

III. Forschungs- und Tagungsberichte

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Narratives across Space and Time:
Transmissions and Adaptations
15th Congress of the International Society for Folk Narrative
Research (ISFNR)

Athens, 21–26 June 2009¹

In June 2009, the fiftieth anniversary year of the ISFNR, the society's members gathered in Athens for the fifteenth congress. This marked the second convening of the ISFNR in Athens, which had also hosted the fourth congress in 1964. Athens offered itself as a perfect location to commemorate the society's half century of existence, to explore the especially apt congress theme – *Narratives across Space and Time* – and to reflect on the past, present, and future of folk narrative research and of the ISFNR itself. Athens' ubiquitous juxtapositioning of past and present inevitably provokes a profound historical awareness, and in this modern ancient city one could not escape the realization that the ISFNR, even after its relatively modest fifty years, now had its own history. Officially this was evident during the congress in explicit efforts to begin reflecting on the society's own institutional narrative. Among these were a formal exhibit of materials documenting the history of the ISFNR and a CD presented to all participants, courtesy of the Hellenic Folklore Society and the congress organizers, which contained a digitized version of the proceedings of the 1964 Athens congress. Informally, the ISFNR's history was – and is – also apparent in the society's multi-generational membership, whose diverse scholarship and competing conceptions of folk narrative research underline the many changes that have taken place since 1959 and the transitions that inevitably take place over time.

The congress was organized by the Hellenic Folklore Research Centre of the Academy of Athens, which also helped to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of the Hellenic Folklore Society, whose venerable history was on exhibit, too, during the congress. Participants in the fifteenth congress owe an enormous debt of grati-

¹ Just for the sake of historical accuracy, I note here that, although the official program gives the congress dates as June 21–27, the events of the congress actually took place from June 21–26.

tude to the entire organizing committee for their superb work, carried out under the leadership of congress president Aikaterini Polymerou-Kamilaki and spearheaded by general congress secretary and program co-ordinator Marilena Papa-christophorou. During its four intense days of scholarly sessions and plenary addresses, the congress also hosted two international symposia: on charms, charmers and charming; and on belief tales. In addition to these academic programs, congress participants enjoyed three evenings of special events, including musical, dance, and storytelling performances. The mid-week excursions, by now an ISFNR tradition, allowed attendees to tour historical sites such as Delphi or to succumb to the Siren song of the sea and take a full-day cruise to the Saronic Gulf islands of Hydra, Poros, and Aegina.

While the sights of Athens may have competed for the attention of the participants, the scholarly program remained, of course, the core of the congress. Despite the geographical, cultural, and disciplinary diversity the participants, and despite the diversity of approaches to folk narrative on display, the official scholarly program was characterized by one nearly universal feature – the almost exclusive use of English as a formal means of communicating research. To be sure, three plenary addresses were delivered in Greek (with simultaneous translation into English via wireless headsets), and the congress program included a handful of abstracts in German (4) and Russian (1). However, upon opening the CD with the proceedings of the 1964 congress in Athens, one can quickly see just how much things have changed over forty-five years: of the seventy-six lectures and reports included in the 1964 proceedings, twenty-three are in English, twenty-eight in German, and twenty-five in French. What this shift signifies and portends, and whether it should or even could be reversed, may be debated; but it is, in any case, a remarkable aspect of the ISFNR's history.

The historical context and significance of the fifteenth congress were naturally principal themes in the official opening ceremonies. ISFNR president Ülo Valk (Tartu) spoke eloquently of the historic fiftieth anniversary and of the continuing relevance and importance of folkore studies and folk narrative research. In her capacity as congress president and director of the Hellenic Folklore Research Centre, Aikaterini Polymerou-Kamilaki offered insights into the role of the ISFNR and the path of folk narrative research over the last fifty years. Recognizing in particular the nature of generational change, globalization, and the impact of the internet and new media on both narrative and scholarship about narrative, she not only provided multiple frames of reference for understanding the history of the society, but also effectively set the stage for the diverse papers and controversies that were to come. Her cogent summation of the society's history is an excellent starting point for initiating discussions about the past, present, and future of the organization: "During the course of these fifty years, the ISFNR has been a place open to new theories, currents and scholarly methods. It did not create theories, which is absolutely to be expected" (quoted from the congress program, p. 4).

