

Current Activities

The Life Cycle

SIEF's Third Conference in Zürich, Switzerland, April 8–12, 1987

The life cycle encompasses everything, at least everything human. This was the lesson for the 300 individuals attending the Third International Congress of ethnologists and folklorists organized by SIEF (La Société Internationale d'Ethnologie et de Folklore) in Zürich last spring. Since more than 160 papers on the theme of "The Life Cycle" were presented by as many speakers, diversity was naturally the foremost characteristic of the congress. The organizers had tried to manage this diversity by dividing the themes and papers into some twenty different main topics, such as 'Different Approaches to Life Cycle'; 'The Socio-economic Basis for the Structuring of Life's Stages'; 'Age Groups'; 'Life Cycle and Religious Rituals'; 'Childhood, Education and Youth'; 'Secularization of Rituals'; 'Death and Burial'; and 'The Life Cycle as an Individual Process,' to name a few. There were ten working sections at the conference, most of which covered one or two of these topics. Hence, one had the opportunity to stay with the same section for the two and a half days that the congress lasted, or to move freely around among the sections hunting for the most interesting talks.

Of the five plenary lectures, for which had been invited the big guns in the tradition sciences and the allied disciplines of history, sociology, and anthropology, two in particular took up really major and far-reaching problem formulations. *Arthur E. Imhof* (West Germany) spoke on "Planning Full-size Life Careers. Consequences of the Increase in the Length and Certainty of our Lifespans over the Last Three Hundred Years" (*Ethnologia Europaea* XVII: 5–23). As a companion piece to this introductory talk, given by a historian, yet another, *John Gillis* (USA), gave the final lec-

ture, entitled "The Historian and the Life Cycle" (*Ethnologia Europaea* XVII: 97–106). Beginning with the situation on a 17th-century German farm, Imhof finally ended up with the present-day single-family household. He directed a certain amount of criticism toward the tradition sciences' obsession with the concept of 'life cycle'; for the majority of people, including Europeans, such a thing – due to plagues and other causes of premature death – has never existed except in modern times.

Gillis entertained similar thoughts. With a rare effort (for a historian) at making sweeping generalizations, he enumerated characteristics and model typologies of family and household situations in Europe and the United States, and the imprint these have left on the individual during three eras: 'Early Modern,' 'Modern,' and 'Contemporary' society. The points of intersection were chosen with a view to showing when new patterns had emerged. The Modern period (c1850–1950) was thus characterized as the most stable, and at the same time the most rigid of the three, with its ambitions for a 'bourgeois' family type. Gillis also noted that alternative life patterns had been overlooked in research. Referring to the conference theme, he noted how the actors in festivities such as weddings and birthdays use the events not merely to play out given roles, but instead as a means of creating relationships suitable to their taste, class and generational interests. Personally, I am somewhat skeptical of Gillis' assertion of there being similarities in the 'Early Modern' (1600–1850) and 'Contemporary' (from 1950 on) periods, that is, as periods with great 'freedom' for individuals to make choices and the resultant need for rituals at life's milestones. Perhaps we see this freedom

as being greatest in the distant past and an expectation in the present.

Sound presentations of special cases in either a historical or a more functionalistic perspective were made by *Ingeborg Weber-Kellermann* (West Germany) in "Familie als Ort von Bräuchen, Lebenszyklus und soziale Schichtung" (*Ethnologia Europaea* XVII: 107–126), a paper dealing primarily about children's roles and dress, and *Carla Bianco* (Italy) in "The Changing Role of the Kinship Network through the Life Cycle," an in-depth look at an Italian urban community and its role expectations. The lecture by *Martine Segalen* (France), "Familie et parenté: Perspectives de recherches en France" (*Ethnologia Europaea* XVII: 127–137), was a more sociological and socio-historical overview which, unfortunately, was not accessible to me because of the language barrier.

Otherwise, the conference participants had a chance to get an overview of present western and eastern European research on issues involving the life cycle. If, on the basis of small samplings and the written synopses of the talks that were available in advance, one ventured to make a comparison between the trends in the East and those in the West, the following might perhaps be said:

Research topics in eastern European countries are beginning to free themselves from studies of so-called 'traditional societies' and attention is now being paid to phenomena in various ethnic groups. The mechanisms of change are being investigated, as is the meeting with the modern age insofar as the life cycle is concerned. Certain sociologically-inspired papers concentrated solely on modern socialistic reality in general and present-day festive customs in particular.

