

FOLKLORE ON DISPLAY: THE AUTHENTICITY DEBATE REVISITED

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Debates on authenticity are at the core of both culture studies and tourism research. Tourists often seem to embrace artificial displays, reconstructions and commercial events with enthusiasm. Folklore displays continue showing the same colourful versions of an idealised past year after year. Narratives, frozen in time, are re-enacted for paying customers. But might this version of the past get outdated? Or, should folklore displays be preserved in original form, since how we present ourselves and revive our traditions is just as much our heritage as our traditions once were when they were part of everyday life?

Keywords: authenticity, tourism, displaying the past, revising the past

INTRODUCTION

Point of departure in this essay is an advertisement leaflet for a folklore show. I got this leaflet four years ago at Bergen tourist information, while doing research for a lecture on tourism. The cover photo is of a young blond boy, seemingly dancing with two girls, one in each hand. Next to them an older man plays a fiddle. They all wear Norwegian national costumes. "Have you ever been to a country wedding?" the leaflet asks. It continues: "Fana Folklore invites you to one in a simplified form, it is true, yet with the customs and usages which over the centuries have become part of the life in Fana".

My aim in this paper is to address popular tales of the past, the polished tales aimed at tourists. How might we perceive and address such tales today? And how can we relate them to the authenticity debate? Authenticity is a core subject in ethnology, folklore studies and in the field of tourism research. The word authenticity is derived from the Greek "authentēs" and has the



*This picture is the front of leaflet advertising a folklore show near Bergen, Norway.
Photo: Fana Folklore.*

double meaning of authority and original. The word hereby has connotations towards something real, a version that has a premier place in front of other versions, the very first version indeed. Different connotations of the word have been stressed at different occasions. My understanding corresponds with



the folklorist Regina Bendix understanding and use of the term in her book *Authenticity – The formation of Folklore Studies*, that was published in 1997. Bendix suggests that the crucial question is not the question of what really is authentic, more important is who needs authenticity and why, as well as how authenticity has been used by different groups (1997:21). She writes:

The quest for authenticity is a peculiar longing, at once modern and antimodern. It is oriented toward the recovery of an essence whose loss has been realized only through modernity, and whose recovery is feasible only through methods and sentiments created in modernity (Bendix 1997:8).

In the reflexive spirit of late modernity Bendix pursue the concept of authenticity back through the discipline of folklore studies. The concept has had a prominent position, both in folklore studies and ethnology, and has been both an object of investigation and a legitimating idea for the birth and up keeping of our fields. For our ancestors in research it was evident that folk culture had to be found in the primitive *and* in the past. The task of the scholars became to collect, document and analyse the people's voice from the past, and this often involved a race against time, before the voices became quiet, the memories got lost, the artefacts got destroyed and the traditions died.

For something to qualify as authentic tradition it had to be passed on from generation to generation in a vertical process. Scholars discussed how many generations were necessary for the tradition to be regarded authentic. The ideal was a process of transmission under very stable conditions, so that the tradition did not get disturbed – change was not looked mildly upon. The Norwegian folklorist Anne Eriksen writes about this in an essay on national heritage. She says that when scholars found such ideal undisturbed conditions, as they thought they did on remote farms on the Norwegian countryside, they assumed that what they found was an unbroken chain of traditions from the Middle Ages, still alive and kicking, preserved and unharmed more or less through the centuries. And the proud Norwegian farmer became someone much bigger than himself; he was the heir of the free Norwegian citizen of the Middle Ages. The farmer got this status because he had lived his life on an ancestral farm, untouched by Danish government and other miseries, faithful to his land, his relatives and his traditions. Hence, he was perceived as more or less being unchanged through all times (Eriksen 1993:19).



