




1971

# Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context

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## Recommended Citation

Ben-Amos, D. (1971). Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context. *The Journal of American Folklore*, 84 (331), 3-15. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/539729>

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# Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context

## Abstract

Definitions of folklore are as many and varied as the versions of a well-known tale. Both semantic and theoretical differences have contributed to this proliferation. The German *Volkskunde*, the Swedish *folkminne*, and the Indian *lok sahitya* all imply slightly different meanings that the English term "folklore" cannot syncretize completely.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, anthropologists and students of literature have projected their own bias into their definitions of folklore. In fact, for each of them folklore became the exotic topic, the green grass on the other side of the fence, to which they were attracted but which, alas, was not in their own domain. Thus, while anthropologists regarded folklore as literature, scholars of literature defined it as culture.<sup>2</sup> Folklorists themselves resorted to enumerative,<sup>3</sup> intuitive,<sup>5</sup> definitions; yet, while all these certainly contributed to the clarification of the nature of folklore, at the same time they circumvented the main issue, namely, the isolation of the unifying thread that joins jokes and myths, gestures and legends, costumes and music into a single category of knowledge.

## Disciplines

Cultural History | Folklore | Near and Middle Eastern Studies



## Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context

DEFINITIONS OF FOLKLORE are as many and varied as the versions of a well-known tale. Both semantic and theoretical differences have contributed to this proliferation. The German *Volkskunde*, the Swedish *folkminne*, and the Indian *lok sabitya* all imply slightly different meanings that the English term "folklore" cannot syncretize completely.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, anthropologists and students of literature have projected their own bias into their definitions of folklore. In fact, for each of them folklore became the exotic topic, the green grass on the other side of the fence, to which they were attracted but which, alas, was not in their own domain. Thus, while anthropologists regarded folklore as literature, scholars of literature defined it as culture.<sup>2</sup> Folklorists themselves resorted to enumerative,<sup>3</sup> intuitive,<sup>4</sup> and operational<sup>5</sup> definitions; yet, while all these certainly contributed to the clarification of the nature of folklore, at the same time they circumvented the main issue, namely, the isolation of the unifying thread that joins jokes and myths, gestures and legends, costumes and music into a single category of knowledge.

The difficulties experienced in defining folklore are genuine and real. They

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of each of these terms see respectively Gerhard Lutz, *Volkskunde: Ein Handbuch zur Geschichte ihrer Probleme* (Berlin, 1958); Åke Hultkrantz, *General Ethnological Concepts* (Copenhagen, 1960), 243–247; Manne Eriksson, "Problems of Ethnological and Folkloristic Terminology with Regard to Scandinavian Material and Languages," in *Papers of the International Congress of European and Western Ethnology Stockholm 1951*, ed. Sigurd Erixon (Stockholm, 1955), 37–40; Trilochan Pande, "The Concept of Folklore in India and Pakistan," *Schweizerisches Archiv für Volkskunde*, 59 (1963), 25–30. For a general survey of this problem see Elisée Legros, *Sur les noms et les tendances du folklore* (Liège, 1962).

<sup>2</sup> Compare, for example, the definitions of Melville J. Herskovits and William R. Bascom with those of Aurelio Espinosa and MacEdward Leach in *The Funk and Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend*, ed. Maria Leach and Jerome Fried (New York, 1949), 398–400.

<sup>3</sup> William Thoms, "Folklore," in *The Study of Folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1965), 5; Alan Dundes, "What Is Folklore?" in *The Study of Folklore*, 1–3; Samuel P. Bayard, "The Materials of Folklore," *JOURNAL OF AMERICAN FOLKLORE*, 66 (1953), 9–10.

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin A. Botkin, *A Treasury of American Folklore* (New York, 1944), xxi; Francis Lee Utley, "A Definition of Folklore," in *Our Living Traditions: An Introduction to American Folklore*, ed. Tristram P. Coffin (New York, 1968), 3–14.

<sup>5</sup> Francis Lee Utley, "Folk Literature: An Operational Definition," *JOURNAL OF AMERICAN FOLKLORE*, 74 (1961), 193–206. Reprinted in Dundes, *The Study of Folklore*, 7–24.



result from the nature of folklore itself and are rooted in the historical development of the concept. Early definitions of folklore were clouded by romantic mist and haunted by the notion of "popular antiquities," which Thoms sought to replace. Implicit in these definitions are criteria of the antiquity of the material, the anonymity or collectiveness of composition, and the simplicity of the folk—all of which are circumstantial and not essential to folklore. The age of a song, for example, establishes it chronologically; the identification of the composer describes it historically; and its association with a particular group defines it socially. Each of these factors has an explanatory and interpretive value, but none of them defines the song as folklore. Thus, the principles that united "customs, observance, superstitions, ballads, proverbs, etc." in Thoms' initial definition of folklore were not intrinsic to these items and could only serve as a shaky framework for the development of a scientific discipline concentrating upon them.

