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Mormon Folklore Studies

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The first folklore item I collected in my “Introduction to Folklore” class as an undergraduate in 1987 was the story of the Bountiful Witch. As I heard it, an old pioneer woman put the evil eye on a little boy in her Bountiful, Utah, neighborhood. The boy became sick and remained so until some women in his Mormon congregation met in a barn to reverse the spell by ripping apart a chicken and having the boy eat the heart and drink the blood. When the boy recovered, the women knew a witch had put a spell on him. My roommate told me this story when asked if she knew any folklore I could collect for my class assignment. The pioneer past, the evil eye, a witch, and a gruesome deed to destroy a spell assured me that the story I turned in would definitely be folklore.

When Professor William A. “Bert” Wilson returned my collected item, I found that my story was folkloric in a way much more interesting than just the demonstration of the continuity of superstitious beliefs in Mormon Utah. I learned that the story had circulated in both oral and print versions and that various performances of the story contained striking similarities but also some differences. My roommate told me that she had heard the story from her professor during a discussion of the Salem witch trials; she thought the professor told the story to show that even pioneer Mormons could believe in witches, not just New England Puritans. In responding to my item, Wilson explained that he had read the story in a project submitted by one of his graduate students several years before and remembered telling the story to my roommate’s professor. I also learned that the Bountiful Witch narrative was originally collected from a masterful storyteller, and in that context, it was appreciated as a family story that demonstrated the fortitude of the narrator’s ancestor. If studying folklore meant I could spend time hearing intriguing stories, pondering how traditional expressions reflect or contradict cultural norms, and discovering how the meaning of a narrative changes from one teller and performance situation to another, I was hooked.

I did not know that Mormon traditions had been studied since the 1930s until Wilson asked me in 1988 to write an entry on Mormon folklore for the Utah Folklife Newsletter. At that time I concluded the essay by saying that “the purpose of Mormon folklore study will remain to explore and understand the
Mormon ethos as it is created and maintained by a wide variety of folkloric expressions of belief and custom.” In returning to that assertion many years later, I am inclined to ask “why?” Why have folklorists in and out of the religious group identified Mormon folklore as a significant subject for study? Why do Mormons remain both an intriguing subject and an ongoing part of folklore as a profession? And, finally, why and how is the Mormon ethos perpetuated through traditional expressions?

To answer these questions, Wilson rightly asserts that folklore can be an uncertain mirror for cultural truths, and much of Mormon folklore study—if it focuses primarily on Utah Mormons and supernatural stories—will miss the mark of understanding the Mormon ethos. Yet Mormon experiences remain an integral part of life in Utah, and people continue to tell Three Nephite and other supernatural stories. Further, Mormon experiences correspond with other significant human experiences; conversion, migration, persecution, and rites of passage apply to other groups as well as Mormons. As Wilson has said, Mormons as religious individuals express through traditions “their need for security, their quest for meaning, their desire for the continuance of what they cherish most” (“The Concept of the West,” p. 189). To study Mormon folklore, then, is to contemplate what it means to live on earth with dedication to the glory of God, a glory that for members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints still is grounded in practicing the principles that they believe lead to immortality and eternal life.

Mormons as “The Folk” and Mormon Lore as Object of Study

By choice and historical circumstances, members of the LDS Church have been recognized as a distinctive group from the church’s founding. Organized officially in upstate New York in 1830, the church began with Joseph Smith’s stories of heavenly visitations of God and Jesus Christ, the appearance of other angelic messengers, and the translation of new scripture, *The Book of Mormon*, from ancient golden plates. Wilson asserts in *The Handbook of American Folklore* that even in the nineteenth century, such claims “found themselves in conflict with mainstream America” and contributed to names, stories, and customs repeated and perpetuated by outsiders. Therefore, Wilson concludes, “The first folklore having to do with Mormons was probably that created about them by their enemies,” including the initially derogatory nickname “Mormon” itself (p. 155). Perhaps the next type of folklore reflecting on the Mormon experience was narrative songs recounting in a favorable light the founding of the religion, the persecutions against the people, the trek across the plains, and the settlement of the West. Often these songs, such as “Brighter Days in Store,” added new lyrics to familiar tunes, as Thomas E. Cheney showed in his *Mormon Songs*. “Brighter Days,” a Mormon version of Stephen Foster’s “Hard Times Come Again No More,” includes references to historical events involving Joseph Smith, the
grasshopper and cricket infestations, and “mobbers” (p. 92). The song conveys the optimistic worldview that despite persecutions and problems there will be “brighter days in store.”

