

RETHINKING ETHNOLOGY IN THE SPANISH CONTEXT

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This paper¹ discusses Spanish ethnology and its current place in Spanish scholarship. The purpose is to examine possible future directions for the field. After first examining the history of ethnology in Spain, we then turn to examining the role of ethnologists in European societies today, as well as the concept of emergency ethnology. This last refers to the need for developing tools and theories to enable ethnologists to activate rapid-response mechanisms in crisis or emergency situations, and in that sense or context, serve as a meaningful social force.

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Existing histories of Spanish ethnology often refer to it as the precursor of anthropology.² However, once social anthropology was established in Spanish universities in the 1970s, ethnology faded from view. Clearly, one of the issues in Spanish ethnology is therefore related to the past (and present) legitimization of anthropology as a university discipline. At the same time, there is also political pressure today in Spain to employ ethnology to address current social issues. A recent example of this has been the proposal by the conservative Partido Popular, as part of its 2008 electoral campaign, to create an “integration contract” for immigrants to Spain.

One goal of this paper is therefore partly to rethink the role of ethnology in Spanish scholarship, its history, discontinuities and the political interests found in those discontinuities. Another goal is to rethink future possibilities for the discipline, and rethink the formats in which ethnologists package their research. Of particular interest is the concept of ‘emergency ethnology’, that is, the need to develop

tools and theories to enable ethnologists to respond in crisis or emergency situations. This is necessary in order to avoid reproducing old models that have long been discarded by ethnologists and which involve essentializing and fossilizing customs and traditions. Paraphrasing Johannes Fabian, although the future of our discipline is open, its past is not (Fabian 1998: 23).

The Presence of the Past in Current Spanish Ethnology

The history of ethnology in Spain cannot be separated from the history of anthropology. However, in the canonized narrative of the history of how anthropology developed in Spain, late nineteenth and twentieth-century folklore does not play a part. Instead, it is seen as a precursor of anthropology.³ Interestingly, the same silence can be found in the international context when recounting the history of Spanish folklore studies in Europe.⁴

The founding narrative of anthropology in Spain

was articulated when it became a university discipline in the 1970s, and when there was a need to legitimate Spanish anthropology in an international context. As we know, a good beginning is essential to ensure the successful reception of the narrative. As one specialist in the history of anthropology in Spain puts it, “there is a unanimous consensus that the book by Julian Pitt-Rivers, *The People of the Sierra*, was the first modern anthropological work about Spain” (Prat 1999: 39).

The selection of Pitt-Rivers as the founding father of Spanish anthropology clearly reflects the image Spanish anthropology wanted to give of itself, as a completely new discipline that was not linked to previous – or even contemporaneous – works, including those using folkloric and ethnological perspectives (Velasco 1989; Ortiz 2004: 14). The model to be followed was that of British social anthropology, perceived as the dominant methodological paradigm in Europe in the 1970s (Kuper 1973):

British social anthropology, which was so influential for Spanish anthropology, rejected folklore studies. These studies were later re-introduced in the United Kingdom as part of social history, literary studies and cultural studies, but [only] in a very limited way in the field of anthropology (Luque Baena 1989: 51).

The assimilation into the British model created a rupture with previous research in folklore, distancing Spain from other developments in Europe and in the United States. Ethnology was part of a silenced past. It was not to be revived or included in disciplines that used ethnographic fieldwork, particularly not during the transition to democracy in Spain in the 1970s. In other national academic traditions, there is a disciplinary continuum between anthropology and ethnology; in Spain, there is a breach.

There is a link between the changes in anthropology and the political changes after Franco's death in 1975. Like the political transition to democracy, there was a transition to a more professionalized anthropology in a realm that previously had been occupied by amateur folklorists and anthropologists.

By the mid-1970s, anthropologists wanted to see themselves as pursuing a new discipline (Ortiz 1996: 129). A key figure in this was Carmelo Lisón, who explicitly broke with previous studies in folklore, and wanted to create a professional study of anthropology in the universities (Lisón 1976).

Folklore studies at the time were divided. On one side stood a strongly literary approach, one in which orality and folk literature was the main focus. On the other side was an anthropological line of research which focused on festivals and rituals; practitioners here called themselves neither folklorists nor ethnologists. The literary approach had been pursued by folklore societies during the late nineteenth century, and that tradition was continued in the twentieth with Menéndez Pidal's studies on *Romancero* (Spanish ballads). The focus was on the textualization of verbal art.⁵ The anthropological approach, while it concentrated on festivals and rituals, left other aspects of expressive culture such as material culture or the analyses of verbal art using ethnographic fieldwork invisible. While much work has been done on the concept of folklore and tradition (Velasco 1990; Ortiz 1999; Díaz G. Viana 1984, 1996), perspectives that regard the practice of folkloristics as a distinctive field in contemporary Spanish scholarship are lacking.

