

FOLKLORE: A STUDY ON ORIGIN, TRANSMISSION AND FUNCTIONS

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Abstract

Debates about how folklore should be defined have been waged continuously ever since the word was coined in 1846 by William Thomas. Most definitions concern the “lore”, but some concern “folk”. Lore – the materials of folklore rather than the people who use the materials – has been described in terms of origin, form, transmission and function. However, there has been no widespread agreement among folklorists about what folklore is. Not only do folklorists in different countries have different concepts of folklore, but also folklorists within one country may have quite diverse views concerning its nature. Perhaps the most common criterion for definition is the means of the folklore’s transmission. Specifically folklore is said to be or to be in “oral Tradition”. This criterion, however, leads to several theoretical difficulties. First, in a culture without writing almost everything is transmitted orally; and although language, hunting techniques and marriage rule are passed orally from one generation to another, few folklorists would say that these types of cultural materials are folklore. Also, even in a culture with writings, some orally transmitted information such as how to drive a tractor and how to brush one’s teeth is not ordinarily considered to be folklore. The point is that since materials other than folklore are also orally transmitted, the criterion of oral transmission by itself is not sufficient to distinguish folklore from non-folklore. Second, there are some forms of folklore which are manifested and communicated almost exclusively in written as opposed to oral form, such as autograph-book verse, book marginalia, epitaphs and traditional letters. In actual practice, a professional folklore does not go so far to say that folktale or a ballad is not folklore simply because it has at sometime in its life history been transmitted by writing or print. But he would argue that if a folktale or ballad had never been in oral tradition, it is not folklore. It might be a literary production based upon a folk model, but this is not the same as the folk model itself. However, the written forms previously mentioned are rarely if ever communicated orally.

Keywords: Folklore, oral transmission, Tradition, Folktale



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Introduction

Even if there were some agreement as to what folklore is, it is unlikely that there would be much accord as to how folklore began. The history of the discipline of folklore is riddled with the remains of elaborate theories explaining how folklore arose. Some of these theories

are still championed; others are revived only to serve as straw men to be ritually killed in modern surveys of folklore. An example of the latter is solar mythology, which few, if any, folklorists seriously entertain at the present time.

Two of the characteristics of folklore that most of the theories have attempted to deal with in one way or another are (1) multiple existence and (2) irrationality. Multiple existences refer to the fact that an item of folklore appears at more than one time and place. For example, the flood myth and the obstacle flight, in which fugitives throw objects behind them which magically become obstacles in their pursuer's path, are widely distributed throughout the world. The question posed is: How is it that virtually the same story is told among many different peoples who do not appear to be related?

Several explanations have been offered to explain multiple existences. One is the notion of polygenesis, according to which the same item could have independently originated many times. Frequently polygenesis is associated with the concept of the psychic unity of man. Advocates of this idea contend that man is everywhere psychologically the same. Consequently, his psychological products could be and apparently are the same or similar.

Few anthropologists today accept the ideas of polygenesis and psychic unity as satisfactory explanations of seemingly parallel cultural phenomena. However, in the late nineteenth century, many anthropologists subscribed to these theories. According to one scheme strongly supported in England, all men evolved in one evolutionary path through three absolutely identical stages of savagery, barbarism and civilization.

Need of the study

If folklore can provide a means of either actually or vicariously doing what the folk would like to do, then clearly it provides a unique source of information for those interested in studying people. It can furnish answers to questions that if asked directly would probably not be answered. Folklore is much more effective because the folk are not completely aware of this function. Often folklore is easily collected while folk are telling tales and singing songs for entertainment or for education. The folklore is often undervalued and underestimated by most of the folk who, although they treasure and enjoy it, do not necessarily consider that telling it to inquiring ethnographers is unethical. In other words, the folk do not realize how much of themselves they are giving away when they allow a folklorist to collect their folklore.

Objectives of the study

1. To know the importance of folklore in literature.

2. To identify the role of history in folklore literature.

Methodology

The study is based on secondary data collected from reputed articles of research journals, books, websites magazines, etc. The study is all about to focus on folklore literature of the world.

