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Folklore, Verbal Art, and Culture*

IN THE OFT-CITED TWENTY-ONE DEFINITIONS of folklore published under the editorship of Maria Leach,[1] I was intrepid enough to suggest that in anthropological usage folklore could be defined as verbal art. I say intrepid, or perhaps the word should be rash, because I could hardly hope to make my meaning clear in the suggested 50 to 200 words. And yet, in rereading this statement I still find it difficult to see how I could have been thought to be speaking for myself, rather than of the traditional point of view of anthropologists in general. Here again I attempt to clarify this misunderstanding and to defend the term "verbal art" against those criticisms that I am aware have been directed against it. I also wish to consider the nature of the different but overlapping materials falling under the categories of folklore, verbal art, and culture, and the necessity for having three separate terms.

Samuel P. Bayard was the first to object to the term "verbal art"; he did so on the grounds that there is much to folklore that is not art,[2] and I agree with this. Perhaps at that time he did not understand that I was speaking of traditional anthropological usage rather than expressing my own views or did not note my reference to the fact that anthropologists recognize that other topics they customarily categorize under the aspects of culture are of interest to other folklorists. Erminie W. Voegelin took very much the same position in her definition as I did, discussing what folklore meant to American cultural anthropologists and what it meant to students of folk and peasant cultures, while observing that "there is at present a noticeable tendency among cultural anthropologists to use unwritten literature, or primitive literature, or literary forms, to designate materials which, even a decade ago, would have been called folklore."

* Presented in 1965 as the presidential banquet address at the meetings of the American Folklore Society in Denver, Colorado. Although not published at that time, the continuing discussion that Bascom's use of the term "verbal art" has engendered justifies its publication now. It should be read, however, with the time lapse of eight years in mind. The definition cited on page 376 has appeared in William Bascom, "Folklore," *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (New York, 1968), V, 496–497.

[1] Maria Leach, ed., *Funk and Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend* (New York, 1959), I, 398–403.

[2] Samuel P. Bayard, "The Materials of Folklore," JOURNAL OF AMERICAN FOLKLORE, 66 (1953), 1–15.

Meanwhile, in attempting to present the anthropological point of view in my article on "Folklore and Anthropology," I unfortunately had already made a statement that is even more subject to this misinterpretation. Again, however, I was speaking of traditional anthropological usage, and to understand my own position please substitute "verbal art" for "folklore, to the anthropologist" and "folktales" for "tales."

Folklore, to the anthropologist, is part of culture but not the whole of culture. It includes myths, legends, tales, proverbs, riddles, the texts of ballads and other songs, and other forms of lesser importance, but not folk art, folk dance, folk music, folk costume, folk medicine, folk custom, or folk belief. All of these are important parts of culture, which must also be a part of any complete ethnography. All are unquestionably worthy of study, whether in literate or nonliterate societies.[3]

In this same article I reviewed the history of the terms "folklore" and "culture," pointing out the fact that Thoms' description of folklore came twenty-five years before Tylor's definition of culture, as well as noting the remarkable similarities between their two statements. This fact, together with Bayard's comments, led me to write the article "Verbal Art" in which I argued that a new term was badly needed for what anthropologists—and some nonanthropological folklorists as well—spoke of as "folklore," and that "verbal art" is more apt and meaningful than the other neologisms that have been suggested for man's verbal creations. I agreed with Bayard that it was wrong and even presumptuous of anthropologists to have pre-empted and redefined the term "folklore" to suit their own purposes. I added that the responsibility for these terminological difficulties seems to lie clearly with anthropology and that it was with this in mind that the term "verbal art" had been suggested in the first place. In attempting to clarify the misunderstanding about my own position I stated, in the first paragraph:

> I can only accept my own responsibility for failing to state specifically that verbal art was never intended as a definition of the field which folklore now encompasses. On the contrary, it was suggested as a convenient and appropriate term for folktales, myths, legends, proverbs, riddles, and other "literary forms." It was meant to encompass only a segment of folklore and a segment of culture, and not the whole of either.[4]

It has been suggested that my own position had changed in the period between this article and the original definition. I honestly do not believe that this was the case, but it had clearly changed between the writing of the joint contribution on African and New World Negro folklore for Maria Leach in the spring of 1947 and the writing of the definition in late 1948. By that time it was already too late to rewrite the joint contribution, even if Richard Waterman had agreed, and for me to have stated my own position, as I was in fact requested to do, would have resulted in a contradiction that I felt would have been confusing as well as somewhat embarrassing.

