

## The Concept of Nidality and Its Potential Application to Folklore

Thomas Adler  
Indiana University

A significant source of problems in the conceptualizing of folklore today may be due to the attempt to reconcile two fundamentally different approaches to the discipline. The first of these is oriented towards items (i.e., human artworks, artifacts, or mentifacts, sensate products of man's emotions and intellect) and seeks to deal with problems that are conceived as being directly related to the items in question. This approach is the historically significant one in folklore; it is clearly a part of the model used since the heyday of the popular antiquarians and continued up to the present day. The types of questions generated by this approach, though difficult to properly answer, are themselves easy to understand. Folklorists have wondered, for example, where and when items originated, who possesses them, how they function, and (lately) how they are structured.

The second approach, partly winnowed from the products of other disciplines and partly the result of our own changing directions of inquiry, is oriented towards abstract concepts in the light of which whole classes or genres of items may be dealt with. This approach is much more recent, though of no inherently greater worth, than the first. Its areas of inquiry are much more elusive. The key concepts are abstractions such as "behavior," "process," "institutions," or "communications."

Although folkloric study may proceed from either of these directions, it should be understood that neither approach is sacrosanct. Both are academic conveniences, and the confusing, shadowy middleground--which is the area sometimes called the "materials of folklore"--can be reached and dealt with completely only if both approaches are used.

A notion that may be of some use in relating these two broad "approaches" is that of nidality.<sup>1</sup> The term refers to a relatively recent concept in parasitology and epidemiology, dealt with mostly in the work of Evgeny N. Pavlovsky, who introduced his "Theory of Natural Nidality" in 1939. Pavlovsky "pointed out that certain diseases occur naturally in wildlife and are transmitted to man by arthropod vectors when he invades their nidus"<sup>2</sup> or focus of infection. In actual fact, the term nidus (pl. nidi) has been in use in zoology since at least 1742, and more to the point of this paper, in use in a figurative sense since 1778; according to the latter, one can define a nidus as "a place in which something is formed, deposited, settled, or located."<sup>3</sup>

By extension, nidus may be used by folklorists to mean the set of locations and circumstances under which a cultural item is found or could exist if it were introduced. A nidus should be clearly distinguished from a "cultural context," in that nidality (i.e., the property of being nidal, or existing in nidi) is more generic, and focuses attention on the factors necessary for the appearance of an item in a given context. In a sense, one could also define a nidus as the common denominator of all the cultural contexts in which a given type of item appears, or could appear. It should be obvious that, for our purposes, the nidus concept does not convey or connote any sense of disease or parasitism or ethical taint. It is a useful concept

precisely because--like the older approach to folklore studies--it is centered on items, and yet it inherently involves important notions from the other approach, e.g., culture, context, behavior, communication, interaction, and so forth. In describing the tidality of an item, be it legend or house-type or musical style, we are attempting to isolate the specific factors within "culture," "context," "behavior," etc., that are necessary to the existence and manifesting of the item. A preliminary example may help to make the nidus concept more easily understood.

Bluegrass music has been of interest to at least a few folklorists since its appearance as an important aspect of the folksong revival of the early 1960's. The specifics of folkloristic interest in bluegrass need not be completely laid bare here, since they have been ably articulated in Journal of American Folklore articles by Neil V. Rosenberg and L. Mayne Smith and a Folklore Forum article by Howard Wight Marshall.<sup>4</sup> A bit of general background is in order, however: bluegrass music is a complex style of string band music which is derived from several isolable precursors that are considered--usually without question--to be traditional. These precursors include the Appalachian-centered instrumental traditions of the 5-string banjo and fiddle, the "fasola" vocal tradition of the Southern highlands,<sup>5</sup> and a broad stream of Afro-American music that centers on blues and jazz.<sup>6</sup> Bluegrass is characterized mostly by the instruments on which it is played (acoustic guitar, 5-string banjo, fiddle, bass, and mandolin) and the specific roles which the instruments play in the production of a song or tune. The music became known as bluegrass through a generic extension of the name of its main exponent, Bill Monroe and His Bluegrass Boys. (The name "Bluegrass Boys" was in turn the creation of Bill Monroe, and was intended as a reference to and an honor for Monroe's native state of Kentucky). Although often thought of as an old type of music, bluegrass only dates to about 1945; at that time the instrumental style of the Bluegrass Boys first achieved the basic form which exists to this day.<sup>7</sup>

