Editorial

Towards a New Ethnology

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The previous issue of AJEC had 'Ethnological Approaches to Cultural Heritages' as its theme. As that issue was being produced, the *Société Internationale d'Ethnologie et de Folklore* (SIEF) held its 9th Congress, entitled 'Transcending European Heritages: Liberating the Ethnological Imagination', at the University of Ulster during the week 16–20 June, 2008 (see Fenske 2008 for details). This offered an opportunity to explore our theme further, and therefore the plenary speakers at that congress, representing a broad spectrum of backgrounds and approaches, nationalities and intellectual biographies, were invited to submit their texts for the present issue.

Following the wide-ranging opening lecture by Peter Jan Margry, who examined the cultural framing and reframing of a shared European heritage and identity, the congress programme – with nearly four hundred contributions, ranging from standard academic papers to multi-media presentations, musical performances, and craft exhibitions – ran over three days, followed by a day of regional excursions. Each day of sessions was dedicated to a sub-theme, which was introduced on the previous evening by two plenary speakers, and discussed further in a series of paper panels and creative workshops. The three sub-themes were: European Heritages; Transcending Theories and Practices; and Performing the Ethnological Imagination.

A field that is often called 'European ethnology' needs to have a fair idea of what it means by 'European'. In practice, however, this is far from clear. Not only have different regional traditions been influenced to varying degrees by more or less non-European approaches, but the meaning and constituent elements of 'Europe' itself are wide open to debate. The theme of 'European Heritages', introduced by Wolfgang Kaschuba and Sharon Macdonald, addressed both the diverse cultural heritages of Europe and the different national and regional traditions of studying culture.

The 'crisis of representation' affects ethnology and folklore more than other fields, due to the importance of ethnographic texts and museum displays. Critical engagement with the methods and theories we use is called for,

to assess not only where improvement and change is needed, but also how reflexivity and deconstruction might be used in asserting a firm place for the field's future. Gulnara Aitpaeva and Pertti Anttonen reflected on the theme of 'Transcending Theories and Practices', presenting case studies that set pointers but leaving it largely to the audience to ponder possible conclusions.

Since the 1990s, performance has attracted increasing interest in ethnology and folklore as a subject for study and an explanatory framework. But can 'performance' or 'actions' also provide new opportunities for expressing ethnological insights? What is the ethnological potential of active engagement with, for example, the fine arts or drama, and where are its limits? The introduction to the theme of 'Performing the Ethnological Imagination' was provided by Regina Bendix and Helena Wulff with reference to, respectively, music and literature.

The plenaries for each sub-theme were scheduled at the end of the previous day of sessions and were designed to link the sub-themes together. For example, in the plenary for the second theme a speaker from Central Asia (Aitpaeva) offered a contribution that transcended not only established theories and practices of 'western' ethnology but also the concept of 'European heritages', thus expanding perspectives of European ethnology. In summing up for the closing plenary, Tony Candon offered critical reflections on the conference proceedings from the perspective of a historian and museum practitioner.

The second part of the conference title had prompted ruminations on the implications of 'liberating the ethnological imagination', which were published in a special issue of the journal *Ethnologia Europaea*, to coincide with the congress. These implications are at least three-fold (Kockel 2008: 8):

1. that there is an ethnological imagination, and therefore ethnology is creative, not simply an unimaginative gathering of 'facts';
2. that this imagination is currently in a state of captivity, preventing it from unfolding its creative potential; and
3. that there are ways and means of breaking out of this captivity.

A fourth implication might be that such a 'jail-breaking' would be worth achieving – which is by no means self-evident.

What do we actually mean when we talk about 'liberating the ethnological imagination'? What are the sources such a process might draw on?

What counts as imaginative ethnology? Who might create it – and to whose advantage?

