

Nils-Arvid Bringéus as a Folklorist

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Abstract

Nils-Arvid Bringéus was born on 29 March 1926 in Örkelljunga, in the northern part of the province of Skåne in Sweden. After a long and active life in ethnology and folkloristics, he died on 21 April 2023 at the age of 97. This article focuses on the significance of his work as a researcher in folkloristics, more specifically referring to his investigations into customs, beliefs, legends and tales.

Keywords: Nils-Arvid Bringéus, folkloristics, Örkelljunga

Nils-Arvid Bringéus was born on 29 March 1926 in Örkelljunga, in the northern part of the province of Skåne in Sweden. After a long and active life in ethnology and folkloristics, he died on 21 April 2023 at the age of 97. In the present article I focus on the significance of his work as a researcher in folkloristics. More specifically I refer to his investigations into customs, beliefs, legends and tales. In my work with this, his bibliography *Tryckta skrifter*, published in 2007, has been invaluable in yielding important information about his extensive scholarly production (Bringéus 2007).

Funeral Customs

Bringéus began his studies in Nordic and Comparative Folklife Research in 1947 in Lund and presented his first printed paper in 1948. The paper was about a funeral custom where two men walked singing in front of the coffin in the funeral procession (Bringéus 1948). In 1950, a paper on the Luokkaliina tradition in the province of Värmland was published. This custom was about the hearse being decorated with a white piece of fabric on the harnesses. Bringéus connected this to the Finnish immigration to Värmland in the sixteenth century (Bringéus 1950). In 1953 he achieved a Swedish licentiate degree with a thesis entitled *Studier i svensk begravnings sed* ("Studies on Swedish Funeral Customs"). For several decades, investigations into funeral customs became a hallmark of his research. At a Nordic conference in Oslo in 2008, he was able to look back and reflect on sixty years as a student of



Figure 1. Nils-Arvid Bringéus. Portrait painted by Gerhard Nordström. The portrait hangs on the premises of the Royal Gustavus Adolphus Academy for Swedish Folk Culture at Klostergatan 2 in Uppsala. After Bringéus 2014.

funeral customs (Bringéus 2009). In the 1940s and 1950s his focus was on the study of particular elements such as the use of the *prestav* (a special marshal heading the funeral procession). Two men walked in front of the coffin, each holding a mourning rod in his hand. This rod was called a *prestav*, a word originally from Russia. Bringéus followed the history, distribution and expansion of the custom using a mapping technique (Bringéus 1959).

In 1958, Bringéus gained his doctorate in Lund with the dissertation *Klockringningsseden i Sverige* (“The Custom of Bell Ringing in Sweden”). Death knells had a significant role. The mapping technique was an important method highlighting regional and local variations in Sweden. A long historical perspective extended from the Middle Ages up to the present. Both stability and changes in the customs could be demonstrated. Regulations at national, diocesan levels and at parish meetings had an impact on local practice (Bringéus 1958). At his disputation, Bringéus received a newly cast church bell. Later he donated it to the church in Örkelljunga, where it now hangs in the chancel. At his funeral on 19 May 2023 the minister, according to age-old tradition, rang this bell nine times.

Later, in the 1980s and 1990s, Bringéus focused on human attitudes towards death, and how this could be studied by means of the funeral customs (Bringéus 1981, 1994). Minimalism, individualism and professionalization grew increasingly stronger in the late 1900s (Bringéus 2009b). Doing research on death and funerals was important according to Bringéus because “death is a part of life both collectively and individually. Our deceased relatives are with us in our thoughts and dreams as long as we live. Our own

body carries the presage, visual and non-visual, of death, becoming more obvious the older we get” (Bringéus 2009b).

Material Peasant Culture

Having earned his doctorate, Bringéus spent some years as *docent*. He broadened his research area of expertise to cover also material culture with special focus on peasant society in Skåne. Here books about the iron plough as an innovation (Bringéus 1962a) and swidden cultivation (Bringéus 1963) may be mentioned.

