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Group Culture and Oral Communication

Behind the concept of "folk culture", whose definition has relied upon the concept of "the folk", lies a concealed sociological model, a model of the community (*Gemeinschaft*) with all its blessings, advocating in a sense natural relations in society (*Gesellschaft*) as opposed to unauthentic, mechanical ones. But this concept has many shortcomings and constitutes a somewhat romantic idealization of one end point of the model, which detracts from the other end point (Bausinger 1972, 88). It seems to me that the modern conception of folkloric or ethnological phenomena defined in terms of oral communication implies another analytic model taken from sociology – that of the group. How conscious we are of the presence of this model, just what its underlying theoretical assumptions are, and the nature and extent of its contribution to folklore analysis and the interpretation of culture deserve examination.

In some definitions oral communication which is or might be considered to be folklore is explicitly identified as communication in groups or small groups (for a survey of this type of approach see Bošković-Stulli 1978a, 7–20). Researchers of oral literature hold that the significance of its being oral extends to the moment of performance and to oral tradition. The process of communication in and of itself, which can take on other features besides being the basis of folklore (e.g. realizing a specific social relationship), is designated in the study of folklore as the context or part of the context.

Social relations are always present in culture and vice versa. And in ethnological approaches as well, whether or not a theoretical basis is consciously involved, this latent dilemma exists. We can accept Bauman's view where he writes that: "... there is no doubt that in socio-cultural phenomena the 'cultural signs' and the corresponding social relations are in most cases reciprocally motivated and *not arbitrary* towards each other. Their mutual relations can of course assume all shades of the spectrum from entirely genetically accidental to interwoven to the point of identity. But the frequency of

relations close to the second pole of the continuum caused innumerable trespassings of analytical borders between sociology and 'culturology' (whatever its institutionalized name), and – worst of all – plenty of efforts wasted on phony problems of whether the 'ultimate essence' of the society is cultural or social. As a matter of fact, all phenomena of human life seem to be socio-cultural in Benveniste's or Jakobson's sense: the web of social dependencies, called 'social structure' is unimaginable in any form but cultural, while most of the empirical reality of culture signals and brings into existence the social order accomplished by the established limitations" (Bauman 1973, 105).

If Bauman's assumption is correct, it is no wonder that there is always a sociological thread running through ethnological and folklore theories. To bring this contraband current out into the open, let us examine just what the claims of group theory are.

Contemporary sociology has shown sporadic interest in groups, and its motives have been varied. Roughly speaking, this field of interest springs from two sources: investigation of primitive communities as groups, i.e. the way groups function within them; and studies of psycho-sociological processes in groups, particularly in industry, in terms of the influence of group dynamics on production but also in terms of some other social-psychological areas of interest.

Firth thus speaks of "primary groups" as small units – families, work groups, neighborhood groups, and play groups whose members are in direct contact with each other on an everyday basis. He holds that such groups are of vital social importance because they enable people to satisfy their various human needs: some feeling greater security thanks to the group's support, others attaining within the group the power they crave, still others utilizing their capabilities and skills to adapt the physical environment to the group's immediate needs. Finally, satisfaction of people's moral needs is also achieved within the group – love, mutual assistance, self-sacrifice. Firth also extends the concept of the group beyond primitive communities, stating that various clubs, associations and work groups also fulfill the social functions of groups regardless of or in addition to their main goals (Firth 1963, 44). These and similar assumptions have given rise to many socio-anthropological studies of communities and neighborhood settings.

The other type of theory on groups is grounded in psychology. For our purposes a résumé of these theories, as expounded in the definitive article on groups in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, which was written by famous scholars in this branch of research in the second half of the twentieth century, will suffice.

To begin with, the assumption is made that the group is an elementary human unit. It is composed of a number of persons, or members, each of whom interacts with the others or is able to do so (as long as the group exists), or at least knows every other person very well. For this very reason it is believed that there must be some numerical limit on group size.

One characteristic of groups, then, is direct human relations and face-to-face interaction based on these relations. No intermediary comes between the individuals.

Also characteristic of groups are shared norms which they develop during their lifetime. Usually groups have strict rules about what individuals may or may not do if they wish to maintain their membership in the group. Conformity with shared group norms is rewarded, while their violation is punished.

From the psychological standpoint, stress is put on the importance of group members having at least one characteristic in common and, in addition, of their per-

ceiving themselves as members of a group, of their being interdependent in terms of their interests and goals; and of their cooperating to achieve these goals.

From the sociological standpoint it is significant that during the life of a group social norms develop, which regulate reciprocal interaction predetermining individual roles, i.e., behavior, rights and duties.

