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# The American Concept of Folklore

It is probably unwise to speak of "the" concept of American folklore as if there were just one. In the past, and even in the present, there has been considerable disagreement among folklorists as to the nature of folklore. One is tempted to suggest that there have been almost as many American concepts of folklore as there have been American folklorists. Thus "the American concept of folklore" can really only be discussed as "some American concepts of folklore."

By "American" I refer to North American and more specifically to the United States of America. The peoples of Latin America also consider themselves "Americans" and folklorists in Latin American have been extremely active in the last few decades, particularly with respect to formulating "concepts" of folklore.[1] However, the various understandings of folklore held by Latin American folklorists differ quite radically from those championed by North American folklorists and they will not be treated here.

In discussing the American concept of folklore, I shall confine myself to the American *folklorists'* concepts of folklore, inasmuch as a less specific topic would have to include the views of the general public. The public at large tends to think of folklore as a synonym for error, fallacy, or historical inaccuracy. One hears, for example, the phrase "That's folklore," meaning "That is not true," and while this does not

[1] See, for example, Arthur Ramos, *Estudos de Folk-Lore: Definição e Limites, Teorias de Interpretação*, 2nd. ed. (Rio de Janeiro, 1958); Carlos Vega, *La Ciencia del Folklore* (Buenos Aires, 1960); Paulo de Carvalho Neto, *Concepto de Folklore* (Montevideo, 1956), and *La Investigación Folklorica: Fases y Téchnicas* (Quito, 1962); and Efraín Morote Best, *Elementos de Folklore (Definición, Contenido, Procedimiento)* (Cuzco, Peru, 1950). For a useful survey, see Gabriel Moedano N., "E folklore como disciplina antropológica," *Tlatoani*, XVII (1963), 37-50.

help the image of the professional folklorist – he is implicitly relegated to the role of a full-time student of error – it need not concern us here.

A problem which arises in considering American concepts of folklore is the fact that the term "folklore" in American usage refers to both the materials (e.g., folktales and folksongs) under study and the study itself. Consequently, an American folklorist's concept of folklore may include his definition of the materials of folklore (and not all contemporary American folklorists share the same definition by any means) as well as his notion of the theories and methods of a discipline called folklore (and once again there are serious differences of opinion as to what theoretical aims and methodological techniques should be employed.) I shall attempt to survey both American concepts of folklore in the sense of the materials of folklore and of folklore as a disciplinary study of these materials.

Perhaps the easiest way to describe the American concept of what the materials of folklore are is to divide the word folklore into "folk" and "lore." What is the American concept of "folk"? What is the American concept of "lore?" In order to answer these questions, one may begin by examining the American concepts of these two words in 1888, the year the American Folklore Society was founded and the *Journal of American Folklore* commenced publication. Many of the notions held at that time substantially influenced the development of subsequent American studies in folklore. (Folklorists not only enjoy studying tradition but they themselves often tend to be bound by tradition in their studies. Just as the materials of folklore pass from generation to generation, so also do the theories and methods of students of these materials pass from generation to generation of folklore scholars. Thus one finds that many of the twentieth-century American folklorists' concepts of folklore are actually nineteenth-century concepts in disguise.)

William Wells Newell, in the lead article in the first issue of the *Journal of American Folklore*, an article entitled "On the Field and Work of a Journal of American Folk-Lore,"[2] stated that the journal was designed "for the collection of the fast-vanishing remains of Folk-Lore in America," namely:

(a) Relics of old English folk-lore (ballads, tales, superstitions, dialect, etc.)

(b) Lore of Negroes in the southern States of the Union

[2] *Journal of American Folklore* [hereafter cited as *JAF*], I (1888), 1-7.

(c) Lore of the Indian tribes of North America (myths, tales, etc.)
(d) Lore of French Canada, Mexico, etc.

It is clear from this that Newell echoed the European concept of folklore as survivals from a time long past. Notice that Newell did not include the possibility of any folklore arising anew in the United States, that is, any indigenous American folklore. However, Newell faced a conceptual problem in defining folklore, a problem caused by the presence of American Indians. (It might be noted in passing that the American folklorist's work with American Indian folklore has had important influences upon the direction of American folklore theory.) Folklore in the strict sense was used by Newell to refer to unwritten popular traditions of civilized countries.[3] Thus by definition the American Indian, since he was not "civilized" but "savage," in the then popular tripartite unilinear evolutionary scheme of savagery, barbarism, and civilization, could not have folklore. Curiously enough, this distinction still applies in the subdiscipline of folk music.

American students of folk music do not normally include the music of the American Indian in their studies. This is in marked contrast to American students of the folktale who do include American Indian tales in their studies. For Newell, the difficulty was resolved by employing the term "mythology" in addition to "folklore." Newell, in a special note on the subject,[4] explained that mythology referred to the "living system of tales and beliefs which, in primitive peoples, serves to explain existence." Primitive peoples had *mythology;* civilized peoples had *folklore,* which was thought to be survivals from primitive times. The distinction also suggested that mythology was living while folklore was dying. That Newell was quite serious in making the distinction is apparent in his remark that had it not been out of regard for brevity, the *Journal of American Folklore* might have been titled the *Journal of American Folklore and Mythology.* Among most twentieth-century American folklorists, the distinction is not made. Mythology is usually considered to be a subdivision of folklore. Nevertheless, the name of the institute at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) is Center for the Study of Comparative Folklore and Mythology, which implies that folklore and mythology are separate entities.

