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Children's Folklore between Survival and Barrier

Proceeding from the role of children's folklore in the inauguration of the term folklore, the author concentrates on interpretations of children's games in the second half of the 19th century. In reference to multiple sources of folkloristic interest in children during the 1970s and 1980s, she deals with traces of 19th century evolutionary theories of culture in the works of that period.

Key words: children's folklore, folklore study, anthropology, evolutionary theories of culture

William Thoms addressed in 1846 the readership of The Athenaeum with the proposal that the terms 'popular literature' and 'popular antiquities' be in future replaced by the "good Saxon compound Folk-Lore" (1965 [1846], 4-5). In his letter, Thoms invited the readers to record "manners, customs, observances, superstitions, ballads, proverbs etc. of the Olden time", in order to advance the English study of antiquities, and possibly also "enrich some future editions of Grimm's Mythology" (*ibid*.:5). There would be probably no reason to mention Thoms's famous letter and his introduction of the term folklore in this context, if children had not been involved in the inauguration of folklore. It will be recalled that Thoms illustrated the beneficial comparative effect of his terminological modification by comparing a Yorkshire children's game with a paragraph of Jacob Grimm's *Deutsche Mythologie*. In other words, the belief that the cuckoo sings only after he has eaten his fill of cherries is linked to the game in which children dance around the cherry tree, repeating the rhyme: "Cuckoo, cherry tree! Come down and tell me, how many years I have to live". Every child would then shake the tree and deduct the answer to the song question from the number of fallen cherries. Based on this, the author of the term folklore concluded that this game offers a plausible interpretation of the connection between the cuckoo, the cherries and their powers of prophecy. Like so many others, he thus turned the practice of a group of children into an eloquent witness of, as he believed, an ancient, vanishing culture. However, it is important to emphasize that

Thoms, as opposed to many of his successors, compared the belief and the game without paying special attention to the fact that it was a children's game. In his view, the practice of the Yorkshire children was just an example of "a mass of minute facts, many of which, when separately considered, appear trifling and insignificant, - but, taken in connection with the system into which his master-mind has woven them, assume a value that he who first recorded them never dreamed of attributing to them" (*ibid*: 5).

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Just a few decades after Thoms's famous letter, children's games will due to their attributes become irreplaceable analytical material to researchers of folklore. The analysis of children's practices or, in Thoms's terms, children's folklore as a particularly reliable mouthpiece of the past, reached its scientific elaboration and affirmation during the second half of the 19th century in works of several British folklorists and anthropologists, of which Edward B. Tylor is today probably best known. Based on the assumption that every stage of civilisation "grows or is developed from the stage before it" (1960 [1881]:16), Tylor maintained - as summarized by Elvin Hatch - that in all societies "some ancient patterns of thinking and behaviour survived the conditions under which they originated and serve 'as proof and example' of an earlier stage of development. Bows, arrows and slings, for instance, are only toys in modern society, but also witnesses of activities once practiced by Europeans with deadly seriousness" (1979: 40). In sum, the first professor of the anthropology at Oxford believed that "children's games, popular proverbs and absurd customs can be practically meaningless, but are not fully without philosophical relevance, because they speak volumes about the most important stages of early culture" (acc. Moore, 2002 [1996]: 30).

As opposed to scholars of the 17th and 18th centuries who researched, and sometimes even created the so-called wild children in their search for the original human nature (cf. Jahoda, 2002:15-17), Tylor regarded the London schoolchildren also as interesting analytical material (Bernard, 2000: 39). They came to the focus of his interest also due to the phenomenon of the so-called "arrested development" (cf.. ibid, 2002: 18), which persisted as a commonly known fact in distinguished scientific discussions until the first decades of the 20th century.[1] Tylor also refers to this "fact" when writing that children of other races learn equally well as white children approximately until the age of twelve, but then their performance falls behind (acc. Hatch, 1979 [1973]: 46). Adopting the viewpoint that "primitive people" are childlike and therefore closer to earlier patterns of human thinking and behaviour, he believed that children's songs, games and toys "reproduce, in what are at once sports and little children's lessons, early stages in the history of childlike tribes of

[1] Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, for instance, writes straightforwardly in his Primitive Mentality that it is "well known that native children, wherever the missionaries managed to establish schools, are as fast and good learners as our children, at least to a certain age, when their development slows down and then stops" (1954 [1922]: 11).

mankind" (Tylor acc. Lévy Zumwalt, 1995: 25).[2] This is why he, for instance, interpreted the children's game where a burning match circulates from one boy to another until it burns out as "a cruel Manichean custom" in which a child is circulated from hand to hand, receiving knife stabs until it dies (Tylor acc. Kokjara [Cocchiara], 1985 [1971]).