Subsequent attempts to construct a definition that would hold together all these apparently diversified phenomena encountered a difficulty inherent in the nature of folklore. On the one hand, folklore forms—like mentifacts and artifacts—are superorganic in the sense that once created their indigenous environment and cultural context are not required for their continuous existence.<sup>6</sup> Background information may be essential for the analytical interpretation of the materials, but none of it is crucial for the sheer existence of the folklore forms. Tales and songs can shift media, cross language boundaries, pass from one culture to another, and still retain sufficient traces of similarity to enable us to recognize a core of sameness in all their versions. Folk art objects can outlive their users and even exist when their culture as a whole has become extinct, so that they are literally survivals of ancient times. A folk musician nowadays can perform for millions of people on a television network, in a style and manner that approximate his own singing and playing in the midst of his own small group, thus extending his art far beyond his social circle. In sum, the materials of folklore are mobile, manipulative, and transcultural.

On the other hand, folklore is very much an organic phenomenon in the sense that it is an integral part of culture. Any divorce of tales, songs, or sculptures from their indigenous locale, time, and society inevitably introduces qualitative changes into them. The social context, the cultural attitude, the rhetorical situation, and the individual aptitude are variables that produce distinct differences in the structure, text, and texture of the ultimate verbal, musical, or plastic product. The audience itself, be it children or adults, men or women, a stable society or an accidental grouping, affects the kind of folklore genre and the manner of presentation.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the categorization of prose narratives into different genres depends largely upon the cultural attitude toward the tales and the indigenous taxonomy of oral tradition. Thus, in the process of diffusion from one culture to another, tales may also cross narrative categories; and the same story may be myth for one group and *Märchen* for another. In that case the question of the actual generic classification of the tale is irrelevant, since it does not depend on any

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the implications of the concept of the superorganic see David Bidney, *Theoretical Anthropology* (New York, 1953), 129–131.

<sup>7</sup> See Linda Dégh, "Some Questions of the Social Function of Story-telling," *Acta Ethnographica*, 6 (1957), 91–147.



autonomous intrinsic features but rather on the cultural attitude toward it. Finally, unlike written literature, music, and fine art, folklore forms and texts are performed repeatedly by different peoples on various occasions. The performance situation, in the final analysis, is the crucial context for the available text. The particular talent of the professional or lay artist, his mood at the moment of recitation, and the response of his audience may all affect the text of his tale or song.

Thus, definitions of folklore have had to cope with this inherent duality of the subject and often did so by placing the materials of folklore in different, even conflicting perspectives. In spite of this diversification, it is possible to distinguish three basic conceptions of the subject underlying many definitions; accordingly, folklore is one of these three: a body of knowledge, a mode of thought, or a kind of art. These categories are not completely exclusive of each other. Very often the difference between them is a matter of emphasis rather than of essence; for example, the focus on knowledge and thought implies a stress on the contents of the materials and their perception, whereas the concentration on art puts the accent on the forms and the media of transmission. Nevertheless, each of these three foci involves a different range of hypotheses, relates to a distinct set of theories about folklore, and consequently leads toward divergent research directions.

However, since knowledge, thought, and art are broad categories of culture, folklorists have had to concentrate mainly on distinguishing their subject matter from other phenomena of the same kind. For that purpose, they have qualified folklore materials in terms of their social context, time depth, and medium of transmission. Thus, folklore is not thought of as existing without or apart from a structured group. It is not a phenomenon *sui generis*. No matter how defined, its existence depends on its social context, which may be either a geographic, linguistic, ethnic, or occupational grouping. In addition, it has required distillation through the mills of time. Folklore may be "old wine in new bottles" and also "new wine in old bottles"<sup>8</sup> but rarely has it been conceived of as new wine in new bottles. Finally, it has to pass through time at least partially via the channels of oral transmission. Any other medium is liable to disqualify the material from being folklore.

Further, folklorists have constructed their definitions on the basis of sets of relations between the social context, the time depth, and the medium of transmission on the one hand, and the conception of folklore as a body of knowledge, mode of thought, and kind of art on the other, as illustrated in the following table.

|                  | <i>Social Context</i>               | <i>Time Depth</i> | <i>Medium of Transmission</i> |
|------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------------|
| <i>Knowledge</i> | Communal possession                 | Antiquity         | Verbal or imitative           |
| <i>Thought</i>   | Collective representation           | Survival          | Verbal                        |
| <i>Art</i>       | Communal creation<br>or re-creation | Antiquity         | Verbal or imitative           |

<sup>8</sup> Botkin, xxi-xxii.