In the mid-twentieth century, traditional Mormon song materials were collected and published by Cheney, Austin and Alta Fife, Lester Hubbard, Levette Davidson, and other collectors with ties to Utah and/or Mormon heritage. In addition to studying Mormon songs, folklorists gathered other types of lore such as Three Nephite stories, beliefs, and customs. *Saints of Sage and Saddle* by the Fifes remains the most complete book-length treatment of Mormon folklore. Austin Fife may have overstated the case in claiming that “were every other document destroyed, it would still be possible, from the folk songs alone, to reconstruct in some detail the story of [Mormon] theology, their migrations, their conflicts with the Gentiles” (quoted in Cheney, p. xi). However, Fife’s suggestion that the Mormon story could be reconstructed from folksongs demonstrates why Mormons were identified as a folk group with lore that deserved to be studied. Mormons and “anti-Mormons,” or outsiders to the group, told stories, sang songs, and repeated customs and beliefs about members of the church. Mormons were a self-proclaimed “peculiar people” who had a distinctive range of traditions that matched what folklorists had studied and collected for more than a hundred years.

From at least the eighteenth century, “the folk” were conceptualized as lower-class, agrarian, and communal. The lore associated with the folk was therefore assumed to have artistic features which revealed, in a formal, patterned way, a people’s values and ways of life. Many ballad collectors in the 1700s and 1800s subscribed to and promoted the idea that songs of the common people revealed the national character. These scholars assumed that stories and customs were elemental, even ancient, forms of poetic human expression; they saw in ballads and other types of lore a paradoxical blend of authentic humanity that could be heroic or common and was at once universal and yet particular to a people, place, or nation. They also assumed that peasants and common people maintained a sense of naturalness and simplicity through their expressions, even as the modern world and art became more rational and complex. While ballad collectors in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries tended to prize the simple beliefs and expressions of the folk, early anthropologists such as Edward B. Tylor found old-time expressions and customs to be curious survivals from an earlier stage of human development. Those folklorists who viewed traditions as being at odds with civilization and modern life also believed that education would be an important way to uproot irrational lore.

Sometimes folklorists held both views: that the lore was artistically sound in a simple, natural way and that it was destined to be perpetuated by a people who remained quaint, backward, and out of touch with modern society. When the American Folklore Society was organized by William Wells Newell and other intellectuals in the 1880s, they recognized that America did not have a peasant class but rather groups with a distinctive heritage whose lore should be collected
and published. By the 1930s, scholars who had been raised in the West recognized that Mormons had songs and stories similar to those that folklorists were collecting in other areas of the country and world. Even at mid-twentieth century, Mormons remained a close-knit minority who were still relatively isolated geographically and who maintained distinctive customs and beliefs.

The geographic isolation of the group definitely contributed to the identification of Mormons as a people ideal for folklore collecting. The physical location of the group in Utah and other western settlements gave folklorists an easy explanation for cultural coherence and unique traditions. Writing of Mormon songs in 1945, Levette Davidson of the University of Denver explained, “The migration of the Saints to the Salt Lake Valley in 1847 and the years following, resulted in a geographical isolation which permitted cultural inbreeding and encouraged communal life” (273). He presented his collection of songs as traditions that deserved study because they were “surviving from earlier times” and represented the more folkloric era of Mormon geographic and cultural isolation. In this essay and in other articles by Wayland Hand, the Fifes, and Hector Lee, it is the lingering elements and expressions of the Mormon past that interest these folklorists and, presumably, their reading audience. Others also began to acknowledge a distinctly Mormon place and culture. Wallace Stegner wrote Mormon Country in the early 1940s at the same time that many collections of Mormon folklore were being published, giving the people a distinctive status in the American West. A leading American folklorist, Richard M. Dorson, identified Utah Mormons as a distinct regional group in his 1959 book, American Folklore. Studies of vernacular architecture and material culture conducted by the Fifes and others both confirmed and sometimes challenged the idea of a distinct Mormon cultural region in the Great Basin.

