

## **Folklore Fellows Workshop in Finland**

### *Report from a Participant*

-Prof. S. Carlos

The Folklore Fellows Summer School (FFSS 95), held at the Mekrijaarvi Research Station of the University of Joensuu, situated in the Eastern part of Finland from the twenty sixth of June to the ninth of July, 1995, earned the attention of folklore researchers of the world through its meticulously planned lectures, group discussions, field work and cultural programs. The countries represented in this Summer School were Turkey, China, India, Portugal, USA, Sweden, Bangladesh, Finland, Tanzania, Ireland, Russia, Estonia, Denmark, Latvia and Argentina.

This particular course selected the problem of tradition and conflicting identities as its main theme. This innovative theme which is seldom considered a main thrust area in Indian folklore, was perhaps selected as a result of the break-up of the erstwhile Soviet Union, and the emerging nationalist struggles and wars that we see all over the world. This selection of the topic has another angle which was rightly described by Professor Galit Hassan Rokem of Israel when she said that the selection of this topic was like walking on a double-edged knife. As expected, later, during discussions, questions were asked whether the terms tradition and identity would not encourage Fascist elements of different countries.

In this background it was appropriate to start the first session of the workshop with Prof. Lauri Honko's talk on "Traditions in the Construction of Cultural Identity and the Strategies of Ethnic Survival." This eminent scholar who has been visiting countries including India and is currently working on Tulu Folk-epics, approached this topic by elaborating on various concepts and key terms of identity study. Prof. Honko has done field work among the minority community of Lapps in Finland and Norway, and among the Ingrians and Karelians in Russia.

The field experience which he gained from his research in Africa, Bangladesh, China and India enabled him to achieve different levels of understanding of identity. The American sociologist Edward Shils' different conceptual frames were critically examined to show that identity is not merely a rigid mental expression. This introduction to different levels of understanding of identity, making use of the insights of the book, *The Invention of Tradition* edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, appropriately paved the way for a full discussion. The different concepts introduced in this talk and their potential to be applied to different cultures were tested, taking up examples of different cultures for elucidation. Comparison of the Telugu *Palnaveeracharitra* with the Finnish epic *Kalevala* was made to bring out the important role played by epics in establishing the identity of different peoples. The vast theoretical opening this perspective provides is very apt in the Indian situation. Our theoretical formulation of different disciplines has not solved the problem of national versus different regional or, regional versus the multifarious ethnic categorizations and their different manifestations in the overall definition of various components of Indian national culture. This, everyone knows, is inadequately labeled "Hinduism".

Prof. Honko's next lecture on "Epic Identity: National, Regional, Communal and Individual" threw much light on the relation between the epic genre of folklore and the problem of identity at various levels of understanding like national, religious etc. Going systematically through different forms of epics as formulated by Susan Wadley, Stuart Blackburn and Brenda Beck who are familiar to the students of Indian folklore, Honko arrived at the delineation of different features that go to make up the national epic concept. These are, as Honko explained, 1) the individual intellect having imbibed the traditional storehouse of epic models, 2) the poetic materials of ancient origin, 3) the reception by a literary elite and 4) the transference of tradition from periphery to the center. During the course of this second lecture, Prof. Honko cited many Indian examples in order to arrive at a comprehensive definition of Folk-epic; this enabled him to go through the observations made by Blackburn - an epic in one community is not an epic in another community - and Susan Wadley, on epics. This made it possible for the Indian delegates, Surjit Singh, others and

me to express our opinions. The suggestion I made that the yardstick to be used in approaching an Indian epic, should be Indian, received an affirmative reply from Honko. This kind of debate, even in India, would go a long way, I hope, in correcting the westernized methods of studying Indian folklore.

