

Toward a Definition of Folklore in Practice

Simon J. Bronner

Pennsylvania State University
Harrisburg, USA

My title is a reverent nod to Dan Ben-Amos's pivotal essay, "Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context" (1971), in which he famously proposed a definition of folklore as "artistic communication in small groups." I use it as a starting point to ask whether or not practice theory can inform a revised definition and concept of folklore, as necessitated by the advent of the twenty-first century digital age (Bronner 2012). Such a definition should go beyond folkloric behavior in digital communication and be applicable to a variety of cultural phenomena or "practices," including those not covered by Ben-Amos's definition. At the time it was published, his essay sparked discussion not only about the changing characteristics of folklore in a post-industrial world, but also about folklorists' need to have a distinctive definition of folklore for disciplinary identity. I hope my consideration of practice as a keyword of folkloristic and cultural analysis will renew thinking about the phenomena analysts observe to be folklore as well as the scholarly enterprise, or discipline, to which this information contributes. My stab at defining folklore at this time is not coincidental. I point out that we are in the midst of an auspicious time for this, as current social and technological factors at work are similar to those that prompted the definitional discourse around Ben-Amos's theoretical grounding of performance and contextual approaches. In both cases, signs point toward similar paradigm shifts.

To proceed, I first review the conditions and dialogues that prompted Ben-Amos and other folklorists to undergird their action-oriented study with a definition that would announce their analytical concerns for a transformative age. I reflect on the efficacy of Ben-Amos's definition for a rising discipline. I look at the span of time from the 1960s to the end of the century and move on to assess challenges the dawn of the twenty-first century presented to conducting cultural analysis of folklore as "artistic communication in small groups." In the concluding section, I propose a definition around the concept of *praxis*, growing out of Ben-Amos's concern for folklore as a process-oriented subject. I evaluate the ways that such a definition addresses those challenges, and I explore the ultimate philosophical implications of this move for a theory of mind in culture.

The Indefiniteness and Inertness of Folklore During the 1960s

As a point of departure, Ben-Amos's definition responded to a European ethnological precedent of conceptualizing folklore as a product of rooted or peasant communities (Erixon 1937; Dundes 1966). From the literary side, he addressed the text-based emphasis on survivals and literary treatment going back to the "Great Team" of Victorian British folklorists (Dorson 1968; Dundes 1969). However, rather than revising a definition from the ethnological or literary side, Ben-Amos suggested that

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folklorists of his generation needed to generate a distinctive conceptualization of their subject and professional enterprise. As Maria Leach's twenty-one different definitions of folklore in *Funk & Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legends* (1949) showed, there was hardly consensus on the scope of folklore or folklore studies by the mid-twentieth-century, although various keywords such as *tradition, oral, transmission, culture, and literature* frequently surfaced. Anthropological folklorists tended to underscore culture and transmission while literary scholars were naturally drawn to literature and orality. As the iconoclastic 1960s began, a probably less acknowledged, but nonetheless significant work is Åke Hulkrantz's eight "headings" of folklore definitions in *General Ethnological Concepts* (1960), in which he pointed to the common ground of tradition among different factions of folkloristic work. Ben-Amos's "context" at the time (according to what he calls his "personal narrative" of making his definitional essay) is the prompting of an innovative, cohesive definition suited to the rise of an independent, academic and degree-granting discipline (Ben-Amos 2014, 12).

With the development of the discipline during the 1960s, courses in folklore proliferated (Baker 1971; Baker 1978). Publishers became interested in folklore textbooks that called for a definition of the subject, and Ben-Amos reported that he had a textbook project, along with Alan Dundes in his *Study of Folklore* (1965) and Jan Harold Brunvand in *The Study of American Folklore* (1968). Ben-Amos noted that earlier in 1946, on the 100th anniversary of W. J. Thoms's definition of "lore" or learning "of the people," the definition had received re-examination but it had not resulted in a notable change of approach (see Herskovits 1946; Thompson 1951). Of significance to the first public unveiling of his definition in 1967 is the American Folklore Society's first meeting in the twentieth century outside the auspices of either the American Anthropological Association or the Modern Language Association, just the year before. With a spirit of independence in the air and a number of young, new folklore doctorates in attendance, Ben-Amos presented his definition as a rushed, last presentation on a panel with the broad rubric of "Oral and Written Literatures." Of the participants on the panel, he was the only one associated with a separate graduate program in folklore, and his definition addressed narrative process as the core of folklore for oral transmission. For Ben-Amos, his thinking was affected not only by his degree in folklore from Indiana University but his appointment to the graduate folklore program at the University of Pennsylvania (Ben-Amos's previous appointment at UCLA was in anthropology).

