

## APPLIED FOLKLORE

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Three senses of applied folklore seem to be currently in the air. One considers that folk wisdom and folk know-how can be culled out from the mass of folklore tradition and put to use, i.e. applied, in the sophisticated culture. An example would be the utilization by modern medical science of time-honored folk remedies or recipes that actually work. A second is the application of folklore concepts and content to teaching and research in other fields. The folklorist "applies" his stock of knowledge to illuminate, say, arid stretches of history. The third sense has to do with the obligation of the folklorist to ameliorate the lot of the folk. This is the sense in which applied folklore is invoked in the debate now underway between activists who feel a strong twinge of guilt at making, if not fame and fortune, at least some reputation and professional recognition out of the folk whose lore they extract and publish, and ivory-tower do-nothing scholars like myself.

The twinge of social conscience and impulse to contribute one's expertise for the betterment of underprivileged man are certainly commendable. One scholarly discipline after another -- sociology, political science, anthropology -- has agonized over applied versus pure research, and it is inevitable that folklorists, working so closely to the grass roots, should suffer the same recriminations and respond to the same idealisms.

I contend that it is no business of the folklorist to engage in social reform, that he is unequipped to reshape institutions, and that he will become the poorer scholar and folklorist if he turns activist.

First, as to the alleged exploitation of the folk by the folklorist. We can by the same token say that any humanistic scholar is a parasite, making a living out of Shakespeare's reputation, or Civil War battles. Of course Shakespeare and the Confederacy are dead, and our informants live, but the historian and the literary critic of the twentieth century deal with the living, and sometimes with the poor and the wretched. Should the contemporary historian of Appalachian whites, or the urban blacks, or the reservation Indians, apply his knowledge for their improvement? My answer is, not as an historian. He may work in their behalf as a public-spirited citizen, but here he moves in a different arena and pursues different aims. The politicians and the welfare workers and the mental health therapists and the sanitation engineers have their skills, which are not the skills of the folklorist. Historian Arthur Schlesinger served as special assistant to President John F. Kennedy, and later he wrote a history of Kennedy's administration, but he did not mix his roles. He assisted the president on immediate, practical problems, and he wrote his history after the events seeking to capture their meaning and sequence.

How can the scholar, and especially the folklorist, remain aloof and uninvolved in the face of the world's tragedies and crises, and the inequities near-at-hand that he directly perceives? Well, in my view he is very much involved, simply as a folklorist. Look what an impact upon the landscape of learning the folklorist has already achieved -- not nearly as considerable as he would wish, but still a sizable dent. This is where I see the folklorist playing his activist role: within the university arena, where

he must bring all his energy, persuasive powers, and political acumen to bear if he is to defend, explain, and advance his subject. Folklore studies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have done more than any other field of learning to bring attention to the culture of the overlooked sectors of the population. No subject is more humanistic, more people-oriented than folklore. Today the folk narrator and bard have won recognition in books, sometimes as their author, in recordings, and even on the documentary screen. This is the achievement of the folklorist, in which he can take pride. By teaching, studying, collecting, and writing about folklore, the scholarly folklorist is making a noble contribution to man's knowledge of man. And these activities will absorb all his skills and strength. If he wants to divert them into a reformist role for which he is not equipped, he will succeed neither as a scholar nor as a philanthropist.

The excesses to which well-intentioned folklore activists can go was made evident to me at the hearings before Senator Ralph Yarborough in Washington, D.C. in April, 1970 on the Senate bill to establish an American Folklife Foundation. One expert witness after another -- Alan Lomax, Archie Green, yes even my buddy Roger Abrahams -- poured forth purple cadences on how the passage of the bill would restore freedom, love, and dignity to the American people. Lomax, in an hour's peroration, marveled at the serenity and brightness in the eyes of the happy throng on the Mall for the July 4th Smithsonian festival of folk artists, eyes that had previously been glazed and torpid in front of the TV tube. Archie Green brought in Laos and Cambodia. When it came my turn I entered a demurrer against the tenor of the entire testimony at the hearings which, contrary to the language of the bill, had regarded the folklife foundation as an agency not to study but to propagate folk culture. And whose folklore will the foundation be thrusting upon the people? If the richest folklore is scatological, will the foundation exhibit latrinalia at its annual festival on the Mall? Anticipating the direction of the bill, the Smithsonian Institution had already withdrawn its support of the Folklife Foundation in advance of the hearings. Subsequently Senator Yarborough wrote me a letter in which he said he could not accept a "medieval conception of the university." Senator -- now alas ex-Senator -- Yarborough has been a great friend to folklore. He sent me a splendid letter in 1961 when I was appealing to Senator Morse's committee on Labor and Education against their decision to eliminate folklore from Title IV of the National Defense Education Act, and when folklore was under attack again in 1969 in connection with the National Endowment for the Humanities, he read into the Congressional Record my introduction to Folklore Research Around the World and sent me a copy, although I was far outside his constituency.

Parenthetically I might say that I have nothing against festivals, pristine or revivalistic. As a folklorist I study them. As a mensch I get a kick out of them. Were I a performer I would participate in them, and were I an entrepreneur I might organize one. But each role would be distinct from the other.

The task of scholarship is no light one. I see many eager students coming into folklore each year whose enthusiasm dims as they wrestle with seminar papers, field projects, languages, dissertations that somehow they never seem to finish. And I see others beyond the doctorate with unfulfilled dreams of great pioneering works that still are not done. I think of all the projects I will never consummate. Our subject is so vast, and the re-

turns are yet so small. We cannot afford much diversion from our primary responsibilities as scholars to seek and record the truth about man and his ways.

Yet that is not the main issue. Suppose we agree to activate an Applied Folklore arm of the American Folklore Society. Who is to do the applying? There are plenty of nuts, and birds, around only too anxious to prescribe nostrums and panaceas in the name of keeping alive the dear old folk traditions. And what is it we are prescribing, and to whom? I think fighting the battle of fakelore, in the American Mercury, in the Atlantic Monthly, with publishers, with professors, with the Congress, has kept me sufficiently involved, but that is something I feel I can do with self-assurance as an educator. Beyond that, I hesitate to give advice on how to make the world better, or happier, or freer, through folklore.