

The “Text/Context” Controversy and the Emergence of Behavioral Approaches in Folklore

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In his 1972 introduction to *Folklore and Folklife*, Richard Dorson referred to an upcoming group of young scholars as “Young Turks” due to their new and highly theoretical approach to the study of folklore. As noted by Hasan El-Shamy in 1976, the label was somewhat dubious in that it indexed internal strife and conflict; perhaps Dorson foresaw the debates and controversies that the ideas of this group would provoke for the next twenty-five years. Although many so-called Turks protested Dorson’s identification of them as a “school” and stated repeatedly and publicly that their views on the subject of folklore were extremely diverse, for better or worse Dorson’s label stuck. This group, along with other contributors, came to be perceived as initiating a theoretical revolution in folklore embodied by what is now called the “text/context” controversy.¹ In their efforts to make folklore a legitimate social science, these scholars drew upon the study of language and psychology, calling for a “behavioral” approach to folklore that shifted the conceptualization of folklore as an extractable item or “text” to an emphasis on folklore as a kind of human behavior and communication. Conceptualizing folklore as behavior redefined the job of folklorists: rather than identifying the origin and change over time of specific kinds of folklore texts and known variants, many folklorists began producing highly contextualized, ethnographic descriptions of the uses, processes, and communicative nature of folklore in specific settings. This paper offers a very brief introduction to some of the arguments and players during that shift in orientation, spanning the years 1965–79.

The behavioral approach to folklore has deep roots in sociolinguistics, particularly in Dell Hymes’s work in the ethnography of communication.² This overview, however, starts with the 1967 public presentation by Dan Ben-Amos at the annual American Folklore Society meeting in Toronto, Ontario, which helped bring the behavioral approach into a wider arena and open debate. Entitled “Folklore: The Definition Game Once Again,” his paper generated discussion and controversy even before it was published.³ Ben-Amos drew on a long-

standing tradition in which folklore scholars have struggled to define their field of study. Ben-Amos argued that the reason folklorists had failed in the past to identify the unifying thread traversing their diverse subjects of study—thereby arriving at a definition of the field—was because of the problematic way in which “folklore” was conceptualized. He noted that folklore had always been difficult to define because it was conceptualized as both a superorganic and context-specific phenomenon, and that criteria such as oral transmission or traditionality merely offered potential qualities of folklore rather than irreducible properties. The problem with past definitions, Ben-Amos declared, was that they were based on a conceptualization of folklore as an aggregate of things; he proposed reconceptualizing folklore as a communicative process. He claimed that such a reorientation would shift the discipline of folklore from collection-based projects to a scientific and fully-fledged discipline in its own right and offered “artistic communication in small groups” as his own (now widespread) definition, one noted for its exclusion of both “tradition” and “oral transmission.”

The shift from an item-centered perspective to a more processual one was developed by other scholars in a number of ways, with a pronounced concern for rules governing behavior and language in particular situations. Drawing upon the theories of Kenneth Burke, Roger Abrahams (1968), for example, proposed viewing folklore as a form of rhetoric in order to unite the analysis of form and function, and he used the term “performance” to describe the way in which folklore items “came to life.” In 1969, Dell Hymes, Richard Bauman, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, and Bruce A. Rosenberg participated in an AFS panel entitled “Folklore and Communication.” During this session, they offered ethnographic examples demonstrating the importance of looking at folklore in a sociocultural context.⁴ By considering the actual use of parables in real situations, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett illustrated that their significance and meaning lay not in the text but in social use. In his examination of Quaker proverbs, Bauman demonstrated why proverbs were particularly well suited for Quakers by examining the rules for the social use of language in general among Quakers and the effect that those rules had on the expression (or suppression) of folklore.

