FOLKLORE AND THE IDIOSYNCRATIC MAKE-UP OF THE FOLKLORIST

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Although I read many guides and handbooks about fieldwork in my graduate folklore courses, when I joined the Gary team I had to leave behind the ideals of the classroom to fully submerge myself in actual field situations. The lessons of Goldstein and Ó'Suilleabháin, as well as numerous articles on the how of collecting folklore, did not always fit my own personality needs nor the community in which I was doing fieldwork. Thus, the purpose of this short treatise is to indicate how one fieldworker's personal make-up influenced his approach to collecting folklore.

In order to become better acquainted with the new environment in which I would be working, I began to pose questions about northwest Indiana (often referred to as "the Region") while I was still in Bloomington. What I heard from students at Indiana University was upsetting at best! Indeed the horror stories they told me probably would have shaked to the core the bravest of war heroes. Since the Gary team had already experienced a year in the field, I turned also to them. My inquiries to them yielded stories that caused my blood pressure to rise. Initially I accepted their observations and reports as gospel. Consequently, for the first two days in the Region, I tiptoed gladly alongside fellow fieldworker Adrienne Seward. But after two days with Adrienne, I became aware of a certain disharmony between what I had been told about Gary and what I now experienced. Adrienne first took me on a tour of the major parts of the city and showed me how easy it was to travel about. Next she took me to a restaurant owned by a Mr. T., who seemed to be a very sincere and jovial person. Meeting him and several of his customers began to convince me that Gary really was not as horrifying as many had painted it. Besides, I saw neither lions nor tigers roaming the streets devouring whomever they wished. To my own surprise, I

found the Region to be little more than an oversized, black, southern town that had temporarily strayed from its hospitable southern tradition. So that if Gary at one time had been a modern-day Sodom and Gomorrah, I could only see minute survivals of that characteristic now. These revelations, along with other bits of knowledge, nerved me to drop the psychological chains that hindered me from pursuing my own fieldwork goals. Adrienne and I decided to separate and venture forth on our own; she was interested in the image of Gary, while I planned to inquire into the supernatural belief system of Region blacks.

Although a number of folklorists had previously studied this belief system in the South, relatively few had conducted research in northern cities, and none specifically in the Calumet Region of Indiana. In 1973 I had worked in the Piedmont section of North Carolina, where I collected numerous accounts of hoodoo. Thus I knew at first hand that rootwork (another name for hoodoo) existed in the South, but I wondered whether blacks in an urban setting believed in and practiced hoodoo. Would I find tales and legends about hoodoo in northern oral tradition? To answer these questions, I set out to ask people in the Region.

I identified informants through a number of techniques. Obviously, my first contacts involved Region students on the Bloomington campus. They supplied many more names and addresses of parents and relatives as well as friends than I could follow up in the four weeks I spent in the field. On days when I finished my interviews early, or on days when informants cancelled appointments, I sometimes asked them for the name of a friend who would be willing to talk with me. This technique was very rewarding. On days when appointments were cancelled and I did not come up with a specific substitute informant, I conducted impromptu interviews with persons who seemed to be idle on the street or at some recreational facility. This last method also worked fairly well.

I knew that I was dealing with a sensitive and, to some people, taboo subject. During the initial stages of my fieldwork in Gary, I often experienced immediate disappointment after I explained my interest to an informant. My first approach was to ask questions such as, "Do you believe in voodoo?" or "Do you know anything about rootworking?" In response to these pointed queries, a number of potential informants sealed their mouths. Some were actually offended that a college student would be interested in something "so base and immoral"; others indicated embarrassment or shame, as if an affirmative response to my queries would prove them superstitious. I quickly experienced the core of truth in Goldstein's warning about the difficulties inherent in researching emotion-laden topics. Also, I surmised that if I were to get answers I had to adjust my introduction and description of voodoo so as to defuse the tension my initial vocabulary was engendering in the people I met.

Consequently, when I now approached informants I devoted more time to a layman's definition of folkloristics and the importance of its study. I presented myself as a student of folklore who wanted to understand more about the voodoo system. Furthermore, instead of inquiring directly whether or not informants believed in hoodoo, I more often asked whether they were aware of the term, or whether they might share with me some of the stories they had heard. With this approach, I hoped that after talking to me objectively about the subject at first, they would slowly warm up to it and eventually take a more subjective point of view. To my surprise, this transition often occurred within a few minutes and was signaled by such statements as "I don't believe in it, you know, but this actually happened to my mother!"

In their pursuit of data, folklorists quite often put informants on the spot. In quite the reverse of this situation, I found myself frequently placed in an awkward position by informants who did not want to be the only ones expressing a particular belief. For some, it was easier to talk about hoodoo if they thought their listener shared their point of view.

