

Why “folklore”? Seeking belonging and identity

This special issue is the result of a debate that took place during the SIEF Congress 2023, whose main theme was uncertainty, and which was part of a panel discussion organized by the co-editors of this issue. The panel shared the same title as this editorial and addressed how the past and elements of traditional culture are (re)interpreted and (re)invented in contemporary society. Scholars were invited to discuss how folklore is used to create a safe place in today’s uncertain world. The starting point was the premise that in uncertain times the proposition of “a return to one’s roots” becomes attractive. It raised the question of how elements of traditional culture are used in cultural life and social communication, and to what extent these elements are transformed by contemporary practice. This is based on the argument that the past in the present takes on new authentic forms and connects organically to current ones. At the same time, even at the beginning of the third millennium, folklore revival is not a simple and unambiguous activity, as it takes place within a network of cultural and political contexts. In contrast to the European folklore movements or revivalism of the second half of the 20th century (Stavělová – Buckland 2018; Bithell – Hill 2014), there is a clear shift within the presentational/participatory polarity. The environment of such activities is changing, and they take place not only as a part of the activities of folklore ensembles and associated events (festivals, competitions, etc.) but in connection with newly established events. An important aspect is that cultural memory plays a role, and this is characterized by its selectivity and purposefulness. The principal questions relate to the selection of elements representing different groups in everyday life and the manipulation of these elements in a larger social discourse.

An important starting point for the discussion was Zygmunt Bauman’s idea of seeking safety in an insecure world and ways of creating community (2001: 87). He develops the idea of a place of safety in an insecure world as an associated concept. For him, an essential prerequisite for safety is that it should be a “DIY” activity– meaning that the concept should be based on brotherly unity or communal spirit. In a place where the state has failed, a community provides a feeling of safety epitomized in “a territory inhabited” by its members, which also means a certain separation and isolation. This is why the panel invited papers addressing, for example, the role of music, dance and other folklore practices in building the identity and sustainability of a community.

It turned out that there was considerable interest in this issue, which allowed us to have a panel within the SIEF conference, which consisted

of the maximum number of possible sessions, creating space for the presentation of 14 papers that today's understanding of the concept of folklore, as well as of other phenomena related to the practice or use of elements of traditional folk culture, is always linked to the specific situation of the particular country. The historical context in which cultural expressions of the pre-industrial period were given political or ideological connotations also plays an equally important role in individual countries.

Although the notion of folklore revival, or folklorism and revivalism, is an international phenomenon, it is increasingly obvious that there is enormous variation in the associations of the term, and there may even be different labels for similar practices within Europe itself. In some European countries, the same term has two meanings, but which are actually dichotomous, and seemingly alternative labels, such as folklorism and revivalism, may also signal distinctive, and often subtly discrete, connotations according to context. It was necessary to take into consideration this diversity and the various ways of understanding the phenomenon in different social and political contexts. The primary purpose was to use this contextualization to reveal the role and power of folklore practices, in which traditional folk culture, more specifically music and dance, play a key role in a multiplicity of social and ideological processes.

The folklore revival movement, as it is currently understood in the Czech Republic, originated in the period after the Second World War, when the Communist Party became the dominant power in the political system of former Czechoslovakia from 1948. The term "folklore revival movement" encompassed festivals, performances and competitions of staged forms of traditional folk music and dance. On the one hand, the folklore revival movement was activity promoted and controlled by the political regime, but, on the other, given the lack of opportunities for other similar activities, it brought together people with diverse outlooks, creating the conditions for the development of alternative ideas. As a result, the movement was both part of the official culture and a place for potential independent activities (Stavělová et al. 2021).

The political situation in other European countries, both within the Socialist Bloc and outside it, also had an impact on revival movements and certain outputs provided various perspectives for considering to what extent the revival was an instrument of power, and to what extent it was an opportunity for people to follow individual strategies. In order to better understand the revival movement, the meaning of this phenomenon was reflected upon in the wider context of its historical and local forms and transformations. The book *Folklore Revival Movements in Europe post 1950* (Stavělová – Buckland 2018) provided an in-depth discussion of the explicit

and implicit meaning of the folklore revival movement and also of the issues of re-traditionalization, post-colonial theory, nationalism and exclusion in the folklore revival movement. The authors addressed the question of the folk ensemble as a community, institution or subculture, they explored the theme of cultural policy versus personal creativity and they considered music and dance a manifestation of cultural heritage. The folklore revival movement was also viewed in relation to economic, professional, social, educational, age, gender and ethnic characteristics. The meaning of this phenomenon was reflected upon in the wider context of its historical and local forms and transformations for a more comprehensive understanding.

