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# FOLKLORE AND ANTHROPOLOGY

BY WILLIAM R. BASCOM

THE DUAL affiliations of folklore with the humanities on the one hand and with social science on the other are well recognized. They are reflected in the membership of this society and in its policy of alternating presidencies and meetings between the Modern Language Association and the American Anthropological Association. Although the literary and the anthropological approaches are both clearly essential and complementary, the two groups of folklorists have tended to work independently rather than together on their common area of interest, following their own separate courses without becoming familiar with each other's concepts, methods, and objectives. This intellectual isolationism is by no means universal, but it is common enough to present real difficulties to this society and its journal, and to have been mentioned in three recent presidential addresses.<sup>1</sup> This paper is an attempt to bridge this gap by presenting the anthropological approach to folklore, as I see it; it is my hope that one of you may reciprocate by presenting the viewpoint of the humanities.

Of the four branches of anthropology, cultural anthropology, which is also referred to as social anthropology, ethnology, or ethnography, is most closely associated with folklore. Neither physical anthropology nor prehistory or archeology have any direct relationship to folklore, although the latter may occasionally provide information regarding past developments and population movements which is useful to the folklorist. Linguistics is somewhat more closely related, both because the style of verbal expression of a tale or proverb is influenced by vocabulary and grammatical structure, and because linguists have found folktales and myths convenient devices for collecting linguistic texts, with the result that some of the most carefully recorded and translated American Indian tales have been published by linguists. Folklore, however, falls squarely within the fourth field, cultural anthropology, which is concerned with the study of the customs, traditions, and institutions of living peoples.

When the anthropologist goes to the South Seas or to Africa to study and record the ways of life of a particular people, he describes their techniques of farming, fishing, and hunting; their system of land tenure, inheritance, and other phases of property ownership; their kinship terms and obligations, their institutions of marriage and the family, the other units within their social structure and their functions; their legal and political system; their theology, rituals, magical practices, concepts of the soul and the afterworld, omens, techniques of divination, and other aspects of their religion and world view; their housing, clothing, and bodily deco-

<sup>1</sup> Melville J. Herskovits, "Folklore after a Hundred Years: A Problem in Redefinition," *JAF*, 59: 232 (1946), 89-100; A. H. Gayton, "Perspectives in Folklore," *JAF*, 64: 252 (1951), 147-150; Francis Lee Utley, "Conflict and Promise in Folklore," *JAF*, 65: 256 (1952), 111-119. My paper was presented at the Sixty-fourth Annual Meeting of The American Folklore Society, held at El Paso, Texas, in December, 1952.

ration; their woodcarving, pottery, metalworking, and other graphic and plastic arts; their music, their dancing, and their drama. Such studies, which we speak of as ethnographies, can give only an incomplete description if they do not also include the folktales, legends, myths, riddles, proverbs, and other forms of folklore employed by the people.

Folklore, to the anthropologist, is one of the important parts that go to make up the culture of any given people. It is important, if only because it is one of the universals: that is, there is no known culture which does not include folklore. No group of people, however remote or however simple their technology, has ever been discovered which does not employ some form of folklore. Because of this, and because the same tales and proverbs may be known to both, folklore is a bridge between literate and nonliterate societies. Although some anthropologists, for one reason or another, devote little attention to folklore, it is obvious that any ethnographic study which does not consider folklore can be only a partial and incomplete description of the culture as a whole. Moreover, since folklore serves to sanction and validate religious, social, political, and economic institutions, and to play an important role as an educative device in their transmission from one generation to another, there can be no thorough analysis of any of these other parts of culture which does not give serious consideration to folklore.

"Culture" is the basic concept in anthropology today. Although it has been variously defined, anthropologists are clearly in general agreement as to what it means. And it has become almost impossible for anthropologists to discuss their subject without employing it. Culture has been referred to as man's "social heritage" and as "the man-made part of the environment." It consists essentially of any form of behavior which is acquired through learning, and which is patterned in conformity with certain approved norms. Under it anthropologists include all the customs, traditions, and institutions of a people, together with their products and techniques of production. A folktale or a proverb is thus clearly a part of culture.

