

Modern folklore: local traditions versus global subcultures

The words “modern” and “folklore” together seem like a contradiction in terms, two words that do not belong together. Folklore implies tradition, more specifically traditions from the past that nowadays mostly exist as nostalgic reminders of identity in certain regions of the world. It is kept alive for tourism above anything else, frozen in time as an act of authenticity, which simultaneously makes it paradoxically artificial. It does not seem modern in any way. The conceptions we have of folklore often consist of images and ideas that are preserved from a specific time, right before they started to die out in the course of the twentieth century. This makes it seem like folklore is an unchangeable, rigid form of culture that stands for authenticity and purity, which is a nostalgic projection on a history that is in fact dynamic.

But what is folklore really? Literally, the “lore” of the “folk” is the knowledge of the common people, of a society. The dictionary defines folklore as orally transmitted traditions that cover the beliefs, myths, tales and practices of a people. Associations that follow immediately are costume, folk dance, food, handicraft, folk music, fairy tales and rituals.



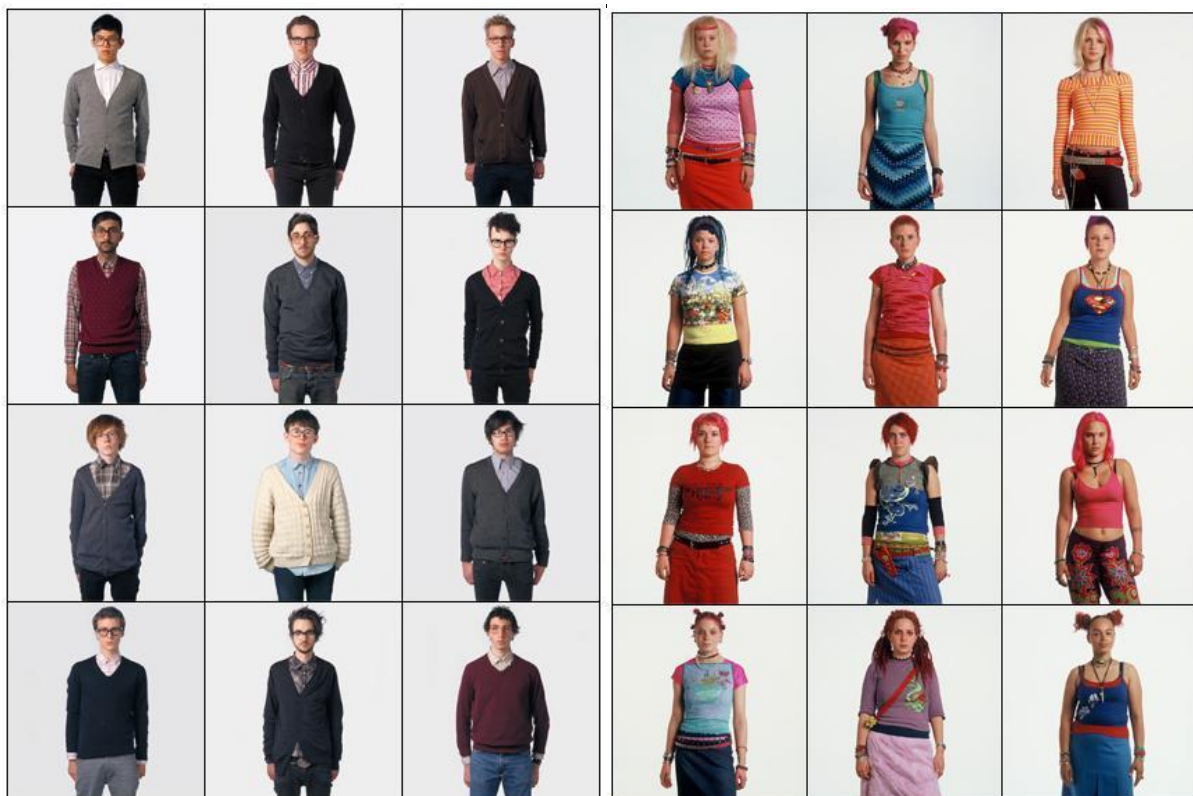
Dutch costume: from left to right: Volendam, Urk, Scheveningen, Spakenburg, Marken, Arnhem, Walcheren, Staphorst (kneeling down)

These are cultural characteristics that belong to a specific region of the world, that establish and secure an identity of a people and of the individuals within that group, and that indeed are transmitted orally from generation to generation. Some of these, like costume and traditional handicraft, have almost ceased to exist in everyday use, and are only re-enacted for nostalgic reasons. Others, like local foods or festivals, continue to exist and develop.

We now live in a world where globalization processes have ultimately changed our sense of locality by shortening the distances between places through fast, affordable and accessible transportation, and by fostering new and different connections between people through communication

technologies that are available, at least in the western world, to nearly everyone at any time in any place. Oral tradition is thus more and more replaced by digital archives, open source software, blogs and social networking websites. We grow up with the same knowledge as everyone else with access to Wikipedia, instead of having only the frame of reference of the culture and traditions that you were born into. People are less bound to the place they live, and their friends on the other side of the earth might know more about them than their neighbors do.

It follows logically that our sense of identity has moved from the local to the global as well. We do not necessarily wear the same clothes as the people around us, or practice the same rituals as our neighbors. We might, however, dance to the same music and have the same hairstyle as someone from the other side of the planet who also reads our favorite blog. Even though the importance of locality and oral tradition have diminished, we still feel the need to conform to group traditions and identify ourselves by referring to shared fashions, music styles and beliefs.



90. Geeks - London 2008

49. Teknohippies - Rotterdam 2001

The photography project “[Exactitudes](#)” by Ari Versluis and Ellie Uytenbroek shows many forms of group identity and subcultures that seem quite similar to folkloric costume traditions. People conform to a group tradition to identify with this group, consciously or unconsciously, while they also claim their individuality within that group by searching the parameters of these traditions, being original within the borders of conformity. The same was true for traditional folklore, where, for example, women would compete with their needlework skills to produce the most elaborate designs that would make them stand out between their peers.

Globalization has erased much of the folklore from our world, but its function as a tool for identification is taken over by global movements and trends. Contemporary subcultures could therefore be seen as modern versions of folklore.