By 1890, Newell had come to realize that the distinction was a false

[3] "Folk-lore and Mythology," *JAF,* I (1888), 163.
[4] *Ibid.,* 79-81.

one and he saw that the term folklore had to be more inclusive. On March 24th of that year, Newell presented a paper entitled "The Study of Folk-lore" to the New York Academy of Sciences. Newell's concept of folk-lore as expressed in that address is notable because it is remarkably close to the concept of folklore held by many contemporary American folklorists. Newell said, "By folk-lore is to be understood oral tradition, – information and belief handed down from generation to generation without the use of writing."[5] He then remarked that since European oral traditions were related to traditions found among savage tribes, it was clearly necessary to extend the term folklore so as to cover the latter. So folklore was used first to include tales, beliefs, and practices now retained among the unlettered peasantry of Europe, and then secondly, in a broader sense, so as to embrace the traditional tales, customs, and usages of uncivilized races. Folklore in this second broader sense, according to Newell, was a part of anthropology and ethnography insofar as it concerned the mental side of primitive life, with special reference to folk narratives in which beliefs and habits were related or accounted for. Newell then concluded by distinguishing two sides to the subject of folk-lore: the aesthetic or literary, and the scientific aspect.

Newell's conception of folklore as "coextensive with oral tradition"[6] led to his applauding R. E. Dennett's study of the folklore of the Fjort. The fact that the English Folklore Society had published a work in which the term "folklore" was used in reference to African (i.e., savage) materials confirmed Newell in his decision to use the term in the wider sense.

Newell's list of "folks" in his lead article in the first volume of the *Journal of American Folklore* is of interest because, with a few important additions and modifications, they are the folk groups with whom modern American folklorists are most concerned. The emphasis upon English (and Scottish) materials, particularly in the area of the ballad, continues. It is worth noting that Newell made a distinction between English survivals in the United States and survivals from other European countries. Logically, English folklore should be part of what might be termed American immigrant folklore. However, traditionally, probably because the English were among the first to arrive in the New World, they put a priority on themselves and called other later groups "immigrants." In American folklore scholarship, this is all too obvious when one

[5] *Transactions of the New York Academy of Sciences*, IX (1890), 134-136.
[6] Review of R. E. Dennett, *Notes on the Folk-Lore of the Fjort*, *JAF*, XI (1898), 302.

compares the much greater attention devoted to studies of English folksongs in America (e.g., the Child ballad in the United States) to studies of American immigrant folksongs.

The second "folk" in Newell's list refers to the Negro in the southern portion of the United States. The lore of Negroes is still an important area of research in American folklore circles and, interestingly enough, the emphasis upon the lore of *southern* Negroes has persisted up until very recently. It is only in the last decade that collections have been made from northern Negroes, notably by Dorson,[7] and only in 1964 was there an intensive study made of northern *urban* Negroes.[8] Yet even Dorson claims that American Negro folklore belongs primarily to the plantation culture of the Old South and he goes so far as to say that "Free Negroes living north of the Ohio River possessed no traditions."[9] The difficulty here is that some American folklorists have considered only the folklore of the *rural southern* Negro. While Dorson is undoubtedly correct in observing that rural Negroes who move north tend to lose many of their traditions, it does appear that the *urban northern* Negro does have a folklore of his own, much of it probably recast from white folklore, as Abrahams' study of Negro folklore in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, abundantly demonstrates.[10]

The lore of the American Indian is still a legitimate subject for the American folklorist. However, the collection and study of American Indian folklore has for the most part been left to anthropological folklorists. Comparatively few literary folklorists have worked extensively with American Indian materials. (Stith Thompson is probably the most notable exception.) In the division of "folks" between anthropological and literary American folklorists, it is the Negro who has provided the common ground. Literary folklorists are concerned with European-derived folklore and Negro folklore; anthropological folklorists study Asian-derived (i.e., American Indian) folklore and Negro folklore. One reason for this may be the fact that American Negro folklore is a combination of European and African elements. Thus the literary folklorist interested in European folklore and the anthropological folklorist interested in

[7] Richard M. Dorson, *American Folklore* (Chicago, 1959), p. 180.
[8] Roger D. Abrahams, *Deep Down in the Jungle ... Negro Narrative Folklore from the Streets of Philadelphia* (Hatboro, Pennsylvania, 1964).
[9] Dorson, p. 181.
[10] Abrahams, *op. cit.*

African folklore both find important sources in the rich American Negro oral traditions.

