

The Folklore Period

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ABSTRACT

Leaving aside cases of lifelong dedication, is there a period in life when a person would be most likely to cultivate folklore? This piece argues that there is, and it is in a person's twenties and thirties. Various historical examples are adduced to support this proposition. Then seeming (and real) exceptions to this generalization are discussed, and a series of possible explanations for this phenomenon are put forward. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications of this phenomenon, and questions for the future.

KEYWORDS

Folklorists; Activity; Life-course; Youth; Age

RESUM

Deixant de banda els casos de dedicació al llarg de la vida, hi ha un període de la vida en què és més probable que una persona conreï el folklore? Aquest article argumenta que n'hi ha, i és als anys vint i trenta d'una persona. Es donen diversos exemples històrics per donar suport a aquesta proposta. A continuació, es discuteixen aparents (i reals) excepcions a aquesta generalització i es presenten una sèrie de possibles explicacions d'aquest fenomen. L'article conclou amb una discussió sobre les implicacions d'aquest fenomen i preguntes per al futur.

PARAULES CLAU

folkloristes; activitat; curs vital; joventut; edat

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Recently a critic provided a brief outline of the life of a typical novelist. Such a person would “start publishing between 25 and 35, and write a novel respectably every two or three years until they die” (Hensher 2021). We might contrast such a life with what is stereotypically held to be a course of a mathematician’s life: to peak creatively before thirty, and then to tread water. In the light of these notions, what might be the life of a typical folklorist? Would such a person be like the mathematician, do their best work early and fade away? Or would they, like the novelist, start issuing their work between 25 and 35, and publish a folklore title respectably every two or three years until they die? There certainly are some people who have worked all their lives at folklore. The heroic figures of Evald Tang Kristensen (1843 – 1929) and Giuseppe Pitrè (1841 – 1916) come to mind as two examples of the category of lifelong folklorist. Indeed, lifelong folklorists are to be found throughout the various corners of the discipline, from famous figures, such as Jacob Grimm (1785-1863), through moderately well-known ones such as Richard Wossidlo (1859-1939), to those who as yet remain somewhat obscure to the wider world, such as Dam Jaarsma (1914-1991). And at international gatherings today, we often enough encounter individuals who have worked with folklore their whole lives, whether in academia or in the public sphere—for it is nowadays possible, at least in some territories, to work professionally as a folklorist for one’s entire professional life. Yet such professional options were not available for some of the key characters in folklore studies. As the history books tell us, many of these people were not so much first and foremost folklorists as they were polymaths (or, at the other end of the spectrum, dilettantes), people for whom folklore was only one of the several strings they had to their bows. Indeed, many of the people folklorists might identify first and foremost as fellow folklorists, tend to be identified (whether in biographical dictionaries, encyclopedias, or in the metadata of public archives) as something else—authors, vicars, lawyers, linguists, and so on. This reflects how people had careers to pursue, and maintained their interest in folklore as a hobby. But for all this, there is also something else that is not mentioned in the histories of folklorists, namely that their interest in folklore was often at its height at a distinct period in their lives. This “folklore period” in the individual life is the subject of this brief communication.

1. Some Examples of Folklore Periods

We might begin with the case of James Britten (1846 – 1924). In the standard British biographical dictionary, he is identified as a “botanist and Roman Catholic propagandist” (Stearn 2004). This description, while fair, is not comprehensive: nothing is mentioned about his folklore activities. Happily, Roy Vickery (1978) has documented these. Britten was, for example, a founder-member of the [British] Folklore Society, he authored various notes on plant-lore, including “Plant Lore Notes on Mrs Latham’s West Sussex Superstitions” in the first issue of the Society’s journal, he edited and annotated the *Remaines*, the seventeenth-century folklore collection of John Aubrey, and he was the joint-editor of the *Dictionary of English Plant Names*, a work which does contain a modicum of folklore. Besides describing his folkloristic activities, Vickery also makes the following observation:

Britten's interest in folklore first became apparent whilst he was in his early twenties, but had ceased to be active by the time he reached forty (Vickery 1978: 71).

