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"Folklorization" as Misconception: Global Uses, Critiques, and the Continued Use of a Contested Concept

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Abstract

"Folklorization" names a movement through which cultural practices, taken out of the settings in which they are ordinarily lived, reappear as "folklore" in tourism, national representation, or heritage display. The argument suggested here is that the term functions as a misconception when the loss of authenticity assumed in this movement is itself made to explain the change. In such a reading, folklore is something static and rural, something belonging to a past from which its present forms are separated. The paper examines this usage through a qualitative reading of the term's genealogy and a comparison of cases drawn from published research on staged performance, nationalist ideology, cultural survival, and commodification. Indigenous representation in Bolivia, shamanism in Ecuador and Siberia, Balinese performance, and European traditions under changing political and commercial conditions serve as the cases through which the problem is discussed. What we find is a continuation of the older model, although adaptation, agency, and reflexivity also appear within attempts to understand folklorization. Contemporary folkloristics, in questioning whether a change of context necessarily diminishes cultural meaning, allows us to distinguish the critical warning contained in the term from the explanation it offers as a theoretical framework.

Keywords: Authenticity, Cultural heritage, Folklore theory, Performance, Tourism

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INTRODUCTION

Folklore was once commonly understood as what remained of a simpler past: the songs, tales, rituals, handcrafts, and dances of rural communities imagined as standing somewhere outside modern life. For much nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholarship, these were survivals, "relics of an unrecorded past" (Gomme, 1890, p.1), which urbanisation and social change threatened to bring to an end. The association of folklore with a disappearing world is, thus, part of the history of the discipline itself. When a practice is separated from the life that sustained it and presented in a reified form as folklore, this association continues within its very naming; "the root sense of 'folklore' entailed in this construction is of an always, already adulterated product" (McDowell, 2010, p.182). Nonetheless, this is not the only sense in which the term has been used. In Américo Paredes's (1973) study of José Mosqueda, it is "the way that folklore adapts all kinds of material into generic patterns dominant in a tradition" (p. 172). Subsequent uses refer to rituals staged for tourists, religious practices presented as secular culture, and local traditions appropriated as national symbols. According to McDowell (2010), "in its most common acceptation today, 'to folklorize' means to remove traditional expressive culture from an original point of production and relocate it in a distanced setting of consumption" (p.182). Similarly, in Poljak Istenič's (2011) words, folklorization "generally denotes a social and cultural phenomenon that presents and revives folk culture forms in a series of versions ranging from scholarly reconstruction to (folk) performance" (p. 51). Although these contexts differ, what the common use of the word suggests is the displacement of something authentic, or, to put it differently, the reduction of lived culture to its folkloric display.

The theoretical difficulty of "folklorization" lies with this framing. An authentic tradition is placed on one side and its inauthentic, folklorized counterpart on the other; the opposition which has been established is then taken as an explanation of what has happened. It is in this sense that I argue the term functions as a misconception. If change, performance, or recontextualization is already understood as degradation, how can we understand the processes through which tradition is recreated? Contemporary folkloristics takes into account expression in urban communities, public cultural work, and digital media, as well as in rural or premodern settings, understanding tradition as something formed through continuing interaction (Baron, 2016; Blank, 2009). As such, to call a practice folklorized may tell us as much about the observer's expectation of cultural purity as about the practice itself. The criticism, too, has to be examined; it

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cannot be taken as proof of what it claims.

The paper will, therefore, try to examine whether the prevailing literature allows a coherent theoretical use of folklorization, rather than attempt another definition of the term. A related question is what happens when its different meanings are taken as interchangeable. For this purpose, I follow its historical and conceptual genealogy across scholarly traditions and then turn to cases in which it names staged performance, nationalist representation, survival through adaptation, and commodification. These cases help us understand how a description of cultural change becomes a judgement about its value; the assumptions underlying this movement are brought into discussion with contemporary folklore theory. Although exploitation, cultural simplification, and unequal authority are problems to which the term may usefully draw attention, bringing them under a common name does not in itself make that name a theory. Questioning this conceptualization is, in this sense, a way of asking more precisely how traditions change and for whose purposes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Origins in Folklore Studies and Anthropology

The genealogy of folklorization belongs to the development of folkloristics and anthropology, although the term and its related concepts did not acquire the same meaning everywhere. In much of the German and Slavic ethnological debate, *Folklorismus*, or folklorism, provided the concept, with Hans Moser's 1962 article, "Vom *Folklorismus* in unserer Zeit," helping to establish it within ethnology. Moser described it as "the secondhand transmission and presentation of culture" (Moser, 1962, as cited in Poljak Istenič, 2011, p. 52), while acknowledging the difficulty of arriving at a more precise definition. If we take folk dancing on a stage as an example, we can see the distinction his formulation suggests: the expression has a second life away from its familiar setting, a life in which it is selected and reproduced for another audience or purpose. The tradition as lived and the tradition as presented are, thus, distinguished. Although folklorism and folklorization appear within overlapping discussions, their different histories and uses should not, on that account, be taken as the history of a single concept.

