

# A Tradition of Invention

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**Abstract:** The nineteenth and twentieth centuries were a heyday for founding festivals, some of which were to die on the vine, while some continued until meeting an especially rough obstacle (like a world war), and yet others have carried on to become centenarians. There are ample records of particular people as “inventors”, whose ambition is to see a festival take hold and survive their own influence for the greater benefit of the community. This can provide an opportunity to examine the dynamics of continuity and the eventuality of rupture. A town outside Paris, France, has two invented festivals, one in spring, begun in 1906, the other in autumn, begun in 1990, both attributed principally to the mayor at the time of inception. Examination of these “inventions” entails adding considerable nuances and attempting to see into a multi-stranded weave of custom, agency, feedback loops and shifts in context over time. In both cases, there is an archive record, as well as oral testimony, on efforts to mobilize the energies of the town folk and create a festival with multiple benefits, from providing an event embracing the symbols of their identity in a forest and rural region, make everyone pleased with a lasting impact on tourism, underwrite a congenial interest in making money, as well as in development of the town as residentially desirable, and, most recently, insert these festivals into an emerging pattern of national policy on social integration and strategies of territorialization. Everything comes from somewhere, so this examination will attempt to trace out the landscape of social context, precedents and often impressive personal networking that enabled inventors to carry town festivals over into broad acceptance and make of them, as they explicitly intended, a tradition – twice.

**Keywords:** lily-of-the-valley, *Convallaria majalis*, Fête du Muguet, Fête de la Saint-Lubin, Rambouillet, town festivals, farming fairs

“The trick is not to set up a holiday, but to find someone who will enjoy it”. Friedrich Nietzsche (Koerner, 180)

At the heart of any on-going festive event, one might see the question of continuity – what motivates people enough for them to go on with a particular festive activity over the years, through several generations, and to lace their discourse, be it official or in everyday language, with the term “tradition”? Must a fête be “enjoyable”, according to Nietzsche’s line, so that it attracts people to attend, go on attending, bring friends and family and even draw in strangers from outside?

In Rambouillet, a town in the Île-de-France, between Paris and Chartres, among the many national holidays, there are two homegrown festivals patently regarded as invented. First celebrated in 1906 is the annual Lily-of-the-Valley Festival (*Fête du Muguet*) on a weekend in mid-May, and the second is the Festival of Saint Lubin (*Fête de la Saint-Lubin*) every two years on the last Saturday of September since 1990. The latter has never been cancelled during its shorter history, while the *Fête du Muguet* has withstood the tides of world war, twice, to be reinstated at the return of peace, and cancelled twice due to political events: in 1960 for the visit of Premier Khrushchev to General De Gaulle, one of many diplomatic meetings that made Rambouillet famous in the annals of international summitry, and in 1997, due to the dissolution of Parliament and calling of snap elections to be held on the Sunday of the fête, when only the Sunday *corso fleuri* was called off. Cancelled during the covid pandemic in 2022, the “FM” bounced back, if somewhat reduced, in 2021, and seems to have recovered in 2023 and 2024. The two-yearly Saint Lubin was not held in 2020, but had also come back to its former flourishing in 2022 and is scheduled as usual for 2024.

These festivals, clearly “invented” and regarded as identity to the town, are frequently linked in discourse and everyday discussion of their respective merits, so that we might ask whether they interact, what impact they may have on each other, and how they stand in relationship, in the perceptions of the people who partake in or observe them. Can one fête come to outweigh and draw allegiance away from the other? Both are associated with official narratives that project them back to a period that lends them historical legitimacy and that are explicitly stated to underwrite local identity, often in relation to the still-rural setting of the town, surrounded by agricultural lands and the second largest forest in France. The Lily-of-the-Valley Festival is a harbinger of spring and the flower is the classic luck-bringer (*porte-bonheur*) celebrated in poetry and song, while the Festival of Saint Lubin harks back to the farming fair (*comices agricoles*) held in mid-September right into the early twentieth century that brought harvest production and most especially livestock to the town for sale. With these dates, they might be seen to mirror each other at the opening and closing of the warm season. The way they are timed today within the rich offering of festive events on local, regional and national levels likewise has a direct impact on their viability.