Among the plenary addresses given at the congress, several took special advantage of the historical moment and the privileged plenary format to engage topics of significant magnitude and to grapple with major questions that genuinely illu-

minated the history of folk narrative research or that advanced new ideas or theories for dealing with important contemporary issues. One notable example was Michael Meraklis' address *Narratives in Space and Time: Transmission and Adaptation. Or: The Vital Importance of Variants* (given in Greek). Balancing theoretical considerations with analysis of specific examples, Meraklis tackled the phenomenon of variation, which he showed to be not only a necessary strategy in adaptation but also an inevitable aspect of transmitting folk narrative under any circumstances. Meraklis' rich discussion, which implicitly entered the contemporary struggle to understand the relationship between the particular and the universal, reconfirmed the position that the study of variants lies at the core of folklore as a discipline. In an act of disciplinary self-reflection, Gabriela Kiliánová (*New Topics and New Tasks? Social Actors and Their Strategies in Academic Activities*) examined the methodological and theoretical positions of ethnologists under the rule of totalitarianism in Slovakia during the latter half of the twentieth century and delivered significant insights into the scholar as social actor and into an important chapter in the history of ethnology and folklore studies. Gary Alan Fine (*What Has Happened to the Joke? The Politics of Joking Cultures*) constructed a compelling theoretical foundation to explain the sociocultural and political importance of jokes and joking, which function both to create and to test the boundaries of community. Fine's analysis of joking culture not only provided a framework for understanding the embattled joke in a politically charged era, but also implicitly reasserted the joke's significance in the field of narrative research and provided a model for treating it in a serious and sophisticated manner. Taking on another politically charged issue, Ulrich Marzolph (*Intellectual Property and the Power of Interpretation: A Case Study of Folk Narrative and Folk Narrative Research in Iran*) explored the thorny question of ownership in the context of folk narrative research, thus engaging one of the central issues of our time. Although focused on Iranian folk narrative, Marzolph's plenary lecture illustrated essential problems for folk narrative research and was followed by a substantive question-and-answer period that highlighted the cultural, political, legal, moral, and emotional perspectives that make the question of ownership and control so difficult and so urgent. One concrete result of this address and the ensuing discussion was the consensus that the Ethics Committee of the ISFNR would take an active role in pursuing this issue.

As one might expect in a discipline as multifaceted and multidisciplinary as folk narrative research, the twenty-minute papers delivered in the regular sessions of the congress covered a very wide spectrum of topics and approaches (and – it must be said – varied widely in quality). However, distinct trends surfaced during the course of the congress, attesting to the common concerns and directions of contemporary folk narrative scholars. As in Marzolph's plenary lecture, there was considerable interest in questions surrounding proprietary rights (who owns narratives, who has authority over them, and what are the rights and responsibilities of collectors and scholars?) – questions that were considered in both historical and contemporary contexts. Reflecting the introspective historical mode in which we find ourselves after fifty years of the ISFNR and concomitant expansion in the

field of folk narrative research, many scholars appear to be searching for new ways of understanding, re-assessing, and even re-utilizing the past. This trend was evident in papers exploring new ways of articulating the nature of collecting and collections, reviewing the history of the discipline, or reconsidering the foundational work of important scholars in new contexts. As evident from other presentations, the impact of globalization and the implications of new media on folklore and narrative research continue to expand the scope and complexity of the discipline, offering scholars not only new texts to consider but also new contexts for thinking about transmission, adaptation, and (once again) questions of authority and ownership. Papers dealing with the internet and digital media as a focus of research were complemented by those reporting on projects involving digital databases and archives. Finally, papers on film, television, and the relationship between folklore and literature were well represented at the congress, demonstrating once again the necessarily wide, multidisciplinary embrace of the ISFNR.

The general assembly of the ISFNR conducted its business on the final day of the congress, and the full minutes of that meeting can be consulted at the ISFNR's web site. Notably, the general assembly supported establishing three new committees: the Committee for Folktales and the Internet (Theo Meder, chair); the Committee on Charms, Charmers, and Charming (Jonathan Roper, chair); and the Belief Narratives Network (Willem de Blécourt, chair). The assembly also received and approved invitations from the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore to host the sixteenth congress of the ISFNR in Vilnius, Lithuania, in 2013; and from Gauhati University and North-Eastern Hill University to hold the next interim conference in Guwahati and Shillong, in North-East India, in 2011. Finally – after expressing its thanks to outgoing president Ülo Valk for his exemplary leadership over the past four years, to treasurer Ulf Palmfeldt for his many years of tireless service, and to vice-president Manuel Dannemann and executive committee member Gabriela Kiliánová for their dedicated service to the ISFNR – the general assembly elected the following new officers: Ulrich Marzolph (Göttingen) as president; Marilena Papachristophorou (Athens) as treasurer; María Inés Palleiro (Buenos Aires) as vice-president representing Latin America; Ülo Valk (Tartu) as vice-president representing Europe, and Sadhana Naithani (New Delhi) as a member of the executive committee.

I left Athens and the sixteenth congress occupied with thoughts about the past and future of the ISFNR. Like Athens itself, the ISFNR – in its relatively brief history – continues to be characterized by both continuity and change. Still visible, the foundations of the original society remain in place as new generations build upon them. Change is inevitable as new members, new leaders, new ideas, and new conceptions of the field emerge; but the fundamental legacy of the ISFNR's founders – who gave folk narrative scholarship an international profile and established a global forum “open to new theories, currents and scholarly methods” – remains.