". . . And You Put the Load Right on Me": Alternative Informants in Folklore

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"The ethnographer," writes Claude Levi-Strauss, "while in no wise abdicating his own humanity, strives to know and estimate his fellow-men from a lofty and distant point of vantage: only thus can he abstract them from the contingencies particular to this or that civilization."[1] This is an elegant statement of the presupposition, long supreme in anthropology and folklore, that only by keeping his distance from the objects of his study can the cultural investigator properly carry out his scientific work. I need not enumerate here the authorities who have advocated it, nor need I quote those anthrpologists who, departing from their informants after a stay of years, allowed their "human" feelings to be momentarily acknowledged. The detached objectivity formerly required of the anthropological investigator has been eloquently criticized at length by the contributors to Dell Hymes's stimulating anthology Reinventing Anthropology.[2] The conceptual problem for folklorists that concerns me here, in any case, will be phrased differently: my question is not "What is the appropriate stance of the folklorist towards his informants?" but more simply, "Who is the folklorist's proper subject?" My answers will be that subjects are not so far away as Levi-Strauss indicates; that important as investigation of other persons or groups is, in the end the folklorist's best and only subject is himself.

In the history of folklore studies, one way in which this problem has been formulated is, "Who are the folk?" Indeed one still hears this question sometimes from reputable folklorists who should remember the social structure that underlay Herder's idea of das Volk. Definitions of "the folk" always concealed the assumption "some group of people that I do not belong to." This separation of the observer from the folk expressed itself in a variety of ways: temporal ("the folk lived a long time ago"), spatial ("the folk live in some community far away from the centers of culture where I live"), social ("educated people, being above the folk, have no folklore"), national ("Since America has no peasant class, there are, of course, no American folksongs"), intellectual ("the folk are people who believe in a lot of ideas that aren't so and cures that don't work), and progressive ("soon we shall get rid of the folk by enlightening everyone"). Anthropological folklorists studied exotic tribes at the greatest possible distance from their homes, acting on the principle that the farther they had to travel to get to "the field," the less time they had to spend there to be considered an authority on it back home. In Europe the Grimms chose peasants as their subjects as did the British antiquaries like Baring-Gould.

Present-day American folklorists prefer to answer the question "Who are the folk?" by saying that in America at least, and probably in most twentieth-century societies, a number of distinct folk groups may be identified (Brunvand) whose members are connected to one another by one or more linking factors (Dundes). Prominent models for folklore studies today are the "action" or "performance" model advocated by Richard Bauman, Roger Abrahams, and others, and the "behaviorist" model offered by Robert A. Georges. In these approaches, the usual definition of the investigator's role is drawn from Malinowski's idea of the participant observer, which is well known. If I understand that idea correctly, though, the participation of the investigator is a means to the

observation, which is the end. Observation, one assumes, cannot be done effectually or perhaps at all without establishing that sort of rapport and acceptance which participation bestows on the outsider. More crudely, participation is the price the folklorist has to pay in order to do the observing.

Alternatively, the folklorist of today could well apply his efforts to enhancing the observing ability of those already participating in folklore processes. Members of folk groups who already identify themselves as such can consciously make themselves observers of their own participation. Preserving for the moment the exotic idea of "the folk," one would try to help members of the folk group become aware of their own uses of folklore in daily living and of their own identity as carriers of folk knowledge. Of course this is an effect and often an intention of undergraduate folklore courses in American colleges. But when going afield, instead of doing the collecting themselves, folklorists could well use their professional training to create tools for increasing folklore awareness, for example, among peoples who have recently freed themselves from colonial domination. A field work manual addressed to newly independent nations could be a real aid in focusing their attention on tales, songs, drama, or festivals that might be neglected in a search for westernized progress, and thus in heightening their sense of the importance and beauty of their own cultural products. It should be easy enough for the professional folklorist to devise a theoretical framework and a set of questionnaires that can be quickly understood and put to use by peoples of Asia or Africa who lack previous orientation to the study of folklore.

