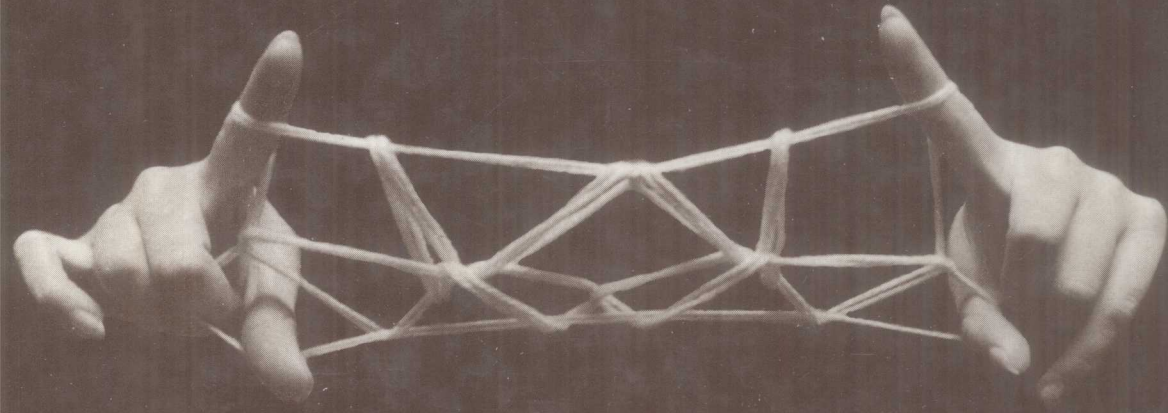
THE DYNAMICS OF FOLKLORE

TOELKEN



THE DYNAMICS OF FOLKLORE

For Wayland D. Hand

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PREFACE

Most folklorists, and most folklore textbooks, have paid more attention to the items of folklore than to the live processes by and through which folklore is produced. This has led at least one folklorist to lament recently that folklore scholarship tends to "dehumanize" folklore. Briefly put, this book is an attempt to provide a partial remedy for that situation by urging a basic attitude toward folklore study that stresses "the folk" and the dynamics of their traditional expressions. In this approach, my thinking is very much indebted to the works of Roger D. Abrahams, Richard Bauman, Dan Ben-Amos, Alan Dundes, Henry Glassie, Robert A. Georges, Dell Hymes, Albert Lord—in short, those who have focused on style, performance, event, and process, rather than on genre, structure, or text. However, the book does not attempt to do away with generic considerations. My hope is rather that it will constitute a theoretical complement to other works on folklore by providing a balance, or, to use another figure, by suggesting other equally valid axes along which the performances of tradition may be viewed.

No particular folklore school is espoused or represented here; indeed, the suggestions offered by this book should be palatable to a broad spectrum of theoretical positions, for in it I try to provide a fair, eclectic

combination of the main trends in folklore today, with the focus admittedly on the active, live aspects of folk and their lore. Because it places its emphasis on the basic operation of folklore process, the book may be used by anyone from a student in an introductory course trying to find out about the internal mechanics of folklore to the advanced scholar interested in live perspectives in the profession. I do not assume that the reader has had extensive exposure to folklore previously; for this reason particularly, the bibliographies are meant to be basic and suggestive rather than exhaustive.

Students complain, often with justification, that literature is killed in the classroom, that social sciences in the academic setting can cause us nearly to overlook people, that the music in a book of technical analysis is nowhere near as interesting as music falling on the ear from a live source. The same kinds of objections have been made of folklore classes and folklore texts: Since it is possible to separate the lore from the "folk" and spend endless hours dissecting and studying the resultant texts, it is indeed possible for folklorists to overlook, or to avoid intentionally, those very dynamic human elements that make the field an exciting one to begin with. In view of this state of affairs in academia, I hope this book can present some views of the subject that have not been particularly characteristic of the academic approach. For one thing, where possible I have followed the lead of the tradition-bearers themselves, using their terms, topics, and perspectives. For another, I have not filtered out the so-called obscene elements that are so characteristic of folklore. In real life, and therefore in folklore, the ingenuous and friendly hospitality of old Mrs. Judkins stands side by side with the brash machismo of the logger, and next to the shy, home-oriented customs of the Japanese-American family there exists the open and exciting street jive of urban Black youths. Since folklore is not limited to rural environs, minority groups, and past times, I have looked as much as possible to all situations where we may see folklore in performance the way it is normally performed.

