

TOWARD A RECONCILIATION OF MICRO-
AND MACRO-LEVEL ANALYSES OF FOLKLORE*

Roger L. Janelli

Indiana University

The performance-centered approach to folklore has been advanced with all the fervor of a new religious movement. Unlike previous approaches which had been content to coexist peacefully with their alternatives, the performance-centered viewpoint challenged the very theoretical foundations of traditional folklore scholarship. Perhaps this is the reason it has engendered such controversy.¹ Perhaps, too, Thomas Kuhn has persuaded us that alternative theories are necessarily in competition with one another: Copernicus and Ptolemy could not both have been right.²

The present paper attempts to reconcile some of the seemingly contradictory assumptions implicit in different approaches to folklore and social behavior in general. It attempts to show that certain theoretical positions, although often viewed as logically incompatible, are not inherently so.

During 1973-74, my wife and I spent about 19 months in Korea studying rituals of ancestor worship.³ Almost half of that time (about 8 months) we spent as participant-observers in one rural village. There we studied the culture and social relations of the villagers and gathered data on approximately 50 of their ancestral-ritual performances. We attempted to view these rituals with a performance-centered perspective, and, in general, we found that perspective to be rather productive. Korean ancestral rituals can be seen as a form of interaction between the living and the spirits of their deceased ancestors. The spirits may not be visible to the outside observer, but they are quite real to the ritual participants (who are not at all reluctant to reveal how ancestors react to performances, especially improper ones). These rituals may also be regarded as a form of interaction among the living: parents may view them as a means of inculcating their offspring with the ideals of filial piety, and elders of the lineage may use the rituals as a means of demonstrating to the outside world that their kin group is entitled to gentry status and that its members fulfill their social obligations toward their ancestors. We also found that performers had a complex set of performance rules--some easily verbalized, others only implicit in their behavior--which they use as guides to ritual performance. And finally, with a knowledge of performance-centered theory, we were able to see that the actions exhibited in any ritual depended upon the social composition of the group which performed it, as well as upon their motives at the time of performance.

*An earlier version of this paper was read at the American Folklore Society Meeting, November 1975, in New Orleans, Louisiana. For their helpful comments, I am indebted to Jan Brunvand, Linda Dégh, John McDowell, and many of the participants present at the session during which the paper was presented. However, they are in no way responsible for any of its faults.

We also found, however, that some aspects of these rituals could not be fitted into the performance-centered paradigm. For example, certain forms of ancestor worship--specifically rituals commemorating remote ancestors⁴--were performed primarily in those villages which contained localized, extended kin groups. Such a finding did not surprise us because it agreed with other studies which have found a correlation between ancestor worship and extended kin groups.⁵ Where these kin groups exist, a remote ancestor--especially an apical ancestor or founder of a kin group--can serve as a focal point of reference for the entire membership, or as a symbol of group solidarity. However, in Korea as elsewhere, the correlation between localized, extended kin groups and rituals for remote ancestors is only statistical or probabilistic; not all localized, extended kin groups perform these rituals,⁶ nor are all of these rituals performed by persons who comprise such a kin group.⁷

Thus, a strong statistical type of correlation exists in Korea between local kin groups and rituals for remote ancestors; our understanding of social theory indicates that this correlation is neither accidental nor epiphenomenal. Instead, there seems to be some kind of causal relationship between these two variables. I might also point out that there are practical considerations which lend support to the inference of a causal relationship: it is far easier for a ritual performance group to assemble if several descendants of the same ancestor are living in the same village (that is, if they comprise a localized, extended kin group) than if they are dispersed all over Korea.

Viewing ancestral rituals as the product of social organization on the one hand, and viewing them from the performance-centered perspective on the other, creates a problem of reconciliation which touches upon a basic theoretical issue in the social sciences, an issue which has recently become evident in the study of folklore. One perspective, according to which social organization is viewed as having some causal influence upon folklore performance, ignores the immediate situation in which performance occurs: it excludes the actors' perceptions of the situation, their rules for acting, their motives for performance, and indeed, even their own volition. Marvin Harris states one of the more extreme formulations of this position as follows: "a scientific approach to sociocultural phenomena must proceed on the assumption that individual choices are the products of and not the originators of social forces."⁸ The same epistemological position is implicit in most traditional folklore scholarship, for it too has ignored--or at best regarded as peripheral--the immediate situations in which performances occur. The performance-centered approach, on the other hand, regards as especially important those immediate situations and the factors which Harris would ignore or see as merely derivative of social forces. A similar dichotomy seems to pervade the phenomenologist critique of Durkheim⁹ and the cognitivist versus behaviorist approaches to the understanding of human behavior.¹⁰ It is, of course, the cognitivist position which has influenced performance-centered theory.¹¹

The purpose of this paper is to suggest a way to reconcile these two apparently contradictory positions. Such a reconciliation is made possible by first recognizing and then trying to relate two different levels of causality: a micro level and a macro level. Micro-level causality deals with the effects of

the immediate situation upon each folklore performance; macro-level causality deals with statistical correlations between categories of regularities in human behavior, or with the effects of social forces upon folk traditions.