It is possible to distinguish three types of relations between the social context and folklore: possession, representation, and creation or re-creation. Basically, a literal interpretation of the term "folklore" sets up the first type of relationship. Accordingly, folklore is "the learning of the people,"<sup>9</sup> "the wisdom of the people, the people's knowledge,"<sup>10</sup> or more fully, "the lore, erudition, knowledge or teaching of a folk."<sup>11</sup> This view of folklore as the lore shared by the whole group communally applies, in practice and theory, to different degrees of public possession. First, folklore can be the sum total of knowledge in a society. Since no single member of the community has a complete command of all its facets, folklore in this sense must be an abstract construct based upon the collective information as it is stored with many individuals, "the whole body of people's traditional beliefs and customs."<sup>12</sup>

Secondly, and in contrast, folklore has been considered only that knowledge shared by every member of the group. This definition excludes any esoteric information to which only selected experts in the community have access, since it restricts folklore to "popular knowledge"<sup>13</sup> alone. In that case, folklore is the real "common property"<sup>14</sup> of the community. Thirdly, this real communal lore can be expressed by the group at large in "collective actions of the multitude," as Frazer defines it,<sup>15</sup> including public festivities, rituals, and ceremonies in which every member of the group partakes. Lastly, folklore can be restricted to customs and observances that each individual adheres to in the privacy of his home, though all the people in the society abide by them. Although this last interpretation is theoretically possible, no definition has limited the scope of folklore so narrowly.

The construction of the second set of relations between folklore and its social context is based upon British evolutionary theory and French sociological anthropology. Accordingly, folklore represents a particular mode of collective and spontaneous thought, as André Varagnac has formulated his definition: "Le folklore, ce sont des croyances collectives sans doctrine, des pratiques collectives sans théorie."<sup>16</sup> In that case, the actual customs, rituals, and other observances are representations of the mode of thought that underlies them. The notion of collective thought in the context of definitions of folklore has several connotations. First it refers to the average, unexceptional thought that lacks any marks of individuality, "conventional modes of human thought."<sup>17</sup> Secondly, it implies the particular thinking patterns of primitive man, as they were conceived by early folklorists and anthropologists. Edwin Sidney Hartland, for example, defined tradition, the subject matter of the science of fairy tales, as "the sum total of the psychological phenomena of uncivilized man."<sup>18</sup> In that sense, folklore is "the expression of the psychology of early man" as it concerns any field, either philosophy, religion, science or history.

<sup>9</sup> Charlotte Sophia Burne, *The Handbook of Folklore* (London, 1931), 1.

<sup>10</sup> Y. M. Sokolov, *Russian Folklore* (New York, 1950), 1.

<sup>11</sup> Ralph Steele Boggs, "Folklore: Materials, Science, Art," *Folklore Americas*, 3 (1943), 1.

<sup>12</sup> James G. Frazer, *Folklore in the Old Testament*, vol. 1 (London, 1919), vii.

<sup>13</sup> Espinosa, 399.

<sup>14</sup> Bayard, 8.

<sup>15</sup> Frazer, vii.

<sup>16</sup> André Varagnac, *Définition du Folklore* (Paris, 1938), 18.

<sup>17</sup> Boggs, 1.

<sup>18</sup> Edwin Sidney Hartland, *The Science of Fairy Tales* (London, 1891), 34.



All these aspects of thought are represented collectively in the folklore of the people. The conception of a special mode of thinking pertaining to primitive people was developed by Lévi-Bruhl as "the collective representation." Folklore, as other social facts, is a manifestation of this particular mode of thought. It expresses the particular mystique that characterizes primitive mentality in its perception of natural and social reality. Although Lévi-Bruhl's theories are no longer accepted without reservations, they still serve as a basis for defining folklore, as exemplified in Joseph Rysan's, "Folklore can be defined as the collective objectifications of basic emotions, such as awe, fear, hatred, reverence, and desire, on the part of the social group."<sup>19</sup>

When the principle of collectivity or communality is applied to the definition of folklore as art, reference is made particularly to the creation of folk literature. Two concepts have been developed in that regard: communal creation and re-creation. The first—whose main exponent in America was Francis Gummere—implies that folk songs, especially ballads, are a product of communal creation.<sup>20</sup> This notion, long discarded, is not as absurd as Miss Louise Pound would have liked us to believe.<sup>21</sup> Although its particular application to the origin of the ballad is rather doubtful, it is possible to conceive of such a process in relation to other kinds of folklore. Paul Bohannon reports a case of communal creation in the decoration of a walking stick and of other objects. Many members of the group, including the anthropologist himself, contributed to the formation of the wooden pieces.<sup>22</sup> Some of my own informants, composers of songs from Benin City, Midwestern Nigeria, admitted readily, and without perceiving the theoretical difficulties such admissions impose upon us, that they often composed a song alone, but that the group of singers to whom they belonged reworked it afterwards until everybody was pleased. However, by now the notion of communal creation has been completely discarded from any definition of folklore and replaced, when applicable, by the concept of communal re-creation. Archer Taylor, for example, incorporated the concept explicitly into his definition of folklore.<sup>23</sup> Actually this process is implied in the notion of oral transmission and the variability of the text. The concept of re-creation differs from that of creation only in regard to the duration of the creative moment. The main feature of folklore remains the same: verbal art is the sum total of creation of a whole community over time. Actually, when this hypothesis itself is challenged, the notion of passive creativity is introduced. Accordingly, the audience reaction is as much a part of the act of creation as the active imagination of the folk artist.<sup>24</sup>