A parallel of particular significance is that of the meaning of the English term “revival”, which is used to refer to similar manifestations of cultural production in other European countries and outside Europe. However, it is important to note that the term is often used on a conceptual level, i.e., in academic literature and institutionalized media, while domestic and vernacular terminology in general may employ other vocabulary. Moreover, revival has a wider meaning that extends beyond phenomena connected with past traditions and includes more mainstream and international cultural practices. Therefore, the phenomenon needs to be explored in terms of similarities between different countries. Such an approach results in comparable features that allow revival and the folklore movement and folklorism to be studied from a single perspective.

The theoretical and terminological background provided by Caroline Bithell and Juniper Hill in their introduction to the *Oxford Handbook of Music Revival* (2014: 3–42) suggests that revival is characterized in different countries by common features that can be understood as cultural manifestations and, at the same time, as social processes. Revival is first and foremost about mobilizing and resuscitating the past, and the related processes of transmission, preservation, transformation, aesthetization, heritage and negotiation of authenticity. Moreover, the editors conclude that the past is applied and manipulated selectively, while the selection needs to be legitimized to suit present needs. Thus, the mobilization of the past and selective use of history manifest themselves through various folklore phenomena, shaped by past experience and – more importantly – by today’s ideas of the past (Bithell – Hill 2014: 12). It is thus expected to evoke and, simultaneously, transform the past. This act of a reconsidered history often has an alternative nature, its purpose being to compensate for present inadequacies. It can sometimes even be called peaceful resistance to modernity, or a rebellion against the modern idea of time, history and development

Revivalists often define their position as being in opposition to the cultural mainstream, identifying instead with a different historical tendency

and offering a cultural alternative, where references to specific past experience can be emblematic (Livingstone 1999: 66). In this way, revival can lead to the establishment of new sub-cultures, although it may become part of mainstream culture as well. The associated dynamic processes include transmission, re-contextualisation, transformation and innovation in order to meet current needs. A significant factor is the wish or need to enter into dialogue with the past. Revival can also be understood as continuity, keeping alive or making visible what is hidden (Bithell – Hill 2014: 4–5). The movement is often accompanied by activism and efforts to legitimize changes related to the re-contextualization of the past. For this purpose, certain individuals or groups are considered culture-bearers or bearers of tradition or, in other words, authorities who are able to convince others to accept the necessary cultural changes.

Another characteristic feature of revival is that it undergoes various stages of transformation from an excessive boom to a decline or the demise of these tendencies, always in line with the needs of the given socio-cultural environment. Paradoxically, at the same time it is considered a never-ending process that lies dormant in every society, as something cyclical and as part of the natural flow of the given culture (Jabbour 2014: 116–134). The universalism connected to this appropriation of the past and its further use seems to be the natural tool of people when defining and, more importantly, redefining their cultural environment. The concept of revival as a never-ending process is sometimes also characterized as post-revival, with new-born manifestations of culture continuing to live independently, in symbiosis with their social, political and aesthetic motivations. Their bearers are most often the following generation of revivalists who have inherited the knowledge of the field and can, unlike the previous restrictive generation of guardians of purity, authenticity or originality, pursue these practices more freely (Bithell – Hill 2014: 28). Post-revival corresponds, moreover, with the global flows model posited by Arjun Appadurai (1996), which explains the transnational overlapping in globalization, ethnicity and cosmopolitanism.

The discursive nature of the terms “revival”, “folklorism” and “folklore movement” resides primarily in the fact that they never lose sight of other related processes, namely, reconstruction, preservation, restoration, resuscitation, revitalisation, regeneration, transformation, dissemination, transfer, innovation and others, including the regular negotiation of these processes in the social context. It is, therefore, primarily a social movement which acquires its meanings through social interaction, becoming an object of communication analysis in social theories (Goffman 1963, 1967; Giddens 1988). These theories then make it possible to explore this phenomenon

as part of a cultural or post-traumatic renewal, a therapy related to post-colonialism, political oppression, post-war situation or disastrous events.

Nevertheless, the aim of the SIEF panel was not to define what revival is, but to answer the question of why (and how) it is happening, and not just for its own sake, but with a deeper intent. It was about discerning the purpose for which elements of traditional culture are used and how this meta-language can be used in a broader socio-cultural and political context. We were interested in the intentionality of folklore and whether we understand the term from different perspectives and use it in different contexts.