It is precisely this epoch in a person's life, the early or mid-twenties to the mid or late thirties, which I suggest represents the typical "folklore period" of an individual.

Pavel Florensky (1882 – 1937) was a true polymath. A priest, who also had serious interests in physics, mathematics, electrical engineering, and philosophy, amongst other topics, he has sometimes been spoken of as a Russian da Vinci. In addition to all this, he also had an interest in folklore, publishing a collection of *chastushki*, the short, humorous and often satirical rhymes typical of Russian popular culture (Florensky 1910). This publication fell within the typical "folklore period", appearing when he was aged 28). If we turn to the example of Italo Calvino (1923 – 1985), find while he is remembered as an author of novels, short stories, and essays, he too had his folklore period. Shortly after turning away from his earlier realist writings, he began a fabulist period with the novella *Il visconte dimezzato*, written when he was 28. In 1954, when he was 32, the publisher Giulio Einaudi commissioned him to compile an Italian equivalent of the Grimms' tales. Calvino's *Fiabe Italiane* was published in 1956. During this time, he also closely studied the *Morphology* and the *Historical Roots* of Vladimir Propp, and corresponded on folklore matters with Cesare Pavese, Giuseppe Cocchiara, and Ernesto De Martino (Calabrese and Cruso 2008). Yet, though he lived on another three decades, he was to publish no more folklore books after this date.

There are other great European writers interested in folklore, who rather than work with published collections like Calvino, went out into the field to collect folklore. In the summer of 1862, aged 34, Henrik Ibsen (1828 – 1906) set off on his folklore collecting trip in the remoter areas of Norway, sponsored by the Akademiske Kollegium. It was the only time in his life he was to collect folklore. In 1864, he left Norway for Italy, and after writing *Peer Gynt* (1867), a work which shows the influence of Norwegian folklore, he soon turned away from folklore to realist dramas, in the shape of *The Pillars of Society* (1877) and *The Doll's House* (1879). Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749 – 1832) collected German folksongs in Alsace in his early twenties (see Strohbach 1982). The model of these songs was behind verse he wrote at this time. "Goethe could hardly have come closer to the impossible, to writing a true folk-song" says one of his biographers of *Röslein auf die Heide* (Boyle 1992: 113). However, after his move to Weimar at the age of 26 (and even more after his Italian journey, which began when he was aged 37), the folklore note fades from his writings.

In histories of literature and folklore, the name of Thomas Percy (1729 – 1811), the compiler of the *Reliques*, is often swiftly followed by the sobriquet "the Bishop of Dromore". This gives a rather false impression however, as he was only appointed to a Bishopric in 1782, when he was over fifty, whereas his folklore work came much earlier than this. Born in 1729, he found the famous manuscript of folksongs that now bears his name in 1753, aged 24. His publications fill his thirties – *Runic Poetry* (1763), *Reliques* (1765), his translation of *Northern Antiquities* (1770). As the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* notes, "after the early 1770s Percy wrote little" (Palmer 2006). In other words, his folklore period spans his life between 24 and 41. (The one exception to this being his abandoned edition of

Ancient Songs Chiefly on Moorish Subjects that was ready for publication in 1775, but which he did not bring to the press. It was not published till 1932).

