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[See table of contents](#)

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Nationalism and Internationalism in Folklore Research

Lauri HONKO

Folkloristics is a Janus-faced enterprise. It looks at the heritage of one's own country with an appreciation that tends to transform scholarly statements into nationalistic propaganda. On the other hand, it is widely comparativistic and able to create international contacts and dependencies that are likely to appall both historians and anthropologists. The question is to what extent the folklorists are themselves aware of the inherent conflict in the fact that the same folklore materials may be used to glorify the creativity and unique intellectual achievement of a particular tradition community on one hand, and the deep, wide and ancient layers of global traditions on the other. It may be the task of methodological and theoretical work to decide whether this conflict is real or only apparent, but the fact remains that folklorists are always running the risk of being labelled either as "nationalists" or "internationalists." The labelling implies that some non-folkloristic overtones are creeping into the discussion: the terms "national" and "international" are never used merely to describe an opposition between different types of research, for example, to say that folklorists are interested in both micro and macro studies of folklore.

The overtones and connotations I am referring to are mainly political, historical and culture-ecological. They are political in the sense that once folklore research has been recognised and accepted as a cultural activity and/or an academic discipline, it is given a locus and function in the wider framework of cultural policy defined and sponsored by some non-scholarly community or body. In most cases this has meant that folkloristics has become dependent upon national cultural policies. The pluses and minuses of this situation are fairly easy to grasp. Serving national policy may give purpose and economic and social security. Scholars may feel that they are doing real ideological

work, and the role of the humanities in our culture is ideological, whether we like it or not. Folkloristics will never be part of an economic strategy like, say, biotechnology. Whatever our conclusions may be, they will always be judged by their ideological import by the surrounding community of non-folklorists. But folklore as a phenomenon may not be national at all; most of us may claim that it is rarely or never national. The danger of converting folklore into something which it does not in its natural state truly represent becomes very obvious.

By historical connotations of our terms of reference I mean that "nationalism" and "internationalism" are largely fruits of historical development. It is our vantage point and view on history that defines our judgement, whether they are good or bad. If I say that during a crucial period of growth toward independence Finland utilised folklore as a proof of the genuine value and power inherent in the Finnish language, as a forerunner of literature in Finnish and as a source of an authentic history of Finland, I refer to a particular historical situation which is in some respects unique but which simultaneously shows a family resemblance to a number of similar situations in 19th century Europe and among 20th century developing countries of Africa and Asia. If I say that the United States of America established folklore work at national level relatively late by creating the American Folklife Center in the process of the country's bicentennial celebrations, I am again referring to a particular historical situation and development. The important thing here is that while many a developing country of today may be grouped with Finland under the first wave of folklore interest determined largely by growth to independence and Romantic ideology, the case of the United States of America in the 1970s is entirely different. It represents the second and probably bigger wave of folklore interest in the world determined by the breakthrough of ethnicity and regionalism as a political force. Again there are some unique features and a family resemblance with other poly-ethnic, federative states.

That culture-ecological considerations are also of importance is due to the fact that "nationalism" and "internationalism" do not remain the same in every context. They are part and parcel of the political climate, social environment and education system. They are able to ring bells for or against capitalism, socialism as well as humanism. From this angle folklore research may at any time become the tool of some ideological movement, sometimes enthusiastically accepted, at other times bluntly rejected. These attitudes may be socially so indicative that it is not enough to try to understand them historically.

They must also be viewed synchronically against the entire societal system in which they appear.

Among the many paradoxes of folklore research are the following. Folklore lies at the core of the cultural identity of a group or community, yet it is, as a rule, detected and defined by outsiders, not by the group or community itself. Folklore is almost entirely oral, but to be able to become recognised, it has to be transformed into literature. Folklore is in its natural state a living phenomenon, constantly changing and adapting to new environments and situations, but to be made available in culture it has to be archived as seemingly dead, petrified notes. Folklore can convey its true meaning only in its authentic, original context, yet it is constantly put to secondary use to serve ends that are totally alien to its original function. By this I do not refer merely to folklorismus, fakelore or commercial uses of folklore, which are often enough scorned by folklorists. The category of the secondary use of folklore also includes folkloristic research.