Nevertheless the suspicion persists that I have proposed the term "verbal art" for all of folklore, and I take this opportunity to deny again that this was my in-

[3] William Bascom, "Folklore and Anthropology," JOURNAL OF AMERICAN FOLKLORE, 66 (1953), 284.

[4] William Bascom, "Verbal Art," JOURNAL OF AMERICAN FOLKLORE, 68 (1955), 245.

tention. Let me add that I welcome the fact that these meetings have included a session on Material Folk Traditions in the United States and that, except for its emphasis on the past, I am perfectly willing to accept Marius Barbeau's eloquent definition, in which he says folklore "is handed down by example or spoken word, by the older to the new generations, without reference to book, print, or schoolteacher" and "it is the born opponent of the serial number, the stamped product, and the patented standard."[5]

Most recently, however, Alan Dundes in his editorial introduction to "Folklore and Anthropology," reprinted in his otherwise excellent new book, says:

> As Utley pointed out, Bascom tends to limit folklore to what he later termed verbal art, which includes prose narratives (myth, folktale, legend), riddles, and proverbs, but not folk dance, folk medicine, and folk belief (superstition). Bascom goes so far as to say that to the anthropologist, the texts of ballads and other songs are folklore but the music of ballads and other songs is not. Most folklorists would regard this definition of folklore as too narrow. On the other hand, Utley's conception of folk literature is really quite similar to Bascom's notion of verbal art.[6]

I hope that any lingering suspicion about my own position will finally be dispelled by the definition I offer in the forthcoming new edition of the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*:

> Folklore means "folk learning"; it comprehends all knowledge that is transmitted by word of mouth and all crafts and other techniques that are learned by imitation or example, as well as the products of these crafts. . . . Folklore includes folk art, folk crafts, folk tools, folk costume, folk custom, folk belief, folk medicine, folk recipes, folk music, folk dance, folk games, folk gestures, and folk speech, as well as those verbal forms of expression which have been called folk literature but which are better described as verbal art.

As Dundes suggests, Utley seems to find the traditional anthropological definition of folklore acceptable; he has chided me for not defending it and for abandoning the field too quickly to Bayard.[7] In a footnote he adds, "See comments on the difficulties of the term 'verbal art' by Marian W. Smith."[8] What Marian Smith refers to, however, is the great breadth of verbal art and the tremendous task of studying it if we include written literary forms (which I do not, and Utley does not) and current anecdotes and jokes. I have previously discussed some of the interrelations between verbal art and literature, and I have already indicated that jokes and anecdotes are prose narratives that belong in the category of verbal art.[9] My only question on the latter score is how long jokes and anecdotes have to persist before they can be considered traditional. I would argue simply that we should not reject the term "verbal art" simply because the field it encompasses is large; nor should we be dismayed by its scope, because the fields of folklore and culture are both much larger.

Another objection comes from Richard M. Dorson, who protests that "verbal

[5] Leach, I, 398.

[6] Alan Dundes, ed., *The Study of Folklore* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1965), 25.

[7] Francis Lee Utley, "Folk Literature: An Operational Definition," JOURNAL OF AMERICAN FOLKLORE, 74 (1961), 195–196.

[8] Ibid., 205, note 18. See Marian W. Smith, "The Importance of Folklore Studies to Anthropology," *Folklore*, 70 (1959), 306–309.

[9] Bascom, "Verbal Art," 249, and William Bascom, "The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narratives," JOURNAL OF AMERICAN FOLKLORE, 78 (1965), 5.

art" does not comfort the American folklorist.[10] However, his reasoning escapes me, as it should be obvious from what I have already said that I would also include the shivaree and the couvade as folklore, but not as verbal art.

John Greenway writes in his recent book, "Professor Bascom went on to suggest the term *verbal art*, which is allright, I suppose, except no one uses it other than Professor Bascom."[11] Yet to my surprise in the JOURNAL OF AMERICAN FOLKLORE, no. 304, which he edited, I find his book described by his publishers as "the first modern study of verbal art among nonliterate peoples."