The western European papers, in turn, presented a more fragmented picture: social change is taken for granted, and there are more attempts at dissecting occurrences and phenomena in various communities, social classes, and social and age groups in both older periods as well as the present. The theoretical level of ambition varies, but is often high, and the methodology quite diverse. The majority of the talks dealt with phenomena characteristic

of the 20th century. A certain interest in odder behavioral forms also characterized the most recent life cycle research – if this kind of designation has any validity whatsoever.

With a precisely mapped-out schedule, one could manage to hear about twenty of the approximately 160 papers. A large number of those I heard seemed to have been 'public successes'; they also appeared to be ground-breakers with respect to both themes and methodologies, thus forming a unit. Consequently, one may perhaps say that they present a picture of what the vanguard in European ethnology and folklore has to offer today. My personal leanings toward the German school of thought are evident; only a very few English contributions are included, and French thinking was, as aforesaid, impenetrable. But it is likely Germany where the greatest gains are being made, at least in ethnology.

One can begin by giving an account of the most spectacular lectures, and here *Ina-Maria Greverus* and *Utz Jeggle* should undoubtedly be mentioned. The former is the leading researcher in Frankfurt; the latter, one of the followers of Hermann Bausinger in Tübingen. In her talk, "Transformation, oder jedem sein Charisma. Die Stilisierung der totalen Verwandlung im Lebenslauf der 'geheimen Verschwörer' des New Age," Greverus started from the present-day cultural situation in the West. In many groups, and at any rate, in the disparate ones to which she is now devoting her attention, this situation is experienced as being 'meaningless': our culture does not provide answers to questions of the most important kind. The individual with the loosely defined identity which secondary socialization provides has no opportunity for giving full expression to and fulfilling the identity acquired through primary socialization. Greverus sees this phenomenon as being intimately connected to the structural lack of orientation in society – and the ensuing personal crises of orientation – that in the end are due to a surplus of technological knowledge combined with the afore-mentioned lack of meaning.

In light of this, Greverus has taken upon herself the task of studying what she calls spiritual counter-movements in the West of the

'New Age,' 'Ecology of Mind' or 'Revolutionary Mutation of Consciousness' type.

She explained more closely how the individual, through a transformational process, is made to lose his 'old self,' and with his new identity, to enter into a new social context among like-minded individuals. This salvation occurs under the influence of the spiritually charismatic leaders of these groups. For the individual his salvation means both a cultural death – i.e., his western values die – and the death of his identity – a new life commences in the new group. Greverus stressed in this process both the ensuing new social ties and the fact that the new meaning – the individual's new life – after all merely underlines western individualism.

Jeggle's contribution, "Kontinuität in der Lebensgeschichte von ehemaligen Nazis," was distressing. By going through statements made by former Nazis (in reports of various proceedings, memoirs, and the like), he has tried to ascertain how these individuals – following the collapse of Germany and the total rejection of Nazi ideology which this meant – have attempted to give their lives a logical continuity and thus maintain their identity. Jeggle has done this in order to track down the mechanism which enables people to continue living in spite of the crimes they have committed. In general what happens is that the events are not perceived of as crimes. In addition to the usual explanations, such as placing the blame on one's superiors or subordinates, there are more profound psychological mechanisms which facilitate a 'surmounting' of the actual rupture in the life cycles of these individuals brought about by the downfall of Germany. These consist of a *splitting of the identity into two parts* (the part that carried out the crimes and the other self, which still possessed a heart), or the division into an *official role and a personal identity*, as well as, finally, a gradual slide into insanity, either temporary, feigned or often, actual. With this talk, which gave rise to painful and serious discussion (among other things, some questioned whether this problem was a specifically ethnological one, feeling that ethnologists lack the psychological competence), our notice was drawn towards disconti-

nunity in life, a subject that has not been so common in life cycle research. Jeggle wished also to point out how repressed events and memories are dangerous, not only to the individual, but also as collective phenomena to 'civilization' in the long run. The only way to manage these problems is to take them up for discussion called by their proper names.

These two papers dealing with crises and ruptures in individuals' lives and life histories were supplemented by other similar analyses. Two young scholars from Frankfurt, *Ronald Lutz* and *Katharina Steffen*, chose to analyze from original points of departure the lives and life situations among homeless men and female taxi drivers, respectively. Each of these analyses was interesting enough to warrant a somewhat lengthy commentary.