The History of the Discipline

Another research area during Bringéus’s time as a *docent* was the history of the subject. In 1962 a paper was published about the temperance advocate and clergyman Peter Wieselgren’s collection of folk memories in the 1800s. He introduced the term folk memory meaning ”litteratura non scripta” (non-written literature) and published the book *Ny Smålands beskrifning* (“New Description of Småland”) 1844–1847 (Bringéus 1962b). In 1966, Bringéus published the extensive monograph *Gunnar Olof Hyltén-Cavallius som etnolog: En studie kring Varend och wirdarne* (“Gunnar Olof Hyltén-Cavallius as an Ethnologist”). In 1844 Hyltén-Cavallius (1818–1889) published the first edition of *Svenska folksagor och äfventyr* (“Swedish Fairy Tales and Legends”), and a second edition in 1849. In 1853 he also published *Sveriges historiska och politiska visor* (“Historical and Political Songs in Sweden”). He was an avid collector of written folklore and recorded many legends. His main work *Varend och wirdarne* (“Varend and Its People”), with the subtitle *Ett försök i svensk etnologi* (“An Essay in Swedish Ethnology”), was published in two parts in 1863–1868. Hyltén-Cavallius studied both the region of Varend in Småland and the individuals living there. Bringéus gave the following description: ”the extensive ethnological work of Hyltén-Cavallius covered, as shown here, both field and archive research and the publishing of articles, and he combined the tasks of the ethnographer, the ethnologist and the folklorist” (Bringéus 2010:13).

In conjunction with the investigation on Gunnar Olof Hyltén-Cavallius, in 1967 Bringéus published an amended edition with several comments on the notes written down by the farmer and churchwarden Lasse of Lassaberg, on folk life in Södra Unnaryd in Västbo parish, Småland, at the beginning of the nineteenth century. These notes were first published in 1874 by the collector of folklore Gabriel Djurklou (Bringéus 1967a). In 1967 Bringéus also published a special study on black magic books supposedly owned by a minister in Västbo parish, Småland. Bringéus tried to discover the originals of these black magic books and found that they ”mostly contained

learned magic from continental sources” (Bringéus 1967b). As we will find below, studies on originals became an important hallmark for Bringéus in his investigations of folk pictures.

Even after the 1960s, Bringéus continued to publish older folkloristic sources. In 1985 two publications appeared, containing source material that the folklore collector Eva Wigström (1832–1901), alias AVE, had collected in Skåne, and with extensive comments by Bringéus. One publication has the title *Allmogeseder i Rönnebergs härad* (“Folk Customs in Rönneberga Hundred”) and deals with life in the 1840s (Bringéus 1985a). There are several examples showing how a new era developed in the rural areas from where she came. Innovations came both from the towns and through high-class individuals. The other publication bears the title *Fågeln med guldskrinet: Folksagor samlade och upptecknade i Skåne* (“The Bird with the Golden Box: Folk tales Collected and Recorded in Skåne”). Eva Wigström stated that the 42 published stories, which are primarily wonder-tales, were written down from oral performances by individuals mainly in rural areas. The eponymous fairy tale is a version of the Cinderella story (Bringéus 1985b).

In the early twenty-first century Bringéus published two extensive biographies: one about the folklorist Carl Wilhelm von Sydow (1878–1952) in 2006, and one about the ethnologist and folklorist Åke Campbell (1891–1957) in 2008. Important source material here was a large number of preserved letters. In a letter to me in April 2006, Bringéus noted that “biographies are now popular again after long being regarded with disdain”. C. W. von Sydow created the Folklore Archive in Lund. In 1910 he became lecturer in the new discipline of folklore studies. Folk tale research became an important part of his investigations. His doctoral dissertation in 1909 was about The Three Female Spinners. von Sydow created several new folkloristic concepts such as *ekotyp* (“ecotype”) and *fikt* (special fictitious creatures like the bogeyman). The theory he embraced was functionalism, as he tried to find rational explanations for the folklore concepts. In 1940 he became Professor of Nordic and comparative folk culture research in Lund, and stayed there until his retirement in 1946. Bringéus writes about the importance of von Sydow still in Sweden: “Through his interest for the carriers of tradition, von Sydow has also created the foundation for the study of modern ethnology investigations of the human being as a cultural being” (Bringéus 2006:84).