The Expansion of Heritage Processes in the Spanish Context

The uses of folklore engender intense debates about key aspects of daily life in Spain and about the Spanish economy, because tourism is one of the main industries in this country. It means there are debates over the commodification of folklore, the construction of an image of the rural that is linked to increasing efforts to make rural tourism attractive, the role of local culture(s) in current economic development policies, the policies designed to “recover” traditional expressive culture, and practices, both economic and “traditional”, that emerge in the context of the expansion of “cultural tourism” (Aguilar et al. 2005; Prats 2004[1997]; Jiménez de Madariaga 2005; Pereiro Pérez & Sierra Rodríguez 2005).

Folklore used to be a topic that interested amateurs

of the study of traditions, or was what one might call “the territory of the lovers of traditions”. In the last decades, it has become a realm for the industries of culture: traditional practices are used to add “value” to local culture industries.⁶ The use of folklore and traditional practices in tourism, and in the Spanish market in general, is widespread. The relative paucity of involvement by ethnologists and anthropologists with the agents, such as tourist companies or political institutions, is worrying. The lack of ethnological theory in the concepts for managing these programs is even more worrying, since “good policy cannot be made from bad theory” (Noyes 2006: 44).

In legitimizing traditions, various logics are at play: those of the market, of politics and academics, of the media, and of civil society. If only the market logic is taken into account, then the essentializing – or the turning into spectacle – results in a “culture to be eaten” (Prats 2005: 22).

The development of a “critical approach to the processes of ‘heritage’ transformation” would seem a first step to provide professionals with the tools to avoid reproducing monolithic ways (or models) for looking at traditions. There is a demand for researchers to address folk culture, orality and expressive culture in daily life. However, public institutions typically develop public folklore programs in Spain without the aid of ethnologists or anthropologists. There is an urgent need to create multidisciplinary teams to engage in the study of the processes of heritage transformation in a critical manner, and to incorporate strong theoretical approaches in the process. At the same time, there is a need to conduct systematic and rigorous studies of folklore.

This is not just a question of rhetoric but an essential contribution that can be made to public debate. In early February 2008, in the middle of the Spanish electoral campaign, a clear answer from ethnologists was needed to counteract a proposal to make immigrants sign an “integration contract”. That contract was included as a key element of the campaign platform of the conservative Partido Popular during the 2008 electoral campaign; it followed a similar proposed contract for the integration of immigrants in France.

This proposed contract includes three elements: Immigrants will respect Spanish laws, they will learn “our” language (it is not specified which one of the four official languages this is), and they will respect “our customs”. In our view, this is an attempt to legislate “customs”.

And not only this. If this becomes a formal proposal, it would fossilize old theories that have long been discarded, which held that traditions of a “community” were defined in terms of whether the person or persons engaged in those traditions was a “legal” citizen of that community. Spain faces the challenge of constructing *convivencia*⁷ models that are based on equality; this political proposal undermines the bases for the democratic management of diversity, both practically and in theoretical terms. As the studies by the sociologist Sandra Gil Araujo indicate, policies to “integrate” reflect more about the fears of the countries that legislate it, or how they establish relationships with the “others” than about the “integratable” populations themselves (Gil Araujo 2006). Other models have been followed lately in Spain, that focus more on equality and citizenship rights. Thus, the 2007–2010 Spanish Strategic Plan for Citizenship and Integration emphasizes equality, citizenship and inter-culturality (Ministerio de Trabajo y Asuntos Sociales 2007).

Ethnologists have much to say about the political instrumentalization of customs and traditions. Yet, we feel that as professionals we need both speak up, in order to avoid reproducing outdated models, and we need to develop “emergency” ethnological tools for such situations, so that we can provide politicians with models to support democratic ways of dealing with cultural diversity (Sánchez-Carretero 2008: 16). We are experts in a field in which a major objective is the analysis of the processes of traditionalization in our societies.

Imagining the Future: Ethnology as a Meaningful Social Force

The symbolic construction of folklore remains a meaningful social force. It is given force through the dynamic processes of traditionalization, but also by existing power relationships in expressive culture

that is linked to the practices in and of daily life. Still, the role of ethnology remains unclear, so we would like to end with a list of desiderata, or a wish list, of five points for the future:

1. The ethnological imagination makes us wish for a turning point in folklore studies, one in which solid theories of the processes of traditionalization inform politicians and other social agents; a process that needs to be cautiously developed to avoid reproducing essentializing models not longer maintained in the academia. Because, as Noyes clearly pointed out, there is a danger of resurrecting as policy what has already been buried as theory (Noyes 2006: 34).

