Ethnic Folklore Studies

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The investigation of ethnic diversity in Utah history has produced a large number of varied and dynamic studies by historians and folklorists, all of them concerned with traditions, customs, and change in the interaction between the Utah environment and nationality and ethnic groups. In the 1940s, most folklore studies concentrated on Indian legends, tales told from the non-Indian perspective, and Mormon folklore. In the 1950s, some scholars—including Helen Z. Papanikolas and William Mulder—turned their attention to other ethnic groups; they sensed that folk traditions and customs were vital ingredients in the ethnic experience of Greeks and Scandinavians, respectively, in Utah. Since then, the collection of ethnic folklore has affected the work of folklorists, historians, and geographers, and has moved from the simple narrative approach to analytical study. In addition, this scholarly interest in ethnic folklore has evolved into the programming of museum exhibitions and public celebrations of ethnic traditions.

Jan Harold Brunvand’s A Guide for Collectors of Folklore in Utah (1971) defines the “essence of all genuine folklore” as oral or customary transmission, the creation of varying forms, and folklore’s possession by a “folk group” (p. 4). A folk group is “any group that has some distinctive folklore,” says Brunvand, including ethnic and nationality groups. He adds that “a person shares the traditions of his group (or groups) unconsciously and casually” (pp. 21–22). This unconscious use of folklore is of particular importance in defining contemporary manifestations of ethnic folklore. A person’s degree of sharing in the lore of his or her immigrant group may vary, depending upon how many generations ago the family immigrated, how clannish the settlement patterns were, and how actively the group maintained Old World customs. As examples, Brunvand cites Austrian wedding customs and Basque folkways.

The decade of the 1950s witnessed both a continuation of interest in Utah’s Indians (see chapter 14) and the expansion of research into other ethnic groups. Some of these efforts, primarily narrative in nature, would form a solid foundation for future work. Most prominent of all was Austin and Alta Fife’s study of Mormon folkways, Saints of Sage and Saddle (1956), which focused mainly on Mormon songs, narratives, and beliefs but also included stories of Indian
The Open Heart coffee house in “Greek Town,” Salt Lake City, was a haven for Greek immigrants and their music during the 1920s. Owner Emmanuel Katsanevas stands at left.

encounters related by Mormons in Utah. The authors state succinctly that these were contemporary legends of Utah about Indians—a chronicle of stories and firsthand accounts from the pioneer point of view. About the same time, William Mulder chronicled the lives of Scandinavian immigrants to Utah in *Homeward to Zion: The Mormon Migration from Scandinavia* (1957) and in various articles in the *Utah Historical Quarterly* that explore the folk elements in Scandinavian life in Utah, primarily pertaining to language. In *Homeward to Zion*, Mulder devotes a chapter to “Mother Tongue” and how C. C. A. Christensen’s Danish verse became an institution to his fellow immigrants. Thomas E. Cheney’s “Scandinavian Immigrant Stories” (1959) recounts the tales common to that experience, and Dennis H. Atkin’s “A History of Iosepa, the Utah Polynesian Colony” (1958) breaks new ground in providing sketches of life and celebrations in the Hawaiian colony in the Great Salt Lake Desert. A later essay on the same subject, Richard Poulsen’s “Polynesians in the Desert: A Look at the Graves of Iosepa,” examines the material culture left behind.

The decade of the 1950s also began the productive career of Helen Z. Papanikolas (see chapter 9) with the publication of “The Greeks of Carbon County” in the *Utah Historical Quarterly*. A daughter of Greek immigrants, she brought to her analysis of folk beliefs and traditions an insider’s knowledge of customs and a command of the Greek language. She also recognized very early the vital roles played by immigrant women in their families and communities;
her essay on “Magerou, the Greek Midwife,” matriarch of the first Greek families in Midvale, Bingham Canyon, and Magna, is probably the earliest account of the life of an ethnic woman in Utah. In her work, Papanikolas mixed the history of the immigrants with an explanation of the folk elements that formed such a vital part of the interactions between immigrant and environment. Over more than fifty years of research and scholarship, Papanikolas wrote dozens of articles and books that reevaluated the immigrant experience, the concept of ethnicity, and the importance of folk traditions in the lives of those displaced and dislocated by the currents of war, nationalism, and economic privation.