A central concern of L. Mayne Smith's M.A. thesis on bluegrass is indicated by its subtitle: "An Introductory Study of a Musical Style in Its Cultural Context."<sup>8</sup> Smith, following the lead of his mentor Alan Merriam, felt that a musical style can only be understood if its "cultural context" is dealt with. In his own attempt to define the cultural context of bluegrass, Smith included the following observations (presented here in abbreviated form):

1. Bluegrass is a musical style of the South, especially the upland or Appalachian South; it is played by white Southerners.
2. Bluegrass is played exclusively by males, on non-electrified instruments.
3. Bluegrass music is presented as a commercial form, especially on radio and television shows, on phonograph records, in bars and taverns, at county fairs and racetracks, and on weekends in outdoor park bandstands throughout the South.
4. Bluegrass music is not used as dance music.
5. Bluegrass is intimately tied to evangelical Christianity, and "gospel" music is a large and important subset of the musical style itself.<sup>9</sup>
6. Bluegrass is characterized most especially by the major solo role of the 5-string banjo, which is played in a three-finger style or styles derived from that first played publicly by Earl Scruggs about 1945.
7. The instruments and voices of bluegrass music fill very specialized and highly formalized roles, and change according to predictable patterns.
8. The apparent social distance between bluegrass musicians and their audience is not great.

9. Audiences at bluegrass shows comprise mostly rural and blue-collar families.
10. Bluegrass bands tend to be identified with their band leader. (As a corollary, many bluegrass bands' names are built around the leader's name: Bill Monroe and His Bluegrass Boys, Lester Flatt and the Nashville Grass, Jimmy Martin and the Sunny Mountain Boys, Mainer's Mountaineers, Red Allen and the Kentuckians. These naming patterns would themselves make a fascinating study.)

To sum up, the cultural context of bluegrass may be defined by the factors given above and by Smith's own words: "The participants, be they general audience, special aficionados of bluegrass, or professional musicians, conceive themselves to be members of essentially the same, rural-and-blue-collar, Southern-based social group."<sup>10</sup>

However, as Smith, Rosenberg, and others have noted, bluegrass music has to a significant extent invaded a different sub-culture, with the observable creation of new social contexts for the same musical form. Rosenberg--who confirmed Smith's view of the cultural context of bluegrass in slightly different terms ("...old rural values such as fundamentalist religion....")<sup>11</sup> --clearly stated what happened:

In the late 1950's the folksong revival discovered and accepted Bluegrass as folk music, for three reasons: it did not use the electric instruments then identified with the mass culture "pap" of rock'n'roll and popular Country-Western music; Bluegrass recordings included a large number of traditional or tradition-based songs;<sup>12</sup> and its instrumental styles, especially that of Earl Scruggs on the five-string banjo, were seen as exciting innovations based on folk styles which appealed to the revivalists. From 1959 on, many bands played at folk festivals, colleges, and coffee houses to a new and enthusiastic audience. This affected the repertory of most bands and the style of a few bands; in general it stimulated the popularity and salability of the music.<sup>13</sup>

A comparison of Smith's findings on the cultural context of bluegrass with the contemporary situation clearly shows the extent to which a different set of musical and cultural premises is now associated with bluegrass. Bluegrass music is now seen to be--in addition to Smith's findings--a style played by Northerners as well as Southerners, by females as well as males, on both electric and non-electric instruments. It is still presented as a commercial form, but is found as often in coffee houses, pizza parlors, and college concerts as it is in bars, taverns, and outdoor park bandstands. Bluegrass is occasionally used as dance music now, is often divorced from its emphatically-Christian stance, and is performed for audiences whose orientation is Northern, urban, and student or white-collar. The names of many newer bluegrass bands reflect this change; instead of describing a band as the possession of a patriarchal leader, a band name will demonstrate its members' equality (e.g., The South County Rounders, the Jordan River Ramblers, the Haystack Mountain Boys) or their ability to pun (e.g., Wry Grass, Monroe Doctrine, Phantoms of the Opry) or even their relation to the music they play (e.g., The Newgrass Revival, The Bluegrass Crusade, The Nu-Grass Pickers).

