

## What's in a Discipline?

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On Friday, September 12, 2014 SIEF, the *Société Internationale d'Ethnologie et de Folklore*, celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> birthday in a festive event held in Amsterdam with a Jubilee Symposium and a General Assembly.<sup>1</sup> The illustrious line-up of speakers included two of SIEF's ex-presidents, Regina Bendix (Göttingen) and Konrad Köstlin (Vienna), SIEF's historian and ex-vice president, Bjarne Rogan (Oslo), and two special invited guests, Jasna Čapo (Zagreb) and Orvar Löfgren (Lund).<sup>2</sup> We asked them all to speak "out of the box" but gave them free rein otherwise. The result was a fine series of presentations, moving from a meditation on anniversaries to reflections on the history of the society and its disciplines, and from an analysis of disciplinary relations in the centers and margins of Europe to visions for the future of the field and, finally, to new research perspectives on everyday life. The present volume follows up SIEF's Jubilee Symposium and presents four of the papers from Amsterdam in full article form, as well as two original discussion pieces by Kristin Kuutma (Tartu) and Cristina Sánchez-Carretero (Santiago de Compostela).

Just as this volume is published, the society meets for its biennial 2015 congress in Zagreb, Croatia. Reading through the paper abstracts submitted for this congress, still in our demi-centennial jubilee mind-set, it struck us that much of what will be said in Zagreb—the vantage points, the dialogues, not to mention the vocabulary—would have been hard to imagine for our predecessors, the scholars who took part in the society's founding in the mid-1960s. Our successors might say something similar about us when SIEF meets for its 37th congress in 2065. If SIEF congresses from the last fifty years are any indication, if the future differs from the present as the present differs from the past, then, to be sure, much will be said that we may find it difficult to wrap our minds around today. And yet over the past half century, some key concerns have stayed with us, and it is hard to believe that they will fade away any time soon: the popular, the vernacular, the everyday, the local and the translocal, the national and the transnational, diffusion and migration, difference and sameness, inclusion and exclusion, religious and secular imaginaries, the nar-

rative and the material, tradition and creativity, class and gender, the archive and the museum, and food and the home.

These topics have cut across SIEF congresses from the outset to the present, and persist across the panels at the Zagreb congress. They define the society and its field(s) of research and practice; these are the concerns that mark the common ground of ethnologists and folklorists in all their various denominations and renominations, concerns shared with colleagues from neighboring disciplines who take part in the work and congresses of SIEF. We bring to these common concerns those questions and concepts that motivate our inquiry any given year: from the historic-geographic, the functional, structural, and post-structural at previous congresses; and to the affective, the digital, the corporeal, or the post-human at current congresses. These traveling concepts bring us into larger conversations that cut across disciplines; they are crucial, if ephemeral. The common concerns, in contrast, have proved resilient; they remain at the heart of our field(s) through all of the various “turns” it has taken and will take. They unite us, in spite of our differences.

At the Jubilee Symposium in Amsterdam, Konrad Köstlin (himself president of SIEF between 1990 and 2001) addressed head-on the problematic of celebrating anniversaries. Turning an ethnological eye on the ethnologists in their celebration of themselves, Köstlin’s analysis is spot-on. It opens the contemporary, “decimalist” preoccupation with anniversaries up to a scrutiny that is insightful, witty, and embarrassing. On behalf of SIEF, we plead guilty: Köstlin’s shots hit the bull’s-eye. SIEF’s self-chosen moment of auto-historicizing and self-glorification is indeed about affirming the society’s unity and continuity, it is about shameless self-promotion and an inflation of our collective sense of self. Its slightly pompous tone and serious setting—with a “Golden Jubilee” celebration parading professors and presidents (current, ex- and vice-) amid classical nude Greek statues in the Special Collections building of the University of Amsterdam—are very much in tune with sensibilities and structures that Köstlin’s analysis brings to light. They are characteristic, he argues, of a contemporary decimalism that propagates an endless array of anniversary celebrations that all follow a similar logic, each marking nothing more substantial than round numbers, but doing so with great solemnity and self-importance. Even SIEF’s Extraordinary General Assembly in Amsterdam—a sort of symbolic re-enactment of the assembly that founded SIEF 50 years earlier in Athens—is symptomatic of this logic. Whereas the founding assembly in Athens offered universal suffrage to individual members, with the right to vote in person at the society’s General Assemblies, the jubilee assembly in Amsterdam introduced online elections, moving SIEF into an age of digital democracy—a



Overview of the jubilee symposium in the Nina van Leer-Room (Special Collections Building, University of Amsterdam). Photo: P.J. Margry.

claim that Köstlin also picks apart in his article. The repetition and return perform the organic coherence and historical unity of the society.

