Notes from the workshop on field work in the former USSR, AATSEEL Conference, 1997

(These informal notes, provided thanks to Natalie Kononenko, outline the issues discussed at the workshop in Toronto in December.)

Practical considerations come at 2 levels:
1) It is different
2) What you need may not exist

Equipment you are likely to need for fieldwork:
> voltage plugs, phone jack
> tapes -- expense may determine whether you buy there or here
> film, video tape (European and American systems)
> your own computer, printer (and paper), scanner, e-mail access -- it is sometimes possible to buy e-mail access for a limited period
> consider comfort -- the weight of your computer, etc. and carrying it about to villages, on buses and other transportation
> shoes -- standing waiting for bus, standing on the bus
> other clothes and necessities of comfort flexibility -- lots of things don't work
> buses, trains may not run, or may be too full
> many people have not been paid * may show up at archives and may not
> this uncertainty necessitates flexibility or alternative research plans * or the ability to be on the look-out for good data

Working with your colleagues:
> be aware of different understandings of the field: what it is; what the important questions are
folklore examples of such an issue:
> viewing folklore as necessarily old (archaic, and a province of old people) and rural
> therefore it's hard to get data on contemporary practices -- they try to get you old people who will tell you about the past
> they steer you away from urban sources

There are nationalist considerations * especially outside Russia, in the republics of the Russian Federation, and in former republics of the USSR:
> Here, as well as in Russian Russia, you may be directed not to straight data, but to data that will give you the impression they want you to have
> Often they will try to make their country appear more advanced than it is, or more like the West, or more nationalistic, independent, anti-Communist.
> This is in fact a relic of the Communist mentality (folklore viewed as evidence to prove one thesis or another, people can't be trusted to produce folklore properly by themselves).

Anti-Soviet drive:
> Many folklorists tend to want to do away with all Soviet folklore, unless it's a folklore of camps and repression, not realizing that they're using almost Soviet cultural engineering practices to do so. They see it as a bad practice when the Soviets did it, but not when they themselves do it: Soviet influence must be undone!
> It is therefore very difficult to collect Soviet data (unless it demonstrates some fault with the Soviet system), even though this is legitimate data too and needs to be collected ASAP.
> There is a strong drive to do away with Soviet things in Russia, too; not just in the former republics
as they reinstate national language, culture, whatever, outside Russia.
> An example: the orthographic debates in Ukraine.

Working on-site -- as in the village:
> culture and courtesy -- how to behave
> dress -- what to wear where and when (men as well as women) -- be aware of different ideas of decency: sleeping with 3 guys in a train compartment is okay (there are techniques for changing clothes without being an exhibitionist), but showing up in shorts in a village is not
> recall the comfort question from before, but also considerations of age, gender -- how can you find out what is considered appropriate?
> It's a delicate balance -- do it their way and still admit that you are, after all, different
> Being different is NOT disadvantageous; it can create a context where you get very good material.

The question of payment also raises gender issues:
> paying informants, paying colleagues who accompany you or provide contacts
> there are various systems of ALTERNATE pay
> gifts, esp. for someone other than the informant, a helpful colleague
> providing work opportunities for colleagues or their students
> pay for their trip, for equipment, for wanted books; buy needed supplies
> help with publishing opportunities

Practical issues to consider as you are planning:
> food, lodging
> daily life (like hygiene)
> choose clothing from the practical point of view -- washing and drying
Photography -- what you can and cannot photograph:
> different restrictions than in US
> the use and the etiquette of still camera, of a video camera

Ethical issues:
> telling the truth can become much more thorny than you are used to -- never lie; but in some cases explaining exactly how it is in the US may create more confusion than it is worth
> intimacy -- the kinds of questions you can ask your informants
> what kinds of questions they are likely to ask you
> continuing the relationship after you leave the country