1973). Also interesting and useful are Dundes's collections of his own essays, *Analytic Essays in Folklore* (The Hague: Mouton, 1975) and *Interpreting Folklore* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1980), although the former volume is too expensive for classroom use whereas the essays in the latter rely almost exclusively upon a psychoanalytic approach.

Students are encouraged to seek out articles in the numerous folklore journals which have been published. Among the best known and most worthwhile of the English-language journals are: *Journal of American Folklore* (1888), *Folk-Lore* (1890), *Southern Folklore Quarterly* (1937), *Western Folklore* (1947) [originally *California Folklore Quarterly* (1942)], *Keystone Folklore Quarterly* (1956), *Kentucky Folklore Record* (1955), *Fabula* (1957), *Journal of Folklore Research* (1983) [originally *Journal of the Folklore Institute* (1964), originally *Midwest Folklore* (1951), originally *Hoosier Folklore Society Bulletin* (1942)], *Folklore Forum* (1968), *Indiana Folklore* (1968), and *New York Folklore* (1975) [originally *New York Folklore Quarterly* (1942)].

For a listing of folklore programs and course offerings in North American universities, see Ronald L. Baker, "Folklore and Folklife Studies in American and Canadian Colleges and Universities," *Journal of American Folklore* 99(1986): 50-74.



# Chapter 1
# On the Concepts of Folklore

Elliott Oring

Although the word "folklore" is regularly employed in our everyday speech, its precise definition presents a problem. The term is clearly a compound made up of "folk," implying some group of people, who have something called "lore." In his prefatory essay to *The Study of Folklore*, the eminent folklorist Alan Dundes attempts to simplify the issue for the introductory student: "'Folk' can refer to *any group of people whatsoever* who share at least one common factor."[1] The common factor creates a sense of collective identity, so that any population with such a sense could be regarded as a "folk," according to Dundes. This sense of identity can be based upon such salient social factors as ethnicity, occupation, kinship, religious belief, sex, age, or on an almost limitless number of other factors, such as health (e.g., people suffering from heart disease), spatial proximity (e.g., people in the same room), or personal habit (e.g., cigar smokers). Theoretically, the number and kinds of folk groups are limited only by the number and kinds of elements which can serve as the basis for group identities. Since Dundes argues that "folk" can refer to *any* group based on *any* factor (rather than a specific group formed on the basis of select factors), it would seem that the term "folk" does not contribute significantly to the definition of "folklore" as a whole (other than suggesting that it characterizes human rather than nonhuman populations). Consequently, the semantic weight of his definition must rest upon the notion of "lore."

Dundes attempts to define "lore" as an itemized list of genres. Even though the list is lengthy, he considers it only a sampling of folklore forms:

> Myths, legends, folktales, jokes, proverbs, riddles, chants, charms, blessings, curses, oaths, insults, retorts, taunts, teases, toasts, tongue-twisters, and greeting and leave-taking formulas (e.g., See you later, alligator). It also includes folk costume, folk dance, folk drama (and mime), folk art, folk belief (or superstition), folk medicine, folk instrumental music (e.g., fiddle tunes), folksongs (e.g., lullabies, ballads), folk speech (e.g., slang), folk similies (e.g., as blind as a bat), folk metaphors (e.g., to paint the town red), and names (e.g., nicknames and place names). Folk poetry ranges from oral epics to autograph-book verse, epitaphs, latrinalia (writings on the walls of public bathrooms), limericks, ball-bouncing rhymes, jump-rope rhymes, finger and toe rhymes, dandling rhymes (to bounce the children on the knee), counting-out rhymes (to determine who will be "it" in games), and nursery rhymes. The list of folklore forms also contains games; gestures; symbols; prayers (e.g., graces); practical jokes; folk etymologies; food recipes; quilt and embroidery designs; house, barn and fence types; street vendors' cries; and even the traditional conventional sounds used to summon animals or to give them commands. There are such minor forms as mnemonic devices (e.g., the name Roy G. Biv to remember the colors of the spectrum in order), envelope sealers (e.g., SWAK — Sealed With A Kiss), and the traditional comments made after body emissions (e.g., after burps or sneezes). There are such major forms as festivals and special day (or holiday) customs (e.g., Christmas, Halloween, and birthday).[2]

This list is exceedingly useful in providing the novice with a sense of what folklorists document and study. Included are forms that the beginning student undoubtedly expects to find (e.g., myths, legends, folktales, folksongs, and superstitions), as well as some that perhaps appear as something of a surprise (e.g., fence types, envelope sealers, latrinalia, epitaphs, and practical jokes). In any event, it is important to recognize that this list in no way *defines* "lore." For a list to do so, the items included must be clearly defined (which they are not) and the list must be *complete* (which it is not). Dundes himself acknowledges that the terms are not well defined and that his list is not comprehensive. Even if



one could define each genre on the list, an incomplete list would still remain unacceptable as a definition. How would we go about deciding whether something not on the list were "lore" or not? For example, is a barn decoration or a football cheer a kind of lore? Barn types and quilt designs are mentioned, but not barn decorations. Taunts, rhymes, and games are mentioned, but a football cheer only accompanies a game, and if it were neither a taunt nor in poetic form, how would we decide?