A narrative of the history of the two fêtes, the usual discourse of town website and press, credits their invention to two mayors – the Fête du Muguet by Marie-Louis-Joseph-Jules Roux (“Marie Roux” for short), whose term extended from 1904 to 1935, and the Fête de la Saint-Lubin by Gérard Larcher (time in office 1983-2014, with a brief stand to the sidelines from 2004 to 2007), who is now President of the French Senate. Both these mayors represent a deep attachment on the part of French officials, whether political or in the civil service, to Republican values, in which secularism, dedication to a cohesive educational system, and social inclusion are repeated bywords, if not always part of the *realia* of national life. Of course, beyond the website and into the archival documents, both the inventors can be seen explicitly sharing credit for their inventions with a larger cast of local actors. As an aside, their two impressively long terms in office stand on either side of a major player of equal longevity, Jacqueline Thome-Patenôtre, mayor from 1947 to 1983, whose unwavering support for the Lily-of-the-Valley Festival, and its association with famous guests in politics or particularly in entertainment, is another factor in the long life of the spring fête. By the time Gérard Larcher succeeded her in 1983, there was a consensus that the flower fête’s momentum was faltering, in no way due to lack of effort to keep it going, but rather as an effect of modernization, particularly with television replacing the attractions of live entertainment. All three of these long-term mayors were communications experts in their own times and ways, had and have remarkably rich personal connections, and drew valuable assistance from their entourage in the town hall and in the municipality as a whole.

In the case of our mayors as festival “inventors”, Roux and Larcher, both called upon able companions who are cited by name in the archives of internal municipal records, press reports and personal testimony. Marie Roux’ most active partner in promoting the early years of the Lily-of-the-Valley Festival was the Duchesse d’Uzès, a flamboyant aristocrat famous as the first French woman to have a driver’s license and, true perhaps to her prowess as a hunter and rider, also the first to receive a speeding ticket, among many other adventures indicating her intrepidity (Huon 34). Her own address book added considerable punch to Marie Roux’ personal contacts as a prominent Paris attorney. By the time of the first photographs of the most active players, we know their names and professions from the remarkable notebooks (*cahiers*) meticulously kept by the Festival Committee (*Comité des Fêtes*), that the town’s shopkeepers and trades people were highly committed, as were the two representatives of the local press, the editors of *Le Progrès* and *L’Indépendant* (Archives Municipales 1J6–1J8–9). In fact, by 1908 there is even a brief but sharp debate over whether it was the newspaper owners who invented the fête, a debate clearly resolved in favor of Marie Roux (Programme 23–24 May 1908 and Cahier du Comité, 12–13). The role of communication in promoting and popularizing the festival was paramount and included international press reports (*Le Monde*

*Illustré*, 6 June 1908), as well as intense publicity to attract Parisians in the form of distribution of the sheet music with the song composed explicitly to glorify the Fête du Muguet and hiring of street singers to bring that over with the maximum impact in Paris.

Added to the star-studded list of invited guests, such as the Duchesse d'Uzès or Baron Rothschild, it is no wonder that the highly popular raffle offered as first prize a Sèvres porcelain vase donated by the President of the Republic, premier among the long list of donations, that included lesser prizes such as liquors, toiletry kits, bicycles, and other desirables. Additional donations to the fête activity included the regal apparel for the queen and demoiselles, free use of carriages, expert horse teams and automobiles, participation by the town's important Army contingents and their musical bands, as well as the volunteer work of town employees, foresters and local builders.

By the time we have archival documents of all kinds in 1907, from booklet-programmes to posters, sheet music and press reports, the Fête du Muguet has all the elements it was to keep and enrich over the early years – a special train service from Paris to enable holiday-makers to reach Rambouillet (even to stay overnight for a return the next day), mountains of lily-of-the-valley for sale in the square, decoration of homes and shops, a contest with prizes for the finest flowered children, baby carriages and bicycles. These were already linked in a parade (*corso fleuri*) tending towards the giant horse-drawn floats that were to emerge immediately after the First World War, with their evening torchlight parades. Numerous excursions in charabancs were organized directly from the train station for day visitors. From the outset, the major attractions were the two dance balls, one indoors by invitation and the other outdoors for the crowds flooding in from village, town and city, the outdoor Theater in the Green (*Théâtre de Verdure*), where famous actors and singers were invited, and the crowning of the Lily-of-the-Valley Queen, accompanied by her two Maids of Honour (*Demoiselles d'Honneur*).