To avoid this problem, reflexive research on theories is needed, yet at the same time, we need to develop an emergency ethnology. How can these two apparently contradictory extremes be combined? A possible answer is to concentrate on theory, along with pursuing rapid-response strategies that will enable professionals in ethnology to actively transfer the type of knowledge we produce to society. To do that, we need horizontal mechanisms for distributing information that are supported by strong networks of ethnologists. One such mechanism could be provided, for instance, by H-Folk, an international listserv for folklorists and ethnologists.

2. Ethnologists will make efforts to incorporate more in-depth studies of dissonant heritage. This draws attention to the legitimization processes linked to those aspects of expressive culture that develop in traumatic or conflict-ridden situations.⁸
3. A further line of research will be developed at the intersection of ethnology, mass media and communication, and “communicability”. As Martín-Barbero points out, we not only live in societies with mass media, but our societies are mass-mediated and the media construct us (Martín-Barbero 1987). Charles Briggs created the concept of “communicability” in his analysis of hegemonic ideologies and dominant practices in communication (Briggs 2005). This is not about substituting one dominant discourse for another, but about mak-

ing “communicability” itself a subject of study. In the “integration contract” noted above, it is not a question of having access to the media in order to understand current approaches to the study of tradition, but rather to analyze the basis of the communicative process and the underlying communicable cartographies.

4. Ethnology and folklore studies should continue to address the social spaces of exclusion, injustice, trauma and death. Such research topics can be approached by treating spaces of power – international organizations (UNESCO, WIPO), political elites, the sites where heritage policies are crafted and managed – as ethnographic field sites.
5. Ethical issues will become more significant, in particular in the context of the conduct of professional ethnology.

The role of ethnology as an active social force cannot be based on dichotomies – and battles – such as public vs. academic folklore; these do not help our discipline to envision a sustainable future. Our discipline provides a very open path for exploring new ways of transferring our research to society, and new possibilities in the “performance” of academics. To paraphrase McLuhan, the medium of our research is partly the message. There is an urgent need to expand the limits of our theories while adapting our ways of delivering it, particularly in our “scholarship formats”, our own academic daily life and expressive culture, so that it becomes part of the expressive culture of current European societies. We need research projects focused on the repertoire of communicative acts that ethnologies are engaged in. Yet, we need to take them a step further, and explore our own academic performance and our own expressive culture in order to answer a fundamental question: Why are our theories about the processes of traditionalization and the construction of difference not reaching society at large?

Notes

- 1 This article is part of a research project that focuses on the role of ethnology in crisis and conflict situations (Spanish Ministry of Science and Education MEC: HUM2005-03490).
- 2 Authors who have been particularly important for tracing the history of anthropology in Spain include Moreno (1971, 1984), Prats (1982), Prat (1983), and Comelles (1984). Their analyses have served as the basis for other critical reflections (Cátedra 1991; Greenwood 1992; Prat 1992; Comelles & Prat 1992; Aguilar 1993; Aguilar, Feixa & Melis 2000; Ortiz 1996, 2004; Fernández de Rota 1996; Calvo 1997; Mairal 2004; Anta 2005).
- 3 This situation is very different than in Portugal, where early folklorists such as Adolfo Coelho or Rocha Peixoto are considered anthropologists (Pina Cabral 1991; Sánchez Gómez 1997). Analogous figures in Spain, such as Machado y Álvarez, are not considered anthropologists but “precursors” of this discipline. Ethnographic fieldwork is the distinctive element in order to be included as part of the “legitimate” history of Spanish anthropology.
- 4 Apart from a brief mention in the classic *History of Folklore in Europe* by Cocchiara (1981), we could not find any references to the Spanish context articles on the history of ethnology in Europe written in English.
- 5 Key figures in the literary approach to folklore include José Manuel Pedrosa (studies of different folklore genres and their literary sources), Diego Catalán (who co-ordinated *romancero* research of the Seminario Menéndez Pidal), and Margit Frenk (traditional lyrics).
- 6 On the topic of local industries incorporating traditional practices as added value, see the research conducted by the Andalusian Research Group on Cultural Heritage coordinated by Encarna Aguilar (Aguilar et al. 2005). In addition, the pioneering research project coordinated by Joan Frigolé Reixach entitled “Globalization and the production of locality” focuses on the strategies for constructing a sense of locality (Frigolé Reixach 2006).
- 7 See Liliana Suárez-Navaz’s monograph on models of *convivencia* (literally, “living together”) among Senegalese migrants in southern Spain (Suárez-Navaz 2004).
- 8 The term “dissonant heritage” was introduced by Tunbridge and Ashworth in 1996, in their book *Dissonant Heritage: the Management of the Past as a Resource in Conflict*. Anthropologist, Llorenç Prats uses the terms “patrimonios incómodos” or “patrimonios indeseados” (uncomfortable or undesired heritage).

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