Thus Ben-Amos and other participants at the conference pondered the distinctiveness of folklore, not only as material but also as the focus of an emerging, hybridized discipline. As Ben-Amos recalls, American Folklore Society members were often split between English and anthropology departments and fretted over the "indefiniteness of folklore, or the inertness of the discipline that the term had initiated" (Ben-Amos 2014, 12; see also Foster 1953, 159). Earlier in the decade, American Folklore Society President Francis Lee Utley tried to find consensus by suggesting that the common denominators in Leach's twenty-one definitions were orality and tradition. Leaning toward the literary side of folklore, Utley (1961) offered a succinct definition of

“literature orally transmitted,” preceded a few years earlier by anthropologist William R. Bascom’s even more concise phrase “verbal art” (1955; see also Bauman, R. 1975). Yet this irritated the newly independent-minded students of folklife or “folk culture” who viewed the scope of the field more broadly to include ethnological concerns of social and material culture (Foster 1953; Glassie 1968; Yoder 1963). In the folklife perspective, many of the cultural phenomena they considered traditional were utilitarian practices rather than artistic oral performances.

Other, younger folklorists with degrees in folklore from American universities had also expressed discomfort with the “indefiniteness” of folklore in the few years before Ben-Amos’s (Ben-Amos 2014, 15). While teaching at the University of Texas, Roger Abrahams (who wrote a folkloristic dissertation at the University of Pennsylvania’s English department) posed an initial challenge by objectifying folklore as “a series of artifacts which obey culture’s general laws, those generated by the conflict of innovation and stability, and complicated by the interactions of different groups” (1963, 98). Abrahams proposed that folkloristic analysis accordingly focus on the processes and contexts that produce the artifacts of folklore. Also complaining of the divergent approaches of literature and anthropology, Abrahams suggested a convergence, a definition of folklore as “items of traditional performance which call attention to themselves because of their artifice,” or more succinctly “traditional activities” (1968, 145). Accordingly, “the full analysis of a tradition or genre,” he declared, “calls for study of the organizational elements of both items and performances” or in other words, the rhetorical use of folklore (1968, 145). His emphasis on tradition and the agency of tradition-bearers could be viewed as a reconciliation of folklore as oral and folklife as social-material phenomena.

Abrahams drew attention to performance to underscore the active, relevant uses of folklore in everyday life, but in doing so, narrowed the scope of materials that folklorists considered to contemporary verbal expressions. With a degree in folklore *and* folklife from the University of Pennsylvania in progress, Henry Glassie theorized that this concentration on orality and performance had an American background in contrast to a European orientation toward culture and repeated social, non-performative practices that are “culminations of culturally determined know-how,” such as plowing, building, and crafting (Glassie 1968, 5). With material folk culture in mind, Glassie offered a consensus view that “a folk thing is traditional and non-popular” and pointed out that this holds for the composition of new tales as well as the construction of a wagon (1968, 6). Although problematic for marking a hard and fast line between folk and popular, Glassie’s definition attempted to guide a study of oral and material forms characterized by continuity with the past, localized usage and association, and non-academic learning by imitation and demonstration.

Attracted to structuralism and intrigued by paremiologist Archer Taylor’s observation that folklore expresses analogic, or connotative, reasoning (1946, 104; see also Ben-Amos 2014, 14, who called it “associative thinking”), Elli-Kajja Kögäs, another recent folklore doctorate, applied her experience in the literary “Finnish method” of motif and type analysis and sought a keyword to represent a discipline as

well as a body of material. She wrote, "It must be possible to find the distinctive feature which shows its [folklore's] identification and which shows in what respect it differs from literature or anthropology" (1963, 84). For her, that feature was transmission, not as an end of study but as evidence of mind, which she argued is what folklorists should ultimately seek.

