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Meaning of Folklore

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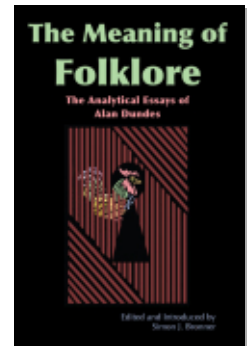
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FOLK IDEAS AS UNITS OF WORLDVIEW

(*Postscript*) Worldview in Folk Narrative

Introduction

The opening essay of this section is significant for its groundbreaking interpretation of worldview in folkloristic terms. Dundes was not the first to point to the interpretation of worldview as a valuable goal of cultural study, but he made a tremendous contribution by proposing that worldview—a concept often noted for its diffuseness and vagueness—could be clarified with reference to the fundamental units of analysis he called “folk ideas.” Dundes thought of worldview generally as “the way a people perceive the world and its place in it,” and sought to objectify this perception with the use of folklore as source material. An important distinction he made between folk ideas and expressive genres (such as beliefs or proverbs) was that the folk idea was not a genre, but rather was evident across genres. Folk ideas underlaid the thought and action of a given group of people, and, therefore, were markers of their identity. Yet, in Dundes’s words, “they are not likely to appear consistently in any fixed-phrase form.” They were not “myths,” which folklorists thought of as a narrative form, and they could be popularly used to connote fallacy. The issue was not the veracity of these ideas, but rather that they were “underlying assumptions” affecting outlooks as well as expressions. Dundes also referred to folk ideas as “unstated premises,” “existential postulates,” “notions,” “conceptions,” or “cultural axioms” that could be discerned not only in folk culture, but also in popular movies and television, objects, advertising, and other commercial items. He thus called upon folklorists to broadly commit to the study of human thought, rather than follow a natural history model of the collection and classification of items somehow divorced from contemporary life.

Dundes applied a linguistic model, by likening folk ideas to generative principles of grammar that were difficult for natives to articulate. He argued that just as languages were governed by inducible principles, worldviews were equally highly patterned. The whole could be discerned from cultural expressions, “particles,” as Dundes called them. Thus, folklore became especially significant as a comparable, empirical source that acted as a metaphor for the cultures in which it was found. Methodological problems still had to be addressed, such as whether the compared material, especially in different contexts, was in fact comparable; whether the texts were truly representative; and whether the quantity and variety of texts were sufficient. Still, Dundes emphasized that the pursuit of worldview

was crucial to the overall objective of identifying cultural patterning in microcosms. These microcosms, he hypothesized, “may be isomorphically parallel to macrocosms,” that is, they were minute expressions of overarching, culturally shared cognition and values.

Since Dundes had contributed to, and called for, the definition of genres, particularly with structural criteria, his criticisms of genre work in the “folk ideas” essay may seem surprising. He did not abandon the definitional project, but his concern was that collection and classification had become ends in themselves rather than steps in identification, leading toward interpretation. The renowned archives he amassed at Berkeley, arranged in fact by genre, are testimony to the utility of collection and classification in the folkloristic enterprise. He implied, though, that the obsession for ordering aggregate data was a disciplinary “folk idea,” or at least a “habit of thinking” that “artificially” limited research; see his suggestion (in the essay on the psychology of collecting, later in this volume) for theorizing that collecting and classification were forms of anal retention by which material was held in, and therefore not worked with into expansive interpretations. A keystone of his comparative approach was to find symbolically equivalent images and texts across genres, cultures, and even transmitting media. In his scholarly jeremiad, he insisted that the goal of the folkloristic enterprise should not be the assignment of collected items to one genre or another, but, instead, the interpretation of their meaning.

Dundes was not alone in his plea and complaint. His “folk ideas” essay originally appeared as part of a paradigm-changing symposium called *Toward New Perspectives in Folklore*. Richard Bauman, in his introduction to this book, characterized Dundes as taking “a characteristic role [in the group], that of extender and rearranger of the conceptual boundaries of the field,” and sharing with others a questioning of “the received canon” of folklore genres and diachronic methods. Unlike others in his cohort, who were oriented toward contextual and performance perspectives, and who, in the words of editor Paredes, were “less interested in defining a general concept of folklore than in delimiting folklore in specific situations” (1972), Dundes called for cutting an even wider conceptual swath with folklore. His objectives were more cognitive than behavioral, more global than situational, more macro than micro.

Subsequently, a number of studies picked up on Dundes’s concept of folk ideas. For example, Patrick Mullen extended the comparison of Mexican and American worldviews. From fieldwork with the borderlands fishing community on the Texas Gulf Coast, he reported different patterns in the conclusion of buried treasure stories among Mexicans and Americans. With the former, tellers report finding treasure, while with the latter, treasure is not retrieved or the seeker is fatally cursed. Mullen concluded that the narrative evidence confirmed Dundes’s contrast of limited good in Mexican society (as described by George Foster) and unlimited good in American society (1978). In the Mexican view, since wealth was limited and a rigid class system prevented mobility, the explanation given of a person’s success was that he or she must have landed treasure. With “good” or wealth perceived as unlimited, and mobility accessible in the American worldview, the legends discouraged finding the treasure because work would be rewarded. America, according to Dundes, “remains a land of opportunity, that boundless wealth is still readily available to anyone with the energy and the initiative to dig for it.”

Dundes pointed out that folk ideas were not only narrated, but also materialized. To demonstrate, he extended the analysis of how national societies perceive “good” via his study of folk toys that featured pecking chickens placed on a paddle. The beaks are attached to a weighted string, and when the paddle is moved, the beaks peck at the wooden surface

on the paddle. He found that the American versions of the toy are the only ones to use edible food; each chicken has an individual portion of corn kernels, leading him to the conclusion that “only a country with an abundant food supply could waste food to construct or decorate a toy” (1989). Other countries vary in the space provided for pecking and in the extent of food depicted, which suggested to Dundes that makers constructed toys in accordance with the “unstated premises” of their society. He showed objects produced in India that “hint at a basic overpopulation problem,” while Swedish versions have “an unbounded and near infinite amount of food.” For an alternative interpretation of the toy in a situated event using a psychoanalytical perspective, see Bronner 2005d.