But I was determined to avoid taking sides in what I perceived as a no-win situation: if I offered my opinions and offended the informant, the recording session would be over. Similarly, when an informant looked to me as the final authority on whether the supernatural events reported in hoodoo tales were real, I sidestepped the issue and answered that I really did not know, since I had heard stories both pro and con. This technique is a sound one for it promotes objective research. (Besides, if we behave as if we know all there is to know about a certain culture, then it would be pointless to try to pluck feathers from a plucked hen.) And, too, by remaining interested, but neutral, I was giving each individual a chance to inform me, a person who really did not know the full scope of the system.

In the matter of establishing rapport with my informants, I can only emphatically state what worked for me. Often in the opening moments of a session, the generous host would offer me some type of alcoholic beverage. But, being something of a teetotaler, I was reluctant to compromise my ideas on alcohol in order to promote my research. Fortunately I quickly found that I could hold to my values while simultaneously accepting the hospitality of my informants. Since the hot and humid weather in Gary almost always left me dehydrated, I said, "No, thank you, but I would like to have some water or pop." In this way, the session still got started on a positive note. A similar story pertains to sharing meals with informants.

Early one day, I decided to do several sessions with some high school students, just to see if they were familiar with the subject of hoodoo. These students kept me a little longer than I had planned, so I was somewhat pressed to be on time to meet Mrs. M. When I arrived, I discovered to my chagrin that she had just cooked dinner. I felt awkward--as if I were intruding--so when she invited me to dinner, I responded

with the conventional "No-thank-you-I'm-not-hungry" ritual, even though I was starving. Eventually, of course, I accepted her invitation to share the meal, and not only did eating with her help establish rapport for our later discussion, it also helped to keep me going! The nonstop conversations with her friends did not have to be delayed or interrupted because of a fieldworker's hunger. I had been taken care of.

Although I knew I would be a few minutes late in arriving at Mrs. M.'s, I nonetheless refused to cancel the appointment. In some cases, it is almost tragic for the fieldworker to call off a session, for there is the risk of never getting another chance to talk with that informant. The busy life of urbanites, as well as the ties many of them maintain with the South, keep them on the go.

Another area in which I exercised strict caution involved the police. I almost never conversed with them. As is so often the case with field researchers, we were initially looked upon by curious and suspicious eyes. Some folks in the Region wondered if I were an agent or if I worked for the local narcotics office. Thus even though in some instances I could easily have approached a policeman for a street number, I did not, so that I would not jeopardize my research project.

During the course of many of my interview sessions, people often mentioned spiritual stores and religious shops, a phenomenon I was not familiar with from my work in North Carolina. Thus, I felt it imperative to visit them, especially since they offered candles, sprays, oils, incenses, statuettes, and other items associated with good or evil effects in hoodoo. The rear of these stores often contained a small room for prayers or for conferences between the patient and the occult specialist. My first visit was to a spiritual shop in East Chicago, one owned by Reverend Solomon T. I accompanied team member Richard March and Project Director Richard M. Dorson, who had made the initial contact and now took charge of the interview, questioning Rev. T. about a

number of topics. As they talked, I noticed that a sudden and overwhelming anger came over Rev. T. I still wonder if he became angry because Dorson was asking him about the purported powers of several items or whether he had become nervous because the video camera so closely resembles a television camera; or perhaps because we were distracting him from his incoming customers. Whatever the reason, I noticed that the tension decreased once Dorson expressed an interest in purchasing several items. A similar situation developed at Sherry's Spiritual Shop on Fifth Avenue and Broadway, which I visited alone. Again, the owners were suspicious until I bought something; this purchase apparently convinced them that my primary goal was to obtain an item that would benefit me. The owners of the two stores catering to the supernatural belief system of the Region blacks refused to allow me to take pictures or conduct an interview.

A different kind of problem emerged as I talked with two other occult specialists, both of whom welcomed the interview (probably because they expected publicity) but then seemed pre-programmed with the information they shared. One psychic, H. W., after hearing that I was interested in hoodoo, received me with open arms. I introduced myself to him and he immediately began to talk. He talked on and on, becoming very engrossed in his own monologue. To redirect this unchecked verbosity, I decided to pose specific questions. Mr. W. would begin to answer, but after two or three sentences, he would switch back to his own train of thought. Rev. J. also seemed pre-programmed. Twice I asked him the same question, simultaneously aware that my interruptions might offend my informant and bring the interview to a close. But I knew a choice had to be made: I could listen to and tape record a two-hour exegesis that was not pertinent to my inquiry, or I could try to salvage the conversation by asking him to focus on hoodoo. I chose the latter approach and it worked.