Review: Visions and Traditions

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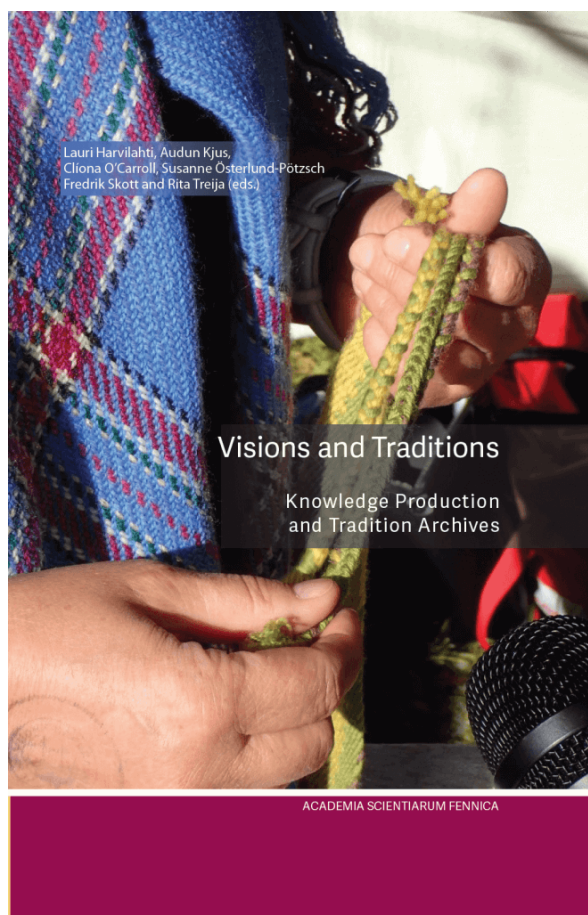
This volume is part of a revolution that folklore-studies has been undergoing almost silently in the past two decades. It stages what became evident at conferences and meetings, but that until now was not spelled-out so explicitly: tradition-archives have become – once again – the forefront of the entire discipline. Not so long ago, folklore-archives (or tradition archives as they are considered more broadly in this volume) were imagined as dusty sites conducted by outdated rules that are irrelevant to the questions discussed in folklore-studies. Not anymore.

Recap

Folklore-studies was shaped as a discipline in a number of different – though interrelated – institutions: universities, museums, libraries and tradition archives. The introduction of the latter in the second half of the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century was revolutionary in its ambition and importance for the discipline. In a sense, the integration of folklore studies within universities, libraries and museums was not unique. Historically, tradition archives positioned folklore-studies and related disciplines (ethnology and dialectology) between other disciplines in the humanities that make use of archives (history and literature for example) and some branches of anthropology where the archive did not become a key epistemological site. At the same time, although folklore studies and anthropology developed a fascination with the 'field', the archive remained a crucial site only for folklore studies; on the other hand, whereas historians and scholars of literature made use of (historical) archives, they were removed from 'the field'.

The idea of the tradition archive was not challenged until the late 1960s. By then, the national bias of the discipline and the ideological underpinnings of the archive were revealed. The categorization of stable genres was under attack and, with it, the rigidity of archival technology – with its drawers, cupboards, boxes, catalogue notes and such bureaucratic paraphernalia that keeps things in place. Furthermore, the rise of the everyday as a new category disrupted much of this order. The very idea of transcribing an event fell prey to 'New Perspectives' that emerged in the discipline and in which the actual (storytelling) event, the performance with its interaction with an audience, became the most important aspect of the discipline (this is elaborated in the essays of Laura Jiga Iliescu and Eldar Heine in the volume). With new ideas that came from sociolinguistics and with the rise of performance studies with its immense suspicion of any attempt to freeze a performance (or, God

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forbid, archive it!) the archive became less relevant.[1] As dust was accumulating over some of the boxes, the archive – the site that once defined the very discipline – was perceived by some as irrelevant, sustained by inertia for scholars who grew alienated to its potential of carrying any new message or forms of resistance.