These issues are further addressed by an ongoing project titled “Folklore Revival in Post-Socialist Countries: Politics, Memory, Heritization and Sustainability” supported by the Czech Science Foundation and the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency, which is a bilateral project based on the cooperation of the ethnology institutes of the Slovenian and Czech Academies of Sciences. The project focuses on monitoring folklore activities in contemporary society which are associated with making music and dance with elements of traditional folk culture but which do not have an obvious intention to cultivate, care for or further disseminate. Unlike the ideologically conceived folklore revival movement of the second half of



Figure 1 Dance workshop within the folklore festival in Myjava, Slovakia led by instructors for visitors, 2024. Photo Daniela Stavčlová.

the 20th century, there is noticeable a shift from presentational to participatory. There is a change in the environment of these activities, which take place not only within the activities of folklore ensembles and associated events, but in connection with emerging events. An important aspect is the process of adopting images of the folklore movement in cultural memory. There is also a shift from local to global: dance/music folklore as a reflection of local or regional identity versus folklore as a field of hybrid and multi-genre musical dance expression using bricolage and the appropriation of de-territorialized traditions. The main goal and purpose of the joint research is a comparative study, which should show how the phenomenon of the folklore revival movement, which has its origins in similar political and historical contexts, is transformed into different local and national connotations and recent meanings.

The principal question is: Why folklore? Or why is it that, today, in the late modern era, people are engaged in so-called folklore, what is their reason for doing so, and what are the circumstances of its use, exploitation or even abuse. We start from the assumption that it is not a mere leisure activity, but an action based on a certain intentionality. We therefore inquire into the reasons for dressing up in costume, singing and playing folk songs and learning to dance long-forgotten elements of folk dances. How is such competence acquired and how is it used in such performances? Therefore, the basic premise is that it is a performative act with new meanings that work wherever this language becomes a vehicle for a message that is understood. We also examine how folklorization is taking place today, who the bearers of tradition are and what is considered cultural heritage or gradually becoming so. The object of observation is the environment of festivals and other events where folklore can be encountered today. Several mid-term results of the project have already been published (Kolačkovská 2023; Kovačič 2024; Kunej R. 2023, 2024; Kunej D. 2023; Kunej – Pisk 2023; Stavělová 2023; Skořepová 2023; Vejvoda 2023), and two other outcomes are the SIEF panel and this special issue. As part of this discourse, the SIEF panel focused more closely on the question of why folklore can play an important role in finding a place to belong, how it relates to identity formation, and how it can become a tool for overcoming obstacles in the struggle against uncertainty.

This special issue of *Český lid* presents a selection of the panel contributions and offers a continuation of this debate. It brings a compelling exploration of cultural expressions and the transformative nature of traditions across different contexts to answer the shared question: “Why folklore?” In these pages, we explore how rituals, music, and folk customs are redefined and sustained within contemporary societies, each embodying a unique



Figure 2 Children watching games on a tablet while waiting for their performance at the folklore festival in Strážnice, Czech Republic, 2024. Photo Daniela Stavělová.

blend of continuity, innovation, and community identity. Through the lens of diverse cultural practices, our contributing authors illuminate the complexities of heritage safeguarding, identity negotiation, and the evolving discourse of folklore. This issue examines nuanced perspectives, bringing together contributions that illuminate the complex interplay of tradition and modernity, identity and adaptation, memory, and future aspirations.

Barbora Turčanová's investigation into wind music in the Slovácko region of Moravia uncovers the complex intersections of tradition and innovation in musical performance. Her work offers a nuanced analysis of how authenticity and modernization interact within the sphere of wind bands, challenging perceptions and underscoring the vitality of evolving musical traditions in shaping cultural memory and identity. The study describes the complex relationships between traditional music and its performance and repertoire development in the context of the long-standing discourse of authenticity in Czech folklore studies and the folklore revival movement.

Marjeta Pisk and Rebeka Kunej offer a comprehensive historical and contemporary analysis of the Jurjevanje Festival in Črnomelj, Slovenia, il-

lustrating the transformation of the Green George ritual from a localized cultural practice to a folklore festival of national significance. The authors effectively trace the interplay of cultural preservation, festivalization, and modern identity-making within regional traditions, providing a case study rich in symbolism and heritage-making processes.

Jessica Jane Lloyd May's examination of the Randwick Wap custom in Gloucestershire, UK, brings to life the powerful role of folk customs in community cohesion and identity formation. Her ethnographic insights into this annual tradition reveal the intricate balance between historical reverence and contemporary re-enactment, demonstrating how rituals can simultaneously anchor and adapt to shifting communal needs in the village of Randwick.

Jennifer Schlegel's study on the Kutztown Folk Festival, US, emphasizes the continuing importance of oral histories and meta-folkloric practices among the Pennsylvania Dutch. By foregrounding personal narratives, Schlegel sheds light on the dynamic and participatory nature of heritage production within a modern folklife festival, highlighting the challenges and triumphs of maintaining ethnic identity in a globalized context.

Together, these contributions reflect a broad spectrum of approaches to studying folklore, rituals, and cultural expressions, each underpinned by a deep respect for the communities and traditions they examine. This issue clearly reveals the importance of folklore for different communities in the 21st century. We could therefore invert our initial question of "why folklore?" and ask "why not?". It is our hope that this special issue not only informs but also inspires ongoing academic debates within the fields of ethnology, folklore studies, and beyond. Enjoy the read, and may it spark your own reflections and research.

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