Exploring Folk Art

Michael Jones

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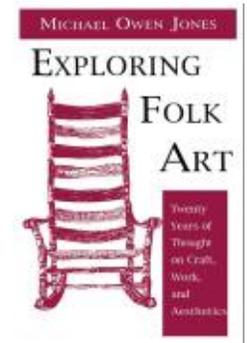
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Epilogue

Some of my publications and papers grew out of my teaching experience at UCLA. During the year and a half that I worked on my dissertation after leaving Indiana University, for example, I presented in folk art classes many of the ideas I was developing. *People Studying People: The Human Element in Fieldwork* resulted from Georges's and my having taught research methods, realizing as we did so that there was much more to the fieldwork experience than had been treated in the publications we asked students to read. But it was administrative responsibilities and service that intensified my interest in organizational folklore as well as aesthetics and material culture at work.

Because I began the prologue on a personal note and in introductions to the 11 articles in this volume I try to give some of the context in which the papers were written, it seems in keeping with the book as a whole to provide information regarding the directions in which my research is now moving. In 1982 I was appointed vice chairman of the UCLA Folklore and Mythology Program, an interdepartmental program empowered in 1965 to offer the M.A. degree (and in 1978, the Ph.D. degree) in folklore and mythology. Serving more than 60 graduate students, the Folklore and Mythology Program is composed of eight core faculty and two dozen adjunct faculty who teach more than 70 courses in folklore and mythology. In 1983 I was acting chairman of the program when Robert A. Georges, chairman, was on leave. In 1984 I was appointed director of the Center for the Study of Comparative Folklore and Mythology, an organized research unit founded in 1960. In order to promote and facilitate interdisciplinary research on folklore and mythology, the center maintains a large library and five major archives; staff include an administrative assistant, a librarian, an archivist, and several research assistants. The center organizes and sponsors workshops, symposia, and conferences; oversees a publication series; seeks funding for research projects and administers grants and contracts; and develops special programming both on campus and off.

As an organizational participant whose appointment is in one unit (the History Department) but whose teaching and research responsibilities lie in

another (the Folklore and Mythology Program), as an administrator (first of a teaching program and then of a research unit), and as one whose activities are supervised by others, I have had a particular interest in organization design, culture, and management. This personal involvement finds expression in some of my teaching, research, and administrative activities.

To give one example, I am a member of the UCLA Administrators and Supervisors Association (ASA), a diverse group of staff and faculty. On 20 November 1985, the ASA held a panel composed of faculty, staff, and administrators who addressed the question, "Can UCLA Adopt Lessons from America's Best-run Companies?" No consensus emerged. Remarks by panelists and some of the 90 or more attendees suggested that, on the one hand, many individuals and units in this large and complex organization evince a sincere concern about members but, on the other hand, sometimes organizational goals are unclear, people feel they are not trusted or given the necessary resources to carry out their tasks and responsibilities, and individual accomplishments are not always recognized.

If the panel in November of 1985 articulated some of the concerns, then another panel on 20 February 1986 suggested some solutions. Called "The Staff Role at UCLA: Strictly a Job or Part of the Family?" the panel was composed of representatives of labor and employee relations, supervisors, a department chair, a vice chancellor and the campus ombudsman. A consultant to Employee Relations, Staff Personnel, identified several "pockets of excellence" at UCLA. Noting that many individuals and even units as a whole attempt to achieve a family feeling and to provide recognition—often through rituals and celebrations—he insisted that "we need to *dramatize* excellence and good performance." By the end of the discussion, many of the panelists and audience were describing examples of traditions attending to social, aesthetic, and symbolic needs and expectations of organization members. Moreover, they were suggesting that such traditions need to be documented and communicated in order to encourage their continuation where they exist and development where presently they are lacking.

At the time, I was coediting a volume on organizational ethnography; completing an article for Blandy and Congdon's *Art in a Democracy* called "Making Work Art and Art Work: The Aesthetic Impulse in Organizations and Education"; preparing "Objects and Organizations: Material Culture Study at Work" for the Conference on North American Material Culture Research: New Objectives, New Theories, directed by Gerald J. Pocius; and writing "In Search of Meaning: Using Qualitative Methods in Research and Application" for the book I was editing. As director of the Folklore and Mythology Center, I was administering contracts and grants, supervising staff, and seeking funding in support of a symposium and other events celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the center and the twentieth anniversary of the

establishment of the teaching program in folklore and mythology. I was also teaching a graduate seminar on organizational folklore, and, with other members of the Organization Studies Group (one of several research groups under the auspices of the Folklore and Mythology Center), giving a series of public workshops in a local library on organizational culture and symbolism. In other words, I was immersed in the subject of organizational life and therefore attuned to the February ASA panel.