This distinction, however, became less secure within the European debate itself. Hermann Bausinger pointed to the difficulty of separating supposedly original folklore from the activities of scholars who studied, reconstructed, or presented it. As Poljak Istenič's (2011, pp.52–53) account shows, folklorism could be understood as an outcome of earlier ethnological practice, while criticism of it sometimes repeated the very assumptions from which it had emerged. The Tübingen school

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incorporated the concept into its disciplinary vocabulary, and Bausinger later characterized it as descriptive and critical, noting its value was largely heuristic. What we find here is a term which opened questions about cultural policy and the market, and about scholarship's own participation in producing the forms it claimed only to observe, rather than offering a fully developed theory of cultural transformation. This does not make description worthless. The difficulty arises when description is made to perform explanatory work for which a basis has not been demonstrated.

In Latin American anthropology, *folklorización* developed within questions of colonial domination, national identity, and indigenous cultural control. Guillermo Bonfil Batalla's work is central to this discussion, particularly the distinction he makes between possessing cultural elements and having the authority to decide their use (Bonfil Batalla, 1988, 1991). The music, costumes, and symbols of a festival may still belong to a community while the decisions about their performance are taken over by a state institution or tourist enterprise. The festival remains visible; can we say that cultural autonomy necessarily remains with it? Bonfil Batalla's account of alienated culture demonstrates that what belongs to a community may nevertheless be subject to decisions made elsewhere. Similarly, in *México profundo*, his concern addresses indigenous ways of life marginalized by an official national image which selectively celebrates their cultural expressions (Bonfil Batalla, 2009). Folklorization here concerns authority as well as representation; to read this criticism merely as nostalgia for an untouched tradition would be to miss the question that gives it force: who controls the transformation, and who can contest that control?

The two discussions, thus, place their emphasis differently. While mediation and the secondary presentation of culture often provide the European point of departure, the Latin American discussion gives prominence to the displacement of cultural authority. Judgements about authenticity may enter both, and their disciplinary history is examined by Bendix (1997). Nonetheless, neither the appearance of a stage nor the presence of an external influence is sufficient evidence that a tradition has become empty. Already within the genealogy we find the question to which this paper returns: does folklorization identify a particular relation, or is the appearance of change itself taken as the reason for declaring a loss?

Folklorization in Socialist and Postcolonial Contexts

Folklorization acquired particular significance in socialist states, where public presentations of folk culture were organized and supported by governments. Songs, narratives, and dances could be selected and revised

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for official purposes, as we find in studies of Soviet cultural politics and later accounts of performance under socialism (Feinberg, 2018; Miller, 1990; Oinas, 1973, 1975). Kaneff (2004), in her discussion of Bulgaria, places the treatment of folklore within the political organization of the past. Although these settings are important, institutional intervention of this kind also belongs to the wider relation between modernization and cultural representation and cannot be confined to socialism alone. Ritual forms could be separated from religious observance and made into secular expressions of ethnic or national identity. As Habinc's (2012) study of Slovenian festivities helps us see, institutional approval could reshape an event without wholly deciding what participants made of it; state policy and local practice were not simply the same thing. Political containment might, in fact, coexist with the continuation of selected forms. We should, therefore, ask what continued, whose authority made that continuation possible, and how its meaning had changed.

Nation-building provides another context in which indigenous or regional cultures are selectively incorporated into an official national identity. Wahren's (2014) study of the *Semana indianista* in Bolivia brings representations of indigeneity, folklore, and the nation into relation, showing how indigenous cultural distinctiveness could be celebrated while the population remained subject to social and political hierarchies. In this reading, the visibility produced through folklorization is visibility on terms established by national elites. The *indio autóctono*, or autochthonous Indian, is, thus, more than a picturesque figure; it is through this figure that the population represented is placed within a particular account of the nation. Similarly, Ilacqua's (2022) study of tourism and regional identity in the French Basque Country between 1830 and 1870 raises a related question, as regional distinctiveness could be presented to visitors within changing ideas of national belonging. Although the histories differ, they bring us to a shared difficulty, in the sense that cultural recognition may coexist with restrictions on the authority of the very people recognized.

This process may also take the form of primitivization or exoticization. People inhabiting the same contemporary world as their audience appear as bearers of an ancient, rural, and unchanging culture; what makes them attractive is their apparent distance from the world which they share with those who watch them. Costumes, dances, and crafts come to signify their difference, while other activities recede from view. Admiration may, thus, become a form of containment, in the sense that the people represented are welcomed so long as they remain recognizable within the expected, timeless picture of the folk. Said's (1979) critique of the unequal authority through which cultural others are

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represented helps us understand this concern. The comparison points to a problem of representation, although it does not make every instance of folklorization an instance of Orientalism; the connection has to be established through the particular institutions, images, and relations at work.

