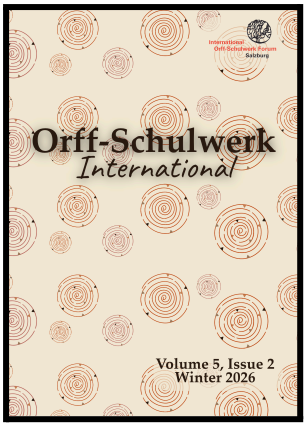
International
Orff-Schulwerk Forum
Salzburg



Orff-Schulwerk *International*

Volume 5, Issue 2

ISSN 2791-4763 (Online)

Tradition and Folklore

George Charonitis

©2026 IOSFS

Published online: November 2026

Full terms and conditions of access and use can be found online at:
www.iosfsjournal.com

Tradition and Folklore

George Charonitis

The understanding and pedagogical use of tradition, folklore, and the concept of the "ethnic" by teachers and educators presuppose, first and foremost, a clarification of these terms. Such clarification is essential for educators to be able to comprehend the complexity of the concepts they encompass, as well as the cultural, social, and ideological meanings they represent and reproduce.

The particularly topical turn, in contemporary times, towards "roots," the primordial, and the elementary cannot be confined to an uncritical search for, or representation of, the past. Rather, it requires an understanding of the processes through which tradition is constructed, transformed, performed, and re-signified within each specific social and cultural context. In this sense, the educational use of tradition requires an awareness not only of its content but also of the historical, social, cultural, and ideological parameters that shape its reception, preservation, and reproduction.

This article begins from a terminological and conceptual specificity that primarily concerns the Greek case as the terms used to describe tradition, folk culture, and related cultural practices may not carry the same meaning or theoretical implications across different national and academic contexts.

In Anglophone contexts, the use of the term *folklore* rather than *tradition* gained currency during the nineteenth century, and what is referred to as *tradition* is encompassed within the broader concept of *folklore* (see Bronner, 2000; Eriksen, 2017). This conceptual distinction, however, cannot be transferred directly to the Greek scholarly and social context. What came to be referred to as *folklore* in Anglophone contexts is, in Greece, primarily designated by the term *laografia* (λαογραφία), while *folklore studies* correspondingly became established as *laografikes spoudes* (λαογραφικές σπουδές).

In this sense, the present article is based on a Greek "paradox" concerning the use and significance of these particular terms. If, instead of "tradition," the term *folklore* was used, and instead of "folklore," the term *ethnic* was employed, the conceptual distinctions that this article seeks to bring to the fore might arguably correspond more closely to those found in the international literature. Such a terminological shift, however, would not adequately capture the historically shaped Greek usage of these terms, nor the ways in which this usage has influenced the perception and representation of popular culture in Greece.
For the argument that follows to be understood, I therefore ask the reader to embrace, at least provisionally, this particularity of Greek terminology—one that may perhaps conceal something more "primordial" within it.

This observation becomes particularly significant in the contemporary context, where even the term *laografia*, or *folklore*, appears to be gradually receding from scholarly discourse and being replaced by the broader concept of *cultural heritage*. This shift is not merely a change in terminology. Rather, it reflects a broader transformation in the ways in which

Copyright©2026 IOSFS

societies, institutions, and the academic community perceive, classify, manage, and represent cultural elements inherited from the past.

Tradition (or "folklore'')

As noted by Karyki and Agalianou (2018, p. 180), Theofanis Soulakellis defines tradition as "all the elements of yesterday that have freely and effortlessly been incorporated into today." This romantic definition, however, lacks the necessary distinction between "tradition" as a scholarly category and "tradition" as it is perceived by the communities that produce it. For the researcher, tradition is an object of study and analysis; for those who embody it, however, it constitutes lived experience, identity, and a means of social cohesion (Charonitis, 2026).

