

At the Eleventh Hour. The Principles of Folklore Collection in the Scholarly Oeuvre of Lajos Katona and in Hungarian Folklore Studies at the Turn of the 20th Century

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ABSTRACT

In Hungary, the academic study of folklore started at the turn of the 20th century. In the period between 1889 and 1920, institutions for the study of folklore and ethnography were established. The author points out that ethnographic collections in this era were motivated by concern about the loss of folk culture phenomena owing to changes brought by modernisation. Major arguments for the establishment of the Hungarian Ethnographic Society as well as the Museum of Ethnography referred to the need to salvage endangered items of folk culture from vanishing. Folklore collections were interpreted as rescue missions aiming to save material in the penultimate moment. The author of this paper investigates the way in which an outstanding folklorist of the period, Lajos Katona (1862–1910), professor of comparative literary studies, defined the essence, purpose, and method of ethnographic/folklore collections. Katona urged on several occasions that collectors of folklore be equipped with professional guidebooks and other auxiliary materials. He played a role in the popularisation of the activities of the Folklore Fellows, furthering the establishment of a network of voluntary collectors. Empirical data collection in the field is a central notion of folklore studies, one of the most important methodological and epistemological categories of the discipline, which functions as a distinctive feature differentiating it from other fields of study. Therefore, it is of central importance to shed light upon how and why the principles of the collection and recording of folklore phenomena in oral culture have changed.

KEYWORDS

folklore collection, 'salvaging at the last moment,' Lajos Katona, voluntary collectors, folklore fellows

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Obsolescence, collection, preservation, rescue – all these terms have served as leitmotifs of ethnographic and folklore research. They crop up again and again as key points of reference and motivating forces and remain present in the history of our discipline. Concern over the disappearance of the phenomena of folk culture and the collection fever triggered by the excitement of the eleventh hour have gained impetus in Hungary in the 20th century, at a time when the traditional peasant lifestyle was gradually disappearing. Such justification for collecting is, in fact, coeval with the discovery of folk poetry in the 19th century, when its research began, and it has accompanied the history of folklore studies as a discipline. It is still present in our very day.¹ It was exactly with reference to the ‘eleventh hour’ that ballads were salvaged from obsolescence since the 1860s, just as we today salvage remembrance materials of WWII or the Hungarian Revolution of 1956.

European modernisation, the industrial revolution, and rapid urbanisation have created the possibility of exploring folk culture and the desire and capacity to preserve it and transmit it as a thing of great value. At the same time, this has triggered a process which led to the complete transformation or disintegration of local ‘folk’ or ‘traditional’ cultures over the 19th and 20th centuries and the eventual disappearance of European peasant culture.

What people in the multiethnic kingdom of Hungary noticed during the 19th century, was that the more spectacular phenomena of folk culture and the representative objects of folk art flourished as an effect of the economic changes. It was from the era of Romanticism in Europe including Hungary, when they became interested in folklore, vernacular architecture and home-industry and began to exhibit and collect highly ornate objects or ensembles of objects, increasingly colorful peasant costumes, the rites of folk customs, and folk music (HOFER 1975a:402–405, 1975b). It was also in the wake of this process that people began to treat peasant culture, folk poetry, folk music, and the folk arts in general as valuable. Folk poetry came to be seen as a source of inspiration for high literature, or, in a broader sense, of all branches of art and related scholarship. This is when folk culture started being seen as an autochthonic system. The oral folk tradition was seen as uniquely original, developing organically and independently of external influences – a manifestation of the “national spirit or the national character,” and thus a depository of national traditions. Thus, the oral traditions, objects, and customs of folk culture are valuable, their disappearance is a loss, and therefore we must salvage them “at the last minute, in the eleventh hour.”

Before the early modern period, the transience of things was self-evident to man who lived in unison with the natural cycle and thus held a cyclic world view. Changes seemed insignificant when the eternity of the divine presence was what really mattered. The spirit of the community survived the destruction of the particular and the concrete. By contrast, modern man has woken up to the fact that life is eternal change and that things can vanish irrevocably and irretrievably. They felt threatened by the global changes brought by technical innovation and tried with all their might to collect all the vanishing objects, phenomena, and memories, to take stock of them, describe them, and systematise them scientifically – and thus salvage them from being forgotten forever. However, ethnographic collections fuelled by the frenzy of the eleventh hour carry the danger that collection and text recording leave no space for interpretation, as that would divert time and energy away from collecting. This way, objects and phenomena come to be stored in

¹A historical review of folklore collection and research inspired by the principle of ‘salvaging at the last moment’ in German scholarship is offered by SCHÖCK 1970:85–104.



collections, databases, and museums deprived of their context, and it is left for posterity to process them and examine them. Rudolf Schenda (1970:124–154) believed that the danger of ethnographic collection focusing on salvaging material, as opposed to a problem-focused approach to collecting, lay in the fact that collectors would show little interest in facts and their interconnections and concentrate merely on the phenomena they strive to rescue. Thus, they would notice only features that meet their prior expectations and confirm their existing assumptions and attitudes. The interviewer and the interviewee would focus not as much on the existing realities as on the ideals they are both trying to meet. A further possible pitfall of collecting efforts inspired by this kind of mentality is that the interviewer may look on the informant and data provider as a true representative of an entire community. Their utterances and acumen may be considered as generally valid for a smaller or even larger group (family, village, or even region or ethnic group), which may lead to false conclusions.