The fourth folk category of Newell's outline, the lore of French Canada and Mexico, has only recently begun to branch out into the field of American immigrant folklore. Because there have been so many waves of immigration to the United States, from so many different parts of the world, it is possible to collect the folklore of almost any European or Asian country within the confines of the United States. Once again, Newell urged in 1895 that immigrant folklore be collected and he expressed the hope that local or regional folklore societies would undertake this task.[11] Nevertheless, the American immigrant as a folk source remained largely untapped for some time, as Stith Thompson observed.[12] Only in the last twenty years has this folk begun to be seriously studied.[13] It is probably American immigrant folklore which offers the greatest challenge to the American folklorist, and it is important to realize that this type of folklore is bound to result in changes in American concepts of folklore.

This is because American immigrant folklore is alive. Whereas the nineteenth-century American concept of folklore was limited to dead or dying survivals – relics of Old English lore, southern Negro animal tales, the last remains of a moribund American Indian tradition – the twentieth-century American concept of folklore includes vital and dynamic traditions, ranging from the lore of schoolchildren to the songs of social protest of labor unions and American Negro civil rights workers. American immigrant groups often live in a formally or informally bounded geographic area. They frequently form a community, or perhaps a small community within a larger community. Many immigrant groups are held together by a church (e.g., the Greek Orthodox Church), or by an official organization or association (e.g., the German-American Club). Members of these groups hold weekly or monthly meetings at which original native languages are spoken and folklore transmitted. Sometimes these immigrants become quite nationalistic, much more so than they were at home "in the old country." They may become nostalgic about their country of origin. Even their children may be influenced. Second-

[11] William Wells Newell, "Folk-lore Studies and Folk-lore Societies," *JAF*, VIII (1895), 238.

[12] "American Folklore After Fifty Years," *JAF*, LI (1938), 6-7.

[13] Dorson, pp. 135-165.

or third-generation immigrants may take an active interest in the country of their parents' origin; they may study their parents' language in college; and they may eventually try to visit the "home" country. The opportunities of studying the differences in the folklore among the different generations of American immigrants are great.

The American concept of folk is not, however, limited to English, Negro, American Indian, and immigrant groups. Nor does the modern folklorist limit the concept of folk to peasants, or to rural, or to uneducated peoples, as is still the case in many European folklore circles. For the contemporary American folklorist in the 1960's, the term "folk" can refer to *any group of people whatsoever* who share at least one common factor. It does not really matter what that linking or isolating factor is – it could be a common occupation, a common language, or common religion – but what is important is that a group formed for whatever reason will have some traditions which it calls its own. In theory, a group must consist of at least two persons, but obviously most groups consist of many more than that number. A member of the group may not know all the other members of that group, but he probably will know the common core of traditions belonging to it, traditions which help the group have a sense of group identity. The group could be lumberjacks, railroadmen, or coal miners; or Catholics, Protestants, or Jews. The members of a country, a state or region, a city or village, a household or family, are all members of groups, and thus there is national, regional, village, and family folklore. It is this broad conception of "folk" which explains why the American folklorist can be interested in collecting American Indian tales one day, and the games of primary school children the next. Universities, colleges, and schools are groups, too, and they have their own traditions. There are, for example, numerous college legends, songs, pranks, and customs.[14] Even folklorists themselves are a group and must in the strict theoretical sense be considered a "folk" with its own in-group jokes and rituals. It should be clear that any one individual is a member of a number of different folk units. A Negro steelworker living in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, might serve as an informant for Negro folklore, for steelworker folklore, for traditions of the city of Pittsburgh, and for folklore of the state of Pennsylvania. One can see, therefore, that Newell's conception of the folk as essentially a unit of

[14] Dorson, pp. 254-267.

ethnic or national identity has been considerably broadened so as to include a host of folk groups based upon other shared factors.

Having considered the American concept of folk, one may turn to the American concept of lore. Newell's identification of lore with oral tradition is characteristic. Folklore is usually said to be oral or in "oral tradition." There are two difficulties with this criterion: (1) not everything which is transmitted orally is folklore (in cultures without writing everything is transmitted orally); and (2) some forms of folklore are not, strictly speaking, transmitted orally. Examples of this last are games and folk art, on the one hand, and such written forms as epitaphs, traditional letters (e.g., letters to heaven), and bathroom writings (graffiti), on the other. Despite these difficulties, many American folklorists continue to use the criteria of oral transmission.[15]

Another common criterion is that the lore is spontaneous or, rather, unconsciously produced. Materials which are consciously contrived and altered are probably not folklore. Self-consciously produced materials would be literary or popular rather than folk (such as Brahms' *lieder*, or composed commercial songs sung in a nightclub). Sometimes, original folklore materials are borrowed by individual writers who consciously reshape and rewrite them. The results should be called "art based on folklore," but occasionally the molders refer to their productions as "folklore." This has aroused the ire of professional folklorists inasmuch as these edited and frequently bowdlerized materials are often quite different in style and content from the original folk forms. Richard Dorson calls such materials "fakelore," arguing that these materials are not authentic products of the traditional folk process. However, there is an important theoretical issue involved. The question is: what happens when an unconscious or un-selfconscious process becomes a conscious one?