Things changed for these archives. Clíona O'Carroll's opening sentence of the entire volume reveals the unapologetic tone that underlies these essays: "This volume consists of contributions that in various ways discuss the political, methodological and ethical aspects of how tradition archives have been – and are – involved in production of knowledge". In fact, the volume does much more than that: it demonstrates how the most urgent theoretical debates in the discipline evolve in archival boxes and in relation to them.

Synopsis

O'Carroll provides a bird's-eye-view of the entire volume, opening some of the key questions and working definitions. The latter are expanded in Maryna Chernyavska's second introductory essay, which together with O'Carroll's introduces this extremely coherent volume. Chernyavska positions tradition archives in the context of the archival world; she also briefly discusses The Ukrainian Folklore Archives at the University of Alberta – the only non-European archive discussed in the volume.

Three sections follow: the first, which includes seven essays that revisit historical episodes in archives in Estonia (three essays), Sweden (three essays) and Norway, delving into archival and collecting practices, providing a very insightful reflection on the role tradition archives played in the development of folkloristic knowledge. The second section, comprises three essays, compliments the first by examining national archival policies, focusing on Finland, Ireland and Switzerland. The final section, which consists of seven essays, looks at our present and to the future, searching for potentialities relevant to different stakeholders, critically examining the digital revolution's impact on tradition archives with cases-studies from Scandinavia, Romania, Latvia, Ireland (two essays), Sweden and Norway. Together, the essays in the volume offer historical observations as well as insights emanating from present-day dilemmas, reflecting the diachronic nature of the archive and its relevance to the development of the discipline.

Essays in the volume blur the boundaries between the field and the archive as the archive becomes a site for fieldwork in its own right. Although the volume examines an overarching question of 'how', emphasizing the archive as a site of knowledge practices, the question of 'what' keeps surfacing in these fruitful discussions, which tell us much about what is contained in these archives. Of the many topics covered in this rich volume, I chose to highlight three themes that cut across the different sections: networks, technology and tradition.

Networks

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the volume's articles is the way archives operate as nodes in a vast network. Any attempt to trace the *modus operandi* of the archive exposes various actors. The archive appears as the crossroad of researchers, collectors, informants and various other collaborators. Thus, in her discussion of ethnographic knowledge carried out by the Estonian National Museum (the ERM) in the 1920s–1930s, Marleen Mestlaid considers co-production strategies in the way the ERM reached out to the public. Although scholars prescribed the kind of knowledge they were interested in discovering with the aid of detailed questionnaires, respondents (mostly) from the countryside were decisive in the production of knowledge. One wonders how this changed over the years. In Sanita Reinsone's discussion of participatory practices in the archive, she relates these practices to what has become a key word in our digital present, 'crowdsourcing' and its manifestation in digital efforts carried out mostly in the Archives of Latvian Folklore in the last years. Evidently, such archives operate as a hub of dialogues between different actors.

Archive-networks are dynamic. Susanne Nylund Skog presents us with the transformation that letters undergo until they become considered 'scientific knowledge' by closely (re)reading the correspondence between Professor Karl Gösta Gilstring from Uppsala's Department of Dialectology and Folklore Research and the housewife Elso Pihl, who during their letter-exchange resided in Vråka, Västra Ed. A different dynamic is presented in Åmund Norum Resløkken's examination of the usage of ethnographic questionnaires – between those posing the questions and those who send the answers that are stored today in the Norwegian Folklore Archives; Resløkken follows Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs' Latourian-inspired examination of purification techniques, tracing the plurality of worlds ('worlding' in Anna Tsing's terms) constructed in the search for 'genuine traditions' through the exchange of questions, answers and quotations integrated in academic articles. Liina Sarlo, on the other hand, looks at how the Kodavere (Estonia) *regilaul* (folk-song) corpus, developed through to the Soviet era during the course of a few decades as a result of activities taken by key folklorists that operated before Estonia gained independence; here, archive-networks reflect the interactions between singers, researchers on expeditions, sound-recordings and practices that are associated with the idea of physically 'going to the field'.

