

Transcript of Dr. Eric Miller's **Keynote Address**  
for the "Folklore Seminar" at Nartiang Monoliths Park  
on Tues 15th Nov 2022.

This Seminar was organised by Martin Luther Christian University,  
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## **"Definitions of Folklore, the History of Folklore Studies, and the Concept of the Living Museum"**

### **Introduction**

Here we are, in the presence of these wonderful monoliths! I am told that the standing monoliths are known as Moo Shynrang, and represent male ancestors. And the flat monoliths are known as Moo Kynthai, and represent female ancestors.

Every communication medium has its strong and weak points. A strong point of stone sculpture and carving is endurance over time, near-permanence. Thus we have the saying that something is "Written in stone". That kind of communication can't move very easily. It can't come to you -- you have to come to it. Mobile phones, the Internet, webpages -- these mediums can transmit globally instantly, but they are impermanent. The webpages you see today most likely will not exist ten, one-hundred, or one-thousand years from now. Unlike these monoliths.

Twenty years ago, the late Dr. Roger Abrahams, the primary professor in my Folklore PhD process at the University of Pennsylvania, used to tell us: "When you give a talk, focus on one or two main points. People can't absorb more than that in a talk."

So here are my two points:

- 1) Folklore Studies has evolved from seeking to collect objects, to seeking to understand communication, in communities.
- 2) Community members should be in leading roles in documenting and presenting their own cultures.

### **1) Definitions of Folklore**

Englishman William Thoms coined the term "Folklore" in 1846. The term and concept of folklore can be seen as an expression of nostalgia (a sentimental longing or wistful affection for a period in the past) by members of the "intelligentsia" (urban intellectuals).

Folklore originally referred to traditional beliefs, customs, and stories of a community, passed through the generations by word-of-mouth. The folk were conceived of as being rural, poor, and illiterate (and thus having orality-based cultures).

Folklore was conceived of as involving communities in the countryside in which people were thought to have little or no money, machines, electricity, individuality, reading or writing, or alienation from nature or from each other. Those people were thought to have senses of connection and oneness with their bodies, nature, and each other. The notion of the folk as a "Singing Dancing Throng" developed.

The emergence of the concept of folklore can be seen as a reaction to the "Industrial Revolution" (late-1700s onward). The Industrial Revolution involved a transition to new manufacturing processes especially in Great Britain, continental Europe, and the United States. This transition included going from hand-production methods to machines, new chemical and metal production processes, and new uses of water and steam power. The Industrial Revolution established the mechanised factory system. The development of Electricity (early-1800s onward) was related to the Industrial Revolution. The electric battery was invented in 1800. An electric motor was created in 1820.

In modern definitions of folklore (1960s onward), conditions of orality and of multi-generational transmission have been relaxed. These definitions are more based on the process of communication:

- 1) "Whenever two or more people have an experience in common, they develop folklore about it" (Alan Dundes).
- 2) "Folk" has become a warm, informal way of addressing any group. For example, "Please keep moving, folks."
- 3) "Folklore tends to occur through artistic communication in small groups" (Dan Ben-Amos).

Folklore is especially the traditions and conventions within a culture.

Folklore (and culture in general) is --

- 4) A system of thought, language, and behaviour of a group of people.
- 5) The formulaic use of conventional units of thought, language, and behaviour of a group of people (Roger Abrahams).

## **2) The History of the Academic Discipline of Folklore**

The academic study of Folklore began in the mid-1800s (especially by people in Europe). These people were looking at the cultures of rural, so-called "backward," and "marginalised" communities in their own nations.

This was in contrast to the conception and study of Cultural Anthropology, which came into its own in the late-1800s. Cultural Anthropology was developed by Europeans in the context of their colonialising activities. Europeans were comparing their own cultures with the cultures of peoples (including tribal peoples) they were colonising.

Folklore can be considered as a topic within Cultural Anthropology. However, Folklore is also a stand-alone academic discipline.

"The Folklore Society" was founded in London in 1878. It was only in the mid-1900s that USA universities began to establish Folklore depts, programs, and centers. (In university programs and centers, the professors are based in depts of other disciplines.) The number of Folklore depts, programs, and centers reached its high-water mark in the 1960s. Now the number of such entities has declined. There was never more than a handful of full-fledged Folklore depts in USA and Canadian universities.