In Hungary, the second half of the 19th century brought about the beginning of the scholarly study of folklore – ethnography no longer had to struggle² to secure itself a place among other scholarly disciplines. The cause of collecting, publishing, and studying folk poetry became separate from other great national movements, from the search for national traditions and a close co-existence with national literature. In the history of Hungarian folklore studies as a distinct branch of scholarship, the period between 1889 and 1920 was the beginning of folklore collection with a professional approach, when the relevant scholarly methodology was developed, institutions established, and learned journals launched.³ The very first initiatives of collecting and publishing folk poetry were already fueled by the fear of the eleventh hour (cf. GULYÁS 2015:15–16), but the subsequent period in the history of the discipline, the age of institutionalisation, is also accompanied by reference to the eleventh hour as the principal force that motivated folklore collection. All of this is also present in the context of the establishment of the Hungarian Ethnographic Society (Magyar Néprajzi Társaság, founded in 1889) and later the Museum of Ethnography (Néprajzi Múzeum). An address about the need to set up a Museum of Ethnography was delivered at the very first assembly of the Hungarian Ethnographic Society in 1889. As Antal Herrmann, secretary of the society said: “In order to secure the future existence of our nation, it is our duty to promote the spread of civilisation even to the detriment of primitive culture, but it is also our duty to *rescue* for scholarship the features and documents of the original nature of our peoples which real life has eliminated from itself. We have tarried far too long, perhaps until *the eleventh hour*, in complying with this duty. *We have filled* monumental museums with the flora, fauna, and geology of the great wide world, as well as with the cultural relics of the past people of Pannonia and the current people of overseas parts; thanks to the eager activity of an enthusiastic professional, we even boast an anthropological museum; laudable efforts have been dedicated to salvaging our intellectual and spiritual legacy; but the

²The promotion of folklore studies as a discipline in its own right was presented as a ‘struggle for life,’ for instance, in Lajos Katona’s programmatic writing in which he argued for the recognition of folklore studies as a separate branch of scholarship (KATONA 1890a, cf. GULYÁS 2015:19).

³cf. VOIGT et al. 1998:47–49 (A népköltészet tudományos vizsgálatának kezdete [The Beginnings of the Scholarly Examination of Folklore]); KÓSA 2001:101–113 (Az alapvető néprajzi intézmények kialakulása [The Emergence of the Fundamental Institutions of Ethnography]); SOZAN 1979:132–224 (The Golden Age of Hungarian Ethnography 1889–1919); LANDGRAF 2011:158–174 (A folklórisztika önálló tudományzakká válása – 1890–1920 [The Transformation of Folklore Studies into an Independent Discipline]).



objects of the peoples of our land, at least as far as their ethnographic aspect is concerned, have been sorely disregarded” (HERRMANN 1890:21, emphasis by I.L.).

The proposal made by the Museum Committee of the Hungarian Ethnographic Society reads, “We must lay a great emphasis on collecting, particularly since *the material which is of ethnographic importance is vanishing at an alarming rate in the wake of the spread of modern transport and the resulting commerce*; and this is particularly true of regions inhabited by pure Hungarian populations where the cottage crafts have already disappeared completely and all occupations are being thoroughly transformed, particularly with regard to the tools used” (N. N. 1890:97, emphasis by I.L.). A similar line of argument was used by Ottó Herman⁴ when he spoke in Parliament in favour of establishing a Museum of Ethnography: “The development of modern culture and transport is swallowing up and wiping away genuine folklore, the *ethnos* and things of ethnographic relevance, and so we are talking about salvaging things that still exist in, so to speak, the last hour” (HERMAN 1891:25, emphasis by I.L.).⁵

Learned members and highly honoured officials of the Hungarian Ethnographic Society voiced their concern that the institutions of ethnography and the collecting campaigns may have been launched too late. This idea was also adopted by amateur collectors who supported the activity of the scholarly society when reasoning about their collecting work.⁶ A penchant to turn toward the past and to study and collect that which affords a conveniently distant perspective in time seems to be a profound characteristic of ethnography and the academic study of folklore. Over the past two centuries, the study of folk poetry has focused on genres and folklore phenomena which were beginning to lose their practical value, significance, popularity, function, potential performers or practitioners due to certain changes in culture. This may be equally true of songs of *Midsummer’s Night* or the use of memorial books (KESZEG 2000:20–21). Such an attitude of scrutinising the past may often permeate not only the ethnographer or collector but even the informants themselves. Indeed, it is a well-known situation in the life of any collector that the person invited to recollect declares that in his or her community traditions have been long dead. The present is perceived as inferior to an earlier past state often seen as a standard of comparison – a trait that can be partially explained by the mechanisms of social psychology. Collectors have encountered this attitude not only in the 20th or 21st centuries – the case was no different in the era of the earliest collecting efforts. For example, János S. Kováts had joined the