Dundes’s concept of the folk idea did not go unchallenged. Stephen Stern and Simon J. Bronner criticized the ahistorical tendencies of worldview analysis, which often led to the false conclusion that the perception of limits remained constant through time, and extends uniformly to the whole society (1980). Methodologically, there was the temptation to be selective with the evidence, ignoring contradictory sources that did not fit the theme, either to give the appearance of an unequivocal pattern, or to begin with one’s conclusion and find data to fit the theme. Aware of the methodological pitfalls, Dundes himself warned that “it is dangerous to speculate on the basis of too few texts or exemplars.”

Another critical concern is the extension of identity to generalizations of national character. Dundes raised this worry in this essay, when he attempted to differentiate between stereotypes as false generalizations (“folk fallacies,” he called them) and folk ideas. Seeking to show American folklore as a reflection of an American type or theme, folklorist Richard M. Dorson—coming out of an American Studies background—fused the concept of folk ideas to the approach of “image, symbol, and myth” (which he credited to the work of Henry Nash Smith; see Smith 1950). In this approach, distinctive expressions of Americanness, arising historically from unique American conditions, were held up as signs of national identity. See, for example, the “American Cultural Myths” (“The Noble and Ignoble Savage,” “Rags to Riches,” “Fables of Innocence,” and “American Adam”) described in the *Handbook of American Folklore*, which Dorson edited (1983), or his narrative study, *America in Legend* (1973). Methodologically, one examined the expressions of values (visible images and texts in art, literature, and folklore), evaluated them for their symbolism, and connected them to overarching non-narrative “myths” or ideas. The significance of this model was that it suggested that ideas drive action, thus setting up a causal connection between culture and historical events. But critics have also noted the reductionist tendency to equate societies to singular “characters” that stress exceptional traits or values; they bristle at the implications of a collective American mind or “group think.” Dundes, for his part, acknowledged that sometimes prevalent ideas in a society can be oppositional, suggesting cultural tensions and paradoxes (for an American Studies demonstration of this notion, see Kammen 1972).

Dundes defined “national character” as a “cluster of specific personality traits which can be empirically identified” (1986). He added that as a folklorist, he examined these traits as expressed in folklore, and encouraged the comparative study of national character. Following from the folklorist’s concern for how traditions diffuse, he hypothesized that people take their national character with them when they migrate. “Individuals may behave differently in a foreign setting,” he wrote, “but it is not so easy to shed one’s national character.” He distinguished between national *stereotypes* and *character* as the difference between what people perceive they (or others) are like in the former, and what people actually are in the latter. Acknowledging regional, ethnic, and class differences with a nation’s

boundaries, he nonetheless advocated for an empirical approach to national character that shed its past associations with romantic nationalism and national socialism, and dealt with cultural patterning (and shared “folk ideas”) in a society. Here is the source of the comment, cited above, which he offered to colloquy speakers in the Netherlands who were critical of national character. “There is a difference between New Englanders in the United States and residents of the so-called “Deep South,” but there are also commonalities which *all* Americans share regardless of regionalism, class affiliation, or ethnic identity. For example, the delight in exaggeration (as opposed to the understatement of Englishmen) seems to be a general facet of American national character, a delight incidentally which probably masks a basic feeling of insecurity and inferiority vis-à-vis Europeans. Boasting and bragging (about being the biggest and best) is a sure sign of such feelings of cultural inferiority. In the same way, Prussians may be different from Bavarians, but both north and south Germans share a penchant for matters scatological.” His last statement referred to his study of German national character (1984a). (He told the group that his publisher insisted on replacing his use of “national character” in the original title with “culture.”) Regarding Dundes’s thesis of migrating traits, see the use of his concept in Bronner 2007. For other statements on national character, see Dundes 1975h, 1969b.

Eminent folklorist Linda Dégh iterated the concept that worldview motivates any human action. She defined it as the “sum total of subjective interpretations of perceived and experienced reality of individuals,” and noted that narratives, in particular, are “loaded with worldview expressions.” Reviewing Dundes’s call for worldview study, she argued that folklorists had an advantage in using the “specific” source material of folklore, rather than the “inconcrete” materials of other fields (1994). A year later, in the same journal, Dundes took her cue, and both encouraged renewed attention to the concept and elaborated on his use of worldview—more than twenty years after his initial publication. In his post-script, he constructed a binary between an “old” and “modern” notion of worldview. In his model, the old approach was synonymous with cosmology, the view of one’s place in the world or cosmos. In contrast, the modern notion was more cognitive and structural. In his words, “it refers to the way in which people perceive the world through native categories and unstated premises or axioms.” One difference between the two notions, he pointed out, was the level of conscious awareness. Cosmology was conscious, while the second kind of worldview was not. He mused that the modern concept was not a Freudian or Jungian unconscious, but a linguistic one in the sense that “speakers of a language are not ‘conscious’ of the grammatical laws governing their speech.” Looking to the future, he urged folklorists to delineate the unconscious worldview postulates, which, he wrote, “are so artfully articulated in folk narrative and other forms of folklore.”

For further discussion of worldview in cultural study, see Kearney 1972, 1984; Hill and Mannheim 1992; Naugle 2002; and Sire 2004.

