

International Folkloristics Update: Vietnam

During the past year, international focus has turned once again to Indochina, particularly the ongoing peace process in Cambodia and the rapid economic and political changes in Vietnam. Vietnam has become more open to foreign contacts, particularly in regard to humanitarian relief and aid missions and intellectual exchange programs. Furthermore, the new spirit of cooperation on the part of Hanoi to assist in the unresolved MIA-POW cases has begun the process of reconciliation between the United States and Vietnam. This thaw in what was once an ice-cold political climate presents the opportunity for a healthy exchange between folklorists in the United States and those in Vietnam.

While Vietnam has played an important role in the lives and works of numerous American folklorists, the past 17 years have left Vietnamese folklorists generally isolated from Western scholarship and precluded the ability of Americans to undertake fieldwork projects in Vietnam. During May of this year I had the opportunity to travel to Vietnam and talk to several folklorists there. The most productive of these encounters was a meeting in Hanoi with To Ngoc Thanh, the general secretary of the Association of Vietnamese Folklorists and director of the Vietnamese Institute for Culture and Arts, and his colleague Luu Tran Tieu, a ranking member of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Information. The following is a brief summary of conversations on the status of folklore and folklife studies in contemporary Vietnam.

Currently, folklore scholars in Vietnam mainly focus on ethnographic surveys of village life among the various ethnic groups which constitute the Vietnamese population. The rapid industrialization of the country has led to a marked disintegration of traditional village organization and a concomitant decline in traditional forms of expression. Ethnomusicologists are finding traditional instruments being supplanted by amplified keyboards imported from Thailand, while the traditional wooden houses, once a focus of numerous village-based rituals, are being torn down in favor of concrete and brick structures. The lure of paying jobs in the industrializing cities has also led to substantial demographic shifts away from the agricultural areas. Consequently, village-based traditions and ethnically homogeneous areas are quickly disappearing. Because of this rapid change in the once stable landscape, Vietnamese folk-

lorists have focused on recording as much as they possibly can before the effects of the current demographic dynamism have irrevocably changed the traditional environments.

Most of the collecting in Vietnam is done in teams, with a group of ethnographers spending considerable time (three months is apparently common) observing and collecting various aspects of the village folklore and folklife. (This is a common pattern for "folklore" research in much of Asia.) Three main areas of focus exist, according to To, in these village surveys: (1) harvest traditions and agricultural practices, including study of rituals connected to the cults of thunder, rain and the spirit of the rice plant; (2) village organization, behaviors and foodways; (3) "cultural" activities encompassing religious behaviors, music, dance, folk art, architecture and oral narrative performance. The majority of these ethnographic studies contribute to the extensive mapping projects currently being undertaken by the Association of Vietnamese Folklorists.

To was quick to point out the difficulties associated with doing fieldwork in Vietnam. As anyone who has been to the country knows, accessing the remote villages and hamlets that dot the rugged countryside can be quite difficult. Furthermore, Vietnam is extremely ethnically diverse, with 54 ethnic groups comprising the total population. Linguistic diversity among these various ethnic groups with countless dialects falling into five (or possibly six) distinct language groups exacerbates the fieldwork difficulties. Thus, the fieldworker in Vietnam must not only have great physical stamina simply to reach many of the villages, he must also be able to perform linguistic acrobatics to communicate with the tradition participants.

To told an amusing anecdote of his fieldwork experience in a northwestern province among a matriarchal tribe. Five generations of a family lived together in long houses, some of which reached 100 meters in length. When he arrived, the villagers were wary of him and unwilling to interact with him, let alone answer any of his questions concerning village life. Nevertheless, he was invited to share a meal with the tribal leader, a woman of considerable age. At the meal, attended by all of the family heads, the tribal leader chewed a piece of river fish, spat it out and offered it to a startled To. He gracefully allowed her to

feed him the half-chewed fish, at which point he was accepted into the tribe as her son and his fieldwork progressed smoothly.

The study of folklore in Vietnam occurs under the auspices of the Institute of Culture and Art, a division of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Information. The Institute has two main divisions concerned with folklore: the Cultural Heritage Center, which produces ethnographic exhibitions at museums, and the Association of Vietnamese Folklorists, which holds conferences, carries out fieldwork projects and publishes regional and national journals. Before 1987, the association members had nearly no modern sound recording equipment and no video recording equipment. Most field observation was recorded solely in notebooks. Furthermore, until 1987, all of the collected materials were stored in an uncontrolled environment, which resulted in losses of substantial portions of the collections. Since 1987, the association has acquired a video camera and has moved the collections to a climate-controlled environment. Although I was in no position to assess the comprehensiveness of the collections, To, an ethnomusicologist by training, pointed out that the archive contained over 20,000 recordings of folk song and folk music variants. Despite the substantial size of the archives, recent fieldwork has been hampered by a lack of funds (apparently a universal problem for folklorists). Items as simple as blank audio cassettes and video cassettes are in extremely short supply. To mentioned three areas in which the international folklore community could be of help to the current problems Vietnamese folklorists face: (1) help in obtaining modern sound and video equipment and supplies—perhaps grants through UNESCO and other international aid organizations; (2) training in fieldwork methodology and folklore theory—To explicitly mentioned workshops and exchanges with AFS members; (3) help in moving from an ethnographic focus on folklife to a theoretical and analytical approach to folklore and folklife—To mentioned that it would be helpful to have young Vietnamese folklorists trained in the United States.