The term culture was introduced into English by Edward Tylor in 1865,<sup>2</sup> and defined in his book *Primitive Culture* in 1871 as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society."<sup>3</sup> In the second edition of the earlier work, Tylor acknowledged that he had drawn largely from the writings of Steinheil and "from the invaluable collection of facts bearing on the history of civilization in the 'Allgemeine Cultur-Geschichte der Menschheit' and 'Allgemeine Culturwissenschaft,' of the late Dr. Gustav Klemm, of Dresden."<sup>4</sup> Both of Klemm's works use the word *Cultur*, the first appearing in ten volumes published between 1843-1852. In the second, published in two volumes in 1854 and 1855, Klemm refers to *Cultur* as including "customs, information, and skills, domestic and public life in peace and war, religion, science and art"; and says, "It is manifest in the branch of a tree if deliberately shaped; in the rubbing of sticks to make fire; the cremation

<sup>2</sup> E. B. Tylor, *Researches into the Early History of Mankind and the Development of Civilization* (Boston, 1878, first published in 1865), pp. 3, 4, 150-191.

<sup>3</sup> E. B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art and Custom* (London, 1871), I, 1.

<sup>4</sup> Tylor, 1878, p. 13.

of a deceased father's corpse; the decorative painting of one's body; the transmission of past experience to the new generation."<sup>5</sup>

Folklorists need not be reminded of the similarities between these definitions and William John Thoms' reference to "the manners, customs, observances, superstitions, ballads, proverbs, &c., of the olden time" in his letter to *The Athenaeum* in 1846 in which the word folk-lore was first introduced into English.<sup>6</sup> These similarities have in large part been the root of the argument about the scope of folklore which still plagues us. Although historically the word folklore is nearly twenty years older in English than the word culture, culture has become accepted in the social sciences in the sense that the anthropologists use it, while the argument over folklore continues, even among folklorists.

It would defeat the purpose of this paper to revive this argument by pursuing it, but it is necessary to carry it a bit further in clarifying the anthropological point of view. Folklore, to the anthropologist, is a part of culture but not the whole of culture. It includes myths, legends, tales, proverbs, riddles, the texts of ballads and other songs, and other forms of lesser importance, but not folk art, folk dance, folk music, folk costume, folk medicine, folk custom, or folk belief. All of these are important parts of culture, which must also be a part of any complete ethnography. All are unquestionably worthy of study, whether in literate or nonliterate societies.

In nonliterate societies, which traditionally have been the primary interest of anthropologists, all institutions, traditions, customs, beliefs, attitudes, and crafts are transmitted orally, by verbal instruction and by example. While anthropologists agree that folklore should be defined as dependent upon oral transmission, they do not see this feature as distinguishing folklore from the rest of culture. All folklore is orally transmitted, but not all that is orally transmitted is folklore. Because of their concern with nonliterate societies, anthropologists have not yet had to face squarely one of the current problems in folklore, that of defining the relationship between folklore and literature, or of distinguishing folklore from fakelore, but it may become prominent as more attention is paid to the problems of acculturation and to the study of the literate societies of Europe, Asia, and America.

The content of culture is analyzed in terms of its aspects or broad component parts, such as technology, economics, social and political organization, religion, and the arts. Folklore falls clearly in the last category as a form of aesthetic expression as important as the graphic and plastic arts, music, the dance, or drama. All aspects of culture are interrelated in varying degrees, as folklore is through its function as a sanction of custom and belief, both religious and secular. Nonetheless this system of classification has proved useful as a basis for cross-cultural comparisons and for the development of specialized concepts and techniques for analysis.

<sup>5</sup> G. Klemm, *Allgemeine Culturwissenschaft* (Leipzig, 1854-55), I, 217; II, 37. Translations from Robert H. Lowie, *The History of Ethnological Theory* (New York, 1937), p. 12.

<sup>6</sup> W. J. Thoms ("Ambrose Merton"), "Folk-Lore," *The Athenaeum*, no. 982 (1846), 862-863; Duncan Emrich, "'Folklore': William John Thoms," *California Folklore Quarterly*, 5: 4 (1946), 355-374. It is noteworthy that although Thoms never gave a strict definition of folklore, this description was repeated word for word in *Notes & Queries*, First Series, I (1850), 223.

The use of the term folklore to include such things as folk arts, folk medicine, folk belief, and folk custom ignores this system of classification which has proven its usefulness for systematic analysis, and groups together phenomena of different order which require different methods of analysis.

