

Reading the Official and the Unofficial: On the Practice of a Historical Investigation of "Folk-Memory" in Scandinavian Folk Museums and Open-Air Museums During the Late 19th Century

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Official documents of the folk museums and open-air museums in Scandinavia demonstrate in many respects a history of similarities between themselves, while the unofficial documents contain a history of different local strategies to maintain the joint visions of the museum. Therefore, it is necessary for the historian to keep his gaze fixed on the texts, on the differences of the contents, but also to be aware of all distractions that originate in one's self, distractions that creates imaginary meanings, which in their turn threaten the otherness of the documents. Thus, the task of a historian, I argue, is to maintain the otherness of the documents, and to dig out their different and presumed unessential contents, i.e. to uphold the straggly shape of the "folk-memory".

This article gives some examples of the official and the unofficial sides of "folk-memory" in late 19th century Scandinavia, which a broader reading of the documents has unveiled. A study of the documents in filing cabinets and in cellar vaults of museums makes it possible to describe different similarities and differences than those which occur in a more limited reading of the published texts. Not until such an expanded and text-focused historical investigation has been carried out, is it possible to see the cracks in the "folk-memory", and its other and more secret boundaries.

Introduction

Do historians need to read both official and unofficial documents when investigating folk museums, or museums of cultural history, at the turn of the century, and their focus, i.e. “folk-memory”? This question can probably be thought of as quite trivial, but I will try to answer it by showing some consequences of a more limited reading. Therefore, I will place a reading of official documents, for example scholarly texts, programmatic texts, and handbooks for visitors, against a broader reading of different documents, i.e. both official compilations and unofficial letters, diaries and memoranda. My interest in this field is due to my archival studies at folk museums in Scandinavia in which it became apparent that “folk-memory” of the late 19th century is not only complex but also consists of contradictory parts.¹

Another danger for me as a scholar, who is trying to understand texts, is my preparedness for them to tell me something, and that I, because I am not sensitive to their alterity, create an imaginary meaning to them. This much desired sensitivity involves, however, neither “neutrality” with respect to content nor the extinction of one’s self. Instead, I must foreground and appropriate my own prejudices, or, as Hans-Georg Gadamer writes: “The important thing is to be aware of one’s own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one’s own fore-meanings.”² It is thus necessary for me to keep my gaze fixed on the texts throughout all the distractions that originate in my self – to maintain the otherness of the documents, to preserve the differences in them, and dig out their presumed unessential lines, i.e. to uphold the straggly shape of the “folk-memory”.

The Concept of “Folk-Memory”, in the Context of Scandinavian Folk Museums

I use the word “folk-memory” which is a direct translation of the Danish “folkeminde”, the Norwegian “folkeminne” and the Swedish “folkminne”. In late 19th century Scandinavia, the word incorporated a material side, also specified as Scandinavian or historical-ethno-graphica, as well as an immaterial side. It included, in other words, both physical features of Danes, Finns, Lapps, Norwegians and Swedes, their folk-costumes and folk-belief, dwelling-houses and folk-traditions, folk-art, folk-epic and folk-speech.

In a letter from January 17, 1879, Bernhard Olsen, the future founder of the Danish Folk Museum, invited Artur Hazelius at the Nordic Museum in Stockholm to participate in his historical-ethnographic section of The Exhibition of Art and Industry in Copenhagen with collections of old “folk-memories” [*Folkeminder*], i.e. material artefacts describing the historical Danish culture in the provinces of Scania, Halland, and Blekinge in Sweden.³ Hazelius himself described the “folkly memories” [*folkliga minnen*] in the 25th anniversary book *From the History of the Nordic Museum*, from 1898, as both immaterial folk-customs and material expressions, the latter as “means of research, which still presented itself in these old cottages, which were torn down, or in these household goods, which were despised, and in these folk costumes, which were put away.”⁴ He also subtitled the volume of prints *Reproductions of*

1 Archival research at The Norwegian Museum of Cultural History, Oslo, during August and September 2005, at The Nordic Museum and The Open-Air Museum Skansen, Stockholm, during April and May 2006, and at The National Museum, Copenhagen, during June and July 2006.