Folk Ideas as Units of Worldview

FOR SOME TIME NOW, FOLKLORISTS have become increasingly annoyed at what they regard as a nonprofessional and indiscriminately extended use of the term “myth” to apply to a wide variety of materials. Accordingly, folklorists are wont to shudder when they read discussions about the “myth” of capitalism or the “myth” of race by different social scientists, who often use “myth” simply as a synonym for “error” or “fallacy.” These definitely are not what the folklorist means by the term “myth,” folklorists carefully explain to questioning students. To the folklorist, a myth is first of all a narrative and that alone rules out most of what modern social scientists refer to under the rubric of myth. Generally speaking, social scientists’ use of the term “myth” has little or nothing to do with traditional narrative forms. Rather it has to do with a belief or a belief system. Moreover, their use of the term “myth” nearly always carries an explicit negative connotation as in Ashley Montagu’s book in which race or racism is referred to as man’s most dangerous myth.¹

If folklorists wish to guard their own narrow definition of myth in the sense of a sacred oral narrative, explaining how the earth or man came to be in their present form, then they ought to offer some constructive terminological alternative to refer to those cultural phenomena that nonfolklorists persist in calling myths. The mere insistence by folklorists that such phenomena as political “myths” are not really true myths doesn’t solve the problem. If these materials are not myths, then what are they? And should they, whatever they are, be studied by folklorists or not?

I believe that there are traditional notions or conceptions that properly belong in the province of the professional folklorist but which have never been fully recognized as being part of folklore because of the folklorist’s obstinate tendency to be bound by traditional genres. There can be no question that genre theory has been instrumental in shaping the discipline of folkloristics. Once any corpus of folklore has been collected, it is to matters of genre classification that folklorists invariably turn. Obviously the exigencies of archiving have forced the folklorist to think in terms of classification and genres. “What do I call this?” and “Where do I file it?” are common questions in folklore archives around the world. Within conventional genres, for example, myth, folktales, and games, there are, of course, elaborate refinements of subclassification schemes created in order to facilitate “information retrieval.” But despite the practical necessity of defining and refining genre categories, the fact remains that the folklorist’s habit of thinking of his or her field almost exclusively in terms of traditional genres tends to be a limiting one. It is a habit which leads him or her to emphasize certain kinds of folkloristic materials and to totally ignore others.

The genre divisions often artificially limit research. For example, a scholar may write about themes in mythology or even in a single myth and pay no attention to the occurrence of the identical themes in other genres. Even course offerings in folklore, and occasionally whole research institutes, are organized by genre. Yet surveys or even partial surveys of various supposedly established genres reveal that there is frequently little agreement among folklorists as to precisely what a given genre is.² Are genres cross-cultural or not? Is what American

folklorists consider under the genre label “proverb” the same as what a German folklorist calls a *Spruchwort* or what a Japanese folklorist calls *kotowaza*? We are aware of the fact that in any one culture there may be a difference between folk or native categories on the one hand and analytic categories on the other. What the folk in the United States might term “old sayings,” the American folklorist might group under “superstition,” “proverb,” etc. But what are the criteria for the establishment of these various analytic categories? And to what extent are these criteria applicable to folkloristic materials from other cultures?

Let me illustrate some of the difficulty by citing a concrete example. Most American folklorists would probably agree that “Lightning never strikes twice in the same place” is a bona fide item of folklore. But to what genre does it belong? I believe that depending upon the specific context and use of this item in a particular situation, the item may be either a superstition *or* a proverb in terms of conventional genre distinctions. If the item is believed literally to be a fact of nature—an individual in the midst of a thunderstorm consciously standing on a place where lightning has previously struck to avoid being hit—then the item would normally be classified as a folk belief or superstition. If, on the other hand, it is taken metaphorically to mean simply that history is nonrepetitive and that an individual who has suffered one misfortune is unlikely to suffer an identical one, then the item would most probably be labelled as a proverb. Incidentally, this example demonstrates the fallacy of simply collecting folklore text items without regard to context and publishing long lists of raw data without accompanying full explanations.

There are many other perplexing problems having to do with genre assignment. To what genre does “All signs fail in dry weather” belong? I would be tempted to classify it as a metafolkloristic proverb commenting upon the lack of reliability of sign superstitions having to do with predicting rainfall. How would American folklorists classify the idea that when it thunders, God is moving his furniture, or that potato carts are rolling across the sky, or that two clouds are bumping their heads together, or that angels are rolling stones downhill? The variant which ascribes thunder to gnomes’ bowling up in the sky is probably related to Washington Irving’s story of Rip Van Winkle.³ To say that such items are used to allay the fears of small children when they hear thunder is not to say to what genre of folklore they belong. Other weather phenomena are similarly described: “The old woman is picking her geese” means it’s snowing, with the falling snow presumably being the plucked goose feathers, and the rain is “Angels crying.” These are not proverbs and they are not superstitions. They are rarely if ever believed to be true and they are hardly traditional causal statements of the form “If A then B, unless C.” Kuusi in his excellent study of “The Devil is Beating His Wife,” said when rain falls but the sun continues to shine, uses the term circumlocution.⁴ Of course, one might argue that it doesn’t really matter to what genres such items belong. It is sufficient to collect and analyze the items without worrying about how to classify them. The practical question of where to file them in folklore archives still remains, however.

One could imagine that in time folklorists might agree as to the generic nature of fictive weather descriptions, but what about a notion found in American culture that everything or every person has its or his price? There are numerous traditional expressions concerning the measure of money, for example, “Money isn’t everything but it helps,” “Money talks,” “What does it mean in dollars and cents?” In fact, Americans are suspicious of items priced too low. Bargains are desirable, but “something for nothing” may be of poor quality. The rule of thumb seems to be “You get what you pay for.” This idea that any object can be measured in monetary terms seems to be a traditional one in American

culture; but it is not always stated in fixed-phrase form, and therefore it is probably inappropriate to call it a proverb. Moreover, if it is not a traditional statement of cause and effect we folklorists would probably not feel comfortable in classifying it as a superstition—though possibly we might attempt to label it as a folk belief. In any event, I suggest that the idea that any thing or any person can be “bought”—whether or not it is ultimately true—is a part of American worldview. Furthermore, it is an important part of American worldview inasmuch as Americans may deal with peoples from other cultures who do not share such a materialistic, capitalistic view of the world. To the extent that such premises or ideas are traditional, I believe they are part of folklore and that they should be studied by folklorists. As a concession to our nominalizing penchant, I propose we term such notions “folk ideas.”

