

AN AMERICAN FOLKLORIST LOOKS AT EUROPEAN HERITAGE STUDIES – THE 2013 SIEF CONGRESS

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In Europe, as in most of the world today, heritage is a major focus of academic discourse and public engagement for folklore, ethnology and anthropology. Intangible culture heritage (ICH) is now a priority for national cultural policies as a result of UNESCO's 2003 convention for safeguarding ICH. Following from the mandates of the convention, folk culture is extensively inventoried, academic "experts" are called to advise on policy and community involvement in ICH safeguarding is emphasized. Heritage was a principal topic at the 2013 biennial Congress of the International Society for Ethnology and Folklore (SIEF) held in July at the University of Tartu, Estonia. Scores of presentations critically analyzed the consequences of intervention, recontextualizations and transformations of traditions, government policy, mediation and community self-determination. While all of these issues have been confronted by American public folklore for decades, public folklore scholarship and practice is absent from ICH discourse, in Europe as elsewhere. At the same time, American public folklorists have little awareness of European ICH initiatives and scholarship. As an American public folklorist, I was engrossed and intellectually energized by presentations at the SIEF Congress which described heritage case studies from throughout Europe, critically assessed national ICH policies, and engaged in critical reflexivity about the roles of scholars in heritage projects.

SIEF is, in effect, the European equivalent of the American Folklore Society. It traces its origins to the Commission Internationale des Arts et Traditions Populaires (CIAP), established in 1928. CIAP, renamed SIEF in the mid-1960s, experienced several periods of conflict among members who saw folklore as a distinct discipline and others in favor of ethnology as a unified discipline

encompassing folklore studies. While in some European countries Folklore Studies is incorporated within Ethnology, in at least two others Ethnology is incorporated within Folklore Studies. There are European countries where Folklore and Ethnology remain as distinct disciplines, with Folklore especially focused towards oral literature and belief systems and primarily associated with departments of language and literature. Ethnology studies have been directed mainly towards material culture and the ethnographic study of local communities and regions, maintaining close institutional relationships with anthropology and history departments as well as museums. Valdimar Hafstein noted in an email message to me on July 29, 2013 that throughout Europe, “these disciplines correspond more or less to different emphases in the field of folklore as it is conceived of in the US.... Some describe them as non-identical twins, but for many of us they are just two different hats to wear on the same head. At many universities, it is more out of strategic concerns that they are maintained as two different departments (out of fear that if they merge, positions will be lost), but at others (e.g. here in Iceland) the distinction between them has never been made.”

The question of whether to include “folklore” in the name of SIEF, at issue as recently as the 2011 Congress in Lisbon, was absent from the 2013 Tartu meeting. In fact, outgoing SIEF President Ulrich Kockel, in a letter to members in *SIEF News*, observed that SIEF had been “moving deeper into an anthropological commons” whose “increasing crowdedness makes the case for retaining Folklore in our association’s name even stronger than before.” Asking “what practical use does folklore scholarship have in the 21st century” and reflecting upon folkloristic involvement with heritage, he contended that the answer should not be found in applying folklore knowledge to a neoliberal agenda of “perpetuating or enhancing the market economy.” Rather, “far more interesting answers are likely to come from a more radical approach that mines the various intangible cultural heritages of the world for alternatives to

prevalent misconceptions of how this world works – not out of some romantic, anti-modern hankering for paradise lost ... but rather from an acute sense of ecological responsibility that guides us towards a radical critique of the thinking that got us into the current politico-economic mess” (Kockel 2013:3). Throughout the SIEF Congress, participants engaged in critique of the manipulation of heritage, recurrently questioning government policies viewed as inimical to the interests of communities.

While SIEF is oriented primarily towards European ethnology and folklore studies, many non-Europeans attended the 2013 Congress, which had participants from over 40 countries. Americans are a growing presence in SIEF. A number of prominent members and leaders of SIEF were trained in the US, including incoming President Valdimar Hafstein, Regina Bendix, President from 2001 to 2008, and the 2013 Congress program chair, Kristin Kuutma.

