Ships Pass in the Night No More?

Joseph Jacobs, Kaarle Krohn, Possible Pasts and Potential Futures

Frog
University of Helsinki

Winds of cultural change have swept the world, driven by the global pandemic. Among the myriad impacts, it seems only natural that the Folklore Fellow's Summer School was transformed into an online event with participants in time zones across the globe. This breakthrough into the virtual entails a new type of connectivity to which most of us are rapidly becoming acculturated. Geographical distance and national boundaries have historically been significant factors affecting who participates in academic events, which are key sites for the development networks and collaborations. The breakthrough into the virtual holds the promise that these factors are fated to wither away. The implications of this are challenging to grasp, which makes it worthwhile to reflect on a meeting that did not occur, but that might – just might – have had resounding consequences if it had.

Long before the mass-cancelation of flights and border lockdowns, it was not uncommon that someone was unable to attend an event, in which case we missed what they had to say. We do not usually give much thought to the 'might have beens' of such missed encounters, and they receive even less consideration in the history of scholarship. Here, however, I would like to introduce the missed encounter of Joseph Jacobs (1854–1916) and Kaarle Krohn (1863–1933), an encounter which almost took place in London and Oxford at the International Folk-Lore Congress in 1891. The case is interesting because it is an example of a conversation that, had it occurred, could have significantly impacted the history of folkloristics.

The International Folk-Lore Congress was established to create a nexus for the emerging field. Krohn was at the first event in Paris in 1889 but Jacobs was not. However, Jacobs was on the Second Congress's organizing committee and subsequently edited the proceedings. Krohn received funds from the Imperial Alexander University in Helsinki (today the University of Helsinki) to attend the event, yet, for reasons unknown, he never made the journey. Surprisingly, he arranged instead for his younger brother Ilmari Krohn to use the funds and speak at the conference (Krohn I. 1851: 175–176). Ilmari Krohn was still a university student at the time and his topic was folk music rather than folktales, making his paper rather tangential to the section in which he spoke and more generally to how folklore was addressed at the Congress (Laitinen 2020: 116–117 and p.c.).[1] As a consequence, he, rather than Kaarle Krohn, presented in the same session with Jacobs (Jacobs & Nutt 1891: xxi), and the encounter that was primed to happen never took place.

Kaarle Krohn's name is of course legendary in folkloristics. He was a driving force in the foundation of the Folklore Fellows with Axel Olrik in 1907 and established an agreement for a devoted international publication series in 1908, which appeared as FF Communications in 1910. This situated Kaarle Krohn at the heart of the international network. He was a staunch advocate and propagator of the so-called Historical-Geographic Method (HGM), which he consistently attributed to his late father, Julius Krohn. Julius Krohn had observed that Finnic epic poetry exhibits a continuum of variation that he interpreted as stadial, reflecting a succession of innovations as the respective epic spread from place to place (1883). At the First Folklore Congress, Kaarle Krohn presented the methodology that had been largely implicit in his father's work, updated with his own list of 'laws' of folklore (1891: 67). Krohn's 'laws' are largely unknown today, but they stand apart from 'laws' being proposed by his contemporaries in that they focus on the form and variation internal to folklore as documented rather than on theories of its derivation from something else or of its historical spread. The methodology and 'laws' specific to the research object were instrumental in validating folkloristics as a distinct 'science' and gaining its institutional recognition. This culminated in the establishment of a professorial position, maintained through the present day, and the model was exported, establishing professorships of '[National] and Comparative Folklore' elsewhere. Krohn's

1 I would like to thank Heikki Laitinen for consulting on this topic.

advocation of the methodology and these 'laws' suggests that he was already oriented to establishing folkloristics as an independent discipline in the 1880s.