That same year both Robert Georges and Barre Toelken also published influential articles. In “Towards an Understanding of Storytelling Events,” (1969) Georges sought out behavioral rules for storytelling interactions. He pointed out the distinction between the text and the behavior that it was supposed to record maintaining that narrative scholars had untowardly privileged the linguistic dimensions of storytelling by examining them at the expense of other integrated dimensions, such as the paralinguistic or kinesic features, as well as the identities of the participants, all of which contributed to the entire “message” of the event. Noting that his statement

was not simply another plea for the study of narratives in context, but aimed to promote "a holistic rather than an atomistic concept—of a complex communicative event" (317), Georges pointed out that storytelling was an emergent phenomena, generated by the face-to-face interactions of at least two people, each of whom assumed particular, rule-governed roles. Barre Toelken (1969) demonstrated how aspects other than structure or content affected meaning and interpretation in his analysis of Navajo storytelling. Expanding upon Alan Dundes's 1964 explanation of "texture," Toelken pointed out how his own content-based ideas of genre had led him to initially misunderstand many of the narratives told by his informant Yellowman. Yellowman himself classified Coyote stories according to the style in which they were told, and Toelken illustrated not only that much of the meaning in the Coyote stories resided in textural features such as recitational devices and cultural associations, but also that the narratives were dramatically affected by the audience.

The various proposals that the discipline radically reconceptualize the idea of folklore itself, as well as such entrenched concepts as "tradition" (Ben-Amos 1971 [1967]), "folk" (Dundes 1965), and "story" (Georges 1969) generated much debate, including dissention among those scholars who sought to conceptualize folklore as process.⁵ Roger Welsch was one of the first scholars to respond in print to Ben-Amos's paper, and in a 1968 issue of the *Journal of American Folklore* he took issue less with Ben-Amos's suggestion of folklore-as-communication than with his attempt to offer a single definition of folklore and a unified theoretical viewpoint, a point of contention that would run throughout later years. Noting the arbitrariness of language in general and the ongoing shift in meaning and use, Welsch said that the meaning of the word "folklore" could and would change and that scholars generally manipulate the definition of folklore to suit their own needs. He stated that as long as researchers were clear about their own use of the term, it was better for the discipline to support a number of definitions, rather than narrow itself to a single one.

A year later, Richard Bauman replied to Roger Welsch in a well-known article entitled "Towards a Behavioral Theory of Folklore" (1969) in which he succinctly pointed out that Ben-Amos's paper really had nothing to do with defining folklore according to the methods that Welsch described. In defending folklore scholarship against Ben-Amos's accusation that past definitions lacked conceptual consistency, Welsch had opened his argument by stating that the search for definitions of folklore was always analytical, arrived at either through the abstraction of common elements from a set of materials or the identification of a unique perspective; Bauman reiterated that Ben-Amos was specifically

disassociating himself from this item-centered perspective. In looking at folklore as a communicative process rather than as a common set of materials, Bauman wrote that Ben-Amos "is doing no more and no less than advancing the concept of a behavioral study of folklore, thereby opening the way for a behavioral science of folklore" (168), which Bauman described as being devoted to the collection of data reflecting the direct behavior of individuals or small groups.

This "behavioral" approach was more fully explicated in the set of papers entitled *Toward New Perspectives in Folklore* (1972), which were first published as a special issue of the *Journal of American Folklore* in 1971 and later as a book in 1972. According to the book foreword by Américo Paredes, the papers developed out of a debate in 1966 between Latin American and North American folklorists and were a response to the accusation that North American folklorists lacked theory (see, for example, Paredes 1969). In his introduction, Richard Bauman wrote that "no attempt was made by the editors to limit or direct the contributors other than the stipulation that theoretical or methodological considerations should be given prominence," yet acknowledged that the majority of articles concerned themselves with the "doing of folklore" rather than the "things of folklore." He wrote:

In particular there is an emphasis upon performance as an organizing principle that comprehends within a single conceptual framework artistic act, expressive form, and esthetic response, and that does so in terms of locally defined, culture-specific categories and contexts. The latter requirement...is particularly important, given the predilection of folklorists in the past for the construction of universal classification systems or functional schemes without due regard for the ethnographic realities of particular cultures or awareness of the principle that the cognitive, behavioral, and functional structuring of folklore is not always and everywhere the same, but cross-culturally variable and diverse. (Bauman 1969:xi)

