



Book Review

Science of the *Volksggeist*

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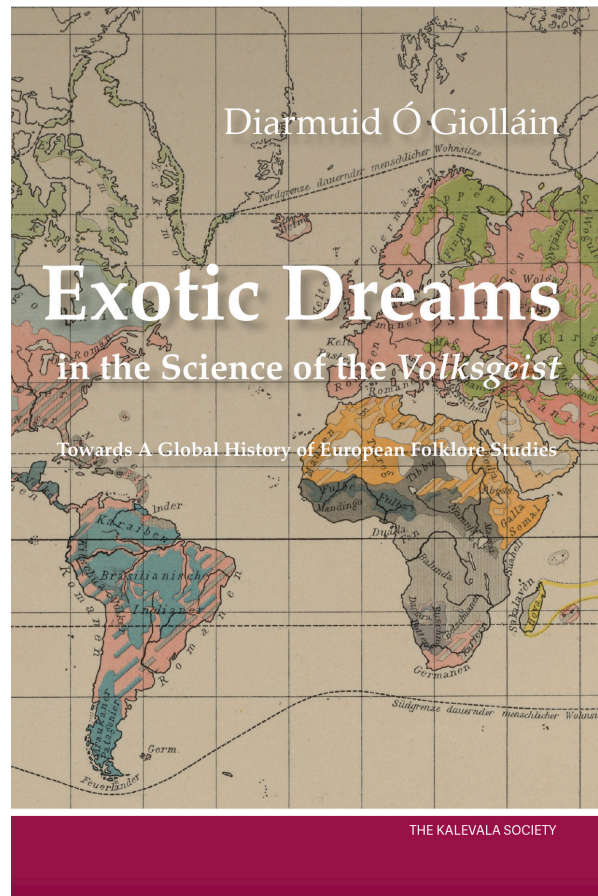
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Diarmuid Ó Giolláin. 2022. *Exotic Dreams in the Science of the Volksggeist. Towards a Global History of European Folklore Studies.*

In recent decades, there has been increasing interest in the interrelationship of the concept of folklore or folklore studies more broadly and coloniality. Pertti Anttonen pointed to the links between them in his *Tradition through Modernity* (2005). Additionally, Cristina Bacchilega has based her research *Legendary Hawai'i and the Politics of Place* (2007) on the inherent link between the colonial place making and earlier publications of stories. Sadhana Naithani's *The Story-Time of the British Empire* (2010) was significant in its aim to see connections between the continental and colonial practices of folklore collection and publication. Relying for example on Mignolo, Charles Briggs and Naithani suggest in their latest article that "it is [...] problematic to think of a traditionality that existed apart from colonialism and the colonial power" (2012: 233) and want to undermine some of the central Romantic notions familiar for folklorists.

However notable the recent discussions have been, they have not significantly dealt with Europe, but stayed mostly outside "the continent", which has inadvertently strengthened the division between empires and their colonies or between nationalism and folklore studies on the one hand and imperialism and social anthropology on the other (see Ó Giolláin 2014). Therefore, the histories of imperialism and nationalism within folklore studies have not met. Diarmuid Ó Giolláin's *Exotic Dreams in the Science of the Volksggeist* introduces these two to each other and shows how they have known each other the whole time.

The book provides its readers with a thorough base of intellectual history, or "Coordinates", and three national cases tied to France, Italy, and Ireland, each of them being as exhaustive as the Coordinates chapter. If the intellectual history reaches beyond Europe, so do the different national chapters, too. One is compelled to see Europe – together with its national developments – as entangled with other parts of the world. Similarly, the division of labour between disciplines focused on European societies and cultures



and those examining 'primitive' cultures outside Europe is called into question, or at least complicated. Folklore studies is about to be given a global history, as the subtitle of the book suggests. What is more, our understanding of the foundations of anthropology and related disciplines is also rewritten.

Ó Giolláin has framed his Coordinates as the development of ethnological sciences, which lets him discuss the history of folklore against an extremely broad backdrop. Therefore, the background intellectual history goes back to interest to the Other and towards storytelling already in antiquity, it advances through early colonialisms and

searches for oral tradition, and only then comes to Ossian, Herder, Romanticism, philology, and the rest of the historical narratives that have habitually framed folklore studies. Additionally, Ó Giolláin is able to bring concepts such as race and phenomena such as human zoos, which have usually not been dealt within the history of the discipline in Europe, into research. These gestures are remarkable in opening new strands of thinking. They are also compelling and demanding at the same time: one longs for a more detailed discussions on the histories in the future.

The following chapters provide the opening coordinates with more nuanced scenes, elaborating them through a series of case studies. These are on France, Italy and Ireland, each outlining the national contexts and the development of interest in oral tradition and the 'folk'. Additionally, Ó Giolláin describes the central national institutions related to ethnological sciences such as university chairs, publication channels, archives, and museums.

There are certain parallels between France and Italy, which make the case of Ireland distinguishable from them. Although France has been one of the most powerful empires in Europe, and Italy strove to gain colonies only after its unification in 1861, there has been a long interest in popular traditions – both oral and written – in both areas known today as France and Italy. Similarly, the tension that emerged between, on the one hand, the significant cultural and linguistic variety within the state, and, on the other hand, the state-based tendencies to centralise and regiment the linguistic landscape, has pushed the early folklorists in favour of localities and regionalism. The important difference between these cases is produced by the fact that, in France, regionalism worked against folklore studies, whereas in Italy, studying the people was seen as a key to national unity.

From the point of view of colonialism, the most interesting points are brought out when Ó Giolláin shows, how for example René Maunier's and Arnold van Gennep's work was based on methodological uniformity, whether folklore studies happened in the French countryside or in the colonies (Algeria in their case). In Italy, it seems that folklore was more strongly related not only to regions, but also to the lower class, which then was viewed as paralleled by primitive societies in the colonies.

Ireland, again, is a more peculiar case, when compared to France and Italy, pinpointed by the question "was Ireland a nation, a colony or a province," posed in the beginning of the fourth chapter. Yet, it seems that Irish folklore studies began with the similar kind of othering of its object, the folk: Thomas Crofton Croker was as much stimulated by the barbarous image he painted of the Irish peasants as by the strangeness of their beliefs and customs.

Ó Giolláin's research is *not* a decolonial or postcolonial one, but rather a more traditional presentation of the history of ideas. In other words, *Exotic Dreams* does not aim

to deconstruct or critically reflect either folklore studies' or ethnology's disciplinary history from the point of view of coloniality. Rather, his aim is to point to the ways in which nationalism and imperialism have come together in studying people at home and abroad, and how these practices have mutually given shape to each other. In the conclusion, this is discussed in terms of a dialogue between Eurocentric universalism versus a cultural relativistic particularism. In this vein, the book ends up giving a well-structured and well-argued research history on a demanding theme. Finally, Ó Giolláin convincingly accounts for the variation in the names of the disciplines focusing on folklife in Europe and the general unpopularity of the notion of folkloristics, which has been replaced with European ethnology in many contexts – a state of affairs that is often confusing for anthropologists or non-European researchers. This book is an outstanding resource of historical information and synthetic insights that paves the way for new critical work on the history of disciplines, and the deep entanglements of the intellectual worlding inside Europe with colonialism.

Works Cited

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