Åke Campbell gained his doctorate in 1929 with the first dissertation in ethnology in Sweden, entitled *Skånska bygder under förra hälften av 1700-talet* (“Settlement Districts in Skåne during the First Half of the Eighteenth Century”). The theory applied here was diffusionism with its particular mapping method (Bringéus 2008).

In the early twenty-first century Bringéus started an initiative for an edited volume about prominent Swedish folklorists and ethnologists in

the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Royal Gustavus Adolphus Academy for Swedish Folk Culture, which Bringéus chaired 2002–2004, published the volume in 2010, with Mats Hellspong and Fredrik Skott as editors (Hellspong & Skott 2010). Following the publication, Bringéus called on Norwegian cultural historians to produce a similar book on early prominent individuals in the field in Norway. In a letter to me dated 11 April 2011 he wrote: “I am particularly glad that my proposal for a book on Norwegian ethnologists and folklorists seems to have received a positive response. I am looking forward to seeing the final outcome.” In 2013 the volume *Etnologi og folkloristikk: En fagkritisk biografi om norsk kulturhistorie* (“Ethnology and Folkloristics: A Disciplinary Biography of Norwegian Cultural History”) was published, edited by Bjarne Rogan and Anne Eriksen (Rogan & Eriksen 2013).

Professor in Lund and Supervisor of PhD Students

On 1 July 1967 Bringéus assumed the position of Professor of Nordic and Comparative Folklife Research in Lund. On that same day, I also became his licentiate student and in 1969 I went on to be his first PhD student. With my thesis *Kyrktagningsleden i Sverige* (“The Custom of Churching of Women in Sweden”), presented in 1972 (Gustavsson 1972), I was the first PhD student supervised by Bringéus all the way to the defence of the dissertation. Later in the 1970s and 1980s he supervised several other students who gained their doctoral degrees. The seminars led by him were constructive, calling for independent thinking. Following one seminar, about a chapter in my thesis where several different opinions had been expressed, he urged me: “Now you are the one in command, standing up for your opinion. Neither I nor anyone else should tell you what to think.” Bringéus also made sure that his PhD students established international research contacts, for example at meetings and conferences both in the Nordic countries and in the rest of Europe.

Food Research

As a professor, Bringéus also worked on building international networks. The first one focused on food research. In 1970 he published *Mat och miljö: En bok om svenska matvanor* (“Food and Environment: A Book about Swedish Eating Habits”) (Bringéus 1970). The chosen perspective was how human beings relate to food. Folkloristic aspects of cooking were prominent in the paper “Är Hålle hemma?” This was about prophylactic measures when cooking *blodkorv* (a kind of black pudding, boiled sausage containing blood from cow and pig). Magic measures and taboos were necessary so that the skin of the sausage would not crack in the cooking process. One

taboo was not to speak during the cooking. The prayers said took on an almost magical meaning. "When the sausage was put in the pot you could also say a prayer called a *pölsebön* or *korvabön* [sausage prayer]" (Bringéus 1972:96). Likewise, when brewing beer there were magical precautions. The fermenting process was threatened. You needed to make sure that *skogsmannen* ("the forest man"), *skogssnuvan* ("the forest nymph") or the underground people did not come to the place and steal the beer vessels or the Christmas beer (Bringéus 1993b). Among Bringéus's later publications about food, *Mat och måltid: Studier i svensk matkultur* ("Food and Meals: Studies in Swedish Food Culture"), 1988a, and *Den skånska smaken: En bok om gångna tiders matvanor i Skåne* ("Scanian Taste: A Book about Bygone Food Habits in Skåne") may be mentioned, 2009a.

