

## The Concept of "Folk" in Sigurd Erixon's Ethnological Theory

AS IS WELL KNOWN, Sigurd Erixon is the chief promoter of the expansion of the terms "folklore" and "folklife research" as synonyms of regional European ethnology<sup>1</sup>. In particular the latter term is associated with his name. It is true that, as pointed out by Erixon himself, the word "folklife" was used in Sweden more than hundred years ago<sup>2</sup>, and that "folklife research" was coined fifty years ago by Erixon's countryfellow Sven Lampa<sup>3</sup>. In modern context, however, Erixon has launched both these terms and given them their conceptual foundation.

In view of this fact it is of common interest to know to what extent this frequent use of the prefix "folk" corresponds to a definite idea of the import of this word. In other words, is there a conscious use of the syllable "folk", or has this word simply been taken over with the forms "folklore" and "folklife research"? There can scarcely be any doubt but that the latter term was used by Erixon as a good equivalent of German "Volkskunde". The term "folklore", originally British as we know, has been reserved for French readers and should communicate the same idea as the Swedish and English "folklife research"<sup>4</sup>.

It is always hazardous to comment upon a scholar's theories and concepts as long as he is still developing them. As everyone knows, this is the case with the indefatigable Sigurd Erixon — in spite of his eighty years he is still creating new ideas, new views. Perhaps more than before, for the last two decades of his life have been dedicated to formulating a theoretical framework, a concise apprehension of the dimensions of his folklife research. The reviewer of Erixon's concept of "folk" runs the risk that, in the future, this concept will be further elucidated by its true expounder. The reviewer's exposition might also be criticized and corrected by the latter — as was recently the case in a similar issue<sup>5</sup>. Still, a preliminary attempt will be made here to define Erixon's position in regard to the concept of "folk".

In one of his latest articles Erixon observes that the term "folklife" is composed of the words "folk" and "life". He continues: "These three, folk, life and folklife, constitute key concepts within this science and have, as such, had importance far ahead of the time when with us folklife research emerged as an independent science"<sup>6</sup>. Erixon then makes a retrospective survey, but, it is interesting to note that he pays close attention only to "life" and "folklife", whereas the third concept, "folk", receives no attention at all. Is this omission due to oversight? This could scarcely be the case. It is rather more probable that Erixon considers the other two words more important. In particular he stresses the word "life" which, as observant readers of Erixon's writings are well aware of, has an especial fascination for him<sup>7</sup>. One of his

1. Cf. S. Erixon, *Folk-life Research in Our Time: from a Swedish Point of View*. *Gwerin* (Cardiff), 3 (1962), pp. 271 ff.; *Ethnologie régionale ou folklore. Laos*, (Stockholm), 1 (1951), pp. 9 ff.

2. S. Erixon, *Folklivsforskningens framväxt*. *Folk-Liv* (Stockholm), 26-27 (1962-63), p. 66.

3. S. Erixon, *Benämningen på Sven Lampas docentur och den svenska folklivsforskningen*. In: *Kulturspeglingar, Studier tillägnade Sam Owen Jansson*. Stockholm, 1966, pp. 67 ff.

4. S. Erixon, *Ethnologie régionale ou folklore*, p. 17.

5. S. Erixon, *Termen "kulturfixering" och dess användbarhet*. *Folk-Liv*, 30, (1966), pp. 16 ff.

6. S. Erixon, *Folklivsforskningens framväxt*, p. 64.

7. In his preface to the first volume of *Folk-Liv* Erixon lays down that the name of the paper marks a principal attitude, and that the central core of folklife is way of life. [*Folk-Liv*, 1 (1937), p. 10.]

publication series is, as a matter of fact, termed "Liv och folkkultur" (life and folk culture). "Life" is here more emphasized than "folk".

If now Erixon does not give prominence to the concept of "folk", this is quite in line with his summary interpretation of this concept in different connections. Repeatedly he points out that "the particle 'folk' in folklife research need not imply anything but that we have to do with group researches" <sup>8</sup>. Recently he explained that folklife "means that part of life which is due to social transmission and contact. In other words, folklife is social life" <sup>9</sup>. This is clear enough: the prefix "folk" stands for "group", "collectivity". Incidentally, this definition of the concept comes close to the most common meaning of the word in the English, German and Swedish languages <sup>10</sup>. It offers no problems.

However, these quotations do not give the whole truth. There is another, and complicating dimension in Erixon's formulations of the concept. Thus, he refers in several works to the "folk" as the typical and characteristic quality in the people, "the traditional and common basic stratum in every human being within the cultural communion to which he belongs" <sup>11</sup>. He makes here a connection with Spamer's concept of *vulgus* <sup>12</sup>. It is evident that Spamer has influenced Erixon's thinking on the subject, but Erixon places his emphasis differently. Peuckert and Lauffer interpret Erixon's position in the following way: "Volk ist ganz einfach dasselbe wie Gruppe, entweder lokale oder auf andere Art abgegrenzte Einheit oder in weiterem Sinne Volksgemeinschaft" <sup>13</sup>. It seems to me that Erixon has given a more elegant definition when he states that the prefix "folk" in folklife research indicates that this discipline deals with analyses of groups with certain definite qualities <sup>14</sup>.