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1 This is no longer the case also in Performance Studies – see e.g. Borggreen & Gade 2013.

Archive networks are very diverse, presenting many challenges. In her examination of Estonian folkloristics during the Soviet era, Ave Goršič demonstrates how folklorists who studied folk beliefs had to negotiate the Soviet regime, with its animosity towards religious culture. During the Soviet era, with its institutional censorship and self-censorship, it was easier to pursue the *collection* of folk belief than to get research *published*. Ultimately, Goršič is still able to access the material gathered in these archives. Audun Kjus' extremely reflexive piece highlights the everyday of the archivist and the way archivists negotiate funding bodies, IT staff and, in his case, Norwegian data agencies that no folklorist in the 1940s could have envisioned when reaching out to the public. Kjus' survival maneuvers, reminiscent of our neoliberal age, demonstrates how the archive is today networked in broader frameworks.

Many of the essays examine the digital *Zeitgeist*. Fredrik Skott examines archive networks in Sweden in this context. Instead of reflecting on the networks that made the archives, Skott is interested in the networks that evolve *out of* the archives, particularly what becomes available on the internet. As he shows, there are various ethical problems that arise from the way the archive mediates between promises made in the past and those that can be fulfilled in the present. The current "Digital gold-rush" is reflected upon critically in Clíona O'Carroll's essay that examines her work in the University of Cork's Department of Folklore and Ethnology. O'Carroll scrutinizes the demand to 'make an impact' in a world governed by algorithms out of our control and the implications of reaching out to as many people possible. Indeed, many reflections in the volume help us consider the networks in which those who work in archives today are entangled with and the challenges these present.

Technology

Evidently, many of the essays shed light on the way archive-networks are driven through ever-changing technology. Technology can be found across this network – from gathering material in the field through the handling of material and its classification to processes of digitization. Agneta Lilja's investigation of paradigm shifts within the Institute of Dialect Research in Uppsala (ULMA) reveals a vast network that extended to Swedes living in the US; Lilja demonstrates how networks connected to ULMA were tied to technological developments – fieldwork and questionnaires were followed by recordings made first by a gramophone and then by tape recorders. The diversification of topics and theoretical advances, such as the demand to study context that was advocated in the early 1970s, was made possible also thanks to such technological innovations. Archival technology is sometimes less associated with the ethnographic medium, but resembles much more the bureaucratic medium. Indeed, Konrad J. Kuhn's examination

of the work of Richard Weiss and his involvement in the Atlas der schweizerischen Volkskunde and other publications of his explores some of the most mundane practices that can be traced in the archives: from the letters sent from the field to the way such ethnographic knowledge was organized with the aid of thousands of filing cards. Kuhn's discussion of the filing card highlights paper-culture, which was once omnipresent in archives.

Catherine Ryan and Críostóir Mac Cárthaigh focus on classification technologies and how analogue classifications of material at the Irish National Folklore Collections were adapted with digitization; with current library and archival digital thesauri the rigidity and inflexibility of archival classification systems could be overcome to a great degree. In a similar vein, Eldar Heide considers digitizing of archives in Scandinavia 'a game changer'. He makes explicit the kind of shortcomings and paradoxes that digitization creates. Following Tim Tangherlini in advocating the building of a 'Folklore Macroscope', he sees great potential in this technology in asking new questions and countering some old objections to tradition archives. Clearly, technology has a crucial impact on the way such archives are conceptualized and evaluated. Technology underlies the slow evolution of a tradition of tradition archives.