In 1970 Bringéus sent out invitations to the first international symposium on food in Lund. This was a successful move, and international symposia on food were thereafter arranged every second or third year and continue to be arranged in the 2020s as well. Following every symposium a volume is published containing a significant number of papers from many different countries. In 1994, the symposia on food became one of the working groups in the International Society for Ethnology and Folklore, abbreviated SIEF, with the name Food Research.

Folk Pictures

Another international network was started by Bringéus in the beginning of the 1980s and focused on the study of folk pictures, in particular the message of the pictures. The perspective of communication became important. In 1981, the book *Bildlore* appeared, where the title is a word coined by Bringéus himself. This was, according to him, supposed to be a new field of research. "Bildlore should aim at revealing the values and attitudes expressed in the pictures" (Bringéus 1981a:13). The *Bildlore* book appeared in German in 1982 (Bringéus 1982c). That same year, a large and richly illustrated edition of South Swedish painted wall hangings was published. The motifs were largely biblical (Bringéus 1982b).

Regarding the study of the pictures, Bringéus expended a great deal of energy tracing the prototypes of the motifs in the wall hangings. He found those mostly in *kistebrev* ("chest prints"). Those were single-sheet prints of coloured woodcuts that were often glued to the inside of the lid of chests in farmers' homes. Copperplates, more common among well-off people in society, could also sometimes be prototypes. In 1995 Bringéus published *Skånska kistebrev* ("Chest Prints in Skåne") (Bringéus 1995) and in 2003 *Västsvenska kistebrev* ("Chest Prints in Western Sweden") (Bringéus 2003b). In 2013 a special study on the tapestry painter Anders Eriksson of Ås in Västbo parish in Småland appeared (Bringéus 2013). In addition to



Figure 2. The ascension of Elijah painted by Anders Eriksson in Ås. After Bringéus 1982b.

biblical motifs, there are also secular motifs in his paintings. One of them is the age staircase, symbolically showing the cycle of life which Bringéus has also analysed in other papers. The oldest Swedish examples of the age staircase are from around 1300 (Bringéus 1982a, 1988b). Another secular motif by Anders Eriksson of Ås is the wheel of fortune, belonging to a tradition of pictures originating in the thirteenth century. Bringéus devoted a monograph in 2004 solely to the study of fortune and its relation to misfortune in older folk tradition. A special notion refers to the fortune of farmers (Bringéus 2004).

In 1984 Bringéus arranged an international symposium in Lund on the theme of *Man and Picture*. Some thirty scholars from Scandinavia and Central Europe attended. In 1985, he was able to publish a volume with the same name (Bringéus 1985c). Picture research became another working group within SIEF, where Bringéus was president during a set-up period during the years 1982–1987.

Folk Religion

Yet another international network initiated by Bringéus focused on folk religion, later labelled ethnology of religion, which for a long time was one of his most important areas of research. In 1955 he had published a paper on the introduction of the early-morning service on Christmas Day in the diocese of Lund in the late nineteenth century (Bringéus 1955). Studying innovations, inspired by cultural geography as it developed in Lund, continued to be an important component in Bringéus's investigations of church customs. In 1965 this research involved the introduction of the Christmas

crib in Sweden, with Germany as the prototype (Bringéus 1965). In 1969, a publication on harvest service was published, referring to an innovation in the twentieth century (Bringéus 1969). In 1979, Bringéus presented a paper on the custom of saying grace and how it later disappeared. This is a study about regression but also about revival or revitalization in free-church circles in the twentieth century (Bringéus 1979). To strengthen research in the ethnology of religion at Lund University, Bringéus, together with historians and church historians, was able to create a research centre in Lund named *Centrum för religionsetnologisk forskning*, where I became the supervisor.