In the 1880s and 1890s, establishing folklore as a 'science' nowhere received more enthusiastic and energetic discussion than in the British Folk-Lore Society (founded 1878). However, in parallel with the rise of the Folklore Fellows and the HGM during the early twentieth century, British folkloristics went into decline. Richard Dorson (1961: 305) relates this to the failure to gain institutional status for the discipline. This failure can be viewed against the British folklorists' orientation toward disciplinary distinction by emphasizing taxonomies, as in biology, and documentation, while their methods and theories remained bound up with those of anthropology. Sir Edward Burnett Tylor was on the society's first board, and his theory of 'survivals' (1874 [1871]) was embraced by its members, who conceived folklore through that lens. Folklore was viewed as a type of cultural anachronism inherited from an earlier era, ripe for reconstructing myths and rituals of the past. Cross-cultural parallels were approached within a universal paradigm of cultural evolution; they were interpreted as emerging independently, and thus traditions documented in more 'primitive' societies of the colonies could be used to illuminate British folklore 'survivals'. The folklorists' taxonomies were specific to their research object, but their methods remained derivative of, and subordinate to, rather than distinct from, anthropology, while the 'laws' being proposed were bound up with the more general theory of 'survivals'. University politics aside, they did not show that folklore was a research object not already covered by the methods and 'laws' of another 'science'.

Within British folkloristics, Jacobs was a vocal dissenter to the Tylorian model. He focused instead on folklore's cross-cultural distribution. His paper at the 1891 Congress calls for mapping folktales' variation across Europe, in which he outlines a "geographical method of regarding the diffusion of folktales" (1892: 81) with principles he describes as "Grimm's laws", such as "a Grimm's law that the closer nations are the more stories they have in common" (1892: 82, and cf. 84). His methodology not only resonates with that championed by Krohn; he mentions in a footnote that "much the same method appears to have been advocated by the late Prof. Krohn and his son", though their method was known to him only through an "abridged German translation" (1892: 81n.1), which would have been Kaarle Krohn's dissertation (1888).[2]

Jacobs' approach was at odds with the dominant trend in British folkloristics, which categorically excluded the historical spread of traditions. Tylorian 'survivals' were, by definition, inherited. But his approach dovetails with Krohn's. They would have discovered and presumably explored their affinity of interests had Krohn attended the 1891 Congress. Barring personality conflicts or accidental offense, they would no doubt have kept in touch (in German), and might then have reciprocally impacted one another's work surrounding shared concerns of methodology and the development of 'laws' of folklore. Such conversations might have echoed into the development of the HGM, but far more interesting is that their conversations would likely have led to inducting Jacobs into the Folklore Fellows. This connection could have created awareness of the FF's exportable model for validating folkloristics as a 'science', even if Jacobs never held a significant university position to lobby for its institutional recognition. More generally, establishing a dialogue with the FF might – at least potentially – have created a tether to a rising international discussion that could have helped buoy British folkloristics as the Tylorian platform sank beneath it. But Jacobs, it seems, never contacted Krohn,[3] who, in his turn, appears to have remained unaware of Jacobs' work, like ships passing in the night.

The history of folkloristics is entangled with nationalism, colonialism, ideologies of ownership, exclusion and aligning identities amid changing political concerns. At the same time, it is a history of people with interests, intentions and relations, in which individuals like Jacobs and Krohn could have transformative impacts on the field or steer its trajectory. Krohn's impacts are bound up with the networks that nurtured and supported them, whereas Jacobs' similar views were pitted against those in his local networks. Had that fateful International Folk-Lore Congress taken place in today's milieu of hybrid and virtual events, Krohn would not have needed to withdraw and a dialogue with Jacobs would have been opened. The hypothetical dialogue remains only a springboard for speculation, yet their conversation presents the possibility of having had, for better or worse, a transformative impact on the history of British folkloristics, which, in its turn, would have impacted the field globally. The early HGM is viewed quite critically today, as is the relationship of early British folkloristics with colonialism, yet this remains a missed encounter that could have changed the world of folklore research.