By its very nature, the notion of communal re-creation involves a relationship between folklore and a second factor—time depth. The persistence of the ma-

<sup>19</sup> Joseph Rysan, "Is Our Civilization Able to Create a New Folklore?" *South Atlantic Bulletin*, 18 (1952), 10.

<sup>20</sup> Francis B. Gummere, *The Popular Ballad* (New York, 1908).

<sup>21</sup> Louise Pound, *Poetic Origins and the Ballad* (New York, 1921).

<sup>22</sup> Paul Bohannon, "Artist and Critic in an African Society," in *The Artist in Tribal Society*, ed. Marian W. Smith (New York, 1961), 85–94.

<sup>23</sup> Archer Taylor, "Folklore," *Funk and Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend*, I, 402.

<sup>24</sup> See C. W. von Sydow, *Selected Papers on Folklore*, ed. Laurits Bødker (Copenhagen, 1948), 11–43; Walter Anderson, *Kaiser und Abt, die Geschichte eines Schwanks*, FFC No. 42 (Helsinki, 1923), 397–403.



terials in circulation in a culture, "bequeathed from generation to generation,"<sup>25</sup> has become the determining criterion for the identification of folklore items. For Thompson "the idea of tradition is the touchstone for everything that is to be included in the term folklore."<sup>26</sup> According to this notion, however, there cannot be any innovation in tradition, and if there is, it still has to "live in people's mouth for at least several generations."<sup>27</sup> This conception of folklore was contained in the original definition of Thoms and maintained by folklorists up to the present time. Francis Utley, who made a content analysis of the definitions in the *Funk and Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend*, found the great preponderance of the term "tradition" to be unchallenged by any other concept.<sup>28</sup> The idea of tradition refers to folklore both as knowledge (the "wisdom" of the past) and as art (old songs and tales). In relation to thoughts and beliefs, the relative time depth qualifies folklore even further. It designates the materials as survivals, as implied by the evolutionary theories of Edward Tylor<sup>29</sup> and Andrew Lang.<sup>30</sup> In that case, "folklore" applies only to that item in culture that had vital currency in previous stages of human evolution and either survived the changes of time and became "a lively fossil"<sup>31</sup> or remained alive among those segments of society least exposed to the light of civilization.

Of the three factors, it is the medium of transmission that has been the most persistent in folklore definitions. Almost from the beginning, the most accepted characteristic of folklore—whether conceived of as knowledge, thought, or art—has been its transmission by oral means. In order for an item to qualify as folklore, the prime prerequisite is that it have been in oral circulation and passed from one person to another without the aid of any written texts. When a visual, musical, or kinetic form is considered, the transmission can be through imitation.<sup>32</sup> The basic assumption is that this particular form of transmission introduces some distinct qualities into the materials, that would be lost otherwise. In this sense, folklore as a discipline preceded Marshall McLuhan in declaring "the medium is the message."<sup>33</sup>

The criterion of oral tradition has become the last citadel of folklore scholars in defending the uniqueness of their materials. When the theories about communal creation collapsed and the doctrine of survivals fell through, scholars were able to hold firm to the idea that folklore is "verbal art," "unrecorded mental facts," and "literature orally transmitted."<sup>34</sup> This conception of folklore was

<sup>25</sup> Boggs, 1.

<sup>26</sup> Stith Thompson, "Folklore at Midcentury," *Midwest Folklore*, 1 (1951), 11.

<sup>27</sup> Richard M. Dorson, *Bloodstoppers and Bearwalkers: Folk Traditions of the Upper Peninsula* (Cambridge, Mass., 1952), 7.

<sup>28</sup> Utley, "Folk Literature: An Operational Definition," 193.

<sup>29</sup> *The Origins of Culture*, paperback edition, vol. 1 (New York, 1958), 70–159.

<sup>30</sup> "Introduction," in *Grimm's Household Tales*, vol. 1, trans., Margaret Hunt (London, 1884), xi–lxxv.

<sup>31</sup> Charles Francis Potter, "Folklore," *Funk and Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend*, 401.