In 1993, Bringéus arranged an international symposium in Stockholm on *Religion in Everyday Life*. The year after, he was able to publish a volume with the same title. The focal point for the study was presented as “a question of religion in the home and at the workplace, religion at the beginning and end of the day, religion practised by people in life crises and risk situations” (Bringéus 1994a:6). A working group under the name of *Folk Religion* was established within SIEF, and I served as its first chairman up until 1999. The name of the working group was later changed to *Ethnology of Religion*.

Also after the symposium in Stockholm, Bringéus’s studies on church customs continued. In a paper in 1997 he focused on pilgrimage to the church and the spring in the village in Skåne named after Sankt Olof, both in older and more recent times. A revitalization occurred in the late twentieth century (Bringéus 1997b). In a paper in 2003, Bringéus brought up the question of the hymn book as a book for the people. He wrote: “To me as an ethnologist the relation between man and the hymn book is what is interesting” (Bringéus 2003). Some of Bringéus’s many textbooks for ethnology students focus on questions of folk religion. In 1997 the book *Folklig fromhet: Studier i religionsetnologi* (“Popular Piety: Studies on the Ethnology of Religion”) appeared (Bringéus 1997a). This was also published in German in 2000 (Bringéus 2000). An example of magic in folk religion was that when a pregnant woman suffered a miscarriage, she tried to touch the priest’s robe without him noticing, as he officiated at a church service, most often a funeral. This practice, called false churching, was supposed to help heal the woman after her miscarriage (Bringéus 1964). In 2005 Bringéus published a book on church customs where he talks about what happens inside the church from the perspective of the people in the congregation. There has been a shift from words to action and experience. The minister has acquired several co-actors among the parishioners present (Bringéus 2005a).

Textbooks

Bringéus found teaching ethnology important, as evidenced by his many textbooks which appeared in several editions. Three of these were published

in 1976 when the number of ethnology students was on the rise. These three textbooks from 1976 had the titles *Arbete och redskap: Materiell kultur på svensk landsbygd före industrialismen* (“Work and Tools: Material Culture in Rural Sweden before Industrialization”) (Bringéus 1976a), *Människan som kulturvarelse: En introduktion till etnologin* (“Man as a Cultural Being: An Introduction to Ethnology”) (Bringéus 1976b) and *Årets fest-seder* (“Festival Customs of the Year”) (Bringéus 1976c). In 1986, *Livets högtidsdagar* (“Celebrations of Life”) was published, where the author’s stated aim was to “describe how the different festivals of the life cycle were perceived by the average citizen in actions and in economic terms” (Bringéus 1986:7). In 1987, *Livets högtider* (“Festivals of the Life Cycle”) was published, partly “intended as an introduction for ethnology students” (Bringéus 1987). In addition to the many studies on funeral customs (see above), Bringéus performed a special study on “round-number birthdays” during life. Celebrating round-number birthdays was first introduced at the end of the nineteenth century in high-status circles. During the twentieth century the tradition spread to the countryside. The family pages in the newspapers were increasingly filled with birthday reports. Lately, the trend has turned because of the informalization of birthday celebrations. An individual with a forthcoming birthday can now advertise in the paper asking people not to observe his/her birthday (Bringéus 2005c). In a letter to me in April 2006, right after his own eightieth birthday, Bringéus wrote: “Personally I would rather write about the round-number birthdays than celebrate them”.

Bringéus has also conducted some special studies on annual holidays. In 2005 a book was published highlighting how young people amused themselves in Skåne in olden times (Bringéus 2005b). The author observes the youngsters’ propensity to push the limits and to make fun of each other. During Shrovetide, before the actual start of Lent, massacres of geese and cats occurred in bygone times as a form of young male entertainment. It was called “goose-riding” and “knocking the cat out of the barrel” (Bringéus 1989). As the sheriffs and ministers kept an eye on the antics of young people on annual holidays in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there is source material that Bringéus was able to use. Another special study deals with the feast of Lucia on 13 December, a celebration that dates back to medieval times and changed quite a lot during the twentieth century (Bringéus 1998b).

