

Papa Boas's Children or The Road to the Center of Folklore: A Folk History

[Stephanie A. Hall, Ph.D.](#)

**Folklife Center
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Over a hundred years ago Franz Boas had an idea. He believed that the study of the folklore of a people could lead to an understanding of their culture. Because people use creative expression to convey cultural ideas and values, anthropologists could learn those ideas and values most quickly by studying these expressions. But the anthropologists of the time were more interested in kinship studies than in folklore, and were not amenable to allowing Boas and his students to publish Native American narratives in their journal. So, along with scholars in literature who were also interested in folk expression, Boas founded the [American Folklore Society](#), and its *Journal of American Folklore*.

Although every folklorist today would recognize and agree with Boas's idea, some understanding of that as the seminal idea of twentieth century folklore seems to have gotten lost along the road. We all agree that Boas studied folklore since he was studying the tales of Native Americans; peoples we all accept as "the folk." But when the same techniques are applied to, say, computer technicians, many folklorists have their doubts about whether such studies are central to the discipline of folklore.

When I describe the people I have studied: contemporary American teenagers, Deaf Americans, science fiction fans, and others who are neither agricultural nor are they preserving ancient traditions, I am often told by other folklorists that what I study is on "the fringes" of the discipline of folklore. How did folklore develop these "fringes?" "Fringes" must be a construct of the discipline itself, but how are they defined? *[Select on the image for a photo caption.]*



Of course, it is not only folklorists who have a problem understanding what folklore may encompass. In the United States, the term "folklore" is commonly understood as that which is not true. A group I have begun to study, organized skeptics, expresses some of the most disturbing attitudes about what folklore means. Folklore, to many skeptics, is the study of outmoded beliefs, traditions, and superstitions that modern human beings no longer need. They feel that folklore is interesting, had its place in human history, and is fun to laugh at, but by no means is it something that modern people should continue to perpetuate.

Perhaps one of the reasons I find the skeptic's view of folklore so disturbing

is that it is a reflection back at folklorists of some of our discipline's own outdated ideas that we wish were more thoroughly buried. Ideas that keep reasserting themselves within the discipline in spite of many efforts to rid ourselves of them are reflected back at us from the surrounding culture. Skeptics may be a small group, but they are, nevertheless, intelligent and articulate representatives of American rationalist attitudes. Skeptics, I have decided, have something to teach us about what folklorists look like to people outside the discipline. As Walt Kelly's Pogo explained, "We have met the enemy and he is us."

Our history can at least partly explain how we got to this point. It seems those literary scholars that Boas teamed up with had some unsavory ideas that he did not share. One of these was a compelling force behind the study of non-western cultures by anthropologists and of agricultural people by folklorists at the end of the last century: Sir Edward Tylor's idea of cultural evolution.¹ By studying peoples unaffected by the industrial revolution, Tylor and his followers felt that we could learn more about "primitive culture" and the cultural evolution of man. Many of Tylor's ideas persist in popular culture today, and for many of the reasons the tylorians believed them: people with complex technology must be more highly evolved than people with simpler technology. It just "makes sense" in the same way that other forms of bigotry and racism "make sense" to those that believe in them.

Sadly, ideas about cultural evolution persisted much longer among folklorists than among anthropologists. One proponent, Alexander Krappe, published a textbook *The Science of Folklore* in 1930 (reprinted by Methuen & Co: New York, 1974), which continued to be used to teach folklore in literature classrooms into the middle of this century. Krappe's views of "primitive" peoples and their rituals and beliefs in contrast to those of modern man are remarkably similar to those expressed today by organized skeptics and by others who see folklore as something of the past.

Folklorists' interest in "survivals" helped perpetuate acceptance of the outmoded theory of cultural evolution into this century. For a long time folklorists were out trying to preserve cultural traditions that they expected would be swept away by industrialization, precisely because they believed they were preserving clues to primitive thought and culture.

Indeed, the songs and stories of many cultures that no longer exist were documented by the efforts of those scholars. At the [American Folklife Center](#) in the Library of Congress, Native Americans regularly make use of recordings made of their progenitors by collectors who would never have believed that any Indian culture would have survived until today. Though their documentary work is invaluable, and the idea that some traditions are endangered by modernization of various kinds is still valid, survivalism could not survive the folk's defiance of it. Folklorists started to notice the persistence of tradition among industrialized people, and began to revise their opinion that all folklore might soon be lost.

As we began to recover from the idea that all folklore was being wiped out by technology, people started asking some interesting questions. Richard Dorson wanted to know if there were folk in the city, and we discovered that there were.² Since then many of us have discovered that there is folklore in the suburbs as well, and that people with computers have folklore, as do engineers, and scientists. All these different people with folklore bothers some folklorists. Does everybody have folklore? If so, what happens to our cause, our sense of a pressing need to preserve tradition before it dies out? If we lose our sense of who has folklore, have we lost the center of our discipline?