⁴Herman, Ottó (1835–1914), zoologist, archaeologist, ethnographer of international stature, politician. From 1875, member of the Hungarian National Museum. At the National Expo of 1885, he presented his own collection on fishing, which later became the foundation of the Hungarian ethnographic collection of the Museum of Ethnography. He was also a founding member of the Hungarian Ethnographic Society.

⁵15 years later, arguing for the need to organise museums and collections of ethnography, Zsigmond Bátky, later director of the Department of Ethnography of the Hungarian National Museum, wrote, “consider *the loss* that our national culture has suffered because our forefathers did not *think to collect all of this* a hundred or even more years ago. What treasures have sunk into eternal oblivion, and we watch with an aching heart how we are treading among *ruins* in the field of the ethnography of this country, even if these ruins are fairly abundant compared to those of other nations” (BÁTKY 1906:7, emphasis by I.L.).

⁶See, for instance, KOVÁTS S. 1892:74: “Just consider how many characteristic customs have been wiped from the face of the Earth by the rapidly spreading new currents of culture and education! They have left barely any trace! And the depressing political and economic conditions of our present time (...) *have utterly crushed the fashion for folk customs*. (...) The former merry spirits of the people are gone, their place has been taken by dreary greed. I am not sure whether *the establishment of the Ethnographic Society has not come too late*” (emphasis by I.L.).



Hungarian Ethnographic Society as a novice schoolteacher upon its foundation in 1889, and a few years later the journal *Ethnographia* published his article on the collecting of folk customs. In the Introduction he writes, “When I was a child, *the world was quite different here*. Neighbours, relatives, and in-laws would come together in each other’s homes on snowy winter days and *chat merrily* by the good old tiled stove with a glass of wine and a pipe to smoke. Young lads and maidens used to gather in the spinning house; with the spindles whirring, you heard the sound of storytelling, song after song; lots of laughter, chatter, and jokes – some harsher, others tamer. Today these places are empty. (...) Today! Today everyone stays home with their own family. (...) One wonders whether the spread of education is not as detrimental as it is blissful, in some ways?” (KOVÁTS S. 1892:74).

The above diagnostic of vanishing customs and a world that has already changed was written in 1892(!).

The intention to rescue vanishing phenomena nearing oblivion due to changes brought on by advances in civilisation and plans to register them and systematise them are also observable in the oeuvre of Lajos Katona (1862–1910). However, his investigations were inspired by a problem-centred scholarly approach based on comparative philology. He was interested in interpreting phenomena rather than amassing material or salvaging things.

Lajos Katona played a key role in the intellectual history of the turn of the 20th century not only by Hungarian but also by European standards. He was born and raised in a Catholic artisan family in the city of Vác.⁷ At the Faculty of Arts of Budapest University, he embarked on a course of studies in Greek, Arabic, Turkish, and Creole languages. His lecturers included philologists Gusztáv Heinrich, Aurél Mayr, Emil Ponori Thewrewk. His linguistic competencies, profound knowledge of classic philology, sensitive approach to problems, wide-ranging research interests, and instinctive feel for philology predestined him to becoming the figure who was to lay several cornerstones for Hungarian folklore philology. The most powerful influences on his scholarly approach came from the scholarly methodology used by positivist German philology and cultural history. The most powerful impact on the development of his theoretical thought came from Romanist Hugo Schuchardt⁸ and Gustav Meyer, who specialised in Balkanology and Indo-German studies. His approach to culture and folklore reflected Theodor Benfey’s monogenesis theory on the universality of folk tales and Wilhelm Wundt’s school of folk psychology in equal measure.

⁷Vác is a city and seat of a bishopric on the bank of the Danube, a township that has been inhabited since the Hungarian Conquest. It is 40 km from the capital city. Hungary’s first railway, which opened in 1846, ran between Vác and Pest. In the second half of the 19th century the city underwent considerable industrialisation, which strengthened the middle classes. It came to be characterised by sports clubs, educational circles, and a flourishing local press. At this time, it had approximately 16 thousand inhabitants.