James Orchard Halliwell (1820 – 1889) is typically thought of as an “antiquary and literary scholar” (Edwards 2004). Yet his vast literary output also includes folklore works: when he was 22 the *Nursery Rhymes of England* appeared, when he was 27 his *Dictionary of Archaic and Provincial Words, Obsolete Phrases, Proverbs, and Ancient Customs* (1846-7) saw the light, and when he was 29 his *Popular Rhymes and Nursery Tales of England* (1849) appeared in print. After this date he focussed on publishing on topics such as Shakespeare. Halliwell had, at the age of 20, become one of the founder members of both the Percy Society and the Shakespeare Society. His commitment to the Percy Society was such that between 1841 and 1850 he produced 22 volumes of their series entitled “Early English Poetry, Ballads, and Popular Literature of the Middle Ages”. But in the end, his interest in folklore waned, while his interest in Shakespeare remained. One event that may signally mark the end of his folklore period is his sale of a series of Restoration broadside ballads to William Euing of Glasgow for £260 in 1856. This sale is the reason Halliwell’s collection is now known as the Euing, rather than the Halliwell, Collection (Holloway 1971). He was then aged 36.

Yuri Lotman (1922 – 1993) is remembered as a semiotician and as a theorist and historian of culture. In his youth he was deeply interested in folklore, having studied with Vladimir Propp and Mark Azadovsky. Even during his wartime service, he managed to collect the words of folk songs he heard. He might have developed under the guidance of Azadovsky into being first and foremost a folklorist, had it not been for his discovery of an archive of Decembrist material in the late 1940s, when he was in his late twenties.

George Frederick Abbott (1874 – 1947) is remembered, at least by Wikipedia, as a “war correspondent and author”. But in his youth Abbott won renown as a folklorist. His anthology *Songs of Modern Greece* was published when he was twenty-six. This publication helped him secure a grant to undertake fieldwork in Greek-speaking parts of the Ottoman Empire, and the outcome of this research, *Macedonian Folk-Lore*, was published in 1903, when he was 29. Though it was positively reviewed by contemporary luminaries such as van Gennep, Hartland, and W.H.D. Rouse, he wrote no more folklore works after that date. His interest in that such places continued, but although Abbott continue to write about Greece and Turkey, it was in the ambits of popular history and journalism, rather than folklore.

Elisabeth Greenleaf Bristol (1895 – 1980) was another figure who was only active in the sphere of folklore during her youth. She encountered folk song during her spells teaching in western Newfoundland in 1920 and 1921, then, following her marriage and the birth of her son, she revisited the island aged 34 to record further songs, and to revisit earlier informants, this time accompanied by a trained musician to notate the melodies. She turned the song material she collected into a book, *Ballad and Sea-Songs of Newfoundland*, that was published in 1933, when she was 38. It seems that she published nothing else on folklore, beyond a solitary article on riddles in her forty-third year (Greenleaf 1938), which was also based on her youthful field experience.

Achim von Arnim (1781 – 1831) and Clemens Brentano (1778 – 1842) compiled the volumes of *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* in 1806 and 1808. They were 28 and 30

respectively, when the final volume appeared. While von Arnim wrote literary works after this, as did Brentano before subsequently withdrawing to a monastery, neither of them were to work with folklore again. Just Mathias Thiele (1795 – 1874) is a key figure in Danish folklore history by warrant of his collections of legends. Four volumes of these, *Danske Folkesagn I-IV*, appeared in quick succession, the last in 1823, when he was aged 28. Later in life he became an art historian and administrator. Nevertheless, he did subsequently issue two more folklore publications: two volumes of *Danmarks Folkesagn* in 1843, and a third in 1860. The first of these works represents a revision of his youthful volumes, this time more consistently arranged and indexed, and supplemented with material from other collectors and some of his own earlier unpublished material, while the 1860 volume is a collection of folk beliefs, that drew once again on his youthful fieldwork. In other words, although the publication dates suggest that Thiele's active work with folklore lasted a lifetime, his major activity was over before he was thirty, and, according to Timothy Tangherlini (personal communication May 2021), it is unlikely that he conducted any meaningful fieldwork after 1823. Publication dates can skew our estimates of the date of folklore activities in other cases as well. For Thiele, as it often is with others, much of the later work is revision of (or a return to) earlier work.