Alan Dundes agreed that a cognitive goal would help a discipline find explanations in the materials under study, but he criticized the criterion of transmission because while processes such as driving a tractor and brushing one's teeth are transmitted, they would not usually be recognized by folklorists as folklore (1965, 1-2). Dundes answered the question, "What is Folklore?" in his textbook *The Study of Folklore* by suggesting a "folk" rather than a "lore" oriented definition regarding traditions arising out of a folk group, "*any group of people whatsoever* who share at least one common factor" and "help the group have a sense of group identity" (1965, 2). One of the distinctions in this broad and flexible definition, Dundes asserted, was its difference as an "American concept," different from European notions of peasant or class-based definitions. In a complex, modern society, it could account for the emergence of repeated expressions or practices used folklorically within a family, locality, or occupation—or more temporary groups of friends, campmates, or music fans. Without the criterion of oral transmission, the definition also included the possibility of material traditions and mediation of items by technology. What it did not define, however, was the kind of emergent items considered to be folkloric. Dundes addressed this problem by inventorying folkloric genres, which the new items presumably resembled, but critics such as Elliott Oring found this approach still "indefinite" (Oring 1986, 2-4).

Oring criticized Dundes's idea of group as more relevant to North American situations than to a universal model of folklore because of their absence of a peasantry and ancient legacy upon which European concepts of folklore were built (Oring 1986, 2-4; see also Cocchiara 1971, 467-95). Hultkrantz, in his summary of European ideas on folklore, acknowledged that one of the approaches to folklore "that easily developed in Europe" was an understanding of "the total culture of the folk in contradistinction to the culture of the higher classes" (1960, 138). But he also identified two other "big groups of definitions on the subject": folklore as "cultural traditions" and as a form of "literature" linked to culture (1960, 138). Hultkrantz abstracted these tendencies as "the spiritual tradition of the folk, particularly oral tradition" (1960, 137). He derived this statement from delegates at a 1955 congress of folklorists in Arnhem, Netherlands. He contextualized the definition as separating their consideration of practices within living communities from what he called Thoms's "romantic" mid-nineteenth-century emphasis on strange, antiquated customs in the characterization of folklore as "the manners, customs, observances, superstitions, ballads, proverbs etc. of the olden time" (Hultkrantz 1960, 135). Hultkrantz blamed the discrepancy between Thoms's original equation of folklore with old traditions and the European ethnological emphasis on functional interpretation of class-based groups as being "responsible for...the many divergences in definitions up to the present time, and the dubious relations between ethnology and folklore" (1960, 135).

According to Ben-Amos, the collective drive toward a definition during the 1960s had several purposes. One was to identify folklore in the modern world and another was to declare differences from other disciplines. Aware of his teacher Richard Dorson's campaign against "fakelore" (Dorson 1950; Dorson 1976), he thought another reason for redefining folklore at this juncture was to distinguish it from a spreading mass or popular culture, while at the same time making its analysis more social, scientific, or ethnographic. At the time, the folksong revival was taking hold and questions also arose about the authenticity of folk songs on radio airwaves and commercially produced concert stages (Dorson 1963, 434-39; Legman 1962). Ben-Amos reflected that, "the definition of folklore became a personal need rather than a task" (2014, 15). In the context of the turbulent 1960s, with the rise of counter-cultures and subcultural youth communities, Ben-Amos sought a new path that established, in his words, "a correspondence between the socio-cultural and the scholarly-analytical conceptions of folklore" (2014, 18). In other words, for a rising discipline, he wanted to find more connection between folklore in social reality and the way scholars analyzed the subject of folklore, primarily in the textual manner of the historic-geographic school.

Fresh from fieldwork on storytelling events in Nigeria, Ben-Amos viewed folklore as a special form of communication separated from everyday life. Particularly influenced by a special issue of *American Anthropologist* edited by John Gumperz and Dell Hymes and titled "The Ethnography of Communication" (1964), he adapted the keyword of communication to a view of folklore as performance (Ben-Amos 2014, 17). Although first met with resistance, his definition of "artistic communication in small groups" caught on as more folklorists representing a disciplinary perspective, particularly in the United States, embraced event-oriented analysis and developed ideas of folklore as performance (Ben-Amos 2014, 17). Yet the descriptive micro-functionalism of most performance analyses and the extreme localization of expressions, mostly oral, raised criticisms as to a lack of comparability between performative situations and limiting folklore's cultural phenomena to "verbal art." Without a structural or comparable basis, the idea of folklore as performance or "artistic communication" as applied in analysis served to contribute further to the indefiniteness of folklore.