2 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (transl.), Second, Revised Edition, London and New York: Continuum, 2004 (1960), p. 271f.

3 The Nordic Museum Archive in Stockholm, The Early Archive of Artur Hazelius, The Nordic Museum and Skansen, E2B:21/617 Incoming Documents, Bernhard Olsen, 1879-1897.

4 Artur Hazelius, “Ur Nordiska museets historia” (From the History of the Nordic Museum), *Meddelanden från Nordiska museet 1898*, (Announcements of the Nordic Museum 1898), Stockholm: The Nordic Museum, 1900, p 271.

Artefacts in the Nordic Museum, published 1888-1899, “also of Nordic Face Features, Folk Costumes, and Buildings.”⁵

These are just two examples, of many others, which allow me to argue that in this context the boundary between human beings and material things was not central, but rather, as will be shown, between uniqueness and representativity.

The material and immaterial connotations of the “folk-memory” were, however, both expressions of a metaphysical dimension, i.e. they represented both the national character and the universal progress of civilisation – the thought and feeling of a folk, the transmission by and embodiment in artefacts, features, traditions, beliefs, dialects, etcetera, of certain distinctive ways of thinking and acting from generation to generation. Thus the concept of “folk-memory” consists of these dimensions, which all were important for the Scandinavian museum curators, folklorists and ethnologists in the late 19th century. In their scholarly and curatorial texts about “folk-memories”, reasoning about the development of culture as content in the forms of the peculiar nation was very common.

The Straggly Shape of the “Folk-Memory”, and Some of Its Sides

Some of the parts of the “folk-memory”, which I noticed during my archival studies, become evident already in a reading of official documents. Thus, it is possible to give an interesting description of the visionary history of the folk museums and the “folk-memory”. It is, however, important to remember that these descriptions are only one part of the history of memory and museum. Other areas of the “folk-memory” do not appear until the historian decides to increase his field of interest and incorporate documents on unofficial and in many cases secret discussions. The aim of a historical investigation is then to let lost events swarm at the side of the already proudly affirmed phenomenon, i.e. to dig out the suppressed histories and to describe them on the stages where they once did make a difference.⁶

In my study, these events are allowed to stand out in the uniqueness and straggling shapes which they still incorporate after having been preserved in textual and material documents. It may then be of some interest to explain what the idea of uniqueness, straggleness, and representativity mean in my study. Firstly, I argue that uniqueness was not a relevant category in folklore research and the practices of folk museums at the turn of the century. That is to say, that the diverse and unique history of a peasant’s life, his own testimony of his life and livelihood together with his family, friends and neighbours, was not of interest to scholars and curators in late 19th century Scandinavia.⁷

5 Artur Hazelius, *Afbildningar af föremål i Nordiska museet äfvensom af nordiska ansiktstyper, klädedräkter och byggnader, af hvilka teckningar förvaras i Nordiska museets arkiv* (Reproductions of Artefacts in the Nordic Museum, also of Nordic Face Features, Folk Costumes, and Buildings), Stockholm: Nordic Museum 1888-1899.

6 This approach is inspired by Michel Foucault’s essay from 1971, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”, in *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984, Volume 2*, New York: The New Press 1998.

7 Compare my notion that the curators of late 19th century Scandinavia were uninterested in the unique object, and fascinated by the representativeness of “folk-memory”, with Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, from 1960, about historical research in the 19th century: “The individual case does not serve only to confirm a law from which practical predictions can be made. Its ideal is rather to understand the phenomenon itself in its unique and historical concreteness. However much experiential universals are involved, the aim is not to confirm and extend these universalized experiences in order to attain knowledge of a law – e.g., how men, peoples, and states evolve – but to understand how this man, this people, and this state is what it has become or, more generally, how it happened that it is so.” The concept “folk-memory”, I argue, includes both the universal progress of man, and the particularity of how men had evolved in a nation. At the museums of cultural history in Scandinavia in the late 19th century, the representativeness of the “folk-memory” was all about the universal (Western) progress and the nation’s standpoint in relation to that, but never about the uniqueness of a personal testimony of life and livelihood.