⁸Hugo Schuchardt (1842–1927), an excellent linguist, was professor of Romance philology at Graz University from 1876. He was in active correspondence with his former student, Lajos Katona. Schuchardt’s legacy is currently being processed and published online at Graz University under the direction of Professor Bernhard Hurch. The project is accessible at: <http://schuchardt.uni-graz.at/> (accessed November 27, 2021). Schuchardt’s total correspondence amounts to some 12 thousand letters, 300 of which were to or from Katona. Within the broader project, their correspondence is being processed by Frank-Rutger Hausmann, professor emeritus of Freiburg University. I owe him many thanks for the information he provided regarding the correspondence.



Katona was one of the founders of the Hungarian Ethnographic Society, a member of its select committee for a number of years, its notary and then secretary, until finally, in 1906, he became its deputy president – a post which he held until his death in 1910.⁹ He played a fundamental role in ethnography and folklore studies becoming an independent discipline in Hungary.

It was shortly after the establishment of the Society, at one of its first reading nights in 1890 that he delivered his ambitious address titled *Ethnographia. Ethnologia. Folklore* [Ethnography, Ethnology, Folklore]. The significance of the author and his work is indicated by the fact that this address was published as the opening article in the first learned journal of Hungarian ethnography, *Ethnographia*, launched in 1890. The author supported his argument for seeing ethnography as a discipline in its own right with a rich international array of references and placed the issue in a historical context. He claimed that the following conditions needed to be met for this field of study to become an independent discipline: “does it have its *own object* of study which is fully or (. . .) at least partially separate from that of other disciplines? Does it have its own *methodology* corresponding to that object? Furthermore, does it comprise a *system* of knowledge which is closely coherent and which was obtained through this method and which fits organically into the universe of all other disciplines as a higher whole?” (KATONA 1890a:71).

Since the answer to these questions is affirmative in the case of ethnography, it has a place within academic scholarship and may be considered a discipline in its own right, argued Katona. His suggestions about the possible objects of ethnological, ethnographic, and folklore studies, along with his terminological suggestions, have only partly become incorporated in 20th-century Hungarian folklore studies. At the same time, his perspective on his subject matter and his exacting standards of quality, along with his striving to integrate Hungarian research in their international context, were exemplary both for those helping the emergence of the new discipline and for posterity. The respect he enjoyed among his contemporaries is expressed by the following words of laudation spoken by Gyula Sebestyén:¹⁰ “we have to acknowledge that in the fields of comparative literary history and folklore, all of us here were students of Lajos Katona” (SEBESTYÉN 1910:453).

It was with a sharp-eyed sagacity that he drew attention to certain questions and problems that had regularly recurred in the history of ethnographic and folklore research. Thus, for example, he emphasised that the study of folk poetry was of an interdisciplinary nature, since the collected material itself, i.e., the object of study brought it closer to literary history, but the subject, the performer of the texts, placed it in connection with ethnography and ethnology. The method of investigation, Lajos Katona believed, cannot be anything other than philology. He admonished his colleagues to apply the strictest consistency in handling, tracing, and comparing their data. Collectors and analysts of folklore data could forestall distrust from other branches of scholarship – and in his age this mostly meant philology, primarily classic philology – by applying the strictest discipline in their methodology, as Katona convincingly

⁹On his role in the foundation of the Hungarian Ethnographic Society, the posts he held, and his relationship to Antal Herrmann, see HÁLA 2014:281–288.

¹⁰Sebestyén Gyula (1864–1946), folklorist, literary historian, Chief Custodian of the library of the Hungarian National Museum, corresponding member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and member of the Board of the Hungarian Ethnographic Society in various functions, co-editor of *Ethnographia* jointly with Bernát Munkácsi between 1898 and sole editor between 1911 and 1917.



claimed (1900a:165–166, re-published 1912/II:13–14). In an era of scholarship where questions of origin and the search for genetic connections represented one of the central issues of folklore research in Hungary, just as elsewhere, it was particularly significant that he deployed all his knowledge and professional prestige to try to curb the search for genetic connections and parallels which are remote in time and space and cannot be philologically validated.¹¹

In light of Lajos Katona's essays and reviews, a clear distinction between pseudo-scholarship – meaning naïve dilettante scholarly pursuits, mostly motivated by the noblest intentions – and genuine professional scholarship emerges. He believed that collectors and amateur researchers with an interest in folk traditions “were only unscientific in their methodology, but their strong faith in tradition can no more be condemned than the noble respect and enthusiastic zeal with which they apply themselves to their uncritical efforts. It is quite natural that, learning from their examples, we will not emulate their naïve mistakes, but we will no more imitate those who, falling into the opposite extreme, deny tradition any of its credit and validating potential. They are even willing to twist the facts about by force rather than accept something from tradition” (KATONA 1897:59, re-published 1912/II:207). Thus speaking, he captured the desirable ethos of the ethnographer and folklore researcher in a manner which is valid to this day.