The indigent or homeless men were found without exception to have a divorce and an associated unresolved male-female relationship as a basic reason for their homelessness. For the women involved, the only way out of a marital crisis was to get away from the relationship, while for the men this crisis signified the beginning of a life crisis, one often characterized by the external symptoms of unemployment, homelessness, and alcoholism. In Lutz' interviews with homeless men it was evident that they saw a reunion or a new relationship with a woman as their only salvation: only this could restore the equilibrium in their lives. According to Lutz, this behavioral and value pattern meant that their male identity was dependent upon a particular type of male-female relationship, which, judging from his interviews, was more or less a very traditional one in which the woman was the good mother who created a home and was supportive of her husband in all situations.

Lutz sees the men's homelessness and associated behavioral patterns after their marital break-ups more as a compulsory mobility, a search for a more 'defined self,' and 'intentional orientation,' that partially takes place spatially. This orientation is an attempt to overcome the prevailing situation, but according to Lutz, in its schematized form it cannot mean anything long-term for the men's identity.

Lutz' unusual point of application demon-

strates the importance of new approaches that can be used in scientifically oriented social policy-making. The Frankfurt school's emphasis on the human social and spatial fixed points can thus give ideas for new ways of looking at problems that previously were unraveled from their symptoms, rather than their root causes.

"Eine typische Erscheinung im modernen Lebenslauf: der Einbruch in die lebensgeschichtliche Kontinuität" was what Steffen called her analysis of the life situation of modern people, based on the female taxi drivers among whom she did fieldwork in Frankfurt from 1981–1983. She characterized the choice of occupation of the taxi drivers as both a cause and a consequence of a more or less dramatic turning point in their lives, such as a divorce. Such turning points generally also give rise to a need to look at and analyze one's own life more thematically than is the case with 'continuous' destinies. They thus invite research about how people view their own lives.

On the one hand, Steffen feels, one can investigate how the individual on the whole manages to understand, characterize and 'represent' her own life and also give it a clearer conceptual content; on the other, which ideas, images and interpretive models are then available. In contrast to what is the case in 'traditional society,' modern society does not necessarily offer coherent models, such as a circle, for the individual to see his/her life against or to perceive it as involved in anything beyond the individual. In the light of the freedom-seeking taxi drivers she interviewed, Steffen tried to point out new specific either tragic or consolidating – forms of continuity, growth, constancy, and return for modern human beings.

Another way of catching hold of the lives and life configuration of modern people was offered by *Andreas Kuntz-Stahl's* paper on souvenirs, "Erinnerungsgegenstände – Biographical Objects," as triggers and gateways for accounts about important life events. He discussed people's relationships with things almost from its biographical aspect and as the fabric of family traditions. The souvenirs of some 40 working-class families in Hamburg offered Kuntz-Stahl an opportunity to ascertain the existence of certain recurrent themes in the lives of the

narrators. At the same time, he saw them as a means of getting a line on individual constructions for one's family history that were also common to and typical of a social group. As well, the souvenirs offered their owners a chance for telling stories within the immediate family, a function which strengthens and stabilizes the personal existence and continuity of the individual.

If one wishes, nearly everything can lead to contemplations of structures or ruptures in the lives of individuals. This was demonstrated by *Andreas Hartmann's* interesting discussion, "Verzierungen am Lebensweg. Zur biographischen Ordnung in galanten Verhaltensanleitungen," of prescribing patterns in etiquette books from the mid-17th to mid-18th century. In these he discovered unspoken and implicit patterns for how a successful life was to be conducted. The man's active role in both relationships with women and as the determiner of his own fate was stressed, while at the same time they tell much about the everyday situations in which male members of the contemporary, literate, higher social group might find themselves and have to master. Hartmann's point of application is different than that of cultural historian Norbert Elias; on this occasion he wished to present a conception of the life of that day, with its discontinuity, segmentation and thresholds in different situations.

Proceeding from the most diverse phenomena, things and circumstances, as well as the more 'abnormal,' these German scholars attempted to also analyze more 'normal' patterns for people's lives in modern times. Concurrently, an obvious effort at giving their questions a more profound and more topical meaning than what a mere presentation of scholarly case-studies allowed, was evident. The total situation of the individual and the fixed points in his/her life appeared to be the main object of the problem formulations, rather than an attempt at just finding culturally and social-class specific patterns for how individuals go through different stages of life.