One of the messages of both panels seemed to be that many people at UCLA were aware of and wanted information about networks of support generated and sustained largely through traditions (stories, rituals, kidding relations, celebrations, customs of cooperation, and so forth). What appeared to be called for was a folkloristic study. Accordingly, I prepared a proposal.

"Bringing Out the Best in Us": A Research Project on Organizational Traditions

What traditions at UCLA provide individuals with recognition, fulfill needs of belonging, demonstrate trust, convey a sense of caring, generate the feeling of family and community and reward excellence and creativity?" I asked in the proposal I prepared following the panel on the staff role at UCLA. "Why should these practices be perpetuated where they already exist and instituted where presently they are absent?" In addition, "How can behaviors, traditions and ways of doing things that we perceive as 'bringing out the best in us' be documented and then communicated campus-wide as models of 'positive management practices'?"

The proposal was only a preliminary one, of course. During the next five months I met individually and in small groups with nearly 60 people in a wide range of job titles to discuss and develop the proposed research on traditions and expressive forms in our organization that articulate or fulfill social and aesthetic needs of members. They in turn talked to their supervisors or, if they were in supervisory roles themselves, to their staff (and also to those at administrative levels above them). Participants ranged the gamut from clerks, bibliographers, and secretaries to their immediate supervisors as well as representatives of labor relations, consultants in employee relations, faculty, department chairs, trainers, administrative assistants, management services officers, assistant deans, assistant vice chancellors, and vice chancellors.

A final proposal for research was generated out of this extensive cooperation and collaboration, one that set forth a pilot study with objectives of compiling and disseminating information about traditions and expressive forms but also of developing and testing several hypotheses. The pilot project offered an opportunity to explore the assumption that feelings of self-worth

and dignity at work and in an organization are linked to a supportive social context, ascertaining for future study what factors might bear on the development and maintenance of networks of support; what universals obtain regardless of the effects of a unit's size, functions, overall style, clients or other factors; and what the social and aesthetic needs of organization participants are that are met by various traditions as well as why, when, and how these traditions function in this way.

Although only a pilot study, the research is extensive enough to require assistance. Funding from the Academic Senate (which provides faculty with small grants for research) in combination with additional support from Research Programs and also the Office of the Administrative Vice Chancellor made possible the hiring of part-time research assistants, beginning in late July. The assistants are students in the Ph.D. program in folklore and mythology. They include Susan Montepio (who is combining folklore studies and applied anthropology), Susan Scheiberg (who is majoring in folklore and communications), and Peter Tommerup (who is taking behavioral and organizational science as an allied field with folklore studies). The three have had previous experience in organizational ethnography, having carried out research at Hughes Aircraft, TRW, American Medical International, Kaiser Permanente, several small businesses, and numerous ethnic organizations and not-for-profit corporations.

An advisory committee has been assembled. Composed of a dozen members, this committee, like the research and everything else about the project, represents as broad a spectrum of interests as possible. As I write this (the end of December, 1986), the pilot project is well under way although by no means complete. The assistants and I have interviewed several dozen people in a variety of units, met frequently to confer among ourselves and discussed the research in progress with individual members of the advisory committee. We have given feedback to those we interviewed. In January we will have lengthy meetings with the advisory committee as a whole, not only to describe the research to date but also to seek advice and recommendations for both future study and additional means and manner of disseminating information.

Besides making presentations to individuals and units directly involved in the research, we are scheduled in April to constitute a panel at a meeting of the Administrators and Supervisors Association, which will be widely announced on campus, an arrangement made months ago when the pilot study was being developed and shaped by various participants. We have also been invited to discuss the use of qualitative methods in the study of organizations at the annual meeting in April of the American Association of College Registrars and Admissions Officers; our session will be called "Doing Ethnography in Organizations: Methods and Techniques of Applied Qualita-

tive Research." Also in April we will be participating in the annual meeting of the Western Academy of Management in a session called "Performing Well: The Impact of Rituals, Celebrations, and Networks of Support." Our presentations, based on research at UCLA and other organizations, concern the range and variety of expressive forms manifested in organizational settings, the personalization of work space, rituals and celebrations, and the concept of "self-management." Rather than ignoring organizational problems, we seek solutions to them from within as offered by members themselves.

