

"AND HOW DO YOU DEFINE FOLKLORE?"

When I was asked by the Folklore Forum editors to contribute an informal essay on the definition of "folklore," primarily for new students, I didn't know whether to groan or guffaw. The question has been asked so often and so many answers have been attempted, that I doubted the worth of a few more pages on the subject written to meet an editorial deadline. Frankly, sometimes I think that I was more certain in my definition of folklore--as material and as discipline--when I was a new folklore student myself. My present curious attitude is not the result of my participation in the Indiana University folklore program, but relates to larger factors: recent developments in methodology and technique; new appraisals of what falls within the folklorist's realm of interests; and the fact that more and more students have interested themselves in the academic study of folklore and, concerned with its development, have asked difficult questions about the discipline, both of their teachers and their colleagues. Concepts and definitions once satisfactory to the serious folklorist must be clarified, reshaped, and rendered useful and pertinent to our work in the 1960's, or else be subsumed once and for all under the label of the "historically interesting."

Folklore study today is very much alive and new folklorists have a lot of questions to ask: Is folklore a legitimate discipline or is it essentially an interdisciplinary pursuit? What are the boundaries of folklore materials today? Do sociology and anthropology have anything to offer us besides a few techniques and methods that give us feelings of greater respectability among the social scientists? Who is to deal with pseudo-folk materials and their cultural significance? What about "applied folklore?" The list could continue at length. Because folklore study is a comparatively new academic discipline, natural growing pains are to be expected, especially in the present decades of radical and rapid change on all cultural fronts. In my opinion, the 1960's are exciting and confusing years for the folklorist, but most of us would rather be in on the answering of these questions than putter around with questions already and finally answered.

So back to the original question, "What is folklore?" One of the problems of definition is the fact, often pointed out, that "folklore" refers to both the materials studied and the method of study. Within these few pages I will concern myself only with the materials studied--what a folklorist works with as primary subject matter. How you wish to study these materials is a complex matter about which there is even less agreement.

The traditional Thoms definition of 1846 may be cited for a start, of course, or another frequent answer could be referred to--"Take a look at O'Sullivan's Handbook of Irish Folklore," Francis Lee Utley in a 1961 JAF article, "Folk Literature: An Operational Definition" (reprinted in Alan Dundes, The Study of Folklore), examined the oft assigned twenty-one definitions in the Dunk and Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend with these conclusions.

... the statistical weight of authority is for the exclusion of bad science, mass culture, survival, communal, and matters of origin, and for the inclusion of oral (verbal, unwritten), tradition (transmission),

primitive culture, and the sub cultures of civilized society both rural and urban. As for the materials of folklore, art and literature are a clearly unanimous choice, custom and belief win the suffrage of about half the definers, and crafts and language are generally excluded. (Dundes, p.10)

Utley also notes that European folkliiv and Volkskunde cover craft and custom, but omit the ethnography of primitive groups.

Richard M. Dorson, in Bloodstoppers and Bearwalkers (Cambridge, 1952) enlarges the standard definition of folklore by expanding the concept of folk into "any homogeneous group, any group that is vitally integrated," these groups being formed by place of residence, racial or national heritage, occupation, and so on. Each of these groups, Dorson continues, possesses its "own set of esoteric traditions, familiar as the sun to members, bizarre as the jungle to any outsider." In defining "lore", Dorson emphasizes that it is passed orally, is shared by a number of people in the group, has been transmitted for several generations, and has been shaped in various ways by this process of sharing and transmitting. (Dorson, pp.6-7)

Dundes appears to be guided by these criteria in his definition of the subject in "The American Concept of Folklore" (JFI, III, 3 1966, 226-249). He conceptualizes "folk" less particularly than Dorson: "any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor," e.g., religion, ideology, language, residence, occupation, etc. This definition of the carrier of "lore" is especially applicable to group members of any twentieth-century society. Dundes points out that most American folklorists agree that lore is "what's in oral tradition," but he submits that this generalization is not always valid for all folkloric materials. For example, some forms are not transmitted orally—games, epitaphs, graffiti—and not all orally transmitted material is folklore. He questions a hard and fast application of another commonly accepted criterion, that it be spontaneous or unconsciously produced. Dundes finally resorts to an enumerative list, covering ballads, tales, superstitions, dialect, myths, games, proverbs, and riddles, as well as nonverbal materials often ignored by American folklorists, e.g., cookery, festival and ritual days, gestures, dances, and sounds to summon animals. In the second section of the article, dealing with folklore in the sense of academic discipline, he notes a shift in focus among American folklorists today from the study of past forms and survivals to that of past and present forms and of survivals and functions. He emphasizes that the American concept of folklore is now most certainly undergoing change.

Dundes' exploration of what materials the contemporary folklorist considers "folklore" is suggestive. Others however, have opened the door even further to admit any new materials usually relegated by the folklorist to popular and mass culture. The Hamburg Beiträge zur deutschen Volks- und Altertumskunde and Volkakunde Studien have published articles and monographs in recent years on such subjects as the Roman Catholic consecration of automobiles, spanking as a customary family punishment, fashions in first names, dress customs of Hamburg High School students between 1921 and 1939, the film as a subject for Volkskunde research, and national anthems. Manuel Danneman, Chilean folklorist, explains his definition of folklore materials in terms of the subject of the shared event, regardless of the subject's origin and traditional background or lack of it.

So what have we ended up with besides a review of several contemporary suggestions concerning the materials we are supposed to be studying? Because we are inquiring into important problems in the limitation or expansion of our field of study, it is not unusual to hear cautionary remarks from both teachers and students, running from "But that's not folklore, it's mass culture" to "But folklore is more than antiquarian sleuthing, it's tradition wherever and however we find it." The variety of materials under investigation today among Indiana University folklore students is a solid indication of this healthy inquiry. To cite only a few of the research projects: a functional analysis of dream and vision in a Canadian Icelandic community; an examination of the products of a Kentucky chairmaker, the creative process, and the particular influences on his creations; an investigation of Cotton Mather's Magnalia Christi Americana and Wonders of the Invisible World for folkloric items; a study of the protest folksong and its relation to the American left; a sociological-folkloric study of white lore about American Negroes; an examination of traditional materials in the works of the nineteenth-century local colorist Rowland E. Robinson; a study of symbol and American tradition in the context of the Chicago and St. Louis World Fairs; the uses of folklore by a Mexican-American in the processes of urbanization and acculturation.

Whatever consensus is reached in defining folklore, the "folk" and their "lore", and in clarifying the larger question of how broad or how narrow the discipline must become to satisfy the interests and aims of today's folklorists, we probably can agree that this consensus will not be reached very soon. I don't think that any apologies or elaborate defenses need be offered in the meantime. "What is Folklore?" is an honest question that deserves an honest and complete answer, and such answers are not easily come by.

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THE FOLKLORE FORUM NEEDS

MONEY.

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