According to Ewa Dahlig-Turek (2012, p. 313), "the Polish sociologist of culture Jerzy Szacki proposes three possible conceptualisations of 'tradition': (1) the process of transmission, (2) the object of transmission, and (3) the evaluative attitude towards the content being transmitted." All three of these dimensions should be taken into consideration when referring to tradition.

In reality, tradition is not defined but rather endowed with meaning. From the classical descriptive recording of tradition, we have moved towards more interpretive approaches. The relationship between the past and the present demonstrates that tradition is not a static set of values and practices, but a living and constantly renewed phenomenon. It is not self-contained or self-evident; rather, it constitutes a social construction whose meaning derives from its social context.

The term tradition stands in contrast to the terms "mores" and "customs." Mores constitute the prevailing perceptions within society, the "unwritten laws," while customs constitute the actions through which these perceptions are expressed. The repetition of these customs from one generation to another creates traditions. The term tradition also stands in opposition to concepts such as routine or habit, which imply mechanical repetition. Tradition presupposes that someone transmits and someone receives. The freedom of choice exercised by the recipient is what distinguishes tradition from heritage.

This culture of "selective tradition," as Raymond Williams describes it (in Robinson, 1999, p. 106), rejects, over time and through the various processes of the community, significant areas of experience that once constituted a living culture. Tradition adapts to the present; it does not cling to the past. It is simultaneously a product of the past and a process of the present. It is not a static process to which societies remain attached for ever. Rather, it is a living process that is constantly transforming and renewing itself. As Seferis (1974, p. 520) poetically observes: "A part of the past dies every moment and its mortality contaminates us if we cling to it with excessive love. A part of the past always remains alive, and we risk disregarding its vitality."

Tradition is related to the concept of cultural practices and "shows us something beyond itself" (Pelikan, 1984, p. 54).

Copyright©2026 IOSFS

During the nineteenth century, however, tradition was not understood in the way in which, to some extent, we perceive it today. It had been preceded by the European Enlightenment movement of the eighteenth century, which, by promoting freedom, reason, and democracy, led various philosophers to view tradition as an enemy of reason and progress (Adorno, 1992, p. 75). As early as 1818, Haxthausen had referred to the "mania of the Enlightenment" that undermined popular tradition: "For thirty years now, with the mania of the Enlightenment, many old customs and practices have begun to disappear among the Greeks, especially those of the Archipelago" (Karabelias, 2023, para. 4). Historians, for their part, "seemed to be unreceptive to questions concerning temporal continuities—a fundamental component of tradition" (Bronner, 2011, p. 1). Tradition could not be quantified and therefore could not easily be incorporated into a scientific discipline; it was characterised by variability rather than stability, while to many researchers it appeared to be the enemy of innovation. Politically, it was initially devalued, becoming associated with romantic nationalist movements, which themselves used it selectively according to their purposes. Depending on the circumstances, it was treated either as reactionary conservatism or as radical liberalism (Abrahams, 1993). During the twentieth century, however, attention to traditions intensified through the study of the arts.

T. S. Eliot, referring to the neglect of tradition in favour of a search for originality in art, wrote characteristically:

> No poet or artist of any art has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. I mean this as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical, criticism. The necessity that he shall conform, that he shall cohere, is not one-sided; what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it (Eliot, 1960, pp. 4–5).

Tradition constitutes the "hidden information" concerning how people "think and act with continuity and connection in relation to others through lived experience".

The problem is that interpreting tradition can reveal forces and functions that people would prefer not to confront" (Bronner, 2011, p. 5). In my view, this "problem" largely determines the "aversion," the "repulsion" towards tradition, or its "devaluation."

"Performance," the moment in which tradition is experienced and reaffirmed, constitutes something entirely different from the "invention" of tradition in specific historical circumstances, which aimed to serve needs of identity, legitimation, or social cohesion (Kavouras, 2010). The realisation that tradition is not something neutral, but is instead entangled with mechanisms of power, or that it often constitutes a constructed structure, may lead the subject to refuse to recognise the structures reproduced through tradition. Through this process, tradition may come to be "detested" or "devalued". This, however, constitutes another broad and significant field of study and analysis, to which the following reflections have something to contribute.