Now titled "Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context," a revised version of Ben-Amos's 1967 AFS presentation opened the collection. The breadth and depth of the essays in this collection are too numerous to be outlined in this short paper, yet in general the collection focused primarily on verbal genres, examining the social base of folklore in specific situations and promoting a scientifically-based analysis of verbal production as a kind of human behavior. Noting that many scholars incorporated a social dimension into conventional conceptualizations of folklore, for example, Bauman suggested that folklore played an important role in intragroup dynamics as well as intergroup

communication and/or conflict, and he called for an empirical investigation of folklore based on the investigation of the identities of the participants as well as the folklore being performed. Dennis Tedlock's essay critiqued the privileging of content over style in the transcription of Native American narrative and argued for treating oral narrative as dramatic poetry rather than mere content-based storytelling, echoing Toelken's earlier conclusions. Dell Hymes described speech as the intermediary between language and social life, and he outlined past and potential future contributions of folkloristics to the ethnography of speech.

The importance of this collocation of papers was recognized and addressed by D.K. Wilgus in his 1972 presidential address at the American Folklore Society in Austin.⁶ In a lecture entitled "The Text Is the Thing," Wilgus summarized the critiques of more textually-oriented scholars. What worried him about these new studies, Wilgus stated, was not so much the new concentration on the relationship between folklore and other aspects of life as much as the dogmatic undertones underlying much of the scholarship:

What concerns me most is not the productions of the current crop of scholars, but the effect their current work may have on folklore scholars and folklore scholarship to follow if certain absolutist tendencies develop. I have already observed the symptoms. 'Text' is rapidly becoming a dirty word and 'thing-oriented' a favorite pejorative expression. (1972:243-44)

One of Wilgus's worries was how this perspective might affect the folklore archives. Noting that it would be impossible to apply this developing perspective to the catalogued folklore materials of previous scholars which lay in archives and indices, Wilgus voiced his concern about what would happen if such new questions became the only valid ones to concern the discipline. We "might as well burn the archives," he said (245), and the results would be "[not] revolutionary, but catastrophic" (244). Instead, Wilgus saw the text/context controversy as a false dichotomy:

I [do not] see how we can separate the study of the productions of man from the 'Study of Man.' Furthermore, I see the suggested dichotomy between the 'things' of folklore and the 'doings' of folklore as false to the extent that it denies the validity and necessity of viewing a text in all its synchronic and diachronic dimensions as a necessary part of the understanding of any folklore 'event.' (245)

Wilgus concluded by stating that both approaches were important and cautioned against letting one perspective dominate.

The debate continued throughout the next two decades, despite the fact that many scholars on both sides of the debate echoed Wilgus's position that formulating the issue in terms of a "text/context" controversy led to little else than polemics and bad feelings, and that the issue itself was a false dichotomy. In 1979, Steven Jones claimed that by de-emphasizing texts folklorists were "slouching towards ethnography," i.e., that folklore would become no longer the comparative study of aesthetic productions, but rather an ethnographic one that focused on people and events. In rejoinder, Ben-Amos (1979) stated that no one wanted to concentrate on people at the expense of texts, but rather that, "[t]he distinction is rather between a processual versus a completive view of folklore" (49)—contextual folklorists wanted to study folklore as action rather than as a completed production.

In general, the examination of folklore as process has led to more detailed, highly contextualized ethnographic studies with increased attention to the various facets and dynamics of face-to-face communication. It has aided in the development of many contemporary theories, and been applied in a number of ways, yielding fruitful results. Noting the over-reliance on verbal forms in process-oriented scholarship, Michael Owen Jones (1975), for example, was one of the first scholars to apply the behavioral perspective to the study of objects in his work on Kentucky chairmakers. He pointed to the importance of individual aesthetic preferences, history, biography, psychology, and the influence of customer relations, all of which challenged conventional ways of looking at folk art as objects.