The conscious manipulation or changing of folk materials is certainly not a phenomenon peculiar to the United States. As a matter of fact, it is interesting to compare the motivations for the manipulation of folklore in the United States and in the Soviet Union. In the United States, a popularizer may use a dozen versions of a song, from each of which he lifts one or two stanzas to make a "new" version of the folksong. These "composite texts," as they are called, should not be considered true

[15] Francis Lee Utley, "Folk Literature: An Operational Definition," *JAF*, LXXIV (1961), 193-206.

folk materials, inasmuch as they have never been in oral tradition and have never actually been sung by any member of the folk. (However, such a text could go into oral tradition and be accepted by a folk group, in which case fakelore would become folklore!) The reason for this conscious composition is partially aesthetic, but ultimately capitalistic. The popularizer is not interested in scholarship, but in selling many copies of his book of "folklore." In contrast, one finds in the Soviet Union (and also in China), that folklore is consciously altered for quite another reason. The goal is not financial profit, but ideological propaganda. Folklore is supposed to demonstrate the validity and correctness of a particular political point of view.[16]

In the United States, the falsification of folklore serves the purposes of capitalism while in the Soviet Union and China, its distortion serves the purposes of dialectical materialism. One assumes that the scholarly folklorists in both the United States and the Soviet Union deplore this exploitation of folklore. But whether folklorists like it or not, the evolution of man is moving in a direction towards more, rather than less, consciousness and awareness of culture. This may even be a good thing. In the treatment of mental illness, cures are sometimes effected by making the unconscious conscious. Consciousness affords, if not requires, control. Man is no longer the mere passive end product of an evolutionary process. With increased knowledge of the process, man obtains the opportunity to influence the process. More and more, man controls the direction and degree of his own evolution. Within this theoretical framework, it becomes obvious that the conscious manipulation of folklore is not really so extraordinary. Rather it is part of a growing tendency among peoples with complex cultures to actively mold their cultures, instead of simply being passively molded by them. Eventually, the American concept of folklore will have to take account of this self-conscious interference with the folk process.

Another striking example of the conscious interference with folklore is the folklore *revival.* Folklore revivals are quite distinct from folklore survivals. A survival, by definition, is marked by a continuity of tradition. It is the result of an unbroken historical chain through time. A revival, however, may well follow a break in tradition. It may even occur after the item has, for all practical purposes, died out. The point is that the

[16] Richard M. Dorson, "Current Folklore Theories," *Current Anthropology*, IV (1963), 93-112.

folklore revival is a conscious and artificial phenomenon. The survival, in contrast, survives with no conscious assistance. Most American folklorists tend to look askance at folklore revivals, considering them to be somehow spurious. Yet folk dance groups which meet to learn and perform folk dances, as well as folksingers who resuscitate songs no longer sung, are found throughout the United States.

The comparison of survival and revival should not be misconstrued to mean that American folklorists think of folklore as surviving in the fashion of Newell. Yet, in fairness, it must be noted that some American folklorists do conceive of folklore as consisting of survivals.[17] In one case, folklore was said to be a survival which did not survive, that is, folklore was dead. In 1931, Ruth Benedict wrote an article on folklore for the *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, in which she claimed that except for some folktales which were still told in a few rural groups, "folklore has not survived as a living trait in modern civilization," and that "Thus in a strict sense folklore is a dead trait in the modern world."[18] This is not a majority view, and in fact in that same year, Martha Warren Beckwith wrote an excellent survey of the American approach to folklore in which she remarked that "Folklore is not merely a dead survival but a living art. It is constantly taking fresh forms and recreating old ones."[19] Beckwith did comment, for example, that the college community was a folk group with its own songs and rituals.

American folklorists do not insist on the anonymity of folklore creators. Songs of protest known to be composed by Woody Guthrie, e.g., "So Long, It's Been Good to Know You," are considered to be folksongs, since they are sung by the folk, but the authorship of most folklore is not known.

Probably the most satisfactory way of defining lore is the enumerative list of folklore genres or forms. Newell's partial list – ballads, tales, superstitions, dialect, myths, games, proverbs, and riddles – remains a reasonably accurate indication of what the American folklorist considers the forms of folklore to be. It is true that there have been several recent

[17] Elli-Kaija Köngäs Maranda, "The Concept of Folklore," *Midwest Folklore*, XIII (1963), 75.

[18] Ruth Benedict, "Folklore," *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, VI (New York, 1931), 288-293.

[19] Martha Warren Beckwith, *Folklore in America: Its Scope and Method* (Poughkeepsie, N.Y., 1931), p. 19.

attempts to restrict the list of genres. William Bascom, for example, suggested the term "verbal art" to distinguish such verbal forms as folktale, proverb, and riddle, from custom and belief. At one point, he said that "Folklore can be defined as verbal art."[20] Generally speaking, anthropological folklorists have tended to conceive of folklore as consisting of primarily verbal materials. In the case of folksong, the text is folklore but the tune is not.[21] (It is noteworthy that the older ballad scholars such as Child considered texts apart from their tunes.) Another instance of an anthropological folklorist's bias is Melville Jacobs' use of the term "oral literature" in lieu of the term folklore. This American concept of folklore is even narrower than Bascom's "verbal art." For Jacobs, folklore is oral literature, which consists of myths and tales. Apparently, Jacobs does not even include riddles and proverbs under the term "oral literature."