The theme of the 2013 Congress was *circulation*, a term seen as superseding *globalization*. Viewed as a universal process of flow, exchange and mobility, circulation was also seen as incorporating transmission and diffusion, foundational concepts around which our discipline was constructed. Seven keynote addresses addressed the conference theme. Alessandro Portelli discussed the music of immigrants to Rome which has returned music to urban public spaces, considering changes and adaptation in the music and its significance to the migrant experience. Joep Leerssen’s analysis of transformations of Sleeping Beauty as “popular-elite, cross-national and inter-medial circulation” focused upon its impact upon German nationalism. Robert G. Howard analyzed digital circulation as forms of vernacular expression which may challenge authority. Tine Damsholt’s “Circulating bodies – or how matter comes to matter” provided an autoethnographic analysis of her experience in a Turkish hamam during an academic conference, exploring discursive processes of the destabilization and reconfiguration of the body. Greg Urban delineated

four forces affecting cultural motion: inertia, entropy, interest and metaculture. Michael Herzfeld, discussing “Circulation and Circumvention: reciprocity and intimacy in the neoliberal world” argued that contemporary technology and neoliberalism have seriously diminished hospitality, exchange and other forms of reciprocity.

Kristin Kuutma’s keynote addressed cultural heritage and circulation. It encompassed main currents of thought in critical heritage studies which deal with local agency, heritage as a social construct which reifies the past in the present and the power relationships implicated in the valorization of culture. Considering matters of flow, exchange and mobility – heritage as circulation – Kuutma discussed how heritage may involve cultural invigoration or stasis, bring about or suppress agency, revitalize and foster transmission or contribute to the demise of traditions.

As they endeavor to reconcile their roles as scholars and advisors to national and international heritage regimes, folklorists and ethnologists carry out critical inquiry about processes with which they may also be directly engaged. In his paper, “How to bridge these gaps? Experts and their self-concept”, Jurij Fikfak examined multiple roles of ethnologists who are both “representatives of national authority and independent heritage experts” who recognize the value of heritage as an “emancipatory process” while advising institutions that commodify heritage. While they are representatives of the state obliged to carry out cultural protection schemes and legal mandates, they are also responsible to the communities they study, applying their expertise and ethnographic skills to engage in dialogue and determine community interests. Lee Haring, our American folklorist colleague, who followed Fikfak on this panel, “Theorizing heritage fractures, divides and gaps”, discussed his experience with a UNESCO initiative in his paper “Irreconcilables.” The irreconcilability of official heritage management with ongoing local

performance practices was compared to the divergences between a literary work and its translation to another language. Translation theory sees such irreconcilability as inevitable in translation. Haring feels that heritage contradictions should be acknowledged rather than repressed as “contrived mediation.” In his presentation, Bernhard Tschofen underscored that culture is now more than ever both an “analytical tool of academic research” and a “means of self-portrayal and also portrayal by others in everyday life.” “Doing culture”, Tschofen contended, “has to be understood as both acting in culture and acting with culture”, at a time when heritage is widespread in popular consciousness and social action, a “new elaborate mode of culture.”

As I listened to this panel, I remembered responses to my paper on theorizing public folklore practice (Baron 1999) at the 1998 Bad Homburg symposium, “Public Folklore: Forms of Intellectual Practice in Society”, which brought together folklorists from German speaking countries and the United States. Responding to my discussion of a wide variety of presentational, documentary and government funding practices undertaken by American folklorists, Christine Burckhardt-Seebass invoked Konrad Köstlin’s observation at the symposium that “we study the kinds of institutions Robert Baron represents, we do not participate in them”. Characterizing a dominant view of European folklorists about direct engagement with public folklore, Burkhardt-Seebass added that “one acknowledges one’s own unimportance and interprets it positively as our own jester’s license” (Burkhardt-Seebass 1999:205).

How times have changed. The critical distance of European folklorists and ethnologists as observers of heritage programming has been transformed to critical inquiry shaped by direct involvement in heritage programs, acknowledgement of a dissonance engendered by multiple roles and recognition that *culture* and *heritage* are categories which are pervasive among

both specialists and laypersons, with folklorists and ethnologists now acting both with and in culture.