More seriously, the situation is not as discouraging as Greenway suggests. Dell H. Hymes has used the term in seven publications in the past five years,[12] and it has been used by James B. Christensen, Barbara K. and Warren S. Walker, and perhaps others.[13] Thomas G. Winner speaks of oral art; Melville J. and Frances S. Herskovits and J. Berry refer to spoken art;[14] and, although I was not aware of it until afterward, there were precedents for my suggestion beginning as early as 1933 in the use of *Woordkunst* by Amaat Burssens and Leo Bittremieux, and of *Gesproken Woordkunst* in two publications by G. van Bulck and afterward by de Rop.[15]

Immediately after I presented the paper on "Verbal Art," Thomas A. Sebeok suggested that the term "spoken art" has certain advantages, as I noted in a footnote,[16] and I find it perfectly acceptable. It is not important which of these terms is eventually established through usage by scholars in the field, but that some acceptable term for this important segment of folklore be adopted. If either becomes established, it will add considerable precision to our discussions when speaking of prose narratives, proverbs, riddles, and related forms rather than of folklore as a whole, and it will permit the term folklore to be used in the sense of folk knowledge or folk learning, more or less as Thoms originally suggested.[17]

[10] Richard M. Dorson, "A Theory for American Folklore," JOURNAL OF AMERICAN FOLKLORE, 72 (1959), 198–199.

[11] John Greenway, *Literature among the Primitives* (Hatboro, 1964), xii.

[12] Dell H. Hymes, "Phonological Aspects of Style: Some English Sonnets," in *Style and Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (New York and London, 1960), 110; "Ob-Ugric Metrics," *Anthropos*, 55 (1960), 576; Review of Tristram P. Coffin, ed., *Indian Tales of North America*, *American Anthropologist*, 64 (1962), 677–678; Review of Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion. Studies in Logology*, JOURNAL OF AMERICAN FOLKLORE, 75 (1962), 276; Review of Robert H. Lowie, *Crow Texts* and *Crow Word Lists*, *American Anthropologist*, 64 (1962), 901; "Objectives and Concepts of Linguistic Anthropology," in *The Teaching of Anthropology*, ed. David G. Mandelbaum, Gabriel W. Lasker, and Ethel M. Albert, American Anthropological Association Memoir 94 (1963), 286–287; *Language, Culture, and Society: A Reader in Linguistics and Anthropology* (New York, Evanston, and London, 1964), 289, 291, 293.

[13] James Boyd Christensen, "The Role of Proverbs in Fante Culture," *Africa*, 28 (1958), 232; Barbara K. and Warren S. Walker, eds., *Nigerian Folk Tales* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1961), 1.

[14] Thomas G. Winner, *The Oral Art and Literature of the Kazakhs of Russian Central Asia* (Durham, N.C., 1958); Melville J. and Frances S. Herskovits, *Dahomean Narrative* (Evanston, 1958), 3; J. Berry, *Spoken Art in West Africa* (London, 1961).

[15] Amaat Burssens, *Neger-Woordkunst* (Amsterdam, 1933); Leo Bittremieux, *Woordkunst der Bayombe* (Brussels, 1937); G. van Bulck, "De Invloed van de Westersche Cultuur op de Gesproken Woordkunst bij de Bakongo," *Kongo-Overzee*, II–III (1935–1937); G. van Bulck, *Gesproken Woordkunst in Afrika met Toepassing op de Bakongo* (Brussels, 1936); A. de Rop, *De Gesproken Woordkunst van de Nkundo*, Annales de Musée Royal du Congo Belge, Sciences de l'Homme, Lingquistique, XIII (1956).

[16] Bascom, "Verbal Art," 246.

[17] Bascom, "The Forms of Folklore," 19.

My only reservation about either of these terms is whether or not legends, which clearly belong to the category of prose narratives, can be considered as art. The question is somewhat like asking whether history books can be considered as literature, and I assume that some of them can. I believe that the answer to my question must be yes, even though not all legends—nor in fact all myths or folktales—are good art.