The Scandinavian talks I heard were more of the latter type. *Angela Rundqvist* (Sweden) described an interesting rite of passage among the Swedish aristocracy in relatively modern

times. This involved the presentation at the Swedish court which aristocratic young women participated in prior to their definite debut into society. Rundqvist discussed this presentation as a rite of passage that had outlived its day prior to its abolition in 1962. For the participants the ritual signified a transition into a formalized and protocol-governed adult existence, while at the same time it meant much for their future lives, in that the young women then had reached the age when they were supposed to find a husband within the narrow social group now open to them. The actual ceremony at court only meant the beginning of the social theater that was acted out in high society under the guidance of the older aristocratic ladies. By the time of its abolition more subtle forms of entry into aristocratic society had already taken its place.

A second rite of passage with bourgeois and aristocratic antecedents was analyzed by *Mats Hellspong* (Sweden). These are the pre-nuptial 'bachelor parties' held by each sex. Hellspong regarded this custom, which has become very common in Sweden during the 20th century, as a rite of separation. It was at least of this nature during the last century in the milieu in which it occurred. Its enormous popularity today gave rise to more questions from Hellspong. When weddings today are no longer celebrated so lavishly as formerly, why, he wondered, is the preceding festivity celebrated at all? He gave many reasons as an answer, including those that the need for single-gender social occasions is important as a counterbalance to our everyday lives, in which the sexes are continually meeting, and the need to play, clown around, and joke in an otherwise quite serious daily existence. The public nature of the custom and its role in the group of young people were, however, left unanalyzed.

Initiation rites among Finnish workers was discussed in turn by *Leena Rossi* (Finland), who ran down, noted and classified various forms of initiation rites which new workers in the metal, wood, and textile industries can come up against. These involved, for example, the obligation to treat one's fellow workers to something, primarily alcoholic beverages, the joke of asking the newcomer to find a non-

existent tool, the obligation of performing some completely unnecessary task, pet names for newcomers, and various forms of 'bossing' in general. She then divided these into active and passive forms, proceeding from how the newcomer was supposed to behave. Also of interest was the question of why industrial workers had gradually introduced such rites among themselves, rites which are familiar from older communities of artisans, a question which was taken up by Ingeborg Weber-Kellermann in the ensuing discussion. She herself answered it by assuming that the rites were evidence of a sense of prestige and occupational pride that industrial workers also had gradually acquired.

The only French contribution I heard, given in English, also dealt with working-class settings. *Martine Segalen* analyzed in particular wedding rituals among workers of rural origin in Nanterre, a suburb of Paris. The ostentatious wedding celebrations among this group signify, in spite of the financial sacrifices, an investment in the future and are not, as they have often been considered, a sign of cultural dominance by financially more dominant groups in society. Segalen noted a difficulty in the study of working-class culture, namely the lack of information about the rituals of the working class from the 1920s–1950s, a deficiency she regarded as stemming from ethnologists' one-sided interest in the rural population and concurrent lack of interest in urban workers.

Were one to speak of any present-day group which do and did not excite particularly great interest either in current ethnological research or at the Zürich congress, it would probably be the middle class. For a long time the working class was regarded as being traditionless. Segalen spoke, for example, about the perception of the condition of anomie which prevailed among it – and nowadays the existence of the new and increasingly more numerous middle class is presented without its cultural forms being analyzed to any appreciable extent. In Zürich one got to hear many interesting talks about deviant lifestyles, but our modern everyday existence and its turning-points were not analyzed directly, not even in the 140 talks I

missed. A perusal of their summaries shows, namely, that an overwhelming percentage of them either dealt with life cycle issues as changes in festive customs and rituals within the rural community, or among more marginal groups in urban society. Is the 'normal' European way of life among the middle class inherently uninteresting or is it simply too materialistic to capture ethnologists' interest? In life cycle research there should be much to explore, even if one does not choose visible rituals as a point of departure. Starting with material things, one could analyze, as did Andreas Kuntz-Stahl and John Gillis, what the first apartment, town-house and motorboat, as well as festivities such as graduation parties and 50- and 60-year birthday celebrations, actually represent. This notwithstanding, the approach was very refreshing in many of the papers. As

an anthropologist friend said to me, one would almost not believe that this was ethnology!

The congress arrangements were perfect. Both the lecture format and the occasions for socializing, such as a buffet meal (for which credit goes to Professor Arnold Niederer and his wife), provided the best imaginable returns for the participants. The organizers of this mammoth congress, Professor Nils-Arvid Bringéus, Secretary General Ulla Brück, Professor Poul Hugger, Professor Niederer and Dr. Ueli Gyr, deserve much appreciation.

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