The inland farmer and our peasant culture became very important in the reconstruction of Norwegian identity during the 18th century. We needed to reconstruct and create this sense of Norwegian culture and pride, since we for centuries had been under Swedish or Danish government. Not the common poor coastal farmer, but the proud, wealthy inland farmer with his colourful costumes, crafts and well-kept farmhouses became our most favoured tool. The tale of the proud farmer was constructed in a period when both common people and scholars agreed upon the need to separate authentic traditions from fake ones. In the century from approximately 1850 to 1950 a paradigm of dichotomies ruled culture, and scholars decided whether traditions were alive, dead or alternatively, possible to revitalize. From the 1970 and onwards scholars in folklore studies and ethnology have debated, evaluated and abandoned many of the constituting ideas of our fields. Both in Europe and in the States a more process oriented, reflexive stance has come to dominate. Static, text oriented perspectives has had to give in to more process and performance-oriented perspectives, and *context* has become a key term. It is now essential to place traditions in social life and to see tradition as a process where experience is traditionalised, as folklorist Torunn Selberg will claim. In an essay from 2002 she writes:

With a view upon tradition as a symbolic construction in present time a notion of true and false expressions of culture becomes irrelevant. Rather, revitalising of older traditions and modern constructions of traditions are seen as significant in the construction and maintaining of cultural identity (2002:13, my translation).

This is a reflexive position. The researchers of our time does not look for authenticity in the past, but on how individuals and groups use the past to create something they perceive as meaningful, valuable and useful. Authenticity is perceived as a quality inherent in this process. Hence, the late modern researchers glance is a glance *at* the retrospective glance.

AUTHENTICITY IN TOURISM RESEARCH

Tourism research is an interdisciplinary field where culture studies are an important contributor. One authority is Dean MacCannel. His book "The Tourist. A new theory of the leisure class" was published in 1976. MacCannel claims





that "for moderns, reality and authenticity are thought to be elsewhere: in other historical periods and other cultures, in purer, simpler lifestyles" (MacCannel 1999:3). Man is governed by nostalgia, a longing for what is out of reach, both in time and space. Such nostalgia is also the topic in Orvar Löfgrens book "On holiday – a history of vacationing" (1999). Since the beginning of mass tourism in the mid 18th century tourists have responded to places by claiming that the last time they were there everything was different:

There is a constant nostalgia for an earlier "then", which tends to move around in time, as virginity is made and remade in different generational and social experiences of "the local". In the old days, back in the 1850s or 1980s, "when we first came here, there wasn't even a tourist/hotel/airport/disco" or "life was so very different then" (Löfgren 1999:184).

The tourist mourn over what is lost when the tourist industry marches ahead – as modern man mourns what is lost in the wake of progress. A way to revive or re-experience features from the past is through *staging* the past. Behind such staging is the notion of the narratives of the past being important and significant for us today. But which versions of the past that is chosen, why, and how it is done, vary. Is the authentic available for the tourist at all? Authentic everyday-life certainly is available, wherever you go people go to work, eat, follow their children to school and clean their houses. But tourists seldom crave the ordinary and predictable¹, they prefer the spectacular, surprising and amusing. Hence, some events are more ideal than others. Festivals are a great example. They always attract tourists, but even more so if they are perceived as initiated by people themselves, and not commercially created by the tourist industry. Money is a factor that creates distance – authenticity has something to do with mutuality and intimacy. Folklorist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett discuss such matters in her book

Live displays, whether re-creations of daily activities or staged as formal performances, also create the illusion that the activities you

¹ In contradiction to this, agrotourism is a search for everyday life at a farm. Still, modern industrialised farm life is never the aim of such tourism. We have not heard of rooms for rent above a 1000 square meter barn for caged chicken. Again, what is sought for is the authentic represented through a version of *past* farm life.



watch are being done rather than represented, a practice that creates the effect of authenticity, or realness. The impression is one of unmediated encounter (1998:55).

Hence, the staged experience can give the impression of being a direct meeting. It is how the experience is perceived that is the most important, and the tourists get an intense experience when they get to participate when the locals themselves have strong and intense experiences.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett writes; "Public and spectacular, festivals have the practical advantage of offering in a concentrated form, at a designated time and place, what the tourist would otherwise search out in the diffuseness of everyday life, with no guarantee of ever finding it" (1998:59).