Copyright©2026 IOSFS

Folklore (or "Ethnic")

The term "folklore" has been used in Greece to denote a "tasteless aesthetic based on the superficial imitation of models derived from traditional folk culture" (Babiniotis, 1998, p. 1917). This constitutes a vernacular use of the term that became established in the Greek language with an explicitly derogatory connotation and diverged significantly from the international use of the term *folklore* (Kavouras, 2010). The closest equivalent in English -at least during the early stages of the term's use, before it acquired a more autonomous meaning, particularly in the arts - could arguably be considered the term "ethnic."

Folklore was initially associated with conservative perceptions concerning a return to an idealised and "authentic" past. At the same time, ideologies of modernity were leading to an increasing interest in "tradition" (Konstantinidis, 2012). This interest, however, did not necessarily concern tradition as a living social process. Gradually, it became focused on what is referred to here as "folklore": selected elements of the past that are detached from their social context, stabilised, aestheticised, and presented as representations of a supposedly authentic tradition (Kavouras, 2010). This distinction is fundamental to the argument of the present article.

Tradition is constituted through lived experience, participation, transmission, adaptation, and social context; folklore, in the specific sense examined here, emerges when these elements are weakened or neutralised and tradition is transformed into representation. What is produced, therefore, is not simply a different form of tradition, but a different mode of relating to it. An "official" version of tradition gradually emerges, selectively collecting certain cultural elements and presenting them as representations of a stable past, detached from the social functions that originally endowed them with meaning.

Through this process, tradition is deprived of one of its fundamental characteristics: its capacity to express the way in which a society thinks and acts with continuity and connection to others through lived experience. The practice remains, but the social conditions within which it acquires meaning are transformed. Participation gives way to observation, context to display, continuity to repetition, and lived experience to representation.

This transformation served both political and economic activities that developed around folklore. At the political level, it contributed to the construction of an "official tradition," which was increasingly selected, defined, and legitimised by institutions and structures of power. At the economic level, it rendered tradition available for consumption, transforming it into a cultural product: a sterilised image of the past, detached from its context and capable of being reproduced indefinitely, essentially in the same form.

Eleonora Skouteri (as cited in Papapavlou, 2010) emphasises that cultural revivals are not always connected to the natural cycle of local social and rural life but, in certain cases, are influenced by and adapted to, the needs of tourism policy.

The relationship between living tradition and folklore is particularly evident in the case described by Leto Floraki and Rena Loutzaki (2010), who examine the performance of the

Copyright©2026 IOSFS

custom of *Gaitanaki* by the inhabitants of Grammenitsa, Arta, in two different contexts: in the village itself and at the Thessaloniki Concert Hall.

Within the local community, *Gaitanaki* constitutes a living cultural practice integrated into collective life. It functions as a means of social interaction and recreation for the inhabitants, while participation remains open and flexible. The boundaries between participants and spectators are not strictly defined but may shift according to circumstances and the individuals involved. At the same time, the development of the custom is not entirely predetermined, but allows room for spontaneous, variable, and unpredictable forms of participation. In other words, the custom remains embedded within the social relationships that give it meaning.

When, by contrast, the same custom is transferred into the context of an organised stage performance, such as at the Thessaloniki Concert Hall, its function and meaning change. The tradition becomes detached from its social environment and is transformed into an organised cultural spectacle, governed by a specific choreography and a clear distinction between performers and audience. What previously constituted a participatory social practice becomes an object of observation.

Moreover, the representation does not necessarily reproduce the form in which the custom is experienced by the contemporary community. Instead, it may privilege an earlier version of the custom and present it as "authentic." The difference between the two cases, therefore, is not simply a matter of "space." It concerns two fundamentally different modes of existence of a cultural practice.

