

FOLKLORE AND THE FORCES OF MODERNITY

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Among the most formative concepts in our discipline is the classic notion of folk society, the traditional, agrarian, homogeneous, localized, face-to-face community considered to be the privileged locus of those forms of expression we call folklore. One of the great ironies of our intellectual history as folklorists, however, is that the discipline of folklore emerged just at the time that traditional folk society, as ideally conceived, was recognized as a declining way of life under the impact of technological and economic change. Every folklorist knows that the term that names our discipline in English and many other languages was coined in 1846.¹ But very few, I suspect, are aware of some other contemporary coinages, like "industrialism," introduced by Carlyle in the 1830s to indicate a new order of society based on mechanical production, or "industrial revolution," identifying a major social change, amounting to a new order of life, which came into increasingly common usage in English during the mid-to late-1840s.² This same decade also witnessed a great burgeoning of popular journalism and cheap fiction, what we now identify as elements of the mass media that have supplanted much of traditional folk expression; it is worth noting, then, that the use of the term "mass" in this sense, pertaining to the multitude, but also carrying the connotation of "lowness" or "vulgarity," stems from the 1830s.³ The contemporaneity of "folklore" with these other terms, which label contrasting conditions or phenomena, is far from accidental; Thoms himself saw much of folklore as "now entirely lost," "neglected," "fading,"⁴ and so have most other people since then.

(Author's note: This paper represents the introductory section of my presentation in Bloomington, March 4, 1982. The remainder of the paper was devoted to illustration of some of the points suggested in this introduction, based on data collected by students and colleagues at the University of Texas. As they have subsequently revived their intention of publishing the results of their research themselves, I am not at liberty to do so here.)

For a time, it was possible to hold the impending demise of folk society at bay, as long as people's memories and remote pockets of persistence were still available to be tapped and yielded sufficient folkloric riches to sustain the effort. But for the past fifty years or so--certainly since World War II--the sense of crisis among folklorists has become increasingly acute as technological change, the mass media, popular culture, literacy, formal education and tourists have penetrated to the most remote corners of the world, let alone to those formerly isolated byways most commonly thought of as folk cultural regions.

American folklorists appear to have had two principal responses to this problem. The first of these might be termed a retreat into tradition and homogeneity: some of us have intensified our efforts to locate the last of the relic areas and the declining forms and mine them for all they are worth. There's more than a touch of the nostalgic romantic in most of us, and we're still understandably attracted to the old stuff. There has also, however, been an adaptive reorientation in our conception of the folk. That is, we have come to concentrate increasingly on those social contexts and spheres of social relations that appear to retain most persistently the character that we attribute to traditional folk society, namely the face-to-face, intimate, customary, unofficial, shared quality of interaction and communication conducive to the traditional forms and modes of folk expression that are generically or formally familiar to us--stories, sayings, children's folklore, and so on. Hence, for example, the recent rise of interest in family folklore. Hence too the growth of interest in notions of the folk as "any group of people whatsoever who "share" at least one common factor"⁵; it is shared identity, homogeneity--however limited--that is considered to make for folklore.

The second major strategy employed by folklorists in the face of the decline of traditional folk society is to try to confront the processes and effects of modernity head on. The easy course is a surrender to pop culture (I'm revealing my bias here), on the basis of its continuities--of form, function, content, or social currency--with traditional folklore. For those with a strong enough stomach for spurious culture (here, as in

so much else, I follow Edward Sapir),⁶ I suppose that's fine. Much harder--and rarer--is the effort to really comprehend what modernity means and to see what genuine expressive and esthetic responses emerge to deal with it.

What, then, do I mean by modernity? The subject is a vast and complex one and I cannot hope to do it full justice within the scope of this brief presentation. For present purposes, I will concentrate on two tendencies that are central to all discussions of the forces of modernity, namely, social differentiation and centralization. By "differentiation," I mean the process by which "social life constantly subdivides and reorganizes itself in ever-increasing complexity",⁷ the range of categorical distinctions used to differentiate among members of society increases, and social relationships become more and more functionally specific in Parson's terms, less and less functionally diffuse.⁸ In more semiotic terms, differentiation might be defined by reference to the number of specialized social symbols maintained by a given system.⁹ "Centralization" refers to the process by which levels of social interdependency and integration grow successively higher and local structures are progressively incorporated into more and more centralized ones. There is an enormous social science literature on these processes--in anthropology, sociology, political science, government--but, considering that these are the forces pushing classic folk society to the wall, astonishingly few studies by folklorists take them centrally into account.

