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and Folklife



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with other ethnic groups or with the larger society. Syncretism and acculturation both impact these expressions. Moreover, while these folkloric expressions define cultural differences, they also suggest cultural similarities and convergences.

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Frances M. Malpezzi

ETHNOGRAPHY

Literally “writing about people,” ethnography is a form of research and writing invented by anthropologists and sociologists in the early twentieth century. The word names both the scholar’s disciplined immersion in the everyday life of a particular group and the writing that describes and analyzes that experience.

Ethnography entered folklore scholarship through the work of early twentieth-century anthropologists such as Franz Boas, Ruth Benedict, Alfred Kroeber, Robert Lowie, and Elsie Clews Parsons. Folklore studies pre-dated anthropology and, like anthropology, depended on fieldwork for its subject matter. But early literary folklorists such as George Lyman Kittredge, John Lomax, Stith Thompson, and Archer Taylor traced their intellectual lineage back to Johann Gottfried von Herder and the European romantic nationalist movement. Their work drew from fieldwork expeditions to collect very specific forms of folklore—such as ballads, folksongs, folktales, riddles, proverbs, and superstitions—by writing them down as texts. Analyzing the written texts, literary folklorists sought to describe the formal structures of folk expression and to account for textual variations over time and space (the historic-geographic method of comparative analysis). In contrast, anthropological folklorists were interested in how symbolic forms such as folktales and proverbs functioned in the communities where they were found. They were interested in writing about and studying not only texts but also the social lives of the people who performed them. Ethnography offered a way to relate a community’s symbolic forms of expression to its forms of social organization, economy, religion, and politics.

Arguments during the early decades of the twentieth century pitted salvage fieldworkers determined to “save the lore for future ages” against ethnographers bent on understanding how the expressions so cherished by folklorists functioned in their native contexts. Tales, ballads, proverbs, and riddles reduced to texts and detached from their settings formed what Richard Bauman termed “thin and partial records of deeply situated expression.” Rooted in ethnographic insights, such arguments moved folklore from a textual orientation toward a contextual orientation. Kenneth S.

Goldstein's *A Guide for Fieldworkers in Folklore* (1964) heralds an era of ethnographically grounded folklore studies. The late 1960s and 1970s saw the further development of an ethnographic approach to folklore through the ethnography of communication advanced by Dell Hymes and other scholars in sociolinguistics. The concepts of **performance**, genre, and vernacularity emerged during this period and remain hallmarks of folkloristic ethnography.

Through participation in the daily life of a group, ethnography recovers knowledge that is implicit as well as explicit. Whether a foreigner to the community under study or a native, the ethnographer brings the perspective of the stranger to the study of social life either by making the strange familiar ("destrangement") or by making the familiar strange ("bestrangement"). Through these techniques, the ethnographer cultivates a reflexive stance on modern life and society. This means bringing what has become habituated and taken for granted to consciousness. Elaine Thatcher put it this way: "One of my most consistent **fieldwork** experiences in every place I've worked is to ask a question about how something is done and get the answer: 'Oh, just the regular way.' The discovery of how many 'regular' ways there are to can fruit or notch logs is one of the joys of fieldwork" (in Hufford 1986).

To become aware that "the regular way" of doing something is in fact not regular everywhere is to notice what is fundamental to ethnography: that the relationship between the unmarked category (the "regular" way) and marked categories (ways that are "folk" or "ethnic" or otherwise "different") reveals something of the hidden assumptions that shape modern social life. Amy Shuman illustrates the relationship between marked and unmarked categories through a consideration of regional variations in "tea" as an unmarked category. When, for instance, "tea" is the unmarked category, it means that in the northeastern United States we ask for tea and get it hot and unsweetened, while in the South it comes to us iced and sweet.

Coming to terms with this kind of distinction, Kenneth Pike labeled the difference between official and unofficial (or vernacular) forms of thought and expression the "etic"/"emic" distinction. "Etic" refers to the classification of an item within an abstract system that facilitates scholarly discourse, "emic" to shared understandings that emerge through vernacular use. Here, Mary Douglas's famous definition of dirt as "matter that is out of place" would serve as an etic category. Applied to the world of gardening, we find that what may be a weed in one person's garden is a useful herb for another, and that what are considered "weeds" (plants that are out of place) might vary from one locale or community to another. One could not know what is meant by the term "weeds," an unmarked category in many locales, without understanding what fits into that category and why and how it varies from locale to locale.

By illuminating disjunctures between official and unofficial systems of meaning, thereby opening the political imagination to the possibility of alternatives, ethnography can strengthen democratic capacity at the local level. Here the difference between official and unofficial categories is not trivial. When concepts like "development," "modernity," "people," "art," "music," and "forest" are used as unmarked categories both in the domains of official policy and in the local vernacular, we may not understand the implications of a proposal or policy unless we explore such terms and their uses ethnographically. Then we may learn that there is a logic governing local forest

management practices that makes more sense for that locale than the logic governing the practices of the United States Forest Service or between “development” that is community-based and development that is driven by the forces of **globalization**.

Conducting ethnographic research, folklorists use the emic/etic distinction in order to understand the expressive culture of a community in the community’s own terms. For example, while the term “narrative” is widely used by folklorists and other scholars, one is more likely to hear a variety of terms—such as “story,” “tale,” “joke,” or “the one about”—in the American vernacular outside the academy. Yet in some communities, “story” can be taken to mean “lie,” a kind of tall tale, and a folklorist interested in “stories” about a particular theme might have to specify that the stories could be true, in which case they might emically be considered “history” rather than stories. Dan Ben-Amos clarified this kind of distinction as the difference between “analytical categories” and “ethnic genres.”