In the village, *Gaitanaki* constitutes a living and evolving tradition; on stage, it becomes a representation of tradition. The transition from one condition to the other constitutes precisely the process through which tradition is transformed into folklore: into an "exotic" rendering of tradition for the gaze of contemporary urban/Western culture.

Through this transformation, the culturally dominant subject encounters an image of tradition that appears timeless, repetitive, and unchanging. What is presented as "authentic," therefore, is precisely what has been detached from the conditions that once made it alive. Authenticity ceases to be associated with continuity and lived experience and instead becomes associated with repetition and fidelity to an invented or idealised past. When the practice is detached from its social environment and transferred to a theatre or stage, the function of the space itself also changes. It ceases to operate primarily as a social space of participation and becomes a space of display and consumption. The cultural practice is thereby transformed into an object-product for the consumer-subject. Tradition, as it was conceptualised during the nineteenth century, was transformed into folklore: it was reinvented as something sterile and rigid, created to a significant extent for the theatre stage, where performance no longer refers to lived experience but to the remembrance of an authentic, genuine, and romantic past. What is preserved is no longer tradition itself, but an image of tradition.

In conclusion, I will return to Seferis's poetic speech, paraphrasing it: the part of the past that dies remains attached to us. Its mortality contaminates us, not because it belongs to the

Copyright©2026 IOSFS

past, but because we insist on reproducing it as living, immutable, and "authentic." At the same time, the part of the past that remains alive is at risk of being disregarded precisely because it evolves. Thus, attachment to a frozen image of the past does not preserve tradition; on the contrary, it may render it lifeless, transforming it into folklore.

Footnote

The critique outlined above does not in any way - and I would not wish to imply otherwise - concern the work of contemporary creators from different artistic fields who draw inspiration from tradition and create contemporary works. These are artists who turn towards tradition through their own perspective and employ it as a vehicle for developing their own forms of expression. Such a creative relationship with tradition does not necessarily constitute folklor(isation).
The crucial distinction does not lie in whether an artist draws material from tradition, but in whether tradition is used as a source for new creation or is reduced to a fixed representation of a supposedly authentic past. Many of these contemporary artistic forms are now referred to as "ethnic."
The distinction, therefore, is not between "traditional" and "contemporary" culture, nor between tradition and artistic innovation. It lies between tradition as a living, participatory, and constantly changing process and folklore as the aestheticised, detached, and fixed representation of that process.

References

Abrahams, R. D. (1993). After new perspectives: Folklore study in the late twentieth century. *Western Folklore, 52(2/4), 379–400.* https://doi.org/10.2307/1500096
Adorno, T. W. (1992). On tradition. *Telos, (94), 75–82.*
Babiniotis, G. (1998). *Λεξικό της Νέας Ελληνική Γλώσας.* [Dictionary of Modern Greek]. Kentro Lexikologias.
Bronner, S. J. (2000). The meaning of tradition: An introduction. *Western Folklore, 59(2), 87–104.*
Charonitis, G. (2026). *Τα μουσικοκινητικά παιχνίδια των παιδιών προσχολικής ηλικίας στην Ελλαδική επικράτεια (τέλη 19ου–αρχές 20ού αιώνα): Μία ιστορικο-κοινωνιολογική προσέγγιση* [Music and movement games of preschool children in Greece (late 19th–early 20th century): A historical-sociological approach] [Doctoral dissertation, University of Thessaly]. National Archive of PhD Theses. https://doi.org/10.12681/eadd/61018
Dahlig-Turek, E. (2012). "New tradition" musical traditions: Discovery, inquiry, interpretation and application. In P. Richter (Ed.), *XXVI European Seminar in Ethnomusicology (pp. 311–321).* HAS Research Centre for the Humanities.
Eliot, T. S. (1960). *The sacred wood: Essays on poetry and criticism.* Methuen.
Eriksen, A. (2017). Entangled genealogies: History and the notion of tradition. *Journal of European Ethnology, 46(2).*
Kavouras, P. (Ed.). (2010). *Φολκλόρ και παράδοση: Ζητήματα ανα-παράστασης και επιτέλεσης της μουσικής και του χορού* [Folklore and tradition: Issues of representation and performance in music and dance]. Nisos.
Karabelias, G. (2023). *Η «ανακάλυψη» του δημοτικού τραγουδιού (Β΄ μέρος)* [The "discovery" of the folk song (Part II)]. Ardin-Rixi. Retrieved August 10, 2025, from https://ardin-rixi.gr/archives/250765

