
COMMENTARY

Towards New Forms of Engagement – Celebrating 100 Years of Finnish Ethnology *Coppélie Cocq*

The SIEF2021 congress included the occasion to celebrate the 100 years anniversary of Ethnology in Finland: it was indeed in July 1921 that European Ethnology was established as an independent subject field at the University of Helsinki. A virtual roundtable discussion about Ethnology's societal engagements, the social situatedness of ethnological knowledge, and activism in research took place early in the program of SIEF2021. The session was sponsored by the University of Eastern Finland and chaired by Professor Pertti Anttonen (University of Eastern Finland). Speakers included Professor Emerita Anna-Maria Åström (Åbo Akademi University), Dr. Senior Research Fellow Inkeri Koskinen (University of Tampere), Professor Tuulikki Kurki (University of Eastern Finland), Professor Konrad Kuhn (University of Innsbruck), Professor Valdimar Hafstein (University of Iceland) and myself, at that time Professor of European Ethnology at the University of Helsinki.

The invitation to the event took as a point of departure how ethnology has become increasingly collaborative and interconnected to a variety of environments, and how the “engaged turn” of ethnography has an increased focus on social responsibility and engagement in activities characterized by ethical and even political activism, especially regarding humanitarian and environmental concerns, sustainable development, and minority rights, including those of the non-human kind.

The theme of the congress “Breaking the Rules? Power, participation and transgression” permeated the roundtable discussions, with topics such as activist research, societal responsibility and not least the position of Ethnology in contemporary times. The session was framed around a set of questions for reflection: how does historical development acknowledge the gentrification of the “folk” into the middle class? How collaborative and engagement-oriented are ethnologists when the vox populi has the sound of populism? Are ethnological and folkloristic research intrinsically populist, even when conducted by an academic elite? What about scientific objectivism when we see how fellow ethnologists are involved and engaged with politics in one way or another? Will scholarly activity and political activity intermingle in ways in which scholarship becomes a handmaiden to explicit or tacit social and political agendas, even when adhering to the scholarly principles of accuracy and

evidentiality? Or, on the contrary, will European Ethnology once and for all be liberated from the ideological and political agendas to which it was tied in its earlier history, when serving nation-state politics, including its coloniality? These questions aimed to spur discussions regarding our role and responsibility. Ethnology as a field, colored by historical ties to nationalism and Western superiority but now in an increasingly diverse modern society, has a need to reflect upon the paths we are taking.

Professor Pertti Anttonen, an expert in the area of folklore and nationalism (see e.g. Bak, Geary, Klaniczay, & Anttonen 2015) opened the roundtable with a welcoming and thoughtful introduction, followed by Professor Emerita Anna-Maria Åström. Professor Åström, with extensive experience and knowledge in the history of the discipline (see Nilsson & Åström 2021), framed Swedish-language ethnology in Finland as a form of activism. Senior Research Inkeri Koskinen provided new insights from her perspective as a philosopher of science (see Koskinen 2021) asking "Can Activist Research Be Objective?" and discussed problems around participation and methodologies, i.e., how participation can both increase and threaten the objectivity of the research. Together, these two contributions rightly observed the continuity of the engagement of ethnologists, and the social situatedness of our field.

Professor Tuulikki Kurki contributed to the roundtable discussion with a talk entitled "Cultural Change: Publishing Research-Based Knowledge in Unconventional Forums". Professor Kurki's experience and approach to narratives of mobility, borders and intercultural relations (for example, Kurki 2021) reminded us of the role and responsibility of Ethnology in situations out of the ordinary. The contemporary context at the heart of in Professor Kurki's research was strikingly relevant as a contemporary illustration of the context framed in the two first presentations.

Next, Professor Konrad Kuhn shared his reflections about "Societal responsibility and the Search for a Firm Ground in the History of European Ethnology". Based in his previous work on the history of the discipline (see for instance Kuhn & Puchberger 2021) and in the context of this specific event, Professor Kuhn contributed insights into the context(s) of the formation of the field of European Ethnology. While the first presentations had their point of departure in the context of Ethnology in Finland, Professor Kuhn's contribution provided a broader perspective of the field in a larger European context.

The roundtable continued with Professor Valdimar Hafstein (University of Iceland). With an excerpt from a video (Hafstein 2020), he shared his reflections on everyday materiality and how it carries traces of social change, cultural history, ideologies, and cultural references – and how perspectives from ethnology are integrated to a large extent in everyday objects and prac-

tices. Not least, Professor Hafstein stresses how Ethnology is part of a cultural self-understanding and how it shapes society's reflexive understanding of itself.

