DISCUSSION

Why Should Folklore Students Study “Dead” Legends?

(A Round-Table Discussion Held at the 16th Congress of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research, in Vilnius, Lithuania, 29th June 2013)¹

Response 7: “Folkloristics and the Folklore Archives”: Fredrik Skott (Institute for Language and Folklore, Department of Dialectology, Onomastics and Folklore Research in Gothenburg [DAG])

Have the folklore archives been abandoned? Aren’t the huge folklore collections used anymore? In many ways, I agree with Terry Gunnell’s initial comments in the “Introduction”, although as a researcher employed at a folklore archive, I tend to look upon the issues in question from other perspectives. Building on a brief historical overview of the Swedish folklore archives and their relationship to the ethnological-folkloristic research conducted today at Swedish universities, I would like to initiate a discussion concerning the future role of these archives. My perspective is Swedish, although parallels to the Swedish situation can naturally be found in many other countries.

Most parts of the Swedish folklore collections are products of the twentieth century. Developing out of initially being something that had primarily interested an educated elite (in the late nineteenth century), a constantly increasing proportion of the Swedish population began to take interest in folklore after 1900. In the space of a single decade, several archives were founded with the direct purpose of safeguarding folklore, in Lund (1913), in Uppsala (1914) and in Göteborg (1919). Government funds were allocated to these archives, and during the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, hundreds of thousands

¹ Those physically at the discussion were Terry Gunnell, Elliott Oring, Barbro Klein, John Lindow, and Haim Weiss. Ülo Valk’s paper was read aloud (since he had to be at another simultaneous session). Timothy Tangherlini’s presentation was given by way of You-Tube. Fredrik Skott had been invited, but was unfortunately unable to come. However, he kindly agreed to send a response for this publication.
of records containing information about people’s beliefs, rituals, narratives and music came to be incorporated into the folklore collections of these archives. At the same time, the Nordiska museet in Stockholm was intensifying its own collecting activities.

In this period, the folklore archives were closely connected to the folklore research that was being conducted in the universities. The archives thus functioned not only as a continuously growing database, but also as “nurseries” for new generations of folklorists (Skott 2008, 14; and Lilja 1996). In the early 1900s, lectures in folklore research were also being given in the universities of the aforementioned cities. In Uppsala, however, it was also possible to study folk-life, a discipline that was similarly represented with a professorship in Stockholm (Bringéus 1988; 2006, 82-83; 2011; and Skott 2011). During the inter-war period, lively discussions took place about whether the two disciplines should be joined or not. Supporters of the former position got their way; at the end of the 1940s, folklore research was incorporated into the discipline of folk-life research. Remnants of the former division nonetheless remained visible in the descriptions given of the various professorships. In Uppsala, the label “especially in the field of folkloristics” (“särskilt folkloristisk”) followed the title of the professorship in “Nordic and Comparative Folk-life Research” (“nordisk och jämförande folklivsforskning”); while in Lund, the corresponding professorship had the additional label “especially in the field of ethnology ” (“särskilt etnologisk”). In 1972, the name of the discipline in both cases changed once again, now to “Etnologi,” especially European (“etnologi, särskilt europeisk”) (Bringéus 1988). Today, the discipline of “etnologi” has generally become a smaller branch within larger departments in Swedish universities. So far, however, only the University of Göteborg has gone further. There it seems that etnologi is about to be merged into the field of Cultural Studies (“Kulturstudier”) along with the existing departments of “Cultural Studies” (“Kulturstudier”) and “Children and Youth Culture” (“Barn- och ungdomskultur”).

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2 As noted by Terry Gunnell in the “Introduction”, etnologi in the Nordic countries is more closely connected to folk-life than “ethnology” in English, which is a wider concept (see, for example, the “Scottish ethnology” taught in the School of Celtic and Scottish Studies in Edinburgh, or the “ethnology” taught in American Universities).
Nowadays, the folklore archives in Göteborg, Umeå and Uppsala all form part of the Institute for Language and Folklore (Institutet för språk och folkminnen), a government authority. Recently the archive in Lund was also separated from the discipline of Etnologi, although it still forms part of Lund University. Even if none of the Swedish archives are organisationally linked to the university discipline of Etnologi today, ties between the two remain strong. For example, most of the collecting activities carried out by the archive are conducted with contemporary or future ethnological research projects in mind: to a great extent, questionnaires are still carried out on the direct initiatives of individual ethnologists who are working as researchers or teachers at the universities. Recruitment to the folklore archives mainly involves ethnologists, and almost all of those currently employed as archivists have studied Etnologi. I am the only researcher at a Swedish folklore archive with a PhD-degree in another discipline.

It can thus be said that the Swedish folklore collections have been produced within a jointly etnological-folkloristic context. This applies to the start of the twentieth century as much as it does to the start of the twenty-first. On the whole, the nature of the archives have also changed along with the nature of the discipline, although in practice there is a substantial lag in time behind the discipline on the part of the archives. In the 1940s, the folklore archives in Lund changed its name to The Folk-Life Archives (Folklivsarkivet). Even though the archives in Göteborg, Umeå and Uppsala have kept the word “folklore” (folkminnen) in their names, they now largely serve as etnological documentation centres.