The difficulty of maintaining a wholly negative account becomes apparent when we turn to Ewa Klekot's discussions of Polish folk art and the changing uses of cultural forms within modern institutions and markets (Klekot, 2010, 2023). In her work on self-folklorization, the people represented as folk also participate in representing themselves. They may perform, stylize, or reproduce practices recognized by institutions as their culture, although the expectations within which they do so have been formed through education, tourism, and official classifications. Can we take this participation simply as free choice, or, in the opposite direction, understand it as passivity? Drawing on Klekot, Kolenda (2023, p. 30) relates self-folklorization to the adoption and performance of a cultural identity shaped by external classifications. Its relation to self-colonization reveals the ambiguity, for a group asserting its belonging may at the same time reproduce the terms through which it has been subordinated. Participation alone cannot, therefore, settle the value of folklorization in advance; it is the conditions of participation which have to be examined.

Loss of authority over cultural expression, selective staging, and a community's reflexive engagement with its own practices may all appear under the name of folklorization. The term remains contested because these uses diverge, and the cases which follow will help us examine how its different meanings operate, particularly where the claims made through them go beyond the evidence being described.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For this inquiry, I developed a qualitative, interdisciplinary approach, combining a historical reading of the term's genealogy with a comparison of cases from published research. The study is neither a systematic literature review nor a formal conceptual analysis. In reading discussions within folklore studies, anthropology, and heritage policy, I follow the definitions and uses of folklorization across settings, taking into account what the term describes as well as the judgements that give those descriptions their critical force. Some of this literature is in languages other than English, and I have therefore used AI-based translation tools to assist my reading of non-English texts.

The cases were selected as analytical exemplars of the uses under investigation: indigenous representation in Bolivian nation-

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building (Wahren, 2014), Balinese cultural performance (Picard, 2010), ritual and cultural identity in Siberia (Saarniit, n.d.), and Chinese soft power in Central Asia (Jiménez-Tovar & Lavička, 2020). Further examples concern European festivals, musical revivals, and commercial performances. All these cases are read through published accounts, and the selection is not intended as an exhaustive inventory of folklorization worldwide. They serve, instead, as a means of examining what the term does in different arguments, including those in which the same transformation is understood as commodification, political incorporation, or adaptation.

As McDowell observes, "folklorization has had different meanings, even opposite meanings, in different times and places" (McDowell, 2010, p. 182). In comparing recurrent features, therefore, I do not set aside the historical and geographical differences between cases. The reading follows the expressive forms selected, the changes in audience and setting, and the distribution of authority over cultural presentation, together with the consequences described by the cited authors. A performance organized by a socialist institution may resemble one organized by a tourist enterprise or a community association, although its purpose and its relationship to participants need not be equivalent. The question is where the older model of folklore as static heritage enters the account and whether the conclusion depends on it. In this way, similarity becomes an object of examination through comparison, rather than sufficient evidence of a single global process.

These readings are brought into discussion with contemporary folklore theory and critical heritage studies, examining whether the judgements of authenticity, continuity, and loss follow from the practices described. In doing so, I distinguish an author's explicit use of folklorization from my comparison of it with staged authenticity, cultural control, and heritage production. The method is interpretive and argumentative; its conclusions depend on the literature selected and cannot establish the prevalence of particular usages across all disciplines or languages. Nonetheless, within these limits, it allows us to question the term's explanatory claims without excluding uses that recognize cultural agency and change.

FINDINGS

The cases are discussed under four headings: staged performance, nationalist ideology, survival through adaptation, and commodification. These are overlapping uses rather than mutually exclusive categories, for a single festival may attract tourists, represent a nation, generate income, and sustain local practice. What concerns us here is the movement from such observable arrangements to a

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judgement about cultural meaning. For each group of cases, I examine the transformation together with the assumptions through which it becomes recognizable as folklorization.

Staging Tradition for Touristic Performance

The first group of cases concerns a familiar image of folklorization: a dance, ritual, or other practice selected from community life and shortened or restyled for visitors. The performance may become more regular and easier for an unfamiliar audience to understand. But can we say that its arrangement for tourists necessarily diminishes its meaning? Such a judgement has to be established in relation to the practice itself. MacCannell's (1973) account of staged authenticity concerns the organization of tourist settings and the visitor's search for access to an authentic social world; it is not simply a declaration that every tourist performance is false. More recent tourism scholarship employs the concept of folklorization in discussing the transformation of ritual experience (Ruiz-Palacios et al., 2024). Although the terms overlap, the explanations they offer are not precisely the same.

In Michel Picard's account of Bali, tourist demand and the incorporation of Balinese culture into Indonesian national culture belong to the same history of changes in performance (Picard, 2010). The Bali Arts Festival, established in 1979, presented selected arts within an organized program, although its predominantly Balinese audience makes it difficult to understand this simply as culture extracted for foreign consumption. A similar difficulty appears in Picard's discussion of Sendratari, the composite dance-drama form that developed through tourist presentation and subsequent adaptation to Balinese audiences. Selection and staging here occurred together with local cultural identification. If we take the physical recognizability of a dance as the measure of what remains of it, we leave part of the problem untouched. In my reading, a dance selected as an authorized representation of Balinese culture may acquire a new position within local cultural life; it may become a model by which other performances are judged, the particular practice coming to stand as a representative form. It is this movement that gives the criticism of folklorization its force. Nonetheless, the presence of local audiences and the continuing adaptation of the form prevent us from taking the result as an empty spectacle by definition, for both the constraints of presentation and the meanings produced within them belong to the account.