By “folk ideas,” I mean traditional notions that a group of people have about the nature of humanity, of the world, and of life in the world. Folk ideas would not constitute a genre of folklore but rather would be expressed in a great variety of different genres. Proverbs would almost certainly represent the expression of one or more folk ideas, but the same folk ideas might also appear in folktales, folksongs, and in fact almost every conventional genre of folklore, not to mention nonfolkloristic materials. However, insofar as folk ideas are the unstated premises which underlie the thought and action of a given group of people, they are not likely to appear consistently in any fixed-phrase form.

There may well be other terms that might be considered more appropriate than “folk ideas,” for instance, “basic premises,” “cultural axioms,” or “existential postulates.”⁶ The particular term is really not the point. What is important is the task of identifying the various underlying assumptions held by members of a given culture. All cultures have underlying assumptions and it is these assumptions or folk ideas which are the building blocks of worldview. Any one worldview will be based upon many individual folk ideas and if one is seriously interested in studying worldview, one will need first to describe some of the folk ideas which contribute to the formation of that worldview. Sometimes, folk ideas may be articulated in a particular proverb or exemplum, but if folk ideas are normally expressed not in one but rather in a variety of genres, then it is imperative that the folklorist make the attempt to extrapolate such ideas from the folklore as a whole. To do this, the folklorist must of necessity escape the self-imposed bind of genres and categories. Once one has identified a number of folk ideas present in a culture, one may begin to perceive what the pattern, if any, of these ideas is and how each of the ideas is related to the total worldview of that culture.

It would be folly at this point even to speculate about the possible number of folk ideas in American culture, but it might be useful to discuss several tentative folk ideas as a means of illustrating the nature of such ideas and how they are manifested in folklore. Let us assume for the sake of argument that one American folk idea is that there is no real limit as to how much of any one commodity can be produced. The traditional phrase “There’s (plenty) more where that came from” could refer to an invitation to eat heartily as there is an abundant supply in the kitchen or it could refer to a warning to a bully that there is more punishment in store for him if he doesn’t keep his distance. If we wished to label this particular tentative folk idea, we might term it “the principle of unlimited good.” One advantage of this label is the contrast it affords with the “principle of limited good” which anthropologist George Foster has suggested as a characteristic notion in Mexican (and other) peasant cultures.⁶ This also raises the interesting question of how folk ideas as units of worldview of the “scientific” observer might influence what “folk ideas” the folklorist

might discover in the other cultures he studies. The notion of “limited good” is obviously particularly striking to members of a culture who share a notion of unlimited good.

There seem to be numerous expressions of the folk idea of unlimited good in American society. “The sky’s the limit” would be one expression while “shooting the moon” in the card game of hearts or “going for broke” might be others. The idea that “Any man can be President” (despite that fact that no woman and no African American has ever been President) suggests the lack of limit to opportunity. Politicians who promise “a car in every garage and a chicken in every pot” could only be convincing in a culture where there were a virtually limitless number of cars and chickens possible.

Another illustration of the principle of unlimited good is perhaps provided by American buried treasure legends. In this context, it may be significant that most accounts end with the treasure still not recovered. This suggests that Americans think that America remains a land of opportunity, that boundless wealth is still readily available to anyone with the energy and initiative to go dig for it. The fact that the legends are open ended—they do not end as some legends do—may indicate that they are standing invitations to Americans to dig and provide their own happy ending to the story. This may have to do with other American folk ideas such as: “Hard work will pay off,” “Where there’s a will, there’s a way,” and more precisely with the proviso that the “pay off” and “way” will consist of material reward, for instance, treasure or money. American buried treasure legends afford an interesting comparison with Mexican treasure tales insofar as the latter traditions include the finding of the treasure. In fact, as Foster observes, it is the finding of buried treasure that is used to explain the appearance of sudden wealth in a Mexican peasant community where the principle of limited good prevails.⁷ Normally, with such a view, one could only obtain wealth at someone else’s expense. The discovery of buried treasure may represent a form of supernatural aid for fortunate individuals. In contrast, in American worldview, the good fortune of one individual does not necessarily mean misfortune for another. With a notion of unlimited good, there can be good fortune for all.

The contrast between limited good and unlimited good is one which could be extended way beyond discussions of buried treasure legends. For instance, a comparison of Mexican (and for that matter, European) universities with American universities in the area of professorial appointments reveals the same contrast. In the hierarchical European system, there is usually only one professor in a subject at a particular university or at any rate only a few professors. There is thus “limited good” and one cannot obtain a “chair” unless it is vacated, for example, by the death of an incumbent. This is why young academicians are forced to wait expectantly—almost vulture-like—for an opening to occur. They must then fight each other for the post. In the American system, there are many professors in a subject at a university. In theory, there is room for all to be advanced and one need not wait or hope for a colleague’s misfortune in order to be promoted.

Assuming that there is a folk idea in American culture having to do with the notion of unlimited good, we can see that it may be manifested in materials as diverse as proverbs and legends. But are there folk ideas which are without expression in traditional folklore genres? If so, then this would present special methodological problems for the folklorist who was anxious to identify folk ideas. Let us consider as a possible American folk idea the notion that if something is good for you, it must taste bad. If it doesn’t have a bad taste, then it probably won’t help you. This notion could apply to food; for example, to vegetables which children are asked to consume in the name of good health, or to bitter medicines. (One popular brand of mouthwash even features the bad taste of the product in its

1970 advertising as though its awful taste were somehow conclusive proof of its effectiveness.) This possible folk idea may or may not be related ultimately to the Puritan attitudes towards pleasure and pain to the effect that pleasure is sinful and that one must experience pain and the denial of pleasure to achieve salvation. (This association with the Puritan ethic is also suggested by the corollary idea that if something tastes good—like candy—it must be bad for your health.) In any case, the point here is simply that the folk idea of bad-tasting things being more likely to be good for one than good-tasting things is, in my opinion, a part of traditional American thought that is likely to be overlooked by folklorists whose powers of observation are limited by conventional genre categories.