Rethinking the Idea of Folklore and Tradition in the Digital Age

I contend that a similar confluence of factors compels folklorists to re-examine definitions that guide folkloristic analysis at this exigent moment. As Ben-Amos grasped the challenge of popular culture to the identification of folklore, folklorists face questions in the digital age about the influence of the Internet on the notion of "small groups." Whereas he self-critically questioned whether folklore existed in social reality, folklorists openly voice concern about folklore's applicability in virtual reality (Blank 2009; Blank 2012). If folklorists struggled to define themselves between anthropologists and literary scholars during the 1960s, arguably scholars with folkloristic identities now seek their place among a myriad of integrative studies such as cultural studies, women's studies, ethnic studies, and performance studies, all of which claim their own disciplinary locations. In addition, as the historic-geographic method of literary

analysis and the idea of “etic analysis” came under critical scrutiny, so has performance taken its hits for a narrowing of folkloristic analysis in addition to implying a lack of generalization and historicity for cultural phenomena (Bronner 2006; Dundes 2005). In practice, the definition of “artistic communication” led to detailed descriptions of expressive narrative style rather than explanations for an array of traditional activities or the thinking upon which they were based (Ben-Amos 1995; Bronner 2006). Although considered a significant aspect of folkloric transmission, performance in its limited use appeared problematic for building a general, inclusive theory of folklore.

Consequently, tradition as a keyword received fresh review in the early twenty-first century as a unifying concept in folklore (Blank and Howard 2013; Bronner 2000; Bronner 2011). However, scholars noted the ambiguity of tradition and the need to clarify its position for folkloric processes in contradistinction to art, literature, and history. Ben-Amos’s cohort was concerned about distinctive perspectives that mark folkloristics as an analytical study and folklore as a subject, so too were new complaints voiced about an “indefiniteness” of their subject and “inertness” in the discipline, even with tradition as a bedrock that covered oral and material “folkness.” Instead of concerns about folk versus popular culture and fakelore versus folklore, one reads anguish in the twenty-first century over differences between folklore and folklorism, and even folklore and the folkloresque (Foster and Tolbert 2015; Roginsky 2007; Šmidchens 1999).

One counter argument is that indefiniteness is a virtue. Roger Welsch (1968) protested Ben-Amos’s 1967 paper, for example, by maintaining that folklorists did not need a definition. He contended that a standard definition potentially restricted collecting material with arbitrary criteria. He warned that because of their compulsion to craft a lofty discipline taking its place beside English and anthropology, “folklorists seem to be possessed by some definitional demon” and should maintain their independence from conventional approaches (1968, 262).

Richard Bauman (1969) retorted that a definition was essential to outlining a guiding concept that allowed folklore to take its place as a discipline. Bauman emphasized behavior rather than mind and appreciated that Ben-Amos “contextualized” folklore studies as a science, particularly a social and behavioral science instead of, in his words, “drifting aimlessly along the stream of idle and idiosyncratic speculation” (1969, 170). Welsch brusquely replied that a definition for a diverse field like folklore studies sounded too much like “unanimity of thought,” and he preferred an open, humanistic attitude that allowed for the “inevitable diversity” of methodologies. In other words, if a folklorist studies it, it must be folklore. The implication of Welsch’s open door policy is that folklore is what folklorists want it to be, which creates the possible scenario that folklore is everything, and therefore nothing (Ben-Amos 1971, 10; Claus and Korom 1991, 31). Folklorists, then, provide little guidance to popular, and often pejorative or misunderstood, views of folklore as crude relics, falsehoods, and signs of backwardness.

I propose that *folk* is significant as a modifier of culture or learning or lore. Qualifying folklore as a special type of creation, learning, and practice creates the

possibility that folk evidence is distinctly available for cultural analysis versus other materials. If the categories of folk and popular culture, or a view of folk as non-popular, are meaningful, then some identifying characteristics or patterns need to be confirmed and tested. Therefore, definitions of folklore can be perceived as hypotheses to determine what Abrahams called “dynamic qualities” of both the material and its analysis (1968, 147). Folklorists evaluate cultural phenomena as they emerge or as they have been documented in the past in order to test whether they fall within the scope of a definition and can be useful to analyze cognitive, behavioral, and social processes. Ben-Amos’s application of context to the significance of defining folklore is similarly apt when he states that “the definition of folklore is not merely an analytical construct, depending upon arbitrary exclusion and inclusion of items; on the contrary, it has a cultural and social base” (1971, 10). For Ben-Amos, folklore “is a *definite* realistic, artistic, and communicative process” and there are definite “boundaries between folklore and nonfolklore” (1971, 10; emphasis added).