Folklore thus is studied in anthropology because it is a part of culture. It is a part of man's learned traditions and customs, a part of his social heritage. It can be analyzed in the same way as other customs and traditions, in terms of form and function, or of interrelations with other aspects of culture. It presents the same problems of growth and change, and is subject to the same processes of diffusion, invention, acceptance or rejection, and integration. It can be used, like other aspects of culture, for studies of these processes or those of acculturation, patterning, the relation between culture and the environment, or between culture and personality.

The development of any item of folklore is comparable to that of any custom, institution, technique, or art form. It must have been invented at some time, by some individual. It can be assumed that many folktales or proverbs, like many other inventions, were rejected because they either did not fill a recognized or subconscious need, or because they were incompatible with the accepted patterns and traditions of folklore or of culture as a whole. If they were accepted, they depended on retelling, in the same way that all cultural traits in a nonliterate society depend upon restatement and re-enactment. An element of material culture, such as a hoe or bow or mask, has of course a certain independent existence once it has been created, but for the craft itself to continue these items must be made again and again. The nonmaterial elements of culture, however, are entirely comparable in this respect to folktales or proverbs; rituals must be performed, beliefs and attitudes must be expressed, kinship terms must be used, and the privileges and obligations of kinship must be exercised. In the course of this retelling or redoing, change occurs each time new variations are introduced, and again these innovations are subject to acceptance or rejection. As this process continues, each new invention is adapted gradually to the needs of the society and to the pre-existing culture patterns, which may themselves be modified somewhat to conform to the new invention.

In some societies for some forms of folklore, as has been clearly established, the narrator may be expected to modify a well-known tale by the substitution of new characters or incidents in an original way or the introduction of a novel twist to the plot, whereas in the fields of kinship, economics, law, or religion, the emphasis may be upon conformity. However, in this respect folklore does not differ from the graphic and plastic arts, music, or the dance, where creativity on the part of the performer may also be expected. The folk element in folklore, therefore, presents no new or distinctive problems as the anthropologist sees it. However, he prefers to consider the question as one of anonymous rather than collective creativity. As an anthropologist, one may raise the question whether there is any significant difference as far as creativity is concerned between the variants on a particular tale as told by individual narrators among the Zuni or Navajo, for example, and the written variations on the current success story, the mystery, or the boy-meets-girl theme. Viewed broadly, there are the same questions as to who first invented

these themes, how they have been reworked in the past, and how the previous variations have influenced the product of any given storyteller or writer. In literature there is the possibility of being able to answer these questions, while in folklore one can never hope to find the answers, but this does not mean that the processes involved are essentially different.

In the same manner, the spread of folktales from one society to another is strictly comparable to the spread of tobacco, a religious ritual or concept, a tool or a technique, or a legal principle. Again there is the question of acceptance or rejection, and if accepted the subsequent modification to fit the new item into the other cultural patterns, a process which anthropologists speak of as integration. There are again the same problems in interpreting the present distribution of a given cultural trait or complex or a given folktale or proverb. Does one explain this in terms of migration as the Grimm brothers believed; in terms of borrowing as the Diffusionists insisted; or in terms of independent invention as the Nature Allegorical school and the Cultural Evolutionists assumed? These same problems have been faced a great many times by anthropologists and a considerable body of materials bearing on this problem has been assembled. Folklorists could profit considerably from the numerous anthropological discussions of this point and from the various principles such as limited possibilities, contiguous distribution, parallelism, convergence, form, and quantity which have been developed as a basis for choosing between these alternative explanations; they could also profit from an examination of studies such as Spier's analysis of the Plains Indians' Sun Dance or the discussions of the age-area concept and its limitations.<sup>7</sup> These have implications of fundamental importance for those who employ the methods of the Finnish Folklore Fellows.

Moreover, since any cultural law must hold for folklore as well as for the other aspects of culture, the data of folklore can be used to test theories or hypotheses about culture as a whole; and conversely, the accepted theories of culture which have been developed can contribute to the understanding of folklore. It is not surprising, therefore, that many of the schools of anthropological theory are considered as schools of folklore, including the American Anthropologists, the Functionalists, the Diffusionists, and the Cultural Evolutionists.