The idea of the folklore period even applies in the case of fakelorists. James MacPherson (1736 – 1796) was writing verse from his student days in Aberdeen. After university, he moved to Edinburgh, where at the age of 26 he published his *Fragments of Ancient Poetry Collected in the Highlands of Scotland* (1760). Following the success of this work, he published two epics *Fingal* (1762) and *Temora* (1763), which were dogged by controversy as to their authenticity. A recent biographer remarks “The rather negative reception *Temora* received brought to a close Macpherson's highly active involvement in such writing” (Thomson 2006). Two years later, aged 39, he republished his works as *The Works of Ossian*, in two volumes. By this point, he was already working in Government service (which he had entered in 1764), engaged in writing journalism and works of history. In 1780, he became a Member of Parliament for a constituency in Cornwall, a seat he held till his death.

No doubt, many similar examples from other periods and cultures could be adduced, but it is not my intention to fill this contribution only with examples – I also wish to discuss the concept of a youthful folklore period more generally. But before doing so, it should be said that the notion has been expressed in a rather bold way, whereas it requires treatment with a degree of nuance. The “folklore period” is a generalization with exceptions, some real and some apparent, which I shall now turn to discuss.

2. Some possible exceptions

In the first instance, there are cases where the subject's early death has left it impossible for us to know whether their involvement with folklore would have been something confined to their youth or a more long lasting pursuit. We might think of Alexander Afanasyev (1826 – 1871), the compiler of the standard edition of Russian folktales, who died in poverty of tuberculosis aged 45, or of Alexander Hilferding (1831 – 1872), who recorded more than three hundred epic

songs in northern Russia, and who died in the field of typhoid in his forty-first year. We might also consider Milman Parry (1902 – 1935), scholar of Balkan epic songs and developer of oral-formulaic theory, who died in an accident aged 33, or of Philip Otto Runge (1777 – 1810), best remembered as a painter, but who was also the collector of two Low German folktales later to appear in the Grimms' collection and who also died at the age of 33. And English folksong collector George Butterworth (1885 – 1916), was far from being the only European folklorist killed during the course of the First World War. In cases such as these, it is not possible to say whether, had the people concerned lived, their folklore interests would have fallen by the wayside or whether they would have continued into their more advanced years.

Then there are misleading cases where the existence of a limited folklore period is sometimes disguised by publication dates. John Symonds Udal's (1849 – 1925) study *Dorsetshire Folk-Lore* appeared in 1922. But it had largely been completed by 1889 (for example, what was to become the chapter on children's games appeared in that year in the journal *Folk-Lore*), after which he left for Fiji, where he lived and worked for the next ten years, followed by a dozen years in the Leeward Islands from 1900 to 1911. In other words, while this significant work, his only book-length work on folklore, appeared in print when he was 73, it was practically complete by the time he was 40.

Another example where publication dates are misleading is that of Oskar Kallas (1868 – 1946), who is nowadays remembered as a diplomat and a linguist, as well as a folklorist. In 1901, his thirty-third year, he received a doctorate from the University of Helsinki for his work on a folksong topic under the supervision of Kaarle Krohn. He had already helped in Jakob Hurt's collection of Estonian folk songs, and he had collected folktales from the Estonian minority in Latvia back in 1893. After receiving his doctorate, he worked as a lecturer in linguistics, a school teacher and later a head-teacher, before finally serving as a diplomat. From 1922 to his retirement in 1934, Kallas was the Estonian Ambassador to the United Kingdom. If one were to judge solely by the publication dates of his articles in British journals during his service as Ambassador (1923, 1928-9, 1930), one might imagine that he was, despite his other duties, still active in folklore studies in later life. On reading these pieces, it becomes clear that they are not original research however, but rather upbeat overviews of what has been achieved by his compatriots. In other words, they are more an example of a diplomat engaging in nation-branding than in original folklore research.