Perhaps the list is meant only to provide examples of lore, and only a common denominator for the numerous items need be identified to formulate an adequate definition. Then it should be relatively easy to decide whether any particular form (including barn decorations and football cheers) is or is not "lore." In theory, this approach could work; however, it is no easy matter to identify this common factor. Not only must this denominator adequately characterize all the items on the list, but it should not characterize any significant items omitted from the list. For example, it might be argued that all the items on the list are products of human invention and creativity. But so, too, are law, agriculture, marriage, and the parliamentary system. If "products of human invention" is indeed the informing principle of the list, we should certainly expect these items to be given precedence over tongue twisters and practical jokes. So it is not sufficient to find merely a common denominator; it is necessary to find a common denominator which is peculiar to the items on this list and which does not require the admission of glaring omissions or oversights.

Readers are encouraged to search for a principle in Dundes's list, but it is unlikely that they will find one that meets both qualifications for an adequate definition. Either the proposed principle will not characterize all items on the list, or if it does, it will force us to acknowledge glaring omissions. Of course, the possibility always exists that a principle fulfills both conditions but is otherwise trivial. For example, we might define "lore" as those forms of human expression that Alan Dundes so identifies. Such a definition includes everything on the list and probably omits nothing major. (If it did, Dundes probably would have included it.) But this definition is altogether unhelpful because it lacks intersubjectivity.

"Folklore is what Alan Dundes studies," is a definition to which not even Alan Dundes would subscribe.

The enumeration of forms not only frustrates the successful definition of lore in its own right, but also raises questions about Dundes's previous characterization of "folk" as well. If "folk" really implies "any group of people whatsoever," why should this term be needed as a modifier for some items on the list? Why do the terms *folk*tale, *folk*song, *folk* art, *folk* drama, *folk* speech, and *folk* dance appear while other items on the list — legends, curses, jump-rope rhymes, and mnemonic devices — escape such qualification? Why not simply enumerate tale, song, art, drama, speech, and dance? After all, these forms of expression regularly occur within the context of groups and consequently should not need the modifier "folk." Suspicion should be immediately aroused that not all song, art, or drama expressed in the context of groups is really folklore. In other words, perhaps Dundes really regards folksong or folk dance as song and dance which is characteristic of some special kind of group, rather than just any group, as he first leads us to believe. Otherwise, the unqualified terms "song" and "dance" should have been sufficient for his list.

It would be convenient if the problems that we have identified could be ascribed to the definition of Dundes alone, and be dismissed in favor of the definitions of other authorities. However, Dundes's definition is hardly idiosyncratic; it characterizes (or has conditioned) the perspective of a good number of contemporary folklorists. Rather than dismiss Dundes's formulation, much can be learned from it. If we seek to discover why no single principle seems to emerge from his lengthy list, and if we address the reasons for the reintroduction of the term "folk" after Dundes generalizes it almost to the point of meaninglessness, we may emerge with a greater appreciation, if not a better definition, of folklore. The answers to these questions are not self-evident, however. The problems are more historical than logical. To approach a solution at all, we must attempt to gain a sense of the development of the concept of folklore over time.

A serious study of forms that today are labeled "folklore" took place in Germany at the turn of the eighteenth century. A romantic and



nationalistic spirit dominated the times. Romantics bemoaned the rise of civilization which exalted the artifical and intellectual at the expense of the natural and spiritual. They felt that, divorced from nature, man was nothing, his efforts empty and meaningless. Art and poetry could never result from the mere intellectual manipulation and imitation of forms. Poetry was not a deliberate act but an involuntary reaction to the natural and historical environment, a product of feeling and the sensation of a total and natural reality. If civilized man had been cut off from these sensations, more primitive peoples had not. The romantics collected *Volkslieder* (folksongs) in the belief that they were essential for reinvigorating national literatures and saving these literatures from sterile intellectualism. The creation and perpetuation of folksongs was thought to be a function of a group which had not severed its connections with nature. The folk were once thought to comprise the nation as a whole, but with the development of urban civilization they survived only as an unlettered, uneducated, and marginal stratum of society — the peasantry.[3]

Nationalistic impulses directed the effort to describe and recapture the traditions of the primitive nation. For brothers Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm, the publication of *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* [Children and Household Tales (1812-15)], *Deutsche Sagen* [German Legends (1816-18)], and *Deutsche Mythologie* [German Mythology (1835)][4] was an effort to document the poetic and spiritual character of the Germanic people. The Grimms were concerned with the reconstruction of the ancient Teutonic mythology which had been destroyed by the incursion of Greek, Roman, and Christian civilization. The materials used for this reconstruction were the tales, games, sayings, names, and idiomatic phrases still to be found among the peasantry.[5]

These early scholarly and artistic interests betray a particular set of assumptions about the materials which we have since labeled "folklore." First, the unlettered peasants, uncorrupted by civilization, were the remnants and spiritual heirs of a native heathen nation. Second, their distinctive tales, songs, speech forms, and customs reflected the past, they were the fragments of the philosophy and way of life of an ancient people. Third, the material and spiritual life of these ancient peoples could be

reconstructed through the judicious analysis and comparison of contemporary peasant tales and customs. What seems crucial for our purposes is the recognition that the serious scholarly and scientific study of these kinds of materials was based upon a belief that peasants were the remnant of that ancient people who once lived upon the land, and that peasant tales, songs, sayings, and customs echoed the life and spirit of these ancestral folk.