Both ideas, that of unlimited good and that of salvation through suffering, share a commitment to progress. Tomorrow will be better than today, and today in turn is better than yesterday. The future orientation in American worldview is tied to a “bigger and better” principle!⁸ However, it is “achieving” rather than “achievement” that counts and the folk ideas lead ultimately to frustration. This may be seen by considering some of the many forms and symbols of success in American culture, for example, position in a rank-order scheme, as in football teams or automobile rental agencies vying to be “number one,” the acquisition of sizable financial resources—the size often indicated by the number of figures in one’s annual salary, the number of acres of one’s estate, the number of rooms (especially bathrooms!) in one’s home, and the number of cars that one owns. But it is not success per se that is worshipped. Rather it is the process of becoming a success that is admired. Once one has achieved success, one is established and it is time to look for a new achiever. There must always be new losers or underdogs to root for. Americans love upsets; they love to see favorites and front-runners get beaten. “Records were made to be broken.”

These folk ideas produce frustration. On the one hand, there is a drive towards success, but on the other hand, attainment of success can, by definition, be but a temporary one in the context of a progressive continuum of change. Whatever the success is, it is bound to be surpassed by a new success, probably by someone else. This is noncyclic worldview. It is linear and it builds from successful climax to successful climax. This means that with an open system, one can never achieve the ultimate climax, one can never achieve perfection. With the principle of unlimited good, there are always more mountains to be scaled, problems to be solved, money to be made. This suggests a worldview which allows satisfactions, but only limited ones. In other words, the principle of unlimited good in and of itself implies frustration since one can in theory never acquire all the good however good is measured.

The linearity of American life so beautifully described by Dorothy Lee⁹ and so evident in the American definitions of success and progress should not blind us to the possibility that two or more folk ideas in a single worldview system may be in opposition. One need not assume that all the folk ideas of a given culture are necessarily mutually reconcilable within a uniform, harmonious worldview matrix. For example, the line is one model of American thought. One respects directness and “straight” talk. One dislikes people who are “crooked” and one hopes they will eventually go “straight” and get “squared” away (for example, ex-con Square Johns). People who get “out of line” need to be “straightened out.” In business, one tries to get a “line” on something, a “line” of goods perhaps. One must be “sharp” and look for “angles.” In general, the line is opposed to the circle. Circular reasoning is despised, as are most roundabout ways of speaking. “Going around in circles” is a traditional metaphor for ineffectiveness and futility. It is believed that people who are lost go in circles. One of the traditional goals of mathematicians is to “square the circle,” a neat encapsulation of the “line conquering the circle.”

Recently, the line versus the circle opposition has taken a new turn. It has been restated in terms of straight versus groovy. Curves mean "curvaceous" and sex; lines mean "straight" or "square" and the denial of sex. There is a movement away from the "straight and narrow" towards the "groovy and broad." It is possible that part of the shift has come from African American subculture. For decades, African Americans accepted the straight world of the dominant white culture, even to the extent of trying to "straighten" kinky, curly hair. But finally, African American culture has begun to stop denying cyclicity and circularity. In fact, middle class whites have even begun to imitate African American culture. This may be seen in folk and popular dance. The "square" dance and the standard popular dance step known as the "box step" have yielded to twisting, rotating round dance movements as the American white body has sought release from the restricting confines of Puritan strait-jackets. Professor Roger Abrahams has suggested to me that the circular worldview may stem from the cyclic nature of rural country life with its calendrical cycle as model. Following this reasoning, one is tempted to see urban life as insisting upon the more efficient line as in square city blocks and actual efforts to eliminate curves in well-travelled roads.

There are other examples of folk ideas in opposition. For instance, in American culture there is the folk idea that all individuals are or should be equal in terms of opportunity. We have already mentioned the "Any man can be President" philosophy. Through rugged individualism, any person can in theory move "from rags to riches" in a Horatio Alger-like pattern. This folk idea is supported by the Puritan ethic and capitalism. At the same time, there is the folk idea, intimately related to the notion of democracy, that political decisions should be made not on the basis of individual wishes, but on the basis of what is deemed best by and for the majority. Thus if social security and a welfare state are adjudged best for the majority, then individuals must turn over the fruits of free enterprise to the state for redistribution to the less fortunate. It is not easy to reconcile pure capitalism and pure socialism. It is just as difficult to reconcile pure rugged individualism with the idea that the individual must deny individualism in favor of what is best for the group. Both principles are taught to American children and the fundamental opposition is left unresolved. (In some sense, of course, all human societies have to wrestle with the problem of the rights of the individual versus the rights of the group to which that individual belongs.) This is why American children may become confused when they learn on the one hand that leadership is a good and necessary thing but then, on the other hand, that in an ideal democracy, everyone is equal and leaders are resented.

One solution to the leadership-democracy paradox is suggested by a children's game. It is variously titled "Patterns" or "Find the Leader." A group of children gather in a circle and send an individual who has been chosen "It" out of the room or away from the playing area. One child in the circle is then selected as "leader" and all the others have to imitate his or her actions, such as handclapping, jumping up and down, and whirling around in place. The leader changes the motions at intervals of his choice. "It" is summoned and given three guesses to identify who in the circle is the leader, that is, who is responsible for causing the various changes in the group's movements. Obviously, a successful leader is one who can artfully conceal the fact that it is he who is the first to start a new body movement. By the same token, the other members of the circle must be able to follow without revealing to "It" that they are following rather than leading. This children's game may thus be providing a model for an ideal leadership role in American society, namely, that one should lead without making it obvious that he is leading. Americans in positions of authority may be forced to give orders in a nonauthoritarian way in contrast to leaders in societies who do

not share the folk idea of egalitarianism (“anybody is as good as anybody else”) and who are free to lead in autocratic, authoritarian fashion. This may be why in American culture one may ask rather than order a subordinate to perform a certain task. Moreover, subordinate employees may be given some of the accouterments of higher status positions, for example, enlisted men wearing officer-style caps or janitors being rechristened custodians.

