

Nation-Thinking, the State, and the “Fruitbearing Field” of Folklore

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The essays in this volume communicate various concerns that are appropriate to professionals immersed in folkloristic work, such as the status of folklore studies in universities, the role of archives and organizations in centering and advancing folklore studies, and paradigmatic shifts in folkloristic theory and method. Nevertheless, as I read through the essays about the historical contexts of various countries, including Estonia, Turkey, Finland, Latvia, and Slovenia, I note that all these issues emanate from the concept, or problem, of nationalism. The folkloric connection to nationhood might appear at first glance to be a preoccupation of countries recently emerging from the yoke of domination by an imperial larger power, but upon reflection, the themes that the authors raise speak to an underlying current of folkloristic work globally. That is not to say, however, that nationalism and the state’s role in promoting, informing, suppressing, and directing folklore work are widely recognized. One blinder that folklorists and ethnologists frequently apply is folkloristics as a scientific enterprise that transcends politics. Another is that it is a humanistic endeavor that does not answer to artificially imposed borders. Moreover, there is the ubiquitous belief that nationalism is a function of authoritarian re-

gimes, and in democratic societies, scholars are free to pursue their studies unimpeded. However, as I tried to show for the United States, folklore became a critical politicized resource to define nationhood out of composite regional-ethnic cultures throughout the country’s history (Bronner 1987, 2002).

My first compliment for these essayists is that they expose the continued need to analyze nationalism and the state both among tradition bearers and professional scholars. The authors point out limitations of the conventional narratives of the discipline, starting with the Grimms as a comparative endeavor and spreading with literary and anthropological contexts. Although they are not scolding in their essays, they imply that folklorists, whether out of training or personality, have had a historiographical blind spot when considering nationalism and the state. The opening line of Eija Stark’s essay summarizes well the limitations of discourses of nationalism in folkloristic and other disciplinary circles: “We often tend to think that the study of folklore represents a political tool that once belonged to either Romantic nationalism in the nineteenth century or to the ideologies of Nazism and Socialism in the twentieth.” The collective “we,” I presume, refers to folklorists in the post-World-War-II period, particularly those from North America and Europe. The situation is far more complicated than an impression that nationalist uses of folklore arose during specific troubled periods of the anti-monarchical unrest of the 1840s, the Nationalist Socialist period of the 1930s and 1940s, and the Cold War of the 1950s through the 1980s. Currents that need attention beyond the national histories

presented in the volume are the many diasporic ethnic-linguistic groups that confronted their ancient legacies within changing forms of political organization swirling about them throughout many centuries into the new millennium. Even setting aside the complexities of Asia, the Middle East, Pacific Islands, Africa, and South America for the moment, the scattered trajectories of the material conceptualized as folklore and the approaches to it in Europe and North America blow apart the neat pigeonhole into which folklore as nationalist propaganda and state ideology sits in historiography and theoretical folkloristics.

One might look to the critical Paris Peace Conference of 1919 for an ethnographic moment when issues of cultural nationalism were literally on the international table. Victors after World War I were adamant that new states of East-Central Europe (Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia), those that had increased their territory (Romania and Greece), and those that had been defeated (Austria, Hungary, and Bulgaria) should sign agreements granting rights and cultural recognition to their minority groups (Fink 1995). Questions arose, however, whether these rights included autonomous regions and nations of their own and the measures by which cultural integrity would be maintained. Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia appeared to be consolidations of different ethnic-linguistic regions, and border cultures between Hungary and Romania and Bulgaria and Macedonia were problematic. Since many of the minority groups had been marked by their folkloric legacies, the issue of balancing state power based upon national majorities and including minorities in emerg-

ing national identities resonated for years to come. Rather than using the power of the state to validate minority cultures, Bulgaria more than others initiated state-sponsored collection and teaching of folklore to promote “national spirit.” The Bulgarian government moved in this direction out of concern about cultural unity in the face of Macedonian, Turkish, Romani, and Jewish cultural legacies in the region (Minkov 1989; for the influence of the Bulgarian program on the first state folklore program in the United States, see Bronner 1996, 59-62).

Perhaps most perplexing to the victors was the situation of Jews spread across most of Eastern Europe and treated as a separate oppressed “race” and a national group without a nation. In 1897, Bavarian-born immigrant to the United States Moritz Ellinger commented that publicly exhibiting a history of the Jewish minority as occurred in the Anglo-Jewish Historical Exhibition of 1887 (see Bronner 2014a, 9-12) framed an awareness of a dual identity of ethnic and national peoplehood within a country but it did not go far enough. He asserted that to fight defamation and make a case for “life of a nationality,” the group needed “careful collections toward the *preservation of folklore*” (Ellinger 1897, 147; emphasis added). He declared the sympathy of Jews to other groups threatened by modernization. He wrote, “Nothing enhances the value of a treasure more than the danger of losing it. Such a danger threatens today *every nationality* in the ratio as its peculiarity falls victim to the all-leveling culture of modern times” (Ellinger 1897, 147; emphasis added). He recognized that a challenge would be to change the perception of folklore as a sign of backwardness into

what he called a “treasure.” He advocated for “the task of science to confer life and to preserve it [folklore],” as a “fruitbearing field” (Ellinger 1897, 147).

