The Borders of Custom

SUMMARY

The article is devoted to throwing light upon the current status of the ethnological term, custom. A term which has outlived various stages of the development of ethnological science, always remaining one of the central features of the subject, "custom" today contains in miniature, the history of ethnology. The model text for this discourse is the discussion concerning the term, along with accompanying papers, which brought together authorities in this field in Zagreb in 1987. That text represents a document on the status of the term in contemporary ethnology, reflecting the consequences of differing scientific approaches and methodology, as well as epistemological stages. Certain contradictions, overlapping of the term custom with other major ethnological terms (culture, tradition, peoples, rites etc.), allied with the variability of its operative value, have resulted in a quandary. Does this term belong in the "bric-a-brac of ethnological..."
history", or does it continue to retain the status of one of its basic
terms? This radical dilemma requires that our discussion establish
the level of doubt shaking the foundations of the scientific term,
custom. The first level is that of definition which endeavours to
solve the problem by coming to agreement, and adoption of one
of the definitions of the term. However, the problem of definition
leads very quickly to a new problem level, expressed as the
irreconcilability of particular scientific traditions (the European,
the American, and the Soviet). All at once, the problem of
comprehension of "custom", manifests itself as the problem of
comprehending the objectives and subjects of ethnological
science in its entirety. The most serious form of doubt is
expressed in the question of whether custom exists at all as a
cultural phenomenon, or it is merely an "ethnological mirage", an
aspiration of a branch of science to arrange culture according to
the requirements of its discourse. The critical potential of the
levels of the problem is utilised in the discussion as an
opportunity, through destructuring of one term, to outline the
main paths of development of ethnology, from a descriptive
science to one of discourse. The question of the efficacy of the
term is not merely the question of its empirical value, but also
that of its scientific and historical potential, the possibility of
ensuring the identity of ethnology both within the system of
humanities, and within the culture to which it is considered
"responsible". The openness of Yugoslavian ethnology towards
the influences of various scientific traditions and innovations,
has brought a richness of interpretation and a variety of scientific
terms, but, at the same time, a potpourri of epistemological
problems which "collide" within its discourse. One of the major
questions in the science of culture, and that is the very question
of the relation of scientific language with the language (or
languages) of the culture, will thus be put from two diametrically
different positions - conditionally, they may be referred to as the
position of anthropology as a science dealing with the world, and
the position of ethnology, as a science dealing with a people.

(Translated by Nina H. Antoljak)