
CONFERENCES

Living Uncertainty

16th SIEF Congress in Brno, Czech Republic, 7–10 June 2023

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The 16th International SIEF Congress took place in Brno, Czech Republic on 7–10 June 2023. The *Société Internationale d'Ethnologie et de Folklore* (SIEF) is a professional association of scholars in the fields of ethnology, folklore studies and cultural anthropology. SIEF provides platforms for critical debate and networking, and the biannual congress brings together a large number of researchers. This year, there were 998 delegates in attendance and the four days included 97 panels and 669 papers discussing different aspects of the main theme: living uncertainty.

In the first keynote, Marilyn Strathern, an emeritus professor of social anthropology at Cambridge, talked about uncertainty in relations, asking if recognising such uncertainty can help us acknowledge the role that it plays in our lives. The second keynote was given by Andre Pető, a historian and professor in the Department of Gender Studies at the Central European University in Vienna. She is concerned about the ignorance that has given rise to various subjugating structures, such as illiberalism and neo-fascism, and reminded us about the need to be awake in these uncertain times.

My conference experience revolved strongly around the theme of walking, because in my current research project walk-along interviews are a key method of acquiring material. I participated in the panel entitled 'Further steps into the unknown: Walking methodologies as experimentation, experience and exploration'. All the presentations in the three-session panel were related to walking, but they explored a huge variety of topics. The panel started with several presentations about walking in nature. Folklorist Amy Skillman, from Goucher College, shared her experiences during the Covid pandemic, when, amid all the uncertainty, daily walks in the forest brought some kind of certainty. Skillman noticed that her multisensory perceptions became more accurate during the year and that her eyes were open to noticing and recognising things that had previously seemed irrelevant.

Another speaker on the same panel was Monika Kujawska, associate professor at the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Lodz. She presented her studies in the forest in indigenous Amazonian contexts. In her research, which focuses on the use of plants, she gathered information by walking in the forest together with community members. She

wanted to hear stories and meanings related to the forest and felt that they could only be revealed by joint forest walks engaging with the senses as well as experiences.

In the third session of the same panel, PhD student Mirna Tkalčić Simetić, from the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research in Zagreb, took us into the different atmospheres permeating the capital city of Croatia after two strong earthquakes in 2020. She presented the researcher's point of view on go-along interviews in a badly destroyed city. In her opinion, walking together produces more relevant information than just talking. Moreover, she discovered that walks can also serve as healing experiences.

I also presented my paper in this panel. I discussed my current research project, the planned, experienced and sensed socio-materiality and well-being of people in the Castle City of Turku. In this project, my research group, together with the participants, observes everyday practices and sensory experiences in an intensely developing part of town. In this presentation, I focused on the temporalities that can be revealed by using walk-along interviews.

Another perspective on urban walking and time was presented by ethnologist Professor Emerita Kerstin Gunnemark, from the University of Gothenburg. In her project, she returned to her childhood environment to observe how it felt to face the past with all its changes. We heard interesting observations, such as the fact that, after all these years, her bodily memory made her obey the left-hand traffic rules from the time when she lived in the town. Sweden moved to right-sided traffic in 1967.

Walking is not only a way of moving from one place to another but also a meditative or even spiritual activity. Several papers dealt with questions about walking as a central activity of pilgrimage, both as embodied practice and metaphor. I was intrigued by the idea of stumbling, or losing one's balance, on pilgrimage walks, which PhD student Lee Dallas, from Lund University, discussed. He brought out the meaning of unexpected turns and stumbling while on pilgrimage as well as in the work of researchers. The wide range of topics included in the walking theme reminded us of the applicability of ethnographic methods to the most diverse of research subjects.

I also participated in one of the conference workshops. In the workshop entitled 'Let's Get Lost', the focus was also on walking, with the idea being to navigate a foreign city without smartphones. The workshop deftly completed my understanding of uncertainty when walking in an unknown city and linked up quite nicely with some of the themes presented in the panel. The most obvious factors were stumbling and making mistakes, but also finding answers together. Each group was given an old postcard with an image of a place in Brno. The task was to find the place using any means except a smartphone.

My group was given an image of a statue of Gregor Mendel. We assumed it could be found in a park or a square and started walking. We did find many such places and even some statues, but not the right one. The search included much uncertainty and many missteps, but it was surprisingly enjoyable. The element of uncertainty made it an exciting game enhanced by sharing the experience with others.

The experience of getting lost also applies to the work of researchers. The unexpected dead-ends, turns and missteps help us see things from different angles. This idea also encapsulates the core of the conference: Uncertainty is part of life and part of research, no matter how hard we try to eliminate it. The possibility of stumbling or falling is something to keep in mind. We must be awake, as Andrea Petö reminded us in her lecture. Getting lost might be fun for a while, but the fun stops if you do not know how to correct the course.

AUTHOR

Päivi Leinonen (M.A.) is an ethnologist and doctoral researcher at the University of Turku. Her research interests include different aspects of urban environments, housing and everyday life.