The fruit it bears, he concluded, would be a respect for the group from the majority and within the minority a “revival” of ethnic traditions. A critical turn was redefining Jews from a race (*Rasse*) to a folk (*Volk* or people) based on the space it occupied and the customs they shared in common. This sentiment, or Hamburg (Germany) movement as Ellinger termed it of Max Grunwald and others (Schrire 2017), influenced the ambitious ethnographic expeditions led by S. An-Sky to the Yiddish-speaking Pale of Settlement in Czarist Russia before World War I to comprehensively document shtetl life, lore, and traditions (Bronner 2021, 146–70; Deutsch 2016). For Grunwald, it was essential to organize a society and journal for *Jüdische Volkskunde* (established in 1897) and later form the Hamburg Jewish Museum as institutional bases for a scientific niche of study and public education. During the early Soviet period, the An-Sky collections became lodged in a Jewish section of the State Museum of Ethnography in Leningrad. Further research was encouraged but the Stalinist regime later suppressed the material as state policies of anti-Semitism increased (Slotnick 1976; Yalen 2018; see also Gottesman 2003). The An-Sky collections resurfaced in the post-Soviet period at which time they sparked debates about the impact of shtetl life in imagination and reality on the state of Israel. In the early years of the Jewish state, Israeli educational policy stigmatized the East European Yiddish cultural memory. Meanwhile, in Eastern Europe post-Soviet cultural organizations

posted efforts to revive traditional Jewish life in post-socialist nations decimated by the Holocaust and mass out-migration of survivors.

Why do I raise this ethnic-linguistic example if the essays primarily deal with majority cultures? My point is that scholars often narrowly conceive nationalism as a political movement that is separate from the social-psychological process of nation-building or nation-thinking. This process is based upon the expressive cultural connection within a spatial frame that folklore provides. The movement and process are linked much as *traditum* or the item of tradition is to *traditio* or the process (Bronner 2019, 43–47). Toward the theorizing of the latter, which is more difficult to grasp, the authors provide several intriguing examples of nation-building as social and even cognitive action, in the sense of extrapolating from folklore the idea of cultural connection for people, a *Volk*, from often disparate forms—and their consecutiveness in place. This processual approach offers a different perspective on nationalism from the categorization of misuse, misappropriation, and manipulation of folklore as historical artifacts (see Oinas 1976). Rather than judged as a success or failure of political maneuvering at the moment in time, nation-thinking results in traditionalized daily actions and socially influenced responses.

In the United States, for example, the rhetorical response of “It’s a free country, isn’t it?” to characterize a choice that someone makes is arguably nationalist and folkloric at the grassroots that are different from the reading of the Declaration of Independence on July 4 at Independence Hall in Philadelphia. In those

situations, I might not be fully aware of the implications for nation-thinking as an insider. As an outsider, I was sensitive to nation-building as a daily practice when I was introduced to the Latvian Song and Dance Festival as a scholar-in-residence at the Latvian Academy of Culture in Riga. I imagine that many folklorists would dismiss the event as an organized, staged spectacle of questionable authenticity. However, what I saw was a process that invoked tradition for a suppressed *Volk* and ritualized participation in an emerging Latvian nation that needed to declare its separation from neighboring Russia symbolically. In the year-round cycles of preparation for the final performance, it immersed youth and many adults in daily thinking about nation and people-hood (Bronner 2018). I still have questions about the ways that this process subsumes and excludes minorities in favor of creating a “national spirit.” Ethnographers have opportunities to analyze the negotiations that occur between the goal of cultural unity on the one hand and the representation of a varied Latvian culture on the other. The nationalist need to achieve cultural unity for a recently independent nation is not just an Eastern European issue, as I discovered in the nationally declared “Year of Folklore” in the Netherlands when I taught cultural and ethnic studies at Leiden University. At a time of tension between nationally perceived Dutchness and a socially perpetuated value placed on ethnic tolerance, which was tested with the influx of immigrant workers from North Africa and the Middle East, the Year of Folklore emphasized legacy traditions from a perceived Golden Age of national power (Bronner 2019, 238–54).