There are many other folk ideas in American culture which could be mentioned; an important one is the idea that science and technology can eventually solve any problem. Any problem which has not yet been solved could in theory be solved if enough money could be poured into appropriate research efforts. Here we see a combination of the folk idea concerning the infallibility of science and technology and the idea of the “everything having its price.” (Also implied is the folk idea that humans can control their environment—rather than the environment controlling them.) However, the purpose of this essay is not to attempt even a partial itemization of American folk ideas but only to call attention to the possibility of the existence of folk ideas.

One problem arising from the discussion of folk ideas has to do with traditional stereotypes. The question is: are traditional stereotypes folk ideas or not? By traditional stereotypes, I refer to such notions as “The French are great lovers,” “Blacks have a natural sense of rhythm,” or “Jews have big noses.” These might well be examples of what political scientists or sociologists would call “myths”; but folklorists would surely not call these myths. But just what would they call them? Are they folk beliefs? I am tempted to term such traditional statements “folk fallacies” rather than folk ideas. They would be folk fallacies because they are demonstrably false. Of course, there is always the matter of “proving” to everyone’s (including bigots’) satisfaction that folk fallacies are in fact fallacious. No doubt, if the distinction between folk fallacies and folk ideas were to be accepted, there might well be disputes about where individual items should be appropriately placed and in this way should be plunged once more into the hopeless quagmire of genre-type classificatory arguments. Yet I do think there is value in making a distinction between folk fallacies and folk ideas. One difference is that the folk are normally consciously aware of folk fallacies (though not necessarily that they are fallacies) and can articulate them without difficulty. Folk fallacies are part of the stated premises of a culture. In contrast, individuals may or may not be consciously aware of folk ideas and they may not be able to articulate them at all. In this sense, folk fallacies tend to be “native” or folk statements as opposed to “analytic” statements which are descriptions of reality made as a result of and only after analytic study. Folk ideas would be more a matter of basic unquestioned premises concerning the nature of man, of society, and of the world, and these premises although manifested in folklore proper might not be at all obvious to the folk in whose thinking they were central. Folk fallacies such as stereotypes would therefore be part of the conscious or self-conscious culture of a people whereas folk ideas would be part of the unconscious or unself-conscious culture of a people.

The distinction between conscious and unconscious culture is not always easy to draw. By unconscious culture, I do not mean repressed culture in any Freudian sense. Rather I refer to the fact that individual members of a culture are not able to consciously articulate all aspects of their culture. Fortunately, people with virtually no conscious idea of the nature of the grammar of their language are able to speak perfectly well and be understood by other members of their culture who likewise have no conscious awareness of the grammatical nature of their language. There have been many metaphors for this lack of consciousness (for example, a fish is not aware it is in water since it knows no other medium),

but one of the most apt was used by Ruth Benedict when she remarked that “we do not see the lens through which we look.”¹¹

One of the essential tasks of anthropologists and folklorists is to make people aware, consciously aware, of their cultures. However, if people become conscious of what was formerly unconscious, will the cultural patterning change? In the present context, the question would be: if unstated folk ideas become stated folk ideas, will this have any effect upon the influence of these ideas? It is a moot point. On the one hand, one could argue that if more Americans were consciously aware of the folk idea that everything has its price, it would not necessarily alter this mode of perceiving reality in the slightest. On the other hand, if one wished to offer alternative measurement schemes, it would obviously be extremely helpful to know what measurement criteria were already being employed. Thus making the cultural unconscious conscious is the first step toward change—if that is what is desired—much as psychoanalytic therapy aims to help individuals by first making their unconscious conscious.

A final point should be made with respect to the relationship between folk ideas and folk values. In discussions of worldview, there is commonly a distinction made between worldview and ethos. Worldview refers to the cognitive, existential aspects of the way the world is structured. Ethos refers to the normative and evaluative (including esthetic and moral judgments) aspects of culture.” Hoebel’s terms are “existential postulates” as opposed to “normative postulates” or values, though he seems to include both types of postulates in the all encompassing term worldview.” In my opinion, it is possible if not probable that there may be value judgments surrounding a folk idea, but the folk idea in one sense can be considered independent of such value judgments. Assuming there is an American folk idea that there is an unlimited amount of good, one can imagine that some individuals might feel that this situation was a desirable one while others might feel that it was undesirable. The folk idea per se would simply be an empirical description of the nature of reality (or at least a segment of reality as perceived in one particular culture). Folk ideas, then, are no more than descriptive constructs and as such they are neither good nor bad. The idea that everything has its price could be either good or bad or neither. In contrast, the proverb “Money is the root of all evil” takes a definite moral position.

Folklorists in deciding whether or not they wish to make use of a concept such as folk ideas should probably consider a number of factors. First of all, there is the question of the traditionality of unstated premises. It is one thing to call a tale type traditional and quite another to call the one or more folk ideas expressed in that tale type traditional. Moreover, if folk ideas are articulated only after analysis, isn’t there a considerable risk in calling such ideas traditional? Might not one be in danger of labelling a particular analyst’s idiosyncratic formulations as “traditional?” Although an analyst might claim that his formulations of “folk ideas” were extrapolated directly from folklore, they might perhaps be little more than figments of his fertile imagination.

Secondly, doesn’t the proposed emphasis to be placed upon the search for folk ideas constitute a serious threat to the continued research on individual genres? Aren’t folk ideas in fact a kind of glorified super-genre supposedly underlying all other folklore genres?

