

ON THE POSSIBILITIES OF FOLKLORE EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

Every fall new students flock to the folklore departments in increasing numbers in hopes of learning something about our discipline, many with serious intentions of basing a professional career on the education they will receive there. The following comments reflect my opinion of the kind of education the folklore student should receive and of the possibilities of getting it at Indiana University or probably at any other university in the United States. These remarks are in part an outgrowth of reflection on such questions over a long period of time and in part inspired by observations of an entirely different system of folklore education made during my stay in Finland last year.

Folklore research should be a science; i.e., its subject matter should be studied scientifically. This presumes a body of carefully collected data, methods of analysis developed specifically for this data and possibilities for verifying conclusions drawn from the analysis. It is an accepted fact that for statistically significant conclusions, more than just a few variants of a tale, song or proverb are needed in original folklore research. To learn about the folklore of a people, to get to know a genre thoroughly, or even to know the repertoire of one individual, a large collection including all the relevant cultural data is necessary. Familiarization with actual living folklore should be the first step in the education of the folklorist. One cannot really hope to become a folklorist without actually working with folklore material in all its phases from the oral to the printed text. Knowledge of what takes place with the folklore when captured from the living context on tape, transcribed, edited and perhaps published is absolutely necessary for the understanding of these materials.

Field work is essential for the insights it gives into the functions of folklore and for the perspective it provides about the nature of the material, but it is not sufficient for more significant analysis of the materials. For this, comparative material is required to eliminate what is accidental, spurious or distorted. To know where the collected item stands in relation to similar material is of utmost importance in drawing conclusions concerning it.

Most European countries possess archives containing thousands of variants of items in all genres for their students to learn from and to work with, materials which supplement experience in the field. What does the American student have in the way of similar facilities? Presumably he has received instruction in the scientific handling of folklore data. The troublesome question remains: where does he apply the fine-sounding techniques he learned in the classroom? In most cases he is left with a lot of unverified theories dreamed up by some armchair or textbook folklorist, which, if applied to actual data, would in most cases be totally irrelevant or unusable. If the student is fortunate enough to have made a good field collection himself, he has nothing to check it against or compare it with. Instead of being confronted with real problems posed by actual data, the students are forced to work with texts divorced from their cultural background, texts collected by dubious methods, selected, edited and so forth.

The implications of the lack of the above-mentioned prerequisites for folklore study and research (and the two are really inseparable) are ob-

vious to students seriously concerned with folklore. To make up for the decades of neglect will not be an easy task, but the problems will have to be confronted sooner or later if we wish to see folklore considered as a serious discipline. Without going into the practical problems inevitably to be encountered, I make the following suggestions as first steps toward remedying the situation:

1. To make the Indiana University Folklore Archives and other established and budding university archives usable for students for learning and research, full-time archivists should be hired to organize and maintain them.
2. Have students participate actively in archive work. A number of hours of work per credit could be required of all folklore majors.
3. Initiate large scale collecting by various methods, such as those so successfully employed in many European countries.
4. Intensify individual student collecting.
5. Emphasize collecting in specific locales or of genres in which some possibility of acquiring a usable collection exists. As long as plenty of live material exists, it would be a waste of time to attempt to collect survival items of practically dead genres, except for specific projects requiring such data.
6. Integrate the archived material already available into the content of courses in order to illustrate points made, as well as to facilitate original research to meet course requirements by students.

For skeptics who doubt that there is much left to collect, I would like to point out that collecting done during the past few years by I.U. students alone has shown that much valuable material can still be gathered from practically all the immigrant groups in the United States and Canada. Also, the folklore of the Indians is by no means yet exhausted. The possibilities for rewarding field work in this country still exist. If the need is recognized, the manpower for collecting and archiving can be easily obtained. Those who benefit will be all those seriously interested in folklore. I do not mean to say that all that is necessary for a sound folklore education is a huge archives. I only wish to point out that without the "lore" there can be no folklorists.

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Editors' note: Mr. Salo spent 1967-68 in Finland, studying under the auspices of the Fulbright program.