The identification of Mormons as “folk,” however, had more to do with distinctive beliefs and customs than with geographic isolation and an agrarian way of life. Mormons made good folk for study because, in addition to being associated with a particular region, they maintained through stories and customs their distinctive beliefs. While Mormon songs were collected because they revealed the history and values of the group, the Three Nephite legends appealed to folklorists because they showed the supernatural base of much Mormon thought. The stories usually describe the miraculous appearance of a man or, more rarely, two or three men who provide help, advice, or warning before disappearing in a mysterious way. The men are assumed to be the three Book of Mormon apostles who were granted their desire to remain on earth doing good works until the second coming of Christ. As with the Bountiful Witch story and its supernatural elements, some folklorists—including Lee, Hand, and the Fifes—recognized in Mormon traditions and belief an acceptance of supernatural occurrences that seemed antithetical to modern society, and thus quite folkloric. Following the lead of folklore collectors from Utah, Dorson identified Three Nephite stories as “one supreme legend,” an important type of narrative involving claims to truth, historical characters, and/or supernatural happenings. Dorson explained
his interest in Three Nephite stories and in Mormons as a folk group: “Mormon theology invited folklore of the supernatural with its strong commitment to intuitive knowledge and extrasensory experience” (p. 115). This “intuitive knowledge and extrasensory experience,” probably called revelation and testimony by faithful Mormons, remains a sensitive and important consideration for Mormon folklore studies.

**Mormons as Ongoing Subject in Folklore Studies**

From the Grimms’ publication of tales to Francis James Child’s collection of English and Scottish ballads, scholars worked toward the goal of turning oral traditions into written texts for comparative study. This goal complemented, and sometimes overshadowed, the desire to represent and understand a group through its traditional expressions. To salvage what was thought to be perishable lore, many of the early published works on Mormon folklore contained numerous complete texts and some fragments of songs and stories from folklorists’ fieldwork and from printed sources. Following standard methodologies of the time, most publications gave minimal analysis of either the texts or the contexts in which the traditions were collected or performed. Lester A. Hubbard and LeRoy J. Robertson’s article, “Traditional Ballads from Utah” (1951) is an excellent example of trends in folklore studies that extended from the nineteenth into the twentieth centuries. The article published nine Child ballads that Hubbard had collected in Utah, songs identified by Child and indexed by his name and a classification number. In the article’s introduction, Hubbard gives a short discussion of performance contexts and explains that British converts to the church remembered the songs and sang them to their children and grandchildren when they moved to Utah (pp. 37–38). The article is more an announcement that Child ballads were sung in Utah than an analysis of what the songs meant for the people who knew them.

In addressing the issue of Mormon cultural autonomy from a theological rather than a geographical angle, Austin Fife in “Folk Belief and Mormon Cultural Autonomy” (1948) countered this text-based trend in folklore studies, writing instead a cultural analysis based on items of folk belief and narrative in the Fife Mormon Collection. Published in the most prominent folklore journal in the country, the *Journal of American Folklore*, the article acknowledges a growing corpus of Mormon folklore scholarship. In a lengthy note, Fife explains that folklore studies of a Mormon theme have been “extremely limited,” but he then gives references to twelve articles published in regional and national folklore journals in the previous decade. He also mentions Stegner’s *Mormon Country*, Maurine Whipple’s novel *The Giant Joshua*, and the Daughters of Utah Pioneers pamphlet series, *Heart Throbs of the West*, as sources for folkloric information, along with a few song publications and state, university, and church archives in Utah.