A third set of contexts, the specifics of which are not well known, are those which characterize the startling phenomenon of Japanese bluegrass music. Since at least the early 1960's there has been an amazingly large number of Japanese bluegrass fans and musicians; they have been deeply involved in all the same types of bluegrass behavior that are to be found in the United States (e.g., concern with instruments and their history, familiarity with the most prominent bands, etc.) and those few of them who have visited bluegrass festivals and concerts in the U.S. have consistently impressed the locals with their command of the idiom both musically and culturally. The details of Japanese bluegrass, however, have not been investigated by academics,<sup>14</sup> and so the specifics of function, social context, and significance of Japanese bluegrass are not known. It seems safe, however, to regard the appearance of bluegrass music in Japan as a third major instance of the same musical form's existence in a different set of contexts.<sup>15</sup>

The study of bluegrass music can benefit from the realization that this single musical form clearly exists in at least three nidi, as presented briefly above. Instead of noting the emically-insignificant differences between the three musical forms, folklorists would do well to focus on the cultural factors that have permitted bluegrass (musical bluegrass) to flourish in three different sets of contexts. It is clear that such factors should be seen as significant both emically and etically. For example, bluegrass banjoists in traditional bluegrass culture (by which I mean the nidus delineated by Smith) are known to be highly competitive, often encountering one another in subtly-structured duels or contests of ability and proficiency. The awareness of two other nidi for bluegrass should prompt our investigation of "competition" as a determinant of bluegrass music: no such investigations have yet been undertaken. Indeed, the very meaning of "bluegrass" has not been studied from the point-of-view of the participants in these three nidi. The nidality concept itself is not, of course, a solution to anything except an analytic/terminological/ideational muddle. It is hoped that the notion of nidality can help us to ignore the less meaningful areas of inquiry that we construct around the objects of our interests. If it can, we may find ourselves on the way to a workable synthesis of the two approaches available to us now.

#### NOTES

1. This paper has been developed from my first introduction to the concept of nidality by my good friend F. K. Plous, Jr., the translator of Norman D. Levine's editions of several basic Russian works dealing with nidality; I have also benefited from discussing the idea with two of my fellow students, Barry L. Pearson and Howard Wight Marshall.
2. Norman D. Levine, "Editor's Preface," in Norman D. Levine, ed., Natural Nidality of Diseases and Questions of Parasitology, translated by F. K. Plous, Jr., (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1968), v. One of the best simple explanations of biological midality is found in Percy C. C. Garnham, Progress in Parasitology (London: The Athlone Press, 1971), 8ff.
3. These dates and the definition are from the entry "Nidus," Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933) VII, p. 135.

4. Specifically: Neil V. Rosenberg, "From Sound to Style: The Emergence of Bluegrass," Journal of American Folklore 80 (1967): 143-150; and L. Mayne Smith, "An Introduction to Bluegrass," Journal of American Folklore 78 (1965): 245-256; and Howard Wight Marshall, "'Open Up Them Pearly Gates:' Pattern and Religious Expression in Bluegrass Gospel Music," Folklore Forum 4 (1971): 92-112. L. Mayne Smith's ideas are also presented at length in his work Bluegrass Music and Musicians: An Introductory Study of a Musical Style in Its Cultural Context (Indiana University, unpublished M.A. thesis, 1964).
5. Cf. George Pullen Jackson, White Spirituals in the Southern Uplands (New York: Dover Publications, 1965).
6. Jazz is often thought of as being a non-traditional or derivative style itself. Still, jazz has had a good deal to do with the molding of the contemporary bluegrass tradition.
7. An excellent synopsis of the history of bluegrass can be found in Bill C. Malone's Country Music, U.S.A. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968), 305-328.
8. L. Mayne Smith, Bluegrass Music and Musicians.
9. Howard Marshall's article carefully explores the special place that gospel music has in bluegrass.
10. L. Mayne Smith, "Introduction to Bluegrass," p. 255.
11. Neil V. Rosenberg, "From Sound to Style," p. 148.
12. Cf.. Thomas Adler, "The Ballad in Bluegrass Music,"
13. Neil V. Rosenberg, "From Sound to Style" Folklore Forum 7 (1974):3-48.
14. Apart from a few records of Japanese bluegrass bands (issued mostly by American companies), materials on this phenomenon are limited. The salient instances of academic interest in Japanese bluegrass are both by Neil V. Rosenberg: "Nine Reasons For Getting Acquainted with a Japanese Bluegrass Fan," Bluegrass Unlimited (1967): 5-7; and his review of Bluegrass Music, by Toru Mitsui, in the John Edwards Memorial Foundation Quarterly 5 (1969): 31-33.
15. Bluegrass groups have also been formed in France, England, Australia, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Germany, Canada, and Sweden, but only in Japan and the United States has it become more than a local phenomenon.