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# Pathways

Approaches to the Study  
and Teaching of Folklore

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# THE INDIVIDUAL AND TRADITION: FOLKLORE METHODOLOGY TODAY

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**I**N RECENT YEARS, folklore has come under fire in the academy largely because of a an unfortunate conjuncture of shrinking budgets and a growing misunderstanding of the field. Folklorists themselves may be in part to blame for the crisis that confronted the field in the early and middle part of the 1990s (Bendix 1998). Far too much emphasis had been placed on the paradigm shift that allegedly occurred in the 1970s and moved the field from the study of text to the study of performance (Ben-Amos and Goldstein 1975). Often presented in terms of a schism between archive-based scholarship and fieldwork-based scholarship, this representation of the field of folklore did little to assuage the fears of embattled administrators who frequently only knew folklore through colloquial language usage and were unaware of the long history of a discipline dedicated to the study of tradition. In turn, this administrative suspicion of a field that seemed intent on tearing itself apart with the odd proposition that the entire field was based on a single approach precipitated a downward spiral in funding, and forced many folklorists and folklore programs into a defensive stance. The result of this academic self-immolation was predictable and has left a somewhat charred landscape in its aftermath: the closure of the Department of Folklore at the University of Copenhagen, a department which traces its heritage directly back to Axel Olrik, is perhaps the most catastrophic of these developments (Holbek 1990).

Fortunately, in recent years, folklorists have regained their strong theoretical footing, and have become more forceful in promoting the field as one that has methods attuned both to the field and the archive, and one in which scholars who work on questions most dependent on the archive can inspire and be inspired by those who work on questions most dependent on fieldwork and vice versa. A recent conference at UCLA – another institution where folklore has been subjected to diminishing resources, even at a time when developments in the community and the world at large suggest the need for the research of folklore scholars – highlighted the extraordinary insight that can be gained when scholars of medieval and contemporary folk song, ballad and epic pool their methodological and intellectual resources (Nagy & Tangherlini 2001). The interactive street is not one-way either, and work developed by archive-based scholars can help solve problems encountered by scholars in the field (sometimes these scholars are one and the same!).

The schism between the study of performance and the study of text has largely evaporated in scholarly debate in large part because such schism was not based on what folklorists were actually doing. Rather, it represented the foregrounding of certain methods at the expense of others – a typical, and at times painful, development in the life of any discipline as it moves into a position of a mature, critical discipline. One would be hard pressed to argue that early folklore scholars were not attuned to the performative elements of the traditions that they considered. Even the most philologically oriented scholars frequently looked to the contemporary ethnographic record to find recent analogues for the historical phenomena which they were studying (in fact, this premise underlies the notion that current folkloric expressions are survivals of an earlier culture). And so the alleged paradigm shift, away from the archive and into the field, away from the past and toward the contemporary, was hardly a paradigm shift at all. Early collectors such as Evald Tang Kristensen were acutely aware of the performative in the contemporary traditions which he studied, while scholars from the early part of the twentieth century, such as Albert Lord and Milman Parry were among the first scholars of performance theory – this in addition to being trained in classical philology and as adept in the archive as they were in the field (Kristensen 1891; Lord 1960).

It would be unwise and unjust to say that the study of folklore rests solely on methods that privilege the concept of performance. Rather, as in any mature field, scholars develop and refine methods over time, fine-tuning these critical approaches. As a result, there is no single "folklore method," despite what certain early Finnish scholars may have wanted people to believe (Krohn 1926). Rather, folklorists rely on numerous methods – many which rely on fieldwork, many which rely on archival work and many which rely on both – to elucidate questions concerning the dialectic tension that exists between the individual and tradition, and which animates the dynamic processes of variation and transmission of oral culture (Chesnutt 1999).