Fife’s analysis links the distinctive qualities of Mormon belief and culture with the theology of Joseph Smith. Quoting the Articles of Faith, Fife develops
his theme that Mormonism is particularly attuned to “divine intercession in every act of man and the destiny of the world” (p. 21). Noting that there is a Mormon doctrine of salvation and godliness that also is “original in the extent of its departure from traditional Christian concepts,” Fife associates large families, genealogical research, and temple rites with Mormon belief systems. Carefully distorting Mormon beliefs from magic and illogical kinds of causation, Fife develops his main theme through examples showing “the intercession of the heavenly powers in the affairs of man” (p. 24). Many of the examples involve apparent alterations of natural laws and elements: floods, fires, and clouds appear to shield and protect Mormon groups and settlements; in other cases, a spiritual intermediary, like a Nephite or an ancestor in a dream, appears to give information and guidance. Fife notes examples of divine power used to rebuff enemies and the acknowledgement of evil spirits that attempt to counter divine intercessions. Rather than placing these folkloric events in the early history of
the church, Fife concludes that such elements of Mormon experience continue because “the forces for the cultural absorption of Mormonia in the current of intellectual life have, at best, made only superficial penetration” (p. 28). Like Tylor and the survivalists, Fife seems to hope that intellectualism will overcome traditions and beliefs related to the supernatural. However, right up to the present, Mormon folklore studies continue to include traditional expressions related to divine intervention and the principles advocated in the Articles of Faith because these principles continue to animate the lives, belief, and outlook of Latter-day Saints.

As the study of Mormon lore shifted from the first generation of Hand, the Fifes, Lee, and others to the generation of Wilson, Toelken, and Brunvand (see chapters 10–12), many scholars have continued to maintain the view of Mormons as a distinct regional group connected with the American West and having a unique heritage and belief system. Research still focuses on texts of stories, customs, or songs, but the texts often come from student collections or archival materials rather than from the folklorist's own collecting trips or fieldwork. And the articles do not usually print verbatim texts but are more likely to quote from those texts in order to analyze meaning or to comment on specific aspects of Mormon worldview or on a particular folklore genre. Two of Brunvand’s articles on Mormon jokes and supernatural legends demonstrate a mix of older and newer folklore concepts. For example, his article on jokes, “As the Saints Go Marching By,” maintains the older view that Mormons “are . . . a folk group comparable in the homogeneity and strength of their traditions” to other regional groups identified by Dorson (p. 53). However, rather than relying on the familiar genres of songs and narratives, Brunvand instead discusses jokes and “the functions of current traditions known among or told about Mormons” (p. 54).

In another article on supernaturalism and Mormon legends, “Modern Legends of Mormondom,” Brunvand maintains a regional viewpoint in the study of Mormon folklore. After giving a useful review of past work on Mormon legends, Brunvand advocates paying more attention to currently told stories, storytelling contexts, and the varying attitudes among participants in storytelling sessions (p. 191). In contrast, Toelken’s studies of water narratives (“The Folklore of Water” and “Traditional Water Narratives”) also focus on a region, the Mormon West, but he analyzes the narratives to address the thorny issues of “a culture that champions group cooperation but also encourages individual attainment” (“Traditional,” p. 200). These changes in conducting and publishing folklore research reflect the movement from comparative studies and survivalist attitudes toward studies of the function and performance of traditions in the ongoing social life of a strongly interactive group.

Since the 1980s, there has been a distinct shift away from region as a determining feature of Mormon folklore and an extension of research to incorporate the founding of the church, its worldwide missionary efforts, and Mormon congregations in locations outside Utah. For example, in “Hecate in Habit,”
Jeannie Thomas mentions a specific place, Utah’s Logan Canyon; however, she is more interested in issues of supernaturalism, interfaith relations, and gender and patriarchy suggested by stories of St. Anne’s Retreat than in describing a Mormon region. In his discussion of marriage confirmation stories, George Schoemaker does not make region or place a significant element but rather categorizes the narratives and analyzes what the stories suggest about Mormon worldview. The methodology of these articles is similar to work by Margaret P. Baker, Suzanne Volmar Riches, Carolyn Gilkey, Elaine Lawless, Gloria Cronin, and Margaret K. Brady. As this list indicates, more women have begun conducting and publishing folklore research since the 1960s; their interests, combined with new approaches in folklore studies, have contributed additional genres and interpretive strategies to discussions of Mormon lore.

