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LIVING UNCERTAINTY: THE 16TH CONGRESS OF THE INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY FOR ETHNOLOGY AND FOLKLORE (SIEF)

The 16th Congress of the International Society for Ethnology and Folklore (SIEF) took place in Brno, Czechia, from 7 to 10 June 2023 bringing together researchers, teachers, students, archivists, as well as museum and heritage professionals representing European ethnology, folklore studies, cultural anthropology, and adjoining fields. The Congress is a biennial event that showcases the state of research in the fields, facilitates scholarly exchange, provides a forum for discussions and reflections, and offers the possibility to build professional networks. The choice of Czechia as the host country signifies SIEF's symbolic return home, referring to the congress on folk art in Prague in 1928, which is described as "a seminal event in the history of folklore" (Rogan 2012: 609) as among other successes it resulted in the establishment of La Commission Internationale des Arts Populaires, the predecessor of SIEF. This time, the local organising committee represented by the Institute of Ethnology of the Czech Academy of Sciences, the Department of European Ethnology of the Faculty of Arts of Masaryk University, and the National Institute of Folk Culture, welcomed almost 1,000 participants to Brno, Czechia's second largest city and a prominent centre of education and research.

The theme of the 2023 Congress, Living Uncertainty, emerged as a response to a multitude of crises that the world has been going through recently. Armed conflict, the pandemic, climate change, recession, social and political instability, forced migration, growing inequality, all of which are just some examples of contexts that directly involve diverse manifestations of uncertainty and can lead to pernicious outcomes that effect every member of society and act at both global and local scales. Given their vast methodological toolkits and extensive experience in engaging with people and communities while studying life in its infinite diversity, the fields represented at the Congress cannot but approach uncertainty as a research topic.

The Congress featured a total of 97 panels, during which 669 papers were presented by both well-established scholars and young researchers. As is customary at SIEF Congresses, panels were organised into streams representing broader thematic areas. In addition, a poster stream offered an alternative form of presentation of research addressing the general theme of the Congress with different approaches.

Over the course of three days, uncertainty became pivotal in most of the streams and panels, either as a primary focus of the presented papers or as implicit when approached from a variety of angles that provided a multifaceted array of reflections. As today's world is becoming more and more complex, methodological approaches respond with a growing trend of interdisciplinarity, resulting in more integral studies with more attention to detail at the intersection of different fields, such as digital folklore, big data analysis, ecological anthropology, urban studies, etc. Another evolving aspect is research ethics and reflexivity, which have long been an essential part of research practices but are now more explicitly talked about, especially in contexts that deal with uncertain terrains involving people and communities subject to vulnerable living conditions.

Turning to thematic foci, many presenters addressed current conflicts and crises, drawing attention to such topics as armed conflict, exemplified by the ongoing war in Ukraine, forced displacement experienced

by refugees and migrants, the far-reaching consequences of climate change extending beyond the environment to encompass its broader influence on human lives, and the transformative impact of the pandemic, as exemplified by studies of Covid-19 effects coming from various disciplinary and regional contexts. Beyond conflicts and crises, presentations initiated dialogues on other topics incorporating uncertainties related to the rapid advancement of technology, the trend towards digitisation of various aspects of human life, and the proliferation of conspiracy theories and their political uses.

All in all, presentations encompassed a wide range of experiences, drawing on various national and regional contexts. This diversity of topics and themes fostered a rich and productive exchange of ideas across different disciplinary fields, methodological approaches, theoretical perspectives, and research practices. These interactions promoted in-depth discussions of the role and possibilities of our fields to effectively address the evolving challenges confronting the world.

Estonian academia was represented by over 30 researchers from different institutions. Their research interests spanned a wide variety of topics, including, but not limited to, cultural heritage, archival practices, disciplinary histories, folklore revivals in non-democratic contexts, gender and sexuality in folklore, everyday folklore, digital folklore, conspiracy theories, human–plant relations.

Unlike previous congresses which favoured keynote lectures as a form of academic discussion, the 2023 Congress supplemented two keynote lectures with two plenary sessions. Instead of allocating space for individual guest speakers every day, the addition of plenary sessions diversified the range of presented experiences, creating space for a wider discussion and allowing more voices to be heard. Keynote and plenary speakers approached the topic of the Congress from different perspectives, highlighting several ways to reflect on the expressions of uncertainty: from a global to a local standpoint, from the contemporary political environment to the sphere of human relations, from crises and unstable futures to everyday life uncertainties.

The opening keynote lecture was delivered by Marylin Strathern, Emeritus Professor of Social Anthropology at Cambridge. The lecture, entitled Uncertain Relations: Limits and Possibilities, addressed the pivotal theme of uncertainty through the concept of relations. Pointing out the uncertain nature of relations, Prof. Strathern drew upon the global agenda and fieldwork encounters to explore the possibilities provided by relations as a medium to examine the world we live in. Whether these are relations we take part in or the ones present in our research, she encouraged the audience to contextualise them inquisitively in order to grasp better the meanings that uncertainty implies and to be able to better cope with them subsequently.