In the 1960s, folksongs, ballads, and storytelling became an important focus of folklore studies in Utah. Lester A. Hubbard’s *Ballads and Songs from Utah* (1961) chronicled ballads originally from England, Scotland and Ireland. Hubbard remarked in his introduction: “Imported largely by converts to Mormonism who came from Great Britain and various areas in the United States, these songs, which had lived in the hearts of the people because they expressed sentiments and feeling not limited to a group or religious creed, continued to provide a satisfying and emotional experience on the frontier” (p. xxi). Thomas E. Cheney’s 1968 compilation, *Mormon Songs from the Rocky Mountains*, added specifically Mormon songs—many of them based on older tunes from the British Isles—to the rapidly growing documentation of Utah folk music.

Also in the 1960s, the parameters of folklore study in Utah were expanded. Jan Harold Brunvand and John C. Abramson studied the folk art of aspen-tree carving, much of it done by Basque and other Spanish-speaking sheepmen. The authors concluded that tree carvings are a traditional practice motivated by the urge to “record one’s presence by making one’s mark” (p. 94). Citing carvings by the Herrara brothers (sheepmen who left the “most striking examples of individualized name carvings” using decorative printing and, often, carved pictures), the article concludes that the significance of aspen-tree carvings is that they are an individual manifestation that is also recognized by the dominant culture. Thus, the carvings represent both cultural distinctiveness and the process of acculturation.

Claire Noall’s “Serbian-Austrian Christmas at Highland Boy” appeared in the *Utah Historical Quarterly* in 1965. Through the memories of Dr. Paul Snelgrove Richards, Noall describes the Serbian Christmas celebration in the mining community of Bingham Canyon. Recalling the sights and smells of Christmas at the home of Pete and Milka Loverich and Milka Smilanich, Dr. Richards said that this experience had imparted to him a new and different concept of Christmas. Another study of elements of retention and change in Mormon Utah is the 1968 article on Scots Mormons by Frederick S. Buchanan. Primarily a historical narrative, this work also looks at the wearing of kilts and other folk customs. The increased interest in ethnic folklore was further evidenced by a collection of essays edited by Thomas Cheney called *Lore of Faith and Folly* (1971), a publication of the Folklore Society of Utah. In this volume, Juanita Brooks, Karl E. Young, and Ann G. Hansen all recount tales of contact with Indians from the
Euro-American perspective, and Mary Alice Collins writes of Swiss converts to Mormonism and their retention of cultural values, concluding that “you can still hear the Swiss cowbells jangle...” (p. 55).

The process of acculturation occupied a number of scholars in the 1970s. Cynthia Rice’s thesis on Scandinavians in the Sanpete Valley looks at Scandinavian settlement through house types, fences and outbuildings, agricultural practices, and language retention. She concludes that to Scandinavians, affiliation with the Mormon Church meant accelerated acculturation, although later researchers would discover important Scandinavian retentions. In “Folklore of Utah’s Little Scandinavia,” William A. Wilson explored the legends and tales of Sanpete County’s Danish population. Other studies focusing on acculturation were Joseph Stipanovich’s survey of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, which presents a history of immigration and intertwines analysis with elements of folk belief and tales transplanted from the homeland, and Philip F. Notarianni’s “Utah’s Ellis Island,” which concerns the difficulties faced by immigrants in a multiethnic county.