The dean of Mormon folklore studies in the past four decades has been William A. Wilson (see chapter 10), who has been able to define anew Mormon folklore studies by validating religious belief to folklorists and folklore to the Mormon public. In articles published in the 1970s and ’80s, Wilson picks up the theme of divine intervention in human life that Fife found pervasive in Mormon traditional thought, finding such cultural patterns in legends, missionary lore, and family narratives, and analyzing both the contexts and functions of the stories.

In addition, Wilson began to redirect Mormon folklore studies away from assumptions of homogeneity, quaintness, and backwardness. In “Mormon Folklore” (1983), Wilson asserted, “Most studies to date have assumed a cultural homogeneity that in reality has never existed. The fact is that rural and urban Mormons, educated and uneducated Mormons, male and female Mormons, born-in-the-church and converted Mormons quite often view the world through different eyes and respond to it differently in their lore” (pp. 159–160). In 1989, he pressed the issue of changing the focus of Mormon folklore studies in his “The Study of Mormon Folklore: An Uncertain Mirror for Truth,” in which he called for scholars to turn from supernatural narratives to stories of the “quiet lives of committed service . . . at the heart of the Mormon experience” (p. 109). He also noted the function for Mormons of faith-promoting stories and humor “to encourage proper behavior . . . [and] to ease the pressures by laughing at both themselves and at the system” (p. 106). Wilson asserts that the focus of Mormon folklore studies should be on universal as well as specifically Mormon issues: “We must finally discover behind Mormon folklore typical human beings coming to terms through their lore with enduring life and death questions that know neither temporal nor cultural boundaries” (“The Concept of the West,” p. 189).

From the 1980s into the twenty-first century, a growing number of Mormon-affiliated scholars have found their way to folklore studies and may yet fulfill Wilson’s call. Contemporary issues in folklore studies, literary studies, religious studies, and public-sector work have converged to make Mormon folklore an intriguing and expanding area of research in the United States and abroad. While folklore studies will always focus on genre and particular types of expression,
there is an increasing interest in studying more than texts by conducting more
detailed ethnographic research. Recent critiques of ethnography in anthropol-
ogy and other fields have not diminished the scholarly and public interest in
examining lived experience. Likewise, world events and academic trends related
to issues of identity and heritage politics have not resolved concerns or damp-
ened scholarly hopes about the value of studying traditional expressions linked
with the lives and values of a people.

The most recent work on Mormon folklore has included historical topics
like Eric Eliason’s studies of pioneer nostalgia and J. Golden Kimball stories,
Margaret K. Brady’s significant book Mormon Healer and Folk Poet, and studies
of contemporary narratives and customs. Eliason has commented that Wilson’s
focus on religious practices presages contemporary trends in religious studies
to research “living religion,” or ways that theology and religious principles are
enacted in everyday life. Eliason also asserts, however, that the study of supernat-
ural experiences and beliefs will remain a key area of study in Mormon folklore
and religious lore in general. David Allred (personal communication) amplifies
several areas of current intellectual interest that can be illuminated by the study
of Mormon traditional expressions: “We need more research on the interna-
tional church, the syncretism that comes with conversion. . . . The Mormon
experience(s) open the door for research on some of the most significant human
experiences and some of the trendy academic areas (syncretic belief systems and
identity formation, for example).” Allred, Reinhold Hill, Glenn Ostlund, Kent
Bean, and Danille Linquist are all conducting research that incorporates some
of these academic trends in their analysis of Mormon life.

