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Singing and Retelling the Past

*A Conversation with Kirin Narayan and
Barre Toelken*

Kirin Narayan and Barre Toelken explore how songs can go beyond meaning to carry a commonly shared sense of experience; they can be part of our lived experience, even in cases where we have not directly experienced the event or activity described. Songs, and this applies to stories as well, do more than entertain or inform about an event; they create opportunities to be part of a shared performance, a form of participation that engenders a sense of identification with the tradition. In Narayan's Chandravali song, the women from the region identify with and experience the song in familiar ways, even though they do not share knowledge of all the same verses. The experiences they do share create a social bond that reinforces their "collective relationship." In a similar way, Toelken uses the example of the ballad "Rolling Home," which for him and his relatives evokes a common family bond that goes back to the whaling days.

SCHNEIDER: Let's begin by asking how songs are a special way of invoking the past.

TOELKEN: Well, let me start with how songs help to carry on the past. In my own family there were people who went to sea; they were whalers in the 1860s and 70s. I don't think anyone in the family has been to sea in the generations since then, yet they all still sing these whaling songs. And when they do, their eyes change. It is as if they are reexperiencing something they never experienced. Does that make any sense? The song has managed to carry down

Barre Toelken is professor of folklore at Utah State University Press. For many of us, Toelken has been our primary introduction to folklore and the role it plays in our own lives. Some of us have been fortunate enough to hear him play folk music and talk about the role the songs play in oral tradition. His academic contributions are well known. *The Dynamics of Folklore* (1996) and *The Anguish of Snails* (2003) are examples of his work.

some experience for them that they actually didn't have, but they can have through the song. It's not the same bone wearying experience of being out at sea on a whaler, but it is an experience nonetheless, and I think that's something that ought to be examined more with all folksongs. Until recently, folksongs were thought of as just a way of seeing the past as opposed to experiencing the past. The experiences I am describing here are more a way of keeping the past alive in our lives or keeping the near end of the past in our own experience, in our mouth, so we have some way of continuing to experience it.

SCHNEIDER: Wow, that's super, Barre. I think the idea of experiencing—in the sense of being able to imagine and relate oneself to the song, as opposed to being a distant listener—may be similar to what happens when someone tells you a story one-on-one. In that kind of storytelling, the teller re-creates an experience. The storyteller's performance allows us to experience more than the words; we will remember the context of the sharing, the way the teller constructed the story, and our emerging relationship with the speaker. He or she becomes part of the story, our link to the events described. We feel and sense where the person is coming from and where they are trying to take us. In a sense they have invited us into the story.

TOELKEN: There's one song, "Rolling Home," that a lot of groups still sing, but our family sings it and I think there are two verses that I hadn't heard until recently because nobody in the family can sing them without crying. And yet no one in the family has ever experienced the events described in the verses. So, that's a mystery to me. I learned those verses when I was about sixty-five and I'm almost crying now when I'm talking about it. There's an emotional connection, a load that goes beyond what you described, Bill. The song reaches to some shared experience, a bond that we share as a family, a bond that was created years ago and while I can tell you about it, you can't experience it like I do.

I'll give you an example that parallels it in a way. Everyone in my family, including me, has a tattoo on their right shoulder and that is something that goes back to sailing times. I don't think anybody's been sailing since the 1900s. So this tradition of having your shoulder tattooed, and it has to be a particular tattoo, creates a commonly shared experience.

NARAYAN: What I see as the parallel between your description and mine is a sense of continuity with one's progenitors through

imaginative participation in their experience, whether through the performance of a song or through the visible mark on one's shoulder. The sharing of voices blended in a song allows the participants of a group to maintain a collective relationship to the past. There is also something quite magical about singing, as voices join together and become larger than the parts.

TOELKEN: Yes, the songs we are discussing, and the people who sing them, do something special: they take you out of the present context that you share with too many people and put you back in a context that you share with a precise group of people. And now that people are moving much more, maybe the singing is one way they have to get back to a set of people that were formative in their lives.

NARAYAN: Barre, as I think about my Kangra material, your example of a family tradition reminds me of how some of the songs I have worked with in Kangra are also passed down within the family, but also many of the songs speak from a regional tradition, from shared cultural assumptions that transcend particular families. I think I mentioned how when people come from entirely different villages knowing different versions of the song, they have to work out who will be the dominant singer. Sometimes verses get left out and sometimes people take me aside afterwards and say, "*They didn't sing it properly.*" Occasionally there is some tension between households. A mother-in-law and her daughters-in-law might not approve of a version sung by another family group. Sometimes a group will take a song off on a tangent, and when it rejoins the main current of words that others are familiar with, they will join in again. That's why collecting variants of songs across the valley was endlessly fascinating.

TOELKEN: It means that the variants are not just variants; they are parts of the same song sung for different reasons and coming from different places.

NARAYAN: That's so true about place. Women are usually married outside of the village where they were born—so singers are often carrying verses between villages.

SCHNEIDER: Yet despite the variations, the songs evolve over hundreds of years and maintain their identity and they continue to be resung.

TOELKEN: To understand why they persist we should look at the way the songs are sung. Kirin, your description of the repeated lines may

point to a strong element that allows and encourages participation, even by those who don't recall the exact words of each verse. The singer sings one line and then others sing that line again. So there's no fixed boundary between the performers and the audience, and if you are an insider the boundary between your experience and that of the performer is minimized. I think it is significant that that is a feature of the folksong complex in Kangra society.

NARAYAN: Another key factor in the perpetuation of the tradition is the fact that the songs are required. Women *must* sing to make the occasion auspicious, for good fortune. The kinds of songs they choose to sing, though, are changing.

SCHNEIDER: It is appropriate to point out in conclusion that both of you have lived your life not just studying stories but living with them, living as part of insider groups where you are privy to know the cultural assumptions and to participate in the tradition in ways that deeply affect your life and identity. Retelling, or in this case resinging, is a way to participate in your history: to use Barre's term, a way to "reexperience" one's history.