Teaching Note:
"Culture" and "Society"

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In teaching introductory folklore classes,
one of my goals is to heighten my students'
awareness of the folklore surrounding them; an
important second goal is to provide them with
concepts and tools to help them interpret and
analyze the folklore in their everyday lives.
To this end I emphasize the fact that folklore
is enacted in context and is best understood in
terms of its context.
    Like most folklorists, I mean more than one
thing when I say "context." While Bauman's
article on "The Field Study of Folklore in
Context" (1983) is both clear and provocative to
me, I have found it too rich for beginning
undergraduate students. The difference between
his umbrella terms, "cultural" and "social"
context, is one of the first stumbling blocks.
    For the class I am currently teaching, I have
elected to focus on four kinds of context, name-
ly situational, historical, social, and cultur-
al. I explain to my students that what I mean
by "situational context" (and I recognize that
this is possibly an idiosyncratic interpreta-
tion) is all the relevant information about what
goes on when the folklore is performed, used, or
enacted--just what happened right then. By
"historical context," I mean what happened pre-
viously which sheds light on the event. These
concepts seem easily assimilated; the sticking
point for my students (as for many folklorists
and anthropologists) is the difference between
"social" and "cultural."
    I put my apology up front: my intention is
to provide my students with concepts which will
be useful to them, not to rehearse a litany of

definitions or to trace a history of ideas.  No
doubt my concepts of "culture" and "society" do
not exactly match how many of my esteemed col-
leagues (and betters) use the terms, and I read-
ily admit that what follows is rather simpli-
fied.  However, it does seem to be useful in an
introductory folklore class, and also, I hope,
does not sabotage my students' ability to under-
stand what other scholars mean by these terms.

My explanation draws attention to the ab-
stract nature of culture and the concrete nature
of society.  Culture, I tell my students, has to
do with ideas and rules; society has to do with
relationships between people.  Culture is the
set of rules and ideas that a given society
holds about what is right and wrong, what is
acceptable and unacceptable, what is expected
and what is outrageous, and what is the "common
sense" way to approach any given problem.  Soci-
ety is the people who have these ideas.

For my part, the difference between culture
and society is made most clear whenever I re-
read Geertz's article on a Javenese funeral
(1973).  This article, however, is even less ac-
cessible to undergraduate students than is
Bauman's.  Following Geertz's lead, I came up
with two examples of a disjunction between so-
cial reality and cultural ideas that are fami-
liar to my students, both of which have to do
with a lack of adequate cultural terminology for
ubiquitous social realities.

The first example is the social reality of
unmarried people living together ("in sin" as
some would say).  Surely every American knows at
least one couple which fits this category.  What
is the equivalent of the term "husband" for a
man unmarried to the woman with whom he lives?
There is no lack of terminology:  domestic
partner, live-in-boyfriend, significant other,
lover.  What is lacking is any **widely accepted**
terminology.  Certainly the phenomenon is more
common than any of the names for it; certainly

none of the names comes close to the acceptance
enjoyed by "husband."

A second example of an American instance of
social change outpacing the ability of culture
to name the change has to do with divorce.  A
concrete example will illustrate the problem
best.  A and A' marry, have children al, a2, and
a3.  A and A' divorce; A is given custody of the
children.  A marries B', who brings along chil-
dren b3 and b4, leaving children b1 and b2 with
B, the ex-spouse.  A' marries C who brings along
child c1.  Now the households look like this:
    A=B': al a2 a3 b3 b4
    A'=C: cl
    B: b1 b2
    C' (alone)
Clearly al, a2, and a3 have the relationship
"step-sibling" to b3 and b4 and "step-child" to
B'.  But what is al's relationship to C? to cl?
It is bizarre to think of C as al's step-parent
when C lives in a different household, but it is
entirely likely that al will have a steady rela-
tionship with C and cl.  And for a real head-
ache, try to figure out the relationship between
al and b1.

This example might be a bit contrived, but
having taught about one hundred students a
course in elementary composition last year and
having read journals that they kept daily, I can
attest that, at least in that sample, the social
term "dad" is used indiscriminately for biologi-
cal and adopted fathers; at least one of my stu-
dents had been put into her father's custody and
called her biological mother's new husband (with
whom my student did not live) "dad."

My folklore students seemed to understand and
appreciate the examples, which also illustrate
the idea of "cultural lag" (ideas hang around
longer than the social relationships they
describe).

One caveat, pointed out to me by Jennifer
Livesay, is that my distinction between culture

and society might be confused with a distinction
between "ideal culture" and "real culture"--it
might sound like culture is "ideal" and society
is "real." I acknowledge the potential for con-
fusion, which rises partly from some overlap in
the concepts. All I can say is I have not en-
countered a problem with this yet, and probably
anyone who wants to teach "ideal" and "real"
culture would be advised to use a different
pedagogy than outlined above.

## References Cited

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