaps something else will come up in the future.

My current position: with age (born 1935), the personal problems encountered with my husband's illness and later his death (2016), my interest for the New Age phenomena since 2012, I have withdrawn from the links — rather tenuous — I had with the social anthropology and folklore "milieu". I am no longer associated with a journal (I was for some years on the editorial board of *Cahiers de littérature orale*), hardly follow any seminars or attend conferences, even I must admit, no longer keep up to date about new publications via a systematic gathering of relevant information through the Internet and in specialized libraries.

Your approach to study of this subject seem to be interdisciplinary in its nature, combining fields of folkloristics and social anthropology, but also sociology and literary theory (among others). What are the merits of interdisciplinary (or transdisciplinary) approaches to this subject? I am a firm believer in the need of an interdisciplinary approach, sensitive to the margins of academic fields.

Organ Theft Narratives" in Joel Best (ed.) *How Claims Spread: Cross-National Diffusion of Social Problems*. Hawthorne, NY, Aldine de Gruyter, 2001: 185–214 ; "On Organ Theft Narratives" *Current Anthropology* 42, 4, 2001: 555–558; "Organ Theft Narratives as Medical and Social Critique" *Journal of Folklore Research*, 39, 1, 2002: 33–50.; *Organ Theft Legends* [translated by Jacqueline Simpson from 1997 French original *La légende des vols d'organes*. Paris, Les Belles Lettres], Jackson MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2005, paperback editions 2007 and 2011.

14 "The Social Climate and Scare Stories about Children: An Overview and Evaluation" in A. Paladi-Kovacs (ed.) *Times, Places, Passages. 7th SIEF Conference April 2001, Budapest, Selected Papers*, Budapest, Akademiai Kiado: 481–495; "Children as Prey. A Case of the Utmost. Contemporary Legends of Organ Theft, Children's Disappearances, Kidnappings, and the Sexual Abuse of Children and Adolescents". *Folklore. Electronic Journal of Folklore* 62 (3), 2015 :81–110. Accessible at <http://www.folklore.ee/folklore/vol62/campion-vincent.pdf> *Comme un abus d'enfance*. Paris, Seuil [Non conforme], 2008. Introduction. 1. Bref retour 2. Les termes du débat 3. Les 'affaires' 4. Paniques américaines 5. Ripostes et analyses 6. Enlèvements et disparitions 7. Des méfaits des notables au complot des élites 8. Le dernier tabou ? 9. Des mythologies contemporaines au marché de la peur.



An example of this approach lies, for example, in the book *Le saint lévrier. Guinefort, guérisseur d'enfants depuis le XIIIe siècle* by medievalist historian Jean-Claude Schmitt who had observed in the 1970s a persistence of the same devotional practices: objects deposited for healing near the grave of a holy dog, that had caused, in the Middle Ages, the suppression of the dog's grave by the inquisitor scandalized by these "heretical" devotional practices.¹⁵

It is a very interesting book for social anthropologists and folklorists, though this is not the author's approach at all.

And on the other hand; do you think that folklore (folkloristics) should exist as separate academic field? Could it stand on its own, with its own theory and methodology?

This question is beyond me, I don't think folklore should exist as a separate academic field. However, this opinion is based on my intuitive preference for an interdisciplinary approach and I cannot present a whole bunch of arguments to support it.

Charles-Arnold Kurr van Gennep was famously described by prominent Russian folklorist Viktor Yevgenyevich Gusev as "the best folklorist of the 20th century" (1968). Very similar statement could be found in history of international folkloristics by probably the most famous American folklorist Alan Dundes (2004). He is now, however, in contemporary Eastern Europe known more as anthropologist, because of his early work "Les rites de passage: étude systématique des rites" from 1909, which became famous in the 1960s because of Victor Turner. What is his position in French academia now — and is he still being remembered as folklorist?

Internationally, both for the French and the English at least, he is better known as Arnold Van Gennep.

Personally, I had bought the *Manuel de folklore français* and read it (in short spells) quite often in the early 1990s. I also remember with delight his short paper *Vie des saints et roman feuilleton* from 1910 which emphasized the similarities between the episodes of the lives of saints and those of the early 20th century serial novels — sort of pale copies of Alexandre Dumas's mid-19th century creations — such as Michel Zevaco, Maurice Leblanc (author of Arsène Lupin). I also remember discussions with Rosemary Zumwalt, whom I have met at the conferences, she is the author of *The enigma of Arnold van Gennep (1873–1957): Master of French folklore and hermit of Bourg-la-Reine* from 1988¹⁶ whom I'd met at conferences about Arnold van Gennep. And, of course, I have read *Rites de passage*.

15 *Le saint lévrier. Guinefort, guérisseur d'enfants depuis le XIIIe siècle*. Paris : Flammarion (Bibliothèque d'ethnologie historique), 1979, 278 p. ; 2nd edition Flammarion, coll. Champs, 2004. This work has been translated in German: Stuttgart, Klett-Cotta, 1982; English: Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 1983. In Czech: *Svatý chrt. Guinefort, léčitel dětí ze 13 století*, Praha: Academia, 2007.

16 Rosemary Zumwalt: *The enigma of Arnold van Gennep (1873–1957): Master of French folklore and hermit of Bourg-la-Reine*. Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedekatemia, Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1988 (FF communications, no. 241).

Since Nicole Belmont's 1974 intellectual biography,¹⁷ Arnold van Gennep has remained fairly important in social sciences in France. A "collective biography" has been published early 2018 and I found an article from 2004 analyzing Arnold van Gennep's attitudes to colonization.¹⁸



This brings us to the next question — what is the position of folklore studies in contemporary France? Is there a resurgence of interest in the field, tied with tiredness of globalization and research of digital folklore, such as in Great Britain or the U. S. (e. g. current popularity of “folk horror” genre)?