The work of the Grimms proved enormously influential. In England, a long tradition of antiquarian scholarship existed, focusing upon anything old: old buildings, old legal documents, old artifacts, old tales, old songs, old customs.[6] These latter forms were often labeled "popular antiquities" to designate their preservation among the people, i.e., the peasantry and other common classes.[7] In 1846 William John Thoms proposed that these popular antiquities be described by the term "Folk-Lore." He modeled his suggested program for the study of folklore directly upon the work of the Grimms. Thus the term "folklore" came into being to designate materials believed to survive primarily among the rural peasantry and to reflect life in the distant past.[8] Although the term "folklore" would be redefined and qualified many times over, these associations would never be eradicated entirely.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, English folklore research was further influenced by the development of cultural anthropology and the evolutionary perspective of Edward B. Tylor and his disciples. Tylor felt that the history of mankind reflected a development from simple "savage" stages through "barbarism" to "civilization." ("Savage" and "barbarian" did not quite have the same pejorative connotations as they do today.) The proof of this evolutionary progression was demonstrated by *survivals*, "those processes, customs and opinions, and so forth, which have been carried on by force of habit into a new state of society different from that in which they had their original home."[9] Survivals did not quite "make sense" in more advanced stages of society and thus betrayed their savage origins. For example, a Scottish legend told how Saint Columba buried Saint Cran beneath the foundation of his monastery in order to propitiate the spirits of the soil who were demolishing at night what was





built by day. Tylor demonstrated that this legend was rooted in the practice of foundation sacrifice, a practice widespread among primitive peoples, but which survived in Europe only in legends.[10]

Although such survivals abounded in peasant society, they could also be found in industrial urban society; Tylor articulated, for example, the relationship between primitive incantations to keep the soul from leaving the body and contemporary sneezing formulas, (e.g., God bless you!).[11] Tylor's evolutionism provided a new and more encompassing theoretical framework for the kind of folklore studies initiated by the Grimms. The study of folklore came to be defined as a historical science concerned with "the comparison and identification of the survivals of archaic beliefs and customs in the traditions of modern ages."[12] Unlike the Grimms, Tylor's researches were neither romantic nor nationalistic in their orientation. Instead, they were concerned with the history and development of humankind as a whole, not just one particular nation or race. The mythological beliefs and attitudes of the primitive past were regarded as something to escape, not something to cherish. Folklore was not a relic of the national spirit, but rather a relic of systems of primitive thought and belief. In fact, the evolutionists envisioned their science as a "reformer's science," promoting greater rationality, morality, and societal progress through the identification and elimination of remnants of these mistaken beliefs.[13]

It is important to emphasize that the identity between folklore forms and the past was not a matter of fact but established by definition. Though survivals of past custom and belief may be embedded in the various genres of lore, not every song, custom, riddle, or tale existing in peasant society necessarily needs to be a primitive survival. Not every peasant tale containing a supernatural motif requires linkage with primitive principles of animism and magic. When W. J. Thoms coined the term "folklore," he had in mind the "manners, customs, observances, superstitions, ballads, and proverbs, etc."[14] which would throw light upon the British past. But proverbs, customs, and belief as expressive forms — as genres — are not de facto carryovers from the primitive past. We can imagine examples of such genres as completely contemporary and

novel creations with no privileged connections to the ancient past. But nineteenth-century folklorists did not entertain this perspective. Folklore had been *defined* as a survival and therefore, the study of folklore necessitated the description and analysis of these primitive connections. Questions concerning the relation of these forms to the people from whom they were collected — the peasants who continued to tell and express them — were almost irrelevant since these forms had been defined as relics with no meaningful relations to the present.

When the American Folklore Society was organized in the United States in 1888, its mission, as its founders saw it, was to continue the work of their British colleagues. William Wells Newell, the first editor of the *Journal of American Folklore*, instructed folklorists to collect the fast-vanishing remains of folklore in America: the relics of English folklore, the lore of French Canada and Mexico (i.e., that brought by the other colonizers of the American continent), the lore of the Negroes, and the lore of the Indian tribes.[15] In fact, the category of Indian folklore was something of an anomaly, since many of these societies were still judged to be in a stage of savagery. As folklore was defined as a survival *from* that stage into more advanced stages, Indians could not have folklore in the technical sense. "Mythology" was the term utilized to characterize the *living* systems of tales and beliefs of primitive peoples, whereas "folklore" was reserved for the survival of these systems in civilized societies. The American Folklore Society dedicated itself to the study of both. Only unwieldiness saved the Society's journal from the title, *The Journal of American Folklore and Mythology*.[16]

Only a few years later, however, the distinction between folklore and mythology began to evaporate when Newell redefined folklore as "oral tradition and belief handed down from generation to generation without the use of writing."[17] This redefinition was not meant to be revolutionary. Not accompanied by any proclamations of change in kinds of materials to be studied or the methods of inquiry, it was probably promoted to obviate the need for a distinction between "folklore" and "mythology." Nevertheless, the adoption of this definition had important ramifications. Whereas previous conceptualizations of folklore assumed it to be *ancient* or