Not all folklorists will agree on the definition of tradition, nor will all folklorists agree on definitions of oral culture. Indeed, many recent studies interrogate these key concepts in the study of folklore (Dundes 1977; Toelken 1979; Oring 1986). Nevertheless, all of these studies, to one degree or another, engage the question of the role of the individual in shaping tradition, and the implications of that tradition in the lives of individuals and the groups of which they are members (Kaivola-Bregenhøj 1996; Holbek 1987; Pentikäinen 1971; Dégh 1962). What is clear is that folklore methods always incorporate a sense of the individual and the group, a question of culture (and as such identity), and a question of traditions (and as such history). The study of folklore is neither exclusively synchronic nor diachronic, and it is not only comparative. But confronted with a particular problem, a folklorist may decide to emphasize any one of these components in his/her efforts to elucidate the tension that exists between the individual and tradition. In this sense, folklore is not anthropology, history, sociology, philology, cultural geography or political science or a slew of other disciplines. On the other hand, it complements these fields well, with the profound emphasis on the role of the individual reacting to historical and cultural currents which may be local, regional, national or global. By focusing on primarily low-level, face-to-face interactions that reflect the contours of everyday life, folklorists are able to add an important voice to our continued efforts to understanding the human condition.

The current volume is intended to present a range of approaches to problems in both the study and teaching of folklore. As becomes clear as one reads

through these essays, folklore is not bounded by a single method. Rather, as noted above, scholars tune their approaches to the problem at hand. This approach is not one of irresponsible *bricolage*, a pastiche of methods gleaned from other disciplines and assembled in a weakened collage of approaches (Lévi-Strauss 1966). Rather, it is a process in which methods in the study of tradition and the individual, which have proven helpful in the past, are applied rigorously to new problems but perhaps modified to take into account profound differences in culture and history. Furthermore, folklore scholars have shown themselves adept at learning from other disciplines and turning analytic tools developed there to help analyze problems that accrue in the realm of folklore. The broad range of approaches and problems addressed in this volume attest to the lively engagement among folklorists with the analytic approaches of folklore and other fields as well as a critical awareness of questions that have both a significant historic dimension and a significant cultural dimension.

One can perhaps group the papers into several groups as a means for making more apparent the methods used by the scholars in the analysis of a broad array of problems in folklore. Several of the papers deal primarily with concepts of identity and the politics of identity. Ole Marius Hylland, in his essay, for example provides an engaging analysis of the concept of the "folk" as a conceptual category, underscoring the ideological significance of the term. Timothy Tangherlini takes up a similar issue, and explores – in the context of a contemporary notion of the folk in urban environments – some of the processes of variation that animate the dynamic rearrangement of cultural practices in areas of frequent culture contact. Terry Gunnell, in a masterful consideration of performance and costuming, provides a clear understanding of how individuals who perform these masking traditions engage questions of both personal and group identity. As Gunnell reveals, individuals who participate in masking traditions explore the politics of the group, at the same time as they invoke memories of past performances.

The concept of memory and its close links to those of identity and nostalgia inform several of the other essays presented here. As with the essays which focus on the ideological and political implications of folkloric processes and identity discussed above, these essays also underscore the role of the individual.

In an essay revealing the true breadth of folkloric inquiry, Lauri Harvilahti engages the concept of ethnopoetics and proposes the intriguing concept of substrates that influence contemporary craftsmen as they perform a tradition that has a long history. This concept of the dynamic tension between the individual performer and the memory of performances that have come before is an approach of which one can see hints in many early studies of folklore such as those of the Krohns and those of Parry and Lord mentioned above. However, in his formulation Harvilahti makes clear the dynamic interaction between memory and performance of both the performers and the audience that enables extraordinary variation within a long-standing tradition. Tarja Kupiainen, in an archive-based study of Kalevala meter songs, uses these notions of memory and performance as a means to reanimate the archive. In a study that queries the possibility of discovering emotion in the static archival texts, Kupiainen is able to wed lessons learned from the field to rigorous attentive philological research, thereby making the archives come alive.