In the following paragraphs I shall outline the way in which Lajos Katona, this scholar of exceptional talent and authority, and in a broader sense the folklorists of the period, interpreted the essence, purpose, and methodology of ethnographic/folklore collection. Katona summarised the ‘most imminent tasks’ of Hungarian folk story scholarship in four points:

1. explore the historical folk tale corpus
2. collect from the lips of the people
3. process and systematise the material collected
4. comparative examination,

which he saw as the part of research that is “the most difficult and requires the greatest apparatus” (KATONA 1891:227, re-published 1912/I:214). It is widely known in the discipline that Lajos Katona practiced three of these four activities intensely and at a high professional standard. Scholarship has paid less attention to how he thought about folklore collection and what kind of role he played in formulating the principles of collection in the period. His biographers and critics lauding his work often emphasise that he himself did not engage in intense collecting work.¹² He was mostly fascinated by comparative philological analysis and the systematisation and cataloguing of the various types of tales. Instead, he encouraged his students to collect. He considered field research to be a difficult occupation, since, as he writes, “capturing, recording, and publishing traditions” all require different qualities, and it is rare for a collector to be in

¹¹One example is that of Gyula Istvánffy (1863–1921, teacher, ethnographer, collector of folk tales), who explained the similarity between the *sujet* of a Hungarian Palóc tale and a Turkish tale by attributing it to transmission during the 150 years of Ottoman Occupation in Hungary. Katona refuted this suggestion by offering a detailed review of the widespread European prevalence and parallels of the *sujet* and the various motifs of the tale (KATONA 1890b:227–231, 364–371).

¹²“Of all of the workers of Hungarian folklore, perhaps Lajos Katona was the only one who had precious little direct contact with the people and who did not engage in collecting products of folk literature, either (...) He always encouraged his students to study the people and their life directly, and to do what they can to salvage abandoned products of folk literature,” wrote Sebestyén (SEBESTYÉN 1910:453). Katona himself wrote in a letter, “I am too much of a bookworm for collecting, sadly, or for entering in direct contact with the people” (CSÁSZÁR 1912:61; REISINGER 2000:23).



possession of all of these disparate traits. The collector must be familiar not only with the dialect of the people he observes but also with their manner of thinking, living, their customs, habits, and tastes (KATONA 1891:220, re-published 1912/I:210).

In the following section I wish to prove that although Lajos Katona did not carry out intense fieldwork himself, he did fight with great dedication to make folklore collection reach a level that would make its results useable for academic study. He claimed that comparative work was not going to be philologically sound unless the recording of the text can be considered authentic (cf. KATONA 1896a:251–252, 1891:220, re-published 1912/I:208–211). Empirical data collection in the field is a central concept and basic principle of ethnography and folklore studies, one of the most important methodological and epistemological issues in the discipline, the foundation stone of its identity, and, at the same time, the distinctive trait which sets it apart from related disciplines. Around the end of the 19th century, in the period when folklore studies developed into an independent discipline, the guidelines for collecting and recording folklore phenomena living in the oral tradition underwent a change. Lajos Katona's achievement in scholarship contributed to the criteria of the authenticity of folklore texts becoming transformed in Hungarian research.

Ever since he had taken an active part in the public affairs of his discipline, Lajos Katona had been in favour of supporting folklore collecting efforts through professional information and guidelines. As secretary of the Hungarian Ethnographic Society, in his report of 1896 he urged that the long-promised questionnaires for collectors be finally produced so they could guide and assist them in systematic collection work.¹³ After all, the majority of the Society's membership consisted not of academics but of lay individuals interested in ethnography.¹⁴ Several of them felt an affinity for collecting. The Hungarian Ethnographic Society has always had a supportive and helpful attitude towards collecting. In 1900, they decided to increase the number of pages in their journal, *Ethnographia*, in order to publish more of the collected material. But not simply material collected by scholars – they called on volunteer collectors in their advertisement, *Let us collect folk poetry*, as follows: “with regard to this joyful news, we wish to call on all friends of Hungarian folklore (...) to participate in these collecting efforts” (MUNKÁCSI – SEBESTYÉN 1900:31).

Lajos Katona was among the first Hungarian scholars to recognise that in no other discipline did the participation of dilettantes so jeopardised the professionalism and prestige of the discipline as it did in ethnography. Even back then, collectors very easily turned into self-appointed ‘researchers.’ This led to a tremendous number of shortcomings in textual publications and gave rise to flawed conclusions and explanations (MUNKÁCSI 1900:39).

This kind of danger haunts folklore studies to this day. In the preface to his collection of folk stories, János Berze Nagy,¹⁵ a student of Lajos Katona, writes about the dangers that may arise from the attitude of a contrary, all-too-clever amateur collector. “Anyone who has been fortunate enough to listen to the words of a dyed-in-the-wool rural story-teller will know what a

¹³“It would be desirable is our Society finally fulfilled its oft-renewed promise to its collectors and publish the questionnaires that offer instructions for a methodical procedure” (KATONA 1896b:430).