The 1911 photograph of the coronation on the town hall entry steps provides a hint at some of the inspiration, often undocumented, that may well have laid behind the ideas for the invention of the Fête du Muguet, since we see not one Queen and two Demoiselles, but six young women, regally dressed. This is well documented, as Rambouillet invited the Queen of the Paris Central Market (*La Reine des Halles*) with her own Demoiselles, a most fruitful comment on the strategies of leaders in a small town to cope with living in the shadow of the City of Light. Marie Roux was an attorney, a prominent Parisian professional, as well as mayor of Rambouillet, and surely well aware of the Maytime festivities in the capital and beyond. After all, giving *muguet* around and for May Day is well attested in illustrations since the late 1800s, as in the 5 May 1907 edition of *Le Petit Journal* and there were elegant Parisian Flower Festivals in early summer by the late 1890s in the form of parades

down the Avenue du Bois (today's Avenue Foch) with horse-drawn carriages, then automobiles, elaborately decked out on their way to becoming flower floats (for example, the covers of magazines such as *L'Illustré Le Soleil du Dimanche*, 17 June 1898, 11 June 1899, and *Le Monde Illustré*, 15 June 1907).



Fig. 1: *Le Petit Journal* 5 May 1907: Giving lily-of-the-valley for May Day, Collection Griffin-Kremer

In addition, there was a plethora of local events involving flower and greenery decorations as well as processions that were familiar to one and all – the Corpus Christi stations in the town that were decorated like immobile floats, as well as the processions for the same holiday in most localities. On top of this, the Duchesse d'Uzès had her own fête on Easter Monday during which she threw treats from her balcony to the crowds who came to attend (Huon, 108–111). There was, however, no inclusion of any element connected with the Church in the Fête du Muguet until after WWII, in 1949, and the first postcards show us a resolutely Republican affair with flowers and national flags. Among the other early documents spanning the pre-WWI inception through the mid-1930s, the gems are the Festival Committee



notebooks (*cahiers*) and programmes, alongside written pourparlers with department store (*grand magasin*) owners such as the Galeries Lafayette for donation of the girls' apparel, textile-makers for lily-of-the-valley print scarves, or exchanges of correspondence with the President of the Republic and other notables. Marie Roux was attentive to international visibility and among the first articles printed on the Lily-of-the-Valley Festival is one in the 6 June 1908 edition of *Le Monde Illustré*, a magazine published in Paris and London for French-speaking residents there.

Today, there are many human sources to bear testimony to the Lily-of-the-Valley Festival, often based on family traditions, such as Gisèle Deschamps whose grandmother was the first queen to be crowned, her great-aunt following closely thereafter. She inscribes, literally, elements of Rambouillet history – farming, shops and trades, even opening of the recent cultural center – in her ceramic work, where the Fête du Muguet holds pride of place. She was among a host of town folk to loan family memorabilia, from bracelets to gowns to posters and photographs, to the centenary exhibit in 2006 and the more developed exhibit in March–May 2018 called, appropriately, “Let’s Celebrate the Lily-of-the-Valley” (*Fêtons le Muguet*) accompanied by a day’s colloquium and a second exhibit on a wider context of lily-of-the-valley in history and custom (Bernard; Mayer-Küster; *Fêtons le Muguet*). Town officials who organize today’s fêtes are willing partners in interviews and present-day, as well as former, float-makers are an equally helpful source. Former mayor, Gérard Larcher, is President of the French Senate and hence would take over as President of the Republic, should anything seriously hinder the present office-holder in his duties. He has been a most helpful interviewee and participated in the March 2018 colloquium, where he emphasized again, with humor, the fundamental “composition” (Ozouf 2010) with Republican values that both he and Marie Roux, as well as Thome-Patenôtre, in their quite different ways, insisted on respecting. In his talk to introduce the colloquium day, Gérard Larcher said, to pleased laughter, “There are monarchies of divine right, there are constitutional monarchies. In Rambouillet, we have an annual monarchy and, basically, one that can be quite well combined with Republican values” (Larcher in Meunier, 24 March 2018).