However, as Bjarne Rogan, SIEF's historian, shows in his article in this volume, that coherence and unity is anything but self-evident. In fact, SIEF was not born into the world at the assembly in Athens. Instead, a much older organization had its head dunked into the water, was baptized and reborn as SIEF. Whether that dunking was of its own accord is up for debate (though Rogan actually lays that debate to rest in this issue) and so is the extent to which the organization's rebirth as SIEF marked a new beginning. Rogan dates SIEF's roots further back in history to 1928, when its predecessor the *Commission des Arts et Traditions Populaires* (CIAP) came into being as a specialized body of the League of Nations (later reborn as the UN), or more precisely of its intellectual organization, the Paris-based *Commission Internationale pour la Coopération Intellectuelle* (CICI, later reborn as UNESCO). Of course that year is arbitrary in our opinion, too. Another history might begin instead with the society's postwar

reorganization as a commission of the newly founded UNESCO, or alternatively stretch back to the nineteenth century when the SIEF disciplines came into being and the first national societies formed, some of which went on to become the national commissions to CIAP. Or else, SIEF's history might indeed begin in Athens, when a politicized commission consisting of national committees (on the UN model) was dismantled to build instead a professional society consisting of individual members.

Whatever starting point we choose, it holds true at any rate that in Athens, on the afternoon of Tuesday, September 8, 1964, a committee that called itself the "gang of four" decided to put to a vote of all present at CIAP's assembly whether to continue the organization in the same manner and under the same name or to reconstitute it instead according to the gang's proposal.<sup>3</sup> The latter won a narrow majority of votes and so founded the International Society for Ethnology and Folklore (SIEF). In its name, two related disciplinary strains dating back to CIAP—European Ethnology and Folklore Studies—are explicitly foregrounded, representing the two major "blood groups" among its members. It was the result of what some in those years called the "ethnologization" of the field. Others saw it in reverse terms as the result of a schism led by an insurgency of secessionist folklorists.

As Bjarne Rogan concludes in his article in this volume, "When the Folklorists Won the Battle but Lost the War," the unity of the discipline was really at stake in 1964. Were ethnology and folklore to be regarded as two independent disciplines or as different specialities of one common discipline, a unified "European ethnology"? Opposite stances were taken by a faction led by German folklorist Kurt Ranke (Göttingen), and the previous leadership of CIAP, spearheaded by Swedish ethnologist Sigurd Erixon (Stockholm). Bjarne Rogan describes in heartbreaking detail the series of events that culminated in the 1964 (re)constitution of SIEF in Athens, when the Ranke faction won the day, and the common field of study (the "arts populaires" of CIAP) was replaced in the society's name with two distinct disciplinary identities. According to Rogan, the idea of a unified discipline was thus blown for decades. Of course, one might take the opposite view: that, on the contrary, instead of ethnologists and folklorists going their separate ways in two different societies, as might easily have happened, they decided to join their fortunes and make common cause in one common society with regular, common congresses at which to share inspiration and cultivate their close relationship.

There is a good reason why ethnologists and folklorists, whether they go by one, two, or many names in their individual countries, have joint meetings in Europe and share institutions and societies in many of its countries: it is be-

cause their fields and their fortunes are two sides of one coin. For that coin to have currency, it needs both sides. In a recent book, Scottish ethnologist Gary West puts it aptly when he writes: "they should be viewed as non-identical twins within a family of disciplines that study the culture of humanity" (*Voicing Scotland: Folk, Culture, Nation*. Edinburgh, UK: Luath Press, 2013, 36). Each needs the other, whether it is housed in the same department or an adjacent one (the latter arrangement has obvious strategic advantages). Without folklore studies, ethnology all too easily becomes a specialized, regional subfield of social and cultural anthropology. Without ethnology, the study of folklore all too easily becomes a specialized subfield of philology. Together they make sense, as the study of popular/vernacular/everyday expressions, objects, practices, and ways of life. Together they are viable and together they are interesting. That holds true regardless of whether we conceive of them as two separate but closely related fields or as one field with two (or more) specializations/subfields; on this question we are agnostic and profess no opinion. In fact, we are not sure it is a productive question. The answer must at any rate be context-sensitive: relative rather than absolute; pragmatic rather than doctrinal; empirical rather than theoretical. Sometimes (and in some places) they are one; sometimes (and in some places) they are two. Sometimes the picture is more complicated than that.