The Name of the Subject

Bringéus strongly supported naming the subject ethnology instead of folklife research. This was also implemented in Sweden in 1970. In an edited volume on ethnological visions from 1993, he stated that he had previously been

criticized for sinking folklore in Sweden when it was merged with folklife studies and was then called solely ethnology, especially European. He defended himself against this criticism: “It has nevertheless been shown over time that it was only when integrated as a part of ethnology that justice was done to the folklore sector, not least because of the folklorists’ own contextuality requirements and inspirations from anthropology” (Bringéus 1993a:211). In order to bring Nordic ethnology research to an international audience, Bringéus in 1971 created the yearbook *Ethnologia Scandinavica: A Journal for Nordic Ethnology*. This book has so far appeared in over fifty volumes.

Honorary Awards

As testimony to his international scholarly reputation, Bringéus was made an Honorary Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Bergen, Norway, in 1990, at Åbo Academy in Finland in 1993, at Münster in Germany in 1994 and Honorary Doctor of Theology in Lund in 1994. Since Bringéus’s passing I have received many letters from international scholars pointing out his importance for the development of ethnology both in the Nordic countries and in the rest of Europe. The folklorist Ulrika Wolf-Knuts at Åbo Academy wrote: “One of the real great ethnologists is gone. I am happy to have known him.” Sophie Elpers at the SIEF secretariat in Amsterdam, Holland, stated that “Nils-Arvid Bringéus was such a legend.” Patricia Lysaght in Dublin, Ireland, heading the SIEF working group *Food Research*, expressed that “he was a great scholar and person”.

Örkelljunga Local History Society

Bringéus found much of his empirical material in the southern parts of Sweden, in particular the province of Skåne and not least his birthplace Örkelljunga, a small town with a history of craftsmanship. Of his many books, 47 were published by Örkelljunga Local History Society, which Bringéus chaired for 45 years, 1953–1998. One of his especially well-known investigations on Örkelljunga is the legend about the lost church bell. During the construction of the church in the Middle Ages, it was supposed to have fallen from the belfry and ended up in the nearby lake, Prästsjön, where it could not be salvaged despite several attempts. On one occasion it was reportedly almost dragged up, but fell back again into the depths of the water because someone broke the magic order not to speak. This legend was written down in Örkelljunga in 1598 (Bringéus 1949). The lost bell is supposed to explain why the church in Örkelljunga had only one bell all the time up until 1954. A new edition of this legend was published by Bringéus in 1998, as the fallen bell, on the initiative of Bringéus, had been made into the municipal coat of arms of Örkelljunga. This was accomplished through



Figure 3. The lost church bell in the lake Prästsjön has become the municipal coat of arms of Örkelljunga.

a decision from His Majesty the King. The backdrop on the coat of arms is blue, referring to the sky. The bell has a silver-like colour since, according to the legend, it contained a fair amount of silver mixed into the ore. The water with its waves is also silver-coloured (Bringéus 1998).

Because of Bringéus, Örkelljunga is probably one of the localities in Sweden whose cultural history has been investigated most. He was one of the initiators of the open-air museum of Ingeborrarp in Örkelljunga municipality. Bringéus stayed true to Lund and Örkelljunga throughout his life. In his autobiographical book from 2014, which was his last book, he stated: “My home region, Örkelljunga, has shaped me, perhaps too much since even at a distance I have lived in this area. Most of my books have been about this region” (Bringéus 2014:211). He was buried in the church in Örkelljunga on 19 May 2023. Afterwards the funeral guests gathered at Ingeborrarpsgården, where several ethnologists and other individuals made speeches in his memory.

Final Words

Bringéus’s folkloristic work was more extensive than I initially anticipated when I started writing this presentation. It has been inspiring to read the whole of this production and present a compilation of it to an international audience, especially considering the fact that Bringéus found international connections so important and also encouraged his students in this direction.

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