In putting forth this programmatic suggestion, I do not state that such a field work manual or any other tool a professional folklorist could devise can supplant professional folklore training for those few Asians or Africans who are inclined to take it up and acquire the means to do so. Folklore, like linguistics, is mainly a graduate school subject despite the irrelevance of graduate study to the potential contribution of informants.[3] Nevertheless the training of African and Asian professional folklorists is indispensable to the progress of folklore outside the western world and to that increased sense of the importance of cultural products I mentioned above. Conceptually, I advocate annihilating the distinction between subjects and observers. Subject and observer I see as a unity. The goal of folklore study is thus self-knowledge.

Following out the implications of this idea, folklorists would turn away from folk groups they are not themselves connected to, and their own participation in folklore processes will then become the phenomenon to be examined. The purpose would then be the understanding of folklore processes in their actual occurrence in one's own life. Folklore would become reoriented in the direction of psychology. From psychology itself, indeed, can be drawn the chief precedent for this reorientation. I am thinking of the training analysis which is a necessary part of the education of the psychoanalyst. Freud thought the training analysis to be of the greatest importance (albeit for a reason opposed to my line of thought; the danger of the analyst's projecting peculiarities of his own personality on to his patients and thus undermining the objectivity Freud valued so highly).[4] Examination of one's own folklore processes makes a priceless contribution to one's understanding of folklore processes in general and to one's understanding of self. Knowledge of folklore should not be merely the third-person comprehension gained from a reading of studies of folklore nor the second-person sympathy gained from participant observation of other people's folklore processes. Properly understood, folklore should be a first-person study. It would ask people to put off talking about or analyzing folklore processes until these have been vividly experienced and then re-enacted in memory.

In my childhood, my mother, who is of Irish extraction, used to repeat to me in the evenings:

'To bed, to bed,' said Sleepy-Head,
'Time enough,' said Slow.
'Put on the pot,' said Greedy-Gut,
'and we'll eat before we go.'[5]

This rhyme was used not, as one might expect, to urge me to bed through the message of the first line, but in a vaguer way, as an amusing bit of talk in which she could demonstrate her skill at reproducing the brogue of the Irish domestic servants who had been important in her childhood. Reaching back in adult life for my own child-lore, I see how successfully my mother persuaded me by her folkloric behavior that we were connected to Ireland and the Irish. No amount of reading about the functions of folklore, a subject I find profoundly interesting as an intellectual study, has prepared me for the understanding I have gained through such recall and self-observation of one of the most prominent of those formulations: the importance of folklore in asserting the individual's membership in a group.

This then is what I mean when I suggest that the folklorist's best and only subject is himself. In interactive situations such as those studied by Erving Goffman, whose urban psychology has already served as a useful base for folklore study, the folklorist should learn to be aware of both his own patterned behavior and the anxieties and tensions underlying it. One of the most potentially fruitful hypotheses in folklore today suggests that urban folklore is best defined as patterned responses to anxiety.[6] To test this hypothesis, data are needed from urban, literate, educated, middle-class persons. Self-observation is the richest source of such data, both in adding to the body of knowledge and in enriching ourselves as persons. One possible consequence is that we shall learn much more than we know today about the folklore of persons who have traditionally kept themselves in the role of observers, thus righting the now unequal treatment of groups and classes in the literature. Another is that new genres of folklore may be discovered. Goelken's "Folklore of Academe" and Reuss's study of the folklore of the American Folklore Society are examples of the first. Dresser's prank telephone calls and Bird's investigation of rumor, examples of the second, show what happens when we decrease the distance between the cultural background of the observer and that of the subject.[7] The distinct socio-psychological conditions of modern American life appear to breed distinct forms or at least subgenres of folklore specific to this culture.

A further reorientation of concept would shift the emphasis of folklore studies away from the group as the matrix to the individual as a carrier. Folklore is without question the behavior of groups, but also of individuals. A prominent feature of urban folklore is the brevity and fluidity of its communicative events: a group may be only a dyad, and a storytelling event may last only a few seconds, as when one acquaintance stops another in the street during lunch hour to tell a joke. Beginning from the primacy of the group as the matrix of communication impedes folklorists from seeing the genuinely folkloric nature of much apparently casual conversation. Persons form a group which moments later evaporates, before we can perceive it as a group or get out our notebooks . Groups are real, of course, but they are often microscopic. Understanding of folkloric behavior of many persons today, especially in the city, needs to be based upon observation of individuals as carriers and participants first. Then hypotheses can be formed about how these

persons form groups and how those groups may be said to condition the behavior of their members.

