

Richard March, Milwaukee, Wisc.:

Traditional Expressive Behavior and the Tamburitza Tradition

Folklorists as well as scholars in the closely related disciplines of ethnology and cultural anthropology have a long-standing interest in traditional expressive forms of culture. Following an academic tradition which has developed since the early nineteenth century, folklorists have tended to define their field in terms of the object which they study, i.e. folklore. Though there has never been complete unanimity on a definition of folklore, most definitions stress one or more of the following three characteristics: the lore is passed on by oral transmission, or in the case of non-verbal forms, by direct imitation, it is old, and it is associated with the peasantry or the common folk.¹ Many scholars have felt that objects which did not meet the criteria should be beyond the realm of the folklorist's perusal. Increasingly however, this limitation has ceased to be constructive to the further development of folkloristics.

Some of the limitations seem increasingly arbitrary. In the matter of limiting folklore to that which is orally transmitted, for example, perhaps the limitation had a reasonable basis in the past. Folklorists tended to study non-literate societies or societies in which the use of literacy was narrowly restricted and employed only by a small portion of the population. Thus folklorists studied what was actually the most frequent communicative form. A major body of literature has developed which relates directly to oral transmission.² The positive results of studies by such scholars as Stith Thompson, Carl Van

¹ Dan Ben-Amos, "Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context", *Journal of American Folklore* 84 (1971), 8.

² See for example, Carl W.v. Sydow, "On the Spread of Tradition", in *Selected Papers* (1948); pp. 44-59, Walter Anderson, "Ein Volkskundliches Experiment", *FFC* 151, Gyula Ortutay, "Principles of Oral Transmission", in *Hungarian Folklore* (1970); pp. 132-73, and Linda Dégh and Andrew Vazsonyi, "The Hypothesis of Multi-Conduit Transmission in Folklore", in *Folklore Performance and Communication* (1975); 207-54.

Sydow, and more recently, Linda Dégh and Dan Ben-Amos, have been a fuller understanding of the process, the dynamics and the meaning of traditional oral expression.

Despite the discipline's central focus upon oral forms, there has been a persistent trend among literarily-oriented folklorists to examine the connections between oral narrative and another communicative medium — written literature.³ In recent decades there has been a rapid increase in literacy and an explosive proliferation of electronic communicative media. Public education and the mass production of phonographs, radios, televisions and tape recorders have opened many new channels of communication in contemporary culture. Though oral transmission certainly remains an important factor today, it is natural that an individual would utilize whatever communicative means are available in his or her cultural milieu. In the context of the modern world, it is perhaps desirable that folklorists reassess the goals of their discipline. Are we really only interested in understanding the process of oral transmission or should we be concerned with an effort to better comprehend the dynamics and meaning of traditional expressive behavior, and thereby more fully understand creative people and their cultural environment? If the discipline is concerned with the latter goals, it is thus only coincidentally concerned with oral transmission. Therefore folklorists should not fail to examine the forms of communication their informants produce, including those utilizing or influenced by the written and electronic media.

Some folklore studies have already been concerned with these media. I have already mentioned studies which examine the mutual influences of folklore and literature. Also, research has been conducted on peasant letters,⁴ upon the impact of the telephone upon traditional narrators⁵ and of the role of the phonograph record in disseminating and influencing traditional music.⁶ But the surface has hardly been scratched. There is a great need, for example, for studies of the impact of cassette recorders and self-produced record albums upon the transmission of traditional expressive forms.

Why has there been so little folkloristic perusal of these common and everywhere evident phenomena? Certainly a major factor has been the traditional attitude and scholarly inertia within the academic disciplines of folklore and ethnology. For too long most folklorists and ethnologists have understood the paradigm of scientific work in their discipline as a process of defining and rigidly delimiting a particular cultural inventory of classes of artifacts which is termed "folk", "original", "authentic", or some similar designation, and then categorizing all objects of cultural creation as falling within or outside of the allowable inventory.

Like Linneus, who separated the living from the non-living and categorized the living according to genus and species, folklorists have endeavored to separate the folk artifacts from the non-folk and to carefully classify the former. In biology, Darwin's theory undermined the rigidity of the Linnean classification, and more recently, molecular

³ For example, Max Lüthi, *Volksliteratur und Hochliteratur* (1970), and Francis L. Utley, "Oral Genres as a Bridge to Written Literature", in *Folklore Genres* (1974), ed. by Dan Ben-Amos, 3-16.