Fig. 2: Cover of Colloquium *Fêtons le muguet*

Larcher has always insisted that the Festival of Saint Lubin, so often attributed to him as inventor, was the creation of two people who stood by him over long years in his duties, the municipal counsellor Marie-France Faure and Germain Dalin, a man prominently associated with a major institution in Rambouillet, the National Sheep-Breeding Station (*Bergerie Nationale*), French cradle to the merino sheep breed, brought “on the hoof” in 1786 from flocks in Spain (*Bergerie Nationale* website). Marie-France Faure and Germain Dalin had already invented another Rambouillet event, the F.A.I.R. (*Festival Animalier International de Rambouillet / The Rambouillet International Animal Festival*), a colloquium dealing with human-animal relations, long accompanied a thriving biennial sculpture competition.

In fact, by the late 1980s, there was a whole series of traditions of invention building up that gave rise to the momentum for the Saint Lubin Festival, first and foremost, the awareness that Marie Roux had invented a festival which, over the years, often brought the town a number of visitors and holiday-makers up to four or five times the population, as well as the positive, and intentional, collateral effect

of high visibility for Rambouillet as a desirable place to live with rapid transport into the capital. By the 1960s, the town was on the radar internationally due to its role in summitry, with the meetings between De Gaulle and other international leaders (Benning, 39–63). In 1983, there was international attendance from nineteen countries at the bicentennial celebrations of the Bergerie Nationale, in large part organized by Germain Dalin. By 1984, even discussions in print about the Lily-of-the-Valley Festival spoke of a desire to “re-dynamize” it by going back to certain traditions, with much emphasis on the balance between “tradition *and* innovation”, as well as reminders that the local Saint Lubin, the most famous 6<sup>th</sup>-century bishop of Chartres, had been the original patron of an important autumn farming fair until 1915 (*Rambouillet Information* 6–9). The Nature and Animal Day (*Journée de la Nature et de l'Animal*) on the first Sunday in October was created in 1988 by the Friends of Animals association (*Amis des Animaux*), a group of veterinarians. Here, it is pertinent to note that Gérard Larcher, before entering politics at the request of Jacqueline Thome-Patenôtre in 1983, was a practicing veterinarian, had accompanied the national equestrian team to the 1976 Olympics in Montreal, and is still an avid promoter of French animal breeds, especially horses.

To cap this multi-strand of highly successful initiatives over the 1980s, the 7<sup>th</sup> October 1989 bicentennial of the French Revolution attracted crowds from around the world to Paris, as well as enlivening villages, towns and cities outside the capital, which gave rise in Rambouillet to an explicit popular demand for an autumn “event” (*Rambouillet Informations* 14). This was easy to do – just get together the same, quite willing, partners to organize the new Saint Lubin Festival, schedule it for every other year and take inspiration from one of the recent Lily-of-the-Valley Festivals which had had, for the first time, a period theme (1920s and 1930s, flapper days). The very first 1990 poster for the Saint Lubin event show a line-up of activities that have continued to today: large-scale invitation of costumed craft people and food-sellers with street stands, all shops open throughout the day, a “Republican banquet” on hay bales in the town hall square, street artists and musicians, and most especially, the continual presence of animals and prizes for best groomed and trained horses. Equally on the very first 1990 Saint Lubin programme, there is a list of no less than twenty-five official sponsors, from one shop owner to large institutions such as the Banque de Paris, the National Forest Bureau or a large hunters’ association. Today, as in the beginning of the festival, one of its major characteristics has been its participative aspect, as wearing period costume is obviously considered great fun for many among the regular public, as well as for the participants from the town hall, various associations, and choral or instrumental groups who animate the song and dance events throughout the day, and take part in the costume procession from one end to the other of the high street.