The signature research methodology in Folklore and Cultural Anthropology is "Ethnographic Fieldwork, with Participant Observation". Ethnographic Photography, Film, Video, and Videoconferencing are forms of presentation and documentation that proverbially can occur only after at least one year of fieldwork. (I believe I have coined the term, "Ethnographic Videoconferencing". I used this method in relation to my 2010 Folklore PhD dissertation from the University of Pennsylvania.)

The history of the study of Folklore is a story that began with the collecting of objects, and has evolved to seeking to understand communication processes.

### **Pre-1960s -- Collecting, classifying, and analysing objects**

A) Collecting folklore objects -- stories and proverbs, for examples. This involves recording (originally, by writing), translating, and transcribing. The output is a written-text derived from spoken-words.

B) Classifying (identifying the type of story, etc).

C) Analysing the text.

### **Post-1960s -- The Performance-centered Approach to Folklore**

The "Performance-centered Approach to Folklore" emerged in the 1960s. This approach takes into account processes of folklore-sharing events beyond just the meanings of spoken words. These processes include: tones of voice, body language, and psychological dynamics among participants. This approach also takes into account the sociological contexts around folklore-sharing events.

The Performance-centered Approach to Folklore should be seen in the context of a general development in the field of Communication in the 1960s: from the broadcast and print paradigm of mass communication (top to bottom, one to many); to a growing realisation that communication is an interactive process, and that the communicative act is not complete until the sender of a message receives feedback from the receiver of the message.

The Performance-centered Approach to Folklore perceives folklore-sharing as a way that community members can influence other community members. Community members are seen as creative and inventive regarding ways they shape, edit, present, and apply folklore. Performers of folklore material are always reworking, redeveloping, reinventing, improvising, and innovating. Tradition is not static: it exists in a fluid state of change. Every performance of folklore material involves a blend of the old and the new, the stable and emergent.

The individual performer has received ideas from the world, and in performance re-cycles those ideas back into the world, adjusting them to have positive impact. People shape their thoughts for social exchange in the present moment. The mind's capacity to make form becomes one with the desire to situate form in the world as a communication, so that the creation will usefully rearrange the conditions of human existence. (Paraphrased from Glassie, 2001.)

Many folklorists are now trained to consult the folk artist/creator/performer regarding the meaning, significance, and interpretation of aspects of what is presented. One area in which folk artists and other community members can give valuable input is regarding the matter of when and how traditional cultures may understand story elements as being allegorical rather than literal representations of occurrences.

The "Oral-formulaic Theory of Composition" of epics was developed by Milman Parry and his student Albert Lord in the early 1900s, in the course of their fieldwork with epic chanters in Yugoslavia. This work sought to understand how the ancient Greek epics attributed to Homer, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, were composed. The theory posits that a storyteller holds in reserve a collection of conventional words, phrases, and sentences: ways to describe and elaborate, to use metaphors (comparing an item to other items), and so on. A storyteller may also hold in reserve a collection of conventional melodies, rhythms, or even full songs, relating to an episode, or to a kind of episode, in a story. The storyteller may deploy or omit such optional material depending on conditions in the performance event.

Developing alongside the Performance-centered Approach to Folklore have been these fields of study: Socio-linguistics, Ways of Speaking, Ethnography of Speaking, and Linguistic Anthropology. Socio-linguists and Folklorists are concerned with what happens when speech is used in social situations. In addition to being interested in stories, folklorists have also been interested in the places storytelling holds in the midst of all forms of social-speech situations. What are some ways that people enter and exit storytelling? Why and how might certain stories be told at certain times and places, to certain individuals and groups? What are some functions and uses of storytelling?

A performance of folklore material may occur in a "natural context", "artificial context", or "simulated natural context". An example of a "simulated natural context" occurs when senior members of a community might tell stories to junior members of the community -- but instead of this occurring in the tellers' and listeners' home village, it occurs at "Cultural Centre" where outsiders can observe the telling and listening.

Finally, authentic community and folklore occurs when people of the community are relating and communicating with each other, even if this communication may be occurring online.

Around the world, many tribal verbal arts -- even the tribal languages -- are dwindling. In some cases, just a few speakers remain. Multi-media recordings made in collaborations between community members and visiting scholars and technology experts can be essential for the possibility of re-constructions of a language in the future.