From Bali, we can turn to shamans in Ecuador, where presentation again bears on recognition, although the encounter is different. Davidov (2010) examines the discursive effects of ethnotourism among Kichwa

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communities, showing how visitors' expectations help form the shaman's public image. In encountering practices associated with healing and spiritual knowledge, tourists may recognize authenticity through visible signs of difference, and performing shamanism may, thus, become important to a practitioner's recognition alongside knowledge which the visitor is less able to assess. This does not give us grounds to dismiss every practitioner working with tourists as a false shaman; what changes is the way in which expertise becomes recognizable. In the vocabulary of folklorization, we might read this as a ritual at risk of becoming a consumable image of cultural alterity, although this interpretation has to remain distinct from Davidov's particular findings and from the terminology of other studies of mystical tourism, such as Ruiz-Palacios et al. (2024). A demonstration for visitors may change the duration, audience, and public purpose of a practice without its other uses disappearing. To understand the encounter, therefore, we should take economic opportunities and the pressures of outsiders' expectations together. Otherwise, the claim that ritual has become theatre may conceal the very relations which the analysis is meant to explain.

Who invites the performers, who selects them, and who decides what they will present? These decisions precede the audience's encounter with a folk festival, an international exposition, or an Olympic ceremony, framing what will constitute the performance. Organizers allocate time and determine what can be seen, sometimes giving prominence to the picturesque at the expense of the contemporary life of the people represented. Forsyth and Wamsley's (2005) discussion of Aboriginal representation in Olympic ceremonies provides a relevant comparison here. To be present within a national or international spectacle is not, by itself, to participate meaningfully in the authority behind it. This distinction becomes particularly important where contemporary people appear as bearers of a distant past, recognizable to spectators only through an inherited image. What folklorization concerns here is, thus, not only the selection of forms for display but also the restriction of representation.

A shortened chant may be easier to programme, and a costume pageant easier to advertise, than the wider practices from which they are drawn. Such arrangements for public consumption omit certain elements, although what the audience cannot access should not be confused with what the performers no longer possess. In other words, a limited encounter with meaning is not the same as an absence of meaning. We should ask how the shortened form relates to the wider practice and whether the conditions of its presentation allow other forms of knowledge to continue. In my reading, the tourism cases reveal

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a recurring pressure towards an expected image of cultural difference, and the criticism has grounds where this pressure can be shown to restrict knowledge, participation, or authority. It becomes a misconception when staging alone is taken as proof of cultural impoverishment.

Nationalist Branding and Identity Politics

Now, from the staging of tradition for tourists, we can turn to its selection as an emblem of national or ethnic identity. States, cultural institutions, and intellectual elites may transform particular expressive forms into representative images, for purposes that differ from immediate commercial gain although they often serve it. A dance may address citizens through their national belonging while presenting their country to visitors; the practice is made to stand for a larger collective. This abstraction is political, in the sense that someone has the authority to decide which forms will represent that collective, who may perform them, and what the representation may mean.

Wahren's (2014) account of the *Semana indianista* shows how an indigenous presence was constructed within Bolivian national representation. Indigenous difference could help define the nation through its celebration, while the distinction between those who represented the nation and those who governed it was preserved. The autochthonous Indian is, in this sense, an image produced within a contemporary political project rather than simply a figure surviving from the past. I read this as folklorization in the sense of nationalist branding, through which a population's cultural expressions become signs of collective identity, although the terms of that identity may limit its political claims. A participant appearing at a festival does not necessarily control the narrative in which the appearance occurs; recognition and authority are not the same thing. Nonetheless, the distinction does not mean that participants accept the official meaning, or that display necessarily makes them politically passive. For an explanation, we have to turn to the historical relation between organizers, the represented population, and the institutions through which the image circulates. Calling the result folklorized is useful to the extent that it directs us towards this relation.

In their discussion of China's relations with Central Asia, Jiménez-Tovar and Lavička (2020) examine folklorization as the reduction and commodification of identity through selected cultural traits. The study includes interstate relations, particularly those involving Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and the treatment of difference within Xinjiang, placing both within the projection of Chinese soft power and the management of political tensions. Although this setting is relevant to this

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comparison, it should not be made identical to Bolivian nation-building or Soviet cultural policy. What connects them is the possibility of converting difference into a form available for an authorized political image; music, costumes, and other visible expressions may signify harmonious diversity even while the relations represented remain contested. The point at issue here is the analytical movement from identifying such selective representation to explaining its effects. How was the image produced, through what means does it circulate, and how do the people represented respond? Folklorization may name the problem, but the image alone cannot establish its political consequences.