¹⁴cf. Rendes tagok. A Magyarországi Néprajzi Társaság szervezete [Regular Members. The Organisation of the Hungarian Ethnographic Society] (*Ethnographia* I. 1890:60–68).

¹⁵János Berze Nagy (1879–1946), folklorist, tale researcher.



bloom of innocence may be struck from the face of tradition by the layman who knows nothing but pretends to know everything. Our folk poetry collectors fall into the gravest transgressions when they presume to tell the people what the latter actually want” (BERZE NAGY 1907:XII).

Unprofessional folklore collection was not the only point where Lajos Katona identified the dangers of dilettantism – the search for the archaic religion and mythology of the Magyars could also easily depart from the facts in its comparative speculations (KATONA 1897:56, re-published 1912/II:202). He was concerned that phenomena, objects, and motifs of folk culture may be diverted and transformed into cheap sensationalist exhibition pieces in bad taste, often driven by profit (KATONA 1912a:260).

As early as 1896, he urged the publication of a collector’s guide. In the decades following the birth of the discipline, various forms of the Hungarian Ethnographic Society called for more than the auxiliary materials and questionnaires for collectors. They also declared that it is desirable for a Hungarian collectors’ manual to be produced as soon as possible. A compendium like that could review the subjects, goals, and findings of ethnographic research. They tried to bridge this deficiency by translating certain sections of handbooks written in foreign languages. Thus, for instance, Bernát Munkácsi offered a long review of Friedrich S. Krauss’ *Allgemeine Methodik der Volkskunde* (1899) on the pages of *Ethnographia* with the purpose of temporarily bridging over the absence of a local manual on ‘folklore studies.’ In his review, Munkácsi described the most important pieces of advice the author gives on ‘collecting material.’ For collecting folk poetry, he particularly recommends the use of the phonograph. He draws attention to the dangers inherent in questionnaires – asking too many questions may hijack the collector’s work, since the respondent may go out of their way to meet some genuine or imagined expectations. Instead of collecting answers to a questionnaire, the collector should “build on the most authentic and most direct confessions,” according to the suggestions of the ethnographic manual (MUNKÁCSI 1900:40). Incidentally, the use of questionnaires was merely a plan at this time in Hungarian research.

Lajos Katona himself was planning to write a Hungarian manual on folklore studies; indeed, he compiled two book plans, one in late 1889, the other in the mid-1890s. In these he outlined the projected structure of this summary, which, sadly, never came to be written. The outlines, however, clearly reflect Lajos Katona’s perspective on the various fields of folklore research and the system of folklore genres (KATONA 1912b:378–381).

In 1900, when the Hungarian Ethnographic Society published its advertisement on the pages of *Ethnographia* for collectors, titled *Let’s collect folk poetry!*, there was still no Hungarian folklore manual or other collectors’ guide available that they could have recommended to collectors. In view of this lack, Katona translated, and published in the same volume of the journal, a page-long paragraph that starts with *Wie soll man Volksmärchen aufzeichnen?* [How should folktales be recorded?], from Robert Petsch’s¹⁶ newly published writing reviewing the latest publications and research on German tales and legends. In it, the German folklorist summarised the most important rules of tale notation of the era.¹⁷ Lajos Katona did not write

¹⁶Robert Petsch (1875–1945), German expert on Germanic Studies, ethnographer, folklorist. His works most frequently quoted by Hungarian scholarship include *Formelhafte Schlüsse im Volksmärchen* (1900) and *Neue Beiträge zur Kenntnis des Volksrätels* (1899). Both were reviewed by Katona in *Ethnographia*, as well as two of his subsequently published works, *Das deutsche Volksrätel* (1917) and *Gehalt und Form* (1925).

¹⁷PETSCH 1900:381–390. See page 387 for the translated detail. <https://archive.org/details/archivfrdasstu104brauuoft/page/386/mode/2up?view=theater> (accessed November 27, 2021).



about the rest of the work,¹⁸ and the emphases in the translation are his own, marking the points he wished most to commend to the attention of Hungarian scholarship. Writing at the end of the 19th century, Petsch postulated criteria for contemporary German scholarship that were different from those that the Brothers Grimm had followed:

- The collector should not be guided by his own aesthetic and ethical concept. “Today, the collector must entirely put aside his own self, his own notions of what is beautiful and what is moral; and *record with slavish precision all that he hears and in the way in which he hears it;*”
- a fragment heard should not be supplemented based on previously known more complete versions. If the storyteller mingles his story with individual, personal elements, those must be retained, because they also benefit scholarship, but these must not be over-emphasised;
- *unadulterated dialect* must be observed, preserving the speaker’s pronunciation and manner of presentation;
- the same story needs to be heard from as many storytellers as possible. “*It is also desirable that the collector should get the same piece told by as many individuals as possible*, but not with the purpose of selecting, as did the Grimms, the presentation which seems ‘the finest’ of them or to supplement one with the help of the others (. . .) – what scholarship requires is not this kind of ‘edited’ material but the entire body of material” (KATONA 1900b:424);
- even in the most perfect written record a great deal is lost, such as emphasis and tone of voice – this is where the phonograph is of great help, “used widely today in the course of collecting linguistic folk traditions for the purposes of ethnography and linguistics.”