*primitive*, this new definition required only that it be *traditional*, handed from generation to generation. In other words, folklore was related to the past but not necessarily a dark, distant past. Furthermore, this new definition was predicated on a type of communicative channel — oral transmission. It did not require the existence of some particular "folk" who must do the transmitting; nor did it delimit a specific kind of "lore" — that is, a special kind of information to be transmitted. "Lore" in Newell's definition is simply reduced to *anything* which is transmitted over time without the use of writing. Furthermore, whereas previous conceptualizations regarded folklore as only a remnant of something that had once been whole and alive, the definition "oral tradition" does not presuppose such a perspective. An oral tradition could be dying out, but it could also be growing and thriving; the existential condition of folklore is not predetermined by this definition. Of course, the ready adoption of "oral tradition" by folklorists did not cause them to turn away from the tales, songs, or superstitions which they had been studying. It did not immediately change the opinion that these kinds of oral expressions were dying out. It did not substantially alter their view of folklore as a historical science. They simply directed their attention to the "tradition" aspect of the definition — the information and belief that comes down from the past — rather than to the "oral" aspect per se.[18] Nor did they immediately divert their attentions from those quaint, unlettered country peoples from whom they believed such traditions could yet be harvested in abundance. But the definition also contained within it the seeds for change — change in the kinds of forms that could be regarded as folklore as well as the kinds of questions that could be asked about them.

For example, although both the romantic-nationalists and the evolutionists collected and studied legends, neither paid any attention to jokes. In their conceptualization, jokes were simply not folklore. Jokes were considered neither to reflect the spirit of the ancient folk-nation nor to indicate the survival of primitive belief and thought. Consequently, they fell outside the purview of folklore. But in terms of a definition of folklore as "oral tradition," jokes could be studied (and the joke form eventually gained prominence as an object of American folklore research).

Even with genres that had been studied under the older conceptualizations, new questions could now be asked. For example, folksong had been examined only as a reflection of primitive poetry, belief, and ethos. However, if folksong is redefined as a song which participates in, and is shaped by, the oral process over time, then other aspects of the conception of folksong require reformulation. If a folksong is conceived to be any song transmitted orally from generation to generation, questions about creation, transmission, and transformation become crucial: How is it composed? Who sings it? How is it transmitted? How and why does it vary through time and across space? The process of change thus emerges as a central concern. In each generation aspects of the song are transformed while others remain stable. The song is essentially re-composed in each generation.[19] If a song is to continue, a generation must find something in it worth continuing while altering aspects which are no longer consonant with its own values and beliefs. If this perspective is persistently advanced, a song cannot be adequately conceptualized as the reflection of some ancient past. At any point in its history, the song is the distillation of generations of cumulative modification. If it can be said to reflect any group at all, perhaps it can only reflect the group in which it is currently sung — that group which has (for conscious or unconscious reasons) maintained and transformed elements from the past in the creation of a meaningful, contemporary expression.[20]

Perhaps the reformulation of the concept of folklore was inevitable in the United States. With no peasant society to regard as the physical and spiritual embodiment of the ancestral folk — indeed, with no native ancestral population (the Indian tribes were native but not ancestors) — folklore study in the United States could never be anything more than the study of Indian mythology or the collection of Old World folklore in America. The notion of a genuine American folklore would never be possible under the older European conceptualizations. Perhaps that is why the conceptual shift from "survival" and "relic" to "oral tradition" found such ready acceptance among folklorists in the United States. American born and bred oral traditions existed, but native American survivals were far less likely to be found.





If the concept of a peasantry was somewhat problematic for folklorists in the United States, it nevertheless remained seminal in Europe. As various nations in Europe sought or achieved cultural and political independence, the peasantry as an ideological concept increased in importance. The peasantry remained, after all, the physical embodiment of the people and way of life tied to the land. Peasants were regarded as the symbol of a genuine national culture. Consequently, a tradition of peasant ethnography arose which was devoted to the study of the whole of peasant life. Peasant material, economic, social, and spiritual culture were to be documented. Thus their houses, barns, fences, and crafts as well as their tales, dances, songs, and calendar customs were extensively described and studied. In Germany, this inquiry was known as *Volkskunde*, in Sweden as *folklivsforskning*, and in English as *folklife*. Clearly, in the conceptualization of folklife, "folk" is central.[21]

American folklorists, on the other hand, were more inclined to predicate their notions of folklore on the concept of a "lore" (in reality a process) and less on the concept of a "folk," although the concept of folk was not entirely abandoned. The initial directive to study specific groups — Indians, Negroes, French-Canadians, and Mexican-Americans — was being faithfully fulfilled. American folklorists did not seem to recognize the existence of oral traditions beyond the boundaries of traditional types of unlettered or illiterate societies. They gave little thought to the specific characteristics of such groups, however, and rarely addressed the relations of such groups to the larger societies in which they were found.