The interaction between the old and the new – using contemporary fieldwork to understand archival recordings, as well as using archival recordings to understand contemporary fieldwork – underlies several other studies presented in this volume. In an examination of personal experience narrative in her native Estonia, Merili Metsvahi reveals how significant lacuna exist in the archive, and how fieldwork can help fill in some of those gaps. At the same time, she makes it clear that studying the archival record can help explain some of the contours of contemporary tradition. Studies that wed the old and new, the archive and fieldwork, are not limited solely to the study of narrative traditions. Torunn Selberg, in an exemplary study of contemporary religious traditions (a study that also engages questions of identity, memory and ideology), shows how new-age practitioners use the past as a resource in their attempts to legitimate their own practice. Selberg also notes that there exists a significant tension between the past and the present. Magnus Gudmundsson's study of contemporary Tarot card traditions also plays on the tension that exists between the individual practitioner, trying to insert himself into a tradition and thus make meaningful his engagement with that tradition, and the broad contours of that tradition. In his study, he emphasizes the role of the individual in

tradition, a process that lies close to another main current in contemporary folklore fieldwork practice, namely the insertion of the researcher herself into the study through a process of critical self-reflexivity.

This notion of self-reflexive fieldwork informs Mats Nilsson's study of continuity and change in dance traditions and the methods of participant-observation and collecting from oneself that Nilsson uses to engage beginning students in folklore. Once again, the ideas of identity, tradition, and historical change all become highlighted as part of the fieldwork process. Like Nilsson, Birgitta Meurling confronts questions of pedagogy, turning her critical eye toward gender in folklore and the classroom. In her work, she presents a balanced argument for the need for folklorists both in their research and in their teaching to "raise consciousness about gender," a project that is in part self-reflexive and in part attuned to politics, history and contemporary society.

In a well-considered examination of her own research projects, Laura Aro presents a cautionary note on the practice of self-reflexivity. Self-reflexivity and, with this self-reflection, considerations of the profound ethical questions which folklorists have struggled with since the inception of the field, can be powerful analytic devices that help students of culture understand the political, ideological concerns of individuals as they struggle to make personal meaning through their engagement with tradition. Aro notes, however, that the fieldworker also has a responsibility to his informants not to gaze so long at himself that the study becomes a narcissistic self-exploration of the researcher and his own personal crises, but keeps in mind that the study of folklore is one intended to help us understand the dynamic processes of tradition. In two studies that exemplify well the judicious use of self-reflexivity in folklore, Anne Heimo and Lena Marander-Eklund provide intriguing studies of personal experience narrative based on their own contemporary fieldwork. Heimo explores the close relationship between place and history, and how this emerges in stories of war atrocities, while Marander-Eklund provides a detailed analysis of fieldwork methods in a project focusing on the personal experience narratives of childbirth.

The essays collected here in no way represent all of the critical methods that folklorists employ in their study of tradition. Nor do they address all of the pedagogical concerns confronting contemporary folklorists. But the essays do

reveal that folklorists work with a broad spectrum of methods and use a diverse palette of pedagogical tools. Both fieldwork and archival research are constant elements of all these methods. An appreciation of history and the role of the individual in creating, shaping and perpetuating tradition further link many of these methods. To suggest that folklore is synonymous with the study of performance, or to suggest that the archive is "dead," as some folklorists did during the past decade, is simply wrong. Folklore has recently come through a difficult patch in its development as a discipline, a crisis largely brought on by folklorists themselves. It is always exciting to work at the edges of a discipline, to push the envelope as it were – an endeavor encouraged by the energizing interdisciplinary and comparative nature of the field of folklore. Yet, it is also important for folklorists to acknowledge that there is no single way to study the dynamics of tradition. As folklorists, we recognize that the study of folklore cannot provide all of the answers to the study of culture – indeed, no single discipline can. Folklore is not sociology, anthropology, literary studies, philology, performance studies, cultural studies, political science, psychology, or history. Nor does it intend to be. Rather, folklore – and the numerous, varied, interrelated methods that exist in the study of folklore – can synergistically inform, expand and illuminate questions considered by these related disciplines, just as these allied fields can contribute to an understanding of the problems with which folklore scholars struggle.

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