The American Bicentennial in 1976 resulted in a landmark publication for the study of history and folklore among Utah’s ethnic groups: The Peoples of Utah, heroically edited by Helen Papanikolas. With a chapter devoted to each important ethnic group in the state and with authors chosen primarily from those groups, the book launched much of the current interest in Utah’s ethnic history. Central to many of the chapters is the discussion of the importance of group values. For example, Floyd A. O’Neil commences the section on the Utes with a quotation from Connor Chapoose: “... teach ’em to speak Ute. And don’t let them ever forget how we’re supposed to live, who we are, where we came from” (p. 27). Clyde J. Benally, a Navajo, summarizes Navajo values, customs, and traditions: “Father Sky is sacred,” he says, “food and shelter are more than utilitarian objects” (p. 14). They are gifts from Mother Earth.

The Peoples of Utah, which was followed by a television documentary series of the same name, combines the history of Utah’s major ethnic groups with discussions of folk events and practices and of important artifacts that enabled these groups to function in a new environment. Groups covered in the study are Native Americans, the British, Blacks, Scandinavians, Jews, Continental Europeans, the Chinese, Canadians, Italians, Japanese, Yugoslavs, peoples from the Middle East, Greeks, and Spanish-speaking people. Common to each of these groups was a sense of continuity with the past, a culture that has changed and is changing in a new environment, and the constant evolution of new forms of cultural expression.

Many of these same themes have been further developed by Leslie G. Kelen, himself an immigrant, whose work has focused on interviewing contemporary immigrants with regard to their personal and ethnic experiences and their attempts to become acculturated without abandoning their values and traditions. His major works include The Other Utahns: A Photographic Portfolio (profiles of immigrants with photographs by George Janecek, 1988), Missing Stories:
An Oral History of Ethnic and Minority Groups in Utah (chapters on individual ethnic groups, cowritten with Eileen Hallet Stone, 1996), and Streaked with Light and Shadow: Portraits of Former Soviet Jews in Utah (profiles with photographs by Kent M. Miles, 2000). Except in these works, little has been written about immigrants from Japan, China, and other Asian nations. One exception has been studies by Leonard J. Arrington and Sandra C. Taylor concerning the World War II internment camp at Topaz in western Utah and the Japanese-American residents’ survival strategies; another is Daniel Liestman’s article on the development of Chinatowns in Utah.

Ethnic values and elements of cultural distinctiveness also form the basis for Papanikolas’s “Ethnicity in Mormondom: A Comparison of Immigrant and Mormon Cultures” (1978). The crux of this study is its recognition and definition of family and personal values as central to both cultures. For example, she notes that “Keeping the family name free of stain was a lifelong concern of immigrant peoples as it had been in their fatherlands” (p. 96). This study helped encourage other studies that illustrated how traditional values have been transmuted into new forms. Papanikolas’s studies of changes in cultural tradition and her use of comparative methodology have led to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of history and folklore in Utah.

Continued interest in Scandinavian immigration is reflected in Richard C. Poulsen’s study of the material culture of the Sanpete-Sevier area of central Utah (1979). For Poulsen, folk artifacts “represent thoughts, reactions, and feelings as much as they represent historical movements or processes,” so the “symbolic meaning” of cultural artifacts must be understood (p. 131). In another study, “Folklore of Utah’s Little Scandinavia,” William A. Wilson states that folklore may originate in fancy, “but it may also be based on fact” (p. 149). Stories passed on are “often reshaped (probably unconsciously) to reflect the attitudes, values, and concerns of the people telling them” (p. 150). For Scandinavians living in the Sanpete/Sevier area, lore reflects beliefs and attitudes and functions to meet deeply felt needs. Wilson specifically mentions Scandinavian immigrant tales as contributing to these purposes.

The writings of Barre Toelken (see chapter 11) since the late 1960s are of central significance to scholarship in ethnic folklore. His analyses of elements of Navajo culture are especially important because they seek to view that culture according to its internal values and principles. Breaking with earlier anthropological models of describing Native Americans on “white man’s terms,” Toelken deals with native perspectives. His use of linguistic models and codes provides a needed dimension in understanding Navajo tales and other expressive forms more completely.