Experimental research on groups has shown that within a group various structures exist: the work structure, the communication structure, the friendship structure, the power structure, the prestige structure, and so on. Interactional processes in a group may be divided into several categories – from those showing solidarity and cohesion to those indicating the presence of disagreement and tension. One of the functions of communication within a group is to establish similar, uniform views of reality. Group members whose views differ from those held by the rest of the group will be under pressure to make their views conform, or they will be isolated and rejected by the group.

It is believed that in the course of their existence groups develop shared values and norms and that neither values nor norms conflict within any one group. Presumably norms tend to develop mostly in areas which are of vital importance to the group's existence and which are instrumental in achieving the group's goals.

Some authors (M. and C. Sherif 1968, 277) hold that the most essential properties of a group are its organization, that is role and status relationships, and also the extent to which the members espouse shared values and norms regulating their day-to-day behavior.

Social group theorists, at any rate, maintain that people in groups are differentiated not only with regard to task performance, but also in terms of their roles.

Certain individuals are more influential, and thus have more prestige. Their fellows show more respect for them and they have more relative power based on their initiating activities and on their leadership in accomplishing tasks that are important to the life of the group. The individual's rank in group power relationships is his status. Experimental group research has shown that in the course of group formation the highest and lowest status positions manifest themselves the earliest, and that subsequently the other roles and status relationships stabilize.

To sum up the main points of both types of group research and definitions as they stood in the mid-sixties, we can state that they are characterized by an empirical and positivistic understanding of human groups, and also that they definitely fall within the scope of theories of social equilibrium.

But this type of theory of groups as elementary social units overlooks several important problems:

1. No insight is provided into the processes occurring in groups that last over a long period in history or that display historical continuity. Nor could any such insight have been provided by investigations of groups in experimental psychology, or by research on primitive societies believed to be ahistorical because of their lack of written history in social anthropology.

2. It does not question what the relationship is between the culture of society as a whole and the culture of a given group. References to group culture exploit it as a *deus ex machina* in instances where group phenomena cannot be accounted for by the functioning of psycho-social relationships. Theories based on the assumption that social development begins and ends in a state of equilibrium tend to hold culture responsible for social malfunctions and various deviations (Bauman 1973, 159, 192).

3. Today as in the past, interaction between groups remains an open, although essential, question, and all we can do is speculate as to the nature and quality of the relations involved.

4. The possibility of participation by one individual in several groups is not assumed; in other words, the effect of such a situation on the individual and the group is considered a deviation, a departure from normal behavior.

The sociological group theories mentioned above emphasize group culture but do not delve into its content, "the empirical reality of culture" which can be related to social constraints and pressures.

If groups establish power, i.e., role and status relationships, if they lay out their own social structure from within by means of values and norms, and if they ultimately engage in interaction with other groups in the wider social environment, or some of their members do, all these things must constitute the social context of oral communication and creativity in groups, be it in the domain of literature or of some other art.

This is not to say that folk art manifests itself as some kind of superstructure on a social base. But it is evident nonetheless that what we term *oral* when referring to a performance in progress, and also when discussing tradition, bears the marks of the group social structure in which the oral communication took place. Context is not mechanically situated on synchronic and diachronic coordinates. It is interspersed by various spirals of social relationships in time (Bringeus 1979, 13), and by their stretching, breaking, and growing back together... Although small-group theory in its original form did not probe into the relation between social structure and culture in groups, familiarity with social processes, or just a good insight into them, should benefit research on cultural phenomena in and beyond the group.

Recently Fine has attempted an investigation in maximum detail of group culture itself. For his point of departure he takes the small group as the prototype of the interacting unit. He maintains that culture is part of the communicative system in units exhibiting some interaction. Most of the cultural elements that are integral parts of group culture can transcend its boundaries. In other words, a cultural element can be widely dispersed and at the same be the special mark of a group.

Thus, proceeding from social units in which some kind of interaction occurs, Fine claims that every such group possesses to some degree a culture of its own — an "idioculture". He writes: "Idioculture consists of a system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and customs shared by members of an interacting group to which members can refer and employ as the basis of further interaction. Members recognize that they share experiences in common and these experiences can be referred to with the expectation that they will be understood by other members, and further can be employed to construct a social reality. The term, stressing the localized nature of culture, implies that it need not be part of a demographically distinct subgroup, but rather that it is a particularistic development of any group in the society." (Fine 1979, 734).

As opposed to research in experimental sociology which has ignored the "content" of culture, Fine maintains that small groups are not mere collections of individuals devoid of content. This approach to groups from the standpoint of their "content" is useful in analyzing their peculiar characteristics.