In the years since Ben-Amos’s definition of “artistic communication in small groups,” it has been vigorously debated, and even Ben-Amos appeared to argue against himself when he questioned its omission of tradition in an essay, “The Seven Strands of Tradition” (1984) (see also Ben-Amos 1979; Jones, S. 1979; Joyner 1975; Wilgus 1973). His original point, he reflected, was not that tradition was inconsequential, but that in response to other definitions, it was not the sole criterion (Ben-Amos 2014, 18). Nonetheless, it is not a stretch to say that “artistic communication in small groups” has stood as the main benchmark of folklore in North America for over forty years, particularly in a spate of folklore textbooks at the end of the twentieth century emphasizing the “dynamics of folklore” (see Sims and Stephens 2005; Toelken 1979; Webber 2015). Yet most textbooks in the twenty-first century evade the definitional issue or refer broadly to tradition and learning. *A Companion to Folklore* edited by Regina Bendix and Galit Hasan-Rokem (2012) gave no definition, but, in the lead essay, appeared to assume a social basis for the identification of folklore. Some textbooks of around the same time, such as *Living Folklore* (2011) by Martha Sims and Martine Stephens, also avoided definition by stating “folklore is many things, and it’s almost impossible to define succinctly,” though the authors take a stab at it anyway by emphasizing, as Jan Harold Brunvand and Richard Dorson before them, that “folklore is *informally* learned, *unofficial* knowledge about the world, ourselves, our communities, our beliefs, our cultures and our traditions, that is expressed creatively through words, music, customs, actions, behaviors and materials.” (2005, 8; emphasis added; see also Brunvand 1968; Dorson 1972).

They fall into the trap, outlined by Elliott Oring in the textbook *Folk Groups and Folklore Genres*, of a definition by inventory that is hardly a definition. Oring’s first sentence of chapter one is that a “precise definition presents a problem.” Like Welsh, Oring concludes that “definition is not really necessary” to “approach inquiry,” although he advocates for an orientation, that is, concepts that regularly inform folklorists in their research. Avoiding a flippant attitude of folklore is what folklorists do. Oring cites *communal, common, informal, marginal, personal, traditional, aesthetic*, and

ideological as such concepts (noticeably absent is “performance” and “context”), or I might characterize them as aspects, of cultural practices to which the folklorist is drawn. As Charlotte Burne, the British folklorist in *The Handbook of Folklore* way back in 1913 profoundly asserted, “[I]t is not the form of the plough which excites the attention of the folklorist, but the rites *practiced* by the ploughman when putting it into the soil; not the make of the net or the harpoon, but the taboos observed by the fisherman at sea: not the architecture of the bride or the dwelling, but the sacrifice which accompanies its erection and the social life of those who use it” (1913, 2; emphasis added). In this expression of the importance of practice, she had as a goal uncovering, in her words, human “psychology,” although arguably she did not extensively theorize the idea of “practice.” In her evolutionary thinking, the practitioners of folklore came early, were primitive, and did not progress, and yet she cited as precedent for this view the more general definition attributed to W.J. Thoms of folklore as “the learning of the people.” Actually Thoms wrote “lore of the people,” by which he meant the common folk, and it is significant that Burne, through the handbook, encouraged readers to give attention to folklore as learning, whether as vernacular knowledge or a social process (Thoms 1965, 5).

In American folkloristics, attention to learning is evident indirectly through the characteristic repeatability of folklore. In their textbook *Folkloristics* (1999), Robert Georges and Michael Owen Jones emphasized an orientation involving repetition of expressive forms, processes, and behaviors apparent in (1) face-to-face interactions, and (2) judged to be traditional. Taking technologically mediated folklore such as photocopied humor into account, Alan Dundes moved from the folk group as the basis of folklore to emphasizing multiple existence and variation as folklore’s dynamic qualities. Georges and Jones extend this defining idea of folk practice as repetitive patterns in their assertion that folklore represents “continuities and consistencies through time and space in human knowledge, thought, belief, and feeling” (1999, 1). Their mention of knowledge is distinctive, and I think critical, for moving forward, because of the connection of their definition to the principle that folklore is significant to study, because it is “an integral and vital part of our daily lives,” rather than separated into novel or occasional special performances (1999, 2). I believe their connotation of knowledge is of quotidian or vernacular know-how or content, although it is also possible to dig deeper to their additional mention of thought, belief, and feeling to a cognitive meaning of mental and emotional states.