Because the macro level of causality is probabilistic in nature, the difference between it and micro-level causation can be illustrated with an example used extensively in probability theory: coin tossing. Each actual toss of a coin is a unique event whose outcome is determined completely by a combination of physical forces: the balance of the coin, the forces applied to it, and so on. Such unique events are not subject to probabilistic laws, and one cannot make probabilistic statements about them. I cannot take a coin out of my pocket and say that the probability of its coming up heads on a toss is 50 percent. Such a statement cannot be empirically verified: either the coin will come up heads or tails. What I can predict, and verify with repeated experimentation, is that out of 1,000 tossings of a coin, there is a 95 percent chance that somewhere between 469 and 531 of the tosses will come up heads. Of course, I cannot predict which of these tosses will come up heads; I can predict only that a certain percentage (within specified limits) will do so.¹² In like manner, probabilistic correlations derived from the study of human behavior--such as the correlation between local kin groups and rituals for remote ancestors--tell us nothing about any particular kin group or any particular ritual. Whether or not a given kin group decides to perform an ancestral ritual and the manner in which it actually performs it is not determined by macro-level forces, but rather by the volition and knowledge of the performers and the situation in which they find themselves--a situation which they have even helped to create. Macro-level forces operate only collectively; they do not directly affect specific acts or events. Thus, we might predict that a decline in the number of extended kin groups in Korea would result in a lower frequency of certain types of rituals, but we could not point to a specific group of persons and predict whether or not they would cease to perform their rituals if their kin group dispersed. That is for them to decide.

If one grants the existence of two levels of causality--a macro or collective level and a micro or individual level--the theoretical issue is not which of them is more important; they are not really comparable. Instead, the problem is to discover the nature of the relationship between them.¹³ How is it that collective regularities--such as the persistence over time of social forms of tale plots--are evident if each of the events which comprise those regularities is uniquely determined? How is it, in other words, that we can recognize textual or plot stability over centuries if each folkloric performance is unique to the immediate context in which it occurs? Or, why is there a correlation between the existence of localized, extended kin groups and the occurrence of rituals for remote ancestors in Korea if each group of kinsmen can decide for themselves whether or not to perform them? One could even ask a similar question about coin tossings: If each toss of a coin is determined by a unique combination of physical forces at the time of the tossing, why do approximately 50 percent of the tosses regularly turn up heads? One way of resolving this dilemma is to suggest that the probabilistic, macro-level regularities affect the more immediate causes whose unique combinations determine the outcomes of events. In other words, macro-level causes, such as social

organization, affect the situations in which folklore is performed rather than the final text or behavioral act itself.¹⁴

Viewing folklore from a micro-level perspective, one can identify three sets of determinants, or immediate causes, affecting performance directly: First, the social and physical context in which performance occurs; second, the knowledge of the performers, including their standards for perception, their beliefs, their values, and their rules for performance;¹⁵ and third, the motives of the participants during the interaction process. One can view these as somewhat analogous to the physical forces which uniquely determine each toss of a coin; and further, one can view the occurrence of these causes, rather than the observable behavior which results from them, as statistically correlated with such macro-level phenomena as social organization.

The effect of social organization upon performance context has already been noted. If a kin group is localized, its members live in close proximity to each other and can be mobilized for ritual performance more easily than if they are dispersed over several distant villages. However, the resulting relationship between kin group localization and mobilization is only statistical. Not all localized kin groups mobilize for these rituals, whereas some dispersed kin groups do. Therefore, one cannot point to any one ritual and explain (in the scientific sense of the term) the presence of the participants solely in terms of their residential status. Those participants are not present simply because they form a localized kin group. One can only note a higher incidence of kin group mobilization among localized kin groups.

I would also hypothesize that social organization affects, in a probabilistic way, the knowledge of the performers, and specifically, the rules which they use for performing certain of their ritual procedures. Different kin groups have different rules for ritual procedures, and our data indicate that the set of rules which a given kin group comes to adopt tends to be that which is most congruent with its own form of social organization.¹⁶ Thus, variations in performance rules are not merely the result of accidents in the cultural transmission process, but rather exhibit a congruity with social forms. Again, the relationship here is probabilistic and macro-level. Performers did not consciously select from among the alternatives those which were most congruent with their own form of kinship organization. They knew that variant rules existed, but they simply regarded their own rules as the traditional way things were done by their kin group. It was only by comparing both their rules and the structure of their kin group with those of other kin groups that an outside observer could perceive a relationship between them.