Kallas is not alone in having an apparent revival of folklore interests after his folklore period proper. To return to James Britten, the first example we gave, although his interest in folklore had faded by the time he was forty, Vickery also found that there were signs of its "lingering continuance" (1978: 71), in this case his review of a folklore title during his seventy-fourth and final year. A particularly interesting case is presented by William John Thoms (1803 – 1885). As befits the man who coined the word "folklore", his folklore period was longer than average. It began in his twenties, with the publication of *Early English Prose Romances* and translations from *Deutsche Sagen* in *The Original*. In his early thirties he published his series of translations of folk literature, *Lays and Legends*, and when he was 35, he printed some of the writings of the seventeenth-century proto-folklorist John Aubrey. He was 42 by the time he coined the word "folklore", 43 when he

published his articles on the *Folk-Lore of Shakespeare*, and 47 when he announced a call for folklore contributions to his newly-founded journal *Notes and Queries* along with his plans to write an English equivalent of *Deutsche Mythologie* (Thoms 1850). However, in the years that followed, Thoms found himself unable to write his planned master work, and other interests monopolized his attention.

It is therefore wrong to see Thoms as a lifelong folklorist: he is better seen as a man of many interests who had a folklore period. In his case, it was a somewhat remarkable folklore period, in that it lasts longer than usual (into his late forties) and involved the coining of a term that would subsequently become globally important. Nevertheless, he cannot be thought of as being active in the lifelong way that Evald Tang Kristensen and Giuseppe Pitrè were, although there is a trace of a “lingering continuance” in Thoms’ folklore career. In his seventy-fifth year, the Folklore Society was founded in London, and the first issues of the Society’s journal contain a few notes and articles from his pen. However, these do not represent original work, but consist in the publication (and completion) of work carried out decades earlier, alongside reminiscences of his earlier activities and companions. In other words, this represents not a revival, but a tying up of loose ends long after a folklore period has ended – a phenomenon that is far from uncommon.

A potential difficulty in trying to identify the existence and extent of a person’s folklore period is that in many instances the only tool we have to measure it by is their publication history. Might it be the case that in some cases people who seem to have been through their folklore period were in fact still engaged in folklore, cultivating it in ways less visible to historians than authorship? Perhaps. And yet, this does not convincingly account for many of the cases above (and elsewhere), where the figures involved were still authoring books on other topics later on in their life, but had ceased to produce books on folklore. Indeed, this links to the fact that what usually happens when individuals move on from folklore is not so much that they end all forms of public intellectual activity, but rather they divert their energies into new fields. This is especially marked in cases where people, such as Abbott, retain an interest in a certain area (in his case in the Balkans), but move on to subjects other than the folklore of that area.

There are also some cases that are genuinely hard to place. Take Charlotte Burne (1850 – 1923), for instance, a notable figure, remembered for compiling what may be the best regional collection of folklore in England. Was she a lifelong folklorist or someone who went through a folklore period? Burne is most famous for what she achieved in her thirties, especially the three volumes of *Shropshire Folklore: A Sheaf of Gleanings* (1883, 1885, 1886). Her biographers describe the years of her forties as “fallow ones” (Ashman and Bennett 2000: 11). So, at this stage, her life seems very much to fit the folklore-period paradigm. But then, following a move to London things take a turn. She becomes editor of the journal *Folklore*, publishes some (typically brief) articles in it, is invited to serve as the Society’s President, and organises the revision of the Society’s *Handbook of Folklore*. So how should we place her: as someone with a folklore period or as a lifelong folklorist? Although she is chiefly remembered for what she achieved during her thirties, her folklore activities later in life are more substantial than, for example, those of Thoms. But then again, she never attempts anything of the scale of her *Shropshire Folklore*, nor does she manage to bring to completion her book-project with Alice Keary focussing on North Staffordshire. What we have is someone who in

the final third of her life revives her earlier folklore interests, but who does not operate in a manner that is as intense or as significant as in her heyday. Is this continuation or attenuation? Or something in between?

Cases such as Burne's are hard to place. But just as hard cases make bad law, such biographical cases need not invalidate the more general "law" of the folklore period. We now move on to considering why there is such a thing as a folklore period, and why it is that this period typically runs from a person's early or mid-twenties to their mid or late thirties.