⁴ Robert B. Klymasz, "The Letter in Canadian Ukrainian Folklore", *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 6 (1969): 39-49.

⁵ Linda Dégh, and Andrew Vazsonyi, "Dialectics of the Legend", *Folklore Preprint Series* 6 (1974).

⁶ Bill Malone, *Country Music, USA* (1969).

biology has blurred even the distinction between the living and non-living. Similarly, it has long been noticed that many items of folklore are transitional between genre classifications,⁷ and new realizations that the cultural matrix surrounding traditional expressive forms is ever-changing have revealed that also the folk – non-folk distinction is also a relative one.

Traditionally the implicit underlying question of much folkloristic work has tended to be, "Does this particular expression fall within the exclusive category called folklore?" Perhaps it would be more pertinent to ask, "Can analysis of this expression lead us to valuable insights regarding its process of creation, its meaning, its makers, and their culture?" I do not wish to belittle the many valuable studies based on the tenet that folklore must be orally transmitted; rather I am encouraging that further studies aim at elucidating the expressive forms which today arise in the complex web of oral, written and electronic media. Applying limits to the scope of one's inquiry may be useful. A linguist may, for example, restrict him or herself to a study of gesture. This limit, for the purposes of a particular study does not mean that he or she has eschewed the study of verbal forms of communication. Likewise, the insights folklorists have gained in their study of oral transmission may be fruitfully applied to cultural expressions which may involve oral and other means of communication.

Folklore study has been further burdened with an attitude that the items in the folk category are necessarily aesthetically (or even morally), superior to the non-folk. Scholars have reacted with indignation when encountering cultural phenomena which resemble folklore in some way but do not meet one or more of the delimiting criteria required for classification in the "folk" category. The term "fakelore" coined by Richard M. Dorson rings with righteous indignation. In Europe, modified folklore has been termed "folklorism", and is viewed as an insidious threat to the wholesomeness of folk culture.⁸

Folklorism, though as yet imprecisely defined, usually refers to some item or trait of folklore which is utilized in a wider context than the folk group in which it arose, often for a commercial or political purpose, often transmitted indirectly, utilizing the mass media.⁹ To the observers who find it insidious, folklorism's sin is that it involves a traditional expressive form which has been adapted to modern conditions in some obvious way. Focusing on the end product, the artifact produced by the expressive behavior, these scholars seem to have a personal desire that the artifact in question remains static (i.e. "pure") in its form. By emphasizing the object rather than the creative process, such scholars have "artificialized" certain end products of communication and have tended to disregard the surrounding contexts of performance and culture. With the exception of material artifacts, which maintain a discrete existence, the end products of expressive behavior are continually re-created on the occasion of each performance, and are the result of a fluid and ever-changing process. Thus it would seem totally unreasonable to expect communicative acts to remain completely stable regardless of the change in their surrounding environment. Still, many folklorists reject the transmuted forms. On what basis have they sought to impose this seemingly impossible demand for stability upon the creative process?

⁷ Carl W.v. Sydow, "The Categories of Prose Tradition", in *Selected Papers*.

⁸ See for example the titles cited by Maja Bošković-Stulli, "O folklorizmu", *Zbornik za narodni život i običaje* 45 (1971), 171.

⁹ *ibid.*, 171-75.

Probably the greatest justification of their self-righteousness stems from the romantic nationalist ideology developed by Johann Herder in the closing years of the eighteenth century. Herder's ideas linked the maintenance of traditional peasant expressive culture with the purity of a "nation's soul"; thus change or modernization in expressive behavior may represent to his followers a betrayal of one's national culture.¹⁰ The arguments of latter-day romantics are sprinkled with value-loaded expressions like "preserving our heritage" and "saving our folk treasure".

Romantic ideology has proved to be very popular and successful, not only with the learned, but with society at large. It has been spread through mass education and political movements to ever-larger segments of society. It has caused villagers and urbanites alike to become conscious of the folklore of their own regions, producing some ironic results. Because of their acceptance of the romantic idea, through the educational efforts of folklorists and ethnologists, the folk themselves have, like some folklorists, canonized and artifactualized certain expressive forms, notably older forms of folk music and dance, and thereby have placed them in a different and more exalted locus in their cultural matrix. Their new awareness has also prompted them to utilize these folk arts in newly-devised ways — often to commercial or political ends, often through the mass media, thus converting them into folklorism.