SIEF president, Professor Nevena Škrbić Alempijević (University of Zagreb) and Professor Bernhard Tschofen (University of Zurich) contributed with reflections based on the inputs from the roundtable participants and in relation to the role and ambitions of SIEF as an international arena. The talks illustrated both concerns for the future of the discipline in several academic contexts in European universities, and the long-term commitment of scholars in times of changes and crisis: political and ideological movements affect how research and education are perceived (and financed!); the direct consequences of global warming and its discourses have shown the need for humanistic perspectives for understanding our societies responses to climate change, to mention a few examples (for additional examples, see dedicated special issues such as *Ethnologia Europaea*, 50:2 *Brexit Matters*, 2020; *Kulturella Perspektiv* vol 30 *Tema: Pandemi*, 2021; *Ethnologia Fennica*, vol 45 *Crisis and Recoveries*, 2018).

The topics and discussions of the round table did not only reflect about the past (the last 100 years) of the discipline in Finland, but also about the present and the future in an international perspective. Altogether, the talks illustrated and confirmed how ethnologists are highly engaged researchers and teachers. This engagement can take different forms and can be positioned on various places on a scale of engagement and activism. We are trained into developing a culturally sensitive approach, identifying and considering a variety of perspectives; the reflexive turn in ethnology has taught us to be careful when talking about objectivity. Ethnology has indeed been part of national agendas but also, and not least, has become about understanding intercultural encounters.

The discipline of European Ethnology has changed and is changing – in Finland, in Europe, in the rest of the world. Early ethnology in Finland was a lot about local cultural history, or with focus on Finno-Ugric people, folk culture, rural areas for instance, in close relation to the German *Volkskunde*, and the Swedish *folklivsforskning*. Since then, it has diversified; examples of the ongoing research at Helsinki university include for instance academic cultures, urban studies, affects and emotions, digital culture, queer identities, digitalization of cultural heritage and education, knitting practices and their significance, and more. Topics of interest then, and still now, albeit premises have drastically changed, include work culture and working life, rural areas, and research with and about cultural heritage institutions, such as museums and archives. There is also continuity in the mobility and exchange between ethnologists in Finland and Sweden.

In my own concluding remarks, I reflected upon how ethnology is becoming increasingly interdisciplinary. Despite the confusing number of terms that the multinational and multilingual contexts have somehow created (etnologia or kansatiede, ethnology, European ethnology, cultural anthropology etc.), our research networks, collaborations and exchanges are solid and consistent. These networks have expanded (both in terms of geographies and disciplines), and will surely continue to expand – hopefully, in even more inclusive and diverse ways, across geopolitical and linguistic boundaries. Not least, I hope for an increased dialog with Sámi and Indigenous studies. Sámi Studies has developed and is developing in relation to and along with the international field of Indigenous Studies (Cocq, 2010; 2022), and both Sámi and Indigenous Studies are established for instance at the University of Helsinki, but also at other universities in the Nordic countries. There is potential for cross-fertilization between these fields and the disciplines of Folkloristics and Ethnology. By being more inclusive, Ethnology (and Folkloristics) would also better reflect the variety of cultural expressions in our own region in our research and teaching.

The modes of research and knowledge production have changed because they could not remain the same after we experienced the ”reflexive turn” in early 70s (Rabinow 1978; Clifford & Marcus 1986); and later, the ”vernacular turn” (Goldstein 2015), how the relationships of ordinary people to expert knowledge have changed, as we can observe in discourses and action, particularly in environmentalism or issues related to health (and more recently, vaccines).

We also have the internet, which has been called a ”digital turn” and the ”participatory turn” (Jenkins 2019), as yet another significant factor of change. As the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us - if we did not already know - digital places, networks, tools etc. must be included in our fields or research, our methods, our approaches.

Another change in our discipline is the direct and inevitable consequence of the fact that our societies are experiencing new global migration patterns, climate change and its discourses, politics, and its consequences, as well as pandemics that call our working and social lives into question, and highlight, once again, social, and economic inequalities, within and between our societies.

The discipline of European Ethnology engages with what is happening around us and how we meet societal challenges. Our research, methods and perspectives adapt and evolve. These are our tools to examine, question, challenge ideas, hopefully understand, and, maybe, make a change. As ethnologists in the 2020s, we are not only encountering new changes and challenges. We also bear the heritage of a long research tradition, not only through the work of the others who built the discipline and our research and teaching

environments, but also in the responsibility we have with respect to our colleagues and students.

The future of the discipline of European Ethnology that was celebrated at SIEF2021 is unsure due to economical considerations and priorities. This is something that will sound familiar to several of our delegates participating to the congress, as positions in the humanities are unfortunately under threat in different countries. Nevertheless, the value of the work of our predecessors and colleagues, and the engagement and promising work of colleagues and our students, give me confidence that the future of ethnological thinking, approaches and perspectives will endure. One thing is certain: our perspectives, lenses and knowledge are needed. Moreover, as we keep facing cultural and societal challenges, this need will not decrease.

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