The theory of Cultural Evolution, developed by Spencer, Tylor, Morgan, and others, remains another point of disagreement between anthropologists and some other folklorists. Although this theory was accepted almost without question by the scholars of the latter half of the nineteenth century, and was further developed and elaborated by many of the great anthropologists and folklorists of this period,

<sup>7</sup> Leslie Spier, *The Sun Dance of the Plains Indians: Its Development and Diffusion* (Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History, 16: 7, New York, 1921); Edward Sapir, *Time Perspective in Aboriginal American Culture, A Study in Method* (Canadian Geological Survey, Anthropological Series, 90: 13, 1916); Clark Wissler, *Man and Culture* (New York, 1923) and *The Relation of Nature to Man in Aboriginal America* (New York, 1926); Roland B. Dixon, *The Building of Cultures* (New York, 1928); W. D. Wallis, *Culture and Progress* (New York, 1930); Margaret T. Hodgen, "Geographical Distribution as a Criterion of Age," *American Anthropologist*, 44 (1942), 345-368; Melville J. Herskovits, *Man and His Works* (New York, 1948); A. L. Kroeber, *Anthropology*, rev. ed. (New York, 1948).

it was severely criticized by the anthropologists of the twentieth century. Analysis showed that the entire theory rested on several hypotheses which its exponents never succeeded in proving and which, at least in some specific cases, have later been disproved. Since the entire theory stands or falls on these assumptions, it has been rejected by anthropologists and by most social scientists. Nevertheless, one finds some folklorists today defining folklore as survivals from earlier stages of civilization, as "the shadowy remnants of ancient religious rites still incorporated in the lives of illiterates and rustics" or as "a lively fossil which refuses to die."<sup>8</sup> These interpretations derive directly from the theory of cultural evolution which, instead of folklore, has really proved the lively fossil which refuses to die. The theory of cultural evolution was developed primarily by anthropologists; it was criticized primarily by anthropologists; and it has been discarded by anthropologists. It is understandably disturbing to anthropologists to find folklorists, or economists, or anyone else, repeating an anthropological theory which anthropologists themselves have rejected. They would prefer that this argument could be kept a private dispute within the family, and wish that it could be hidden forever in some convenient closet.

Anthropologists have come to the conclusion that the search for ultimate origins, whether by means of the cultural evolutionist approach or the age-area concept, is a hopeless one where historical documents and archeological evidence are lacking. In folklore, where archeology can be of almost no help at all, and where documentation does not yield the answers directly, attempts to reconstruct history on an even more restricted scale can yield results only in terms of probability rather than proven fact, and there is the constant danger of being enticed into the realm of pure speculation for which one can never hope to discover supporting evidence. This conclusion has been reached after many serious attempts to reconstruct history using a wide variety of data, and although anthropologists have not completely abandoned the subject of distribution of specific tales, the questions of diffusion and possible origins is receiving less and less attention and is approached with increasing caution. On the other hand, anthropologists are turning to other problems which are now felt to be of equal or greater importance, and more susceptible to study. The concern with these other problems is another point which differentiates, to a certain extent, the anthropologist from his fellow folklorists.

In line with this thinking, anthropologists would agree that change in folklore can be studied more profitably in process than through reconstructions based on distributions. When Cushing some sixty-five years ago had the foresight to record the Italian tale of "The Cock and the Mouse" as retold by a Zuni informant to whom he himself had recited the tale a year previously, he gave to students of folklore an extremely valuable bit of data. The comparison of the Italian and Zuni variants spotlights many Zuni stylistic features and serves not only to show "What transformation the original underwent in such a brief period, and how well it has been adapted to Zuni environment and mode of thought, but also to give a glimpse of the Indian method of folk-tale making."<sup>9</sup> It is still difficult to

<sup>8</sup> Maria Leach, ed. *The Funk and Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend*, 2 vols. (New York, 1949-50), I, 401.

<sup>9</sup> F. H. Cushing, *Zuni Folk Tales* (New York, 1931), pp. 411-422.

see how investigations of this kind can be pursued systematically and without having to depend upon fortuitous circumstances, but one wishes that there were many more such examples for comparison and analysis, for here one can approach the dynamics of folklore on the solid basis of known and recorded fact, rather than inference, probability, or speculation.