If performers do not consciously select from among alternative performance rules those which are best suited to their own form of social organization, there must be another process by which they come to adopt those rules which are congruent with their social organization. In the case of Korean ancestral rituals, our data indicate that incongruity between performance rules and social organization can generate very awkward and embarrassing situations, the same type of situation that Clifford Geertz found at a Javanese funeral when culture and social organization were incongruent.¹⁷ It is a desire to avoid such sit-

uations that seems to motivate performers to change their existing performance rules--either by selecting from other, already available alternatives or by creating new ones. They can do this, moreover, without recognizing the incongruity which generated the awkward situations. Instead they may simply sense that something is wrong and that some kind of change is necessary. The case of our Korean village was particularly revealing. For one performance rule, we found that if the local kin group were to adopt that version of the rule which is most common throughout Korea, actions would result which would remind the participants of a former feud within the group, of a moral scandal which occurred in recent years, and of a few other embarrassing incidents which the participants would rather not emphasize--especially at a time when they are performing ancestral rituals, two purposes of which (as they themselves recognize) are the promotion of group solidarity and the enhancement of lineage prestige.¹⁸

It is not inconceivable that the members of some kin group, somewhere, may in fact adopt performance rules which are not congruent with their form of social organization; the causal relationship between social organization and performance rules is probabilistic, not rigidly deterministic. Yet in the majority of cases, it seems that performers would tend to select performance rules which do not serve to defeat the purposes of the actions which those rules are supposed to govern.

There may be other mechanisms as well that serve to bring folklore performance rules into congruity with particular forms of social organization. My point is only that a macro-level, probabilistic type of causality is conceivable without recourse to mystical processes, and without denying the importance of human volition.

The goals and motivations of performers constitute the third major set of determinants of folkloric behavior when such behavior is viewed from a micro-analytic viewpoint. These also seem to be affected by macro-level phenomena such as social organization or tradition. A feeling of group solidarity can generate additional motivation in favor of ritual performance; such solidarity is more likely to exist among a kin group if its members have frequent opportunities for interaction. Such opportunities are far more frequent among members of a localized kin group than among kin groups which are dispersed over the length and breadth of Korea. Thus, members of localized kin groups are more likely to be disposed toward ritual performance.

Folklorists have long recognized how traditions can affect the goals and motivations of folklore performers. Past traditions can sanction present behavior, and appealing to traditions often constitutes a powerful technique of persuasion.¹⁹ Needless to say, traditions can be appealed to more easily where they in fact exist. In other words, the reality of statistical regularities in past behavior--that is, the existence of traditions--obviously facilitates an appeal to them. Individuals may, on occasion, "traditionalize" a single act of the past by claiming that it alone constitutes a justification for present action--indeed, they may even fabricate and appeal to traditions which never really existed at all--but such instances are not sufficient grounds

for denying the causal power of real traditions upon human motivation.²⁰ Of course, individuals are not slaves of traditions, but neither are they entirely immune from them. Again, the relationship is only partial or statistical.

Yet another relationship between macro-level or collective regularities and the motivations and aspirations of folklore performers and their audiences may be effected through personality formation. Culture and social organization do not completely determine any individual's personality, but they do seem to be at least partly responsible for the differences in relative frequencies of particular personality traits in different societies.²¹

Conclusions

Two basic points have been offered thus far: (1) that two levels of causality exist (i.e., a micro and a macro level), and (2) that one way of reconciling them is to regard macro-level causality as probabilistic in nature and as indirectly affecting folklore texts and specific acts of behavior through its effects upon the immediate situations in which folklore performance occurs. If one accepts these two points, it is possible to see regularities in collective behavior, such as social organization or tradition, as both a cause and a product of individual folklore performances. Tradition, like social organization, is an emergent when seen from a micro-analytic viewpoint.²² It is merely the cumulative result of several individual acts and decisions. From a macro-level perspective, however, such regularity in behavior can be seen to constitute a system with its own properties and causal influences which cannot be attributed to any one of the individual acts which comprise it. Thus, the theoretical assumptions implicit in some of our major approaches to folklore are not inherently inconsistent. Indeed, it seems that both Copernicus and Ptolemy were right after all. Physicists now realize that motion is only relative, depending upon the perspective of the observer.

