



K O N I N K L I J K E N E D E R L A N D S E
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A critical comment on the SIEF conference 'Among Others'

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THE 7TH SIEF CONGRESS WAS HOSTED BY
L'UNIVERSITÉ DE PROVENCE IN MARSEILLE
(PHOTO: THEO MEDER)

tourism and museum representation.

In 35 workshops or ateliers running in parallel sessions at the St. Charles Campus of the Université de Provence, the conference theme and sub-themes were explored from various thematic perspectives.

The conference languages were English and French. For the plenary papers, simultaneous translation was available via headphones – a first for our organization and the informal response was quite positive. The plenary speakers had been asked to supply their papers a short while ahead of time, unfortunately they did not all oblige which made for rather insanely difficult work for the translators. We were particularly pleased with the sessions where both languages were used, and where discussions, mixing both languages, could proceed at a high level. A book exhibit and an art installation could be continuously enjoyed in the Central Meeting and Registration area. A final banquet was held near the new port. On the last day, optional excursions were organized and guided very competently by the researchers from the Musée itself (a tour of the port, a tour of the old industrial sectors of Marseille, and a tour of the Camargue region with its Félibrige past).

The local organization struggled with numerous problems. SIEF had been invited to Marseille by the transforming Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaire which is in the process of moving itself from Paris to Marseille where it will fully open in 2009 as the Musée des Civilisations d'Europe et de la Méditerranée. The initially strong political support for the endeavour changed, as the mayor of Marseille changed and thus it was extremely difficult for the French colleagues to raise sufficient funds. With assistance from the Université d'Aix en

Provence as well as moneys from regional organizations, a venue for the congress could nonetheless be found and could be covered. Despite the difficulties in organizing the event, the response of the participants was very positive. Denis Chevalier at the Musée will edit a volume of conference proceedings within a year. It will contain the plenary papers as well as brief summaries from the workshop organizers about each of the 35 workshops held.

Regina Bendix, Göttingen

5. A CRITICAL COMMENT ON THE SIEF CONFERENCE 'AMONG OTHERS'.

On every science conference there is corridor chat where critical remarks can be heard, and the SIEF meeting in Marseille made no exception to that; but first of all, it needs to be stressed that the meeting as a whole can certainly be called a success, thanks to the many presentations and that very same corridor chat.

As far as the subject of the conference is concerned, a title like 'Among Others' is sufficiently broad and general to allow the presentation of a wide range of scientific research. Less obvious is why in the subtitle the 'European encounters and conflicts' are further specified and seemingly narrowed down to Mediterranean societies – but in practice, this did not bother the various participants much.

Although now and again, the organization of the conference relied on last minute improvisation, most of the time

things went well. Main nuisance was that the rescheduling of papers was not always announced on time.

One of the surprising features on this conference was the live headphone translation of all plenary events from French to English and vice versa. The student interpreters did their very best, although not every one of them seemed to be prepared for ethnological jargon.

During the plenary meetings there were some excellent presentations, for instance by Daniel Miller on the subject of material studies in the private sphere, and by Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett on the changing role of museums in contemporary society.

By lack of theoretical profoundness, some of the other plenary papers seemed more suitable for presentation in one of the theme sessions, whereas - on the other hand - some papers in the theme sessions turned out to be fit for plenary presentation.

It was frustrating to experience that some of the participants in the theme sessions did not master the English or French language well enough to present and defend a comprehensible paper. If presentation, paper and abstract repeatedly do not match a certain scientific standard, the organization should be more strict in rejecting certain contributions. The same goes for those presentations that seem to have no other objective than to propagate some regional or national culture.

The quality of the theme sessions differed notably. For instance, the excellent session on 'The Testimony of Bones' generated both thorough presentations and lively discussions. The theme of 'Miscellany', on the other hand, provided exactly what one would expect with such a sad title: leftovers on the subject of Music and Oral Literature, that did not fit in elsewhere.

One of the most interesting themes proved to be 'Habits of Violence within and among Cultures': the sessions on 'Intra and intercultural violence' and 'Habits of violence within and among cultures' presented a panorama of tensions, discord and aggression, based on political, religious, ethnic and cultural differences. Even gender-specific differences were dealt with, especially in the Norwegian paper on girls' violence by Sidsel Natland. Another Norwegian contribution worth mentioning was the one by Kari Telste on urban violence and the news media - a comparative study on the representation of non-ethnic and immigrant street gang violence in the 1950s and today.

It was striking to see that in a few other presentations on the subject of human and cultural controversy, researchers were not always able to maintain their professional

distance and expressed their sympathy for one of the contending parties.

Whereas cultural and ethnic controversy was a core theme on the conference, a less violent topic like tourism provided for some notable papers on the subject of identity and authenticity; Ueli Gyr, for instance, discussed Swiss folklore on the tourist Nightboat of Luzern, and Tok Thompson treated the return of the leprechaun in the Republic of Ireland.

Since the SIEF has the ambition to be the foremost international organization of ethnologists and folklorists, what the conferences need is tight scheduling, a more critical selection of papers and participants, perhaps a little less parallel sessions and more theme-specific workgroups. For that matter, the society could do with a scientific, peer-reviewed SIEF journal as well.

Theo Meder, Amsterdam

6. NEW WORKING GROUP: THE RITUAL YEAR

Report on the inaugural meeting held in the Conference Room, Celtic and Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh, 27 George Square, Edinburgh, Scotland, UK, on Sunday, 11 July 2004, at 10 am. The meeting followed a conference of the Traditional Cosmology Society on 'The Ritual Year' organised by Dr Aude Le Borgne, which had been held on 7-11 July. Some members of that conference who were interested in the new working group were unable to attend the meeting but eight members were present.

The meeting was convened by Dr Emily Lyle (e.lyle@ed.ac.uk) who read a message of welcome from the President of SIEF, Professor Regina Bendix, and opened the discussion. It was agreed that the proposer and seconders of the proposal should all be invited to be members of the committee and Dr Emily Lyle, the proposer, was elected President. Dr Irina Sedakova of the Russian Academy of Sciences (ised@ropnet.ru) was elected Secretary and Dr Aude Le Borgne of the University of Edinburgh (Aude.LeBorgne@ed.ac.uk) was elected Treasurer. Dr Terry Gunnell of the University of Iceland, Professor Patricia Lysaght of University College, Dublin, and Dr George Mifsud-Chircop of the University of Malta, were invited to join the committee if they wished.