

Inaugural Editorial

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This journal is intended for scholars, practitioners, readers and aficionados of traditional arts around the globe. In 2017, our intention as editors is to set in motion new discussions, more robust and interdisciplinary discourse, considered and contentious debate, fascinating detail, theoretical challenges and intellectual conversation, drawing on innovative and original research around traditional music, dance, drama, oral narrative and crafts in the context of contemporary society. We define the traditional arts as artistic and creative practices that function as a marker of identity for a particular cultural group and that are believed to have grown out of their oral tradition or that have been newly created using characteristics derived from oral tradition. In so doing, we continue the emphasis on oral transmission (or the somatic or embodied conceptions of that process) that emerges from modernity, but we seek to redirect the focus towards the relationship between these artistic practices and the particular nature of social belonging and identity in a mass mediated and rapidly changing contemporary world.

There has been a long-held but under-acknowledged inclination among researchers from ethnomusicology, folklore, ethnochoreology, ethnology, musicology and those from other related disciplines, such as anthropology, social history, linguistics, ballad studies, cultural geography, cultural sociology, and among others who share our interest and focus of study on the ‘traditional arts’, to celebrate and focus upon *oldness* as the root of tradition’s significance. Or as Bill Ivey more eloquently put it in his 2007 presidential address to the American Folklore Society, ‘antimodernism is a central motivating engine that runs through all of folklore’ (Ivey 2011, 11). We have, however, recently witnessed a fundamental shift, increasingly apparent in research across those aforementioned disciplines, in the social conception of ‘tradition’ as it relates to artistic practice. That shift is essentially a recognition that the study of traditional arts in terms of its oldness does not offer a comprehensive means to understand and improve human experience of music, dance, drama and crafts in the 21st century. Authenticity does not now simply flow from the past. As globalization continues, culture deterritorializes the meanings, values and social significance of songs, tunes, dances and stories, such that the former are becoming more plural and malleable than ever before.

Over the last two decades, and across various parts of the globe, artistic endeavours that are perceived (and often explicitly labelled) as ‘traditional’ in nature have undergone shifts in their respective meanings, significance, audiences, profiles, methods of performance, and processes of transmission. Tradition has taken on new meaning and importance for individuals looking to explore and express a sense of belonging in an increasingly globalized world; tradition has taken on new value to businesses, as a commodity, available for new commercial and branding opportunities; and ‘tradition’ has been increasingly invoked by third-sector organizations and NGOs as a form of heritage in need of celebration and conservation. Tradition has also garnered new attention and responses from governments and policy makers, for whom it represents a cultural and societal element of increasing political potential. In the contemporary world, overtly or consciously ‘doing tradition’ is not simply to

invoke antiquity, but to decisively ally oneself with people, places and values. Engaging in traditional activities variously involves (e.g.) performing the local, the unmediated, the communal, and/or the vernacular, but it can equally now involve performing or making something in a heavily mediatized and commercial setting. However, for many people around the world, doing something traditional often means doing something oppositional to the globalized, mediated, privatized, monetized mainstream of contemporary life, and is thus growing in socio-political importance in an era of increasing inequality.

This act of ‘traditioning’ (to extrapolate from Small’s influential and laudably holistic category of ‘musicking’, 1998) takes many forms, from actively performing or making to spectating or consuming, and an individual tradition-genre is often made up of multiple types of activity. Moreover, discrete traditions based around a single performative activity are often closely allied to the equivalent activities of other tradition-genres, through the sharing of performance contexts, participants, supporting institutions, aesthetics or ideologies. Musicians might play for dancers; dancers might attend story-telling workshops; story tellers might include in their stories songs learned from published albums; albums might be adorned with visual artworks, and might be recorded by artists who play handmade instruments, and who present their live performances wearing elaborate costumes. While it has at some points been helpful to approach one or other specific mode of traditional culture (music, dance, drama, etc.), this journal is intended to reunite these facets of a broader network of traditioning; to examine the overlaps, combinations, and separations of these elements, case-by-case.

The preceding comments on general scope notwithstanding, we recognize that the very concept of tradition is fundamentally context-specific. It happens in particular ways—holding particular meanings—for particular people in particular places at particular times. Writing generally about the concept is now problematized by the fact that the terms ‘folk’ and ‘traditional’ are not only consecrated analytical categories of scholarly observation, but also very meaningful ‘folk categories’ in the anthropological sense of that term. That is to say, they are terms in the vernacular lexicon, deployed by devotees of specific genres of artistic activity who recognise it through experience, and are not ostensibly basing their definitions in the theoretical framings of (e.g.) Cecil Sharp or Alan Dundes (although such framings are, of course, often constitutive of the vernacular shaping of the ‘folk category’ at some point and to some extent). In such a context, we assert that there is an imperative to draw together discourse on different traditions, from different places, with different meanings, in order to begin the project of developing a broader and critically engaged overview of the concept.

The Journal, then, encourages examination of the many varied iterations and concepts of tradition (and its equivalents and comparators) in global perspective. It seeks to address the growing need for an explicit focus on the processual, the mediated and performative ways of understanding orally transmitted or developed arts in the contemporary world that acknowledges that identities can change and are more fluid, shifting and constructing our complex personal forms of belonging in our daily lives.

What all this means for a new journal is three-fold: 1) we need to be engaged in publishing research that has a different set of underlying research questions; 2) the methods that scholars of the traditional arts use today must be fit for purpose in the twenty-first century, and; 3) research within the traditional arts increasingly engages with commercial, applied and

commodified contexts which means sharing our research with a broader constituency of people through open access. Francis James Child's admirable life's work of establishing the provenance of hundreds of English and Scottish ballads was a sort of reaction to modernity; twenty-first century responses to the communications revolution and commodification of everyday life must be understood with a different set of methodologies and research questions.

References

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