<sup>32</sup> Boggs, 1.

<sup>33</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, paperback edition (New York, 1964), 23–39.

<sup>34</sup> See Bascom, "Verbal Art," *JOURNAL OF AMERICAN FOLKLORE*, 68 (1955), 245–252; Elli-Kaija Königs-Maranda, "The Concept of Folklore," *Midwest Folklore*, 13 (1963), 85; Utley, "Folk Literature: An Operational Definition," 204.



hailed both by anthropologists who worked in nonliterate societies and by scholars of literature, who found it an operational distinction separating folklore from literature. Although folklorists concede that the purity of this transmission has often been contaminated by literary texts, the final standard for the identification of materials as folklore is the actual circulation, even once, through verbal media.

In spite of its popularity, the criterion of medium of transmission has not defined what folklore really is; it has merely provided a qualifying statement about the form of circulation. Moreover, such definitions impose a preconceived framework upon folklore. Rather than define it, they establish certain ideals as to what folklore should be. These attempts to reconcile romantic with empirical approaches actually have held back scientific research in the field and are partially responsible for the fact that, while other disciplines that emerged during the nineteenth century have made headway, folklore is still suffering growing pains.

It is still necessary to ask, "What is it that circulates verbally and is transmitted through time within a distinct social entity?" This rhetorical question in itself reflects the wrong direction that various attempts to define folklore have taken. They have searched for a way to describe folklore as a static, tangible object. The enumerative definitions consisted of lists of objects, while the substantive definitions regarded folklore as art, literature, knowledge, or belief. In actuality, it is none of these and all of them together. Folklore does contain knowledge, it is an expression of thought, formulated artistically, but at the same time it is also a unique phenomenon which is irreducible to any of these categories.

In order to discern the uniqueness of folklore, it is first necessary to change the existing perspective we have of the subject. So far, most definitions have conceived of folklore as a collection of things. These could be either narratives, melodies, beliefs, or material objects. All of them are completed products or formulated ideas; it is possible to collect them. In fact this last characteristic has been at the base of the major portion of folklore research since its inception. The collection of things requires a methodological abstraction of objects from their actual context. No doubt this can be done; often it is essential for research purposes. Nevertheless, this abstraction is only methodological and should not be confused with, or substituted for, the true nature of the entities. Moreover, any definition of folklore on the basis of these abstracted things is bound to mistake the part for the whole. To define folklore, it is necessary to examine the phenomena as they exist. In its cultural context, folklore is not an aggregate of things, but a process—a communicative process, to be exact.

It should be pointed out that this conception of folklore differs substantially from previous views of folklore as a process. Focusing upon the dynamics of transmission, modification, and textual variation,<sup>35</sup> such views perpetuated the dichotomy between processes and things. They stressed the transmission of objects in time and society and allowed for a methodological and theoretical separation between the narrators and their tales. These views of folklore are logically

<sup>35</sup> See for example Francis Lee Utley, "The Study of Folk Literature: Its Scope and Use," *JOURNAL OF AMERICAN FOLKLORE*, 71 (1958), 139; Roger D. Abrahams, "Folklore in Culture: Notes toward an Analytical Method," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 5 (1963), 102; Kenneth S. Goldstein, "Experimental Folklore: Laboratory vs. Field," in *Folklore International: Essays in Traditional Literature, Belief, and Custom in Honor of Wayland Debs Hand*, ed. D. K. Wilgus and Carol Sommer (Hatboro, 1967), 71-82.



justified, since after all there is a distinction between the man and his songs, the child and his games. But the ever increasing emphasis on the situational background of tales, songs, and proverbs that developed from Malinowski's functionalism into Hymes' "ethnography of speaking,"<sup>36</sup> enables us not only to study but to define folklore in its context. And in this framework, which is the real habitat of all folklore forms, there is no dichotomy between processes and products. The telling is the tale; therefore the narrator, his story, and his audience are all related to each other as components of a single continuum, which is the communicative event.

Folklore is the action that happens at that time. It is an artistic action. It involves creativity and esthetic response, both of which converge in the art forms themselves. Folklore in that sense is a social interaction via the art media and differs from other modes of speaking and gesturing. This distinction is based upon sets of cultural conventions, recognized and adhered to by all the members of the group, which separate folklore from nonart communication. In other words, the definition of folklore is not merely an analytical construct, depending upon arbitrary exclusion and inclusion of items; on the contrary, it has a cultural and social base. Folklore is not "pretty much what one wants to make out of it";<sup>37</sup> it is a definite realistic, artistic, and communicative process. The locus of the conventions marking the boundaries between folklore and nonfolklore is in the text, texture, and context of the forms, to apply Dundes' three levels for the analysis of folklore in somewhat modified form.<sup>38</sup>