In contrast to folkloristic research, then, which we supplement with an understanding of the *social context* of a group, in this instance sociological investigation of the group calls for familiarity with its *ethnographic or folkloristic content*. "All groups, as

they share experience, will develop a particularistic culture. Each of these cultures provides a task for the humanist as well as the social scientist. While we have emphasized the value of understanding these systems for the comprehension of the dynamics of groups and cultural usage, we have deliberately overlooked the fact that these are also aesthetic systems, and are a product of "artful" communication. At this point we must share our goal of understanding human behavior with the folklorist, the critic, and the poet." (Fine 1979, 744).

Up to now the motives for research on the importance and significance of interrelationships between the concepts of group and culture have been twofold, with the central theme of this volume, "oral communication", serving as a go-between.

The first motive has been set out clearly: some folkloristic approaches to "orality" do not touch upon its many-layered social context; they view it as plain fact where the spoken (as opposed to the written) word is concerned. But if, on the other hand, "orality" is considered as part of the group social process as well, then its significance can extend not only to the understanding of oral literature but also to all the other art forms produced by any group that communicates orally, that is to say, to an understanding of group culture in general.

The other motive for investigations into the relevance of oral communication in groups is inextricably linked with the current state of cultural research in Yugoslavia and in Croatia in particular. As elsewhere in Europe, our cultural and historical ethnology has met with a crisis, though a somewhat delayed one. At home this crisis has been recognized to some extent (Rihtman-Augustin 1976; Kremenšček 1978, 197). Seen from abroad the ethnology and folklore of the Balkans are still considered an "Eldorado for folklorists" (Oinas 1966, 398). What is cited as their *differentia specifica* is the renown and provocative backwardness, or to make it sound more elegant, the cultural lag, which Southeast Europe still enjoys, or languishes in, depending on one's point of view. Thus D. Burkhart (1979, 38), with reference to the tasks of ethnographic study in the Balkans, follows up her first proposition by stressing that "special circumstances reign in the Balkans, characterized by multi-ethnicity and cultural lag, and calling for adequate research methods." With all the author's elaboration of terminology, and probably in spite of her good intentions, the old stance with regard to the quaint, backward Balkans is clearly there between the lines. As an example of the other side of the coin, Ina Maria Greverus is critical of Italian ethnography, once again in Southeast Europe, for its prettied-up portrayal (in contrast with that of Italian literature) of everyday life in the South of Italy (Greverus 1978, 116).

Cultural and historical ethnography in Yugoslavia stopped giving real answers to the basic cultural questions in this area a long time ago. The rise of industry and socialism razed the favorite social ground of that ethnology — patriarchal peasant society and its economic structure — and radically influenced cultural change. Accelerated social processes and mass migration from the villages to cities and industry called attention to the limitations of further ethnographic research on the basis of a socially undifferentiated "folk", i.e., delving no further than peasant culture and the culture of the lower classes. In our country the crisis in cultural and historical ethnography has been heightened by current public opinion and social and political (ideological) perceptions of creations by the so-called folk or traditional cultures. The last thirty years have witnessed an exchange of views ranging from total denial of peculiar "primitive" local traits of the folk as signs

of social and cultural backwardness (internal pressures in small village communities have led most of our former peasant-farmers to flee into modern cities, which have opened up new social and cultural prospects), to utilization of folkloric symbols to affirm cultural differences and yet cultural equality in this land of many nations, or to affirm one's identity in some entirely different setting.

At the same time *folklorismus* plays a significant role in the production of mass culture, while a battle is being waged from the opposite pole to "preserve the authenticity" of folk traditions, the last bastion of the romantic orientation in ethnological and folklore studies.

This has led contemporary ethnological criticism to subject the concept of the folk to its scrutiny (not uninfluenced by similar critical approaches in German ethnology). But such criticism has not reached all the circles and institutions in this country involved in ethnological and folklore research. The concept of the folk is still at the heart of ethnological research where nations are still in the process of formation. Investigations with *ethnos* as their point of departure are in full swing in some centers.