"The stories that people tell, the ways they decorate their work space, ceremonies in which they take part, and ritualistic interaction provide data essential to understanding human concerns and the culture of an organization," I wrote in the booklet *Folklore/Folklife* (1984b:14). "Forms of expressive behavior and aspects of organizational culture may play an important role in clarifying and communicating organizational philosophy and objectives, enhancing managerial styles and methods, and improving life in the workplace."

In other words, forms of folklore generated in organizational settings or about organizations constitute a source of information regarding attitudes, values, and concerns of organizational participants. These might be favorable, of course, or unfavorable. Stories, language, and other expressive forms may also suggest the conditions and relationships desired by organizational participants and even provide models for instituting them. Celebrations, rituals, personalization of space, and so forth may help fulfill organizational participants' needs, desires, and expectations for recognition, reward, personal satisfaction, fellowship, meaningfulness, pleasant ambience, and so on.

Recently a call for papers was distributed by the American Studies Association. The annual meeting of this organization in November of 1987 will be devoted to the topic Creating Cultures: Peoples, Objects, Ideas. The Program Committee emphasizes *material culture* and various subthemes or topics including the "culture or material culture of institutions, occupations, or situations"; "governmental or private sector cultural policy"; and organizational culture. There is recognition, then, of the importance of material culture as well as the fact that the lives of all of us are affected daily by organizations and their representatives, policies and procedures, and products or services. For the 90% of us who are not self-employed, some organizations are vital to us as the workplace, which in turn may constitute our social life and expressive world. If our lives and livelihood—not only materialistically but also socially, aesthetically, and spiritually—depend on organizations, then it seems appropriate to study organizations in order to understand them, and, if necessary, to recommend ways of improving them. Such work can be done through research on material culture as well as other

expressive forms and communicative processes. It also needs to be informed by concepts that have been evolving in recent years in the study of folk art.

On the Future of Folk Art and Material Culture Studies

To many people 20 years ago (and perhaps in some circles still today), "folk art" was epitomized by nineteenth-century samplers, the easel paintings of itinerant artists, duck decoys, and quilts (all of which, even if done during leisure, are products of domestic industry and work life and some of which are the outputs of organized effort). Research in the 1970s and 1980s on traditions and the aesthetic impulse in the home, at work, and during leisure demonstrate that "art" is not restricted to a certain class of objects and that the term "folk" applies to more than a particular category of people. This research also makes us aware that "the aesthetic" (as an attitude, and also as a desire for pleasant sensory and social experiences) pervades our lives at home and at work as well as in organizations. It reveals that traditions may communicate our perceptions and perpetuate our values, thereby helping us cope, expressing our joys, and providing us with bases for interaction, sources of identity, and a sense of continuity.

Explorations of "folk art" in the future undoubtedly will include studies of textiles, paintings, and sculpture of an earlier era. But this research will entail different questions, or solutions to age-old problems will be based on newly generated assumptions. And studies of contemporary craft, aesthetics, and work probably will involve increasingly more participatory and collaborative investigations as well as "action research," that is, suggestions for applying, or the actual application of, hypotheses and inferences to consciously affect the conditions that have been documented and analyzed. Both kinds of research are needed, lest we forget where we have come from or ignore where we are going.

Research on folk art is only one aspect of material culture studies, of course. Sometimes traditional and expressive forms that folklorists document and analyze are examined by cultural geographers, architectural historians, and specialists in American studies. When this happens, these forms may or may not be referred to as "folk" or "vernacular," and they may be combined with other (high-style or mass-produced) forms rather than treated in a separate category. Folkloristic perspectives and hypotheses occasionally influence analysis in other disciplines, just as folklorists derive ideas and inspiration from other fields of inquiry.

Material culture studies is interdisciplinary. If material culturists have a common bond, then it is their conviction that research on objects and their manufacture and use can reveal much about historical, sociocultural, psychological, and behavioral states and processes. Although the term

"material" suggests a preoccupation with artifacts and the word "culture" connotes a commitment to identifying general social values, in fact material culture studies is enlivened and enriched by attention to the intangible and to the individual. Similarly, folk art research enlarges understanding of the human condition when it includes the notion of tradition and the aesthetic impulse as fundamental aspects of our day-to-day struggle to sur-vive—physically, socially, emotionally, and spiritually.

In conclusion, it seems to me that as significant as objects, artifacts, and things are, they should not be elevated to supremacy over the people who made and used them. If the tangible products of human imagination become a center of attention, and the ideas, feelings, needs, and desires manifested by them are ignored, then both appreciation and understanding of those very artifacts are, ironically, diminished. Therefore, material culture studies and folk art research might achieve their purposes most fully when the makers and users as well as the processes of conceptualization, implementation, and utilization—rather than the artifacts per se—are the object of inquiry.