American anthropologists working with peasants in Mexico and Latin America did regard the idea of a "folk society" as a useful construct. Robert Redfield argued that the "folk society" is distinguished by specific characteristics. It is isolated and has little communication with outsiders, although there is intense communication among the members themselves. The society members are to a great extent physically, behaviorally, and ideologically similar, with little change from one generation to the next. Economically independent, the members produce what they consume and consume what they produce. They use few secondary tools (tools to make other tools) and they have no rapid

machine manufacture. There is an absence of books. People communicate and pass on knowledge by word of mouth. There is little critical or abstract thinking and no attempt to systematize knowledge; rather, magical, anthropomorphic, and symbolic thought and expression are standardly employed. Traditional values are regarded as sacred. People behave in personal and familial ways, even toward inanimate objects. Members of folk societies express social relationships and ritual obligations through economic exchange. There is a simple division of labor, and commercial exchange at a money price is unknown.[22]

Redfield did not believe any society existed which fully embodied all these traits. It was an ideal type meant to contrast with the modern city.[23] Some societies approximated this folk ideal more closely than others. Overall, primitive societies resembled it to a greater degree than peasant societies. Peasant societies, in Redfield's estimation, were "part-societies" with "part-cultures." Despite the fact that they reflected many of the traits of the folk society, they were profoundly influenced by the civilizations of which they were a part. The "Great Tradition," the tradition cultivated and recorded in the academies, temples, and other great urban institutions — the tradition of the reflective few — flows into and out of the "Little Tradition" of the unreflective and illiterate many. Peasant societies and cultures are the products of this interaction. Despite continuities between primitive and peasant societies, peasant societies remain incomplete and have to be studied with reference to the Great Tradition of the urban centers with which they are in contact.[24]

Redfield chose "folk" to designate his ideal type of society because he felt that it was this society that possessed folklore and folksongs. He regarded folklore and folksongs as the touchstones of the homogeneous society, distinctive from the popular song and literature generated by specialists in the city. For Redfield, folklore encountered in the urban environment never occurred in robust form; it was always diminishing, always a vestige.[25] It was a survival — not of some ancient folk, but of that homogeneous group whose expression it once had been.

Because Redfield predicates his definition of "folk" upon a set of objective criteria rather than a single kind of society, we are free to





examine the "folkness" of any particular group. Redfield's "folk" is a *relative* term. A society is more or less folk to the extent that it more or less approximates the characteristics of the ideal type. Primitives are generally more folk than peasants, who in turn are generally more folk than modern city dwellers. But the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had witnessed tremendous upheavals in the structure of traditional society, so that even this characterization was insufficient. Urbanized states had conquered tribal peoples, assimilating them or relegating them to aboriginal enclaves. Entire communities had been transplanted through voluntary and involuntary migration. City people formed pioneer settlements in the wilderness. The peasants in one culture had become the urban dwellers of another. Individuals had isolated themselves in comparatively homogeneous occupational communities (e.g., cowboys, sailors, and lumbermen).[26] By the time folklorists came to formally ask the question, "Is there a folk in the city?" the answer was already a foregone conclusion.[27] Relative to the guardians of the formal, written, and reflective Great Tradition of the modern urban center, there were innumerable folk.

Redfield's formal expansion of the concept of "folk" from a strict European peasant model to a quality of society, measured according to specific criteria, in a sense paralleled the American folklorists' expansion of "lore" founded upon the notion of "oral tradition." But these expansions were to condition yet other changes. Technically speaking, if the folklorist studied "oral tradition" — anything transmitted through unwritten channels — no distinction whatsoever between the fields of folklore and anthropology could be made, at least in respect to the study of primitive societies. Since *all* of culture was unwritten tradition among technologically primitive peoples, the concept of folklore was, in effect, indistinguishable from the concept of culture. This conceptual congruence not only irked some anthropologists, but posed problems for many folklorists who never did believe the term "folklore" characterized the whole of culture. (Students of folklife, of course, did regard the entire culture of what they considered to be a folk group as their proper field of study.) Consequently a new definition of folklore was proposed —

"verbal art" — that is, the aesthetic use of spoken words.[28] Suggested by an anthropologist, this definition assured that folklore could never comprise the whole of culture. (After all, what people can subsist on verbal art alone?) In technologically primitive as well as industrial urban societies, folklore would be destined to delimit only some portion of the culture.

"Verbal art" is an important and novel definition because it makes no reference at all to the past — neither the ancient past nor pasts of more recent vintage. This definition reflects the current anthropological preoccupation with the cultural present as well as the effort to explain social and cultural forms in terms of the larger social and cultural systems in which these forms play some part. To the extent that this definition embodies a conception of folklore in an immediate and contemporary field of thought and action (i.e., its social and cultural context),[29] it accurately reflects the perspective of the great majority of contemporary folklorists.

The definition of folklore as "verbal art" is important for another reason. It requires no assumptions about the kinds of groups in which folklore is to be found. While the importance of folklore may be magnified in completely oral cultures, folklore can and should emerge whenever and wherever spoken language serves as an important medium for communication — that is, among *all* groups in *all* societies. This definition characterizes folklore as an expression common to all individuals and groups rather than peculiar to some of them. If *they* have folklore then so do *we*. The term can no longer be used merely to characterize (whether affectionately or pejoratively) the behavior of others. In this sense, we are all "folk," and to the extent that we are all folk, the term becomes empty of meaning. This, of course, is precisely Dundes's perspective.