It is true that these voices from living persons and their milieux were a part of the “folk-memory”, but only in the constitutive phase, and then only to prove their historical point of departure, which was done by pointing out the setting from where the collection had been made. For instance, The Ostenfeld Farmstead at the open-air museum in Sorgenfri, Denmark, had been moved from the Ostenfeld village in Schleswig, The Rauland House, at the open-air museum in Bygdøy, Christiania, was taken from the Rauland farmstead in the county of Numedal, Norway. Apart from this first pointing out, the uniqueness was considered as a worthless curiosity, and was therefore not included in the discussions on the representative “folk-memory”.

Secondly, in this latter discussion there were certain areas which were judged as irrelevant to “folk-memory”, and as such were omitted from official documents, while the more chatty unofficial documents were forgotten in the archives of the museums. In this discussion, the straggling shape of the “folk-memory” was streamlined by the notion that certain areas, which were actually expressed, were considered as unimportant.⁸ However, at the same time “folk-memory” was expanded, beyond the specific discussions in Christiania, Copenhagen and Stockholm, to the general types and the ideal expressions of science, politics and art.

The defence of the straggling shape of the “folk-memory” is of utmost importance in my historical investigation, since an important part of it concerns the mapping of the inter-connectivities, between these partly forgotten events and circumstances, to be able to decipher which patterns they form.⁹ My doctoral thesis concerns, among other things, the patterns of events, and more specifically the shaping and reshaping, and the credit and discredit of the “folk-memory” by different persons and institutions in Denmark, Norway and Sweden during the late 19th century.

How did they produce theories, strategies, models, programmes, and reports to describe this reality and to set their new initiative in motion, i.e. the incorporation of historic buildings in “folk-memory” and their institutionalisation in the open-air museums? Which strategies were used to patch up the threatening cracks between the more and the less illuminated areas of the “folk-memory”?

The Tension between the Official and Unofficial Sides of the “Folk-Memory”

The case study in this presentation is an exchange of letters between Bernhard Olsen curator at The Danish Folk Museum in Copenhagen and the folklore scholar and collector Ulrich Jahn in Berlin.¹⁰ In this exchange of letters, 1897-1899, I will be able to investigate some suppressed and extinct sides of the “folk-memory” in Denmark, but also some affirmed and

8 Cf. Magdalena Hillström, *Ansvar för kulturarvet: Studier i det kulturhistoriska museiväsendets formering med särskild inriktning på Nordiska museets etablering 1872-1919* (diss.) (The Public responsibility for cultural heritage: A study in the formation of cultural history museums in Sweden, with a focus on the establishment of the Nordic Museum 1872-1919), Linköping University 2006, pp. 16f, 264-274. Her interesting notion about the professionalisation as a grand narrative and a limitation of the supposed deformations and hybridities of the museums of cultural history in Sweden around 1900, can in my terms be thought of as a reduction of the already quite moderate stragglingness of the official “folk-memory” of the late 19th century. In a professional folk museum of the 20th century, Hillström writes, the objects should only have a scientific part, which related only to a systematic order, thus the aesthetic and social parts, for example, were cut out of the official side of the “folk-memory”. Did these parts find their places in the unofficial side of the “folk-memory” and museum practice of the 20th century?

9 Michel Foucault 1969, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Transl. into Swedish by C. G. Bjurström and Sven-Erik Torhell, Lund: Arkiv förlag 2002, pp. 40, 146-149.

10 The National Museum in Copenhagen, Archives of the Younger Eras of Denmark, The Danish Folk Museum, Dr. Ulrich Jahn, letters 1897-1899.

living sides, and, last but not least, its spread to other, in many cases contradictory, discussions on politics and art, moral and science in Europe.

By isolating two analytical positions in the discussion which formed this object, i.e. the *visions* in the programmatic texts of the museums and the *practices* in the official and unofficial documents, as the above letters, it becomes possible to open up an analytical field which renders it feasible to investigate the strategies of the museum curators for limiting the “folk-memory” to its official side – partly relative to their own unofficial practices, i.e. the straggling shape of the “folk-memory”, and partly compared with the diverse uniqueness of, for example, the Sámi people, the maids from Dalecarlia, and the museum assistants, all of them employed at the Skansen open-air museum in the 1890s.