Due to transportation, telecommunication, and other sociological conditions, we are living in an age of dwindling of significance of local culture in many peoples' lives. This is occurring after these local communities developed, in some cases, over tens of thousands of years. Today, many young people are more interested in what they can do with their smartphones than in the traditional culture into which they were born. Generally, the balance of power has shifted away from local culture and authorities. Messages from large-scale entities such as governments, religions, ethnic groups, and the business world dominate mass media. "Communities of choice" are increasingly important in peoples' lives, as opposed to the local communities into which they were born. Thus, many folklorists study ways communities and traditions are evolving in modern times, including in diaspora communities of people who have emigrated away from their homelands.

### **3) Living Museums**

As a Folklore scholar, I am performance-oriented. However, let us also consider "material folklore".

The English word, "museum", comes from the ancient Greek word, muse. (The Muses were the goddesses of the Arts in ancient Greek mythology). The word, "museum", originally referred to a sacred grove or a temple dedicated to the Muses. At the dawn of civilisation in the West (in Sumeria, Babylonia, Egypt, Greece, and Italy), buildings containing collections of ancient objects and writings (the equivalents of museums and libraries) were temples.

Empires produce museums, libraries, and zoos. Museums and libraries are storehouses of knowledge, and of relics of cultures. These institutions were often by-products of colonisation, administration, classification, and sedentarisation (the forced settling of nomadic populations). Relics of absorbed, subdued, subjugated, and conquered peoples in distant territories were put on display back home.

The museum as a secular cultural exhibition for members of the public come into existence in England in the 1600s. This was the age of colonisation and empire, when European nations were colonising the world.

Today in "Living Museums", objects that are still in everyday use are on display, indoors and outdoors; and community members help to explain about the objects.

Living Museums are a kind of "Public Folklore". Public Folklore has in the past usually involved a collaboration between a visiting scholar and community members. The visiting scholar may have knowledge relating to writing, publicity, computers, telecommunication, working with government officials, etc. Cultural exhibitions for the public may help put a community and its culture "on the map". Such activities may increase a community's abilities to request and receive government services (roads, electricity, etc).

Some scholars used to fear that it would "ruin" a traditional culture if its members might learn to use modern technology, beginning with writing. Now, in many communities there are "Native Scholars" -- members of the community who have become scholars and who are studying their own cultures. Formerly the role of interested local people was often limited to "Research Assistant" for the visiting scholar.

Living Museums are also a kind of "Heritage Management" and display. These cultural displays may be designed for community members, and/or for members of the general public. It is natural that two separate levels of culture develop: 1) ways community members practice their culture amongst themselves; and 2) ways community members present their culture to the general public. Some communities develop practices of periodically taking groups of community children into the forest and teaching them about traditional ways of living in the forest.

In Living Museums, members of the community whose culture is being studied ideally participate on every level of administration, planning, and presentation. Members of the community should take, or should be given, leading roles in the processes of documenting and analysing their cultures. Community members should have a say regarding ways they and their cultures are presented to the public.

One aim and objective of Living Museums is to inform the public regarding to community's "Traditional Knowledge" (including in relation to nature). Biological, cultural, and linguistic diversity are mutually supportive. If forest areas are destroyed, the local cultures also tend to be lost. Two examples of valuable traditional knowledge are knowledge relating to: 1) medicinal uses of plants; and 2) ways the ocean behaved which were seen as warning signs before the 2004 tsunami.

The question may arise: Is it best to assimilate, or to maintain one's own identity? Should society and culture be a "melting pot", or a "mosaic"? Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, said, "People should develop along the lines of their own genius". (The word, "genius" here seems to mean one's character, nature, self, identity.) If one holds onto and develops one's own identity, one has something to contribute to the whole, and the whole is in-part composed of and enriched by one's contribution.

However, to respect their local traditional language and culture, people have to make at least part of their living from their traditional language and culture. Culture cannot be preserved like a specimen in a jar. Culture is a living process. For a culture to survive and develop, it must be nurtured and respected, and community members must perceive it to be valuable and useful.

#### Citation

Henry Glassie, "Performance Theory and the Documentary Act," *Indian Folklife*, Volume 1, Issue 5, April 2001, pp. 43-48.