In so doing I have stressed groups with whom I have had considerable acquaintance (loggers, Navajos, Westerners, Japanese-Americans, farm families) so I could use anecdotal examples from my own experience to illustrate the main points of the book. For parallel ideas I have referred to the published work of others, but I have not pretended to scrape up extra fieldwork for this book just for rhetorical (or political) balance. For example, I have not done much work in folklore among Mexican-Americans; they are certainly one of the most dynamic folk groups in the United States today, but for that very reason I have decided not to "throw them in" for mere color. Their traditions are too important for

that. But I have tried to indicate works to which the reader can refer so as not to be limited by the peculiarity of my experiences.

A picture may not be worth a thousand words in folklore, for we always want multiple pictures of any folk performance or event. Nonetheless, an attempt is made in this book for the first time to present pictures of those dynamic processes that are discussed. The pictures concentrate chiefly on folklore actually being performed, or folk traditions being passed directly from one person to another. In addition, a few pictures are provided only so that items discussed in the various chapters may be scrutinized by the interested reader.

In the task of compiling this book and providing analytical remarks about its contents, I am primarily indebted to the tradition-bearers who so graciously allowed me to use their most cherished customs, beliefs, and performances. Informants are identified in the notes to each chapter, but I must give particular thanks to the Yellowman family in southern Utah, the Damon and Howland families in Massachusetts, the Tabler family in Oregon, the Kubota family of Utah and California, and the Wasson-Hockema family in southwestern Oregon for allowing me to talk about them at such great length here. All whose words are quoted have given their permission either directly to me or to other fieldworkers who recorded the materials. Some people did not want their names mentioned but nonetheless allowed their remarks to be quoted or paraphrased. No one has received payment for materials used here, but neither have the folk expressions become mine or the publisher's by virtue of appearing in this book. Even if it were not for the new copyright law (which protects the ownership of spoken texts), the various folk "performances" offered here, mere fossils on the printed page, remain among the cultural property and under the personal proprietorship of those who are still telling stories, singing songs, building barns, and playing the dozens in complete (and admirable) disregard for the fortunes of textbooks, the passions of students, and the aspirations of university professors. The appearance of their folklore in these pages does not interrupt the regular traditional process, nor does it diminish the cultural possessions of tradition-bearers. On the other hand, it would certainly impoverish the student of culture if these texts and expressions and events were not available. The flesh, blood, and bones of the live folklore discussed here belong to those who have been the tradition carriers; the hot air is mine.

For assistance in fieldwork details and analysis leading to some of the passages in this book, I am indebted to Ray Scofield, who helped with logger folklore and with the songs sung by Mrs. Clarice Judkins; to George Wasson for his intermediary role with the Wassons and Hockemas;

to my wife, Miiko, and to Donna Misao Joo for guidance in interpreting Japanese-American cooking custom and symbolism; to Twilo Scofield for helping provide a full description of the Wodtli-Tabler Thanksgiving dinner; to Edwin L. Coleman, II, for suggestions and interpretations on Black folklore; to Joseph Epes Brown for unfailing wisdom in regard to Native American culture, religion, and worldview.

Photographers are identified in the captions of each photo, but I must mention here my sincere thanks to the following people for allowing me to use their fine pictures. Suzi Jones, Folk Arts Coordinator for the Oregon Arts Commission, let me pore through her extensive collection of Northwest traditions; Carl Fleischhauer and the American Folklife Center generously supplied a number of photographs from the center's collecting projects, and from Fleischhauer's work with the Hammons family; Ellen Waterston Bartow, of the Rafter Q Ranch in Central Oregon, provided pictures of traditional roundup chores virtually unavailable to outsiders; Edwin L. Coleman, II, volunteered to catch an exciting interchange of Black youths on film; Lucinda Mason allowed the use of pictures from her folklore field collection on a rural Black river baptism in Alabama; William Tabler, formerly a logger and scaler near Sweet Home, Oregon, lent me pictures he took of loggers in the woods during the 1940s; Brody Washburn combed the archives of the Special Collections of the University of Oregon Library for old turn-of-the-century logger pictures, and reproduced the prints beautifully from the original glass plates; Mrs. Chandler Stevens of Salem, Oregon, lent me the picture of her mother, Mrs. Clarice Mae Judkins, a talented traditional singer with an impressively wide repertoire; Oscar Palmquist performed the lab work, copying, and enlargements for most of the pictures used in this text with a remarkable talent that carries over to the pictures themselves.