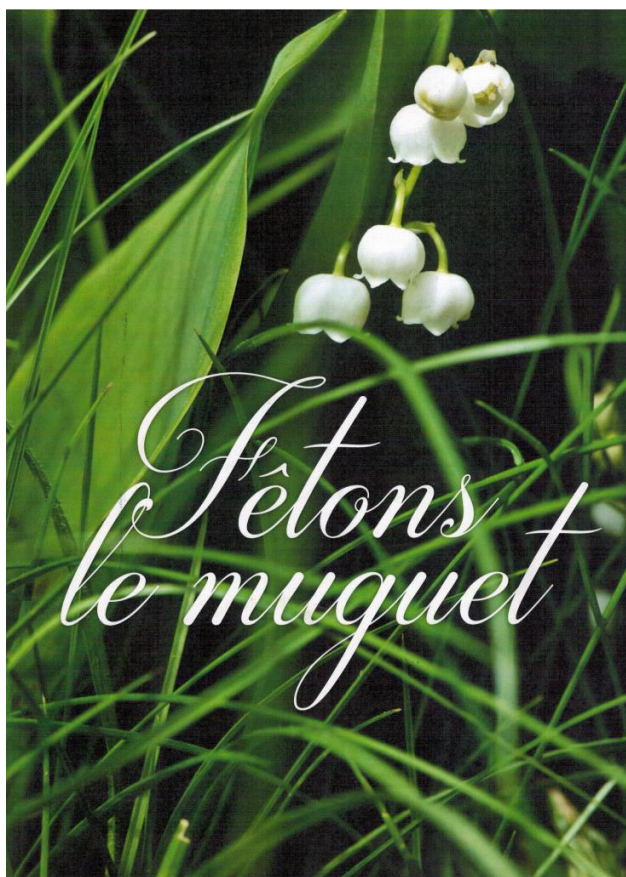


Fig 3: 1990 Saint Lubin programme

Although it is no longer announced in the press, Gérard Larcher has continued at each Saint Lubin to lead the afternoon judging of the animal breeds and this “unannouncement” points toward one of the crucial issues in any of today’s festive events in France – security – bringing us back to the questions raised at the beginning of the article. Security for the public has become a major concern and has multiplied the financial burdens involved in festival activity, especially for a fête that runs over two days, every year. It is responsible for a major and definitive change in 1915 in the Lily-of-the-Valley Festival: elimination of the Saturday evening triple event of the town orchestra concert, the crowning of the Queen and the subsequent fireworks show inside the château park in front of the ornamental reflecting pool (the *Rondeau*), which is a splendid setting, but surrounded by iron fencing that prevents access during closing hours and requires considerable efforts in effective crowd control (Cintrat, 26–27). Luckily, the ensuing years mostly repaired this: the concert presently takes place at the *end* of the Corso fleuri on Sunday before judging and award of prizes to the floats, while the coronation and fireworks have been reinstated on the Saturday night.

Nonetheless, this triple loss did represent a blow to the Lily-of-the-Valley Festival. In contrast to its beginnings as a calculated, highly profitable event for local shops, the fête's most popular element today is the fun fair spread over the town in four locations. Although it is very attractive for young families and teenagers, the fun fair has no discernable impact on local restaurants and shops on the Friday evening or Saturday, with even less on the Sunday, when the float parade is scheduled. In itself, the float parade (*corso fleuri*) is often a small miracle of organization, having to wend its way through a long path that makes it visible to large parts of the town. Even this has been "simplified", that is, made shorter and along the same route every year, so that the various neighborhoods the parade used to move through now feel quite left out. Again, this was done for security reasons. By definition, the shorter Sunday morning procession of the Queen and Dauphines from the crossroads square to the church and the afternoon float parade disrupt traffic and parking totally, so shopkeepers look upon that as a time they are pleased *not* to be open, having already been subjected to the inconveniences of the preparations, streets closed off with concrete security barriers from Friday through Sunday, for example.

The float parade continues to be perceived and explicitly praised as a gift from the associations to the town folk. In spite of its charm, often admirable technicity and aesthetics, it is a largely spectator sport, with active participation and commitment only from the builders. There is no question of recapturing the glory days familiar over a long part of Madame Thome-Patenôtre's mayorship in the 1950s to the 1970s, when national stars were invited for concerts – television and YouTube have replaced that. However, many attendees felt that the highly developed March-May 2018 exhibit at the cultural center with its emphasis on the lily-of-the-valley in general, seconded by the specific exhibit on the Rambouillet festival, represented a real shot in the arm and a raising of awareness, as well as visibility, for the fête. Be that as it may, among the more problematic aspects that cannot be altered, timing is also paramount. The mid-May date of the Lily-of-the-Valley Festival provides the organizers with a regular headache, because they must calculate it not to coincide with the religious holidays following Easter, with school vacations. It is inconveniently close to the national holiday of Victory Day on 8 May, and the more general nearby "heat" from the preceding May Day, often a long weekend. The flower festival suffers from comparison with more recent nationally popular events such as World Music Day (*Fête de la Musique*) on 21<sup>st</sup> June, when the streets are totally impassable, filled with enthusiastic onlookers that recall, to the elderly town residents, the crowds that once attended in the Fête du Muguet's heyday. Springtime in France is one of "hard" choices about when to take time off: considering the frequently granted swing holidays, it is tempting to take two or three days off work to have a full week – if not more – of holidays.