If every person is a potential informant, then every person is also a potential folklorist. Graduate folklore students are accustomed to directly perceiving their own folklore in its occurrence. The same perception should pervade undergraduate folklore education. Is the goal of undergraduate folklore study to produce field workers, able to collect, classify, and analyze material from live informants? Or is it to produce informants? Both these goals are achieved every year for hundreds of American students. But we need to synthesize them and increase the student's direct, moment-to-moment awareness of himself or herself as an acting and reacting person, patterning much behavior according to learned codes which make for social cohesion and personal comfort.

Of course there is the possibility that there is no other object of study for folklorists except the contents of our own experience, and that this is what has been studied all through the history of the discipline. The "God's truth" folklorist is in my opinion no more than a better motivated and more deeply convinced version of the "hocus-pocus" one. I am not the only reader of Levi-Strauss who has wondered where its complex logical structures came from, Brazil or Paris. Does Mythologiques really owe more to South American Indian tales than the sermons of John Donne or Lancelot Andrewes owed to the Biblical texts quoted at their start? Is the work not rather a huge and complex projection of the most sophisticated of European minds? The author writes, "Today I sometimes wonder if I was not attracted to anthropology, however unwittingly, by a structural affinity between the civilizations which are its subject and my own thought-processes."[8] It is really those thought-processes which are offered in Mythologiques, though they can become manifest only when directed to something other than themselves. All great thinkers are vulnerable to this line of criticism. One thinks of Darwin and Marx, but most vulnerable of all was Jung and he gave the best response to it: "Philosophical criticism has helped me to see that every psychology--my own included--has the character of a subjective confession. . . it is only by accepting this as inevitable that I can serve the cause of man's knowledge of man." If it is inevitable that our hypotheses, interpretations, and analyses are fragments of our own confession, stated no doubt in a rhetoric different from that of Augustine or Rousseau, we ought to turn our attention to the immediate activity of folklore in our own lives.

In Hymes's anthology, Bob Scholte has called for a "reflexive and critical anthropology" that would take anthropological thought itself as a subject for examination, and would seek the liberation of dominated peoples through its study. His essay[9] has many suggestions for the folklorist. I believe that the data-collecting and reflexive functions can be carried on at the same time within onself. Socrates held this process to be the essence of thinking. In work with informants, folklore investigation can attend to the interviewees, the interviewer, the situation, and the methodological assumptions all at the same time, as I have tried to suggest in presenting some African narratives.[10] It is time for folklorists to shift the weight:

> Take a load off Fanny
> Take a load for free
> Take a load off Fanny
> And you put the load right on me.[11]

Notes

1. Claude Levi-Strauss, Tristes Tropiques (New York: Atheneum, 1970), p. 58.

2. Dell Hymes, ed., Reinventing Anthropology (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).

3. Kenneth Hale, "Some Questions About Anthropological Linguistics," in Hymes, Reinventing Anthropology, pp. 382-397, raises similar queries.

4. Ernest Jones, The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud (New York: Basic Books, 1955), II, 234.

5. See Iona and Peter Opie, The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), p. 321 for a different version.

6. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, personal communication.

7. Barre Toelken, "The Folklore of Academe," in Jan Harold Brunvand, The Study of American Folklore (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968); Richard Reuss, "That Can't Be Alan Dundes! . . .," paper delivered at 1973 annual meeting of American Folklore Society; Norine Dresser, "Telephone Pranks," New York Folklore Quarterly 29 (1973): 121-130; Donald A. Bird, "Traditional Patterns in the Mass Media," paper delivered at 1973 annual meeting of American Folklore Society.

8. Levi-Strauss, op. cit., p. 56.

9. Bob Scholte, "Toward a Reflexive and Critical Anthropology," in Hymes, Reinventing Anthropology, pp. 430-457.

10. Lee Haring, "Performing for the Interviewer," Southern Folklore Quarterly 36 (1972): 382-398.

11. Jaime Robbie Robertson, "The Weight," copyright 1968 Dwarf Music.