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Divergent Paths: On the Evolution of "Folklore" and "Folkloristics"

That "folklore" has survived to celebrate its sesquicentennial is not too surprising. Many English terms and their related fields of study are much older. Yet this occasion should be significant for those involved in folkloristics. It offers an opportunity to reflect upon folklore as a term, including how it has evolved. This is also an excellent opportunity to consider how "folkloristics" has evolved, how well folklore has served the discipline of folkloristics, and how the histories of folklore and folkloristics do not always move in the same direction and at the same pace.

The story of the term folklore begins in the August 12, 1846, letter in which William J. Thoms, under the pseudonym of Ambrose Merton, proposed "Folk-Lore" to replace "what we in England designate as Popular Antiquities, or Popular Literature." The first problem involved in this choice of a "good Saxon compound" is that folklore is a noun, a *thing*. That is, folklore is conceptualized as some (external) object, tangible or intangible. Thoms develops his notion further by providing a list of genres and specific examples from German culture (the Grimms's collections) and English culture (a children's rhyme). That Thoms thought of folklore as so many *things* is hardly surprising. Many disciplines began with the study of particular things—from chemical elements to plants, from birds to prehistoric bones. This era had seen great successes already in botany, chemistry, zoology, anatomy, and other fields. Stories, customs, ballads, and proverbs could presumably be collected, systematically arranged, and studied in much the same manner as other natural and cultural items. Indeed, one of the first activities the (English) Folk-Lore Society proposed and began (in 1881) was a prototype international folktale index.[1]

William J. Thoms was hardly alone in his view that folklore is an assortment of so many things (and folkloristics then becomes the collection and study of those things).[2] Many folklorists have followed this path.[3] Indeed, such an item-centered view has consumed scholars for the better part of the history of folkloristics. However, one might well consider that disciplines have only truly advanced once scholars shifted from studying things (chemical elements, plants, fruit flies, etc.) per se to studying how those things act and interact—that is, in processes. It is certainly in the study of actions and interactions that scholars gain knowledge. About twenty-five years ago folklore was reconceptualized as a process—with both tangible and intangible manifestations, to be sure, but fundamentally as an activity that people choose to do. This shift from item-centered to activity-centered arguably began in the 1960s and culminated in the 1972 publication of *Towards New Perspectives in Folklore* with its new definitions of folklore:

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> Dan Ben-Amos: "artistic communication in small groups" (p. 13)
> Roger D. Abrahams: "Folklore is all conventional expressive devices available for performance and the achievement of performer status within a socially bounded group." (p. 28)

Both definitions shift the focus from products to processes, from items to activities. Now folklore scholars could shift their attention from the collection and preservation of items to the systems in which people live, the role of traditions in their interactions, and the processes whereby groups and their traditions are generated and renewed.

Folklore might have evolved more quickly from item-centered to process-centered but for another gift from William J. Thoms: the attitude toward and indeed the motivation for collecting folklore. In 1846 Thoms was already convinced that folklore was fast-disappearing and must be collected and studied as quickly as possible.[4] His letter to the *Athenæum* asserted that "No one who has made the manners, customs, observances, superstitions, ballads, proverbs, etc., of the olden time his study, but must have arrived at two conclusions:—the first, how much that is curious and interesting in these matters is now entirely lost—the second, how much may yet be rescued by timely exertion." This backwards looking attitude has dominated folkloristics ever since. Either the folklore or the folk—or both—were vanishing (or, in modern parlance, were endangered). As a result, early attention was focused on traditional forms which were dying out within a region or culture: ballads, folktales, epics, sagas, and animal tales.[5] In doing so, collectors often ignored the contemporary lifestyle of the community, except to bemoan the conditions that threatened the extinction of the particular or distinctive folklore they sought. As a result, a number of folklore collections more accurately were recollections of past traditions than performances from the present. Even today some folklorists have been reluctant to shift away from this salvage orientation. After all, it provides a seemingly clear justification for folkloristics as well as a rationale for (perpetual) fieldwork—the collection and preservation of traditional culture before it "dies out."