3. Why a folklore period?

Could it be that what has been described here as "the folklore period" is simply another name for "the fieldwork period"? This certainly might be true for the most strenuous forms of fieldwork. For example, fieldwork of the type that Elias Lönnrot (1802 – 1884) conducted might rightly be seen as a young man's game: he prosecuted eleven arduous field trips in Finland and Karelia in his youth, the last one when he was aged 47. After that he married and went on no further field trips, instead compiling books in his study. And yet such an equation of a researcher's folklore period with their period of strenuous fieldwork, while suggestive, cannot be all there is to the matter, as there are forms of fieldwork much less arduous than those that Lönnrot conducted. As we may recall, there have even been folklorists who arranged to have informants visit them in their own homes or come to them in a hotel. Such a practice hardly interferes with anyone's enjoyment of their creature comforts. Likewise, there were also folklorists who were willing to rough it later on in their lives. So this is not anywhere near the full story.

A related fact may be that it is easier to travel when one is unattached. Likewise, it is often easier to meet people from social circles different from one's own when one is one's twenties (and, hence, beginning to think about those differences) than it is when one is older, and, for many people, the folklore period may overlap with a footloose "period of travel", a time when everything is new and exciting, when they can get to new places, meet different kinds of people whom they have not met at close quarters before, and gain fresh interests. But if those who turn out to be lifelong folklorists and those who have a folklore period and then move on both share the experience of taking up folklore during the excitement of their youth, the question therefore ceases to be why people start cultivating an interest in folklore and becomes why do some of them stop? A related question here is why it is people do not tend to become folklorists (as opposed to becoming "folklore fans") in their forties, fifties, sixties, seventies and beyond?

Might there be an economic explanation for the end of folklore period? Just as many an interest in folklore flourishes as a response and resistance to the mundane workaday world that people in their teens and twenties are cast into, when eventually those young people marry and form households, they can become occupied with childcare or with working to provide for their family to such an extent that it leaves little time (or energy) for their earlier interests. There is, after all, rarely much money to be had in cultivating folklore, so might it be the case that people move on when they have grown tired of living hand to mouth? Such an explanation, however, does not account for cases of those with private incomes. We may need some kind of additional, complementary

psychological explanation. Might this be related to the trivialising of folklore? Thoms' foreboding that many readers "will at first be somewhat disposed to smile at the high sounding tone in which such trifles as Old Wives' Legends, and Fire-Side Stories, are alluded to" (1834: iii) has been shared by many folklorists since. Could it be that what puts an end to the folklore period for some is the sense that an interest in popular tales and sayings is too trivial for a grown-up to remain engaged in, that a time comes when such childish things should be put away and their place taken by other interests?

In fact, we might invoke psychological explanations for the beginning of a conscious interest in folklore. Whereas adolescents are often intent on not being childish or naïve (or, at least, not being seen to be), the discovery of folklore in post-adolescence may amount to a rediscovery of the naïve. Looking back on his progress as a writer, Calvino said the following about his authorship of the fabulistic *Il visconte dimezzato*, something which followed a string of early neo-realist works that better fitted the mood of the times:

I began doing what came most naturally to me –that is, following the memory of the things I had loved best since boyhood. Instead of making myself write the book I *ought* to write, the novel that was expected of me, I conjured up the book I myself would have liked to read, the sort by an unknown writer, from another age and another country, discovered in an attic (Calvino 1980: vii).

Yet the psychological explanations that we posit above are competing ones. The hypothesis of the folklore period representing a recovery of the wonder-filled nature of childhood following the cynicism of adolescence and being an antidote to the rule-bound notions of formal education would seem to be the opposite of a hypothesis that the high-mindedness and idealism typical of many in adolescence are deepened and become focused during the onset of the folklore period. In this understanding, the folklore period represents a continuation of an earlier psychic alignment, rather than being a second breach and a return to something earlier. Given the diametrically-opposed nature of these two explanations, it would seem that attributing a *general* psychic theory as being behind the folklore period would be a hard task: even if the rediscovery of the naïve that Calvino's account seems to speak of should apply in many cases, it may not apply in all.