Comparable questions appear within the histories of European authoritarian regimes, although the histories themselves should remain distinct. Kamenetsky (1972) examines the political use of folklore in Nazi Germany, while studies of Francoist Spain discuss flamenco and dance appropriated for official cultural representation (de las Heras Monastero & Granados, 2022; Sanz Díaz & Morales Tamaral, 2018). Similarly, socialist Romanian festivals and performances in the former Yugoslavia are studied in relation to cultural organization and ideology (Oancea, 2015; Petkovski, 2023). The field of intervention is broad, but the practices selected, the institutions involved, and the participation or resistance encountered differ across regimes. How, then, does an expressive form become a curated image of collective identity? Encouraging cultural distinctiveness may coexist with restricting the differences permitted in public expression, so that a potentially unsettling claim is converted into an acceptable cultural performance. Folklorization may name this conversion, although it cannot, on its own, tell us how completely the conversion succeeds.

An unchanging past has a particular use in nationalist representation, for it makes the selected forms appear older than the political project that selects them. Hobsbawm and Ranger's (1983) collection on invented traditions provides a related framework for reading this apparent continuity: even a recent arrangement may acquire authority through the appearance of being inherited. Nonetheless, invention and selection are not synonymous with folklorization, nor does recentness alone discredit a practice. We should examine how the claim to antiquity is produced and what authority it confers. If folklore is plucked from community life like a flower for a bouquet of national culture, the relation between the practice and the collective it is made to represent is already changed. To read the resulting image as a transparent survival would, thus, be to overlook the intervention that brought it into view.

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Survival and Recontextualization of Traditions

A ritual acquiring a public performance, a musical repertoire entering a festival, or a regional tradition taught through an educational program may continue through the very change of setting described as folklorization. Not all accounts concern an unequivocal loss; some understand the process as recontextualization or adaptation. The difficulty is that continuation in another form may be made necessarily inferior to an original assumed to have been complete and self-contained. To say that a tradition survives only as folklore may identify a substantial loss, although it may also repeat the assumption that meaningful tradition belongs to a social world which has passed. The distinction between these readings has to be made through what people continue to do with the altered practice, rather than through the change of setting alone.

The survival of religious practice under Soviet rule makes this question particularly pressing. Studies of Siberia and the wider post-Soviet region examine official secularization together with continuing religious life (Peers, 2019; Pelkmans, 2009; Sundström, 2012). Saarniit's (n.d.) discussion of the Khanty places shamanism and the bear feast within cultural identity, repression, and the conditions of transmission; it also includes the Nganasan Kosterkin family, whose shamanic practices continued under the guise of public performance. Survival is, thus, situated within the wider conditions of Soviet cultural policy. Saarniit presents the performance of shamanic elements as a possible means of maintaining contact with culture under severe constraints, and it is here, in my reading, that the ambiguity of folklorization as survival becomes apparent. A public role may be permitted because its religious authority is denied, while performers may retain meanings that the official account of their activity does not recognize. Although continuation need not restore all that repression has damaged, the appearance of a staged form alone does not establish that all religious or cultural significance has disappeared. For an understanding of this survival, we have to take into account the unequal conditions of preservation and the difference between the purposes of the state and those of the performers.

The problem appears differently in musical forms moving into new settings. Studies of Bulgarian folk music, urban musical life in Dhaka, songs in Lithuanian cities, and music from the former Yugoslavia in Istanbul place transmission and transformation within contemporary social relations (Dumnić Vilotijević, 2023; Kirilov, 2010; Mohammad, 2014; Nakienė, 2015). Although these studies do not necessarily use folklorization in the same sense, they help us see why such movement cannot be understood

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merely as a departure from an original setting. The teaching and staged presentation of the jota in Aragon raise a related question about codification and continued practice (Zavala et al., 2023), for a version stabilized through teaching may become available to learners who would otherwise have little access to it. Nam (2019) considers ethnic minority communities' engagement with popular culture in the tourist setting of Vietnam's Mai Châu region, while work on Peru and China examines expressive identities shaped through teachers, cultural institutions, and heritage production (García Liendo, 2017; Hertz, 2024; Ingram, 2020; Li, 2012). These examples do not give us a single answer. They allow us to ask which forms of continuity a new audience or institution makes possible and which it makes more difficult. Codification can restrict variation and also provide a means of learning, just as income may encourage a narrow image and also support practitioners; the possibilities have to be distinguished within the case.

A practice may change through the very knowledge that it is traditional. This reflexivity makes the distinction between folklore and folklorization less secure, for awareness does not, in itself, make a practice culturally unreal. Anttonen (2005) and Köstlin (1997, 1999) place the interpretation of tradition within modern social life, where scholarly categories, cultural administration, and public representation may teach people to recognize what they do as folklore. Hafstein (2018), too, explicitly reclaims folklorization as part of this entry of folkloristic knowledge into the public sphere. In this sense, an unconscious tradition and its conscious reproduction cannot be separated as securely as the simple opposition suggests. A community may organize an event for itself, consider the forms it has inherited, and decide how to carry them forward. Although such deliberation does not guarantee an equitable outcome, it belongs to contemporary cultural life; consciousness of tradition is not sufficient evidence of inauthenticity.