Professors Louie Attebery of The College of Idaho, George Carey of the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and Patrick Mullen of The Ohio State University were my distant Parcae during the writing of the book. They read all of it carefully and gently, indicating where they thought I was dull, where I was verbose, where I was wrong, where I was faking, and (best of all) where I was right. Their criticisms were detailed and just and I followed nearly all their suggestions for rethinking and revision. The book was very deeply affected by their help and would not be in its current state without their generous participation. Of course I accept the responsibility for the way it now stands, but that does not subordinate the really considerable role these colleagues played in shaping the final product and giving me reasons to believe it was worth doing.

The typing was done by Bonnie English, Charlene Gates, and Maren

Halvorsen. Far beyond their labor, which may make them hope never to hear of folklore again, I am sincerely in debt to them for catching innumerable slips and for the generous way with which they helped me confront the publisher's inexorable deadlines.

I am grateful to Twilo Scofield for extensive proofreading and for comments on early drafts of the text. Likewise, Karin Smith was a tremendous help with bibliographical data, and offered inestimably valuable advice, especially with regard to archiving practices and preservation concepts. My colleague, Sharon Sherman, told me all I know about film and gave me a good deal of helpful advice as I worked on later stages of the manuscript. Suzi Jones, my friend, graduate student, and now colleague, has been my most faithful and persistent critic throughout; without her honest advice, this book would contain many more blunders than it does. My son Hiroshi employed his artistic eye to suggest cropping and alignment of photographs.

Lastly, I would like to congratulate my family for leading an entirely normal life while this book was being written, even though to do so meant tripping over tape recorders, file cards, and father.

B. T.

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INTRODUCTION

INTO FOLKLORISTICS

WITH GUN AND CAMERA

ANYONE LOOKING INTO THE SUBJECT OF FOLKLORE FOR THE FIRST TIME WILL NOTICE EARLY ON THAT THE SCHOLARLY DISCUSSION OF THE SUBJECT HAS BEEN taking place for over a hundred years, mostly among people who have approached it from vantage points related to other interests and disciplines: language, religion, literature, anthropology, history, and even local nostalgia and ancestor worship. Indeed, the famous story of the blind men describing the elephant provides a vivid analogy for the field of folklore: The historian may see in folklore the common person's version of a sequence of grand events already charted; the anthropologist sees the oral expression of social systems, cultural meaning, and sacred relationships; the literary scholar looks for genres of oral literature, the psychologist for universal imprints, the art historian for primitive art, the linguist for folk speech and world view, and so on. The field of folklore as we know it today has been formed and defined by the very variety

of its approaches, excited by the debate (and sometimes the rancor) brought about by inevitable clashes between opposed truths.

The earliest "schools" of folklore were mainly antiquarian; that is, they concerned themselves with the recording and study of customs, ideas, and expressions that were thought to be survivals of ancient cultural systems still existing in the modern world. Many early scholars were interested in religious systems and the ancient myths that may have informed their development. Still others were interested in the roots of language and in the study of the relationships between languages in far-flung families. Still others, often country parsons, busied themselves in noting quaint rural observances that might have hearkened back to pre-Christian times. Among the many encouragements to the study of tradition, not the least was the appearance of Darwinian theories in the middle 1800s; if life could be said to have developed from simple to complex forms, then, many argued, culture itself might have evolved in the same way. Folk observances and fragments of early rituals were taken as simple elements from an earlier stratum of civilization, studied because they would reveal to us the building blocks of our contemporary, complex society. The focus for these studies was primarily on lower classes, peasants, simple folk, "backward" cultures, and "primitives," for it was believed that these kinds of people had avoided or resisted longest the sophisticating influences of so-called advanced culture. Conversely, urban dwellers, immersed in literacy and sophistication, were thought to be immune to folklore. From their ranks came those who studied "the folk."

Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that the main arena for early folklore study was the rural environment. In fact, among the German folklorists, the term *Volkskunde* denoted the entire lifestyle of the rural people. The assumption seems to have been that only away from the influence of technology and modern civilization could one find those antique remnants of tradition that might reveal to us the early stages of our cultural existence. This basic assumption for the normal habitat of folklore still exists today in many European and South American countries, where folklore is understood to be by definition the traditions of rural people. In fact, up until very recently the rural scene has been the basis for most of the collecting and study of American folklore as well, for American culture itself has been defined—in its own terms—by a vanishing frontier, a disappearing pioneer tradition, a fading of the "good old days." Modern America has been thought by many to be totally lacking in folklore, almost in direct proportion to the time that separates Americans from their own rural frontier.

Since early American folklorists saw the rural atmosphere as one that