The recognition of both micro and macro levels of analyses should not only help to reconcile diverse approaches to folklore. Utilizing both micro- and macro-analytic viewpoints should also make it possible to investigate the relationships between folklore and culture in a manner somewhat different from that used in the past. Rather than looking for correlations between folklore texts and cultural practices, folklorists can view culture as an ideational system, part of which consists of the knowledge necessary for performing folklore. They can seek to establish macro-level relationships between the knowledge necessary for folklore performance and other, non-folkloric components of that ideational system. Moreover, folklorists can also relate their own theoretical concerns to some of the major theoretical issues of contemporary anthropology: namely, to discover the relationship between cultural and social systems and the relationship of both of them to the ecological setting of each society.²³

And a final point: the identification of macro-level relationships, because of their probabilistic nature, can proceed only by utilizing comparative data. In the case of my own research, I was able to see a relationship between social

organization and ritual performance only after learning of variant practices in other villages and kin groups. Thus, the comparative perspective, which is a traditional strength of folklore scholarship, need not be superseded by the performance-centered paradigm, but rather accepted as a useful complement to it.

NOTES

1. The controversial nature of the performance-centered approach to folklore is evident in the following publications: Roger L. Welsch, "A Note on Definitions," Journal of American Folklore (hereafter JAF) 81 (1968): 262-64; Richard Bauman, "Towards a Behavioral Theory of Folklore: A Reply to Roger Welsch," JAF 82 (1969): 167-70; D. K. Wilgus, "'The Text is the Thing,'" JAF 86 (1973): 241-52.
2. Thomas Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).
3. Roger L. Janelli, "Korean Rituals of Ancestor Worship: An Ethnography of Folklore Performance" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1975).
4. For a description of these rituals, see Janelli, pp. 72-171.
5. Maurice Freedman, "Ancestor Worship: Two Facets of the Chinese Case," in Social Organization: Essays Presented to Raymond Firth, ed. Maurice Freedman (Chicago: Aldine, 1967), pp. 90-91; Guy E. Swanson, The Birth of the Gods (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1968), pp. 97-108.
6. Such a kin group is reported in William Eugene Biernatzki, S.J., "Varieties of Korean Lineage Structure" (Ph.D. diss., St. Louis University, 1967), p. 473.
7. An example is reported in Janelli, pp. 35-39.
8. The Rise of Anthropological Theory (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1968), p. 332.
9. Jack Douglas, The Social Meaning of Suicide (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967); see also Anthony Giddens, The Sociology of Suicide: A Selection of Readings (London: Frank Cass, 1971), p. 56.
10. For an expression of these differences, see Noam Chomsky, "Verbal Behavior by B. F. Skinner," Language 32 (1959): 26-58.
11. For a recent expression of this same dichotomy in anthropology, see J. I. Prattis, "Situational Logic, Social Structure, and Highland Burma," Current Anthropology 17 (1976): 97-100.

12. On this point, see John Neter and William Wasserman, Fundamental Statistics for Business and Economics, 2nd ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1961), pp. 284-85. Mathematicians may assign probabilities to the various outcomes of single events if those events are conceptual, not real (see William Feller, An Introduction to Probability Theory and Its Applications, 2nd ed. [New York: John Wiley, 1957], pp. 4-5), or else they regard such probabilities as "subjective" reflections of uncertainly existing only in the mind of the observer. For a discussion of the meaning of probability according to this subjective or "Bayesian" approach, see I. Richard Savage, Statistics: Uncertainty and Behavior (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), pp. 3-10; and Victor E. McGee, Principles of Statistics: Traditional and Bayesian (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts), pp. 290, 305-06.
13. Percy Cohen has identified a very similar problem as one of the main tasks of current sociological theory in his Modern Social Theory (New York: Basic Books, 1968), pp. 11-15.
14. For a similar explanation of the statistical regularities apparent in suicide rates, see Giddens, p. 56.
15. Ward H. Goodenough, Cooperation in Change (New York: Russel Sage Foundation, 1963), pp. 258-59.
16. See Janelli, pp. 151-58.
17. "Ritual and Social Change: A Javanese Example," American Anthropologist 59 (1957): 32-54.
18. Janelli, pp. 37-38, 154-57.
19. Roger D. Abrahams, "Introductory Remarks to a Rhetorical Theory of Folklore," JAF 81 (1968): 320.
20. For a discussion of the concept of "traditionalization," see Dell Hymes, "Folklore's Nature and the Sun's Myth," JAF 88 (1975): 353-54.
21. Anthony F. Wallace, The Modal Personality Structure of the Tuscarora Indians as Revealed by the Rorschach Test, Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 150 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1952).
22. For an explanation of the concept of "emergence" and its relevance to performance-centered folkloristics, see Richard Bauman, "Verbal Art as Performance," American Anthropologist 77 (1975): 302-05.
23. These theoretical issues are identified in Robert McC. Netting, "Agrarian Ecology" and Roger M. Keesing, "Theories of Culture," both of which appeared in Annual Review of Anthropology, ed. B. J. Siegal (Palo Alto, Cal: Annual Reviews Inc., 1974), pp. 21-56; 73-97.