Origin of Folklore

Even if there were some agreement as to what folklore is, it is unlikely that there would be much accord as to how folklore began. The history of the discipline of folklore is riddled with the remains of elaborate theories explaining how folklore arose. Some of these theories are still championed; others are revived only to serve as straw men to be ritually killed in modern surveys of folklore. An example of the latter is solar mythology, which few, if any, folklorists seriously entertain at the present time.

Two of the characteristics of folklore that most of the theories have attempted to deal with in one way or another are (1) multiple existence and (2) irrationality. Multiple existences refer to the fact that an item of folklore appears at more than one time and place. For example, the flood myth and the obstacle flight, in which fugitives throw objects behind them which magically become obstacles in their pursuer's path, are widely distributed throughout the world. The question posed is: How is it that virtually the same story is told among many different peoples who do not appear to be related?

Several explanations have been offered to explain multiple existences. One is the notion of polygenesis (many origins), according to which the same item could have independently originated many times. Frequently polygenesis is associated with the concept of the psychic unity of man. Advocates of this idea contend that man is everywhere psychologically the same. Consequently, his psychological products could be and apparently are the same or similar.

Few anthropologists today accept the ideas of polygenesis and psychic unity as satisfactory explanations of seemingly parallel cultural phenomena. However, in the late nineteenth century, many anthropologists subscribed to these theories. According to one scheme strongly supported in England, all men evolved in one evolutionary path through three absolutely identical stages of savagery, barbarism and civilization. Savagery was said to be exemplified by Australian aboriginal culture, whereas civilization was symbolized by Victorian England. Since unilinear evolution meant that all people passed or were passing through these three stages, it was believed that ancestors of a nineteenth century Englishman

must have been savages like, the Australian aborigines. This supposition was crucial for folklore theory in as much as it was also postulated that folklore arose during the stage of savagery. As man evolved, he left his folklore behind him. In other words, as man evolved, folklore devolved or decayed. With evolution, only fragments of folklore, called 'survivals', remained in civilized times. Unfortunately, these survivals were so fragmentary that they could not be understood. To understand European folklore, which consisted of survivals from the past age of savagery, it was necessary to engage in historical reconstruction, a favourite scholarly pastime of the nineteenth century which was allied to the ideals of romanticism and the worship of the past.

The explanation of multiple existences, which is generally accepted by twentieth century anthropologists and folklorists, is a combination of monogenesis and diffusion, the process by which a cultural trait moves from one individual to another, from one culture to another. According to this view, a particular myth or riddle did not arise through independent invention in all those places where the myth or riddle is now found. Rather, the item of folklore arose in one place, or perhaps in a very few places and then spread by diffusion to other places. Diffusionists argue that if an item is complex rather than simple and if there is continuous distribution of the item in the area intervening between points A and B, the occurrence of the item at A and B is to be attributed to diffusion rather than to independent origin. The diffusion theory does not require the idea of psychic unity. However, an important point, which is usually not explained by diffusionists, is why many different cultures should accept the same borrowed myth or riddle.

The presence of apparent irrationality in folklore has posed as much of a problem to folklore theorists as has folklore's multiple pursuers. There cannot be magic combs which turn into forests and thus impede pursuers. Since these items are not found in nature, in objective reality, their origin must be related to the origin of human fantasies.

The distinction between historical and psychological origins of folklore is an important one. The historical origin of an item of folklore tells when and where an item may have arisen and perhaps how it has spread. It does not, however, explain why the item arose in the first place. In contrast, a proposed psychological origin of an item of folklore may purport to explain why the item came into being, but the how and when of the item's diffusion may be ignored. Different questions are being answered, although the answers are both called origins and both types of explanations are limited by the amount of data available. Historical records go back

only so far in the evolution of man. Psychological explanations are usually based upon speculative assumptions about modern man.