There is open discussion of whether the Fête du Muguet will go on, in the press and among the public, although there is likewise much support for it from the town hall. This is not an issue for the Saint Lubin, which has any number of points in its favor – only held every two years, hence there is little “fête fatigue”. The Saint Lubin is considered highly participative and lucrative for local business, as well as more manageable, running only one day and in the daytime (think “security” again), with no fun fairs to compete with it and coming at end September, when there is no official holiday or school vacation to create calendar conflict. Although there is no fun fair element to attract families, the massive presence of animals more than makes up for that, along with the children’s games and special activities in the small Roi de Rome mid-town park.

The Lily-of-the-Valley Festival and the Saint Lubin “face off”, mirroring each other, at opposite ends of the summer and, at least in their local narratives, both play to a sense of town identity emphasized in the increasing concern with integration of newcomers, and territorial valorization through the attractiveness of local events. These objectives have been the object of two influential reports made for the town hall and frequently cited by officials (Cintrat *et al.*, Réhel). Equally important, if less tangible, is the intimate insertion of flowers, harvest fruits and animals into the unfolding of the seasons and the rural/forest world still felt by many residents to be a major characteristic of the setting. This view of the town’s identity as close to nature is constantly underwritten by tourism publicity directed inwards and outwards.

What sort of dynamic is at work in the population? Is it a fruitful tension between two “brands” of fêtes or are there signs of stress, that one invention may be overpowering the other? People like to say that the French hate rules but love traditions and “tradition” is the most used (over-taxed) term in all discourse about both festivals, but... will people continue to support a fête simply because it has been there for a long time, perhaps Grandma was even once Queen? The proportion of townsfolk whose forebearers come from Rambouillet is decreasing rapidly. The same demographics apply more acutely to shopkeepers and trades folk, and these sentiments of belonging no longer have the impact they did over much of the twentieth century. Most certainly, shopkeepers are clear about their own choice, since the Saint Lubin is a hands-down winner, as far as profits go.

For every article in the local press intimating that the Lily-of-the-Valley Festival is losing steam, there will be more than one with the counter-argument. There have been articles noting that the Saint Lubin is not seen in a positive light by everyone, as well as a running debate in the municipal council over the years about the expenses involved. As an interested bystander – and even active participant at times (for example, as one of the March 2018 colloquium organizers) – it is not easy to take the temperature of the trends toward continuity and rupture in this nuanced landscape

of custom, agency, feedback loops and shifts in context over time. However, the wealth of strands involved is also a fruitful reminder of the utility of uncertainty. Festivals are not enjoyed, more or less, because someone has predicted they will last, and allegiance to them, from the many participants involved, may be far more nuanced than what appears in conversation, interview or media reports. Rambouillet is a town with a tradition of invention and the festival organizers – be they on the town council, in the various associations or among the shopkeepers – have always these precedents in mind. With two examples of pro-active and determined invention still very “present”, these actors – or others, depending on the tides of political fortune – may well find ways to sustain the momentum of both of their homegrown festivals, and keep them on the road to the future.

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monarchie annuelle [rires]. Il y a des monarchies de droit divin, il y a des monarchies qui sont constitutionnelles. À Rambouillet, nous avons une monarchie annuelle, et, au fond, ça se conjugue bien avec les valeurs républicaines...’

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## Biographical Note

**Cozette Griffin-Kremer**, Associate Researcher, Centre de Recherche Bretonne et Celtique, Brest, France, took her doctorate in Celtic Studies on the subject of May Day practices in the British Isles and an Advanced Research Degree (DEA) in the history of technology at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris, and so attempts to marry the two fields, especially concentrating on the calendar system, human-bovine relations, the relationships between ritual and work, museum work for intangible heritage, food history and plant uses.