My own early ventures into these matters, though some have found them suggestive for certain purposes, appear in retrospect just to be nibbling around the edges of the problem. I argued in "Differential Identity and the Social Base of Folklore"¹⁰ that our traditional concept of the homogeneous folk society and the more recent formulations that continue to insist on a dimension of homogeneity in pointing to shared identity as the basis of a (neo-) folk group impose a set of blinders on us, skewing our attention away from conditions under which **differences** of identity--social differentiation--give shape to the social use of folklore. The focus in that article is on identity differences in the face-to-face use of verbal folklore, small scale, small-group

forms. The problem is, though, that this does not really get at the issue of modernity. Indeed, it may rightly be argued that insofar as every society, no matter how small-scale it may be, is an organization of diversity,¹¹ differential identity may be a potential operative factor in the social use of folklore in any society. That is, social differentiation is a factor in all societies; what is at issue is the relative proliferation of differentiatational principles, which reach quantitative extremes in modern, technologically advanced societies.

More recently, I have been led back to thinking about the problem of modernity through the work of some of our Texas folklore group, especially in the course of working on *And Other Neighborly Names*,¹² a collection of essays on Texas folklore assembled by Roger Abrahams and myself in honor of our colleague Américo Paredes. Among the major themes of the book are the rich social and cultural diversity of Texas and the formative influence of this diversity on folk expression. Roger Abrahams was led in his closing essay, summarizing the collection and looking toward future concerns, to identify an emergent reorientation in our work from "the more homely, private segments of life" and "lore which is commonly performed within the confines of a group socially... set apart from others"¹³ to the more public, celebratory enactments--festivals, fairs, meets, etc.--that he calls display events, suggesting that "if one wishes to find a successful model for cultural pluralism in operation, let him or her look to these fairs and festivals--as the folk have for millenia."¹⁴

Of course, there is a long-established tradition of studying these events in anthropology--from Durkheim to Geertz and Turner, from liminal to liminoid--that is coming back into its own in contemporary scholarship, but American folklorists have been remarkably reluctant to attend to them. Perhaps this is because they are viewed as too complex, too multiseimiotic, too heterogeneous, and cannot be comprehended in terms of the single isolable text, object, or homogenous small group so favored by folklorists. This is too bad, because such events lead more directly and immediately to sociologically significant insights

concerning the large scale effects of modernity than the forms on which we have hitherto focused our attentions. I believe that the forces of modernity, including prominently differentiation and centralization, are played out in complex and revealing ways in these public enactments of community, especially in contemporary community-based festivals (not to be confused with staged, contrived "folk festivals"). These processes certainly represent powerful factors in the everyday life of the community, but festival events have given them a concreteness and immediacy that they may not have in daily life by making them into enactments and framing them as public displays.¹⁵ Display heightens the process of objectification by setting things off in special contexts, marking them with special intensity as being on view, available for examination, contemplation, reflection. What I am suggesting is that the community-based festival represents a mechanism by which the members of a community deal expressively with the forces of modernity. As such, festivals offer us, as folklorists, the opportunity to come to terms with these large-scale social processes ourselves.

NOTES

1. William Thoms, "Folklore," in *The Study of Folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1965), pp. 4-6.
2. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 137-38.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 160; idem, *The Long Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), p. 56.
4. Thoms, p. 5.
5. Dundes, p. 2.
6. Edward Sapir, "Culture, Genuine and Spurious," in *Selected Writings of Edward Sapir*, ed. David G. Mandelbaum (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press,

1924; rpt. 1963), pp. 308-31.

7. Dean MacCannell, **The Tourist** (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), p. 11.

8. James Peacock, **Consciousness and Change: Symbolic Anthropology in Evolutionary Perspective** (New York: John Wiley, 1975), pp. 9.

9. Frank Young and Ruth C. Young, **Comparative Studies of Community Growth** (Morgantown, W.Va.: West Virginia University, 1973), p. 12.

10. Richard Bauman, "Differential Identity and the Social Base of Folklore," in **Toward New Perspectives in Folklore**, eds. Américo Paredes and Richard Bauman (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1972).

11. Anthony F. C. Wallace, **Culture and Personality** 2nd ed. (New York: Random House, 1970).

12. Richard Bauman and Roger D. Abrahams, **"And Other Neighborly Names": Social Process and Cultural Image in Texas Folklore** (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

13. Roger D. Abrahams, "Shouting Match at the Border: The Folklore of Display Events," in **"And Other Neighborly Names"**, pp. 304-5.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 304.

15. Beverly Stoltje, "Researching the American Festival," in **The Handbook of American Folklore**, ed. Richard M. Dorson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983).