In our modern experience society, there is no doubt that experiences can be made into commodities. Knowledge of how to produce experience products as well as the need for such products is on the curriculum for students in marketing, business and tourism studies – no business sell dreams and expectations of future experiences in such an extensive manner as the tourism industry, hence it is no coincidence that discussions of authenticity are so common both among tourists and scholars. Let me return to Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett:

The issue of authenticity has stimulated much of the writing on tourism, which has been highly critical of tourists and tourist attractions. Daniel Boorstin's pseudo-events, Richard Doorson's fakelore, and MacCannel's staged authenticity all characterize tourism in ways that both idealize and take for granted notions of authenticity and culture. Alternative suggestions suggest that all cultures are invented, not just tourist attractions, and that authenticity is not given in the event but is a social construction (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1992: 303).

But even if we as scholars might agree upon authenticity as well as traditions being socially constructed in a given context, people are not necessarily so post-modern and process oriented. For some individuals and groups, essential ideas of authenticity and the idea that it is possible to rate an experience on a scale from true to false might quite relevant. Such people will claim that cultures and places need to be visited before they get ruined or disappear completely, or, worst of all, before they get destroyed by other



tourists. We see a parallel among many modern tourists and our ancestor, the running folklorist from the past, fighting his worst enemy: time. But even if the modern tourist might seem old-fashioned, the very explicit way tourists discuss, criticise or feel the need to justify their own role is, if not new, so at least more prominent and explicit today than in earlier times.

At this point I will like to return to our picture of Fana Folklore. This folklore display is an example of a staged tourist experience, a commercial event based upon particular, much favoured elements from a past constructed in a particular context. We see "real" peasant furniture, and the fiddler plays the Hardanger fiddle, the most Norwegian instrument of all. The baskets that were one used for carrying food to weddings are now decorating the wall. The boy has our most famous national costume on: The Hardanger costume. The costume is shown here as it has been since it was frozen in time during the national romantic period. This narrative of folklore and folk life, this vision of a proud past, appears to be totally timeless. If I had not known when the picture was taken, I could hardly have guessed it. I would have to assume the photo is from after the fifties, since it is a colour photo. I would probably guess it is not brand new, since the fiddler's glasses are somewhat old-fashioned, and the picture quality is not up to digital standard. But the reason why I know when the picture is taken is not my skills at analysing photos, but rather that the boy in the picture is my older brother, born in 1959. Fana is the modern middleclass suburban area outside Bergen where I grew up. Hence, from my brother's childhood in the mid sixties and until today, the very same photo has been used in advertising this event. There has been *no need* to change the photo, since the story has not changed. All through his life my brother has contributed in a particular staging of *what it is to be Norwegian*.

CONCLUSION

Folklore displays continue showing the same colourful versions of an idealised past year after year. Narratives, frozen in time, are re-enacted for paying customers. But might this version of the past get outdated? It can – surely it can. When it comes to Fana Folklore, the story is outdated for at least two reasons. First: we do not *need* this story to give us national self-esteem anymore. Oil and our reputation as a welfare state give us self-esteem



today. Our minority complex of being Sweden and Denmark's little brother is also buried in the past. Today Swedes come to us for employment, and we buy summerhouses in their old-fashioned countryside. Further: the audience will not be able to read and understand this story anymore. Only scholars and old people have enough contextual knowledge to fully interpret the symbolic and ethnographic significance of all the items and acts included.

Still, this display has some significance. Not for showing the world who we are today, but for showing the world how we wanted to display ourselves 50 years ago. Such displays continue though their context is gone, as such displays do around the world. Everybody shows of whom they used to want to be. Not many show tourists who they want to be *today* – maybe we do not know. My question then becomes: should such displays be conserved, in the same manner as some material collections and displays in museums are? Not because they accidentally are able to meet contemporary demands, but rather because they say something important about the past; something about who *used to* produce the stories, who *used to* be the audience, and what stories were legitimate *then*, educational *then*, exiting *then*, authentic *then*. People change, and the demands of their contemporary context change, and as a consequence their history change as well. But in a reflexive, post-modern era, one of our tasks is to acknowledge the pasts from the past. And, possibly, rather than dismiss them as unauthentic, we can embrace them as meta-stories, a reflexive stance many post-modern tourists are perfectly able to take.