Among the authors who followed Tylor's approach to children's games, Alice B. Gomme is particularly important for the study of children's folklore with her two-tome collection *The Traditional Games of England, Scotland and Ireland* (cf.., e.g., Grider, 1980: 163; Grider, 1995: 13). This book contains records of over two thousand games, accompanied with comprehensive comments of the author, where she also analysed the survivals of earlier practices. Starting from the assumption that children's games are "some of the oldest historical sources of our kind" (acc. Lévy Zumwalt, 1995: 27), Gomme established a connection between the earlier described matchstick game and the custom "of sending a flaming cross, a symbol of fire, to the clans who then carefully protected it from going out in their village or house" (acc. Kokjara [Cocchiara], 1985 [1971]: 214).[3]

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Overviews of the research history of children's folklore emphasize a radical turn in methodology and interpretation announced in 1938 by Dorothy Howard in her dissertation on the songs of contemporary American children and popularized in the 1950s by the work of Iona and Peter Opie (Grider, 1995: 14; Sutton-Smith, 1995: 293-295), especially their book *Lore and the Language of Schoolchildren* (1982 [1959]). This title still has the status of one of the most famous studies of children's folklore, even beyond its main discipline (cf., e.g., Jenks, 1999 [1996]: 13; Mitchell, Reid-Walsh, 2002: 118). As opposed to Gomme who described games based on memories of old age informants (Grider, 1980: 164), the Opies contacted with the help of schoolteachers some 5000 students in various regions of England, Scotland and Wales as well as in one Dublin school. In their studies, they insisted on the description and systematization of contemporary children's games, beliefs and customs, superseding the comparative and historical reconstruction of games in the form of

[2] Among a wide range of culture researchers who wrote, like Tylor, about the "childlike tribes of mankind" like (cf., e.g., Hardman, 2001 [1973]: 595-508; Lévy Zumwalt, 1995: 24-27), I would single out Andrew Lang, not because of his analyses of children's practices, but because his extremely popular collections of fairy tales in English language strongly influenced the reading practices of many generations. In the forewords to his collections, Lang promoted the opinion that fairy tales are appropriate literature for children, claiming that "the children to whom and for whom they were told represent the young age of man" (acc. Rose, 1985: 56), i.e. that "these fairy tales are the oldest stories in the world, and as they were first made by men who were childlike for their own amusement, so they amuse children still" (Lang, 1892).

[3] The matchstick game described by Tylor and Gomme is also mentioned by Jelica Belović-Bernadzikowska in her collection 110 Games for the Youth, published probably in 1894. Belović-Bernadzikowska's collection is addressed primarily to children and their educators, which is why the description of the matchstick game is not accompanied by a reconstruction of the source, but by the comment that this is a "very funny and amusing game. But, beware of the fire!" (1991 [1894]: 32).

notes and graphically highlighted paragraphs. The research and documentation of contemporary folklore based on children accounts are only some of the common traits of the studies of the Opie couple and the works published in later decades.

The global rise of the study of children's folklore (cf., e.g., Dovženok, 1981; Virtanen, 1978; Simonides, 1976; Sutton-Smith, 1981; Rajković, 1978; Stanonik, 1984 et al.) in the course of the 1970s and 1980s is attributed, on the other hand, to at least one other source. The growing interest of professional folklorists and ethnologists in children practices is also understandable in the context of the revaluation of tenets and objectives of their disciplines which took place in that period (cf., e.g., Bauzinger, 2002 [1971]; Ben-Amos, 1971; Dundes, 1980 [1964]). As pointed out in the reviews of the text of Zorica Rajković (1978) on the folklore of the Zagreb children, the study of the practices of (urban) children in that period was a constituent part of the expansion of the discipline to "contemporary material or the material hitherto not regarded as folklore or ethnological material" (Rihtman-Auguštin, Turčin, Pavlović, 1979: 179; cf. Povrzanović, 1989: 165; Rihtman-Auguštin, Muraj, 1998: 108). Similarly, Lauri Honko marked the in-depth studies on children's folklore in the mid-1970 (however with a different attitude) as symptomatic for the new tendencies in folklore studies (acc. Abrahams, 1992: 32). It should be added that the bibliographies of children's folklore research after the 1960s (Grider, 1980b; Johnson, McMahon, 1995)[4] include a growing number of paper collections, studies, anthologies and dissertations in that field, which seems to speak in favour of Honk's observation.[5]