Habinc's (2012) study follows carnival and St. Roch's Day in Brežice, Slovenia, through the decade before and the first two decades after the Second World War. Changing political conditions gave the two festivities different positions, with carnival open to being recast within a public, secular cultural framework while the religious celebration faced different restrictions. Her question is whether folklorization diversified festive practice or molded it. We cannot take this comparison as an account of the disappearance of all tradition under socialism, nor as one of the successful survivals of every altered practice. Different forms of continuity could emerge through changes in legitimacy, organization, and setting. What matters for the present argument is this historical differentiation, which asks us to examine the transformation

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before assigning it the general value of preservation or decline.

If disappearance proves tradition fragile, while adaptation leaves only a degraded remainder, what could ever count as continuity? This is the tension we find in folklorization as survival. Adaptation is not necessarily beneficial, for knowledge, access, or authority may be lost even as a practice remains visible; such losses, however, have to be specified. A festival staged for an audience may remain meaningful to participants in ways different from those of its earlier setting. Recognizing these meanings does not require us to romanticize resilience, but to allow that a living tradition may be evidenced through something other than an unchanged form.

Commodification and Exoticization of Culture

A ticketed performance, a souvenir, or a marketable repertoire makes cultural expression available for exchange, which is the particular concern of commodification although it overlaps with tourism and public display. Folklorization often enters the discussion as a criticism of the simplification through which such products become attractive to consumers, as though a complex practice had to be reduced to its most recognizable features in order to sell. The pressure may indeed be real. Nonetheless, payment alone cannot establish cultural impoverishment, just as the absence of payment cannot establish freedom from appropriation. We should, therefore, examine who controls the product and how its value is distributed, together with the relation between its commercial life and the other uses of the practice.

Riverdance carried Irish step dancing into a commercial theatrical form, giving it a visibility far beyond its earlier local and competitive settings. Farrell-Wortman (2010) examines the phenomenon in relation to Irish identity, while Foley (2001) discusses local, national, and global perceptions of the dance. Decisions about choreography, music, costume, and theatrical presentation belong to the commercial production, although naming these decisions folklorization does not in itself show that the performance has become meaningless for practitioners. Success may change ideas of Irishness as well as dancers' opportunities. Similarly, the circulation of "El Condor Pasa," discussed by Li (2024), raises a question about a recognizable cultural work moving through different claims of authorship and heritage. The histories differ, but both concern how audiences beyond an earlier setting come to recognize and value a form. What I question here is the assumption that simplification is an inevitable property of this exchange. A market may favor a restricted image; whether it does so and with what consequences remain questions for the particular case.

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Recognition as heritage may bring resources and a wider audience to a practice while associating it more closely with its publicly recognizable version. Safeguarding and display are, thus, held in tension, a relation placed at the center of Hafstein's (2018) discussion of festivals: "calling a festival 'intangible heritage' is not to describe it, but to intervene in it" (Hafstein, 2018, p. 127). Villamizar Morgado's (2023) study of the Carnaval de Barranquilla in Colombia examines cultural policy, commercialization, and the tensions between local practice and global consumption. Through documents and interviews with twelve carnival practitioners, she considers how heritage recognition and the creative economy reshape the conditions of carnival production. The case brings us to the relation between the public image of cultural value and the people whose activity sustains it. Do the resources accompanying recognition sustain the practice's wider life, or do they lead it increasingly towards the requirements of display? Visibility alone cannot answer this, for the organization of cultural production and the authority of participants within it have to be examined.

An entertaining, picturesque image of folklore may be readily recognizable, although its familiarity may make it difficult to see how much has been selected out. A broker assuming that audiences want a brief, visually striking performance may offer little opportunity for another kind of engagement; the image produced can then seem to confirm the very assumption through which it was produced. What we find here is a problem in the organization of presentation. A simple display does not necessarily mean a simple culture, nor can the commercial setting of a performance decide its value before we examine the relations through which it is made and received.

Selection, context, and representation appear throughout the four groups, although their recurrence does not establish a common cause or outcome. State regulation of visibility, market rewards for particular forms, and practitioners' use of an authorized image for their own purposes may coexist. Folklorization can direct our attention to these transformations; when it is used as a general explanation of loss, however, it may conceal the very differences that the comparison needs to examine.

DISCUSSION

To dismiss a performance as "just folklore" is to make folklore itself appear as a diminished reality, the decorative remainder of something that was once meaningful. Here we return to the tension running through the cases, between folklore imagined as a static relic and folklore lived as contemporary practice. The accounts of adaptation, reflexivity, and political agency question the judgement of diminution and, as such, cannot be set

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aside. My criticism concerns the moment at which a description of changed relations already decides that the change is cultural degradation. Folklorization thus appears to explain the very phenomena it has constructed within its own description; herein lies its conceptual fallacy.