My reservation about Thoms' statement is more serious. By its emphasis on materials "of olden time" it excludes current slang, jokes, anecdotes, games, gestures, and similar new materials of interest to folklorists, and it implies that creativity in folklore is a thing of the past. Moreover, it has contributed to the perpetuation of the outmoded cultural-evolutionist theory that considers folklore to consist of survivals from the remote, prehistoric past; that this interpretation is unsound, Bayard, Dorson, Smith, Utley, and I, as well as many others, are in agreement.[18]

Verbal art comprises a segment of folklore and a segment of culture. The fact that it constitutes such a very important focus of folklore interest and research makes it important for us to adopt an acceptable term to distinguish it from the total range of the materials of folklore. An acceptable term for this segment of culture is also necessary if anthropologists are to avoid twisting the meaning Thoms originally gave to folklore. Verbal art, spoken art, or some other acceptable neologism is needed for the so-called literary materials of folklore.

But what of the terms "folklore" and "culture"? If these are so similar, are both needed? Are they in fact synonymous, so that we could dispense with one or the other? If they are, would it not be simplest to accept the traditional anthropological definition of folklore? If not, what are their differences? The first answer is that they are not synonymous, that the three terms designate overlapping but different materials, and that all three terms are needed. But to answer these questions more fully, we must refer again to the perennial problem: what is folklore?

Despite the tedious arguments about the anthropological and the humanistic definitions of folklore, these definitions are in fundamental agreement on one very significant point: they exclude all learning that is transmitted by writing. Of the twenty-one definitions that Maria Leach edited, twelve specifically employ the terms "verbal," "spoken," "oral," "unwritten," "not written," or "rather than written," and seven others imply the same distinction by their usage of the words "popular" and "traditional" or, as in the case of M. Harmon, by stressing the manner of transmission as the distinguishing feature of folklore. I am more conservative here than Utley[19] who places the number at thirteen, perhaps because he includes Archer Taylor's reference to "verbal folklore"; this, however, refers specifically to verbal art and not to all of folklore. The twelve are Barbeau, Bascom, Botkin, Foster, Herskovits, Herzog, Luomala, Smith, Thompson, Voegelin, Waterman, and Potter who says it is "the traditional, and usually oral." The score would be twenty out of twenty-two if we counted Krappe's definition which follows immediately.[20] Personally I would be very much surprised if the two remain-

[18] Bayard, 11–12; Dorson, 199; Smith, 301–302; Utley, 193–194; Bascom, "Folklore and Anthropology," 287–288. See also Åke Hultkrantz, "Religious Tradition, Comparative Religion and Folklore," *Ethnos*, 21 (1956), 12–13.

[19] Utley, 193.

[20] Leach, I, 403.

ing contributors, R. D. Jameson and MacEdward Leach, would disagree that folklore is restricted to those elements of culture transmitted by word of mouth or by example. We should not, of course, presume to arrive at a definition of folklore by reference only to the statements of twenty-one folklorists in the United States or elsewhere, but I believe that most folklorists the world over would accept this criterion as fundamental.

Anthropologists, I fear, have been less aware than humanists of the implications of this very basic point and of the fact that, even in its broadest Thomsian sense, folklore is only a part of culture. For culture, as anthropologists use and define the term, effectively encompasses all learned behavior, whether transmitted by writing or not; it excludes only that learned behavior (derived from individual experience) which is idiosyncratic and is not traditional in that it is not shared by other members of society. Culture is customary behavior, to use John Rowe's apt phrase. The early statements of Thoms and Tylor about folklore and culture may sound much alike, but, as these terms have come to be used and redefined by folklorists and anthropologists, there is this difference, and it is important.

It would be convenient if one were able to say that folklore is folk culture, meaning that it is all non-idiosyncratic learned behavior that is transmitted verbally or by example. Such a definition would be both precise and concise, and it would be in line with usage with regard to folksong, folk dance, and the rest. Unfortunately, however, the term "folk culture" has already been pre-empted by social scientists to refer to the cultures of the peasant folk of Europe and of American Indian enclaves in Latin American societies. Some folklorists with a penchant for defining folklore in terms of peasant folk may find this congenial, but I do not. For one thing, in some ways folklore is narrower than folk culture, because the culture of peasant groups is at least partially transmitted by writing and formal education now and will become increasingly so in the future. In other ways folklore is far broader, as it refers to all features of culture, in nonliterate as well as literate societies, which are transmitted verbally or by example.