Spirited discussion with audience members following the “Theorizing heritage fractures, divides and gaps” session explored what praxis, as a dialectical process, should entail for folklorists and ethnologists involved with heritage programs. Participants asked, “to what degree should research be practical”, and called for examination of the relationship between the ethics of intervention and research. The metaphor of the “bridge”, introduced in Fikfak’s paper, was further considered in the discussion, with Galit Hasan-Rokem invoking Georg Simmel’s concept of the “bridge.” I mentioned Simmel’s idea that conflict is endemic to all social interaction, and my interest was piqued to re-read Simmel, who I hadn’t read since graduate school. When I got home I read Georg Simmel’s brilliant essay, “Bridge and Door,” which saw in the bridge a “correlation of separateness and unity” which “always allows the accent to fall on the latter” (Simmel [1909]1997:65). Simmel contended that “the human being is the connecting creature who must always separate and cannot connect without separating”, which is “why we must first conceive intellectually of the merely indifferent existence of two river banks as something separated in order to connect them by means of a bridge” (Simmel: [1909]1997:67)

I brought home from the panel a deeper conceptual understanding of the persistence of separations and differences among different parties in heritage initiatives, even when unification appears to have been achieved. For the past quarter century, American public folklorists have addressed the challenges inherent in our mediative role. We recognize the interventionist character of public folklore, which inevitably changes traditions and communities. Public folklore practice involves recognizing our intervention and acting in the expressed interests of communities as cultural brokers who provide resources for communities and equip them to present their traditions on their own terms.

American public folklorists have found praxis through developing dialogic modes of presentations and methods for sharing authority through our collaborations with the communities with whom we work. In stressing mutual engagement with communities and our objective of equipping communities to present their culture on their own terms, public folklore departed from an older, top down applied folklore paradigm which maintained the curatorial and interpretive authority of the folklorist while limiting a community's cultural self-determination (Baron 2010:71). The discourse about praxis, mediation and the persistence of difference in heritage projects at this SIEF session provides suggestive conceptual approaches for American public folklore. For their part, Europeans advising heritage projects could benefit from American public folklore's dialogic approaches for engaging communities through cultural conversations and modes of presentation designed to present traditions to new audiences, which implicitly recognize difference while building bridges among community members, heritage authorities and folklorists.

I discussed these issues in my own paper at the SIEF Congress, "Engaging Communities and Theorizing Practice in American Public Folklore". My paper noted that many American public folklorists have long maintained multiple roles as researchers and scholars, curators, and also, frequently, as government arts or heritage agency officers and directors. We have successfully penetrated government heritage agencies, making and implementing policy in consultation with other folklorists and community members. In Europe, government heritage policy is typically made and carried out by officials lacking background in folklore and related fields.

European nations vary greatly in the degree to which authority is centralized and the extent to which community participation is enabled in their implementation of the ICH Convention. While UNESCO mandates community participation in ICH projects, local engagement varies considerably. These

variations were evident in the “Conceptual circulation of intangible cultural heritage in national policies and laws” session. Christian Hottin, who directs the intangible culture heritage initiatives of the Ministry of Culture and Communication in France, spoke of how the protection of monuments, architecture and art works deemed of national significance has dominated French heritage policy and practice. This orientation has created challenges for the development of ICH initiatives within localities and regions in France. He also noted that the leadership and staff of his agency embody a *culture administrative* of staff members trained in the same university graduate program, from families involved for generations in the protection of elite heritage. In his essay, “Intangible Cultural Heritage in France: From State Culture to Local Development”, Laurent-Sébastien Fournier points out that there are often “struggles between the local and the national level” and that “it is difficult for the local administration to present local or regional cultural elements as legitimate in the eyes of the universalistic doctrine” (Fournier 2012:333). Patrimony is seen as possessed by the nation as a whole, with national identity of paramount significance for France, whose policies have historically emphasized a cohesive national community.

In contrast, Switzerland’s ICH initiatives are decentralized, in consonance with Swiss federalism. As Florence Grazier Bideau indicates, the design of methodologies and criteria for inventorying ICH are undertaken by Swiss cantons in “dialogue with one another” (Bideau 2012:316). During the SIEF Congress, Ellen Hertz pointed out Switzerland’s distinctive approach in responding to a paper by Sven Missling discussing the “legal requirements for cultural sovereignty by the state,” focusing on Germany. Noting that Germany ratified the UNESCO convention in April 2013, Missling indicated that while cultural sovereignty in Germany is vested in the “Länder” (state), the UNESCO convention “enlarges” the “sovereign rights” of nation states, presenting challenges for the implementation of the Convention.

