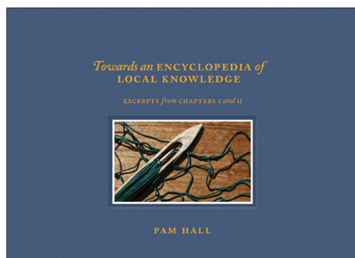
AN INTRIGUING FIELDWORK DOCUMENT



Pam Hall. *Towards an Encyclopedia of Local Knowledge: Excerpts from Chapters I and II*. St John's, NL: Breakwater Books, 2017. 208 pp.

How best to present the culture we encounter during our work as folklorists, especially when that culture is disappearing and may be hard for distant people to grasp? Many researchers write monographs, others make films, yet others organize exhibitions. It seems to me that informants *get* ethnographic film (or, less commonly, ethnographic audio) and exhibitions in a way that they do not get ethnographic books. They may well get the *fact* of ethnographic books – and I have certainly seen instances of how the relatives value the sheer palpable fact of an academic book that they can hold in their homes and hands, which drew upon their now-deceased relative's knowledge. But it is unlikely they often take it down to consult it.

Pam Hall has come up with her own solution to this conundrum by presenting her research on Newfoundland in the form of a visual encyclopedia, a project which combines the visual and the verbal. In fact, Hall's is a long-term project very much still in the making, hence the title *Towards an Encyclopedia*... The elegant 208-page work contains "excerpts" from the first two "chapters", which deal with parts of the north-east and north-west of the island. Hall, an Ontarian by birth, has been involved with Newfoundland culture since at least 1977, when she provided the illustrations for Al Pitman's children's book *Down by Jim Long's Stage*. In 2013, she earned a PhD from Memorial University for a thesis entitled *Recruiting the Visual – Knowing our CommonPlace: Towards an Encyclopedia of Local Knowledge*, a forerunner or outrider of the current book. The introduction to the Encyclopedia still has a little whiff of academe (and indeed of "art-speak") about it, but the heart of the book itself has no such distancing.

The work proper represents 129 display boards, here reproduced in a reduced format (originally approximately 41 by 27 cm, now approximately 30 by 20 cm). Each board/page has a title, such as 'On Trawling for Shrimp in Notre Dame Bay' or 'What Change Island Women Know about Knitting Socks', and is dominated by imagery in the form of photographs, paintings, diagrams, maps, etc., some with added arrows, circling, and labelling. This imagery is accompanied by text – the trawling card (p. 136) discusses how fishermen sought new species, including shrimp, after the 1992 moratorium on cod fishing, data on the typical length of the shrimp-trawling season, and the size of the allowable catches. And the knitting card (p. 129) has a substantial paragraph that mention the 'more than a dozen women on Change Islands who do custom knitting', with a focus on the different varieties of socks they knit and their features, how fast they could knit (a sock a day), and how much money might be raised by knitting in a year (though in the words of an informant 'no-one is knitting just for money').

Such informative and visually-bold "pages" have a broad appeal. As well as appearing in exhibitions, "images of *Encyclopedia* pages have been screened in university classes and seminars and public conferences on democracy and knowledge" (p. 141). Hall is also very open to their re-use:

> *In a culture of mash-ups and remixes, the pages are versatile and lend themselves to multiple purposes in diverse contexts … I imagine that someday the pages on food might be extracted and used to inspire local recipe book projects or cooking classes, or the pages on textiles used to inform conversations about local craft practices, the pages on berries to prompt a project to map local edibles*. (p. 141)

An emphasis on the collaborative nature of the project is found in the ascription of the book to 'Pam Hall and Collaborators'. Intriguingly, at several places in the book Hall also provides visual networks representing the snowball method by which she came by the people she terms as "knowledge holders" – somehow a more revealing form of presentation than a simple list would be. Of course, the fact it is dealing with non-controversial topics means everyone's names can be acknowledged in the work. Dealing with darker or more controversial topics would have made this trickier. The foregrounding of named individuals is evident in such typical panel titles as 'What Lambert Kennedy Knows About How to Build a Longliner' (here p. 65) or 'What Joe Reid Knows About Local Jams and Jellies' (here p. 65 and p. 69). Somewhat unexpectedly, while all of her "collaborators" are named (more than one hundred of them), there are no photographs or drawings of them in the work.

While the topics such as traditional boat-building and jam-making are familiar ethnographic topics in Newfoundland (and elsewhere), some of the most intriguing ones cover less expected themes. For example, on page 93 we find a panel on 'Where Things Come from in Conche', which literally maps out where local people get hold of their supplies of items such as fuses (Roddickton), beer (St. Anthony), paint (Corner Brook), and bingo cards (St. John's). Further panels dealing with innovation in the outports can be found on page 166 ('Growing New Food in Old Places') and page 169 ('Innovation in Traditional Fisheries').

For me, the most fascinating panels were those addressing local language, often from unusual angles. These included 'On Pond-naming in Tilting' (p. 159), 'On Local Signage, Pamphlets and Museums' (p. 95), the coverage of projects to record local fishing marks (p. 153), and names for rocks and fishing grounds (p. 163). Indeed, one of the best features of the cards is that alongside traditional ethnographic objects, such as boats and needlework, they also have photographs of local "documents", such as business cards, handwritten notes, informants' sketches, pages from phone books, articles in local newspapers, maps, road signs, jar labels, etc., and even photographs of entries from the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English*. The presence of these documents supplies another atmospheric layer to the world of objects. Elsewhere she herself mentions information 'nestling in the front and back pages of Bibles, in fishing logs and tally boards, in ledgers and in letters' (p. 106). Perhaps these sources could feature in pages created in the future.