Although the definition of folklore as "verbal art" does reflect the current orientation toward folklore as part and parcel of the societies and cultures in which it is found, and even though it resolves the folklore-equals-culture problem which "oral tradition" posed, this "solution" has not been embraced wholeheartedly by folklorists. The definition, in fact, succeeds too well in narrowing the field. If this definition were to be enthusiastically adopted, folklorists would have to abandon their long-





held interest in materials that either were not artistic (e.g., belief, medicine, custom), or not formulated in words (e.g., dance, music, craft). At present, most folklorists remain reluctant to do so.

This brief review is not intended to serve as a history of the emergence and development of folklore studies. It is intended, however, to illustrate concepts that have informed the characterization of folklore in the past and which continue to do so in the present. At the very least, an understanding of the problematic aspects of Dundes's definition should become apparent. One difficulty was that Dundes's list of forms failed to reflect any single underlying principle. The reason should now be clear. Dundes has listed a great variety of folklore forms, but these forms can be considered "folklore" only if several definitions are employed simultaneously. For example, such forms as myths, legends, tales, riddles, proverbs, jokes, and tongue twisters can easily be subsumed under a conception of folklore as "verbal art." But medicine, dance, festival, custom, drama, art, symbols, gestures, music, recipes, etymologies, and belief cannot, although they can be considered folklore under the definition "unwritten tradition." Epitaphs, latrinalia, limericks, envelope sealers, and autograph-book verse, however, are written forms. They might be characterized as folklore because they are expressive forms that stand apart from the "Great Tradition," apart from the formal, "official" institutions cultivated and sanctioned at the centers of position and power. House, barn, and fence types, as well as quilt and embroidery designs, are probably included because they have been given serious attention by "folklife" scholars who have emphasized studying the material aspects of the culture of some designated rural "folk." Of course, many of these forms can be conceptualized as folklore under more than one of these definitions. However, none of these definitions can be used to characterize adequately all the forms on the list. What Dundes has given us, therefore, is not a definition of folklore but a characterization of those forms, both old and new, that have fascinated folklore scholars over the past two hundred years.

The other difficulty with Dundes's list was the reintroduction of the term "folk" to qualify such diverse forms as tale, song, art, costume,

dance, music, medicine, drama, belief, metaphor, and etymology. This difficulty results from a peculiar dilemma that Dundes and most other contemporary folklorists face. On the one hand, they believe that folklore is a universal category, characteristic of all human groups rather than just some (hence the enormously expanded definition of folk as "any group of people whatsoever"). On the other hand, they do not regard folklore as simply art, music, dance, medicine, or custom whenever or wherever found. Like the earliest of the romantics, they feel that folklore is distinctive from the traditions of fine art, "classical" music and dance, haute couture, and scientific medicine cultivated by elite, urban society. Not that they regard folklore as aesthetically or spiritually superior (although some folklorists may), but they do not view it as emanating from the elite and their centers of political, cultural, and commercial power, or from institutions of media communication. In their view, folklore cannot be legislated, scripted, published, packaged, or marketed and still be folklore.

In some sense, for something to be folklore in an urban society, it must be touched and transformed by common experience — ordinary humans living their everyday lives. As the romantics heard in peasant songs and tales the echoes of an ancestral folk, and the antiquarians attended to the manners and customs of the common classes, many contemporary folklorists still seem to see in folklore the reflection of an intangible, ordinary man. In other words, folklore is often regarded as a mode of expression which emphasizes the human and personal as opposed to the formal and institutional. That is why the term "folk" came to modify tale, art, music, song, dance, and the like in Dundes's list. Since these forms are also created and communicated within the formal institutions of the privileged elite, a means had to be found to distinguish those forms that live primarily in the common, informal communication channels of ordinary people.[30]

Contemporary folklorists do document folklore in the context of the statuses and functions of elite institutions, but this folklore is invariably described as the stuff that fills the gaps and spaces between prescribed official duties and responsibilities. Very few folklorists would regard the





forms and reports generated and transmitted by Washington bureaucrats as folklore. However, the jokes about the bureaucracy that they circulate, the xeroxed cartoons and letters posted on the bulletin board, the locally generated slang used to describe the work and personnel, the office parties, and the stories the bureaucrats tell to one another at the local bar would be considered folklore by many.

Dundes's list was never fully meant to serve as a definition of folklore at all. It was more of an attempt to identify for the introductory student those forms that have traditionally interested the folklorist. But it is important to be able to identify the concepts which have directed this interest because these concepts fundamentally motivate, even if they do not adequately define, folklore research. It is important to recognize that the difficulties encountered in Dundes's definition are not idiosyncratic; they reflect larger issues in the conceptual base of the field as a whole.

For those who find brief definitions helpful, there is no dearth of contemporary formulations: "Materials . . . that circulate traditionally among members of any group in different versions, whether in oral form or by means of customary example" (1968);[31] "The hidden submerged culture lying behind the shadow of official civilization" (1968);[32] "Artistic communication in small groups" (1971);[33] "Communicative processes [and] forms . . . which evidence continuities and consistencies in human thought and behavior through time or space" (1983).[34] All these definitions have been proposed by prominent folklorists in an effort to delimit their field of study. A student, however, will benefit more from the effort to identify the concepts that underlie these definitions and from the attempt to characterize their novel implications, than from memorizing the definitions, recording them in a notebook, and accepting them uncritically.