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FOLKLOR U PRIKAZIMA: JOŠ MALO O AUTENTIČNOSTI

Sažetak

Brošuru sa slikom mladih ljudi koji plešu, kojom se reklamirao folklorni festival u Fani u Norveškoj, pronašla sam 2002. godine. Kako možemo povezati popularne priče iz prošlosti s poznatom raspravom o autentičnosti? Osnovno je pitanje kome treba autentičnost i zašto te kako su različite skupine u našem društvu koristile tu autentičnost. Našim istraživačkim precima bilo je samo po sebi razumljivo da će autentičnu narodnu kulturu pronaći u primitivnom i u prošlosti. U Norveškoj su seljaci iz unutrašnjosti i ruralna kultura postali izuzetno važni za rekonstrukciju identiteta tijekom 18. stoljeća. Morali smo rekonstruirati i stvoriti osjećaj norveške kulture i ponosa, jer smo stoljećima bili pod švedskom ili danskom vlašću. Ponosni norveški seljak prerastao je samoga sebe; postao je nasljednikom slobodnog norveškog građanina iz srednjega vijeka.

Od 1970-ih do danas folkloristi i etnolozi su analizirali, procjenjivali i odbacivali mnoge značajne postavke iz našega područja i danas je dominantan refleksivan pristup koji je usmjeren na pojedine procese. Istraživači našega vremena ne traže autentičnost u prošlosti, već promatraju kako pojedinci i skupine koriste prošlost kako bi stvorili nešto što smatraju značajnim, vrijednim i korisnim. Autentičnost se objašnjava kao kvaliteta koja je imanentna tom procesu.

Rasprava o autentičnosti je važna i u istraživanju turizma. Ali iako se mi znanstvenici slažemo da su autentičnost i tradicija društveno stvorene u određenom kontekstu, ljudi nisu nužno sami toliko postmoderni niti su usmjereni na društvene procese. Neki turisti će tvrditi da se kulture i mjesta moraju posjećivati dok se u potpunosti ne unište ili ne nestanu, te tvrdoglavo



tragaju za autentičnim. Stoga postoji paralela između modernih turista i naših istraživačkih predaka: i jedni i drugi trče za vremenom.

Prikaz folkloru u Fani izgleda kao da je zamrznut u razdoblju nacionalnog romantičarskog pokreta. Ali ja znam kada je fotografija nastala, jer je na njoj moj stariji brat, rođen 1959. godine. Fana je moderno predgrađe pripadnika srednje klase u kojem sam odrasla. Tijekom cijelog svog života, moj brat je sudjelovao u uprizorenju onoga *što znači biti Norvežaninom*. Nije bilo *potrebe* mijenjati fotografiju tijekom svih tih godina jednostavno zato jer se priča nije promijenila.

Stoga se naracija o idealiziranoj prošlosti obnavlja za svakoga tko želi platiti. Ali mi ne trebamo takvu priču da nam pruži osjećaj nacionalnog ponosa. Nafta i reputacija zemlje visokoga standarda sasvim su nam dovoljne i izgubili smo svoje manjinske komplekse. A publika ionako više nije u mogućnosti iščitati i razumjeti tu priču jer im nedostaje kontekstualizirano znanje koje bi im omogućilo da interpretiraju simboličnu i etnografsku važnost objekata i postupaka koji su dio priče. Ipak, takav prikaz ima svoju važnost. Ne kako bi pokazao svijetu tko smo mi danas, već kako bi pokazao svijetu kakvima smo se željeli prikazati prije pedeset ili stopedeset godina. A u našem refleksivnom, postmodernom dobu, naš zadatak je ponekad jednostavno priznati utjecaje iz prošlosti.

Ključne riječi: autentičnost, turizam, prikazi prošlosti, preispitivanje prošlosti