Reflecting on this session, I felt grateful that cultural policy is so decentralized in the United States, with great autonomy for state and local folk cultural programs. However, as I listened to the accounts of the inventorying occurring in various nations, I was both impressed by their nationwide, holistic approach to folk culture and critical of the item-oriented collecting conditioned by UNESCO mandates.

Inventories like the one being carried out in Lithuania described by Vytautas Tumenas in this session encompass hundreds of traditions and cultural practices, evocative of folklore collecting practices carried out over two centuries that have left a huge legacy of recorded traditions. In the United States, the dominant role of arts councils in funding public folklore programs has narrowed the range of traditions presented to the public, with a skew towards those seen as of artistic merit. But the inventorying of items of folklore limits contextual documentation of folklore as situated social interaction and performance. As Tumenas indicated in his paper, “the seclusion of heritage science from the complex cooperation with ethnology and folkloristics” presents a persistently “big challenge for successful process.” If the U.S. finally does the right thing and ratifies the ICH Convention, inventorying must be decentralized and it should include contextual data that folklorists and ethnologists in France (among some other nations) are trying to incorporate (see Fournier 2012:331-332).

Tempted as I was to play hooky and skip sessions to enjoy the charmed old university city of Tartu, I assiduously followed a self-designed ICH track. I was consistently fascinated by empirically rigorous and richly illustrated case studies from many different countries. I was especially interested in papers which discussed how the meaning and use of heritage sites changed over time. Egge Kulbok-Lattik’s “The rise and fall of Estonian community houses,” for example, described the transformation of these nexuses of local expressive

cultural interaction established in the inter-war period to venues for the practice of state determined arts and political education during the Soviet period. Today they are increasingly turned over to NGO's and privatized. Christoph Rausch tracked the “ ‘rediscovery’, translocation, commoditization”, and appropriation of the model modernist “Maison Tropical” as they were moved from their original sites in Naimey and Brazzaville through the international art market to Paris, New York and Venice. Another intriguing paper, by Valdis Muktupāvels, looked at the concept of the Latvian “singing nation”, analyzing the transition from informal, spontaneous singing to formalization of the tradition due to state support, the impact of the UNESCO convention and the publication of songs. Muktupāvels’s talk left me with a vivid image of Latvians breaking into song on trolleys and buses during the 1970s and 1980s, expressing resistance through folk song to Soviet occupation.

I missed many other presentations I would have liked to have heard about heritage and a broad spectrum of other topics. There were over 500 participants in the Congress, so I experienced the wistful papers missed feeling I’ve often felt at AFS meetings. I managed to catch most of the last of a series of sessions on national parks, “Structures of daily life in national parks between theory and practice.” It examined issues familiar to American public folklorists who have worked with national and state parks, including conflicts between the interests of cultural and environmental conservation and strategies for the representation of the interests of community stakeholders. The session considered the “structure and operation of relationship” of the multiple parties involved with parks locally and nationally, including community members, park administrators, “legislative actors” and the cultural specialists participating in the session. I was moved by examples of local residents who resiliently remained on parklands and maintained traditional cultural practices, resisting pressure from government authorities to relocate. Participants in this session

discussed the impact of park management plans which invite responses by community stakeholders, while noting that these opportunities are often provided after the plans are finalized. In speaking with participants after the session, they expressed interest in learning how local residents living in and around parks in the United States are involved with the development of park management plans. It would be worthwhile to have conference sessions and convenings involving American and European folklorists and ethnologists discussing such issues as ethnographic research and folklore programming in parks, methods for successful stakeholder involvement in park management plans, and initiatives to mitigate potential negative cultural impacts of park development. Papers from the “Structures of daily life in national parks between theory and practice” sessions will be published in *Ethnologica Fennica*.

