

SOME APPROACHES TO THE APPLICATION OF FOLKLORE STUDIES

David Hufford

My interest in what we are here calling applied folklore developed gradually and quite innocently out of my work with traditional health systems. I simply found that I was uncovering information and developing concepts which, it appeared, could be used by people involved in therapy of various kinds. This feeling was reinforced as I proceeded to discuss my work with the people involved in research and clinical practice. During this process, I never encountered a situation which led me to seriously question whether my work should be applied to medical and psychotherapeutic ends. The question was whether it could be. Affirmative answers to this question coupled with my sympathy for the general goals of such therapy seemed to pretty much settle the matter. At some point I assumed -- there wasn't really a conscious and critical decision -- that this use of my folklore work constituted a form of "applied folklore." A little occasional rumination on the matter led me to a further assumption that some other kinds of pure research in folklore, especially with a functional bias, must lead to information on concepts which could be useful in solving practical problems which lie beyond the shifting boundaries that define our discipline, and that such uses would be applied folklore.

It was, therefore, a rather rude shock to discover the very considerable extent to which many folklorists are opposed to applied folklore. In trying to find the reasons for this position, which seems to take strong exception to my assumptions, I made a number of discoveries. My unhesitating acceptance of applied folklore seems to be born of naiveté; specifically, historical naiveté, and is probably the result of being young and a relative newcomer to the field. Many who oppose applied folklore apparently do not define it as I did in simple neutral terms, combining the term "folklore" with "applied" as it appears in the dictionary. Specific historical misapplications of folklore and anthropology have given the term a number of rather more limited definitions. The use of folklore to justify and enhance the position of specific political ideologies, Nazism, Marxism, what have you, have been important. Applications through revival movements which have frequently been based on poor and skewed understandings of psychological and social operation and function, an incomplete grasp of the tradition involved, and failure to analyze and define the goals of the movement have helped further define the term. Coupled with this have been frequently silly and misguided attempts to apply so-called folklore to education through song books, over-organized teaching of folk dance, and so forth, and these have damaged the respectability of the term also. These are not the only historical facts that have been involved, but they suffice to make perfectly clear the point that applied folklore has been guilty of much that does not merit respect. I suppose they are also sufficient to justify suspicion and skepticism when one sees the term.

However, the term remains effective in a semantic sense. Also, it is not logical to assume that because something has been done very badly, it cannot be done well. This is especially true when one considers that those bad things have by no means been generally done by the most highly trained folklorists working under good conditions. The concept has not yet received a fair trial. Furthermore, non-folklorists and amateurs will almost certainly continue to apply folklore, often badly. Refusal of trained scholars to have a try will not prevent misapplication, whereas

genuine effort from this quarter might be expected to at least ameliorate the situation.

Another more subtle sort of historical fact seems to have also played a major part in reticence on the part of trained folklorists vis-à-vis applied folklore. It is a simple fact, in my opinion, that applied folklore must involve evaluation, that is, not only objective evaluation but ethics, esthetics. Even if no thought is given to ethics and esthetics by the researcher involved in solving a practical problem, the very acceptance of the situation as a problem requiring solution and certainly the acceptance beforehand of a given kind of solution as the desirable one implies value judgments, and value judgments have been strictly forbidden to us, for good reason, for a long time now. Objectivity is essential to pure research and ethnocentrism is a devastating problem. Explicitly evaluative positions, therefore, have the stamp of the nineteenth century, romanticism, imperialism, and prejudice. As I have said, this is all essential in the context of pure research, but applied folklore requires evaluation; any approach to practical problems which attempts to avoid the consideration of values, simply puts the authority for such judgments in the hands of others. I would suggest that this is what has generally happened in folklore misapplications in the past. I would further urge that folklore and the social sciences in general have very significant contributions to make to discussions of values in their cultural context.

For a start, we have the information to quite nicely devastate the ethnocentric assumption that this or that group value is essentially superior to an alternative one embraced with equal fervor by another group. This rather basic position can make many problems magically disappear, especially in a situation of inter-group conflict. Suppose that public education officials pose the problem of how to make people from rural Pennsylvania Dutch country stop talking like people from rural Pennsylvania Dutch country and start speaking like the people on television. This is a matter they currently consider a problem requiring solution. The folklorist working on applications in that region need not accept the problem and desired solution as posed. He might instead suggest some of the positive values of fitting well into a regional group. He could point out that the student who intends to remain in his community need not become like people in another community because one community has become arbitrarily selected as normal. It could be pointed out that one does a disservice by making a youngster consider his parents' speech patterns to be backward and thus setting up rather serious conflicts for him between those he loves and those he is taught to consider respectable. It can be added that sufficient skill to avoid practical communications problems with outsiders will be more easily achieved if approached with sympathy. It would no doubt be difficult to persuade the authorities to accept these points but success with this problem would be substantially more rewarding than it would be if achieved with the problem as originally stated.

