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The Cultural Mediators
of Folklore

When William Thoms coincd and defined the term 'folklore' he unwittingly opened a Pandora's box which neither he nor others could put the lid back on. Definitions of folklore have been pouring out ever since (Ben Amos 1971:3—9; Legros 1962). With this gesture of nationalism Thoms naively thought that he had offered "a good Saxon compound" that would replace the Latin-derived "Popular Antiquities" (1846; 1965:5); but what he actually did was to propose a name to an as yet unborn, or worse, ill-formed, concept. Logically there is no necessary connection between "the manners, customs, observances, superstitions, ballads, [and] proverbs, etc." (1965:5) that Thoms considered to be the substance of folklore. He brought them together into one category on the basis of three factors: the attribution of antiquity, the observation of their approaching demise, and the goal of salvaging them from total oblivion. He considered the cultural elements he enumerated to be of 'olden time', and then drew two conclusions, "the first, how much that is curious and interesting in these matters is now entirely lost, the second, how much may yet be rescued by timely exertion" (1965:5).

Each of these factors alone would not have been a sufficient defining feature, but the three together appeared to provide the necessary boundaries for folklore as a distinct category. While Thoms did not actually articulate any theoretical issues, he did formulate the basic principles upon which the discipline of folklore could and would develop. The attribution, the observation, and the goal would henceforth recur in various forms and combinations in most subsequent definitions of folklore.

Unfortunately, the very success of the term 'folklore', so far, has occurred in inverse relation to the success of the concept. The wider is the acceptance of the term, the vaguer becomes the concept of folklore. There are several possible reasons for this precarious situation. First, within each language 'folklore' becomes a polysemic term with a proliferation of meanings. For example, in English folklore means, among other things, "a widely held unsupported specious notion or body of notions" (Webster's Dictionary).

The convergence of meanings that associates falsehood with the 'folk' reflects an evaluative interpretation of, and a quality attributed to, the beliefs held by the lower classes of the society, and has nothing to do with what folklore is.

Secondly, in different languages the word 'folklore', along with its cognates or equivalents, has become a term that designates a concept within a particular system of cultural categories. Since there is no perfect semantic correspondence between languages, there are significant differences in the features that distinguish folklore from other categories of knowledge. Furthermore, the attributes and modifiers that single folklore out in relation to other domains are bound to be cultural specific. For example, the notions of popularity and tradition are preponderate in the French *traditions populaires*, whereas the notion of 'people' appears to be the most significant semantic component in the Russian *narodnaja poezija*. Often the inclusion of texts within the category of folklore depends upon their correspondence with these implicit cultural assumptions. Consequently the various themes and forms of folklore elude the attempts to formulate cross-cultural agreement between them.

Thirdly, folktales, folksongs, and folk speech change historically. The classical European tale, for example, is no longer as active a part of traditional European and American repertoires as it once was. Other forms and themes acquire the attributes of rustic life and 'old time' and become part of the category that folklore is in modern society. Even if the category of folklore were stable, hardly a possible assumption, its substance would have been subject to historical modifications. Consequently, new definitions of folklore are required to meet the cultural and historical changes and to adjust the shifting meanings to the coined term.

In my previous suggestion to replace the attribute of tradition as the primary defining criterion for folklore with the notion of "artistic communication in small groups" (Ben--Amos 1971:13) I sought to alleviate some of the problems that Thoms originally created. Essentially this definition offers the category of art, modified in social terms, as a substitute for the attribution, the casual observation and the goal that were the basic components of Thoms' definition. Folklore, thus conceived, becomes a kind of art rather than belonging to the categories of tradition, religion, or knowledge in general.

But such a change has its own perils. While it rescues the concept of folklore from the quicksand of cultures and time, it makes its definition contingent upon the idea of art. But then, art does not necessarily constitute a distinct category in all cultures even though art forms and artistic behaviours occur in every society. Aesthetic appreciation is often based on the evaluation of technical skill, and it is the notion of craft rather than art that appears to be universally recognized. Consequently, instead of advancing the cause of folklore, my definition seems to draw it backward. For if it is impossible to establish that art is a universal category, or a cultural domain that have universal applicability, how could it be possible to define folklore as a kind of art and to expect to find it in every society?