At this point, a definition is not really necessary. The field is still being mapped and any hard and fast definition is likely to prove partial, idiosyncratic, or inconsistent. What is necessary is an orientation, however, and this orientation should be based upon those concepts that seem to regularly inform the perspective of folklorists in their research. As we have seen, folklorists seem to pursue reflections of the *communal* (a

group or collective), the *common* (the everyday rather than extraordinary), the *informal* (in relation to the formal and institutional), the *marginal* (in relation to the centers of power and privilege), the *personal* (communication face-to-face) the *traditional* (stable over time), the *aesthetic* (artistic expressions), and the *ideological* (expressions of belief and systems of knowledge). Usually, folklorists approach the study of forms, behaviors, and events with two or more of these concepts in mind. The advantage of an orientation over a definition is that it is productive rather than restrictive. It allows one to think of folklore less as a collection of things than as a perspective from which almost any number of forms, behaviors, and events may be examined.

The search for new definitions of folklore should and will go on of course. Each new definition will undoubtedly reflect new or refined concepts, introduce new perspectives, and probably create new problems. In this respect, however, the study of folklore is not unique. Art, literature, music, history, culture, philosophy, and mathematics are equally difficult to conceptualize within a single and precise definition.[35] Each of these domains is founded upon implicit and problematic concepts. The tension that such problems produce, however, may be dynamic and creative. The failure to successfully corral a field within a single, neat, handy, and mutually agreeable definition does not suggest that a field lacks value. Actually, it may indicate a special vitality and excitement. This does not mean that we do not need some working definitions with which to approach inquiry, or that we should cease our attempts to formulate comprehensive theoretical definitions. But we need not desire them or cherish them too greatly. Definition is only a regaining of equilibrium and composure from the stimulation and exhilaration of research and discovery — an intellectual "catching of the breath," so to speak. Until we participate in research and experience that discovery, we should not need to catch our breath too often.





# Notes

1. Alan Dundes, "What is Folklore?" in *The Study of Folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1965), 2.

2. Ibid., 3.

3. Robert T. Clark, Jr., *Herder: His Life and Thought* (Berkeley, Cal.: University of California Press, 1969), 147, 253.

4. For available English translations of the Grimms' works, see Grimm Brothers, *German Folk Tales*, trans. by Francis P. Magoun and Alexander H. Krappe (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1960); *The German Legends of the Brothers Grimm*, ed. and trans. by Donald Ward, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1981); Jacob Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, 4 vols., trans. from the 4th ed. with Notes and Appendix by James Stallybrass (New York: Dover Publications, 1966).

5. Ibid., 5-6, 11.

6. For a discussion of antiquarian perspectives see Francis A. de Caro, "Concepts of the Past in Folkloristics," *Western Folklore* 35 (1976): 3-22.

7. For example, see John Brand, *Observations on the Popular Antiquities of Great Britain*, 2 vols., arranged, revised, and enlarged by Sir Henry Ellis (London: Bell and Daldy, 1873). The work by Brand first appeared in 1777.

8. Ambrose Merton [W. J. Thoms], *The Athenaeum* 982(1846): 862-63.

9. Edward Burnett Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, 2 vols. (London: John Murray, 1871), 1:16.

10. Ibid., 104-8.

11. Ibid., 97-108.

12. George Laurence Gomme, ed., *The Handbook of Folklore* (London: The Folk-Lore Society, 1890), 3.

13. Tylor, 2: 539.

14. Thoms, 862.

15. "On the Field and Work of a Journal of American Folk-Lore," *Journal of American Folklore* 1(1888): 3-7.

16. "Folk-Lore and Mythology," Ibid., 163.

17. W. W. Newell, "The Study of Folk-Lore," *Transactions of the New York Academy of Sciences* 9(1890): 134-36. The term *oral tradition* had already been used by John Brand in 1777 but not as a defining principle. See John Brand, 1:xi.

18. Ralph Steele Boggs, "Folklore: Materials, Science, Art," *Folklore Americas* 3(1943): 1; Stith Thompson, "Folklore at Midcentury," *Midwest Folklore* 1(1951): 11.

19. See Gordon Hall Gerould, *The Ballad of Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1932), 163-71.

20. John Greenway, "Folk Songs as Socio-Historical Documents," *Western Folklore* 19(1960): 1-9.

21. See Åke Hultkranz, *General Ethnological Concepts*, International Dictionary of Regional European Ethnology and Folklore, vol. 1 (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1960), s.v. "Volkskunde," "Folklivsforskning."

22. Robert Redfield, *Human Nature and the Study of Human Society: The Papers of Robert Redfield*, 2 vols., ed. Margaret Park Redfield (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962), 1: 234-47.

23. Ibid., 231-32.

24. Robert Redfield, *The Little Community and Peasant Society and Culture* (Chicago: Phoenix Books, 1960), 40-42.

25. Robert Redfield, *Tepoztlan, A Mexican Village: A Study of Folk Life* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1930), 1-2.