This kind of problem, involving cultural change of one sort or another, is one which I would expect to occur frequently in the context of applied folklore. This is only natural considering the emphasis on change which exists in the study of folklore. Western European people have for a long time now been bound by a set of very restricted assumptions concerning change of all sorts, and cultural change in particular. These assumptions are tied into the concept of progress as defined by the Industrial Revolu-

tion. It is certainly not necessary to analyze this concept at any length here, since its basic tenets are familiar to all of us. It can briefly be summed up as considering changes in the direction of: urbanization; specialization; efficiency defined as the reduction in the number of people required to produce the given quantity of goods; reduction of the amount of physical effort required to accomplish a given end; and increase in consumption of materials and goods produced by others; as being good changes. Additional desired changes in terms of language, religion, esthetic style, etc., can be more or less directly derived from the above list. Changes that ~~tend~~ against this "progress" seem bad. Many of the groups that folklorists have studied have obviously epitomized lack of, and resistance to, progress as here defined. Furthermore, we have been looking at them in situations where they have been in the process of being dragged into progress and educated to desire it and abandon their old reactionary ways. Since we have begun to take an interest in urban folklore and the relationships between folk and popular culture, we have come to examine the before, after, and during of that change. We have looked carefully at what was lost, what was gained, and what was changed. I think that very few would deny that this has been very useful in learning about the functions and general operations of culture. I think it would be equally difficult to deny that it puts folklorists in a rather good position to evaluate the changes that have occurred and those which are scheduled for the future.

Progress appears to insist that it is desirable for people to relinquish the artistic forms of entertainment such as singing or composing songs, and making up and telling stories to specialists. Then when people require entertainment they can have it in a great variety by buying a radio, television, books, tickets to the movies, etc. This change scores pretty high in our list of goals for progress and there's not much argument about how successful our culture has been in making this change in most places. Folklorists certainly have an interest in the functions of singing and tale-telling. Are all or most of these functions fulfilled by the professional substitute? No. Are other resources supplied to fulfill them adequately? I personally think not. Then the inescapable conclusion is that this change has had a negative functional value. Perhaps there are economic considerations which mitigate the loss. We can only evaluate such possibilities by entering into a dialogue with others -- pro and con on the subject. I would consider this to be applied folklore at a very basic level, not just solving, but in fact helping to discover and define practical problems. If the consensus on the above were that it did in fact constitute a real problem worthy of solution, a great deal more work would be involved and would again require the efforts of people trained to understand the materials in their total context, that is, folklorists among others.

At the same time that Western culture has been wrapped up in the assumptions concerning change that are expressed in terms of progress, the opposite has been true of many folklorists. I personally find it very difficult to keep free of the assumption that change in the direction of "progress" is just naturally bad. I suppose that a fair part of the reason for this is that most of us would not be folklorists if we did not have positive emotional reactions to the materials which have traditionally been the objects of folklore study. Things which tend to destroy or alter them beyond recognition hurt us, at least they do hurt me. At the same time, I am strongly aware of the obvious necessity of considering

the needs and desires of the people involved. This may seem to be too basic a point to mention, but I feel it to be very important because of the ease with which the folklore specialist could work himself into a paternal role when trying to make the kind of application of which we are speaking. Such a role would not only be damaging to the folklorist and his work but also to the people whose fate he is trying to decide. I think that one safeguard on this point would be the selection of means for implementation. If the group involved agrees with our hypothetical applied folklorist that such and such should nor should not happen, the folklorist may have a major role to play explaining to the government, business, or whoever has authority in the case, what the sound reasons are for the people feeling this way.

Unfortunately, however, there are bound to be many times when a folklorist, examining these issues, comes to the conclusion that people are making decisions that are not in their own best interests. These will obviously be the most dangerous situations. At these points it would be wrong to go to authorities and attempt to thwart what appears to be a misguided action, whatever the changes might be of success. The only possible solution that I can see is to attempt to persuade and educate the people who are involved into an understanding of the folklorist's point of view. This should not require that they all pack up and go to school for a couple of years. It appears to me that folklorists have the information and experience necessary to be able to talk to people about their own culture in terms which they can understand. At least if we can't no one can. It should certainly be worth the effort, and there is certainly no denying the fact that others have been and will continue to be vigorously involved in such persuasion, propaganda might be the more honest word, whether folklorists decide to enter into this area or not.

These things have not been easy to say. It has in fact been a little frightening. In many ways they take us into areas which have already seen the dreadful misapplications of folklore which have made so many wary. In other ways they sound old-fashioned and romantic. On the first point, as I have already said, I cannot believe that the fact of something having been done wrong rules out the possibility of doing it right. The second point is tougher. Part of the problem is the need to be evaluative, and the fact that we have been avoiding this for so long. But certainly we all have ethical and esthetic values which are operant in our lives at all points except, we like to think, our research. When these values lead us to the conclusion that a problem of some sort exists in our environment, and if there are ways in which our special and unique training and experience can make it possible for us to contribute something to its solution, it strikes me that we have a moral obligation to do what we can. To rely on historical failure and the peculiar and limited rules for pure research in order to avoid action would be a mistake. Also, in conclusion, I would like to suggest that there is no more a single thing which is or can be applied folklore than there is a single thing which is folklore, and that I don't think it would be wise to try to think in terms of "Who is for applied folklore and who is against it," in those terms, but rather: "Is this or that application a good one?" "Can this way of making the application succeed?" "Is this particular application dealing with a real problem?" Our discussions must be in terms of specifics because the variety of kinds of applications that can be made is practically without limit.