Copyright©2026 IOSFS

Karyki, M., & Agalianou, O. (2019). Ελληνικά παραδοσιακά παιγνιδοτράγουδα: Από την κοινότητα στη σχολική τάξη [Greek traditional singing games: From the community to the classroom]. In T. Raptis & D. Koniari (Eds.), *Μουσική εκπαίδευση και κοινωνία: Νέεςπροκλήσεις, νέοι προσανατολισμοί. Πρακτικά 8ου Συνεδρίου της Ε.Ε.Μ.Ε.*[Music education and society: New challenges, new directions. Proceedings of the 8th Conference of the Hellenic Society for Music Education] (pp. 178–186). E.E.M.E.

Konstantinidis, P. (2012). Από το Φολκλόρ του εθνικισμού στο έθνικ 2004 [From the folklore of nationalism to ethnic 2004]. *BookPress.* http://www.bookpress.gr/multipress/eikastika-mousiki/apo-to-folklor-tou-ethnikismou-sto-ethnic-2004/

Loutzaki, R., & Floraki, L. (2010). Μελέτες και εθνογραφικές προσεγγίσεις εστιασμένες στα ζητήματα αναπαράστασης και επιτέλεσης του ελληνικού χορού [Studies and ethnographic approaches focusing on issues of representation and performance in Greek dance]. In P. Kavouras (Ed.), *Φολκλόρ και παράδοση: Ζητήματα ανα-παράστασης και επιτέλεσης της μουσικής και του χορού* [Folklore and tradition: Issues of representation and performance in music and dance]. Nisos.

Papapavlou, M. (2010). Φολκλόρ και Φολκλορισμός: Συγκλίσεις και αποκλίσεις [Folklore and folklorism: Convergences and divergences]. In P. Kavouras (Ed.), *Φολκλόρ και παράδοση: Ζητήματα ανα-παράστασης και επιτέλεσης της μουσικής και του χορού* [Folklore and tradition: Issues of representation and performance in music and dance]. Nisos.

Pelikan, J. (1984). *The vindication of tradition.* Yale University Press. https://yalebooks.yale.edu/book/9780300036381/the-vindication-of-tradition/

Robinson, K. (1999). *Οι τέχνες στα σχολεία: Αρχές, πρακτικές, προβλέψεις* [The arts in schools: Principles, practices, provisions]. Kastaniotis.

Seferis, G. (1974). *Δοκιμές, Πρώτος τόμος (1936–1947)* [Essays, Volume I (1936–1947)]. Ikaros.



George Charonitis, PhD, is a music educator and researcher specializing in early childhood music education, born in Chania, Crete. He holds a degree from the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (Department of Physical Education and Sport Science), an MSc in Educational Sciences from the Hellenic Open University, and a PhD in Music Pedagogy from the University of Thessaly. A graduate of the Byzantine Music School of Chania, he completed postgraduate studies in Orff-Schulwerk at the Moraitis School (1994–1996). Since 1999, he has taught in early childhood and primary education. Since 2024, he has served as Vice President of the Hellenic Association of Orff- Schulwerk (ESMA).

Copyright©2026 IOSFS