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[4] For older titles in English to supplement Grider's bibliography, as well as studies of children's folklore in Australia, Norway, Denmark, India etc. see Halpert 1982. For a linguistically more diversified overview of literature on children's folklore, albeit containing less titles, see Messerli, 1993.

[5] An insight into the lists of scientific papers can naturally not answer the question how often the studies of children's folklore of that time were induced by new trends in the main discipline and to what degree they occurred simultaneously with them; to what extent they crossed the limits in their own right or were only affected by expanding the limits. What could be called the "simultaneity of the temporally heterogeneous" in the research of children's folklore has been, I believe, vividly borne out by the presentations of the 27th Congress of the Folklorist Associations Union of Yugoslavia in 1980.

Almost one third of the presentations in the New Year Customs section were dedicated to childhood, children and/or their practices. The approaches to these issues ranged from the reconstruction of ancestor cult survivals in children-related Christmas customs (Matić, 1980) to the analysis of Father Christmas as a pedagogic, socialisation, social and consumer medium (Rihtman-Auguštin, 1980). The section dealing with "creators and carriers of popular creativity" included five works on children's folklore. One of them deals with toys and games of shepherds in the region of Podravina in general, without concentrating on the items and texts in their own right (Kovačić, 1980). The second paper is a micro-study of folklore motives in jokes of contemporary, mainly Zagreb children (Lozica, 1980), while the third deals with social and institutional causes of creative atrophy of the counting rhymes (Bašić, 1980). Two presentations were dedicated to the theory and methodology of the study of children's folklore (Orepić-Rajković, 1980; Perić-Polonijo, 1980).

The multiple sources of folkloristic interest in children in the central decades of the second half of the twentieth century are also evident in the special edition of the *Western Folklore*. The fact alone that such a reputed folkloristic magazine as *Western Folklore* dedicated an entire issue in 1980 to children's folklore, supports the thesis that this subject was recognized as relevant also to the centre of the discipline. Also, the approach of most of the collected texts bears witness to their analytical relevance. Indeed, the ethnographic studies of Elizabeth Tucker (1980), Roberta Krell (1980) and Jeanne Soileau (1980) focus on "texts", but without being - as Brian Sutton-Smith (1990: 17; cf. Hardman, 2001 [1973]: 501-502) puts it when describing the works of Iona and Peter Opie - disinterested in the world these children live in and the meaning attributed to their practices by the children themselves. From the methodological and interpretative aspect, they seem to be closer to, for example, the studies of working place folklore, which were particularly frequent at that time (cf., e.g., Santino, 1978), than to the book *The Lore and the Language of Schoolchildren*.

Sylvia Ann Grider, the editor of that issue, did not, however, locate the origin of the collected papers in the context of broader epistemological changes in folklore studies. Instead, she exclusively contextualised the growing interest of North-American and European folklorists in children by the fundamental studies of children's folklore, among which the already mentioned book by Iona and Peter Opie is singled out as the most significant (1980: 164). In the same text, Grider also reanimated in an interesting way the line of the children's folklore research which was based on an assumed similarity between children and members of "primitive cultures". Even though her review of the history of children's folklore studies voiced criticism of approaches inspired by evolutionary theories of culture, she rhetorically trod in the footsteps of the same approaches by comparing the worlds of children with the worlds of Australian aborigines (*ibid*: 162). Such approach is by no means an isolated one. In those years, for instance, John McDowell interpreted children's riddles by following the Lévi-Strauss concept of wild thought (cf. Lévy Zumwalt, 1995: 28-30), while Lea Virtanen wrote in her paper on children's folklore that "a specific children's tradition is born only where a wild tribe known as the kids is able to isolate itself from the surrounding adults and by dint of daily contact to create its own behavioural norms" (1978: 11). Similarly to Virtanen, Grider revitalised the rhetorical glossary of the 19th century works on children's folklore, inviting folklorists who were worried about the continually shrinking research funds to solve the funding