Through participation in the structures and processes of community life, folkloristic ethnography teases out the forms of expression that are treated as stable and conventional. Though such expressions are always changing, they are recognizable (as greetings, insults, blessings) through recurrent aspects of content, style, structure, and context. A focus on genre and performance is a hallmark of folkloristic ethnography. Folkloristic ethnography tends to recover vernacular or unofficial systems of meaning by studying the genres and performances whereby groups constitute and evaluate social life. Designating forms of expression that become stylized through recurrent use, the concept of “genre” is central to folkloristic ethnography. In a typology of genres ranging from informal conversational genres to highly stylized ritual events, Roger Abrahams delineated the ways in which various genres rearrange participants into social roles that depart from those available in everyday life. A group of friends swapping stories take turns at being tellers and audience members; a practical joke divides a group into **tricksters** and dupes. In order to choose teams or identify “It” for a game of tag, counting-out rhymes reassemble society briefly into “dukers” and those who are eliminated. Through recourse to a variety of genres, people collectively and repeatedly escape from the ordinary world into an alternative one. Sometimes this escape happens fleetingly, through the use of a sports metaphor or a proverb. Other times it is accomplished through elaborate productions: parades, theater, home altars, or rodeos. Tracking these moves as they are orchestrated collectively, folkloristic ethnography contributes to understanding social communication, taking into account the conditions for producing and reproducing alternative worlds, the ways in which participants communicate about them, and the role of such expressive behaviors in social life.

Dorothy Noyes argues that the intensified, stylized forms of communication that folklorists study through ethnography constitute metaculture. Set apart from the events of ordinary life, performance allows participants to achieve a reflective distance on the worlds they create and inhabit collectively. Performance, which opens onto an alternative realm set within the flow of everyday events, provides participants with the kind of reflexive vantage point that ethnographers seek. Folkloristic ethnography studies performance in order to understand how communities achieve and evaluate the conditions for a collective being that, in the words of political

philosopher Hannah Arendt, “transcends mortal time.” For example, Mary Hufford’s *Chaseworld: Foxhunting and Storytelling in New Jersey’s Pine Barrens* studies how a group of hunters conjure and inhabit a world apart from that of everyday life through two different practices: chasing foxes with hounds, and telling stories about the chases. This ethnography and many others in folklore proceed through the identification of genres of communication practiced collectively in the fabrication of symbolic worlds that confer identity on their practitioners and bestow meanings on the events of everyday life.

But traditional ethnography, deemed a powerful way to understand how people create meaning, had to come to terms with its own role in creating those meanings and with the realization that this role was not politically innocent. The difference lodged in the ethnographer who functioned as both observer and participant was supposed to enhance the ethnographer’s authority. The ethnographer was the “objective” observer who could accurately describe social phenomena because of that objectivity. But whether such objectivity was even possible (and many believe it is not), objectivity does not legitimate the subordination of the culture of lived experience to the culture of scientific expertise.

In the late twentieth century, the politics of traditional ethnographic practice were subjected to intense scrutiny. Debates about the ethics of representing the cultures of others led the American Folklore Society to publish a code of ethics for fieldworkers (www.afsnet.org). Scholars challenged the model of ethnography as a process of going into a community in order to retrieve information used to build a body of academic knowledge often inaccessible to members of that community. Once the notion that one could enter a community and observe it “objectively”—that is, without affecting the community’s social life and without any bias whatever—became suspect, ethnographers could no longer write about communities without accounting for their own presence; the “invisible ethnographer” had to come forward in the written accounts of fieldwork. For example, John Dorst cautions the reader of *The Written Suburb* that his is simply one more account of someone’s encounter with the deep suburban world of Chadd’s Ford, Pennsylvania. This kind of writing, called “autoethnography,” presents stories of fieldwork that reflect on the enterprise of cultural investigation. Other forms of ethnography, represented for example in Elaine Lawless’s studies of women in religious ministry, reinterpret the relationship between the traditional “observer” and “informants” as being a reciprocal or collaborative relationship, designed to yield new knowledge for all participants.

Over the course of the twentieth century, then, folkloristic ethnography developed as a way of situating texts in increasingly complex contexts. Both “text” and “context” derive from the Greek word meaning “to weave,” and in this we find the inkling of an ethnographic poesis. In consultation with those who weave together stories out of a variety of media and splice disjunct times, spaces, and socialities into works of collective imagination, folklorists weave together ethnographic texts that tell the story of modernity while continually achieving fresh perspectives on it.

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Mary Hufford

ETHNOPOETICS

Although ethnopoetics is sometimes regarded in folklore studies simply as a transcription technique—the representation of folkloric texts as poetry—this ignores the principles informing such representation.

Ethnopoetics begins with the claim that oral literature is by nature poetic rather than prosaic, displaying the peculiar intensities of language characteristic of poetry, such as economy, imagery, metaphor, and rhythm. Developed in the late 1960s through the 1970s by poets and anthropologists Jerome Rothenberg, Dennis Tedlock, Stanley Diamond, Dell Hymes, Gary Snyder, and Nathaniel Tarn, among others, ethnopoetics yielded such exemplary publications as Tedlock's *Finding the Center* (1972) and the Rothenberg volumes *Technicians of the Sacred* (1969) and *Shaking the Pumpkin* (1972). Much ethnopoetic production found a home in the journal *Alcheringa: Ethnopoetics*, which appeared between 1970 and 1980. Some important American precursors to ethnopoetics include the poets Vachel Lindsay, James Weldon Johnson, and Zora Neale Hurston for their renderings of African American sermons, and the anthropologist Jaime de Angulo for his Indian tales.

Ethnopoetics assumes a commonality in literature, blurring the lines between the sacred texts of indigenous cultures and the poetry of visionary poets such as William