Another panel that particularly stood out was the one entitled 'Woodfinding: On Seeing Boats in Trees', which focuses on how local boat-builders 'find and harvest trees

that have the right shape from which to make stems and keels and timbers' (p. 133). This is an example of a page where the verbal and the visual complement one another especially well. At times one wishes for more information. For example, on page 137, we read the assertion that knot knowledge is being passed on, but we do not learn how this takes place. And all those interested in Newfoundland English would be interested to have been provided with extended examples of connected speech. But then again perhaps that would best be done by online audio files rather than in a book.

All in all, this is a book which does what it says on the cover – it presents local knowledge. This is what so many so-called ethnographic and anthropological studies fail to do, preferring to remain involved in meta-level discussions instead. While this book is unavoidably costly, given its heft (it weighs a kilo) and the number of full-colour reproductions it contains, in terms of accessibility it is worth noting that this wonderful Encyclopedia-project also has other forms – as unbound panels in boxes in community locations, and now also as a website: http://encyclopediaoflocalknowledge.com/.

Indeed, the current website indicates that a third chapter has been begun, dealing with the Conne River area in the south of the island. Long may this project continue to grow!

Jonathan Roper

KYRGYZTAN FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF LEGAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Judith Beyer. *The Force of Custom: Law and the Ordering of Everyday Life in Kyrgyzstan*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016. 272 pp.

Judith Beyer is a professor of anthropology at the University of Konstanz, Germany, and has been engaged with legal anthropology for many years. The book under review is based on her doctoral dissertation and some of the readers might know her work through publications in journals like *Ethnos* or *POLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review*.

The central topic of the book is legal and moral ordering of the everyday in the villages of Aral and Engels, former centres of collective farms in Talas province, Kyrgyzstan, the negotiations of proper behaviour, resolution of disputes, and expression of loyalty and solidarity. For the Kyrgyz (and to be exact, also for the neighbouring Kazakhs) this complex set of unwritten norms is known as *salt*. Everyone who has conducted some sort of fieldwork in the region knows that it is difficult if not impossible to separate the ethnic and the Muslimness when it comes to identity. Therefore, when talking about the moral order, one cannot ignore the impact of Islam but also the rhetoric leaning on Islam. It is puzzling that in many cases it is hard to understand

whether Islamic customs and norms shape the everyday or the language of Islam there justifies the existing norms and customs. The picture is complicated even more by the fact that even in the existing norms and perceptions of the local moral order there is no clear consensus on right and wrong.

Central Asian social life is very ritualised and, as the book helps us to understand, most of these aspects – the sitting order at table, who offers a hand for handshake, how people organise their festive events, how to behave in these events, and so forth – are part of the *salt*. Beyer has conducted an impressive amount of fieldwork stretching over ten years, from 2005 to 2015, in two villages – Aral and Engels – of one of the most remote and isolated regions of north-western Kyrgyzstan. To some extent the story she tells is typical for many regions of the former Soviet Union – after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which had subsidised and centrally governed agriculture with its collective and state farms, people were left on their own. The land and the cattle were distributed in the villages and lack of knowledge, opportunities, and finances let people survive merely on a more or less subsistence level. More than often the state also withdrew other institutions – remote villages became isolated due the decrease of the public transport, local administrations barely coped with their primary obligations (support of schools and children's day care, maintaining public roads in a state of certain usability) and had very little resources for anything else. Often, the Soviet moral order with its policing and courts faded away or was relocated to the cities, i.e., became unreachable. This vacuum was filled with the *salt*, the local moral order to maintain the integrity of the community.

One of the main lines throughout the book is the state's relationship with a community that leans heavily on *salt* in its internal business. Here we can observe different transformations of how state institutions and officials establish their link with the people in the village but also what is the perception of the state (state as an idea, p. 60) among the local people and what they expect from the state. Typical for the post-Soviet Central Asian periphery, the state is often presented as a 'Potemkin state' (p. 81), where the presence of the state structures is rather visual (piling up insignia, p. 81) than fulfilling its functions.

Beyer has, over a long period, studied the aksakal courts or the state-sponsored and institutionalised courts of the Muslim elders. The tensions between the aksakals, between the court and the state, and between the community and the court, is another central topic of the book. As usual, it comes down to local clan politics. The author shows how the clan solidarity and cooperation transform over time and are related to local demographics and economy. Here, community rituals are taken as an example. When years ago some lineages used to feast together then now, when the population has grown, they celebrate certain holidays separately.

A very important contribution to our understanding of the Central Asian societies is the interplay with Islam. The author says correctly that "religious practices are part of getting old" (p. 103). In Central Asian states Muslim practices are indeed related to age and status. This so-called civic Islam is an integral part of the everyday life and serves as justification for the existing power hierarchies and gender order. In some cases, it can also have a conservative edge creating certain inertia. A big problem in the region is more or less compulsory gifts one should make in order to show respect. This is widely known that the price as well as the number of gifts has been growing

constantly so that the state (this is the case in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) has been interfering by limiting the number of guests in weddings or final sums of money spent for the celebration. This is indeed a big economic problem as people are burdened with debts to buy gifts or organise a festive event, the so-called *toi*. In the last three chapters before the conclusion, Beyer tackles this issue, demonstrating how people maintain the customs they would actually like to abandon, what are the economic causes of such indebtedness, and why they do not overcome the reluctance to spend increasingly bigger parts of their incomes on such rituals.

This book is theoretically well founded but not overkill. It means that the style is not typically dry with lots of references but easily readable where the story to be told has the priority. The author has conducted meticulous research and demonstrates that she indeed knows much about details. This book should be of interest not only to the scholars of the region but to a wide range of people interested in the anthropology of the state, legal anthropology or post-Socialist societies. In some sense this is a "thick description" combined with understandable language we so often miss in the academic writing.

Aimar Ventsel