Since I was sticking to my self-designed ICH track, I wasn't able to attend any of the sessions concerned with museums or archives. In Europe, as in the United States, museums have been in the forefront of developing dialogic approaches for curation, public programs and the engagement of visitors and local communities. Dialogism in museums was analyzed in the sessions “Museums as circulation: processes of knowledge-making, collections and audiences,” and “Mediation and circulation of cultural memory in identity settings,” which included analysis of the production and negotiation of cultural memory. A session on archives, “The role of archives in the circulation chain of tradition”, related to the conference theme, considering the kinds of archival materials which could potentially return to circulation. Pertti Anttonen's paper discussed archival collections as mediated representations produced as circulation of folklore, and other papers looked at vernacular memory and archival materials that have recirculated.

Abstracts of all of the panels and papers can be accessed at <http://www.nomadit.co.uk/sief/sief2013/panels.php5> , and videostreams of

the conference keynotes can be found through links on the Congress home page at <http://www.siefhome.org/index.shtml>.

SIEF has a number of working groups that relate to the academic specializations and interests of members. Many of the groups held business meetings at the Congress. Current working groups include Cultural Heritage and Property, Ethnology of Religion, Food Research, Historical Approaches in Cultural Analysis, The Ritual Year, Place Wisdom, Spacelore and Placelore, and the Working Group on Student Affairs. A new archives working group is being formed. Members of the working groups generate collaborative initiatives extending over several years, as official working group initiatives or on an ad hoc basis. Some working groups hold their own conferences in addition to the biennial SIEF meeting. While their structure and position within the larger organization are similar to AFS sections, their orientation to academic production and collaboration is impressive and worthy of replication by AFS.

I attended the meeting at the Heritage and Cultural Property working group. Members were pleased to hear about heritage studies activities undertaken by American folklorists. I mentioned the recent formation of a United States chapter of the Association for Critical Heritage Studies and a session on public folklore and heritage studies at the 2013 AFS meeting, chaired by Michelle Stefano and including Gregory Hansen and me.

The structure and format of the SIEF Congress fostered extensive interaction among participants, in an atmosphere of highly productive, congenial and sweet collegiality. Interspersing keynotes with panels allowed all participants to join together around the conference theme twice each day. Tea breaks with scrumptious Estonian pastries were provided between sessions and luncheons for all participants were held each day. The Congress concluded with a banquet and party featuring a rollicking neo-traditional “fire-folk” Estonian-

Ukrainian band, Svjata Vatra. Tours and receptions were held at the Estonian National Museum and Estonian Folklore Archives. The archives includes, among other collections, over 165,000 recordings and 1.4 million manuscript pages – from a country with a population of only 1,286,000 people. Excursions following the Congress included a barge trip, foodways walking tour and visits to Russian Old Believers’ and Seto communities.

As an organization, SIEF is in an expansive mode. Its membership has increased exponentially in the last decade. While the Congress met every three or four years since the late 1980s, since 2011 it is meeting biennially, with the next meeting occurring in Zagreb in 2015. American folklorists who haven’t yet attended a SIEF Congress will find it intellectually rejuvenating and highly productive, and its scheduling in summer makes it all the more inviting. Now is an especially opportune time to forge new scholarly and professional relationships with European folklorists. While folklore as an autonomous discipline in Europe experienced some rocky times in recent years, there are encouraging signs of resurgence, with a new department in Gotland, Sweden, and a substantial increase of folklore students and faculty in Iceland. Folklore studies had a vital presence at the 2013 Congress. A more substantial presence of Americans at the SIEF Congress could help revitalize folklore studies in Europe, where our discipline was first conceived and conceptualized. ICH, which in many respects is folklore by another name, is a focal interest of European folklorists and ethnologists. Public folklore theory and practice addresses the same concerns that our European colleagues have recently begun to confront as they become involved with ICH initiatives. Public folklorists and Europeans participating in ICH programs have much to say to each other, and the meetings of SIEF and AFS are natural venues for future dialogue and collaboration. And, why not have a joint meeting, as Valdimar Hafstein suggested, “somewhere the two tectonic plates meet?”

Or, as another alternative: Greenland, anyone?

I am grateful to Pertti Anttonen and Valdimar Hafstein for their explanations of the relationship of folklore to ethnology and the state of the field of folklore in Europe today.

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