If this picture is correct, more attention should be paid to an analysis of the secondary uses of folklore. Their cultural impact and importance is much stronger than we are inclined to admit, cherishing the ideal of the study of pure folklore in an authentic milieu. At an American Folklore Society Centennial it may be appropriate to recall the need to study the ideological functions of folklore research of a century ago. On this occasion I have time only for a brief glance at the situation of the founding fathers of the Society. But first, mainly as a contrasting relief, I wish to sketch a point of comparison, the situation in which folklore gained importance in the Nordic countries.

The unification of the political format of the Nordic countries took place during the first half of the 19th century. Denmark and Sweden, the imperialistic countries of the North, saw their dominance outside their own country evaporate for good. The two newcomers, Norway and Finland, underwent a change of political allegiance in the beginning of the century and began a century-long development toward sovereignty. Iceland experienced a similar process that led to independence in the 20th century.

In all these countries we can discern an identity crisis at approximately the same time but on different conditions. The situations in the North were paralleled by similar ones elsewhere in Europe. The compensation of losses and the enhancement of national pride could find peaceful solution through Romanticism, which saw an inexhaustible resource in the "folk." The paradox of Romanticism was that it idealised the "folk" although it was distant and unknown and explained that the "folk" was creative in spite of the fact that it was sup-

pressed and passive. The products of folklore, songs and narratives, myths and beliefs, were seen to contain important messages from generations that had disappeared long ago. The language, poetry and history of a nation or people were preserved in its oral heritage. Folklore was the nation's memory and the people's archive. In Germany this philosophy had been utilised since Herder to compensate for the fact that the country's literature was inferior to that of England or France; similar feelings of inferiority could be detected in the Nordic countries. Herder did not only propagate national folklore, he also spoke of the common voice of all mankind audible through the voices in the folksongs of different peoples, but this internationalism was to gain importance later than the nationalist message. The publication of the *Kalevala* in 1835 was a materialization of one Herderian dream: national literature began with national epic precisely as in ancient Greece, and the epic became a permanent symbol of the cultural identity of the Finns. In Scandinavia roots were sought in the Old Norse mythology and poetry, and the collection of contemporary folklore was greatly intensified. Sweden is an example of a country whose national identity was not stressed so much with the help of folklore. Instead, the provincial heritage was idealised and, in the case of Dalecarlia, developed into a paramount symbol of the entire people.

It is in this setting that folkloristics was born in the Nordic countries in the 1860s and '70s. The nationalist stimulus was the driving force, but soon the scope widened to comprise comparative vistas in time and space beyond the Middle Ages and the boundaries of Europe. This development has a sobering effect: it is not possible, for a serious scholar at least, to indulge in fantasizing history through the free interpretation of folklore. The birth of the stringencies of the geographic-historical method should be seen in this light. It was not only a method for finding reliable information about the paths and development of folklore, but also a way of distancing oneself from the speculative theories of origin, symbolistic interpretations and quasi-historical phantasms of earlier research.

It was at this point that the American Folklore Society was founded. Nationalism was a foul word to the founding fathers of the AFS, and the reasons are not difficult to understand. The nation did not coincide with any ethnic group or community which could have constituted the kernel of nationhood and whose language could have been propagated for more general use. English was the language of the colonizers, and the polyethnic North did not in any way fit the European model of national development. The impact of that model may be discerned in the fact that the only aboriginal inhabitants, the