The second keynote was presented by Andrea Pető (Central European University, Austria; CEU Democracy Institute, Hungary). Prof. Pető's lecture, Teaching and Writing the Truth Today: Five Options, explored the contemporary political scene in Central Europe reflecting on the growing popularity of neo-fascism and illiberal ideas that undermine their opponents' authority to define values. The advancement of such a political agenda raises concerns over the security of democratic foundations in general but also jeopardises scholarly practice. Relying on her own experience, Prof. Pető advocated a broader engagement of scholars in public discourse outside academia in order not to be silenced and offered a range of strategies that can assist in withstanding the threat to academic freedom.

The first plenary, Uncertain Terrains in the Everyday, featured two speakers, Andrea Kitta (East Carolina University, USA) and Michał Buchowski (Adam

Mickiewicz University, Poland). As the name of the plenary suggests, the speakers adopted different angles to address uncertainties present in our everyday lives, covering a variety of topics such as politics, power, environment, and health. Drawing on their professional backgrounds, both speakers opened up perspectives for discussion of the possibilities and limitations of ethnology, anthropology, and folkloristics for studying everyday expressions of uncertainty that affect both individual and social levels in diverse contexts.

The second plenary brought together four speakers, Tatiana Bužeková (Comenius University, Slovakia), Eerika Koskinen-Koivisto (University of Jyväskylä, Finland), Kyrre Kverndokk (University of Bergen, Norway), and Tim Tangherlini (University of California, Berkeley, USA). The session, titled Uncertainty and Methodologies, included discussion mainly around methodological questions, the relevance of certain research tools to different contexts, dialogue with other disciplinary fields both within and outside the humanities, and ways to adapt and develop our research practices for more efficient study of uncertainties.

The closing roundtable, On the Precarity of Our Disciplines: Possible Ways Forward, concluded the academic programme of the Congress. The roundtable was chaired by Monique Scheer (University of Tübingen, Germany) and included four speakers, Čarna Brković (Georg-August-Universität Göttingen, Germany), Martin Fotta (Czech Academy of Sciences, Czechia), Roger Norum (University of Oulu, Finland), and Clara Saraiva (University of Lisbon, Portugal). The discussion addressed multiple challenges that the fields represented face today and which jeopardise the very conditions of knowledge production within these fields. Some of the highlighted issues include the growing lack of funding together with the changing mechanisms of its allocation, which increased uncertainty and are often at odds with the universities, research centres and projects' needs; the unfavourable employment conditions with the prevalence of short-term contracts; and the strengthening audit culture within academia. Taking the debate to the individual level, the roundtable stressed the pervasiveness of precarity and its effects on researchers, especially young researchers who are taking their first steps in academia or starting their careers. The speakers, and one can assume the audience as well, were unanimous that early career researchers find themselves in a particularly vulnerable situation as for many of them a future career in academia could become a vague mirage irrespective of their talents and the quality of their research. It is worth mentioning the efforts SIEF undertakes to address these issues, for instance the activities of the young scholars working group, the ongoing mentor and mentee programme, and the award of the young scholar prize.

Alongside the academic programme, the Congress offered a range of additional cultural and social activities. Creative workshops provided hands-on experience in traditional nettle fibre processing and vernacular building technologies. The curated audiovisual programme reflected sensorily on the uncertainties that the world is facing today and on those that might be ahead of us. The city itself was explored during thematic walks, providing a unique sense of its rich history and vibrant cultural life.

The Congress serves as a tool that helps SIEF perform its principal mission of bringing together scholars and creating a forum for discussion and the exchange of ideas, as declared in the organisation's mission statement (SIEF 2023). As the first face-to-face Congress after Covid-19, the 2023 Congress definitely succeeded in reinstating the academic practice of conferencing, with all the benefits of an on-site event familiar to experienced participants, while introducing the benefits of Congress to newcomers. However, the decreasing number of participants in comparison to the 15th SIEF Congress,

held online in 2021, reveals the downside of moving back to normality. As emphasised previously (Svetel et al. 2021: 99; Novik et al. 2022: 239), the online format provided many participants with the opportunity to overcome obstacles (financial, geographical, environmental concerns connected with travelling, etc.) and thus contributed to wider representation not only in terms of pure geography but also more diverse ideas and experiences. This issue should be addressed in the future in order to clarify the meaning of being international and utilise the associated benefits to promote diversity in its broad sense and deal with inequality.

Organising an event as large in scale as a SIEF Congress would have been impossible without the dedicated work of the entire organising committee, the invaluable support of the NomadIT team, the enthusiasm and contributions of the volunteers, and the cooperation and active engagement of all the participants. The entire Congress programme was arranged and managed with meticulous attention to detail, ensuring that every aspect ran smoothly and efficiently. A number of organisation meetings held during the Congress set the future directions of work in the field. Now the baton goes to Romania's capital Bucharest, which will host the next SIEF Congress in 2025, continuing the tradition of bringing together scholars from relevant fields and providing yet another possibility for critical debate, networking, and exchange.

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