Another paper that we, the Indian and the Third World participants, found relevant was the one by Professor Herman Bausinger, the much acclaimed author of the reputed book, ***Folk Culture in a World of Technology***. This book concentrates on the study of the changing patterns of different genres of Folklore in a technological society like Germany. The frame of arguments of this book is relevant to Indian Social Science and folklore studies to remodel our perspectives and priorities, if we do not forget that our social and research methodologies need not bifurcate the present from the past, as both co-exist in our social reality. The study of cultural identity as was presented in this paper of Herman Bausinger, made us, the Third World researchers and students of folklore, look up to Herman Bausinger for clues and the inspiration to formulate an Indian or Third World method of folklore study. This study also cannot neglect the fact that we Indians live in a modern technological and a primitive society at the same time. Folkloristic features of both societies interweave and coalesce with each other. Herman Bausinger's paper, presented in the FFSS 95 also touched upon different conceptual strands that enable one to understand the situation that a European folklorist encounters at present against the backdrop of Fascist forces gaining the upper hand and raising their voices against migration from poor countries. Folklore, if it has to be useful for throwing light on present-day problems in addition to its historical role in the formation of nation states, has to address problems that different peoples face either within one national boundary or in the transnational diaspora. Herman Bausinger aptly identified both Europeanization and Americanization as two powerful mobilizing forces that work today in the postmodernist globalization of the world. Although he had not tied the concept of globalization, as recent theorists of this concept do, with that of localization directly, he nonetheless brought out the reality of the emergence of ethnic and other indigenous identities in the minds of people. He, in identifying with the voice of the underdeveloped nations, quoted an idea of Salman Rushdie that recommends

acknowledging impurity, hybridity, intermingling and transformation, which come about when different human beings and cultures come together. He opts for the metaphor of an Eastnet having Easter eggs of different colors, to explain the future world instead of a unified globe depending on subtle and overt exploitation of the weak and the oppressed. This paper read out in the absence of Herman Bausinger perhaps set the mood for occasional reactions from another participant Humza Mustafa Njozi of Tanzania. He made his observations that European scholars, through the theoretical models developed in the West, do not give respect to the cultural values of other religions like Islam. Their concept of women goes counter to the values enshrined in Muslim holy scriptures, he said.

Since one of the aims of this workshop was to generate a global debate on folklore and the study of identity, and as the participation was from different parts of the world, the ideas debated were mainly marked by the emphasis given by different cultures, that we could roughly divide into the Western and Eastern. This approach will, I believe, to a certain extent, explain the other two talks given by Barbara Klien. The talk on "Ethical Conflicts in Folklore Research," based its arguments on a neglected aspect of research, the ethical question of folklore research. When the Third World participants pointed out that they were in a different position with regard to ethics of research, they implied that they are both researchers and objects of Western research. The problem of ethics could be taken up when the study of folklore widens its borders. These ideas were discussed both inside the seminar hall and outside, when the participants and the speakers mixed freely, a goal the organizers deliberately aimed at. Barbara Klein brought out many instances of how to edit manuscripts and photographs for preserving in a museum and she insisted that relativism could be the epistemological base for the field work. In another talk, she took up the problem of different strategies of exhibiting identity. She chose the rituals of migrants for her study and explained the different levels of identity formation. Rituals are considered to be the spaces for visibility and invisibility, structure and anti-structure, etc. Identity, in her talk was to tie together ambiguities, paradoxes and loose ends. Klein, thus, by way of elucidating personal museums, which are houses built from the memory of the

displaced peoples, explained how the modern concept of folklore broadens the discipline's boundaries.

The talk of the Norwegian scholar, Stein Mathews, was based on the research he had done using the folklore of a tribe which lives in the Northern part of Norway. This well-researched talk, after clarifying the theoretical foundation, went on to delineate the nature of communication that the tribe called Saami established with the Christian Norwegian people. The tribes who were not Christian were either branded too secretive, or as terrorists. These two groups of people are demarcated by their either possessing or not possessing the magic.

In the talk by Aili Neola on "Cultural Identity and Gender", she stressed the theoretical problems of the contestants' point of view of discourses. She identified militaristic nationalism with maleness.

Thus, the contrastive discourses of the dominant and the lowly, were predominant throughout these talks. The two talks by the South Asian speakers, one by Surjit Singh of India on the Ramayana, and the other by Niaz Zaman of Bangladesh on Women's Folk Drawings were well received. They duly represented different voices; Singh used the metaphor of the story of Ramayana to represent the themes of country and forest that haunt the Indian psyche. This drew the reaction of other Indian participants and, in the course of the discussion they elaborated on the above metaphor revealing their own understanding of Ramayana; participants from southern India like me could highlight the south-Indian versions. Narasamamba could point out that the Ramayana of her area highlighted women's voices; Lourdu Swamy, who works with the tribal people of Madhya Pradesh spoke about the tribal version of the Ramayana; thus the story of Ramayana, was shown to be a store-house of different cultural signs within a region.