The transmission of folklore

Because folklorists depend greatly upon the criterion of oral transmission in defining folklore, there have been a number of studies devoted to describing and analyzing this process. Here the concern is not what folklore is nor what its ultimate origin was but rather the way in which folklore is passed from individual to individual from culture to culture from generation to generation.

Those who are dependent upon print, often to the extent of relying upon it instead of upon their memories, frequently assume that the existence of an item of folklore must be a most precarious one. Oral transmission is considered to be unreliable in contrast to the reliability of transmission by print. It is felt that folklore, to be preserved, must be orally communicated intact from a bearer of the tradition to a new bearer and that this is extremely unlikely to occur consistently over long periods of time. If, for example, a superb raconteur of folklore dies without passing on his materials, it is feared that these materials may die with him. Or perhaps the person to whom he entrusts the task of perpetuating the traditions proves faithless to the trust. The infinite possibilities of the demise of a tradition because of a weak link in the human chain of transmission makes those unfamiliar with folklore suspicious and sceptical of the strength of oral tradition. It is imagined that only if the materials are written down or put in print can they be saved for posterity. Yet the amazing thing is that folklore, in the vast majority of cases, is saved for posterity without the aid of writing or print. One must remember that in most of the cultures of the world, all the information culturally defined as important is passed on orally. In some cultures, special individuals are selected, formally or informally, to be the repositories of oral tradition. In others, individuals simply assume the responsibility on their own.

For some kinds of folklore, it is conceptually useful to imagine a mass of traditions that each generation grows up in to and through. For example, young girls learn many of the same jump-rope rhymes as the ones used by their grandmothers and young boys learn the same marble games and terminology used by their grandfathers. Yet they do not learn these traditions from their grandparents. On the playgrounds older children have become adults and perhaps have forgotten they ever knew the materials, their former young imitators have become the older children who teach a new group of younger children. The traditions are on the

playground, and it is almost impossible to avoid receiving and transmitting them. It is precisely this which constitutes the transmission of folklore. The investigation of this transmission process and the changes that occur when folklore, destined as it is to be forever in transit, is communicated from one person to another is an integral part of the study of folklore.

The Functions of Folklore

The aspect of folklore of least concern to literary folklorists but perhaps of greatest concern to anthropological folklorists is function. The important question is not what is folklore? Nor where does folklore originate, nor how is it transmitted? The important question is what folklore does for the folk?

There are many diverse functions of folklore. Some of the most common ones include aiding in the education of the young, promoting a group's feeling of solidarity, providing socially sanctioned ways for individuals to act superior to or to censure other individuals, serving as a vehicle for social protest, offering an enjoyable escape from reality, and converting dull work in to play. One of the most important single functions of folklore is permitting action that is usually not approved. There are in every culture words that should not be spoken and deeds that should not be done. However, the words and deeds appear in the folklore of this culture, for example, in certain tongue twisters. According to Freud, slips of the tongue are often meaningful on an individual basis – the “mistakes” is what the individual really wanted to say. Such mistakes are, to use the phrase of children referring to a covert act of aggression committed under the guise of being a casual mistake, ‘accidental on purpose’. Tongue – twisters permit socially sanctioned slips of the tongue with the added advantage that the responsibility for the slip is neatly shifted to an external force tradition.

If folklore can provide a means of either actually or vicariously doing what the folk would like to do, then clearly it provides a unique source of information for those interested in studying people. It can furnish answers to questions that if asked directly would probably not be answered. Folklore is much more effective because the folk are not completely aware of this function. Often folklore is often undervalued and underestimated by most of the folk who, although they treasure and enjoy it, do not necessarily consider that telling it to inquiring ethnographers is unethical. In other words, the folk do not realize how much of themselves they are giving away when they allow a folklorist to collect their folklore.

For the folk, the functions of folklore are more important than form and origin. The folk care little about the definition of folklore or about origins or folklore. A woman singing a Child

ballad in the southern mountain may not know or care that it is a Child ballad that diffused from England. However, the folk do care about function. They feel they know and like what folklore can do, whether it be for putting children to sleep at night or passing the time on a job involving repetitious mechanical drudgery.

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