There is little unanimity among folklorists concerning the revivalistic phenomena which have arisen owing to the spread of the romantic ideology. Some folklorists are directly involved in revivalistic efforts, while others lament them as evidence of the passing of non-reflective simplicity. Some feel it is the duty of the folklorist as a specialist within the culture, to guide the endeavors at revitalizing folklore; others feel scholars should in no way intervene in the process but should only study its course from a distance. Artifactually-oriented thinkers tend to approve of revival and re-creation of the "genuine folk repertoire". Process-oriented have tended to reject revivalism as non-folkloric.

What is to be made of these widely differing views? What approach could potentially teach the most about these cultural phenomena? A long established and important influence of cultural anthropology and ethnology on folkloristics has been the concept that folk expressive forms ought to be analyzed in terms of the values, ideas, and mores of the cultural group in which they arise. Without such knowledge the process of creation, the basic meaning and the functions of the expressive forms are hard to elucidate. The romantic concepts have successfully entered modern culture and have become an accepted value among the members of folk groups; therefore it would be misleading to study the expressive forms of a culture without recognizing the role played by a popular romantic idea like a positive value placed upon the "preservation" of folklore, if it is present among the population. Furthermore, since nowadays the folklorist or ethnologist is a recognized specialist from whom village groups expect to receive advice and direction in their revivalistic efforts, it is difficult for a scholar to remain totally detached. The folklorist is faced with the difficult task of being part of a complex process and yet retaining enough scholarly objectivity to be able to step back and examine that whole process, including his or her own role in it. The present need is for a unified and holistic folkloristic approach to the study of complex communicative acts. The sometimes heated

¹⁰ Elinor Murray Despalatovic, "Peasant Culture and National Culture", *Balkanistica* 3 (1976), 3.

debates concerning what may be considered "genuine" folklore and what is folklorism pale in importance if we understand our goal to be a meaningful analysis of traditional expressive behavior. All behavior which really occurs is genuine. It is important to recognize and consider all of the ideas and influences which went into its development. Such issues as whether or not this or that particular communicative act exclusively uses oral transmission or whether it is purely in the "original" peasant style seem at most incidental to our primary concerns. Our aims ought to transcend merely classifying artifacts and address questions concerning the role of tradition in the dynamics of communication. It is with this holistic conception of the task that I have attempted to invest my work on the South Slavic tamburitza musical tradition.

Beginning in the Chicago area, I observed and participated in the activities of local tamburitza organizations, amateur youth orchestras and professional adult performers, over a two year period. In addition to in-depth work in Chicago, fieldwork for the American bicentennial festival enabled me to acquaint myself with tamburitza activities in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan and California. A generous research grant enabled me to spend one year in Zagreb where I was able to do research on the activities of tamburitza groups in that city and in surrounding villages and towns. As in America, I was able to make some wider field forays into the regions of Lika, Podravina, Slavonija, and to Bosnia and Vojvodina, to gain a general overview of activities there. Also in Zagreb, I managed to locate valuable source materials on the past history of organized tamburitza activities.

The results of this extensive research project will be contained in a soon to be completed book-length study. Unfortunately space only permits brief comments here. Taking the musical event as the basic unit in which the tamburitza tradition maintains its existence, I carefully documented concerts, rehearsals, tavern performances and informal music-making, with attention to the roles of both the music makers and the audience. Each of these events is a complex expressive act created through the convergence of cultural influences and resources of various origins. Even the same tamburitza group produces widely varying musical events. The tamburitza orchestra of the Independent Craftsmen's Guild (Udruženje samostalnih obrtnika) of Sisak, for example, expresses a certain sort of message at the careful rehearsals when the music teacher they have hired drills them on the parts for a recently-composed "Slavonian Rhapsody" and on the theme song from a recent film, and a quite different message when they play by ear the well-known drinking songs for a St. Martin's night celebration of their Guild. An American youth orchestra conveys an idyllic image of their supposed peasant ancestors when they perform a choreographed suite of dances from Posavina to a combo of their members, and at the social which follows they are likely to play, in addition to Croatian music, popular Greek dance tunes, polkas originally from Slovenian folk music, but made known and popular by the commercial recordings of Frankie Yankovic, with English lyrics, or they may even play the hybrid "Tamburitza Boogie", a boogie-woogie blues with mildly obscene improvised verses in English.