[6] Grider's comparison of children and natives is a paraphrase of Iona and Peter Opie's remark that folklorists and anthropologists can research - practically at their doorstep - a culture still unnoticed by the developed world and influencing it as much as "the culture of a vanishing native tribe surviving in the hinterlands of a reservation" (1982 [1959]: 22). It must be, however, noted that the comparison of children and natives in their texts serves a completely different function. While the Opies counterpoint children and natives with the purpose of vividly describing the isolation of children's folklore (cf. James, Prout, 1990: 28-30), Grider uses the same parallel arguments for the folklore study of childhood. The Opies write of the principles of children's culture, while Grider writes of the benefits resulting from the study of it.

problems by researching children instead of Australian aborigines (1980: 162).[6] Why should, she writes, their field be miles away, if they can find a group of children in their own yard whose relationships are, just like relationships between natives, marked by tradition? Why would they, continues Grider, go to Australia, when they have children's playgrounds at home, these microcosms-laboratories where they can learn about functions and processes of tradition? Why, she concludes, leave the study of children's folklore to others, if to understand how children create and pass on their traditions means to understand tradition in general.

Grider's comparison of children and natives can be linked to Tylor's argument, since she, just like the famous British anthropologist, uses the terms children and natives as mutually interchangeable. The ways in which Grider and Tylor interchange these terms are, of course, very different. Tylor compares children to natives because he considers them culturally and biologically similar, while Grider sees the similarity of children in the degree to which their cultures are immersed in tradition. To Tylor, the comparison of children and natives is a scientific fact verified by scholarly reports, to Grider it s just a metaphor. Far from the intention to relativise these differences, I would say that Tylor's and Grider's comparisons of children and natives are not only related on a lexical, but also on a pragmatic level, since both authors use the similarity between the child and the native as an argument in favour of the study of children's folklore. It will be recalled that Tylor justified his interest in children's folklore also by the thesis that children's songs and games "reproduce, in what are at once sports and little children's lessons, early stages in the history of childlike tribes of mankind" (Tylor acc. Lévy Zumwalt, 1995: 25). Grider, on the other hand, uses the similarity between children and natives to oppose the formerly "predominant view that everything related to children should be left to disciplines such as pedagogy and psychology" (1980: 167). Based on the metaphor that the worlds of children, just like the worlds of natives, are submerged in tradition, she presents a very attractive argument for folklorists: to understand children's traditions means to understand tradition in general.

Both Grider and Tylor thus refer to the similarity between children and natives to justify the purposefulness of the study of children's folklore. Both use the comparison of children and natives to support the thesis that the study of children will be as beneficial for the discipline as the study of natives.[7] From Tylor's viewpoint, this meant that children's games will expedite the reconstruction of the evolution course of humanity. From Grinder's perspective, children's folklore will illuminate the

[7] Brian Sutton-Smith and Felicia R. McMahon - the authors of a recent "programmatic" text on the study of children's folklore - follow the same thread of arguments when they describe the study of children's folklore as "a very special territory in which groundbreaking research can still be accomplished, that is, if we pay it the tribute of considering it in terms of various contemporary cultural theories that are taken very seriously on the adult level but seldom applied to children" (1995: 229). If we apply, continue Sutton-Smith and McMahon, "to children the same kind of theories we apply to adults in distinctive cultural groups, we might make some progress" (ibid: 298).

dynamics and processes of tradition in general. In this way, with the analytical or rhetorical help of the assumption of the similarity between children and natives, children's folklore was turned into an overrated window to earlier stages of culture, or processes and functions inherent to traditional cultures. By attributing an analytical "seriousness" to a "trivial" or, in Honk's words, "ephemeral" (acc. Abrahams, 1992: 32) phenomenon such as children's folklore, the assumption of similarity between children and natives enabled, in sum, the crossing of the "triviality barrier" (Sutton-Smith, 1970). The disputable issue is that the price of this crossing was the transformation of children and children's folklore into, to paraphrase Jay Mechling (2000), 'texts' which are talked about and discussed, even though such texts and discussions do not necessarily have a particular connection to them.

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