The textual marks that set folklore apart as a particular kind of communication are the opening and closing formulas of tales and songs and the structure of actions that happen in-between. The opening and closing formulas designate the events enclosed between them as a distinct category of narration, not to be confused with reality. As the Ashanti storyteller states most explicitly, "We don't really mean to say so, we don't really mean to say so," referring to the imaginary nature of the story.<sup>39</sup> Tales, however, do not necessarily relate to denotative speech as fiction does to truth. A folkloristic historical narrative, such as a legend,<sup>40</sup> is nevertheless formally distinct from a chronology of events. This contention, admittedly, requires further research. However, the phrase "it is like in a folktale"—which people employ whenever reality duplicates the sequence of actions in an artistic narration—attests to the awareness of a particular folktale structure. Also, other genres such as proverbs and riddles have distinct syntactic and semantic structures that separate them from the regular daily speech into which they are interspersed. Furthermore, these artistic forms are culturally recognized categories of communication. They have special names or identifying features distinguishing them from each other and from other modes of social interaction, pointing to the cultural awareness of their unique character.

<sup>36</sup> Dell Hymes, "The Ethnography of Speaking," in *Anthropology and Human Behavior*, ed. Thomas Gladwin and William C. Sturtevant (Washington, D.C., 1962), 15–53.

<sup>37</sup> George M. Foster, "Folklore," *Funk and Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend*, I, 399.

<sup>38</sup> Alan Dundes, "Text, Texture and Context," *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, 28 (1964), 251–265.

<sup>39</sup> R. S. Rattray, *Akan-Ashanti Folk-Tales* (Oxford, 1930), x.

<sup>40</sup> As defined by William Bascom, "The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narratives," *JOURNAL OF AMERICAN FOLKLORE*, 78 (1965), 3–20.



Each of these forms may also have distinct textural qualities that separate them from other kinds of communication. These can be rhythmical speech, musical sounds, melodic accompaniment, or patterned design. In a sense, this is a reverse argument for the arts. Accordingly, a message is not considered artistic because it possesses these qualities, but it is these textural features that serve as markers to distinguish it as artistic. Since folklore forms are often interspersed in the midst of other modes of social interaction, they require such textural marks to single them out and prevent mistaking them for what they are not. Thus the telling of a story may necessitate a distinct speech pattern, such as recitative, and the saying of a proverb may involve a shift in intonation.<sup>41</sup>

Finally, there are contextual conventions that set folklore apart. These are specifications as to time, place, and company in which folklore actions happen. "To everything there is a season and a time to every purpose" (Eccles. 3:1). Narratives can be told during the daytime in the market place, the country store, and the street corner; or at night in the village square, the parlor, and the coffee-house. Songs and music have other occasions when they are performed. Although such specifications may have other functions, such as confining folklore to leisure and ceremonial activities, they also separate art from nonart in cultures that otherwise lack a complex division of time, space, and labor. In a sense, they provide a spatial, temporal, and social definition for folklore in culture.

These communicative marks of folklore do not necessarily exist on all three levels—text, texture, and context. The identification of social interaction as folklore by the people who tell the stories, sing the songs, play the music, and paint the pictures may be in terms of only one or all of these three. In any case, for them folklore is a well-defined cultural category.

Although folklore is a distinct category in terms of social interaction patterns and communication media, it is not necessarily recognized by the culture as a separate concept. In fact, within the cognitive system its forms may be classified into such apparently unrelated categories as history, tradition, dance, music, games, and tales. The reason for this categorization is inherent in the nature of the folkloristic communication itself. Folklore, like any other art, is a symbolic kind of action. Its forms have symbolic significance reaching far beyond the explicit content of the particular text, melody, or artifact. The very syntactic and semantic structure of the text, the special recitative rhythm of presentation, and the time and locality in which the action happens may have symbolic implications for which the text itself cannot account. Consequently, it is quite plausible that in their classification of these materials people will use as a criterion not the symbolic mode of the form but its reference. Legend, for example, often signifies a chronological truth; myth symbolizes a religious truth; and parable implies a moral truth. A definition, according to these references, would regard them as history, religion, and ethics respectively. However, if their actual cultural mode of communication is the key for definition, then all these forms are but different phases in the same process of folklore.

The allowance for a possible disparity between ethnic taxonomy and behavior implies that, in a certain instance, the definition of folklore in its context depends

<sup>41</sup> See George Herzog and Charles G. Blooah, *Jabo Proverbs from Liberia: Maxims in the Life of a Native Tribe* (London, 1936), 8.



upon actual modes of communication and not necessarily upon the particular cultural concept of them. There may be an overlap between the analytical view, which depends upon observation, and the internal interpretation, which results from participation; however, for the purpose of a cross-cultural application of this definition the analytical approach to the material must have methodological priority.