The strategies of these museum curators, formulated on slips of paper, in letters and diaries, do not only show the official political, scholarly and artistic sides of “folk-memory”, but also the more silent commercial and collegial sides. This enables me, on the one hand, to follow how the museum curator included social-political arguments in the “folk-memory” and limited it to a national discourse, and geographically within the national border. And on the other hand, it is possible to notice how the same museum curator in unofficial connections crossed this limit to expand the “folk-memory” to a collegial discourse which included both museum curators and antiquity dealers in Scandinavia and Germany.

Politics, Science, and Pedagogy, Some Official Sides of the “Folk-Memory”

On August 16, 1885, the article *The Danish Folk Museum* by Bernhard Olsen was published in the pictorial magazine *Illustreret Tidende* (Illustrated News). The article was written because of the public opening of his new museum. Therefore he felt that he, as the founder, had to give an overview of the history of the creation and the future prospects of the museum. The idea behind the folk museums, Olsen started his article, had been thought out by the museum curator Artur Hazelius in Stockholm. Olsen had had the opportunity to view the Swede’s new method at the 1878 World Fair in Paris.¹¹

It was with a feeling of watching something of a permanent value, in opposition to the uselessness of the surrounding objects of the art-industry, that Olsen had stopped in front of the museum interiors showing Lapland and Sweden with their costume dolls and utility articles: “One felt, that one was standing right opposite something new, a breakthrough for a new museum idea concerning layers of society, whose life and behaviour had been unnoticed up to now by the traditional and official concept of, what in a scholarly and cultural-historically respect is of importance. One could also trace an artistic hand in the arrangement – the theatre decorator Ahlgrenson was the professional arranger –, a modern understanding of, how one should capture the attention of the masses and clear the way to an understanding of the purpose.”¹²

Olsen thought that the museum interior was a novelty in many dimensions. In it, there was a newly discovered national treasure of “memories from the even lives of old days”. There was also a new object of knowledge, the “folk-memory”, and a new way to reach the masses, i.e. the application of drama and decorative art to create the right feeling in the exhibitions. Already in these lines, a historian of today can discover the vast and well lit areas of the “folk-memory”, that is, their political significance as memorials of the development of the Danish nation over the centuries, their scholarly value as objects of knowledge for the new

11 Bernhard Olsen, ”Dansk Folkemuseum” (The Danish Folk Museum), *Illustreret Tidende*, August 16th, 1885.

12 Bernhard Olsen, August 16th, 1885.

folklore and ethnographic research, and their didactic relevance as good examples for the upbringing of the soulless masses in the cities.

Politics, science, and pedagogy, these areas were common to the Danish, Norwegian and Swedish “folk-memory”. And also the discussions in the different countries about these areas of the “folk-memory” were very similar. It is a duty, Hazelius wrote in Stockholm 1872, Olsen in Copenhagen 1879, and Hans Aall in Trondheim and Christiania 1894, for a modern and civilized nation to collect and preserve their “folk-memories” from the destruction caused by the foolishness of the novelty-sick peasants, the systematic looting by the antiquity dealers, the hunting for souvenirs by the tourists, and the collecting expeditions by the foreign museum curators.¹³

The curators of the folk museums in Scandinavia regarded themselves as acting at the eleventh hour; save all that could be saved of the disappearing “memories” to the benefit of science, the nation and the masses. These official sides of the “folk-memory” united themselves in an almost monolithic figure, *the peasant*, who became a mirror of the supposed harmonious order of the nation before the new and ambivalent age, a reflection which would be examined and exhibited by the curators in the new didactic museum interiors. In these places, one could not retrieve any cracks, neither on the body of the peasant nor on the body of the nation.