The 2021 FFSS is emblematic of the potential that the changes driven by the pandemic hold to unite us and enable open discussion on a global scale. Such a development is crucial amid current concerns about the asymmetries

2 Jacobs could have been directed to this work by Ilmari Krohn at the Congress, but he may equally have drawn inspiration from it earlier.

3 Kaarle Krohn preserved letters and cards that he received, now housed in the archive of the Finnish Literature Society. No correspondence from Jacobs is found in the collection.

between centers and peripheries, both locally and between the so-called Global North and the Global South. Of course, the case of Jacobs and Krohn might be seen as a missed encounter between an imperial metropole and what Alan Dundes once called "the veritable Mecca of folklore research" (2005: 385), but the metropole can also be viewed as merely the predictable geographical site of the encounter, as Paris had been for the preceding Congress. Jacobs was Australian, from a Jewish family, and Finland was still a property passing between Sweden and Russia, which only gained its independence in the disruptions of the Russian revolution; until then, the Finns were an ethnic and cultural other relative to the respective empire. And, the image of Helsinki as a center rather than a periphery is mainly owing to the agency, energy and strategy of Krohn. Krohn's methodological dogmatism, whatever we may think about the early HGM, was driven to ensure the discipline of folkloristics, as opposed to research on folklore materials, remained unchallenged, and his labours ultimately resulted in establishing a periphery as an enduring center for folklorists. The potential of this possible past is that it could have offered a lifeline for the community at the metropole, even if only through an outsider from the other side of the world. The rise of virtual spaces may enable transformative shifts in the centers and peripheries of folkloristics across the coming decades.

Of course, the potential of movement into virtual venues is not without its caveats. Online events can be more expensive than an onsite conference, and the cost of a hybrid event can be shocking. Utopian visions of the future might get shattered by the resulting participation fees, exchanging geographical for economic factors as limiting participation. Nevertheless, we are entering a new era in which all one needs do is turn on the computer and no historical encounter will be missed owing to physical distance. This situation may have a transformative impact on the international networks formed by folklorists, and the FFSS may become a testament to this.

Works Cited

Dorson, Richard M. 1961. "Folklore Studies in England". *Journal of American Folklore* 74(294): 302–312.

Dundes, Alan. 2005. "Folkloristics in the Twenty-First Century (AFS Invited Presidential Plenary Address, 2004)". *Journal of American Folklore* 118(470): 385–408.

Jacobs, Joseph. 1892. "The Science of Folk-Tales and the Problem of Diffusion". In *The International Folk-Lore Congress 1891: Papers and Transactions*. Ed. Joseph Jacobs & Alfred Nutt. London: David Nutt. Pp. 76–102.

Jacobs, Joseph, & Alfred Nutt. "Introduction." In *The International Folk-Lore Congress 1891: Papers and Transactions*. Ed. Joseph Jacobs & Alfred Nutt. London: David Nutt. Pp. xiii–xxix.

Krohn, Ilmari. 1951. *Sävelmuistoja elämäni varrelta*. Porvoo: Werner Söderström.

Krohn, Julius. 1883. *Suomalaisen kirjallisuuden historia, ensimäinen osa: Kalevala*. Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura.

Krohn Kaarle. 1888. *Bär (Wolf) und Fuchs: Eine nordische Tiermärchenkette: Vergleichende Studie*. Helsingfors: Die Finnische Literatur-gesellschaft.

Krohn, Kaarle. 1891. "La méthode de M. Jules Krohn". In *Congrés internationale des traditions populaires, Paris 1889*. Paris: Société d'éditions scientifiques. Pp. 64–68.

Laitinen, Heikki. 2020. "Ilmari Krohnin tie väitöskirjaan". In *Ilmari Krohn: Tutkija, säveltäjä, kosmopoliitti*. Ed. Markus Mantere, Jorma Hannikainen & Anna Krohn. Helsinki: Sibelius-Akatemia. Pp. 109–134.

Tylor, Edward B. 1874 [1871]. *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art and Custom*, I–II. New York: Henry Holt & Company.