The reason for the position taken by American anthropological folklorists is that from their perspective, folklore is just one of many aspects of culture. Music is another (and those who study it are ethnomusicologists rather than folklorists). Art is still another. This concept of folklore is in contrast to that held by American literary folklorists which has tended to be influenced more by the all-inclusive European concept of folklore with its subcategories of folk costume, crafts, art, and music. Nevertheless, for literary as well as anthropological folklorists, the European concepts of *Volkskunde* and *folklivsforskning*[22] embrace too much by including both folklore and ethnography. In the United States, the compromise between the positions of the anthropological and the literary folklorists is that the American concept of folklore emphasizes verbal materials, but also includes folk music. The distinction is usually made between "folk" and "primitive," the distinction being in part a related survival of the older dichotomy of "folklore" and "mythology." Folk music, for example, is found among peoples with writing, whereas primitive music is found among peoples without writing (usually termed "nonliterate peoples"). In terms of the American concept of folklore, folk music, folk art, and folk dance are materials which properly come under the purview of a folklorist. Primitive music, primitive art, and primitive

[20] Maria Leach, ed., *The Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend*, I (New York, 1949), 398.
[21] William R. Bascom, "Folklore and Anthropology," *JAF*, LXVI (1953), 285.
[22] Maranda, p. 81.

dance do not, and they are left to the interested anthropologist. The glaring exception to the "folk-primitive" dichotomy is the folktale. One section of Stith Thompson's standard work, *The Folktale*,[23] is entitled "The Folktale in a Primitive Culture – North American Indian." There is agreement between anthropological and literary folklorists primarily with respect to verbal materials (e.g., tales, proverbs, and riddles). Verbal materials are folklore, no matter where in the world they are found.

One consequence of the emphasis upon verbal materials is the neglect of nonverbal materials. The folklore of body movement, that is, gestures, folk dance, and even games, is rarely studied by American folklorists. Folk art, another form of nonverbal folklore is similarly infrequently studied. (Notice that the term 'nonverbal' itself signals the priority given to verbal materials. Other forms of folklore are lumped together under a label which indicates they are not verbal.)

While many professional folklorists would definitely claim that their concept of folklore did include folk dance, folk art, and folk recipes, few are engaged in research in these areas. In looking through the major American folklore journals: *Journal of American Folklore*, *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, and *Western Folklore*, one finds very, very few articles devoted to these aspects of folklore. Another striking difference between the American concept of folklore and the various conceptions of folklore found in Europe is the omission of festivals. There are a number of American festivals or ritual days, e.g., Christmas, Easter, Halloween, and birthdays, but few folklorists study them. In contrast, the European folklore journals are filled with studies of festivals. The usual argument presented by American folklorists is that folk dance, folk art, and folk festivals are not as important in American culture as they are in most European cultures. And it is a fact that few Americans wear traditional costumes (with the exception of a few groups like the Amish). On the other hand, this does not fully explain why American folklorists have neglected nonverbal folklore. Even in the case of folk arts and crafts, one could find ample material for research among American immigrant groups. Yet, there has been little work in this area and there are unfortunately very few folk museums in the United States. Except for a small number of institutions such as the Farmer's Museum at Cooperstown, New York, one finds nothing really comparable to the European folk museums.

[23] New York, 1946.

Of course, the American concepts of folklore are not limited by what research possibilities are available in the United States. To most American folklorists, folklore consists of a number of specific cultural items which are usually transmitted from person to person. Verbal and sung items are normally communicated orally; nonverbal items are usually learned by watching and imitating (e.g., games and folk dance). A list of some specific cultural forms might include: myth, legend, folktale, joke, proverb, riddle, superstition, charm, blessing, curse, oath, insult, retort, taunt, tease, tongue-twister, greeting or leave-taking formula, folk speech (e.g., slang), folk etymologies, folk similes (e.g., as white as snow), folk metaphors (e.g., to jump from the frying pan into the fire), names (e.g., nicknames or place names), folk poetry – which runs from lengthy folk epics to children's rhymes such as ball-bouncing rhymes, jump-rope rhymes, finger and toe rhymes, dandling rhymes, counting-out rhymes (to determine who will be "it" in games), and nursery rhymes. There are also such written folk rhymes as autograph book verse, epitaphs, and latrinalia (graffiti). The common nonverbal genres include: folk dance, folk drama, folk art, folk costume, folk festival, games, practical jokes (or pranks), and gestures. Folklore also includes such major forms as folk instrumental music (e.g., fiddle tunes) and folksong (e.g., ballads and lullabies) and such minor ones as mnemonic devices, the comments made after body emissions (e.g., after burps or sneezes), and the sounds made to summon or command animals. This list is hardly exhaustive but it should reveal the general nature of the American concept of lore.