This is how Petsch concludes the line of criteria to be followed, and Lajos Katona adds, in brackets, to the German translation, “As is widely known, our fellow member, Béla Vikár, who up until now has noted down folk tales of Somogy County in writing and with stenography, has for the last year been using a phonograph, thanks to the noble generosity of our Minister of Religion and Public Education, to record with great success and laudable results the poetic relics living on the lips of the people” (KATONA 1900b:424).¹⁹

Around the turn of the 20th century, it was far from obvious that the use of stenography or the phonograph should be accepted and supported. The requirement to capture texts without change and transformation had been clear even in the very first advertisements for collecting folk literature. But fidelity in recording had mostly meant not verbatim adherence to the text but faithfulness to the spirit of the people manifesting in folk literature in these early collections. Up until the second half of the 19th century, right up to the turn of the century and sometimes even beyond, the essence of collecting folk literature had not been to record a story with as much accuracy as possible but to record and publish the most complete variant possible, based on the variants that are structurally complete and aesthetically pleasing. The goal was not to document truthfully the unique, concrete phenomenon, the single speech event,

¹⁸He translated the part starting with *Wie soll man Volksmärchen aufzeichnen*, and in publishing omitted only one sentence, in which the author mentions a German example, and the concluding sentence and its extensions.

¹⁹Béla Vikár (1859–1945), linguist, translator, folklore researcher, corresponding member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. As an official, and later leader, of the Parliament Stenography Bureau, he was a professional practitioner and acknowledged international expert of stenography. He was able to note down text at the speed of natural live speech with total accuracy. The first time he used a phonograph for collecting in Hungary was in 1896 – a pioneering act in this regard even on a European scale.



but to capture the essence, the ideal typical traits of folk culture, and to reflect what was seen as folk performance. During the editorial process it was possible to make aesthetic and ideological corrections to adjust the texts to the assumed expectations of the recipients (cf. GULYÁS 2011:129–130; DOMOKOS 2015:30–42).

Lajos Katona believed that sharp vision and sharp hearing were indispensable prerequisites for the satisfactory recording of folk tales, “where the highest possible proficiency in stenography (. . .) is one of the chief assets” (KATONA 1891:225). Nevertheless, even in some of his writings we find places where he seems to be speaking with a degree of caution and reservation about recording with stenography or the phonograph. János Berze Nagy’s collection was published as Volume IX of the *Collection of Hungarian Folklore* [Magyar Népköltési Gyűjtemény], with Katona’s laudatory words in the Preface: “the collector publishing these texts follows a fortunate golden mean between the faithful recording of stenography or even the phonograph and a free, stylised manner” (KATONA 1907:VIII–IX).

What the above-quoted passage reflects is that the change in the criteria for folklore collection was not a single event but rather a gradual change within the history of the discipline and also in the personal oeuvre of one researcher. After all, these suggestions appeared several years after the previously cited string of advice regarding the annotation of folk tales. Katona, too, speaks of the contingent elements of phonograph recordings, similarly to folk song collector Zoltán Kodály, who made a great number of phonograph recordings and wrote in 1937 that “The phonogram gives you a snapshot, a momentary image. And this is not always the best image, it is often distorted. The true and full image of a melody cannot finally take shape for the collector until he has had several phonograph recordings and several instances of live observation. Only then will he know what is permanent and characteristic in the melody and what is changing or contingent” (KODÁLY 2007 [1937]:293).

Accepting, supporting, and encouraging collection using stenography or the phonograph, as well as striving for truly verbatim notation whereby all that is spoken by the informant must be recorded in the most accurate manner possible, even if the presentation is of uncertain origin or fragmented or aesthetically inferior – all of this was probably closely related to the powerful influence of the historical-geographic method.

European folklore research at the turn of the 20th century was fundamentally determined by the historical comparative method of the Finish historical-geographic school that emerged largely based on the textual philological investigation of Kaarle Krohn. Throughout Europe, the historical-geographic method played a key role in folklore studies growing into an independent discipline. The object of this new branch of scholarship, folklore, was seen as consisting of folklore texts that could be collected in different variants, and its method was seen as historical and comparative. Such a text-centred approach not only encouraged philological research but also opened the way to studying folklore as a social phenomenon. Based on textual variants, it became possible to study local and regional idiosyncrasies or to analyse questions of individual performance style and collective expectations. The method also influenced the criteria of what was considered an authentically recorded folklore text. Social and cultural context became important from the point of view of comparison, including who had performed the given variant, where, when, what their level of education was, and from whom they had learned it.²⁰

²⁰On the re-appraisal of the impact of the historical-geographic method and school, see: FROG 2013:18–34.