The problem with such a justification is not that it is false, but that it is true. Traditions *are* sensitive (in that they are parts of social systems), and thus they are always endangered. Folklore does indeed die out. But it is also perpetually being generated. Folklorists would do well to study how traditions are *created* as well as how they have naturally changed and adapted. This approach considers folklore as it functions across time and space, for both folklore and the group it emanates from are naturally dynamic. Then one can consider folklore as a system in which and through which individuals and groups interact.

While some folklore scholars over the last twenty-five years have turned their attention to contemporary folklore, folklore as process, and systems of traditions, the discipline of folkloristics in the United States has moved rather slowly in that direction. In fact, the discipline's evolution has already begun to diverge from the path set by the new conception of folklore (process-centered, context-sensitive, and performance-oriented). Why? Many public folklore positions are based upon the backwards looking salvage premise, and job descriptions or agency mandates

specify a goal of cultural preservation. Other folklorists continue to view folklore as item-centered, whether for collecting, indexing and archiving, or for analysis. A few have tried to equate political activism with cultural intervention and preservation. As a result, the discipline in the United States enjoys a diversity of outlooks, some of which do not fit at all with the new conception of folklore.

In fact, this new conception of folklore actually poses a threat to the discipline in the United States. The realization that the premise ("Traditional culture is endangered") is true but useless may lead sponsoring institutions and agencies to take second and third looks at their support for folklorists. The preservation of endangered traditions, a part of cultural systems, is no more simple than the preservation of endangered natural sites, plants, and animals. We have come to realize that we have a great deal to learn about the complexity of those systems and our roles in them. Claims that we can preserve or protect *anything* when we don't fully know the situation or our own powers to influence it are surely naive. It is frustrating to sense that pursuing the path of folklore means repudiating an important new area (public folklore) within American folkloristics.

The concept of folklore has changed significantly over the last quarter century. Yet folkloristics has not moved in the same direction. While scholars have shifted their attention to processes and performances, the discipline has clung to an orientation at the heart of cultural preservation. And now that so many professional folklorists have been hired specifically with this exact justification, folkloristics may well have to abandon folklore as its touchstone and look for another term (*endangered cultural expressions?*). For generations folklorists have complained about the problems inherent in the multiple meanings of the term folklore and questioned its utility as the key term for the discipline often known as folkloristics. One might well ask now how well that discipline serves the term folklore.

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NOTES

1. See the *Folk-Lore Record* 4–5 (1881–82). The compilation of world folktales and taletypes progressed for a number of years before the scope of the project was revised and the publication begun with the compilation of Cinderella versions edited by Marian Roalfe Cox in 1893 (London: The Folk-lore Society).

2. Of course the term "folkloristics" is quite modern in comparison to "folklore." The distinction between the discipline and the subject material and the appropriate terms for each came into discussion in the 1980s. Until that time, folklore referred to both the subject and the discipline which studied it—one more reason for confusion. However there was no doubt that Thoms and his followers saw folklore as developing into a discipline. As early as the 1890s, British scholars (Gomme, Hartland, Lang et al.) publicly discussed folklore as a science and distinguished its methods and subjects from other existing disciplines.

3. It is convenient to look at the twenty-one definitions found in Maria Leach's *Funk and Wagnall's Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend* (1949). However, even as late as 1965, Alan Dundes was introducing folklore in his textbook *The*

Study of Folklore (Englewood, N.J.: Prentice-Hall) by providing a list of things—genres.

4. W. W. Newell's rationale for founding the American Folklore Society mentions the need to preserve the "fast-vanishing remains of Folk-Lore in America," a statement that draws its spirit directly from Thoms's letter. See Rosemary Zumwalt, *American Folklore Scholarship: A Dialogue of Dissent* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); Simon J. Bronner, *American Folklore Studies: An Intellectual History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986); and William M. Clements, ed., *100 Years of American Folklore Studies: A Conceptual History* (Washington, D.C.: American Folklore Society, 1988).

5. Arguably these forms also resemble literature, a similarity that perhaps helped scholars most often trained in textual analysis to choose these genres.