Does an interest in folklore differ from that in other pursuits? After all, there are other spiritual domains typically associated with one's twenties and thirties. Many people write verse during their youth, for instance, but few make it a lifelong practice. And, correspondingly, if poetry is popularly associated with any stage in the life course, it would seem to be most closely associated with youth, a link that, while being far from the whole truth of the matter, is nevertheless also found reflected in the iconography of poets (statues, photographs, paintings), as well as in remarks such as Idris Davies' dictum of "the young, the real Wordsworth" (cited in Prothero 2013: 81). And yet, while we might think of some poets as flourishing when young, there are plenty of cases of poets flourishing late in life, and though it is even less commonly remarked upon, there are also some poets whose best work is from their middle years. So why shouldn't there be folklorists renowned for their early achievements, others famed for their mid-life activities, and yet others esteemed for their late works? And might we find there are folklorists worthy of praise for both their early and late works, but not for those in between?

4. Implications (and further questions)

As this stands, there are still some more things to be borne in mind. Firstly, it is worth remembering that not every lifelong folklorist must be a scholar of immense stature. Some of those whose engagement with folklore was of shorter duration will have achieved more than those who stuck at it for their entire lives. Secondly, it is also worth remembering that not everyone is the same after their folklore period. Ibsen, for example, seems to have forgotten about folklore later in life, while other writers, such as Calvino, and maybe Goethe too, were shaped by it even as they moved on from it. There may be many cases where a person's folklore period has had a continuing subtle influence over them later in life when they are no longer dealing with folklore *qua* folklore.

If, regardless of its possible causes, it is more common to go through a folklore period than it is to sustain a lifelong interest in folklore, might there be implications regarding the character of our existing folklore data? If the passing of a folklore period can be seen to have something to do with settling down, physically, economically, and perhaps psychologically, should we not value more highly the example of those who stuck with folklore of local communities during extended periods of living in the same spot, people such as pastors (and in some cultures, doctors, state officials, teachers, or missionaries) who accrued long-term quotidian data on the people about them? People, indeed, such as Robert Codrington (1830 – 1922), who spent a quarter of a century among the Melanesians, working as a missionary and bishop, before writing up his what he had learnt in the final years of his posting and when already back in England during his early years of retirement (Codrington, 1885, 1891). This is a scholarship of a different character than work done with the brio and haste of youth: less bold, yet less superficial. As Codrington (quoting his colleague Lorimer Fison) remarked:

When a European has been living for two or three years among savages he is sure to be fully convinced that he knows all about them; when he has been ten years or so amongst them, if he be an observant man, he finds that he knows very little about them, and so begins to learn (Codrington 1891: vii).

Those who have been sent to outposts, whether on a Pacific island or a rural parish, have the time not only to do the least dramatic kind fieldwork that Burne singled out for praise, “the best collecting is that which is done by accident” (1890: 326), they also have time to write it up, which is not always the case for those who move on.

As far as areas and ethnicities are concerned, the two examples of lifelong folklorists that we began with, Tang Kristensen and Pitrè, felt a special commitment to their particular areas (and local peoples), namely, Jutland and Sicily, although they both also undertook projects for their countries at large, Denmark and Italy. It is often the case that folklorists remain committed to a particular group within their own culture, whereas anthropologists typically begin with studying one foreign group (in their twenties), and move onto to study another group (typically in their forties). To give just one example, the American Clifford Geertz began working in Indonesia before later working in Morocco. So, another explanation for the limits of the “folklore period” might

derive from this very dedication of folklorists to a single area or people. Could it be, in other words, a case of an interest reaching its natural state of exhaustion? Anthropologists avoid the danger of their “anthropological period” coming to an end by shifting to a whole new continent, ethnos, set of problems, or way of approaching existing problems precisely at the time (mid-life) when their initial interest might begin to flag.