Well, suppose everybody does have folklore.
Wouldn't that be interesting? The thesis of my



dissertation was that not only does everybody have folklore, but everybody *needs* folklore.³ I studied folklore in a Deaf American social club where most of the members were older Deaf people who had learned American Sign Language at a time when it was banned in schools. Many of them sacrificed relationships with family and teachers in order to learn to sign and socialize with other Deaf people. Why? Because for the Deaf, interaction using lipreading and speaking is difficult and largely informational. If Deaf people want to really talk, and certainly if they want to gossip, joke, and tell stories, then

they must sign. The fullness and richness of cultural interaction in a language that is unrestricted by their sensory disability was something that they would make great sacrifices for. *[Select on the image for photo caption]*

This study, I have been told, was on the "fringes of folklore," not because of what it said about folklore or because of the folklore collected, but simply because the people that I studied were not what folklorists usually think of as "the folk." Similarly, science fiction fans, internet groups, contemporary teenagers, and organized skeptics are people studied by those of us "on the fringes of the field."

If the Deaf and other contemporary technological people living in complex society are at the "fringes" of folklore then who is at the center? Farmers? Particular ethnic groups? How did the center of folklore come be defined by who we study rather than a what we study? Although many folklorists have tried to redefine the discipline to include creative expression in any group of people,⁴ and few folklorists today would argue against this inclusiveness, a sensibility persists about where the center of our discipline lies that has no contemporary theoretical basis and is nothing more than an anachronism: a survival of survivalism.

This sensibility is not merely outdated, it does us harm. Folklore is harmed when students are discouraged by their professors from pursuing the study of contemporary groups, when people outside the discipline see us as scholars of dying traditions, when new curricula in cultural studies are developed and taught without our involvement, and, perhaps most of all, when we as a discipline fail to define ourselves in a way that includes the variety of our own scholars. The road to the center of folklore must be broad enough for all of us to walk on together.

If we define ourselves as studying only cultures that are threatened or on the decline, then our discipline is, by its own definition, doomed. If our purpose is, on the other hand, to examine creative expression in all cultures and to understand the processes by which tradition emerges and persists in stable communities, as well as how it declines, then ours is a discipline with a future.

We will not lose our cause by embracing a larger view. Indeed, if human beings universally need folklore, then this is a compelling reason for the existence of our discipline. This is not a new idea. Even as survivalism was dying, Johan Huizinga proposed that playful expressions are a defining characteristic of man in *Homo Ludens* (Beacon Press: Boston, 1950). If one of the important and defining things about human beings is their use of creative expression to perpetuate culture, then we need make a case that ours is the discipline that sets out to understand this better.

A number of anthropologists, on their different road, share similar interests. They have realized the folly of trying to study "primitive" cultures, have gotten back from studying insular cultures, and have become interested in studying the folks in their neighborhood. At last it has occurred to both folklorists and anthropologists that in order to understand industrialized man, we must study industrialized man. Perhaps it worries some to have people from two disciplines converging on similar subject matter. But we came by different roads and can bring different perspectives to the same subjects. It is not surprising that we have met up with each other once again along the way. After all, over a hundred years ago Franz Boas had an idea. . .

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Notes

1. Sir Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, 2 volumes, London, 1871.
2. Richard Dorson, "Is There a Folk in the City?" in his *Folklore: Selected Essays*, Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1972, pp. 34-79.
3. Stephanie A. Hall, "*A Deaf Club is Like a Second Home*": *An Ethnography of Folklore Communication in American Sign Language*, dissertation in folklore and folklife, University of Pennsylvania, 1989.
4. See Dan Ben-Amos, "Towards a Definition of Folklore," *Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 84, #331, 1971, pp. 3-15 and Alan Dundes, "Who are the Folk?" in William Bascom, ed., *The Frontiers of Folklore*, Boulder Colorado: Westview Press, 1977, pp. 17-35.

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Who Are The Folk?



Costumers at the 1993 Balticon science fiction convention form a tableau. Science fiction fans have formed a cohesive community that meets common definitions of an ethnic group: they tend to marry within their group, raise their children to have the shared values of their community, and, after sixty years and three generations, they have developed a sense of heritage. (Photo by Stephanie A. Hall. Do not copy without permission)

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The Death of Folklore or the Death of Survivalism?



A costumer in a Philadelphia Deaf social club poses for the audience during the annual Halloween masquerade. From Stephanie A. Hall, "Monsters and Clowns: A Deaf American Halloween," in James Hardin, ed. *Folklife Annual 90*, Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1991. (Photo by Stephanie A. Hall. Do not copy without permission.)

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Stephanie A. Hall, Ph.D.
Folklife Center
Library of Congress.

Stephanie A. Hall is a folklorist and automation librarian at the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. She has a Ph.D. in folklore from the University of Pennsylvania.

Bibliography

- [Folklore and the Rise of Moderation Among Organized Skeptics](#) (article)
- [Papa Boas's Children or The Road to the Center of Folklore: A Folk History](#) (article)

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