One complicating factor, and the most important one, is the relationship to social or cultural anthropology, another major issue in the disciplinary relations and history of SIEF. At various times and places, ethnology and folklore have been identified as subdivisions of a large and encompassing discipline of anthropology. Indeed, Bjarne Rogan mentions that UNESCO made several attempts in the middle of the 20th century to merge SIEF/CIAP with another one of its member organizations, the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES), but these attempts always met strong resistance in SIEF. Indeed, we find it easy to agree that ethnology and folklore belong to the extended family of anthropological sciences, dedicated to the study of culture and society; hence, in 2011, SIEF became a member of the World Council of Anthropological Associations (WCAA).

That is not tantamount, however, to regarding ethnology and folklore as subfields of a united discipline of anthropology. The division between what in Germany used to be known as *Volkskunde* and *Völkerkunde* has a long intellectual trajectory in Europe reaching back into the nineteenth century; despite considerable overlap and borrowing in theory and method, the two have different foci and each asks different questions in dialogue with their own respective history/ies (a similar distinction might be drawn, for example,

between social anthropology and sociology). While the discipline of social anthropology tends to orbit around cosmopolitan centers of gravity in imperial capitals, like Paris and London, European ethnology and folklore are more dispersed, with many of the strongest institutions in countries with no imperial history in the twentieth century (Sweden, Germany, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, etc.). The former formed its knowledge of selves and others in far away countries as part of the logic of empire-building, while the latter formed its knowledge of selves and others at home as part of the logic of nation building and the formation of modern European societies. Further adding to the centrifugal force in the disciplinary structure of ethnology and folklore is their longstanding public engagement—as Konrad Köstlin notes in this volume, scholars in these fields have been charged “with modern society’s historical and reflexive self-consciousness.” This means, among other things, that the lion’s share of the scholarship has been written in the various vernaculars, in contrast to social anthropology, where French and English have long held sway in scholarly communication. The centrifugal force is in many ways productive; it has produced a discipline that is impressively diverse and at times “undisciplined,” with a local audience and often a wide scope of application. It needs to be counteracted, however, by centripetal structures for scholarly dialogue and collaboration, opportunities to produce convergence through divergence, consent through dissent. SIEF is such a structure, the international society that brings scholars in the field together and gives them a chance to present their work to one another and work out their differences, either at its international congresses or in its international journals, *Ethnologia Europaea* and *Cultural Analysis*.

Be that as it may, the relationship to social anthropology is one that is constantly under negotiation and develops at different tempos and even in different directions in the different parts of Europe and in different parts of the world. In many post-socialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, there has been a convergence between these fields after the collapse of communism.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, this convergence has not taken place on equal terms in a relation of parity. In this volume, Jasna Čapo offers an incisive, critical analysis of this convergence and of the present-day relationship between European ethnology and social anthropology. Citing numerous examples from Croatia, from other formerly Yugoslav republics, and from further afield, she deconstructs and challenges reified differences between ethnologies in Central-Eastern Europe and Western, mainly British-style anthropology. The article argues strongly and convincingly for overcoming the existing divisive discourse to work instead in academic dialogue, based in principles of mutual respect, reciprocity,

and equality, towards a trans-national European ethnology / anthropology of Europe.

One might say that this volume moves from the general to the concrete. It begins with a reflexive meditation on anniversaries (capturing in its essay style some of the characteristics that public engagement has given to ethnological scholarship), moves on to a sensational biographical account of SIEF, and from there offers a disciplinary history of the present and an incisive analysis of contemporary disciplinary relations in Europe. It concludes with an innovative study of classic topics of ethnological knowledge: the everyday, the material, and the domestic—of stuff in the home and how people deal with it as part of their daily lives.

In the last article in this volume, Orvar Löfgren analyzes the ways in which people manage clutter in their homes, how they cope with “too much” in their daily activities, their routines, relationships, and daydreaming. As he notes, the modern home is not only crowded with objects, it also overflows with feel-



The jubilee symposium, 2014: Regina Bendix explaining that ethnologists never have been “in a box.” Photo: P.J. Margry.

ings, activities, affects: "Passion, boredom, guilt, longing, nagging irritation, explosions of home rage, moments of bliss all try to co-exist with and also charge material objects ... as well as the normal everyday activities." Bringing to topics of longstanding ethnological concern perspectives and insights generated by new theoretical turns across the social sciences and humanities—namely, affective and non-representational theories—Löfgren's study of domestic overflow grounds theoretical discourses on the mundane in close scrutiny of people's everyday practices.