Tradition

Following Dorothy Noyes (2009), I refer here to three possible contexts for the idea of 'tradition': tradition as a temporal signifier, tradition as a mode of communication and tradition as cultural property. Lauri Harvilahti's essay engages the temporal dimension of tradition archives, examining the long tradition of folklore collections in Finland, from the early imperial attempts made by Sweden and Denmark in the beginning of the seventeenth century, 200 years before the Finnish Literature Society established its well-known folklore archives. Tracing this long inter-generational chain through the activities of Elias Lönnrot, Kaarle Krohn and Martti Haavio, Harvilahti reminds us of the kind of responsibilities this tradition demands from its current bearers.

Laura Jiga Iliescu's reflection on the Bucharest Archive of the Institute of Ethnography and Folklore illustrates how tradition archives partake in the communication of knowledge. By positioning the collector as the link between the informant and those who retrieve knowledge from the archive, Iliescu show how the passage of folklore is mediated in a performative manner that can be retraced in the archive. The archive becomes thus a chain in the passage of knowledge that is not always acknowledged and to a great degree one can also see how this hand-to-hand or mouth-to-ear mode is shaped through the archive.

One cannot avoid the way the archive was rooted in networks, which in hindsight are sources of critique – this is particularly evident in Kelly Fitzgerald and Niina

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Hämäläinen's collaborative piece, which examines archives in Ireland and Finland in the context of societal expectations to serve nationalistic philosophies. In this sense, tradition archives served a particular community and particular stakeholders who look to the archive to find 'their traditions'.

Finally, Alf Arvidsson's engagement with Swedish Jazz history as a topic in the folklore archive of Umeå and the Svenskt Visarkiv in Stockholm reflects on the very idea of tradition promoted in tradition archives. He notes that the concept of 'tradition' went through tremendous changes over the years and in effect the type of material that ends up in such archives is correspondingly tied to this conceptual history. In this sense, Arvidsson demonstrates that a key to the tradition of such archives is that they constantly reflect their contemporary history through what (traditions) get in there, their form and the process of handling them.

Overview

Visions and Traditions is to my mind the richest collection of critical essays on tradition archives to date. It is an essential read not only for those who are employed in archives or who work with material from archives; rather, it is important to any folklorist. In contrast to the image of a dusty archive as a setting of empirical 'raw data', tradition archives emerged in our digital age as a key theoretical front. As Sadhana Naithani (2010) showed in her discussion of colonial folkloristics, theories are not made in an imagined 'center' (London in her case), but rather they are made in the hands of folklore collectors who need to know what folklore is and what it is not in their everyday engagements. At every such crossroad, one is engaged with theoretical dilemmas. Today, theory is made whenever one debates what to digitize and how; it is shaped whenever one is confronted with assumptions about the past as to what folklore means and in the gulf that opens as to what it should mean today. It is therefore not surprising that this collection of essays, which provides ample empirical evidence as to how the archive operated and how it does so today, engages

with fundamental questions of definition, research praxis, performance, ethics and biases. Clearly, tradition archives have re-emerged as one of the most exciting sites for doing folklore research and thinking theoretically about it. It is not coincidental that this takes place in times when practice becomes fundamental in defining folklore, when material culture is becoming the focus of much concern and when algorithmic culture and digital dilemmas surround us.

The only critique I have concerns the scope of this volume which, as you may have noticed, is limited to Europe (with one case in Canada) and mostly takes place in Northern latitudes… This reflects the expertise and interests of the different contributors to the volume, but it can be beneficial to have a wider perspective on the topic by addressing tradition archives in other parts of the globe (e.g. East Asia, Latin America). This is particularly relevant given a theme that is addressed implicitly and sometimes explicitly in the essays: the internationalization of practices and standards in tradition archives. Despite the national foci of the case studies, one cannot avoid noticing how the know-how (or, for that matter, how the tradition) of tradition archives crosses national and linguistic boundaries. It is therefore immensely interesting to examine other national cases and their specific lineages and inter-connections as well as colonial and imperial legacies. Hopefully, this will be dealt with in another volume that will add other perspectives to those that were addressed in the current book.

Works Cited

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