Utah Folk Art: A Catalog of Material Culture, edited by Hal Cannon in 1980, ushered in the decade of the ’80s, a decade characterized by more critical analyses of ethnic folk traditions and folklore, especially of material culture. Essays in the volume include studies of prehistoric and historic Indian artifacts by Ann Elizabeth Nelson and Scandinavian housing by Thomas Carter. Other articles
published in the early 1980s examine the immigrant experience further. Linda Bonar’s study of Scots stonemasons in the town of Beaver is a comparative study of Scottish and Utah masonry. Similarly, Carter’s study of decorative plastering in the Sanpete Valley demonstrates that plastering techniques formed a part of the cultural tradition of both English and Scandinavian immigrants. The underlying principles of design and their connection to cultural motivations are of primary significance.

Carbon County has been Utah’s center for southern and eastern European immigrant groups. In 1981, Carbon County: Eastern Utah’s Industrialized Island, edited by Philip F. Notarianni, presented a group of essays that discussed elements of ethnic folklore. Of particular importance were the connections between immigrants and the landscape. This theme provided the basis for another article on the Italian community in Helper by Notarianni and Richard Raspa, in which the authors observe that some Helper Italians interacted with the landscape in very traditional ways, recognizing the power of nature and harboring a respect for that power. As reflected in many landscaped yards, Italians often present an image of symmetry and order in the front, while the back yard reflects a more random life of seeming disorder, product of a peasant heritage. Another study of Italian and Italian-American folkways was produced by a team of researchers from the American Folklore Center in the Library of Congress; it was edited by David A. Taylor and John Alexander Williams (1992). It includes three studies of Carbon County Italians: immigrants from the Calabrese region by Philip F. Notarianni, “Folklore and Survival” by Steve Siporin, and Italian building traditions by Thomas Carter. In another article on the role of music and other expressive forms in the Nick (Nicolavo) family of Carbon County, Siporin observes that while forms may change, values do not. The concern for “quality” in food preparation, representing the reflection of honor in the family, remains intact, although the repertoire of food prepared has expanded to include other types. The Nick family, especially the singing group the Nick Sisters, expanded their interests into the realm of country-and-western music yet continued to sing traditional Italian and religious songs. As in the case of food, the values of sociability did not change, but the forms of its expression expanded.

Utah’s Spanish-speaking population (see chapter 16) now forms the largest ethnic group in the state, one of growing influence because of its large numbers, the proximity of their places of origin, and the continuing arrival of newcomers. Studies by Edward H. Mayer and E. Ferol Benavides demonstrate the interaction of folk and cultural forces into new forms. For Spanish-speaking peoples, the maintenance of language continues to provide a key element in cultural identification.

Language is also closely examined as a key to the immigrant experience in Richard C. Poulsen’s “Folk Material Culture of the Sanpete-Sevier Area.” In this article, Poulsen concludes that the loss of language among Scandinavian immigrants was regressive and led in turn to a lack of material culture. Allan Kent Powell’s study of German-speaking immigrants confirms that for this group
language is also a key element. Many German-speaking immigrants, Powell concludes, have maintained ties to their homeland primarily through language, especially German theater and weekly radio programs. As Toelken has demonstrated in his studies of the Navajo, the linguistic dimension is of critical importance in understanding the full spectrum of a culture’s underlying meaning.

Not surprisingly, many researchers of the folklore of Carbon County have focused on coal miners, beginning with Philip C. Sturges’s essay in 1959. Another study by Marianne Fraser examines the beliefs of ethnic coal miners from Wales and England, concluding that “oral transmission of beliefs assisted both in the continuation of customs from one country to another and in the explanation of unpredictable, dangerous occurrences in a new nation” (p. 246). Allan Kent Powell’s “Tragedy at Scofield” not only reviews the history of Utah’s worst mining disaster but examines the beliefs and stereotypes that developed about Finnish miners in the wake of the explosion, a concern expanded by Craig Fuller in “Finns and the Winter Quarters Mine Disaster” (2002). A parallel study by Janeen Arnold Costa examines the mourning customs of Greeks, Italians, and African Americans after another mining tragedy, the Castle Gate Mine disaster.