Bauman, along with a number of interdisciplinary scholars interested in the use of symbolic language, developed the idea of performance, a central perspective in the field today. In "Verbal Art as Performance" (1975), Bauman utilized the ideas of Erving Goffman to expand William Bascom's 1955 notion of "verbal art" from a text-centered perspective to one anchored in performance as the constitutive and analytical unit of analysis. Bauman proposed that performance, defined as a situation in which a performer assumes a degree of responsibility to an audience, was a fundamental way of speaking and mode of communication. Given this, performance, and not the text or the manipulation of linguistic features, should be made the basis of scholarship.

Other aspects related to performance that have come to be emphasized in a variety of ways include increased attention to kinesthetic and paralinguistic features, including the importance of silence; the communicative exchange between the artist/performer and the audience; the effects of audience on composition style, length, and content; environmental and situational factors affecting a performance; the influence of the ethnographer; and the relationship between researcher and informant. Furthermore, the use of ethnography has led

to increased wariness of generalizing about groups as researchers have become aware of discrepancies between universalizing theories and day-to-day realities. Scholars have therefore paid more attention to the individual artist and notions of individual identity; individual repertoire; the influence of individual belief, life history, psychology, and personality on performance; individual creativity; and ethnographic description of individual experience, including the physical and sensory experience of the body. Finally, expanding concepts such as "tradition" and "folk" have affected not only the way in which scholars look at culture, but what they look at as well. For many, the distinction between folklore and popular culture is either blurry or non-existent, and whether folklore as a discipline should join with other emerging disciplines who study culture as a general whole is a question that some folklorists have asked in recent years.

One of the many problems facing the discipline today is how to reconcile its nineteenth-century universalist and comparative past with a newer emphasis on close ethnographic data that does not easily allow for comparative analysis or universal generalizations. Roger Janelli formulated the problem in terms of micro and macro levels of analysis in 1976, proposing that the issue was not that the two approaches were incompatible, but rather that the problem was to discover the nature of the relationship between them (61). He suggested that macro-level regularities affected performance situations rather than folkloric behavior itself and were both a cause and product of individual performance. Yet despite his and others' suggestions, problems arising from tension between the two approaches remain. Certainly to a degree Wilgus's fears about the relevance of the archives have become realized. Archives containing thousands of "items" stand virtually unused and symbolize, at least in this scholar's mind, the dramatic shift in disciplinary perspective. Yet the concept of "text" certainly has not disappeared in folkloristic inquiries, particularly if one takes postmodernism into account. Rather, process-oriented research has demonstrated that we simply should recognize texts as our own creations, or even, in some cases, those of our informants (see, for example, Silverstein and Urban 1996). We therefore face the twenty-first century with the important challenge of reconciling current theoretical paradigms with virtually context-less texts created by earlier scholars laboring under different conceptions of folklore.

Notes

1 Robert Georges, for example, identifies himself as a behaviorist, and notes that there was only a "contextualist" school because Dorson decided there was one. In a 1980 essay Georges writes, "[T]here is, to my knowledge, no 'contextualist school' in American folkloristics. Richard M. Dorson must take the credit—or, more accurately, the blame—for creating such a fiction" (x).

2 For a summary of Hymes's work and the ethnography of speaking, see Hymes 1968, 1973, 1974a, 1974b, 1975.

3 Other scholars were interested in this approach and developed different ways to look at folklore as behavior at the same time. Drawing on the work of behavioral psychologists and psychological learning theory, Hasan El-Shamy (1967) argued for viewing folklore as learned behavior in terms of cues and responses. Ben-Amos's 1967 presentation, however, was the most publicized. A modified version of his presentation was first published in the 1971 special issue of the *Journal of American Folklore* and later in *Toward New Perspectives in Folklore*, edited by Américo Paredes and Richard Bauman. This summary was drawn from the published version of the article entitled "Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context" and not from the original conference paper.

4 This panel became the basis for the seminal anthology *Folklore: Performance and Communication* (Ben-Amos and Goldstein, 1975).

5 Again, this is why such scholars protested against being lumped together into a single "school." The idea of "tradition" was especially problematic; while Ben-Amos wanted to subject it to scholarly inquiry rather than making it a criteria, many others protested against this position.

6 This summary is taken from Wilgus's article published under the title "The Text Is the Thing" (1973).

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Suggested Readings

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