The Dynamic Nature of Folklore and the Static Model

The continuing life of folklore in the present is central to this criticism. Dundes (1965) opened the field beyond rural or illiterate bearers, while Beatie's (n.d.) account of urban communities similarly questions the confinement of folklore to a particular place. Digital expression provides further instances of vernacular forms produced and circulated within modern life (Blank, 2009). An urban legend, an occupational expression, or an online practice need not preserve something from a village past in order to be folklore; its significance comes through the group and the situation in which it is used. If we take this into account, departure from an earlier rural or ritual setting is no longer sufficient ground for saying that a practice has ceased to be real folklore. We should turn, instead, to the relations within which it works in the present.

Ben-Amos's contextual definition, "folklore is artistic communication in small groups" (Ben-Amos, 1971, p. 13), directs us towards communication and interaction, and towards what people do through expressive forms rather than the forms taken as isolated remnants. He also reminds us that "the definition of folklore is not merely an analytical construct" (Ben-Amos, 1971, p. 10). In this sense, arrangement and competition do not automatically remove an organized performance from a community's expressive life; the performance may remain embedded within it. An essentialist use of folklorization, however, places authenticity in an original, untouched setting and understands public or commercial forms as diminished copies. Where, then, could we find that untouched setting? Selection, adaptation, and exchange often already belong to the history of a practice. Noyes's (2016) attention to folklore's social life allows us to examine these processes on a broader basis, understanding traditionalization as continuing work through which people negotiate what they inherit and how to carry it forward.

Picard's (2010) discussion of performance adapted to Balinese audiences helps us understand this change of perspective. The association with tourism does not decide the subsequent cultural life of a form, for performers' choices, local expectations, and the changing relation between audience and event may carry it beyond the stage, beyond what appears to be the moment of removal from context. This is not to say that every commercial performance sustains all the meanings of an earlier practice.

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Rather, we have to follow the process further: what appears as an ending from one position may belong to another history of practice, and to call that history merely folklorized risks overlooking the activity through which it continues.

Meaning may also change without simply disappearing. A practice presented to visitors may acquire an economic role, become a public statement of identity, or offer younger community members an occasion to learn, although these are possibilities to investigate rather than benefits to assume. They may coexist with lost spiritual knowledge, restricted participation, or unequal access to earnings. Framed as a misconception, the discourse around folklorization overemphasizes cultural loss, inherently relegating new significance to a secondary position. We should, therefore, ask what changed and for whom. Otherwise, the observer's preferred past becomes the measure of everything that follows it, and the present is declared to be in decline before it has been examined.

The Myth of Pure Authenticity and the Role of Rhetoric

The desire for authenticity is itself part of the problem. Bendix's *In Search of Authenticity* (1997) traces the disciplinary desire to distinguish genuine cultural expression from its supposed substitutes, a desire that is not outside the modern conditions giving rise to the search for an untouched tradition. It cannot, therefore, serve as a neutral instrument of observation. Poljak Istenič's (2011, pp.52–53) account of folklorism reveals the difficulty for scholars who reconstructed and presented folk culture while directing criticism at other forms of cultural production from which their own work could not readily be exempted. Collectors, arrangers, and revivalists all intervene, although their purposes differ. What appears as an original may already contain collection, performance, and institutional recognition within its history; the boundary between authentic folklore and representation is, therefore, something that has to be investigated historically.

Hafstein (2018) reclaims folklorization to describe the public effects of folkloristic knowledge, taking reflexive cultural practice as part of modernity rather than as a sign that tradition has become unreal. This use questions any criticism that takes the term as uniformly negative, allowing us to examine how people recognize and organize their own culture. Nonetheless, the problem addressed here remains where the term moves between scholarship, heritage administration, and public criticism, and where description and evaluation may become conflated. A reflexive use does not make those other uses disappear; each account has to establish the sense in which it uses folklorization

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and what the term, in that sense, explains.

For a community objecting to the conversion of a ceremony into a public attraction, refusing folklorization may mean retaining authority over access and performance, rather than demanding that culture should never change. The term's polemical force can be useful in such a dispute. By recognizing this distinction, we can preserve its value as advocacy without making criticism of the concept into a dismissal of practitioners' concerns. What does the objection concern, whose account does it express, and which conditions would answer it? It is through these questions that the warning acquires analytical precision, rather than through the strength of the word alone.

Context, power, and process must, therefore, be examined within the case. A carnival organized differently need not be presumed to have lost its real meaning; we can ask how participants understand the change, what continues, and what has become more difficult. Similarly, selling cultural objects may support some activities while restricting others, and the livelihood provided may be one that is secured on unequal terms. Income and appropriation do not exclude each other. As such, neither the destruction of culture nor its secured survival can be inferred from entry into a market; what is required is an account of the terms of exchange and their consequences, with the general label remaining useful where it helps us see these relations.