Hande Birkalan-Gedik’s reference to the “indissoluble” relationship with nationalism that state-sponsored institutes established raises questions about how the material that is produced and the thinking in presenting academic studies of folklore as “knowledge” rather than detached science have a bearing on national self-awareness. Science implies a “low-context” environment in which folklore can appear rare and needs explication by authorities. Knowledge suggests a “high-context” framing of daily communication widely understood by participants in the culture (Hall 1976). Questions for analyzing *traditio* is whether this shift was encoded, directed, and naturalized by the state, individuals, or movements and how it was encoded and re-interpreted by recipients of the knowledge. Similarly, Rita Grīnvalde refers to tradition-bearers as “actors of knowledge” that suggests that tradition is active and consecutive rather than as relics provided by “informants.” The project of compiling massive volumes of Latvian folklore by ex-patriates might be viewed as decoding that provides resistance to state organization by presenting tradition as extensive and immersive within a space that is not visible inside the state. She also questions the rhetoric of scholarly production as part of the process of nation-thinking since ethnology suggests a division by groups and communities, whereas folklore can be presented in national and regional frameworks. Ethnology also implies the integration of environments—material and social—that remains intact despite urbanization and modernization. The Latvian National Archives, for example, has separate collections for Jewish communities that are connected to their linguistic us-

age of Yiddish. “Folklore” can more easily be treated as a literary resource that might not be separable by the community. Archival resources framed by being housed in a “National Library” become more significant as a treasure house for the nation to be mined for creative and political purposes. With attention to documentation and entextualization, the archives are significant because they encode folklore as the collective cultural memory of a nation in forms that can be accumulated and compared. In situ actors of knowledge convey folklore with reference to a past that exists in the present, and relate cultural expressions to the frame or situation in which it is communicated (Bronner 2010). Although Grīnvalde looks to American folkloristics for guidance on situated analysis, I should point out a serious problem of many American approaches to performance that limit and trivialize folklore as a fleeting artistic urge in a modern setting. I see advantages to the European ethnological attention in Latvia and other nearby differentiated countries to folklore as a social action or *practice*. The ethnological approach has the advantage of opening up the study of folklore as a purposeful part of daily life along with considerations of the cognitive sources that generate traditions.

Indrek Jääts’s essay poses languages’ relationship to culture—and nationalist movements in alliance with one another. The approach that he identifies in Estonia runs counter to Bronislaw Malinowski’s stream of global ethnography that ignited the American performance paradigm and influenced an aversion to cognitive and psychological analysis. Malinowski asserted that language is not a countersign of thought; it is socially functional

in the “context of situation” (Malinowski 1923). The image that I recall from moving through the Estonian National Museum is different. Upon entrance, one is awed by an entire wall electronically illuminated with a geographic rendering of the massive extent of Finno-Ugric speaking peoples. As visitors move through the museum, they take in the encoded implication of a cultural mindset suggested by the diffusion and differentiation of Finno-Ugric languages. The challenge of explaining how nearby Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland can manage such different languages and therefore cultures, while Hungary is connected to the Finno-Ugric diffusion explains the significance of expeditions that were perceived variously by Estonian nationalists and Soviet authorities. Kaisa Langer provides nuance to Sovietization and notes that it was not successful in Estonia. To her credit, she brings out the need to analyze folklore in terms of nation-thinking as representing overlapping and sometimes conflicting levels of region and nation.

Ingrid Slavec Gradišnik’s essay returns to what she calls “the topography of knowledge” and the relation of institutions to the organization of that knowledge. She thus raises important, often unasked questions of the conflicting authority of the state and academy. Gradišnik contemplates the attraction to “ethnology” as a sociological consideration of living traditions. In tracing a displacement of history with “how” rather than “why” questions in interpretive “middle-range” studies, she implies a retreat from explanation in a rush to be less ideological and authoritarian, partly in response to a perception of the negative nationalism of the pre-World-War-II period. However,

concerning my reflection that the volume suggests a direction toward viewing nation, region, and locality as different overlapping forms of knowledge-formation or thinking, one has to wonder about the absence of psychology or cognitive exploration Malinowski portended. The Boasian stream of ethnography and folklore allowed for more psychological considerations (Boas 1910; Bronner 2014b; Dundes 2015). A sign of this absence is the girding of the binary between theory and practice, although the largely European-based construction of "practice theory" suggests that this is a false dichotomy. The result of the binary is the positivist emphasis that Gradišnik finds in earlier Slovenian ethnography. She makes a pronouncement that "it is impossible to tear folk culture out of the socio-historical context," but I would argue that the national ethnology mired in "interpretation" cannot get to the "why" and explanation of tradition without moving into psychology and cognition as the basis of social action.

As I began these remarks with Eija Stark's indisputable citation of the "political burden" of European folklore studies, I conclude with affirmation of her clarion call beyond Europe that "nation-states continue to exist and boundaries between ethnic culture continue to be maintained as well as created." Regarding my pointing out of viewing the nation-state as a composite of minority cultures, many of which thrive in urban and modern contexts, she acknowledges the Finnish tendency after World War II to orient study to the "one-culture in the nation-state" that was challenged by the post-Cold-War view of "cultural communication by a group of any kind." That does not take away from the analysis of nationhood but

instead suggests a view of it as an outlook invoked at various times and in certain situations. I hope that folklorists will be brave enough to engage nation-thinking rather than pretend it goes against the folkloristic spirit, reconcile the perceived differences between folkloristics and ethnology, and finally, figure out the psychology of nation-building, and institution forming, societies around the globe.

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