How does a folklorist approach such material? Is the tamburitza tradition folkloric, or has it been a form of folklorism from the very beginning? To what extent does this phenomenon suit the criteria of the exclusivist definitions of folklore? First of all, regarding the social base, a criterion often stressed in Europe, the instrument, the music, and most songs performed ultimately stem from an origin in the peasant class. There can be no doubt that the tamburitza's existence as an instrument used in peasant culture

is not derived from an elite origin. That is to say the tamburitza instrument is not a *gesunkenes Kulturgut*.¹¹

Also, there is evidence that the instrument has been known in the Balkans for over four hundred years and songs still performed today have been documented eighty to one hundred years ago, thus satisfying a second commonly cited criterion, time depth. Thirdly, much of what the *tamburaš* learns is by ear, from listening to and imitating the music played by others. For the most part the artisans who make the instruments learn their skills through apprenticeship, that is by imitation of a master craftsman. In short, transmission through oral, aural and imitative means are very important both to the music and the craft of making the instrument.

The preceding statements seem to squarely place the tamburitza tradition in the realm of folklore, even according to the most stringently exclusive definitions. Indeed, there are still illiterate mountain shepherds who strum hoary melodies on their primitive handmade tamburitzas. There is however much more to the tamburitza tradition than this aspect. Such a depiction of the tradition ignores many of the most significant manifestations of tamburitza as it exists today, often in much more urbane contexts.

Today's tamburitza's music is an expression of a more complicated way of life. For every shepherd musician whose rugged-figure matches a romantic image of the primitive folk, there are dozens, perhaps hundreds of educated and sophisticated *tamburaši*. For every player of the primitive *samica*, an instrument whose very name means it is designed to be played solo and usually is incapable of playing in any sort of ensembles, there are many musicians who belong to twenty or thirty-member tamburitza orchestras who learn to play their material from sheet music with repertoires which may include not only arranged folksongs, but also compositions by classical composers like Franz Schubert or Aram Khachaturian.¹²

Café entertainers use the tambura to perform an eclectic repertoire drawing on popular hits as well as folk tradition.¹³ Even the "primitive" shepherd no longer seems so idyllic; nowadays he is as likely to sing and play recently composed songs which he hears on the radio as the old ballads and lyric songs of folk tradition. In the world of the present, the tamburitza has entered the mass media — radio and television broadcasts transmit the music across great distances so that sophisticated musical forms can easily penetrate the most remote backwater. Phonograph records travel still farther, even across the world's wide ocean to reach a distant audience. Once limited to oral transmission, the tradition has since entered whatever medium of communication is available in its cultural environment.

The picture is further complicated by the reality that the tamburitza musician of today has lost, if indeed he ever possessed, the innocence and purity attributed to him by romantics. The *tamburaši* in Yugoslavia and North America are not isolated individuals, cut off from the mainstream of modern culture. Indeed they often include the more educated and sophisticated members of their communities. Nowadays even the word "folklore" has entered the lexicon of most *tamburaši* along with a certain romanti-

¹¹ E.E. Kiefer, Albert Wesselski and Recent Folktale Theories (1947).

¹² Walter W. Kolar, A History of the Tambura vol. 2 (1975), 76.

¹³ See record albums, "Zvonko Bogdan peva za vas" RTB 1p 1323 or "Šafet Isović", Jugoton CPY V 847.

cally-based concept of what it means. Strident arguments rage between certain practitioners of the tradition as to whether a particular song, instrumental style or form of presentation is "authentic folklore". Far from being a non-reflective, spontaneous creation as some scholars believe pure folklore should be,¹⁴ *tamburaši* make a conscious choice to play their particular instrument and continually make severely judged choices regarding what music to play on it and just how it should be played. Often their judgments are based on how the music measures up to the musician's concept of and attitude toward "authentic folklore".¹⁵