A solution to this problem is essential. If folklore is to be a discipline that addresses fundamental human issues, and not a descriptive and particularistic history of one society or another, its subject matter must constitute a category that is universally known. Hence it would be erroneous to formulate its definition contingent upon an ethnocentric notion, at worst, or an idea of limited applicability at best. But before we decide to abandon this definition on logical grounds, it would be worthwhile to examine, first, the nature of the ethnographic evidence that militates against its acceptance, and secondly, the

basic cultural concepts that mediate between reality and the category of art. If the examination has positive results it will be possible to argue that these cultural mediators provide a definition for art, and hence folklore, in society, and the subject of folklore research has a tangible basis in the cultures of the peoples of the world.

B. The Ethnographic Evidence

In his classic statement about 'primitive art' Franz Boas (1927; 1955[2]) considered technique in attaining typical forms as the basis for aesthetic response. For him there is "an intimate relation between technique and a feeling for beauty" (1955 : 11). Without contradicting this basic relation, subsequent anthropological research and thought revealed the occurrence of the category of art, rather than that of craft, among an increasing number of peoples. Certainly as in other aspects of culture, there is diversity rather than universal uniformity in the boundaries of this category. It did so through the examination of the viability of aesthetic vocabulary and hierarchy of norms (Thompson 1966; 1973; Warren and Andrews 1977), through the discovery of the improvization and innovation of artistic creativity in traditional societies (Crowley 1966; d'Azevedo 1958; Hymes 1975), through the study of social role and position of the artist (d'Azevedo 1973; Smith 1961), and through the analysis of the homological relations between art, cosmology and social structure (Fernandez 1966; Gossen 1971; Levi-Strauss 1964—1971). In short, after more than fifty years of research it is no longer possible, nor justified to reduce art to skill. In various cultures, artistic creativity is valued, evaluated and given a position in social life. Even without clear verbal articulation art becomes a 'covert category' (Berlin, Breedlove and Raven 1968) to which dance and narration, carving and singing belong; people discuss them in similar terms and attribute to them similar affect (Armstrong 1971) and values.

C. Cultural Mediators

Certainly, the lack of verbal articulation is a methodological problem that has theoretical implications. Even when a language lacks a word that signifies 'art' people still may have other cultural concepts that would enable them to categorize activities as artistic, and mediate between reality and the category of art. These are social concepts that enable members of a society to establish the distinctiveness of art, and folklore, in relation to other social and verbal activities. Without being exhaustive I would like to examine briefly four such cultural mediators that have been discussed in recent folklore and related studies.

Context. The notion of context would not have emerged had not its opposite, 'out-of-context' so often been employed for analysis and interpretation. As John Dewey pointed out "in the face to face communications of everyday life, context may be safely ignored. For — it is irrevocably there. It is taken for granted, not denied, when it is passed over without notice" (Dewey 1931 : 206). Paradoxically, context is a concept that becomes apparent only by its negative. The idea of 'out-of-context' demonstrates the lack of neutrality of context itself, and the mediation of meaning it accomplishes.

Confusing, perhaps, are the dual perspectives of context. On the one hand there is the ethnographic and analytical view that requires a distanced observer who attempts to comprehend an interaction. The history of folklore and the social sciences evidences an increased awareness of the analytical value of context from these perspectives (Ben--Amos 1977:48–51; Lakoff 1972). At present there is a general awareness that "the context of interaction is in some degree shaped and organised as an integral part of that interaction as a communicative encounter" (Giddens 1979:83), even though, for meta-phorical purposes, there is a shift to employ the term text where others would have used 'context' (Geertz 1973; Lotman 1977). Such a view inevitably develops *a posteriori* for interpretive purposes, after the completion of a social action.

On the other hand there is the participatory concept of context, the notion governing the actions of peoples in social situations that generates the expectation of an agreement between the component parts of an event. Such a concept of context assumes an integra-tion of actions and words. In that sense the concept of context is an unarticulated guiding principle for acting and speaking in society. Such a concept can, then, provide for the possibility of the occurrence of distinct artistic forms of behavior, that might otherwise be considered as deviating from the norm, but would be most appropriate within the context of particular situations.

