

Introduction: Culture Archives and the State: Between Nationalism, Socialism, and the Global Market

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Welcome. We are delighted to greet folklorists who have come so far to be here for this conversation, and the first order of business is to give you our grateful thanks for your effort in coming to join us.

The Center for Folklore Studies had a double motivation in organizing this conference: First, concern for the state of folklore as an academic field. At the present historical moment there is enormous global attention to our subject matter, but we ourselves are fragmented and find ourselves in not just a disciplinary but an intellectual transition—trying to define our object. To coordinate both our professional and our intellectual work, we must ask ourselves: How do we bring back the comparative tradition in folklore studies?

The comparative tradition has always lived under political stress, in tension with the national mandate (indeed the nationalist mandate) of most folklore institutions. It has often been difficult for folklorists to work beyond the borders of the nation-state, and also to address the diversity within those borders appropriately. This kind of stress is becoming more acute under globalization with the new valorizations of traditional culture as intellectual property, as intangible heritage, and more generally as a resource for development. Nation-states have an increasing stake in controlling traditional culture inside their borders and distancing it from anything outside of them.

The comparative tradition came under intellectual stress with the new kinds of consciousness infusing academic work as a result of the end of colonialism in the South, civil rights movements in the West, and the fall of the Soviet Union in the East. We turned inward upon our fieldwork, enriching our study of texts with the ethnographic context, with the close reading of performance, and most importantly in dialogue with the actors and makers of culture. All of these turns provided essential gains in our understanding. But in many cases, and certainly among U.S. folklorists, we found it more difficult to move out beyond our individual field settings, not wanting to impose an imperialist theory or to violate particular understandings.

I think we are now at a moment when we can learn to talk to one another once again, taking what we've learned from the ethnographic and the performance turns. Moreover, it is now urgent that we talk to each other, given the global commodification of tradition, intergovernmental organizations' increasing attention to tradition, and the increasing use of culture and tradition to legitimate often divisive political action in both national and international settings.

So, along with many of the people here—Regina Bendix as the president of the Société Internationale d'Ethnologie et de Folklore and earlier as the longterm chair of the American Folklore Society international committee; Margaret Mills working with the International Society for Folk Narrative Research; Lauri Harvilahti and his colleagues in Finland coordinating the Folklore Fellows international summer schools; and several more junior colleagues—I have been working for many years to build up a network of people who would be interested in having this conversation, and perhaps other conversations in future. You are some of those people. I have brought you here selfishly, because I'm interested in hearing what you come up with together,

but I hope also that this meeting will strengthen some existing international connections and create more of them.

The immediate task of the conference, of course, is to talk about folklore archives, and cultural archives more broadly. We emphasize “culture archives and the *state*” because in thinking about that uneasy compound, the nation-state, the history of our discipline has overemphasized the other side of the hyphen.

Our standard story of the emergence of folklore studies has to do with the nation. Folklore studies are a byproduct of romantic nationalism, and folklore archives were created in the drive to assemble the resources for a national culture. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, large-scale folklore collection projects became one of the key mechanisms for creating an “imagined community” among the educated inhabitants of many territories that subsequently became (or tried to become) independent nation-states: Germany, Ireland, Finland, Catalonia, and so on.

But there is a less celebrated story of culture archives in the service of the state, starting as far as I know in the sixteenth century Spanish empire with the *Relaciones Geograficas*, but soon after in Scandinavia and elsewhere in Europe, growing in the eighteenth century and attaining massive bureaucratic form in the Napoleonic empire. Systematic ethnographic questionnaires were used as instruments of policy—and policing—by states looking to consolidate control of their territory, assess their economic resources, and govern their population. The same is of course true of ethnographic investigations in Europe’s colonies. When we talk of folklore archives, we cannot talk only of Herder or even Benedict Anderson: we must also invoke Foucault.

Indeed, we will hear some telling anecdotes here of the ambiguity of documents as both relics of precious tradition and instruments of surveillance. Ergo-Hart Västriik will tell us of ideologically suspect documents in the folklore archives in Tartu that were not purged and destroyed but reclassified: they were transferred to the police archives in Tallinn. Alina Branda's father, professor Ion Cuceu, described to me last year his attempts to conduct fieldwork in Transylvania in the 1960s. He was greeted with suspicion by villagers, who were not at all eager to talk to a man from the city with a little notebook. Moreover, he discovered that he himself was being followed into the villages by a man from the city with a little notebook—whose interest in the proceedings was not precisely ethnological. We might remember Ismail Kadare's brilliant novel on the ambiguities of documentation, *The File on H*, in which foreign scholars searching for the roots of Homeric song in the Albanian mountains find that they and their tape recorder are having all of their own activities recorded in turn by the local surveillance apparatus.