A performer may value an occasion of public representation or teaching that an observer regards as an impoverished ritual. Neither judgement should be allowed to stand for the whole community without inquiry, for differences of age, position, and access run through communities, and their members may disagree about what should be performed or kept restricted. The external, etic account and the internal, emic account provide a starting distinction, although the distinction itself is not a solution. We should read the authority to organize, alter, or refuse a performance in relation to these different interpretations, taking into account the conditions under which agency can be exercised if we are to recognize it.

Attending to these differences does not mean denying exploitation. As the processes considered in the literature show, minority culture may be appropriated, religious expression restricted, or cultural difference converted into an acceptable official image. Folklorization may identify a real political problem in such settings, although its limitation lies in the explanation claimed on its behalf. Who is folklorizing whom, through which institutions, and with what consequences? Practitioners may gain, lose, or contest something while the state, the market, and inherited

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inequalities shape their choices. To ask these questions is to preserve the critical concern by requiring it to answer to evidence.

If we take elite representation in Bolivia, a historically specified account can examine the events, institutions, and images through which indigenous culture was incorporated into the nation (Wahren, 2014). Calling Bolivian culture folklorized and therefore inauthentic tells us little of the motives or consequences; the judgement has already performed the work of analysis. It is in this sense that I use misconception, rather than to declare every scholarly use of folklorization invalid. A description appears as an explanation of cultural transformation because its conclusion has already been supplied by the opposition between genuine tradition and degraded representation.

Folklorization as Rhetoric in Heritage and Policy

A warning may remain useful even where it does not provide a general theory, and this partly accounts for the persistence of folklorization in heritage discourse. Hafstein's (2018) discussion connects safeguarding with culture organized as a festival, raising the possibility that a living practice may increasingly be arranged for display. Whether the warning applies has to be considered through the practice, the proposed intervention, and the concerns of its bearers. For policy, the alteration of a performance is not, therefore, the whole question; we should ask whether the alteration supports continued practice and transmission in terms which remain meaningful to the people concerned.

Listing a practice makes it available to a public language of value, while recognition may change expectations of its appearance, as Hafstein's (2018) discussion suggests. Safeguarding and representation may, thus, pull in different directions. Nonetheless, the 2003 Convention should not be read simply as another statement of folklore's supposedly static character, for Article 2 explicitly describes intangible cultural heritage as continually recreated by communities and groups, while Article 15 addresses their participation in its management (UNESCO, 2003). We have to distinguish what the Convention formulates from what particular safeguarding arrangements do. A programme whose stated aim concerns a changing practice may nevertheless encourage a fixed public image. This tension helps us understand the continuing appeal of folklorization as criticism, although it does not prove that all heritage recognition necessarily produces the outcome against which the criticism warns.

The relations brought together under folklorization may be distinguished through more precise concepts. MacCannell's staged authenticity concerns the organization of access and

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appearance in tourist settings (MacCannell, 1973), while invented tradition concerns practices established through claims of continuity with a past (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). Heritage production examines how objects and practices acquire value within new contexts of display and recognition (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1995, 1998). Although these approaches overlap, their distinctions allow us to ask which transformation we are examining, without making staging, commodification, and political appropriation interchangeable signs of decline. Folklorization can begin an inquiry; its analytical value depends on whether we go beyond the name.

CONCLUSION

Something once lived may become a museum exhibit of itself. The anxiety contained in this image helps us understand the persistence of folklorization, especially for people encountering their own practices under unfamiliar expectations. Although the image has force, that force does not make it a complete explanation; even restrictive conditions rarely make culture wholly motionless. The cases discussed here require us to distinguish public presentation, institutional control, commercial exchange, and continuing practice, for a performance may sustain some relations while changing or weakening others. It is by following these relations that we understand what has happened, rather than by accepting the metaphor of cultural petrification in their place.

The argument of this paper has concerned the point at which a presumed movement from authentic tradition to degraded representation takes the place of an explanation of cultural change. It is at this point that folklorization functions as a misconception. Its value as description or caution is not thereby removed, for loss of authority, restrictive stereotypes, and the displacement of wider meanings remain matters to which it can direct attention. The literature also contains reflexive and historically specific uses which do not require an entirely static model of folklore, and these have to be distinguished if the criticism is to remain faithful to its own evidence. Contemporary folkloristics allows us, in this sense, to examine continuity within change, without dismissing all alteration or celebrating all adaptation.

What is being safeguarded, and whose judgement informs the decision? Heritage research and policy need to specify this, for the persistence of a visible form cannot alone measure continuity, just as a change of form cannot alone prove loss. Transmission, participation, and the authority to decide cultural presentation have to be examined; folklorization may bring these questions into view, but it cannot answer them beforehand. To understand folklore in the present is to engage with what people continue to

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make of it, with what they refuse as well as what they revise and carry forward. It is through this engagement that criticism can retain its force without returning folklore to an imagined world outside history.

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