Until the 1980s, Utah’s Polynesian community had received scant attention from historians and folklorists. This deficiency was partially corrected in 1983, when the Deseret News published a special issue, Utah’s Polynesians: Zest from the Islands, with articles by Joyce Hammond and others. The publication demonstrates how these immigrants, near the beginning of the cycle of the acculturation process, are maintaining their folk traditions and culture.

The Utah Historical Quarterly has also served as an important host to articles on ethnic history and folklore. The 1984 winter issue, with guest editor Margaret K. Brady, focused on Ethnic Folklore in Utah. Brady’s introductory essay, “Ethnic Folklore in Utah: New Perspectives,” summarizes the trends of the past and sets agendas for the future. She states that folklore provides “indices both to degree of assimilation and to degree of preserved ethnicity, for it is the expressive culture of [ethnic] groups that has provided the clearest indication of just how much of the traditional old country way of life has been and is being maintained” (p. 3). Perhaps her most telling observation is that the essays included in the volume “point to the necessity of examining the expressive forms of ethnic groups in Utah (the folk houses, the rituals, the jokes, the stories and songs) in new ways that will illuminate not only their resemblance to older, more traditional forms, but also their dynamic, innovative status as entirely new expressions of ethnic identity” (p. 4). Within this context, Brady views the evolution of ethnic folklore study from an initial interest in “survivals” (remnants) to examinations of cultural pluralism that emphasize the fluidity and dynamism within ethnic groups. Future research in ethnic folklore, she asserts, “needs to go even further in examining both traditional expressive forms and new forms, created in Utah, which nonetheless express a true sense of ethnic identity” (p. 7). Following Brady’s introduction are articles on Hispanics, Greeks, Scandinavians, and Native Americans by, respectively, William H. González and
Genaro M. Padilla, Helen Papanikolas, Thomas Carter, and Patricia C. Albers and William R. James.

Other studies in the 1980s and ’90s have examined foodways, beliefs, and religious practices. Richard Raspa’s study of exotic foods among Italian-Americans in Carbon County delves into the area of ethnic food, finding meaning not only in the foods themselves but in their preparation and the perceptions maintained about them within the group. Raspa concludes, on the basis of oral testimony and observation of food preparation and consumption, that exotic foods “serve commemorative and celebrative ends more than economic and nutritional ones. Ultimately, the preparation and consumption of exotic food among these Italian-Americans is a nostalgic enactment of ethnic identity and familial solidarity…” (pp. 185–86). “Preparing and eating exotic food allow the performers to recreate their ethnic identity, maintain traditional boundaries with the dominant culture, and nurture familial closeness” (p. 193). Basque, Italian, Greek, Native American, and Irish beliefs and superstitions are also included in Anthon S. Cannon’s *Popular Beliefs and Superstitions from Utah*, with entries gathered between the late 1930s and the 1960s. A 1997 study by Elaine Bapis examines the design and function of Greek home altars in the state.

Other studies on the Swedes of Grantsville by D. Michol Polson, on Swiss immigrants by Jessie L. Embry, on nineteenth-century Norwegian pottery by Kirk Henrichsen, and on English gravestone carvers by Carol Edison continue the examination of the assimilative capacity of the Mormon Church and its influence on old-country traditions. The authors generally conclude that the church tended to hasten cultural assimilation, largely because of the loss of the mother language, and that ethnic traditions tend to diminish rapidly in Utah.