When it comes to the older folklore collections created on the initiative of folklore scholars during the inter-war period, the situation is different. Modern Swedish etnologists, especially those of the younger generation, seem, with very few exceptions, to be fairly uninterested in this material, and in particular in records of legends, folk tales and other forms of verbal folklore. Although texts are occasionally used as “illustrations”, few scholars approach these collections seriously. I would argue that the number of larger etnological studies from the last decade based on the older folklore collections could be counted on one
hand. Significantly, studies of the collecting activities of the archives are now more common than studies based on the folklore records themselves.

As I see it, there are several parallel explanations for this development. As Terry Gunnell points out in the “Introduction”, attitudes to this older material and the processes behind its collection offer a partial explanation (see also Skott 2008). However, more important are the changes in the discipline as whole and the sharp break made by its representatives with the history and the traditions of the discipline. As Barbro Klein notes in her response (see above), during the late twentieth century, Etnologi in Sweden changed rapidly from being a historically-oriented discipline to becoming a cultural science with a focus on modern society. Nowadays, historical perspectives are comparatively absent in many etnological projects, and the same applies largely to the older research traditions of the discipline. Several older ethnologists have been questioning the sharp break that has occurred within the discipline, some suggesting that the gap between the “old” and the “new” has become an abyss (see Skott 2008,14-26). Professor emeritus Nils-Arvid Bringéus commented: “Tänk om arkeologerna slutade gräva och historikerna vände sig bort från de skriftliga källorna. Det är ju egentligen något motsvarande som skett bland de yngre etnologerna” (“What if archaeologists stopped digging and historians turned away from written source? Something similar has happened among the young etnologists”: Bringéus 1993, 216).

At the same time, it should be borne in mind that, in my opinion at least, the archives have not done enough to adapt their collections and search indexes to meet the changes and new perspectives that have occurred within the discipline of etnologi. Tellingly, the means of searching the older folklore collections today have changed little since the 1930s; the archive- indexes were designed to facilitate the folklore research of the interwar period, not the etnologi of today. Furthermore, the digitisation of the collections has only recently begun. If one needs to study every folklore record concerning a particular subject, one has to visit the archives in Göteborg, Lund, Umeå and Uppsala, and preferably also the Nordiska museet in Stockholm. Another way to make the collections more attractive for modern etnologists would be to connect
different kinds of archival material, and contextualise the folklore records in the way suggested by Beyer (2011) and Tangherlini (see Tangherlini’s response in this volume). For example, letters and field diaries which are often fairly hard to find today, commonly contain valuable additional information about the folklore collectors and their meetings with informants. Ideally, parts of the folklore collections should also be typed and most preferably translated. Many of today’s young students have difficulties reading the handwritten records, and as the material contained in this round-table discussion demonstrates there is great international interest in parts of the older folklore collections. However, as with other cultural organisations in the present economic climate, the financial situation of the archives is very strained. Just recently, in the spring of 2013, a proposal was made to close down the Department of Dialectology, Onomastics and Folklore Research (Dialekt-, ortnamns- och folkminnesarkivet) in Umeå and relocate its activities.

Nonetheless, the fact that few modern Swedish etnologists pay attention to our older folklore collections does not mean that the collections are lying dusty and unused. Fortunately, the void is being filled by representatives of other disciplines as well as the interested public. As noted above, organisational links between the archives and the discipline of Etnologi no longer exist at the universities. Most Swedish folklore archives now form part of the government-run Institute for Language and Folklore (Institutet för språk och folkminnen). This authority is expected to cooperate with, and address itself to both the universities and the interested public. Nowhere in the instructions of the Institute for Language and Folklore is there any statement suggesting that they should turn their attention to or cooperate with etnologists in particular. More commonly than in earlier times, folklore collections are now being used by representatives of local history societies, school children and general enthusiasts. Along with the few university etnologists that appear, the collections are also being used by students and researchers from within the fields of Conservation, Comparative Literature and Religious Studies. More recently, students from various kinds of Cultural Heritage programmes have also
discovered the folklore collections. Historians, too, are becoming increasingly common.