ERIXON HAS DWELT MORE EXTENSIVELY on the nature of these qualities in his discussion of Redfield's theory of a dichotomy between "folk society" and "urban society" <sup>15</sup>. As is well known Redfield ascribed to a folk society such characteristics as homogeneity, isolation, illiteracy, group solidarity, self-sufficient economy, etc. Erixon accepts this description only half-heartedly, and prefers to label such a society not "popular", but "primitively popular". In this connection he rejects Redfield's idea that urban society is the opposite of folk society. He argues that in Europe at least the qualities of the latter also pertain to many urban population groups <sup>16</sup>. The discussions which took place between Erixon and Redfield in Stock-

8. S. Erixon, An Introduction to Folklife Research or Nordic Ethnology. *Folk-liv*, 14-15 (1950-51), p. 7. Cf. S. Erixon, Studies of Social Groups and Occupations. *Laos*, 2 (1952), pp. 33 ff.

9. S. Erixon, European Ethnology in Our Time. *Ethnologia Europaea*, 1 (1967), p. 7.

10. Cf. e.g. J. A. H. Murray (ed.), *A new English Dictionary on Historical Principles*. Oxford, 1901. 4:1, pp. 389 f., 661 f.; H. C. Wyld, *The Universal Dictionary of the English Language*. 2nd ed. London, 1936, p. 439; J. and W. Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*. Leipzig, 1951. Vol. 12:2, pp. 454 ff.; E. Hellquist, *Svensk etymologisk ordbok*. 3rd ed. Malmö, 1948. Vol. 1, p. 230.

11. S. Erixon, Nyorienteringar inom folklivsforskningen. *Folk-Liv*, 12-13, (1948-49), pp. 5 ff.

12. Cf. S. Erixon, *Svenskt folkliv*. Uppsala, 1938, pp. 280 ff.; Regional European Ethnology. *Folk-Liv*, 1 (1937), p. 91.

13. W. E. Peuckert and O. Lauffer, *Volkskunde: Quellen und Forschungen seit 1930*. Bern, 1951, p. 15.

14. Unpublished lectures by Sigurd Erixon. October, 1951.

15. R. Redfield, The Folk Society. *American Journal of Sociology*, 52 (1947), pp. 293 ff.

16. S. Erixon, *An Introduction to Folklife Research*, p. 7.

holm in 1953 made it quite evident that whereas Erixon referred to actual, empirical societies Redfield had in view models of societies, ideal types<sup>17</sup>.

What, then, are the "folk" qualities which Erixon assigns to folk societies? In order to achieve a more substantial point of departure he proceeds from the concept of "folk culture", and develops his views as follows: "The first condition necessary for a cultural element to be designed as popular is that it should occur among the people as a thing incorporated into its life, inherited, learnt and really assimilated, consequently, it must not be anything external or more or less accidental. In order to fulfil these conditions it must occur fairly frequently within a group or a society and be regularly adopted into its culture. In other words, it should characterize the group or, if it is a whole society, the families that belong to it... Folk culture is, in fact, the same thing as living traditional culture"<sup>18</sup>. As Erixon adds, conditions of this kind may be fulfilled by urban as well as by rural elements.

As a further characteristic trait of folk culture Erixon mentions its immobility. Folk culture, he says, "is fundamentally stationary and not very active with regard to distribution and migration. Having survived one or more generations it will become more firmly anchored, which does not prevent it from spreading and being transferred to other groups and areas, but this is to some extent contrary to its nature"<sup>19</sup>. From this point of view the opposite of the folk culture is the "mobile culture", which is represented as non-stationary and continually spreading. It is an expression of the social and cultural élite.

From this scrutiny of his definitions of related concepts — folk society, folk culture — it appears, then, that the concept of "folk" according to Sigurd Erixon comprehends the notion of a traditionalistic, stationary, social group. He seems to convey this idea more directly in one of his later papers: "The old term 'folk' has gradually come to be emphasized in a particular way. In some countries a more special significance has been read into the word, which I do not here propose to discuss. I myself regard the word 'folk' as marking the fact that it is a matter of a science with a sociological trend; but at the same time I consider that as a scientific term the word applies to human groups having a certain stability due to traditional solidarity or to some sort of isolation or conscious or unconscious defensive attitudes to the outside world"<sup>20</sup>. Although tradition and traditionalism are not explicitly expressed in this statement ("traditional solidarity" stresses solidarity rather than tradition) there is no doubt that they are implied.

Our introductory question if Erixon's use of the word "folk" corresponds to a definite interpretation of this term can thus be answered in the affirmative. It does not play a prominent part in his writing, for reasons already indicated. As part of other concepts like folklore, folklife, folk culture it has, on the other hand, been of basic importance to his body of theories.

17. Cf. also Å. Hultkrantz, *General Ethnological Concepts. International Dictionary of Regional European Ethnology and Folklore*. Vol. 1. Copenhagen, 1960, pp. 130, 131; H. Möller, *Gemeinschaft, Folk Society und das Problem der "kleinen Gemeinde"*. *Folk-Liv*, 28-29 (1964-65), p. 138.

18. S. Erixon, *An Introduction to Folklife Research*, pp. 7 f.

19. *Ibidem*, p. 8.

20. S. Erixon, *Folk-life Research in Our Time*, p. 282.