Scholars from various fields of the humanities and social sciences have, in recent years, turned their attention to everyday life—it is no longer the more-or-less exclusive domain of ethnologists—but Orvar Löfgren's article illustrates the radical empiricism that is still the hallmark of the ethnological perspective. Ethnologists ground their theorization of the everyday in empirical analyses of people's actual practices: how people go about their daily lives and how they talk about going about them.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, there was one more speaker at SIEF's jubilee symposium whose contribution could not be developed in written form for this volume, but the gist of which we find interesting to relate here nonetheless. Picking up on our invitation to speak "out of the box," former SIEF president Regina Bendix gave a presentation titled "We have never been in a box!" Arguing for the intellectual, creative freedom of the loose structures in ethnology and folklore, or of what we have described here as the productive powers of the centrifugal force in the field, Bendix illustrated her argument with reference to the work of a number of colleagues, including Pietro Clemente (Florence), Barbro Klein (Stockholm), Dunja Rihtman-Aguštin (Zagreb), Martine Segalen (Paris-Nanterre), and Bernhard Tschofen (Zürich). They all serve as excellent examples, she noted, of scholars who "have never been in a box;" intellectuals who have opened up new avenues of research and struck up new conversations in our "undisciplined" discipline, across the disciplines, and with the reading public, precisely because of their idiosyncratic and creative approaches and style.

Notwithstanding Konrad Köstlin's critique of pomposity and self-celebration, as ethnologists we advocate reflexivity and we find, moreover, that certain moments provide an ideal opportunity for its exercise. Anniversaries are such occasions, be they those of individuals, couples, scholarly disciplines, or their international organizations, like SIEF. In tune with Regina Bendix's argument for idiosyncrasy and intellectual freedom, we do not expect such reflexivity to produce rigid or essentialist definitions of the discipline and its boundaries. That has been the case too often in past decades, as Bjarne Rogan's

historiography reveals. The disciplinary battles fought out in SIEF's founding and early years lend themselves rather nicely to more recent analyses of inclusion and exclusion, identity politics, techniques of othering, and the labeling of constitutive outsides. We are content now to locate ourselves, alongside adjoining fields (with borders blurred), in the broader realm of cultural and social sciences. SIEF itself—the International Society for Ethnology and Folklore—presents itself as a pluridisciplinary organization, centered in the twin fields of ethnology and folklore. Like the fields it represents, SIEF is eclectic and open-minded. It is promiscuous in its disciplinary relations, while keeping faith with its founding values and vision. On the occasion of SIEF's anniversary, it is therefore more important to reflect on what's *in* a discipline than on what a discipline actually *is*, on its ingredients rather than its essence. Ingredients belong to the cookbook genre, and the greatest meals will always result from the idiosyncratic take on the cookbook, from its creative use, adding or leaving out an ingredient here, changing the ratios there, or perhaps throwing in a dash of something unexpected.

Such reflection need of course not wait until the ripe age of fifty; it is best done continuously. But with the banality of everyday work, its thrown-togetherness, and many stresses (cf. Löfgren in this volume) one tends to put it off in wait for a specific date or a triggering event that offers the perfect excuse to indulge. And so in Amsterdam in September 2014, SIEF started to chew on its past and future, self-image and self-reflection, on its “hundred years war” and on the celebration of creativity and renewal and of “out of the box” thinking; SIEF stepped back in order to bring the field forward. It is less important, we found, to debate what a discipline is than to understand what is in it, but ultimately what matters most is what comes out of it.

## Notes

- 1 SIEF's jubilee symposium was organized in the Special Collections building of the University of Amsterdam, with the support of the same university and the Meertens Institute. The Amsterdam Center for European Ethnology (<http://www.meertens.knaw.nl/acee/>) sponsored the lecture of Orvar Löfgren as the first ACEE-Lecture.
- 2 The jubilee lectures were filmed and they are all available to view (under “Videos”) on SIEF's website: <http://www.siefhome.org/videos.shtml>.
- 3 The “gang” consisted of Roger Lecotté (Paris), Roger Pinon (Liège), Robert Wildhaber (Basel) and Karel C. Peters (Antwerp); read more about them in Bjarne Rogan's contribution in this volume.
- 4 A similar convergence took place earlier after fall of the dictatorships in Spain and Portugal.
- 5 While unwieldy and eccentric, the name chosen for the field in Tübingen, one of the centers of its innovation in the 1960s and 1970s (Löfgren's department in Lund being another), seems in this sense rather appropriate: *Empirische Kulturwissenschaft*, or empirical cultural science.