But we must also remember that most governments lack the resources to live up to their disciplinary ambitions. In a context of scarce economic resources and scarce human resources, there is room for negotiation between the state and its subjects. Traditional culture cannot lightly be destroyed or readily be reformed without heavy costs to the state itself as well as to individuals.

So the intention of the conference is to consider, in a nuanced way, the interaction that is entextualized inside the file drawers—an interaction between the state and local actors, mediated by that ambiguous figure the folklorist.

Folklore archives bring everyday practices under scrutiny and constitute them as traditional culture. There is often a disciplining involved, beginning with the censorship of erotic, scatological, anticlerical, or counterrevolutionary content. Appropriate texts are fabricated

and lodged within the archives to authenticate their folkloric status. There are more subtle reconstitutions: Kurdish melodies are transcribed according to Turkish musical modes. And in extreme revolutionary situations—we will hear of one such from our Afghan participant, Mr. Ahmadzada—archives can be destroyed in the interests of creating a tabula rasa for a new state project.

But it is perhaps more surprising that so much is preserved in archives, that regimes usually do not destroy what is dangerous to their self-definition or undermines their self-representation. Instead they put it away to keep track of. The nagging doubt—we might need this stuff someday—betokens a recognition in even the most radical regime that its designs cannot fully anticipate all contingencies or dictate all outcomes.

Inattention thus matters as much as attention in the potentialities of archives. Once constituted, archives can become zones of neglect and refuge for cultural expressions and memories not favored by the current regime. Archives are not museums, under constant display and revision. They are dusty, old, tedious—full of old paper that no one can be bothered to sort out to determine what is of any value. Archives are what Michael Thompson defined as “rubbish”—material that is not marked out either as valuable or as dangerous, but in effect invisible. Rubbish, according to Thompson, becomes available for recuperation and recycling when a new social group or project needs markers by which to identify itself.

The immediate motivation for this conference came out of more hopeful and urgent archival projects. Margaret Mills, together with Professor Lorraine Sakata, has been working for a couple of years on a project in Tajikistan to preserve a Soviet-era folklore archives and bring its collection of folktales and music back into circulation. Professor Sakata and Mr. Ahmadzada, with the support of the American Institute of Afghanistan Studies and the National Endowment

of the Humanities, have been working to preserve the collection of Afghan music in the archives of Radio Afghanistan—and to bring music back on the radio. Last year, here at the Mershon Center, Margaret organized a conference of Afghan women leaders.¹ A casual reference to putting music on the radio brought tears to the eyes of more than one woman, raising the prospect of a normal culture to be built from beneath the rubble left by the Taliban.

The Afghan women also talked of “tradition” as the authority invoked to oppress them. Another thing that folklore archives can do is to show that traditions are more complex and plural than states represent them to be. What is preserved and ignored inside the file drawers can potentially foster political as well as cultural recovery in times of transition: Gao Bingzhong will tell us how the so-called “cultural survivals” documented by Chinese folklorists have been brought back as everyday practice since the 1990s.

These cases inspire me because I have been depressed by our field’s turn from the problematic term “folklore” to the equally problematic term “heritage.” Still more am I unhappy with a growing sense among both scholars and local communities that the only future for traditional culture is to move into what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett calls a “second life as heritage.” Our field is in a moment of some temptation to become the legitimization branch of the heritage industry—providing certificates of authenticity, as it were. The primary scholarly reaction has been an important reflexive turn to the analysis and critique of the heritage industry. But I would like to believe that even today there is more to our future than the spectacularization and commodification of folklore. There are other kinds of cultural recycling and revitalization that do not condemn us to become museums of ourselves. So I look forward also to hearing from

¹ Mills, Margaret A. and Sally L. Kitch 2006. “Afghan Women Leaders Speak”: an academic activist conference, Mershon Center for International Security Studies, Ohio State University, November 17-19, 2005. *NWSA Journal* 18(3): 191-201.

all of you not only about how the world is squashed into the archives, but also about how the archives are moving back out to the world.