Performance. The mode of presentation that gives social allowance for the communi-cation of exceptional forms of speaking and acting is performance. Narrators and musi-cians, carvers and dancers display their art through performance. This mode of action makes possible the manifestation of art in society. Arguing against the negative use of the term in linguistics Dell Hymes (1975:13) contends that performance is "the realiza-tion of known traditional material — as something creative, realized, achieved, even transcendent of the ordinary course of events." Bauman proposes to describe perfor-mance in interactional terms and for him it is

> "a mode of spoken verbal communication [that] consists in the assumption of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative competence. This competence rests on the knowledge and ability to speak in socially appropriate ways. Performance involves on the part of the performer an assumption of account-ability to an audience for the way in which communication is carried out, above and beyond the referential content. From the point of view of the audience, the act of expression on the part of the performer is thus marked as subject to evaluation for the way it is done, for the relative skill and effectiveness of the performer's display of competence" (Bauman 1977:11).

However, the creativity and social accountability according to these views that define performance, result from the very communicative force of that mode of speaking: performance culturally defines art in society. Whatever is artistic must be performed and whatever is performed represents artistic performance. Performance mediates between traditional knowledge, imagination, and experience and art.

Frame. Artistic performances occur within frames that have temporal, spatial, and social boundaries. Each frame has its own constellation of features and together they imbue performances with particular meanings. Frames thus articulate the import and symbolic significance of communication and offer keys for interpretation. They are

32

a priori culturally accepted categories with known significance and hence are capable of communicating meanings. While context and performance mediate between reality and the concept of art, in society, the frames for performance mediate the meanings of particular performances. When messages shift frames, a change in meaning occurs; a narration can turn into a parody of itself, or, in another context, a folksong can become an imitation of folksinging. Thus, frames and forms (which are one kind of frame) mediate the meanings of performances. At the same time, by their very capacity to change the nature of communication they can transform a non-art into art* and thus mediate the artistic in society (see Bateson 1972; Goffman 1974; Smith 1978).

System. The multiplicity of performance frames makes the concept of system essential for the understanding of artistic expressions in society. The systemic quality of culture, society, and language has been a major springboard for modern scholarship. However, the success of this analytical concept largely depends upon its ability to re-capture a perspective held by people in their respective societies. The notion of a system reflects an awareness of order, sense, and significance that is shared by members of a single society. They are able to perceive relations between frames and performances, and to manipulate these relations for a purpose. The concept of a system enables the audience to accept the creativity of a narrator and to reject the singing of a madman. As much as art borders on divergence from everyday life, it has a regular principled standard of deviation that articulates the system and its categories and their manipulation.

D. Conclusions

Such a cultural mediation, together with new etnographic evidence that has been accumulating in past years, demonstrate the existence of the notion of art in many societies. On that basis it is possible to proceed and accept a definition of folklore that is contingent upon the concept of art, as was my previous definition (Ben-Amos 1971). However, while the idea of art, and with it the notion of folklore, is potentially universal, its applications are bound by the system of communication of each society.. In traditional cultures all artistic creativity and artistic performances occur within small groups, and hence, if the social modifier in the definition is accepted, all arts are within the category of folklore. In contrast, in industrialized societies in which artistic communication takes place within several social channels and media there are a variety of features that differentiate between folklore and other artistic forms. No doubt they all share the quality of being art but they differ in terms of their social base and reference. As this basis changes, so does the relation of performances to the notion of folklore change. Often, following a surge of self-reflection, industrialized societies indulge in a revival of previous traditions. While the songs and the tales may be the same, their social base is no longer identical with those they previously had. They no longer celebrate an event in their traditional culture, but celebrate their own traditionality, self-referring to their

* But not vice versa because an art form has already an accepted form and meaning and any shift in that case will be artistic playfulness that inevitably, if not deliberately, alludes to the originally known form.

quality as 'old time' songs or narratives attempting to traditionalize modern culture (See Hymes 1975:353—56; Shils 1971). The phenomena is world wide and should be a subject of folklore research. At the same time it is necessary to distinguish such performances that involve self-reference, drawing attention to their own traditionality from performances in actual traditional societies.

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