Indians, were declared the prioritized group among research objects. This implied a more anthropological approach to folklore than in Europe, where the concept of "vulgus in populo" or the uncivilized part of the people often limited folklore studies to a specific social class which, like the free peasant, could be heavily idealised to represent the otherwise lacking ancestry of a new hegemonic class, the young bourgeoisie. In America such a connection was impossible. Instead, a broad concept of folklore and internationalism in the spirit of evolutionary or diffusionistic research paradigms was accepted in the program of the Society most succinctly formulated by William W. Newell:

The work of the Society includes publication and research in regard to the religious ceremonies, ethical conditions, mythology, and oral literature of Indian tribes; collection of the traditions of stocks existing in a relatively primitive state, and the collation of these with correct accounts of survivals among civilized tribes; gathering of the almost wholly unrecorded usages and beliefs of Central and South American races; the comparison of aboriginal American material with European and Asiatic conceptions, myths, and customs; a study of survivals among American negroes, including their traditional inheritance from Africa, and its modification in this continent; preservation of the abundant folklore of French and Spanish regions of North America; record of the oral traditions of the English-speaking population, and description of communities now or lately existing under isolated conditions. — JAF 8, No. 30 (1895), p. 231.

Fringe groups and isolated nations could also become important in Europe from the point of view of folklore research, but the startling difference between America and Europe seems to be the low level of emancipation in America of these populations; nowhere do we find a nation growing around folkloric symbols in America, whereas some countries of Europe display this process and become power bases for folklore research. Only much later did similar developments begin in the Americas. I am tempted to quote a private letter from Henry Glassie on this point:

The situation in America is interesting in that folklore [work] developed not around nationalism but around, in a sense, a compensation for nationalism. The nation as a state contained nations - Indians, blacks, ethnic groups - that were not part of national power and therefore national history, who were in need of scholarly attention, and so folklore study. It might be as if Europe were a "nation," a state, then within the nation would be nations (assuming Europe's capital to be Paris) that had more or less power; then folklore [research] would have developed in inverse ratio

to that power, and that is pretty much what happened. Finland, Ireland, Hungary are more important than England, France, while in world historical terms the opposite is the case.

So folklore seems to be the "game of the powerless," as Bengt Holbek once put it, and this is not true of the folk only, i.e. subordinated groups and oppressed classes who seem to have most use for folklore, but of folklore research also, at least in Europe.

The game of the powerless will continue and reach a climax during the AFS Centennial Year on the most authoritative platform for cultural affairs, namely Unesco's General Conference in the Fall 1989. This meeting will either pass or reject a Recommendation for the Safeguarding of Folklore. Without going into any detail, I can say that all contentual and factual criticism of the recommendation is of secondary importance. The recommendation should be acceptable to all Member Nations that can tolerate the idea that folklore is an important part of culture, both nationally and globally. Still I think that opposition may come from two directions. One is the group of old civilisations which never accepted the idea that they had any folklore of their own, not to speak of its importance. Thus nay-votes may come from the United Kingdom, France, Canada, Japan, and possibly from West Germany, regardless of the fact that these countries may in some cases have leading folklorists. Another group of opposition would consist of totalitarian states and federations that may suspect that political uses of folklore by suppressed minorities might ensue if the recommendation is put into effect. Hopefully the United States of America will be a Member State and voting by that time. It is my expectation that it will support the recommendation and thus side with the small nations of Europe, most Socialist countries and the developing countries.

One final remark concerning the future of the terms "nationalism" and "internationalism." It is my guess that they will, because of the political onus, be left aside by most folklorists, who could in many cases replace them with "regionalism" and "globalism." What the people are fighting for today, through folklore or otherwise, is the integrity and survival of local milieux, the nearest environment of man, be it geographical, social or natural. And the wider concern going beyond that circle of immediate facts is clearly global, a feeling of responsibility toward man and nature. I see no obstacle whatsoever to the construction of a folkloristic theory and methodology between these two poles of regionalism and globalism, placing the weight of analysis on concrete tradition communities with a sense of cultural identity on one hand, and on the comparative science of culture on the other.

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