Having examined, albeit cursorily, the American concept of the materials of folklore by considering both "folk" and "lore," I should like to turn briefly to the concept of folklore as a discipline. One difficulty is that the American concept of the discipline of folklore is no more precise than the concept of folklore as materials. Another problem is that the discipline derives so much from the European concepts of folklore that it is hard to distinguish any aspect of the discipline which may properly be considered as original with American folklorists. The question may thus be put: In what ways, if any, does the American concept of the discipline of folklore differ from those held in Europe?

Historically, American folklorists appear, by and large, to have been imitators rather than innovators. The American Folklore Society itself, founded in 1888, was specifically modeled after the English Folk-Lore

Society, organized ten years earlier in 1878. Newell, one of the founders of the American Folklore Society, stated explicitly that the rules of the English society "served as the model of those adopted by the American Folk-Lore Society."[24] More importantly, European theories and methods of folklore were readily adopted by American folklorists. Thomas F. Crane, a professor at Cornell University, who was perhaps the leading American student of folktales in the late nineteenth century, used for his research model the European comparative method. Crane made his position perfectly clear in one of the first articles in the *Journal of American Folklore*. In "The Diffusion of Popular Tales," Crane gave a short review of the European methods of studying folklore and suggested that these methods be applied to American materials.[25] Earlier, Daniel G. Brinton and John Fiske had borrowed from various European theories, notably solar mythology.[26] Very few important original theoretical works in folklore have been penned by American folklore scholars. One is tempted to question whether any American study in folklore has been as important for folklore theory generally, as such European contributions as Olrik's analysis of epic laws, Von Sydow's notions of active and passive bearers of tradition, Aarne's laws of change, or Malinowski's functionalistic conception of myth as a sociological charter for belief. Most of the discussions of theory and method in American folklore scholarship are essentially rehashes of European concepts.[27] One gets the impression that not only is much of American folklore – the materials – essentially transplanted European folklore, but many of the theories and methods of studying folklore employed traditionally by American folklorists are likewise European borrowings. Even in the areas of collection and classification, where American scholars have made their mark, one sees the European influence.

Francis James Child, in his prefatory "advertisement" to part I of his celebrated collection, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, specifi-

[24] Newell, "Notes and Queries," p. 79.

[25] T. F. Crane, "The Diffusion of Popular Tales," *JAF*, I (1888), 8-15.

[26] Richard M. Dorson, "The Eclipse of Solar Mythology," *JAF*, LXVIII (1955), 393-416, includes a critique of these men among the followers of Max Müller; for their original writings, see Daniel G. Brinton, *The Myths of the New World: A Treatise on the Symbolism and Mythology of the Red Race of America* (New York, 1868), and John Fiske, *Myths and Myth-Makers: Old Tales and Superstitions Interpreted by Comparative Mythology* (Boston, 1873).

[27] Beckwith, *op. cit.*; Richard M. Dorson, "Current Folklore Theories," *Current Anthropology*, IV (1963), 93-112.

cally mentions that he "closely followed the plan of Grundtvig's Old Popular Ballads of Denmark."[28] With regard to the collection of Child ballads in the field, one must note that such fieldwork was largely stimulated by the work of an English collector, Cecil Sharp, in the southern Appalachians. The same situation prevails in folktale and riddle classification. Stith Thompson after failing to utilize Aarne's 1910 tale typology for his 1914 Harvard University doctoral dissertation "European Borrowings and Parallels in North American Indian Tales" (or for the 1919 partial publication, *European Tales Among the North American Indians*) made more than an *amende honorable* by twice revising Aarne's index (in 1928, and again in 1961).[29] Even the idea of making an index of motifs, as opposed to tale types, had occured to Aarne, Arthur Christensen, and Albert Wesselski before Thompson undertook the arduous assignment.[30] This is not to minimize the incredible amount of time and scholarship which Thompson has devoted to his world-famous projects, but only to assert that the basic underlying ideas for them came from Europe. In the same fashion, one can remark that Archer Taylor's riddle classification scheme, found in his superb *English Riddles from Oral Tradition*, is an adaptation of one made first by Robert Lehmann-Nitsche in a collection of Argentinian riddles.[31] Inasmuch as the majority of American folklorists were either trained or heavily influenced by Stith Thompson and Archer Taylor, the European concepts have tended to dominate American folklore scholarship. Some students were encouraged to compile tale type or motif indexes; others were encouraged to apply the European comparative method to American Indian materials.

What are some of the theoretical assumptions underlying the European-derived American concept of folklore? First of all, one must remember that in nineteenth-century Europe, folklore was conceived of as a historical science. The aim was the historical reconstruction of the past. Folklore, according to this view, provided a key to the past. By applying the comparative method, in 1886 refined into the historical-geographic or Finnish method, one could arrive at a hypothetical *ur*-form of an item

[28] Reprint edition (New York, 1962), p. ix.

[29] *European Tales Among the North American Indians: A Study in the Migration of Folk-Tales* (= *Colorado College Publication, Language Series*, Vol. II, No. 34) (1919), 319-471; *The Types of the Folktale*, 2nd revision (= *FF Communications*, No. 184) (Helsinki, 1961).

[30] Thompson, *The Folktale*, p. 422.