Similarly, the acceptance of the possible disparity between the analytical and the cultural views in regard to processes of social interaction permits the extension of the scope of folklore beyond the limits imposed upon it by the concept of verbal art. As an artistic process, folklore may be found in any communicative medium: musical, visual, kinetic, or dramatic. Theoretically, it is not necessary for the people themselves to make the conceptual connection between their melodies, masks, and tales. From the cultural point of view, these may well be separate phenomena unrelated to each other and not even existing in the same situation. Sufficient is the cultural recognition of their qualitative uniqueness in relation to other modes of communication in the respective media of sound, motion, and vision. The factor of rhythm changes human noise to music, movement and gesture to dance, and object to sculpture. Thus, they are artistic communication by their very essence. Furthermore, they are recognized as such by the people, since there are definite contexts of time and place in culture in which these actions are permissible. In the case of music and dance, there is no need to differentiate them from nonart communication. Their artistic qualities are intrinsic and essential to their very existence. There is, however, some necessity to distinguish these media as folklore. The distinguishing factor would be the particular social context of folklore.

As a communicative process, folklore has a social limitation as well, namely, the small group. This is the particular context of folklore. The concept of the small group, so popular among sociologists in the early fifties,<sup>42</sup> somehow bypassed the ranks of folklorists, who preferred the more romantic, even corny, term "folk." Since, in America at least, the connotations of marginality and low socioeconomic status that once were associated with the term "folk" have long been abandoned,<sup>43</sup> the concept of "folk" has become almost synonymous with the group concept. A group is "a number of persons who communicate with one another, often over a span of time, and who are few enough so that each person is able to communicate with all the others, not at second-hand through other people, but face-to-face."<sup>44</sup> A group could be a family, a street-corner gang, a roomful of factory workers, a village, or even a tribe. These are social units of different orders and qualities, yet all of them exhibit to a larger or smaller extent the characteristics of a group. For the folkloric act to happen, two social conditions are necessary: both the performers and the audience have to be in the same situation and be part of the same reference group. This implies that folklore communication takes

<sup>42</sup> For a critical survey of these studies see Robert T. Golembiewski, *The Small Group: An Analysis of Research Concepts and Operations* (Chicago, 1962).

<sup>43</sup> See Boggs, 1-8; Kenneth W. and Mary W. Clarke, *Introducing Folklore* (New York, 1963), 1; Dundes, "The American Concept of Folklore," *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, 3 (1966), 229-233.

<sup>44</sup> George C. Homans, *The Human Group* (New York, 1950), 1.



place in a situation in which people confront each other face to face and relate to each other directly.

It is necessary to remember at this point that even when a certain literary theme or musical style is known regionally, nationally, or internationally, its actual existence depends upon such small group situations. In these cases the tellers know their audience and relate specifically to them, and the listeners know the performer and react to his particular way of presentation. Of course this familiarity is often relative to the size of the general reference group. A storyteller who has a regional reputation may entertain people whom he does not know as intimately as he knows the people in his own village. Yet, even in such cases, both the performers and the audience belong to the same reference group; they speak the same language, share similar values, beliefs, and background knowledge, have the same system of codes and signs for social interaction. In other words, for a folklore communication to exist as such, the participants in the small group situation have to belong to the same reference group, one composed of people of the same age or of the same professional, local, religious, or ethnic affiliation. In theory and in practice tales can be narrated and music can be played to foreigners. Sometimes this accounts for diffusion. But folklore is true to its own nature when it takes place within the group itself. In sum, folklore is artistic communication in small groups.

Two key folklore terms are absent from this definition, namely, tradition and oral transmission. This omission is not accidental. The cultural use of tradition as a sanction is not necessarily dependent upon historical fact. Very often it is merely a rhetorical device or a socially instrumental convention. The combination of a narrative content concerned with olden times with the cultural conviction in the historicity of tales necessitates a presentation of the stories as if they were handed down from antiquity. Further, in past-oriented cultures, the sanction of tradition may be instrumental to the introduction of new ideas; and tales may serve as the vehicle for that purpose. Thus, the traditional character of folklore is an accidental quality, associated with it in some cases, rather than an objectively intrinsic feature of it. In fact, some groups specifically divorce the notion of antiquity from certain folklore forms and present them as novelty instead. Thus, for example, the lore of children derives its efficacy from its supposed newness. Often children consider their rhymes as fresh creations of their own invention.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, riddles have to be unfamiliar to the audience. A known riddle is a contradiction in terms and cannot fulfill its rhetorical function any more. In fact, riddles may disappear from circulation exactly because they are traditional and recognized as such by the members of the group.<sup>46</sup>

In both cases the traditional character of folklore is an analytical construct. It is a scholarly and not a cultural fact. The antiquity of the material has been established after laborious research, and the tellers themselves are completely ignorant of it. Therefore, tradition should not be a criterion for the definition of folklore in its context.

