

CONFERENCES

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ‘DEFINING REGION: BALTIC AREA STUDIES FROM SOCIO-CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES’ (Institute of Baltic Sea Region History and Archaeology, Klaipėda University, Lithuania, May 19-22, 2005)

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From May 19 to 22, 2005, 31 scholar from 10 countries were invited to the University of Klaipėda to discuss Baltic Area Studies in terms of contemporary interdisciplinary research. Conference participants coming from Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Sweden, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States were asked to consider ways in which the discipline of Socio-Cultural Anthropology articulates with European Ethnology, Regional History, Historical Anthropology, Ethno-musicology and Folklore Studies. The conference was conceived as an opportunity to map out the anthropological dimension of contemporary research on the Baltic Region and promoted this objective by inviting senior anthropologists from France and the United Kingdom to keynote the conference’s plenary sessions. This conference represented an important occasion for exchanging ideas and sharing practical research experience between local scholars affiliated with the recently established field of Social Anthropology in Lithuania and their foreign colleagues. The international composition of research teams represented at the conference positively enhanced the exchange of ideas on common research problems. The conference was ably organized by the Institute of Baltic Sea Region History and Archaeology at Klaipėda University and sponsored by the Lithuanian State Science and Studies Foundation. Below I summarize the plenary sessions which are presented in detail at the conclusion of this review.

Papers presented in the first session discussed ways in which our understanding of culture has been shaped by the historical mapping of cultural difference, the dislocation and relocation of people (and ethnic/national groups) through border making and regime changes, the creation of multi-ethnic communities through global migration and the introduction of new genetic and reproductive technologies. These papers challenged established understandings of territoriality, social organization (e.g., kinship), identity formation and historical continuity normally associated with the idea of culture. Such fundamental considerations, as well as general problems of inter-disciplinary and international research in the conceptualization of borderland regions, opened the conference to more specific areas of investigation.

The keynote paper to the second session, entitled “Multiculturalism: Remaking Boundaries,” challenged anthropologists to provide a corrective to the often essentialized, primordial and ethnocentric conclusions of popular discourses about multiculturalism. The following papers were focused primarily on the study of Baltic borderlands, emphasizing methodological and practical challenges to interdisciplinary research and raising general questions about identity formation and the social integration of multi-ethnic local communities suddenly confronted by new geo-political re-

alities, especially along the EU-Russian border. Proposed research on religious pluralism in post-socialist societies was also a topic of this session.

The keynote to the third session alluded to processes of European integration and cultural diversification promoted by the European Union as a basis for proposing new ways of studying “Identity, Heritage and Tradition” – the themes of this session. The remaining papers addressed topics of traditional ethnological (ethnographic) and folklorist (ethno-musicological) research in the Baltic region; they also critically appraised these approaches in view of inter-disciplinary research and contemporary social and cultural anthropology. The session was highlighted by assessments of local research traditions and biographical accounts of children displaced from Königsberg to Lithuania after Soviet take-over – the theme of the extraordinary film *‘Wolf’s Children in the Baltic Region. 1947-1997’* which conference participants had the opportunity to view following the session. In my opinion this film, and its insightful contextualization by the author, provided a multifaceted narrative capturing central concerns of many conference participants.

The final session, “Anthropology in New Europe,” filled the agenda for the conference’s final day. The first three papers established a larger framework for the day’s discussions. The keynote presentation proposed a new role for anthropology/ethnology in an expanding European Union promoting universal citizenship rights and identity, suggesting that border regions at the EU periphery (such as those examined in this conference) should be primary sites for investigating in terms of local life-worlds the coeval processes of cultural diversification and politically driven unity. The second paper envisioned the emergence of a Baltic School of Anthropology as a constructive alternative to various entrapments of the discipline as it has become ensconced in Western academia. And the third outlined the establishment of Social Anthropology in Lithuania with reference to established academic traditions. The remaining papers of this session were noteworthy for their application of a wide range of anthropological perspectives to research problems reflecting contemporary social phenomena (and pressing social issues) of the Baltic region, ranging from the role of medical anthropology in the field of public health to discussions of the transformation of rural society and urban (public) space and the role of citizenship as a vehicle of inclusion and exclusion in Baltic states of the post-socialist period. Reflections on the study of religiosity and an imaginative presentation of neo-paganism in contemporary Lithuania also enriched this impressive array of on-going research conducted primarily by local and foreign junior scholars.

I left this conference with the feeling that those attending shared a strong commitment to promote anthropological perspectives for better understanding the social and cultural diversity of a rapidly changing region noteworthy for its consolidation by newly independent states and the European Union – a region increasingly marked by the global flow of people, ideas and things while it rediscovers and mobilizes historical memories in quests for collective identification. This conference was an optimal occasion for outsiders such as myself to orient themselves to a broad range of ethnographically based anthropological research that gave a solid impression of the current status of Baltic Area Studies. The able organization and dedication of the sponsors and organizers of this meeting is to be commended. Our visits to the Klaipėda Municipality Ethnoculture Centre, the Simon Dach House and concluding excursion to the Curonian Spit provided us all an opportunity to experience first hand settings inspiring numerous contributions to this conference. The planned publication of the conference papers promises to capture the significance of this conference as an occasion to consolidate anthropological research in the Baltic Area and especially in Lithuania.