[31] Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1951, p. 3.

of folklore, and in addition show the possible, if not probable, paths of diffusion of the item. In the United States, Child, Newell, Kittredge, Thompson, and Taylor sought to reconstruct past forms of present folklore. American folklorists, like their European precursors, looked backwards. Present folklore was collected primarily to illuminate the historical past. Even the development of one of the principal American contributions to folklore theory, the oral-formulaic theory of Parry and Lord, was motivated by an interest in the past. The extensive fieldwork in Yugoslavia and the detailed analyses of Serbo-Croatian folk epics were undertaken principally because of the hope that an analysis of present-day epic creation would shed light on the epic-making techniques employed in Homer's day. The idea of studying the present to discover the past is entirely in keeping with nineteenth-century historical reconstructionist aims.

The historical bias remains strong in American folklore scholarship. Alexander H. Krappe, an American folklorist greatly influenced by European scholarship, made an unequivocal statement in his *The Science of Folklore* to the effect that folklore is a historical science.[32] More recently, Dorson has argued that "...the only meaningful approach to the folk traditions of the United States must be made against the background of American history."[33] However, Dorson is more interested in using history to understand the significance of folklore than in limiting the discipline to using folklore to reconstruct history.

American anthropological folklorists under the influence of Franz Boas have also favored a historical approach to folklore. Like their literary colleagues, they have sought to ascertain the distribution and diffusion patterns of particular items of folklore. Nevertheless, the anthropological folklorists have contributed to the American concept of folklore by documenting the fallacy of the older notion that folklore reflects only the past. Boas considered folklore to be a kind of a mirror for a culture and he suggested that a people's folklore was that people's autobiographical ethnography.[34] This meant that although folklore might be a key to the past, it likewise reflected the present culture and thus was also a key to the present. The importance of this shift in the

[32] New York, 1930, p. XV.

[33] Dorson, *American Folklore*, p. 5; "A Theory For American Folklore," *JAF*, LXXII (1959), 197-215.

[34] Franz Boas, *Tsimshian Mythology* (= *31st Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology*) (Washington D.C., 1916), p. 393.

American concept of folklore cannot be exaggerated. If folklore was not limited to dead survivals but included living materials, then the study of folklore did not have to be limited to the search for origins. Instead, the present day functions of folklore could be investigated.

This distinction between folklore as a product of the past and folklore as a reflector of the present has had crucial implications for folklore methodology. If folklore were limited to nonfunctioning survivals from the distant past, then by definition there would be no point in trying to observe folklore in context. For this reason, the past-oriented American folklorist was interested only in collecting texts. Minimal informant data was recorded, for instance, name and age plus the place and date of the recording, but no attempt was made to discover how that item was used or how the informant himself regarded the item. On the other hand, present-oriented American folklorists have become more and more interested in the dynamics of the use of folklore in particular situations. The concern for the recording of folklore in context has led to new requirements and techniques in the collection of folklore.[35] For example, how does a raconteur evaluate and interpret the tales he tells? What are his aesthetic principles? If there is "oral literature," then there is bound to be "oral literary criticism." As folklore is transmitted from one generation to another, so also are the traditional attitudes and interpretations of folklore communicated in similar fashion even if they are not always formally articulated. Another contextual factor is the set of rules which determines whether or not a particular individual will use a particular item of folklore in a given situation. What makes one proverb appropriate, but another one inappropriate? The rules for the use of folklore, or as it has been termed, "the ethnography of speaking folklore," are just beginning to be seriously studied.[36]

Besides the shifts in the American concepts of folklore from "the past" to "the past and the present," from "survival" to "survival and functioning element," one detects a tendency to move away from the narrow historical approach to folklore towards a broader outlook which includes both historical and psychological perspectives. In American folklore scholarship, there has been enormous resistance to the application of

[35] Kenneth S. Goldstein, *A Guide For Field Workers in Folklore* (Hatboro, Pennsylvania, 1964): see also Dundes, "Metafolklore and Oral Literary Criticism," *The Monist*, 50 (1966), 505-516.

[36] E. Ojo Arewa and Alan Dundes, "Proverbs and the Ethnography of Speaking Folklore," *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 66, No. 6, Part 2 (1964), 70-85.

psychological principles to folklore materials. There are at least two reasons for this. First, with the historical bias came an accompanying literal reading of folklore. For Boas, what was in the culture was also in the folklore. Boas did not concern himself with the materials which were in the folklore but which were not in the culture.[37] Folklore was not recognized as a socially sanctioned outlet for taboo thoughts and acts. It was not understood that an item of folklore can serve as a vehicle which *requires* an individual to do what he may not be permitted to do in everyday reality (e.g., in courtship games, complete strangers may kiss; in games of chase, acts of physical aggression are mandatory). Moreover, Boas did not bother about the apparently irrational content of much of folklore: the cannibalistic ogres, the magical objects, and the like. Both anthropological and literary folklorists have been united in favoring a historical, literal approach to folklore as opposed to a psychological, symbolic approach. If American folklorists speak of psychological approaches, it is only to berate and demean them.