Finally, another severe blow to conceiving of the tamburitza tradition as "pure" folklore can be found in the fact that the form of the instrument most commonly in use today, and the manner in which it is played (that is in large ensembles of various-sized tamburitzas), trace their origins to the efforts of nineteenth century nationalists; the Illyrian, for the most part urbanites, who wanted for political reasons to "ennoble" Croatian culture with a folk-based but nevertheless refined and polished musical form, a proof of the autonomy of their national culture.¹⁶ Suddenly the self-same tradition which a moment ago seemed surely folkloric, a spontaneous, orally-transmitted, traditional creation of the peasantry, now seems to be a monstrous forgery, the fabricated "folk soul" of a romantic nationalist movement which is being spread by today's entertainment industry.

Actually, either extreme view — that the tradition absolutely is or is not folkloric — is untenable when we approach the subject holistically. Certainly the tamburitza had a period of existence as a "pure" folk tradition, but since the mid-nineteenth century the tradition has been saturated by the attempts of urban intellectuals to apply, modify and convert folk music to use in a number of cultural and political settings. In the course of their efforts they promoted musical literacy which, though never completely dominant, is nevertheless an important factor in the tamburitza tradition. Written notes made it possible in the nineteenth century to introduce new and varied musical ideas, and technical advances by instrument makers who become familiar with other fretted stringed instruments like the Spanish guitar and the Italian mandolin, transformed the tamburitza into a versatile instrument capable of playing a chromatic scale and executing the new musical ideas.

Despite the efforts of the intellectuals, or in some cases perhaps, owing to their efforts, the older folkloric tamburitza tradition continued to live on. Not only did some peasants remain uninfluenced and continued to make and play the original "primitive" forms of the instrument out of which the nationalists had created their "ennobled" tamburitza, but also the improved instrument along with new songs and musical ideas were selected, filtered and adapted by the country folk to their own uses, on the basis of their own aesthetics, and placed in socio-cultural niches of their own choosing. Small ensembles of peasant musicians used the "orchestral" tamburitza instruments to entertain at weddings, saint's days and other village festivities, playing tunes and singing songs learned by ear, a part of their local oral tradition. The peasant tamburitza ensem-

¹⁴ Norbert Riedl, "Folklore and the Study of Material Aspects of Folk Culture", *Journal of American Folklore* 79 (1966), 557-63.

¹⁵ Dunja Rihtman-Augustin, „Pretpostavke suvremenog etnološkog istraživanja", *Narodna Umjetnost* 15 (1976), 11.

¹⁶ Franjo Ks. Kuhač, *Ilirski kompozitori* (1897).

bles and gypsy bands spirited the music out the back door of the concert hall into which the intellectuals had endeavored to place it, and brought it back, in a changed form, onto the village street or into the tavern and coffeehouse. Such ensembles moved into the traditional contexts occupied by the players of older traditional instruments – various bagpipes, *lijerice*, *sopile* and others, and sometimes completely replaced the older instruments in the local tradition.

There can be no simple yes or no answer to rhetorical question, "is it folklore?" Nor is it essential that there should be. The tamburitza tradition is an extant phenomenon. It seems pointless to judge it in terms of preconceived criteria. What is important is that clearly the theories and methodology of folklore study can fruitfully be utilized in an analysis of the phenomenon.

The tamburitza tradition is far from being a trivial element in South Slavic culture, both in North American immigrant colonies and in the homeland. It deserves the careful attention of folklorists. Its extremely complex nature, however, and rigid conceptions of folkloristics have combined to severely limit scholarly work on the subject. The various sorts of traditional expressive behavior which comprise the tamburitza tradition need to be studied holistically. The extent to which oral, aural, written and electronic transmission have influenced a given musical event needs to be considered. The influence of romantic and nationalist ideas upon a performance, and the specific nature of those ideas, which have themselves undergone change through time, is an important factor influencing both the content and the meaning of a tamburitza performance.

The tamburitza tradition is typical of the sort of traditional expressive activity in which large numbers of ordinary people are involved in contemporary society. Such activities bear many similarities to the folklorist's traditional object of study, and may even be a contemporary manifestation of the same phenomenon. The people involved may be the same ones folklorists have turned to in their studies of "pure" folklore. It is in the interests of advancing human knowledge that folklorists should examine the complex hybrid expressive forms encountered in contemporary society.