There is also the question of methodology. How precisely does a folklorist determine what the folk ideas of a given folk group are? How can one work inductively from folkloristic data to arrive at a delineation of one or more folk ideas?

There are certainly legitimate questions to be raised about the conceptualization of folk ideas and their utility and practicality for folklore research. Nevertheless, I believe the

fundamental issue is the nature of the discipline of folkloristics. If folklorists are interested only in collecting and preserving the heirlooms of the past so as to produce a permanent, antiquarian “museum of the mind,” then they need not concern themselves with the possibility of studying folk ideas. However, if folklorists view folklore as raw material for the study of human thought, then they might wish to seriously consider adopting this concept or an improved analogous one. Folk ideas are not limited to folklore and they can surely be found in movies, television, and the mass media generally. (In theory, a given folk idea might pervade nearly every aspect of a culture.) Anyone therefore truly interested in folk ideas—as opposed to being interested only in proverbs or in jokes—will have to cast his net widely enough to include popular or literary culture as well.

If one is intrigued by the possibilities of examining folklore as source material for the study of worldview, he or she might welcome a smaller unit of analysis. The concept of worldview is too vague and diffuse to be of obvious use to folklorists. However, folk ideas as units of worldview are much more manageable. Moreover, those writers who have long been accustomed to using the term “myth” in a loose sense might be encouraged to use “error” or “folk fallacy” where such is their meaning (as in the “myth” that blacks have a natural sense of rhythm) and to use “folk idea” where that is appropriate, such as, the “myth” of the frontier in American thought is clearly related to the folk idea of unlimited good (with good expressed in space and opportunity), among others.

Finally there is the matter of the relevance of folk ideas to comparative studies and applied folklore. It is perfectly conceivable that the identification of sets of folk ideas from different cultures will facilitate valuable comparative analyses. No doubt when two cultures come into contact, it is the conflict of folk ideas which causes the most difficulty. Yet inasmuch as these folk ideas are unconscious, unstated premises, it is almost impossible to place one’s finger on the specific details of the conflict. If folklorists can aid in the task of identifying folk ideas, they may be able to assume a key role in improving communications between peoples (and subcultures) and reducing the number of misunderstandings which might otherwise arise. This would permit the study of folklore to take its proper place among the “applied” social sciences.

Notes

1. Ashley Montagu, *Man’s Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race* (New York, 1945)
2. For an excellent discussion of genre theory see Dan Ben-Amos, “Analytical Categories and Ethnic Genres,” *Genre*, 2 (1969), 275–302. For samples of the extreme diversity and proliferation of genre and subgenre terminology, see Laurits Bødker, *The Nordic Riddle Terminology and Bibliography*, vol. II (Copenhagen, 1964) or Bødker, *Folk Literature (Germanic): International Dictionary of Regional European Ethnology and Folklore* (Copenhagen, 1965).
3. The story in which the hero bluffs the ogre by claiming that the thunder is the noise made by the rolling of his brother’s wagon is classified as Aarne-Thompson tale type 1147.
4. Matti Kuusi, *Regen bei sonnenschein: zur Weltgeschichte einer Redensart*, FFC 171 (Helsinki, 1957). For a discussion of “jocular ficts,” see C. W. von Sydow, *Selected Papers on Folklore* (Copenhagen, 1948), pp. 80, 372–373.
5. There is simply no agreement in the anthropological literature as to what to call what I am terming folk ideas. Clyde Kluckhohn, for example, was extremely interested in the “unstated assumptions” that a people take for granted. In his exemplary discussion of nine such assumptions among the Navaho, he referred to them as “Some Premises of Navaho Life and Thought.” See Clyde Kluckhohn and Dorothea Leighton, *The Navaho*, rev. ed. (Garden City, NY, 1962), 303–314. E. Adamson Hoebel speaks of “cultural postulates” in his textbook *Anthropology*:

- The Study of Man*, 3rd ed. (New York, 1966), 23; and he has delineated sixteen major basic postulates underlying Cheyenne culture in *The Cheyennes: Indians of the Great Plains* (New York, 1960), 98–99. Hoebel does see postulates as providing the frame of reference for a people's worldview.
6. George M. Foster, "Peasant Society and the Image of Limited Good," *American Anthropologist*, 67 (1965), 293–315. See also Foster, *Tzintzuntzan: Mexican Peasants in a Changing World* (Boston, 1967), 122–152; "World View in Tzintzuntzan: Re-examination of a Concept," *Summa Anthropologica, en homenaje a Roberto J. Weitlaner* (Mexico, D.F., 1966), 385–393.
 7. Foster, "Treasure Tales and the Image of the Static Economy in a Mexican Peasant Community," *Journal of American Folklore*, 77 (1964), 39–44; Compare Gerald T. Hurley, "Buried Treasure Tales in America," *Western Folklore*, 10 (1951), 197–216.
 8. For an extended discussion, see Alan Dundes, "Thinking Ahead: A Folkloristic Reflection of the Future Orientation in American Worldview," *Anthropological Quarterly*, 42 (1969), 53–72.
 9. Dorothy Lee, "Codifications of Reality: Lineal and Nonlinear," *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 12(1950), 89–97; reprinted in a collection of her essays, *Freedom and Culture* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1959), 105–120, and in Alan Dundes, ed., *Every Man His Way: Readings in Cultural Anthropology* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968), 329–343.
 10. Traditional stereotypes about other nations and cultures are normally grouped by folklorists under such labels as ethnic slurs or blason populaire. See Alan Dundes, ed., *The Study of Folklore* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1965), 43–44.
 11. Ruth Benedict, "The Science of Custom," *The Century Magazine*, 117 (1929), 641–649; reprinted in Dundes, *Every Man His Way*, 180–188.
 12. This involves another thorny theoretical controversy. I follow Geertz's distinction between ethos and worldview. See Clifford Geertz, "Ethos, World-View and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols," *The Antioch Review*, 17 (1957), 421–437; reprinted in Dundes, *Every Man His Way*, 302–315.
 13. E. Adamson Hoebel, *Anthropology*, 23, 500.