Of course, abandoning the concept of the folk as a basic ethnological notion requires that we determine just what social structure the phenomena to be studied by ethnology and folklore studies reside in. The theoretical shift in ethnology from the folk towards "a group of people who communicate by word of mouth" and mutually interact, who, it follows, know each other, and whose interrelationships are authentic, provides a new impetus for ethnological and folklore research. Human groups having their own particular norms and values, sharing their own worldview, are not confined to anthropology textbooks. They are still alive, here in Southeastern Europe, that is to say, in villages where folk costumes are no longer worn except in performances by the local folk ensemble, where spinning parties and outdoor gatherings have made way for television and the motifs in everyday conversation are drawn not only from Grandma's repertoire, but also from retold TV programs and popular magazines or newspapers reports of crime and violence, where they mix together in a variety of ways, becoming interwoven in urban and rural situations, in everyday speech and children's games, in proverbs appearing as newspaper headlines (Lozica, Perić-Polonijo, Rajković 1978, Bošković-Stulli 1978b, 1979, 1980).

On the other hand, hypotheses about the culture of small groups that communicate orally make ethnological research possible in urban settings which at first seem completely culturally homogenous, or in culturally complex agglomerations, even in urbanized villages.

Evidence of such *idiocultures* can be seen every day in obituary notices in our local newspapers and also in big-city newspapers with wide circulations. The texts of these obituaries include one section with a conventional form for the notice. The other part refers to family, work, neighborhood, and friendship ties. Thus these contemporary human groups advertise their presence day by day, sometimes with traditional expressions much like a dirge, and sometimes with laments akin to Central European sentimental literature. They pay for expensive space in the papers in order to call attention to their identity (Rihtman-Auguštin 1978, 118-175).

If we accept groups exhibiting oral communication as a working hypothesis for ethnological research, and thus for the investigation of cultural content, the same hypothesis can cover what used to be the field of study of cultural and historical ethnology,

i.e., traditional culture, as well as contemporary phenomena in everyday culture. Research on the "folk life" described in the past and up to the beginning of this century (which Croatian ethnography has primarily dealt with) that also included the dimension of social groups would be sure to turn up some previously unknown or inadequately recognized relationships (e.g., a women's subculture in extended family groups or the existence of several small groups with their own respective cultures in a traditional village. I presented a paper on the women's subculture in Slavonian communal families at the *Ethnographiae Pannonicae* symposium in Vinkovci in 1980.)

The patriarchal communal family — *zadruga*, the prime example of the old ethnology in the Balkans, is nothing more in this instance than a social group. But the notion of the folk from which research with a traditional view of cognitive, material and social culture proceeded was at the same time a frame enclosing that research. The patriarchal communal family was not considered for the most part in terms of a social relationship, but rather as a national trait of the "dove-hearted people" (Utješenić 1869). Riehl's model of a patriarchal peasant economy merged in our country with Slavic romanticism. Renewed research on the *zadruga* as a social group would thus reveal its social elasticity and adaptability, but also its economic inefficiency; it would reveal confrontations and conflicts within the communal family conflicts of an economic nature, but also conflicting values within its familial economic organization.

These more or less random examples are intended merely to illustrate the possibilities opened up by a working hypothesis concerning groups that communicate by word of mouth.

In fact, what we are dealing with is a specific sociological dimension in ethnologic research which is absolutely indispensable if one takes into account the extent of the interconnection and interweaving between culture and society, i.e., between the cultural and social aspects of phenomena.

Nevertheless many researchers feel as if — in this shift of main interest from the ethnic specificity of culture towards the cultural specificity of social groups with oral communication — something has been lost. It is as if something straggled off "along the way", as if the "quality" in cultural phenomena is hiding somewhere, or gone forever. For no matter how effective the obituary notices or the rhymes that children accompany their games with today may be, no matter how provocative and moving the shift in motifs in contemporary folkloric creations, or even by the interpolation of motifs and expressions from the mass media into contemporary folklore production and into the culture of urban groups, all this simply does not measure up to the worth of that production and those cultural contents which we are familiar with from investigations of our traditional culture and folklore!

But maybe this is only the way it seems. We know, to cite an example, that Slavic peasant folklore existed long before the romantics started admiring it. We also know that our familiarity with it was and is based on a more or less romantic selection, even today when we go to do field work in an "out-of-the-way" village.

We cannot foresee what the future's appraisal of the contemporary cultural contents of small groups and their interaction with the mainstream of general culture will be. How will the resistance these small groups offer be judged, and their efforts to hold onto or create an identity in an era when the individual does not belong to just one group, but is "segmented" in the course of his lifetime and often belongs to several groups at the same time (Douglas 1966, 68–69; Bauman 1973, 139). Who will have the data,

anyway, the material on all those idiocultures? Who will comprehend the extent of their social, and especially their national cultural relevance, in times like ours when only large social systems are considered relevant? And, as a matter of fact, how many small groups with cultures of their own does it take to maintain social and cultural equilibrium, and where and to what extent do they alter it?

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