26. Redfield, *Human Nature*, 253.

27. Richard M. Dorson, "Is There a Folk in the City?" *Journal of American Folklore* 83(1970): 185-222.

28. See William R. Bascom, "Folklore and Anthropology," *Journal of American Folklore* 66(1953): 283-90; William R. Bascom, "Verbal Art," *Journal of American Folklore* 68(1955): 242-52.

29. William R. Bascom, "Four Functions of Folklore," *Journal of American Folklore* 67(1954): 334, 336.

30. The concepts of "common" and "ordinary" are explicit in the title of the 1725 work by Henry Bourne, *Antiquitates vulgares, or the Antiquities of the Common People*, upon which John Brand's work was based; these concepts remain





explicit throughout the writings of William J. Thoms and William Wells Newell as well.

31. Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Study of American Folklore: An Introduction* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1968), 5.

32. Richard M. Dorson, *Folklore Forum* 1(1968): 37.

33. Dan Ben-Amos, "Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context," *Journal of American Folklore* 84(1971): 13.

34. Robert A. Georges, "Folklore," in *Sound Archives: A Guide to Their Establishment and Development*, ed. David Lance, International Association of Sound Archives, Special Publication 4(1983): 135.

35. For example, see Phillip J. Davis and Reuben Hersh, *The Mathematical Experience* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1981), 6-8.

## Further Readings

An overview of the development of folklore scholarship in Europe is provided by Giuseppe Cocchiara, *The History of Folklore in Europe*, translated by John N. McDaniels (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1981). The development in Britain is amply documented in Richard M. Dorson, *The British Folklorists: A History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968). Alan Dundes gives some sense of American trends in the "The American Concept of Folklore," *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 3(1966): 226-49, but also in this journal see Michael J. Bell, "William Wells Newell and the Foundation of American Folklore Scholarship," 10(1973): 7-21 and Regna Darnell, "American Anthropology and the Development of Folklore Scholarship, 1890-1920," 10(1973): 23-40. Gene Bluestein outlines the development of the romantic interest in folksong in "Herder's Folksong Ideology," *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 26(1962): 137-44. How this and other early folklore perspectives shaped later research can be glimpsed in Ellen J. Stekert, "Tylor's Theory of Survivals and National Romanticism: Their Influence on Early American Folksong Collectors," 32(1968): 209-36 in the same

journal. Alan Dundes extends the European nationalistic involvement with folk materials into the American domain in "Nationalistic Inferiority Complexes and the Fabrication of Fakelore: A Reconsideration of Ossian, the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, the *Kalevala*, and Paul Bunyan," *Journal of Folklore Research* 22(1985): 5-18. The *Midwestern Journal of Language and Lore* 3(1977) includes several essays devoted to past conceptualizations of folklore, and the journal *The Folklore Historian* (1984) is entirely devoted to the history of the discipline.

For examples of folklife studies and their emphasis on the material culture of rural societies, see Don Yoder, ed., *American Folklife* (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1976) and Geraint Jenkins, ed., *Studies in Folklife: Essays in Honour of Iowerth C. Peate* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), as well as the Welsh journals *Gwerin: A Half-Yearly Journal of Folklife* (1956) and *Folklife: A Journal of Ethnological Studies* (1963). A recent American journal is *Folklife Annual* (1985).

Åke Hultkrantz has compiled a useful dictionary of folkloric and ethnological terms and concepts in *General Ethnological Concepts*, International Dictionary of Regional European Ethnology and Folklore, vol. 1 (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1960). Many of the essays in *Toward New Perspectives in Folklore*, edited by Americo Parédes and Richard Bauman (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1971) [*Journal of American Folklore* 84(1971): iii-171] critically examine basic folklore concepts and definitions. For useful overviews of the theoretical perspectives brought to the analysis of folklore materials, see Richard M. Dorson, "Current Folklore Theories," *Current Anthropology* 4(1963): 93-112; J. L. Fischer, "The Sociopsychological Analysis of Folktales," *Current Anthropology* 4(1963): 235-95; and Thomas A. Burns, "Folkloristics: A Conception of Theory," *Western Folklore* 36(1977): 109-34.



# Chapter 2
# Ethnic Groups and Ethnic Folklore

Elliott Oring

Ethnicity seems an omnipresent force in contemporary American society. When people are hungry, a host of restaurants offer "ethnic cuisines" which compete for their attention and capital. They read in the newspapers of numerous ethnic events, festivals, and other entertainments which vie for their attendance during leisurely weekend afternoons. They decorate their homes and offices with "ethnic" objects and enjoy exchanging ethnic jokes with neighbors and friends. When they apply for jobs, they may be requested to fill out ethnic identification forms which require that they locate themselves in one of several predefined ethnic categories. The pervasiveness of the ethnic idea might lead us to assume that both the term and the concept are ancient. This assumption, however, is only partially true.

The term "ethnic" indeed derives from ancient Greek words — "*ethnos*" and "*ethnikos*" — the first meaning "nation" and the second having the sense of "heathen" or "Gentile." This latter notion of "heathen" or "pagan" (derived from the New Testament Greek usage) dominated the sense of the English term "ethnic" well into the nineteenth century. The term was generally applied to peoples who were neither Jewish nor Christian; in other words, not of God's chosen. In the mid-nineteenth century, the term came to characterize groupings conceptualized on the basis of race or nationality, and only in the twentieth century did it become common to characterize as "ethnic"