In the annals of folklore study, few folklorists have moved on to this extent. One notable exception would be that of the American Henry Glassie (b. 1941). Beginning with fieldwork ‘at home’ in America like so many of his contemporaries, in his thirties he undertook extended fieldwork in Northern Ireland, and then having turned forty, he began fieldwork in the radically different setting of Turkey, before moving on to Bangladesh, Brazil, and elsewhere. Another example of someone willing to find himself in different settings might be his compatriot Herbert Halpert (1911 – 2000), who, it seems, wanted to spend his life investigating as many Anglophone folklores as possible, and who carried out fieldwork in New York, New Jersey, Kentucky, and elsewhere in the eastern United States, before finally settling in Newfoundland. In addition to his geographical shifts, which are still modest when compared to a shift from Indonesia to Morocco, it may also be significant that the geographical moves also went along with a shift in the genres he chose to focus on, in this case from folksong texts and child rhymes to folk narrative. Such a refreshing shift might not only be in space or by genre, it might involve a change of period, such as the changes that historians sometimes make. An example of the latter might be Carl Lindahl (b. 1947), whose shift was from medieval folklore (as found in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*) to modern folklore (as found in the Appalachians, and in Louisiana). Similar to such moves made by historians, Lindahl’s move was forward in time, rather than backward. Another example might be that of John Miles Foley (1947 – 2012), who was interested in three traditions: Old English, Ancient Greek and recent South Slavic. The model of a mid-life shift does not apply so clearly in his case, as Foley had already equipped his bow with these three strings by the time he completed his doctoral thesis in his twenty-eighth year (1974). But perhaps it was by switching between the three during the course of his career that he managed to maintain his interest in oral tradition. Such mid-life shifts may have an element of chance, but they may also be involuntary, for instance, the shift by Linda Dégh (1920-2014) from Hungarian to American folklore was conditioned by her change in place of residence. Alongside this, a folklorist may make several shifts, yet one may still prove more decisive than the rest. For example, Lauri Honko (1932-2002) made various moves from his initial concentration on Finnic folk belief (which ranged from Saami folklore to Karelian laments), before finally settling upon the study of epics.

With this contribution, I have tried to draw attention to what seems to me to be a remarkable, yet unremarked, phenomenon – namely, that an active interest in folklore often only lasts for a certain period of the individual’s life, and that when this is the case, it mostly occurs when they are in their twenties and thirties. I have also suggested that publications by someone with a passing interest in folklore (even if they take a dozen years to come to fruition) may well represent a different style of scholarship from those who are residents rather than visitors, and who steadily accrue their data and repeatedly turn over it in their minds, and that we

should be alive to this when we read their works. I have also attempted to suggest sociological, economic, psychological and other factors behind the existence of the “folklore period”. These explanations may be less convincing than the claim itself, so alternate explanations would be welcomed, as, indeed, would be ideas about what might extend a folklore period. Additionally, I have suggested that lifelong folklorists may be characterised as undergoing a refreshing mid-life shift in interest that forestalls any early end to their folklore interests and activities.

To conclude, let us return to our initial observation regarding novelists. In the same piece where we were introduced to the model of the prototypical novelist who begins publishing “between 25 and 35, and write[s] a novel respectably every two or three years until they die”, the critic concerned also pointed out exceptions to this model: those novelists who “don’t start until they are 60”, others who “stop abruptly without warning”, and yet others who “write one novel and no more” (Hensher 2021). These multiple career trajectories also apply to folklorists, meaning that the notion of a “folklore period” must remain a generalization. Nevertheless, it still seems to be a generalization that gives a better-than-random account of when folklore is likely to be taken up as a vital interest and, by the same token, when it will be put to one side.

5. References

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