To also spoke at some length about the Association of Vietnamese Folklorists, the Vietnamese counterpart to the American Folklore Society. The association boasts 417 members, all of whom are engaged in the study of folklore and folklife. Although

the Vietnamese universities do not have separate departments for the study of folklore and folklife, the literature colleges and the fine arts colleges both have folklore programs, while the music conservatories have programs in ethnomusicology. Students in these programs go on to become active members of the association. The association has an executive board at the national level and a branch in each of the provinces; each of the provincial branches has numerous local chapters. Each branch produces a journal dedicated to the traditions of groups in the province; the journals are primarily written in Vietnamese, although dialects and languages of the ethnic groups are also used. Once a year, the

association produces an annual of Vietnamese folklore and folklife scholarship which includes an English summary. Starting in 1993, the association plans to publish an English edition of the annual. Because most of the folklorists working in Vietnam have minute budgets and have minimal access to libraries, I appealed for copies of books on fieldwork methodology and folklore theory. This point was stressed repeatedly, and I was asked to mention to any interested AFS members with duplicate copies of such books to send them to the Association of Vietnamese Folklorists, Ministry of Culture, 51-53 Ngo Quyen, Ha Noi, Viet Nam, attn: Dr. To Ngoc Thanh. To was extremely interested in be-

ginning to coordinate joint fieldwork projects of Americans and Vietnamese as soon as possible, and encouraged any interested AFS members to contact him concerning such projects. Furthermore, he was interested in arranging for distinguished American folklore scholars to present visiting lectures in Vietnam as well as begin the process of developing workshops on folklore theory and fieldwork methodology in Vietnam for the association membership. Any AFS members interested in any of these propositions should write him at the above address or contact him by phone at 56415 (Hanoi).

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Publication News

The Executive Board of the California Folklore Society is pleased to announce that Margaret K. Brady has been selected as the new editor of *Western Folklore*. Brady's editorship will begin with the January 1993 issue; all manuscripts intended for publication in *Western Folklore* should now be sent to her at the Department of English, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT 84112.

A special issue of *Southern Folklore*, scheduled for publication in September 1992, features the six major papers presented at the Southern Arts Federation's 1990 conference, "Promoting Southern Cultural Heritage: A Conference on Impact." SAF Folk Arts Coordinator, Peggy Bulger, served as guest editor for the volume, which explores issues surrounding cultural tourism and regionalism as they pertain to the work of public folklorists. For more information about the journal or subscription information, contact: Erika Brady, Editor, *Southern Folklore*, Intercultural and Folk Studies, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY 42101.

Studies in Medievalism, Volume VI (1994), will be devoted to the subject of medievalism in America. Papers are solicited on all manifestations of medievalism in American literature, history and historiography, scholarship, art, architecture, religion, economics, music, and popular culture from the 16th century to the present. Proposals will be considered until 1 De-

ember 1992 but should be sent as soon as possible; deadline for completed manuscripts is 1 May 1993. Address correspondence to Kathleen Verduin, *Studies in Medievalism*, Department of English, Hope College, Holland, MI 49423; tel. 616/394-7626 or 394-7609, fax 616/394-7922. *Studies in Medievalism* is published as an annual volume by Boydell and Brewer, Ltd.

Contributors are needed for an encyclopedia on **Folklore and Literature**. Most entries are only 500 words long—a typed 1½ pages. If you are interested in participating in this project, please contact Bruce Rosenberg, American Civilization, Brown University, Providence, RI 02912.

Annual Meeting News

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dispersed and may not be aware of each other's work. What are the implications of studying folklore in highly politicized or sensitive settings? Is it desirable for the study of political folklore to be separated from social action? How do these issues fit in with the field of applied folklore?

There is not only considerable possibility for promoting the study of these issues in a scholarly setting, but moreover, there exists the possibility of folklorists organizing to apply our special skills where needed. The American Anthropological Association, for example, has a human rights caucus that responds when activists for indigenous rights are detained, arrested or tortured by their governments. Do folklorists want to establish similar channels for intervening on behalf of traditional artists and

others? Do we want to establish the means to become involved in the social justice work of arts and cultural organizations around the world? A current example: ASTAC (la Asociación Salvadoreña de Trabajadores del Arte y de la Cultura [the Association of Salvadoran Art and Cultural Workers]) hopes to launch a program to collect and document folklife during the recent war in El Salvador, with a concentration on the lives of refugees and the displaced and on the folklore of the war itself. ASTAC has asked for support from cultural workers in the US. What role can US folklorists play in the development of such a program? Can we work to obtain donated audiovisual equipment, books and computers for war-damaged universities in El Salvador, Cambodia and elsewhere throughout the world where needed? Would we want to send delegations for fact-finding, education, and support?

We also may want to organize around the political struggles we face as folklorists in this country: for a reevaluation of the American Folklife Center, for more NEA funding for folk arts, for continued and increased funding of city, state and other federal programs, for increased educational opportunities for higher education so that people can study folklore, for more truly multicultural education, for greater diversity of membership, for full accessibility at performances and meetings, and yes, even for a return to a paper mailing wrapper around issues of *JAF*.

Are these issues some folklorists would like to address as a group? What kinds of projects might such a group want to undertake? If interested, please come to the caucus meeting in Jacksonville, or contact Bill Westerman, Folklore Dept., University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA 19104-3325, especially if you don't plan to be in Jacksonville.