Across the Borders of Nation States, Foreign Trade as An Unofficial Side of the “Folk-Memory”

On April 29, 1897, Olsen received the first letter from Jahn. He offered in this letter an impressing collection: “It concerns, whether the Folk Museum, which you are leading, or other museums in Copenhagen have an interest to acquire my folklore collection from Schleswig and the Northern Frisian Islands, which was exhibited firstly in the year 1890 in the so called German Exhibition in London and then later on in The Museum for German Folk Costumes Berlin C Klosterstrasse.”¹⁴

Already the day after, April 30, Olsen sent a letter to the Chairman of the museum’s board in which he expressed his duty to the Danish nation to acquire the collection, freed as it was from the foreign museum. It was a collection, Olsen stated, which could demonstrate the historic spread of the Danish folk in “the lost lands”, i.e. in this case Schleswig in Germany, but also the counties of Scania, Halland and Blekinge in Sweden. And it could also show ancient and pure types of evolution, which were extinct within the present border of Denmark. With his national appeal, Olsen caught the ear of the Culture Minister of Denmark, the acquisition of the collection was granted public funding and within a few months 439 items had been listed in the museum catalogue of The Danish Folk Museum.¹⁵

13 The Nordic Museum Archive in Stockholm, The Early Archive of Artur Hazelius, The Nordic Museum and Skansen, 2A:1, Literary Work, Private Literary Work of Artur Hazelius, 1868-1901; Letters from A. Hazelius to O. Dickson, 1872. Bernhard Olsen, ”Stuen fra Magleby paa Amager paa Konst- og Industriudstillingen” (The Cottage from Magleby in Amager at The Exhibition of Art and Industry), *Illustreret Tidende*, July 29th, 1879. The Norwegian Folk Museum in Oslo, Private Archives of Hans Aall, Travel Diary, 1894.

14 The National Museum in Copenhagen, Archives of the Younger Eras of Denmark, The Danish Folk Museum, Dr. Ulrich Jahn, letters 1897-1899; Salg og Overdragelse af og Fortegnelse over Den Jahnske Samling, 1897. ”Es handelt sich darum, ob das von Ihnen dirigierte Folkemuseum oder ein anderes Museums-Institut in Kjøbenhavn daran interessiert ist, meine volkskundliche Sammlung aus Schleswig und den nordfriesischen Inseln, die zuerst im Jahre 1890 auf der sogen. German Exhibition in London und dann später im Museum für deutsche Volkstrachten Berlin C Klosterstrasse ausgestellt war, zu erwerben.”

15 The National Museum in Copenhagen, Archives of the Younger Eras of Denmark, Archive of Mollerup, Letters from Olsen, The Jahn Collection, 1897-1898.

The correspondence between Olsen and Jahn also demonstrates the more hidden parts of the “folk-memory”, and thereby the cracks between the moral duties of collecting, which limited it to the border of Denmark, and the collegial competition of collecting, which transferred it to the broader market of antiquities and “memories”. The contents of these letters were about the international market, about constant negotiations, barter transactions, cash transactions, and instalment purchases.

Thus, the folk museum in Berlin could lose their collections to the folk museum in Copenhagen, which in turn, contradictory to the official duty discourse, could sell certain items to The Nordic Museum in Stockholm, and trade for other objects with antiquity dealers in Denmark, Sweden and Germany.

In a letter from Olsen to Hazelius on July 13, 1898, that is, at the same time as he was filling his official writing to, among others, the Culture Minister with explanations about the national value of the collection, he offered some of the artefacts to his Swedish colleague: “I would also be grateful to have your response on my offer on the woman’s dress from Ostenfeld, which is a superb piece.”¹⁶

In other words, the new folk museums in Scandinavia and Germany were unofficially an important part of the reshaping of the “folk-memory” as a commodity in a commercial market with such players as antiquity collectors, antiquity dealers and museum curators. But since these parts threatened to blow up the political-moral side of the “folk-memory”, and thereby a cornerstone for the existence of the museum, they were kept outside the official and visionary documents of The Danish Folk Museum.

16 The National Museum in Copenhagen, Archives of the Younger Eras of Denmark, Archives of Bernhard Olsen, The Nordic Museum, 1880-1899. The National Museum in Copenhagen, Copy Book, Letters, Incoming and Outgoing, 1893-1902.