Postscript

Worldview in Folk Narrative

LINDA DÉGH'S ELOQUENT ADVOCACY OF an approach to the study of folk narrative which concentrates upon the extrapolation of worldview (1994) is most welcome. Dégh rightfully critiques the post-modern muddle which seems to result in either re-inventing the wheel or simply spinning wheels already in place (1994:246). As a folklorist who has long been concerned with analyzing worldview (Dundes 1969) utilizing folklore ranging from festivals (Dundes and Falassi 1975:185–240) to folk toys (Dundes 1986), I would like to echo and amplify Dégh's plea for more attention to worldview in folk narrative studies.

First of all, there is an abundant literature devoted to the concept of worldview including essays by anthropologists Redfield (1953), Geertz (1957), and Foster (1966). For representative surveys, see Kearney (1972, 1984). As for the more limited area of worldview as reflected in folk narrative, one might mention Melville Jacobs' all too brief chapter, "World View," in his now classic *The Content and Style of an Oral Literature* (1959:195–199), Blackburn's attempt to isolate worldview principles from Chumash oral narratives (1975), and Sparing's effort to identify worldview themes in Schleswig-Holstein folktales (1984). Perhaps the most inspirational in-depth treatments of the worldview of individual cultures involving some attention to folk narrative would be Marcel Griaule's *Conversations with Ogotemméli* (1965) which should be required reading for every serious folklorist, and Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff's *Amazonian Cosmos* (1971).

Sometimes the folkloristic treatment of worldview is quite limited, if not completely idiosyncratic. Italian folklorist Cirese, for example, uses "world-view" to refer exclusively to the Marxist-Gramscian notion of the hegemony of the oppressors over the "subaltern" (1974). It is true that Gramsci's famous seven page "Osservazioni sul folklore" (1971) did utilize the concept of worldview (cf. Byrne 1982), but only in the highly restricted Marxist class-conscious sense.

If I were asked to select the best single essay on worldview in folk narrative, it would be an easy choice to make. It is Sandor Erdész's remarkable essay, "The World Conception of Lajos Ami, Storyteller," which appeared in *Acta Ethnographica* in 1961. In this essay, we learn that an illiterate storyteller's worldview came largely from details contained in the vast repertoire of folktales that he told. Particular worldview premises are documented by Erdész when he cites parallels to Ami's interview responses, parallels from the actual folktales told by Ami. I shall not summarize this fascinating article further but rather urge folklore students to read it in its entirety.

However, the essay does afford an excellent opportunity to distinguish two different notions of worldview, both of which are discernible in folk narrative. I should like to briefly distinguish the two notions as a means of encouraging further research in worldview through folk narrative.

The older notion of worldview tended to consider the term synonymous with cosmology. Worldview in that sense meant people's view of their place in the world, in the cosmos. This is the sense employed by Erdész, who notes that Ami sees Budapest as the "center of the world," and that since Adam and Eve fell from the Garden of Eden to land "someplace between Vienna and Buda," the door or gate to Eden is located above that area. As there is an upper world, so there is also a lower world which one enters through the "Hole of the World" which Ami claimed was to be found somewhere in Russia.

A more modern notion of worldview tends to be more cognitive and structural. It refers to the way in which people perceive the world through native categories and unstated premises or axioms. Thus the cosmology itself (the older sort of worldview) could provide data from which one could extrapolate principles of the newer kind of worldview. Let me illustrate with a few details from the Erdész essay.

According to Ami, there is a firmament so thick that "no human being could cut through it." Even the famed mythical Sky-High tree was forced to curve "thirteen times under the firmament" because it could not break through to achieve its full height. Similarly, it is deemed impossible to reach the "edge of the world." People who tried to cross the North Pole with an airplane "got so frozen that they couldn't break through it." Where the firmament touched the earth, it was so low "that the swallow has to drink water kneeling on the black cottonweed." Moreover, the reason why the cottonweed is black is "because the sun couldn't shine under the angle of the sky" and therefore the cottonweed there "cannot become green."

These striking images (most of which are derived directly from the folktales told by Ami) clearly convey messages of limitation, of stunted growth and development. The Sky-High tree was forced to curve thirteen times since it was unable to break through the firmament; a swallow was forced to kneel—a physical impossibility since birds have no knees—in order to drink where the firmament touched the earth; cottonweed in such an enclosure must be black because even the powerful sun cannot reach it. The worldview principles here articulate the fatalistic acceptance of the impossibility of unlimited mobility. Even the sun is obliged to remain in its own orbit, Ami explains. A peasant must know his or her place in the world and remain in it. There are impenetrable walls everywhere—above with the firmament and also at the edge of the world. Even with modern technology, such as an airplane, one cannot break through the surrounding barriers. (Whether the plight of the Hungarian peasant with respect to social or spacial mobility is to be attributed to the bourgeois class system or to the socialist regime then in place is debatable. What is not debatable is the consistent worldview articulated by Ami.)

One important difference between the two kinds of worldview discussed above has to do with conscious awareness. The account of worldview as cosmology is clearly conscious. Most individuals in the West, for example, presumably could confirm the folk belief that "heaven" is located "above" the earth whereas "hell" is located "below" (despite the fact that what is "below" on one side of the earth is the same direction as "above" on the opposite side!) In contrast, it is by no means obvious that either Ami or the folklore-collector Erdész, for that matter, were fully aware of the many metaphors of stricture and boundedness. More than likely this second kind of worldview is not in consciousness. It is not like a Freudian or Jungian unconscious, but rather unconscious in the same way that speakers of a language are not "conscious" of the grammatical laws governing their speech.

It is my hope that future folklorists will seek to delineate the "unconscious" worldview postulates which are so artfully articulated in folk narrative and other forms of folklore.

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