Previously regarded almost as pariahs, both uninteresting and unscientific, the older folklore collections are slowly but surely being reassessed to gain a place within the discipline of History. The growing interest in the material may have arisen out of the discussions involving historical anthropology which took place in Sweden in the 1980s and 1990s. Nonetheless, it has only been since around 2000 that historians have seriously begun approaching the collections. In Göteborg alone, a number of papers based on folklore records are now being written annually by students of History. In recent years, a number of theses partly based on this material have also been published in Sweden: for example, Kristina Tegler Jerselius’ Den stora häxdansen: Vidskepelse, väckelse och vetande i Gagnef, 1858 (“The Great Witch Dance: Superstition, Revival and Knowledge in Gagnef, 1858”: Tegler 2003), Monica Weikert’s I sjukdom och nöd: Offerkyrkoseden i Sverige från 1600-tal till 1800-tal (“In Sickness and Need: Early Modern Votive Church Offerings in Sweden”: Weikert 2004); and Mikael Häll’s Skogsrået, näcken och djävulen: Erotiska naturväsen och demonisk sexualitet i 1600- och 1700-talens Sverige (“The Forest Nymph, the Neck and the Devil: Erotic Nature Spirits and Demoniac Sexuality in 17th and 18th Century Sweden: Häll 2012). These theses all deal with issues that in earlier years would have primarily interested folklorists. My own thesis was also written in History. In Folkets minnen: Traditionsinsamling i idé och praktik 1919-1964 ("Popular Memory: Folklore Collection in Theory and Practice, 1919-1964": Skott 2008), I tried to nuance the widespread notions that lie behind folklore archives the early 1900s in terms of bourgeois political projects.

From the viewpoint of the archives themselves, the fact that representatives of other disciplines have discovered the folklore collections is an opportunity rather than a threat. It is suggested in the “Introduction” to this round table that historians might not have the knowledge and tools to understand the folklore records properly. It is also questioned whether they can “read” material of this kind which, for the main part, doesn’t involve facts? Undoubtedly there is some truth in the fact that the majority of historians have
very little experience of dealing with orality and oral sources. Furthermore, few of them have ever conducted their own interviews, something that gives a clear advantage in understanding the older records. In short, understanding the older folklore collections is easier if you not only have extensive experience of fieldwork but also have reflected the role that you yourself play in it.

One might nonetheless raise a similar question in this regard concerning today’s etnologister: have those young etnologister coming out of universities today enough knowledge to understand the older folklore collections? Is not an intimate knowledge of the society and the historical period in which the folklore was “alive” necessary for understanding the older records? How many of them now have any experience of working with archive material? It should be emphasised that I am not questioning the ability of the young etnologister of today to use the folklore collections but rather underlining that representatives of different disciplines have different problems to overcome when approaching the archival material.

Now and then I receive questions about the status of folkloristics in Sweden from representatives of other disciplines and from researchers in other countries. It is sometimes even claimed that folklore research no longer takes place in Sweden. I usually answer that it depends on how you define folkloristics and where you look for it. Folklore research is still being conducted within the field of Etnologi. My feeling is also that interest in “folkloristic” perspectives has increased in recent years, especially with regard to narratives and performances. Nonetheless, the field of Folkloristics in Sweden seems have followed the development of its companion field, Etnologi. Research projects within this field deal with our contemporary society, are largely based on the scholars’ own interviews, and deal with other topics than before. As Inger Lövkröna notes in a recent issue of Rig: Kulturhistorisk tidskrift: “Folklorister studerar idag etnicitet, kön, klass, kropp, hälsa, familj, arbetsliv och institutioner, dvs. samma teman som etnologer och kunskapsmålet är i bred mening detsamma – att bidra till och att förklara och förstå samhället” (“Folklorists are now studying ethnicity, gender, class, body, health, work and institutions, that is the same themes as etnologister and the learning goals are broadly the same – the aim being to
explain, understand and contribute to the community”: Lövkrona 2013, 125: my translation).

However, as noted above, if you are looking for a different type of folkloristics, for example, those topics, problems and time periods that interested older scholars such as Hilding Celander, Gunnar Granberg, Martin P:n Nilsson, Dag Strömbäck, Bengt R. Jonsson or even Carl Wilhelm von Sydow, you also need to look outside the discipline of Etnologi, in other words, among those representing other disciplines. As noted above, studies that might earlier have been produced within the fields of folklore or folk-life research are today also found in other disciplines such as History, Comparative Literature, Nordic Languages or Religious Studies. This, however, is no innovation: Folklore research in Sweden has always had a multidisciplinary character. It might be borne in mind that several of the scholars noted above had an active background in other disciplines (see Hellspang and Skott 2010; and Rogan and Eriksen 2013).

With regard to the future, I believe that it is very important that the former cooperation between the folklore archives and the discipline of Etnologi should not only be continued but deepened. Ideally, the links between the collecting activities of the archives and ongoing research at universities should be increased. It should also be the rule rather than the exception that both folkloristic and etnologically related interviews made by students and researchers at universities be incorporated into the archive collections. As I see it, both the archives and the discipline of Etnologi have a great deal to gain from reawakening the interest of young students in the older folklore collections. For both sides, it would be deeply unfortunate if future generations of etnologists lacked both knowledge and experience of dealing with the original material.

In spite of this, the present prospect does seem to be that we are unlikely to witness a new widespread interest in the Swedish folklore of earlier times within the discipline of Etnologi, at least over the next few decades. For the archives, I thus believe it is very important to not only strengthen their own research, but also expand cooperation with scholars and research milieus within other disciplines which ask other questions and examine the folklore collections from other perspectives than those employed by the Swedish etnologists of
today. As I see it as an archivist, what is most important is not who uses the folklore collections, but rather that they are used at all as a means of increasing our knowledge of various aspects concerning both our present and our past.

References