Kaija Heikkinen of Finland brought out the explicit strands of the two national minorities, Karelians and Veps. The dynamic chairperson of this workshop, Prof. Anna Leena Siikala, in her talk on myths, narratives and their relation to

history, concentrated on the problem of narrative representation of history, which is a recent concern among ethnologists and anthropologists the world over, particularly after the advent of postmodernist study of Anthropology and History.

The two papers presented by Prof. Richard Bauman elaborated, in one, the theory of genre making use of the concept of intertextuality, and in the other, the problem of mediation in oral performance.

Prof. Bauman's two papers which were circulated among the participants reflected the latest research trends in the U.S.A., and slightly deviated from the theme of the papers presented in earlier sessions. Before we go into that, the difference in the aims and perspectives of research in Finland and in the U.S.A. can be pointed out by referring to one of the observations made by Roger D. Abrahams (see *Folklore Processed* in honor of Prof. Lauri Honko on his 60th birthday). He compared the methods followed by Prof. Honko of Finland with the methods and aims of the discipline as it is followed in the U.S.A., since Honko noticed a redirection in the folklore research of the latter. Abrahams says that the alteration on their part is due to the reassessment taking place in the discipline.

This alteration of methods of folklore study and selection of topics was reflected in the presentation of Richard Bauman. This redirection, though unintended, had provided an opportunity to make it an issue for further debate among the participants. I could sense this when we exchanged views outside the seminar hall. The discussions that will soon take place in different countries would make this site of debate a fertile area for planning folklore research according to the needs of each country. This will enable scholars of different countries chart their research priorities by agreeing to disagree with their counterparts from other countries.



L-R :- Richard Bauman, Carlos, Halit Hassan, Aili Neola, Barbara Stein.

The two papers by Bauman largely dealt with the theme of mediation, one taking up genre as mediation of different intertextual manifestation of a performing context; the other paper was concerned with the middleman who comes between the speaker/ reciter and the hearer/audience. These two papers largely depended on the constitutive operation of different forces that come to play their parts in the folklore context. This once again reminded one of the attempts of another American Folklorist, Alan Dundes, who drew on the reconstructing aspects of the theories of Vladimir Propp and Claude Levi-Strauss in his 'structural' study. But the deconstructive study (a la Derrida) of the concept of genre and mediation is perhaps, I hope, the method which we in India look for, since folklore is very often considered as a fixed, a much fossilized and rule-governed field of study. These two essays, though their aims were different, provided the much needed impetus to the studies in our part of the world. This will help us understand the role of *vidushaka* or his counterparts in different Indian languages, who gain entry into inter-textual as well as intra-textual domains of a performance, evoking laughter and new ideas (through their own interpretation and their comparing the textual event with national as well as the regional day-to-day life of the masses). This act of the *vidushaka* is the act of deconstruction during the performance. To raise the problem of post-structuralist rejection of the reconstructive aspect of the Levi-Straussian method of study, is not out of place here. Bauman's concept of

mediation as authorization may open new avenues if the post-structuralist dictum that the author is dead (Roland Barthes) is brought to bear in Folkloristic studies, too.

Two other scholars who presented their papers, and who have conceived the discipline of folklore from different perspectives were the West Asian scholar Prof. Rokem Halit Hassan of Jerusalem and Prof. John Miles Foley of the U.S.A. Halit's significant presentation of a scholarly paper in Mysore, India in 1995, was elaborated on, and it formed the theme of one paper, while the dialogical perspective of Mikhail Bakhtin provided the determining methodological framework of another paper. Although this shared the methodological concern of Bauman's paper, Halit's emphasis was on the audience and their role in the study of proverbs. In the Indian context, the theories of Milman Parry, Chadwick and A.B. Lord were introduced by Kailasapathy, through his "Tamil Heroic Poetry". Further development of this tradition of studying the compositional aspect of literary folklore was introduced by John Miles Foley to the participants in his two papers. His consistent writing on this aspect of folklore composition, including books like ***The Theory of Oral Composition, Traditional Oral Epic, Imminent Art and The Singer of Tales in Performance***, need to be introduced to Indian folklore students. This has a special significance to students of Indian folklore which is largely interlinked with classical literary tradition. John Miles Foley took up the different ideas of Dennis Tedlock and Dell Hymes to emphasize the utility of studying oral-derived written text. John's research will be all the more appropriate in the Indian context as most of the students of folklore come from Indian language departments where the interlacing of folklore and written text is very often the mainstay of their research.