The late, great John O'Donohue, in his book *Divine Beauty* (O'Donohue 2003: 145–48), had this to say about the gifts the imagination brings:

The imagination retains a passion for freedom. It never wants to stay trapped in the expected territories. The old maps never satisfy it. It wants to press ahead beyond the accepted frontiers and bring back reports of regions no mapmaker has yet visited. (2003: 145) . . . The old clichés of explanation and meaning are unmasked and their trite transparency no longer offers shelter. We become interested in what might be rather than what has always been. Experimentation, adventure and innovation lure us towards new horizons. (2003: 146) . . . The imagination has a deep sense of irony. Because [it] inhabits the province of possibility, it is well aware that the image it presents could indeed be otherwise. . . . To awaken the imagination is to retrieve, reclaim and re-enter experience in fresh new ways. (2003: 148)

In that spirit, the congress itself was part of two on-going projects of art-based, practice-led ethnological research. The *Song Archive* project by Yvonne Buchheim (www.song-archive.org) is a response to Herder's proposition that cultural identity is reflected through song tradition. During the congress, Buchheim exhibited video work from the *Song Archive* project, and also generated new material by recording singing conference delegates as part of her ongoing research, thus quasi 'turning the tables' on the delegates, making them research participants and subjects rather than directing research themselves. This led to a wider debate on the boundaries of ethnography and the discipline of ethnology.

The *Borderland Postcards* project by Iain Biggs and Sarah Blowen also challenged delegates to think about the boundaries and methodologies of ethnographic research, and especially about our ways of seeing the world through visual images and symbols. In advance of the congress, all delegates had been sent one of ten postcards – each representing an unidentified European 'borderland': geographical, cultural, political, historical or environmental – and asked to respond to what they saw, in any form and format they wished, using the blank side of the card. The responses were displayed at the congress and will be edited for an installation and publication in 2009.

Creative moments, such as the SIEF congress, can generate much enthusiasm and new ideas for projects. But the everyday usually catches up with us

pretty quickly, which is particularly piquant for a field of enquiry that projects itself as an *Alltagswissenschaft* (science of the everyday). In a lecture some time ago, I posed the question of what, if anything, ethnology might be good for, these days, when we all know what an unholy mess it created in the past? The keynotes of the 9th SIEF congress, while discussing the theme and sub-themes of the conference, invariably engaged with this question, implicitly or explicitly, offering a number of tentative answers as well as food for further thought and debate.

What emerged from the debate at this and other recent conferences in the field is that ethnology appears to be in the middle of one of its recurrent phases of reinvention. The present phase may appear less cataclysmic than previous ones, but in many ways it is every bit as existential. Some seventy years ago, Sigurd Erixon proposed comparative perspectives in a bid to overcome the parochialism of folk life research in ethnology. Nearly forty years ago, German ethnologists rang in a farewell to folk life altogether (Geiger et al. 1970). Since around the same time, anthropology has been ‘coming home’ from the colonial settings that had been its metier for so long, giving rise to a debate that is far from concluded today, about what constitutes ‘proper’ anthropology. Meanwhile, in the post-Soviet world anthropology is no longer ideologically suspect and has been reconstructed, in tandem and sometimes in tension with reviving national ethnologies. Anthropology and ethnology both grapple with ‘applied’ and ‘public’ approaches, not least because the former subjects of their inquiry have now joined the profession and are asking searching questions. In these circumstances, where the nature and purpose of the ethnological enterprise seems anything but straightforward and budgets are tighter by the day, it is hardly surprising when university managers prefer to treat our field as a taboo subject, as a colleague recently observed somewhat caustically. Walking the tightrope between, on the one hand, a quick-fix disciplinary affiliation confined to more established or fashionable academic subjects that might suit the managers and secure posts and student places for the foreseeable future, and, on the other hand, the idealist pursuit of academic inquiry driven by nothing but intellectual curiosity and conviction, we may not wish to fall for the former but may have little choice in the matter if we want to sustain at least our research. We may well expect our field to be marginalised by the process of confinement. However, there is something rather liberating about being denied the opportunity to develop your field fully – it stops you from becoming complacent about your ideals, and inspires you to

seek out new interdisciplinary connections. Instead of becoming settled and stale in a cosy disciplinary ghetto, can we perhaps turn the disadvantage of an uncertain canon into a virtue, and put our energies into developing something new and exciting? At Derry last June, many of the SIEF delegates followed the keynote speakers in anticipating US President Obama's mantra: Yes, we can!

References

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