

• *Notes* •

## Quantum Folklore

JULIA KELSO  
*University of Washington*

---

When I first came to Memorial University of Newfoundland in 1998 to study folklore, I was largely unaware of what it actually was. I have always been a fan of Ben-Amos' classic definition of "artistic communication in small groups" (1971, 13), but it too often elicits the same blankly polite stare that words like *etic*, *emic*, and *counter-hegemonic* garner in most non-folkloristic conversations. I tell my composition students and most of my colleagues that the folklore discipline is about the stories we tell to illustrate and understand our lives. Like the many other concepts used to try and define this amazing field over the years, it falls far short, but we can only keep trying. At least we *should* keep trying.

While it is bad enough that outside the boundaries of our field there is often a complete lack of comprehension—I once had a credit card bill sent to me at the *Forklore* Department at MUN (which could make for an interesting subsection of foodways)—it is worse that within folkloristics there is often a sense that it is no longer worth bothering to correct misconceptions anymore. From conversations that I have had, I get the impression that at least some portion of our discipline believes that the rest of academia is not even remotely interested in us, which may be true. The rest, as far as I can tell, tend to have come from centuries of

unsuccessful attempts at fitting what we do into a tidy little box with neatly organized drawers.

The fact of the matter—as *NDiF* works to demonstrate—is that folklore is a dynamic field of study that is not really amenable to a single label or point in the space-time continuum. This argument was postulated back when Alan Dundes noted that “Folk can refer to any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor” (1965, 2). When we currently consider the Internet and the level of global communication that exists, it is easy to argue that everyone in the world shares at least one other common factor outside of the genetics that allow for opposable thumbs. According to Elliott Oring, “the number and kinds of folk groups are limited only by the number and kinds of elements that can serve as the basis for group identities” (1986, 1). These definitions are only two affirmations that support the belief that folklore will continue to evolve as the world changes, long before we became aware of how rapidly the world could become unrecognizable. In fact, the folklore discipline may be the only thing that actually keeps pace.

In quantum physics, it is understood that the act of observing changes that which is observed; technically this refers to a quantum particle, but the comparison applies on any scale. While we may think only the subject, object, or ourselves are experiencing something that makes analysis and assessment difficult, I would argue that both observer (us) and the observed (them?) are evolving and we will be stronger for embracing this.

I have always believed that folklore is inextricably entwined with popular culture. Itinerant tall tales were akin to today's TV/radio/movies and webcasts, bringing information and entertainment into the home and/or community; not only sharing everything from morality plays to soap operas and action flicks, but carrying news and ideas with them around the world. Concepts passed from person to person to person and slowly made their way around the world at the speed of the human footsteps that carried them from community to community. If the iteration was virtually unrecognizable at the "end" of the journey, is that any different than what we see today, only at much greater speeds? The ability to lock a given version in time does not change the fact that the lore itself continues to evolve, as do the terms we use to describe it.

Today data travels at speeds that make tachyons feel old and slow, but at heart it is the same. Beliefs, lessons, news, "news," are all part of the narrative about an increasingly shared reality. This is our folk lore: vampires that bear almost no resemblance to the restless dead who rose from their graves to kill their families; the Other who is supposed to be embraced rather than feared; myths that are "busted" as seen on a wildly popular television show. Rather than quietly evolving into legends, jokes about disasters and the deceased seem to rise into the ether and multiplying almost faster than the event they refer to. This should not be a problem because we stopped searching for the Ur narrative a century ago; the mercurial nature of folklore is what makes it so vital to understanding *us*.

In my personal worldview, an excellent example of the intersection of folklore and popular culture can be found in a potent revelation uncovered by Thomas Friedman in a May 2005 lecture at MIT titled, "**The World Is Flat.**" While researching when people "discovered the world was flat," Friedman came across the phenomenon of Ramadan lanterns. Not that these lanterns exists—they have been carried by children during this holy month in Egypt for over a thousand years—but that "They are now all being imported from China with a microchip that plays the *latest Egyptian folksong*" (emphasis added). If this does not tie together all the aspects of the modern world in support of folklore, then I don't know what does.

Many people, some even within our own discipline, use the cross-contamination of subjects and people to argue that there is no longer a purpose for us in the academic world. I disagree; furthermore, I believe that the flattening of the world can actually be seen to enliven folklore, as we are in the world of Folklore 3.0. The shibboleths of a billion cultures are present online for anyone to Google, but this does not make them any more comprehensible to the lay reader. More importantly, this widespread availability of unsorted information ironically leaves lore and legend, in greater danger of becoming ephemera than when they were carbuncles carried in the heads of troubadours.

The Internet and all the other current means of transmitting narratives are often information without context. Context is what fuels understanding, which is what we provide and why we, and the study of folklore, are at least as important as they were when the question of solar mythology held center stage. Right now we are

Schrödinger's cat, waiting in a box for that plutonium atom to decay (or not) and decide whether our study thrives or dies. But, unlike that hapless feline, it is our choice whether or not to open the box and see what is happening inside.

### **Works Cited**

- Ben-Amos, Dan. 1971. "Toward A Definition of Folklore in Context." *Journal of American Folklore* 84: 3-15.
- Dundes, Alan. 1965. "What Is Folklore?" *The Study of Folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
- Oring, Elliott. 1965. "On the Concepts of Folklore," *Folk Groups and Folklore Genres*. Elliott Oring, ed., pp. 1-22. Logan, Utah: Utah State University.