Because of my marginal position I cannot really answer this question. My ideas are dated and concern the situation 30 years ago. I have hardly followed the trends since then.

When I started to publish (the early 1990s) the term folklore was taboo in France. Thus Nicole Belmont's 1986 influential article started with the radical sentence “No contemporary ethnologist would dare to call himself folklorist”.¹⁹

Folklore suffered from its enhanced status during the times of Vichy — when the meaning of the term was really rural traditions with a superior status for country life (a little like the situation of the term *Volkskunde* in the 1950s after its exploitation during the time of Nazi Germany). This attitude irritated me, so I made no great efforts to join the “milieu” and drew my knowledge from avowed folklorists, from Germany, the Nordic countries, the UK and the U. S., later from former communist countries, especially the Baltic countries where folklore is so important.

So, I am in no position to say whether there is a renewal of interest in the field of contemporary folklore in France. The term “folklore” is still very seldom used in France, but probably there is less hostility today.

There is certainly, in the circles studying youth culture, an interest for the “folk horror” genre. However, these fads come and go. Let's recall the once-popular expression “hoax”. Now it is gone and replaced by “fake news”. Many people, who feel a vague interest for the field of spontaneous “folk” expressions, but are only amateurs, jump on the blanket term that is in fashion and use it without looking any further. Yesterday it was “hoaxes”, today it is “fake news”.

Question about terminology — do you prefer term “contemporary legend” over “urban legend” and why?

Well, *contemporary legend* is the preferred expression of the group that originated in Sheffield in the 1980s, which gave birth to the International Society for Contempo-

17 Nicole Belmont: *Arnold van Gennep: créateur de l'ethnographie française*. Paris: Payot, 1974 (in English as *Arnold van Gennep: The Creator of French Ethnography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

18 Daniel Fabre & Christine Laurière (eds) *Arnold van Gennep. Du folklore à l'ethnographie*. Paris: Ed du CTHS [Coll Le regard de l'ethnologue, 30], 2018. Emmanuelle Sibeud. « Un ethnographe face à la colonisation : Arnold van Gennep en Algérie (1911-1912) », *Revue d'Histoire des Sciences Humaines*, 10, 1, 2014: 79-103.

19 Nicole Belmont « Le Folklore refoulé, ou les séductions de l'archaïsme » *L'Homme* 26 (97/98) 1986 [*L'anthropologie: état des lieux*]: 259-268.



rary Legend Research (ISCLR) to which we both belong and which organises a yearly meeting and publishes a journal *Contemporary Legend* (alas, no longer a newsletter).

But the expression *urban legend* is more widespread and has the advantage of being shorter. I will not go any further into this, especially because I remember several articles criticizing successively each of these. But you do need to designate the phenomena you're studying. So, let's keep terminology as simple as possible, and thus use the shorter *urban legend*. But let us not think the expression says it all: analysis is still needed.

Back to organ theft legends: anthropologist and activist Nancy Schepher-Hughes recently visited Prague and seemed to claim that illegal thefts (i.e., not only trade) of body parts do exist and it is no contemporary legend at all. I still think it is a legend; what is your position on this subject?

It is a subject to which I have given great thought. I admired greatly Nancy Schepher-Hughes's Brazil book and quoted it. We met in 2000 in Berkeley. I was there for a meeting of the California Folklore Society which honoured Alan Dundes and also gave a talk at a meeting she organized at the same date for her organization: Organ Watch. Jean La Fontaine was one of the participants I remember, with Veena Das. My communication was not well received and considered superficial I remember but I think Nancy Schepher-Hughes later went astray. Her strong point is her discussion of "the transplant elite" of the medical profession's *a priori* and acceptance or criminal endorsement of the shadier aspects of organ trafficking. Her weak point is the inconsiderate use of the term *theft*.

I know what I talk about as we have met in Paris later, and I heard her give a talk which I thought edifying — but full of unjustified shortcuts and far from proving the existence of an "organ-theft network".²⁰

Czech folklore studies have been historically strongly influenced by French academia (e. g. one of our oldest folklore journals, "Národopisný věstník", established in 1906, still use French subtitle of "Bulletin d'ethnologie"), later by French ethnological structuralism. Are you aware of any historical ties of French folklore studies with Czech (or Central European ones), or Czech academia and culture in general?

Question really beyond my scope. The influence of researchers of Central European origin, often in my time voluntary expatriates from Communist-led countries, has certainly been important. The institution where I was located, Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, housed many of them: Victor and Veronica Karady, or Anthony Oberschall originally from Hungary amongst others.

Best Francophone book on contemporary legends (or folklore in general) which was not translated yet and which you can heartily recommend?

Jean-Bruno Renard's short book *Rumeurs et légendes urbaines* (1999) has not been translated into English and should be.²¹ Also really innovating is his more recent book

20 For list of Véronique Campion-Vincent's publication on organ theft legends, please see footnote number 12.

21 Paris, PUF, « Que sais-je ? » n° 3445, 1999; new edition 2002, 2006, 2013.

Le merveilleux, Sociologie de l'extraordinaire (2011) in which he situates and analyzes the debate opposing “rationality” and “wonders”, i. e. all phenomena out of the “normal” order.²²



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22 Jean-Bruno Renard : *Le merveilleux, Sociologie de l'extraordinaire*, Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2011, 212 pp.



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