

## ATLANTA: ONE VIEW

As a first-year graduate student in folklore, I was disillusioned and disappointed by the American Folklore Society meeting in Atlanta, basically because of the papers presented. Although some people did not seem to take them too seriously, without them there would have been no convention. Most of the papers I heard were deficient in two areas: presentation and content. In regard to the former, I was astonished to find that many professors, who spend much of their time lecturing before classes, had no idea how to deliver a paper. They mumbled incoherently, hid their faces in their notes, or spoke too rapidly. Thirty- or forty-minute papers were arbitrarily squeezed into twenty because their authors had not taken the time to cut them previously. Papers destined for future publication (or in some instances already published) were barely edited, if at all, for oral presentation, and this led to a stilted, unnatural style and, in one case, some puzzling biographical references.

Still, folklorists are human and possess human failings, such as an occasional incapacity for public speaking. I was less inclined to pardon the content of much of the paper material. Scholars whose books and articles I had read avidly and whose opinions I had respected mouthed gross generalizations (one that comes to mind was the confusion of the "Bantu world" with the whole of mid-Africa), performed daring feats of logic (e.g., wide musical intervals indicate a high degree of civilization) and reacted to others' papers in a petty, egocentric manner. One savant insisted on interpreting the comments of his fellow panel members to fit his approach; in order to do this he enthusiastically misquoted as he thought necessary. Another avoided specific statements, apparently not wanting to say anything challengeable. At the first session I attended an interesting paper on rumor theory was followed by a question-and-answer period consisting mostly of parallel anecdotes ("oh, yes---I've heard that one before at X University, but mine was like this..."), rather than any information that could have been helpful to the speaker in correcting or adding to his thesis. At another lecture I listened to material I had heard---and read---before.

What is the purpose of the paper sessions? Are they only an excuse for bringing AFS members together socially? Are they intended to convey useful information and attitudes? Or are they a quantitative, prideful show of size; i.e., the AFS has arrived---just look at the dozens of papers and all the simultaneous sessions. Why, do you remember when...?

My expectations were too high, I have been told. Perhaps. But I do not feel that badly delivered, badly organized and badly conceived papers are inevitable at conventions of professional societies, my lack of experience notwithstanding. What made some papers and sessions especially poor, in fact, was their contrast with others which were truly fine; the student fieldwork session was one of these. It seems to me that many members accept low quality simply because they are unused to anything else, and yet these same members may polish endlessly an article they want to publish. Must the written article be a more perfect product than the oral paper, just because it is more permanent? Some of the persons who gave papers made a more lasting impression on me, due to their lack of

preparation and care, than did their finely-honed articles in the JAF or elsewhere.

I am glad I went. Seeing and meeting folklorists who had been phantom names in books and journals was exciting for a lowly acolyte to whom Dundes, Abrahams and others were as deities. And in some small way I have changed---as have the other first-year students who made the pilgrimage. I am a little more skeptical of the power of names; I am a little more knowledgeable about my chosen field and the people in it. My folkloric world has expanded and my perspective is wider.

I will probably go to Los Angeles next year. I am not sure why, except that now, two days after Atlanta, some of the sting is already wearing off, and maybe by this time next year so much will have worn off that I will have forgotten the disappointments and will eagerly be awaiting the kind of spiritual experience that was absent in Atlanta this year. If this communication opens me to attack, hopefully it also will prod some AFS members into examining their motives for and methods in presenting papers. I have cited no specific cases and mentioned no names because I intend this comment to be a general criticism of the membership and not criticism of particular members. I am interested in your comments, whether attacks or defense.

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#### AFRICAN FOLKLORE CONFERENCE

The Folklore Institute of Indiana University will sponsor an African Folklore Conference, to be held in Bloomington, Indiana, on July 16, 17, and 18, 1970. This conference will continue the series of special summer programs in folklore held at Indiana University every four years since 1942. Scholars from Africa, Europe and the United States will discuss the genres of African folklore, oral tradition as literary art, the influence of African folklore on modern African literature, relationships between African folklore and American Negro lore, African folklore as a source for the historian, and teaching materials for courses in African oral traditions.

The African Folklore Conference will call attention to African folklore as an independent field of study. Further information and reservations may be obtained from the Director of the Folklore Institute, Indiana University, 714 East 8th Street, Bloomington, Indiana 47401.