There are methodological reasons as well for releasing folklore from the

<sup>45</sup> See Iona and Peter Opie, *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* (Oxford, 1959), 12.

<sup>46</sup> Kenneth S. Goldstein, "Riddling Traditions in Northeastern Scotland," *JOURNAL OF AMERICAN FOLKLORE*, 76 (1963), 330-336.



burden of tradition. The focus on those items alone that have stood the test of time cannot provide us with a systematic understanding of the principles of diachronic transmission, selection, and memorization of folklore. Since the criterion of tradition determines a priori the selection of items, any research into these problems lacks the "control data" to check its conclusions. After all, the study of transmission requires the inquiry into the principles both of forgetting and of remembering. Thus, even the study of tradition itself should demand that we broaden the scope of folklore and not limit it to time-proven tales and songs alone. The artistic forms that are part of the communicative processes of small groups are significant, without regard to the time they have been in circulation. The statement that "all folklore is traditional, but not all traditions are folklore"<sup>47</sup> might well be revised to "some traditions are folklore, but not all folklore is traditional."

Furthermore, if folklore as a discipline focuses on tradition only, it "contradicts its own *raison d'être*."<sup>48</sup> If the initial assumption of folklore research is based on the disappearance of its subject matter, there is no way to prevent the science from following the same road. If the attempt to save tradition from oblivion remains the only function of the folklorist, he returns to the role of the antiquarian from which he tried so hard to escape. In that case, it is in the interest of folklore scholarship that we change the definition of the subject to allow broader and more dynamic research in the field.

The same applies to the notion of oral transmission; an insistence on the "purity" of all folklore texts can be destructive in terms of folklore scholarship. Because of the advent of modern means of communication, folklorists who insist upon this criterion actually saw off the branch they are sitting on. They inevitably concentrate upon isolated forms and ignore the real social and literary interchange between cultures and artistic media and channels of communication. In reality, oral texts cross into the domain of written literature and the plastic and musical arts; conversely, the oral circulation of songs and tales has been affected by print. This has long been recognized, and yet it has been a source of constant frustration for folklorists who searched for materials uncontaminated by print or broadcast. The notion of folklore as a process may provide a way out of this dilemma. Accordingly, it is not the life history of the text that determines its folkloristic quality but its present mode of existence. On the one hand, a popular melody, a current joke, or a political anecdote that has been incorporated into the artistic process in small group situations is folklore, no matter how long it has existed in that context. On the other hand, a song, a tale, or a riddle that is performed on television or appears in print ceases to be folklore because there is a change in its communicative context.

This definition may break away from some scholarly traditions, but at the same time it may point to possible new directions. A major factor that prevented folklore studies from becoming a full-fledged discipline in the academic community has been the tendency toward thing-collecting projects. The tripodal

<sup>47</sup> Compare William R. Bascom, "Folklore and Anthropology," *JOURNAL OF AMERICAN FOLKLORE*, 66 (1953), 285.

<sup>48</sup> Dell Hymes, "Review of *Indian Tales of North America—An Anthology for the Adult Reader*, by Tristram P. Coffin," *American Anthropologist*, 64 (1962), 678.



scheme of folklore research as collecting, classifying, and analyzing emphasizes this very point. This procedure developed as a nineteenth-century positivistic reaction to some of the more speculative ideas about folklore that prevailed at that time. Since then, however, the battle for empiricism has been won twice over. Folklore scholarship—which developed since the rejection of unilinear cultural evolutionism and the solar and psychoanalytical universal symbolism—has had its own built-in limitations and misconceptions. These resulted in part from the focus on facts. Because of the literary and philological starting point of folklore studies, the empirical fact was an object, a text of a tale, song, or proverb, or even an isolated word. This approach limited the research possibilities in folklore and narrowed the range of generalizations that could be induced from the available data. It might have been suitable for Krappe's notion of folklore as an historical science that purported to reconstruct the spiritual history of man, but it completely incapacitated the development of any other thesis about the nature of folklore in society. Consequently, when social sciences such as anthropology, sociology, and psychology came of age, they incorporated folklore into their studies only as a reflection and projection of other phenomena. Folklore was "a mirror of culture" but not a dynamic factor in it, a projection of basic personality, but not personality in action. Once viewed as a process, however, folklore does not have to be a marginal projection or reflection; it can be considered a sphere of interaction in its own right.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> A shorter version of this paper, titled "Folklore: The Definition Game Once Again," was read at the American Folklore Society Annual Meeting in Toronto, November 1967. My wife, Paula, helped me in many ways in preparing this paper for print.