The process whereby this method became integrated into the Hungarian study of folk literature has not been adequately explored, even though the investigations of European textual folklore into questions of genre, its textual corpuses, catalogues of types and motifs, its principles of systematisation, or its conceptual terminology have strong ties to the basic principles of the historical-geographic method. The comparative method had an invigorating effect on folklore collecting, striving to base analyses on the largest possible number of variants. Lajos Katona's investigations, particularly his folk tale research and his attempts at cataloguing, were fundamentally affected by the historical-geographic school.

With the objective of exploring and salvaging the relics of folk poetry, folk music, folk belief and customs, and of processing and publishing the collected material, an international folklore association was founded in Finland in 1907 under the name Folklore Fellows by Finnish, Swedish, Norwegian, German, and Danish scholars. The draft Deed of Foundation and the invitation document were signed by Kaarle Krohn, Carl Wilhelm von Sydow, and Axel Olrik. The society was commended to the attention of the Hungarian Ethnographic Society by Lajos Katona in 1908. At the meeting of the board of directors he described the goals of the international association. The Deed of Foundation was presented in *Ethnographia* (KATONA 1908:374–375). He encouraged his colleagues to have the Hungarian Ethnographic Society join the initiative. However, the *Hungarian Branch of Folklore Fellows* was not formed until 1911, after Katona's death. By organising the Hungarian collectors' network, their goal was to salvage phenomena that were rapidly disappearing under the influence of ongoing changes. By involving and training the broadest possible range of collectors from the community, they were planning to collect the *folk traditions* of the Hungarians and ethnic minorities living in the country (SEBESTYÉN 1912:193–199). It was under the auspices of this organisation that they first began to print collectors' guidelines, proposed topics for collection and questionnaires. In a publication called *Tájékoztató* [Prospectus] (SEBESTYÉN – BÁN 1912), collectors could read about the most important criteria for collecting, suggested subject areas, and the questionnaire itself. They emphasised the importance of noting down texts verbatim and the necessity to interview several informants. They also admonished collectors to record the exact personal data of both the collector and the informant. This was a new consideration, since the Society's guidelines for collectors issued in 1900 had not required that the data of the informant be recorded. In order to support this grand-scale research effort financially and morally, they managed to secure the assistance of the Hungarian National Museum, the Kisfaludy Society, and the Hungarian Ethnographic Society, as well as private individuals and various institutions. The National Széchényi Library was going to house the vast number of manuscripts that would result from such an international venture – indeed, the institution planned to organise a separate folklore department. However, the national archive that was envisaged did not come to exist until quarter of a century later, in 1939, as the Ethnological Repository of the Museum of Ethnography. Within a few years after its establishment, Gyula Sebestyén, in an address assessing the achievements of the Hungarian Branch of FF, once again spoke of the organisation of the Hungarian collecting network as a rescue operation.²¹

²¹“In the framework of an international alliance of scholars, a series of experimentation overarching several generations of our national literature and preparatory efforts of varying intensity, we have successfully found the method for the systematic exploration of Hungarian folk tradition, for *salvaging it at the last moment* and for valorising it in the national consciousness and international scholarship” (SEBESTYÉN 1914:135, emphasis by I.L.).



In his obituary on Lajos Katona, Sándor Solymossy²² spoke of the activity of the ‘master’ as one that brought about a change in the history of Hungarian folklore studies. In his work, the romanticist, aestheticizing view of folk poetry is replaced by comparative research exploring genetic connections, which sees an imperfect fragment as vital as a perfect piece of mature text.

“His activity marks a new turn in Hungarian literary scholarship. In place of the romantic vision and aesthetic appraisal of folklore, he accorded general validity to the genetic theory based on the psychology of the people, which holds that a shapeless fragment living in the memory of the people is just as valuable as the complete whole which happened to survive intact – indeed, the former may be even older due to its archaic character, which preserves age-old tradition” (SOLYMOSSY 1910:259).

He was among the first to point out the significance of Lajos Katona’s theoretical approach and investigations for the history of the discipline. Concluding his laudation, Solymossy recalls one of his last conversations with Katona. Talking of social theory, Katona reflected on the antagonism that was emerging between the rapidly changing modern metropolis losing its local colour to international influences and the “the conservative villages changing at the slow pace of forced transformation” – a type of internal war within our societies. We must endure this degree of destruction and loss in exchange for mutual understanding and rapprochement, says Solymossy, quoting Katona’s words, “Let us strive to know and understand the people in their true essence. Let us study regularly all with which they surround themselves – let us collect and study their intellectual treasures” (SOLYMOSSY 1910:261).

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²²Sándor Solymossy (1864–1945), ethnographer, expert on textual folklore, member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. He was a member of the Hungarian Ethnographic Society in various functions, acting as Vice President between 1918 and 1935.



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