All of these studies represent written materials on ethnic folklore in Utah. But the quest for understanding and explanation of folk culture among Utah’s ethnic population has appeared in other forms as well. Tape- and disk-recorded materials—tales, stories, legends, and music—along with museum exhibitions and festivals have aided in the representation and interpretation of ethnic folk and material culture and its present-day manifestations. In 1964, for example, Hector Lee recorded *Folklore of the Mormon Country: J. Golden Kimball Stories Together with the Brother Petersen Yarns*. On the record, Lee recounts dialect stories that were “extremely popular among the many Scandinavian converts who made their way to the Mormon country of Utah and Idaho.” The use of recorded stories and music was further developed in a series of ninety-minute radio programs originally aired by Salt Lake’s KRCL between 1987 and 1999. On *Utah Traditions: Traditional Music and Cultural Identity*, producer-host Craig Miller presented music and cultural insights from Utah’s Italian, Tongan, Lebanese, Greek, Yugoslavian, German, African American, Swiss, Swedish, and Native American communities.

The radio series on African Americans and Miller’s essay on religious music is especially significant, along with the work of Ronald G. Coleman and KUED television’s program “Utah’s Black Legacy.” These are among the few projects that
shed light on Utah’s African American culture. The role of blacks in Mormon folklore—a topic of special importance following the admission of blacks to the priesthood in 1978—is the subject of William A. Wilson’s “Folklore and History: Fact amid the Legends” (1973) and Wilson and Richard C. Poulsen’s “The Curse of Cain and Other Stories: Blacks in Mormon Folklore” (1980).

Museum exhibitions have also been produced in or brought to Utah under the auspices of the Folk Arts Program of the Utah Arts Council (UAC), the Utah State Historical Society (USHS), the Utah Museum of Natural History (UMNH), the Salt Lake City Arts Council (SLCAC), and the Oral History Institute (OHI). These have included “The Greeks of Utah” (USHS), “Flower Cloths and Baskets: The Art of Indochinese Refugees” (UAC), “One with the Earth” (USHS-SLCAC), “Made in Utah: Contemporary Folk Art” (UAC), “Made in Utah: Polynesian Quilts” (UAC), “Folk Art from Utah” (UAC), “Ten Afro-American Quilters” (USHS), “Things Left Behind: Objects from the Historical Society Collection” (USHS), “Willow, Beads and Buckskin: The Folk Art of Utah’s Great Basin Tribes” (UAC) and “Working Together: A Utah Portfolio” (OHI). The last of these is a photographic portrait of Utah’s Black, Chinese, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Jewish, and Mexican/Hispanic communities. Many of these exhibitions and radio programs have received invaluable funding support from the Utah Humanities Council.

Beginning in 1986, a multi-ethnic festival, “Living Traditions: A Celebration of Salt Lake’s Folk and Ethnic Arts,” has developed and prospered under the
sponsorship of the Folk Arts Program of the Utah Arts Council and the Salt Lake City Arts Council. The 1987 program for the festival, for example, contained essays on ethnic music, dance, crafts, and foods, as well as Steve Siporin’s thoughtful commentary on the nature of ethnic folklore, in which he stresses the development of new traditions that express ethnic identity as part of today’s world: “. . . all ethnic groups depend upon a wide variety of folk traditions to identify themselves and to express their feelings, attitudes, and values. . . . Folklore is the crystallized experience of our ancestors; it enables us to be part of the present without losing the past.”

The study and presentation of ethnic folklore in Utah has indeed been varied, spanning some four decades and moving along a continuum from the simple reporting of tales, legends, and jokes to explanations and analyses of what they mean and how they can be interpreted. These endeavors have generally been focused on specific groups as folklorists and historians have probed aspects of the folk experience that shed new light on immigration and the ethnic experience.

Much remains to be accomplished. Scandinavians have received the most attention and recent immigrants from southeast Asia and Polynesia the least. Even with those groups that have been the most exhaustively studied, new perspectives are possible. For example, the artifacts brought to Utah by these people may offer rich explanations of cultural maintenance, adaptation, and change. Such objects can serve as vehicles, as support for identity, and as mediators between the past and present. In a parallel way, Utah’s ethnic history has moved beyond the mere narrative of what happened and when. Interdisciplinary approaches must be used to explain the why and how of the ethnic experience and to examine closely the implications of that research. Folklore and the study of ethnic traditions and their transmission may hold the keys to answering these questions.