The relationship between folklore and ethnography has been a continuing subject of discussion, but I assume that few folklorists today would follow Krappe in saying that nonliterate societies have no folklore.[21] Krappe himself says that folklore and ethnology are virtually inseparable since both are concerned with oral traditions. In the twenty-one definitions Herzog and Thompson consider this distinction to be simply a convenient division of labor, while Botkin, Espinosa, and Jameson make no distinction between ethnology and folklore. These five contributors, along with Balys, Barbeau, Bascom, Foster, Harmon, Herskovits, Luomala, Smith, and Voegelin, agree that folklore exists in nonliterate societies as, I am sure, do Taylor and Waterman.

This widely accepted criterion of folklore based on its means of transmission has been challenged in a recent article by Alan Dundes, who argues that there are numerous written forms of folklore including "autograph book verse, automobile names, flyleaf rhymes (for example, book-keepers), latrinalia, and traditional letters (such as chain letters)."[22] He also argues that a good many aspects of

[21] Ibid.

[22] Alan Dundes, "Texture, Text, and Context," *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, 28 (1964), 251–252.

culture that would not be considered folklore are transmitted verbally or by example, such as learning to drive a tractor, spreading toothpaste on a toothbrush, and depositing coins in a parking meter. I confess that I have not given much attention to these forms of behavior, nor have I had adequate time to think through the question he raises; nevertheless, I would hope that it would be possible to give an acceptable definition of folklore that is not simply an enumeration of the genres of folklore. Perhaps we can find a cue in Barbeau's references to book, print, schoolteacher, serial number, stamped product, and the patented standard. If we are to accept Dundes' examples of what are and what are not folklore, we should perhaps consider defining folklore as those elements of culture that are not mass-produced or transmitted by mass media. Yet, if we do so, it will require a rethinking of the generally accepted distinction between literature and that portion of folklore that I call verbal art.

In literate societies, such as our own, folklore constitutes only a small part of the total body of knowledge, so much of which is stored in books and transmitted in writing; it is but a small fragment of culture. Folklore persists even in urban, industrialized areas, as I believe we all recognize, but nonanthropological folklorists have found the richest fields for investigation in the rural areas, among the peasants, a fact that has given a particular character to folklore studies in the past and lends some credence to the definition of the folk as peasants. With the increasing attention paid by anthropologists to the peasant groups in Europe and elsewhere, and with the recent shift of anthropological interest to literate societies, the distinction between folklore and culture should take on increasing significance in anthropological circles. And if peasant groups are to be discussed, not simply by and of themselves but also in relationship to their societies as a whole, I would expect the concept of folklore in the Thomsian sense to become more meaningful than folk culture, as this term is now used.

In truly nonliterate societies, on the other hand, where all knowledge is transmitted by example and the spoken word, and where mass production and mass media are lacking, folklore becomes synonymous with culture. Perhaps for this reason anthropologists, with their long emphasis on nonliterate cultures, thought that the term "folklore" in its original sense was redundant, and felt justified in redefining it to suit their own purposes. However, it is only in the completely nonliterate societies, which have been disappearing so rapidly, that the study of folklore is equivalent to ethnography. With the increasingly rapid spread of schooling, international trade, and industrialization throughout the world, the distinction between folklore and culture is becoming increasingly important in the study of the American Indians and the peoples of Oceania and Africa. As their cultures change through Western influence, the corpus of their folklore diminishes.

It is still possible for anthropologists to ignore these changes and concentrate on the description of the traditional, pre-contact cultures in these areas. Such studies have been attacked by social scientists in other disciplines and by the peoples being studied on the grounds that they do not accurately represent life as it is lived today; personally I would defend them as both valid and important because they attempt to add to the very incomplete record of history before it is too late and to document what the many peoples of the world achieved before contact with Western culture. However, anthropologists who engage in such

studies should freely admit what they are doing and, what is perhaps even more important, they should be fully aware that increasingly, as time passes, they are no longer studying culture as a whole; they are studying folklore.

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