The second and probably the most important reason for the strong hostility towards psychological interpretations of folk materials stems from a superorganic concept of folklore. Both American anthropological folklorists and literary folklorists have shared this concept. For anthropologists, folklore is a part of culture and culture has been conceived to be an autonomous abstract process separate and distinct from the human behavior in which it is manifested. The superorganic is a level of reality *sui generis* independent of, and not reducible to, the organic, that is to say, man. Thus abstract patterns or principles have been thought to govern man. For the literary folklorists, folklore has been thought to be ruled by laws which operated independent of individuals. In theory, one could "discover" these laws and their mechanics without reference to the humans who were subject to them. Typically, the superorganic principles are reified and given a "life" of their own. Thus Stith Thompson asks whether motifs combine freely or whether some are isolated, each one "*living an independent life* as a single-motif tale-type?"[38] This is not merely a matter of phrasing but a serious matter of theoretical principle. Literary folklorists speak of the "life-history" of a tale or song, but not of the "life-history" of the people who tell or sing it. This artificial separ-

[37] Melville Jacobs, "Folklore," in *The Anthropology of Franz Boas* (= *Memoir 89 of the American Anthropological Association*) (San Francisco, 1959), 119-138.
[38] Thompson, *The Folktale*, p. 426.

ation of the lore from the folk is recognized. Thompson speaks of the personal affection which an amateur collector may have for his informants and then observes that "The comparative folklorist is disturbed by no such affection.... If he is interested in the people who tell the tale or sing the song, such interest is purely incidental."[39] The study of text without context, of folklore without reference to folk, continues. The logic is that if folklore is a superorganic phenomenon which can be studied without reference to the folk, then there is obviously little need of examining the psychology of that folk. By this reasoning, the study of folklore does not require recourse to analyses of individual psychology.[40]

It is encouraging to note that in American anthropology, the importance of the individual and his psychology is now understood. However, the subdiscipline in anthropology is termed "Culture *and* Personality," which clearly implies that personality is not part of culture but is something separate from it. In the study of folklore, the relationship of individual and social psychology to folklore materials barely has been hypothesized. Yet despite the strong historical-literal tradition and the powerful influence of superorganicism in American folklore scholarship, one can conjecture that the American concept of folklore will in time become eclectic enough to utilize psychological theories.[41]

One of the most intriguing psychological approaches to folklore is that employed by psychiatrist Abram Kardiner. Kardiner took Freud's original notion that folklore, like religion, is a projective system derived in part from infantile life (with specific reference to the relationship between infant and parent), and added the necessary element of cultural relativism. In other words, Kardiner saw that as child-parent relationships differed in various cultures, so the content of the folklore in these cultures would vary.[42] More recent studies have compared the results of such psychological tests as the T.A.T. (Thematic Apperception Test) with myths from the same culture. The similarity of themes is striking.[43] The significance for folklorists is that a folktale or a folksong is a 'natural'

[39] Stith Thompson, "American Folklore After Fifty Years," *JAF*, LI (1938), 2.
[40] Alan Dundes, *The Study of Folklore* (New York, 1965), p. 130.
[41] J. L. Fischer, "The Sociopsychological Analysis of Folktales," *Current Anthropology*, IV (1963), 235-295.
[42] Abram Kardiner, *The Individual and His Society* (New York, 1939), and *The Psychological Frontiers of Society* (New York, 1945).
[43] Bert Kaplan, "Psychological Themes in Zuni Mythology and Zuni TAT's," *The Psychoanalytic Study of Society*, II (1962), 255-262.

T.A.T. Whereas the psychological test is usually introduced into a culture from *without* and may or may not test what it is said to test, the folktale or folksong is a projection of personality from *within* the culture.

In this modern updating of Boas' notion of folklore as a mirror of culture, it is possible to conceive of folklore as providing an invaluable means of seeing a culture from the inside out instead of from the outside in. This includes the corollary notion of folklore as a source of native categories. Each culture has its own system for slicing up objective reality. There may be different logical, linguistic, and semantic categories. Concepts of space, time, number, weight, distance, direction, and many others, vary with each culture. An obvious example is the fact that the color spectrum is divided differently in different cultures. For those interested in understanding how a people live and think, it is essential to discover and describe these native cognitive categories. But it is difficult for the collector to put aside his own native categories. They are so "natural" that it may not occur to him to question their universality. But, in the folklore of a people, native classifications are recorded or alluded to. This means that by collecting and analyzing folklore, one has an excellent opportunity of coming upon these crucial categories.

The American concept of folklore as a discipline appears to be in the process of change. While the European heritage of historical reconstruction and the comparative method remain, there may be some American innovations, coming partly from the historical accident of American anthropologists working with aboriginal folklore materials. Folklore is still a historical science but it is also a social science. With the advent of M.A.'s and Ph.D.'s in folklore at such leading universities as Indiana University, the University of California, and the University of Pennsylvania, a new generation of professional folklorists is being born. For these folklorists, there is no difficulty in reconciling the literary and the anthropological approaches to folklore. The possible fruits of a combination of the comparative method with a psychological perspective are such that it is quite likely that the American concepts of folklore will change more drastically in the next several decades than they have in all the years that American folklorists have been studying folklore.

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