The problem of the creative role of the narrator is receiving increasing attention. Through examples such as that of Cushing, through the comparison of tales, and particularly through the comparison of variants of the same tale within a given folklore tradition, it is hoped to learn the degree and kind of freedom permitted to the narrator or expected of him in various forms of folklore and in various societies. Benedict has made an extremely enlightening analysis of Zuni folklore along these lines, in which she demonstrates how the interests and experiences of the narrators are reflected in the tales they tell, and other studies have been published or are in process.<sup>10</sup>

The problem of stylistic features of a body of folklore is regarded as of primary importance, although the anthropologist feels diffident to approach it when so many folklorists have been trained in literature and are far better equipped to attack it, as well as the analysis of tales in terms of plot, incident, conflict, climax, motivation, and character development. Yet Utley in his presidential address has said, "Some of the most intelligently critical students of folk literature have been anthropologists: Gladys Reichard, Franz Boas, and Paul Radin. I am convinced, for instance, that Radin's *Winnebago Hero-Cycles* contains a more subtle analysis of the poetic meanings of one segment of oral literature than anything we MLA-ers have done."<sup>11</sup>

Anthropologists are also concerned with the place of folklore in the daily round of life, in its social settings, and in the attitudes of native peoples toward their own folklore. One cannot determine these facts from the texts of tales alone, nor whether a tale is regarded as historical fact or as fiction, yet without them one can only speculate as to the nature of folklore and its full meaning.

They are also concerned with the relationship between folklore and the rest of culture, from two different points of view. First, there is the extent to which folklore reflects culture by incorporating descriptions of rituals, technology, and other cultural details. Secondly, and of broader significance, there is the fact that characters in folktales and myths may do things which are regarded as shocking in daily life. To cite only one example, Old Man Coyote has intercourse with his mother-in-law, whereas in ordinary life the American Indian who finds amusement in these tales must observe a strict mother-in-law avoidance. From the time of Euhemerus on, folklorists have attempted to explain, or to explain away, the striking divergencies between folklore and actual conduct. Most of these explanations are unacceptable today, but the problem remains with us as one of the most intriguing of all those in folklore, and one which raises important questions about the nature of humor and the psychological implications and the function of folklore.

<sup>10</sup> Ruth Benedict, *Zuni Mythology*, 2 vols. (Columbia University Contributions to Anthropology, 21, 1935), I, xxxvii-xlii; Gladys A. Reichard, "Individualism and Mythological Style, *JAF*, 57 (1944), 16-25.

<sup>11</sup> Utley, 1952, p. 112.



Finally, anthropologists are becoming increasingly concerned with the functions of folklore—what it does for the people who tell it. In addition to the obvious function of entertainment or amusement, folklore serves to sanction the established beliefs, attitudes, and institutions, both sacred and secular, and it plays a vital role in education in nonliterate societies. It is not possible to present an adequate analysis of this problem here, or even a discussion of the very suggestive data bearing on it which have been accumulated from many different parts of the world. But, in addition to its role in transmitting culture from one generation to another, and to providing ready rationalizations when beliefs or attitudes are called into question, folklore is used in some societies to apply social pressure to those who would deviate from the accepted norms. Moreover, even the function of amusement cannot be accepted today as a complete answer, for it is apparent that beneath a good deal of humor lies a deeper meaning, and that folklore serves as a psychological escape from many repressions, not only sexual, which society imposes upon the individual.

The anthropologist, to speak frankly, often feels that his colleagues in folklore are often so preoccupied with the problem of origins and historical reconstruction that they overlook problems of equal or even greater significance, for which one can hope to find satisfactory solutions. He looks to them for guidance in the literary analysis of folklore, and for cooperation on the problems of style and of the creative role of the narrator. He would welcome their cooperation in recording local attitudes toward folklore and its social contexts, in analyzing the relation of folklore to culture and to conduct, and finally in seeking to define its functions.

In my own view, the most effective way to bridge the gaps between the different groups of folklorists is by a common concern with common problems, rather than by reliance as in the past upon a common interest in a common body of subject matter. In conclusion I wish to assure you that these remarks have not, of course, been based upon any assumption that anthropologists are completely without blame, and for this reason I repeat my initial invitation, that one of you address yourselves to this same topic from the point of view of the humanities.

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