THE MORMON ETHOS AND TRADITIONAL EXPRESSION

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, ethos comes from the Greek word
for character, a person’s nature or disposition; in nineteenth-century England,
the word became associated with conveying the spirit, tone, or sentiment of
a people or a community. When intellectuals assumed that the folk were one
homogenous throng of people, it made some sense to assert that songs and
tales known by the people would represent clearly the sentiments and values
of the group. Given assumptions about knowledge and human behavior that
 gained credence during the eighteenth century, a religious group associated
with prophecy, revelation, the building of Zion, and the attainment of eternal
life would seem to be ideal to investigate whether actions and behaviors align
with professed beliefs. Folklorists studying Mormons have found that the songs,
stories, customs, and material culture of the group express a tendency to value
a unique heritage, theology, and way of life attuned to the conflict of good and
evil and the intervention of God in human affairs. Contrary to expectations that
rationalism would stamp out such traditions and beliefs, folklorists and many
other scholars now admit that religiosity is not a “survival” from a “primitive
past” and that it deserves contemporary consideration and study.
Yet even the Bountiful Witch story suggests that such lore may contradict or conflict with official doctrine and with the beliefs of the group. Despite a bent toward accepting supernatural intervention in human experiences, pioneer Mormon leaders did not advocate witchcraft and neither did any of the storytellers who passed along the legend, an example of a tradition that does not square with doctrine or with the deeply held values of Latter-day Saints. Yet those traditions still suggest something about what it means to be a member of the church. Likewise, some of the traditions that most closely align with the Mormon ethos may not appear in diaries, family histories, archives, or published scholarship. As Wilson points out in “The Study of Mormon Folklore: An Uncertain Mirror for Truth,” folklore scholarship may be “uncertain” because “the cultural reality reflected in a published work depends very often upon the predisposition and presuppositions of the scholars holding the mirror” (p. 107). The mundane nature of traditional acts like taking Cub Scouts on a hike to fulfill a church calling or of checking in on a neighbor may not appear on the radar screen of folklore studies; Wilson suggests these traditions have not become prominent in the study of Mormon lore, even though acts of service show the character of faith at the heart of Mormon life.

Whether collected, compared, analyzed, and published or not, the traditional actions and expressions of members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints appear in choices they make each day. For this reason there is value in gathering and studying examples of Mormon traditions enacted in everyday life.
Previous scholarship on Mormon lore need not be thrown out, however, because the focus on group identity, the Mormon West, and the past can contextualize studies that emphasize the contemporary lives of individual members of the group. Comparative studies with religious individuals and traditions from other groups also can give insights into how traditions create, deflect, and maintain group ethos.

Olive Burt asserted in her article on a dozen Mormon murder ballads that Mormon converts tended to be “the ‘folk’ of each country, and they brought with them the folkways and folklore of their native lands” (p. 141). As early articles on Mormon lore suggest, the geographic isolation of Utah and the Great Basin did not mean that Mormon culture was either homogenous or free from crime or sin. On the contrary, proselytizing efforts and the doctrine of free agency associated with the religion assured that cultural and behavioral diversity would always be an element of Mormon traditional life in addition to the insider/outside conflicts that have continually shaped Mormon experiences. Because traditions show what people are used to and relate to what they value, a Mormon ethos can be better understood through continuing work in folklore studies. As indicated earlier, much work needs to be done on the international church, on the relationship between new members and outsiders with the established group, on the emergence of new traditions, and on those traditions that remain significant and dynamic over time and space. Eliason’s collection Mormons and Mormonism: An Introduction to an American World Religion suggests the possibilities of studying the international church; Susan Buhler Taber’s study of a year in her Delaware ward, Mormon Lives, answers some questions about how Mormons actually live their religion.

But there is much more work to do by interested scholars in and out of the church. Margaret K. Brady’s work on Mormon women’s visionary birth narratives and her book on Mary Susannah Fowler give important insights into Mormon experiences in the past and present; her work, like that of Jan Shipps in Mormon history, indicates the benefit of careful scholarship conducted by an outsider familiar with the group. The topics, theories, and methodologies for future research also are in place. Echoing Wilson’s call to study lore nearer to the heart of Mormon experience, David Allred adds, “This means less work on Three Nephites and more work that focuses on personal experience narratives and narratives that define LDS identity—not J. Golden Kimball stories but rather Heber C. Kimball [an early church leader] stories. . . . The literature of Mormon folklore also may be too text-based. More ethnographic work needs to be done . . . [and] more performance-oriented work needs to happen” (personal communication).