Applying Ben-Amos’s assertion of definition as having a social and cultural basis, it might be said that the nature of knowledge in a digital age changed thinking about face-to-face interaction and the kinds of transmission recognizable as folklore in relation to mediated culture. “Context” as used by Ben-Amos referred typically to face-to-face gatherings of people in which expressive behavior could be observed, whether in tribal storytelling events in Nigeria or teen slumber parties in North America.

At least five “challenges” have emerged to contextual definitions in the digital age that force, if not another paradigm shift, then at least an adjustment that encourages explanations on an array of practices as well as processes perceived to be “folk.”

1. First, there is the consideration of digital culture and its “analytical” characteristic. That is, it is based upon variable repetition rather than a social “relational” core, characteristic of what has been called analog culture. With so much made of the social base of folklore, digital culture provides a challenge to the idea of folklore arising out of “face-to-face interaction.” The case for its mediated expressions goes back before the digital age. In Alan Dundes and Carl Pagter’s case, they labeled photocopied humor as folklore because of their repetition and variation. This view opened the door for other mediated forms created by “users” such as digitally altered photographs, so-called memes, vernacular animations, and virus hoaxes (Blank 2012; Ellis 2015).
2. Second is re-examination of tradition as the keyword of folklore in works such as *Tradition in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Rob Howard and Trevor Blank (2013). Whereas tradition was noticeably absent in earlier contextual definitions, because it supposedly did not account for the emergence of forms and the styles of performance, tradition is re-conceptualized as a mode of thought with reference to precedent action that allows for human agency, rather than historical authority (see Bronner 2011; Jones, M. 2000). The use of tradition has also brought material and social practices into consideration, or what Kongas (1963) called mentifacts, under the umbrella of folklore as something individually created, often routinely. The reduction of folklore to verbal art, literature orally transmitted, or performance commonly excludes this material.
3. Third, is more of a call for finding cognitive sources for the production of folklore, rather than leaving it to surface behavioral descriptions of social interaction-based outcomes. Logically, the emphasis on “artistic communication” as performance has not explained action; it has contextualized an occasional form of it (Ben-Amos 1995; Bronner 2006). But more work is needed to get at the question of why people repeat themselves and frame activities as vernacular practices, particularly in modern societies that value the novel and unprecedented (see Abrahams 2005). More data are needed on the patterning and organization of everyday life, and on folklore as a cognitive process, or *praxis*, of organizing experience (Bronner 2011).
4. Fourth, maybe most profoundly, is the idea of dropping the group requirement of folklore, presented by Jay Mechling (2006) as “solo folklore” and Michael Owen Jones (2000) as “symbolic construction of self.” What Mechling and Jones both imply, perhaps radically, is that one does not need people in the plural to possess and produce folklore. Individuals by themselves or within organizations can propagate, adapt, and manipulate folkloric ideas (Jones, M. 1996).
5. Finally, there is the so-called “practice turn” in contemporary philosophy defined by Theodore Schatzki in 2001 as attention to “arrays of activity,” and

particularly important for the practice-oriented folklorist, the explanation of “skills, or tacit knowledges and presuppositions, that underpin everyday and ceremonial activities” and the constructed “cognitive frames” that direct, embody, and contextualize these activities as something expressive and cultural (2001, 2). To be sure, there is not a unified practice theory, but there is consensus on a need to shift the collectivist thinking of the past to “practical reasoning,” that is, a philosophical concept of framing action as purposeful and connotative experience arising from analogic, symbolic reasoning (Bauman, Z. 1999; Bourdieu 1977; Bourdieu 1990; Bourdieu 1998; Bronner 1986; Bronner 1998, 469-73; Schatzki 1996).

A Definition of Folklore in Practice

Based upon these challenges, I submit a practice-centered definition that retains a consideration of context to account for the processes associated with the folkloric expression, but focuses attention to the knowledge domain, or cognition, at the basis of the production of tradition. I invite your contemplation on the way that the following identifies “arrays of activity” that benefit from analysis as folklore and equally guides the activity’s (and the array in which it is a part as well as the human agents for whom it is significant) explanation: “*traditional knowledge put into, and drawing from, practice.*”

By emphasizing activity or practice, the analyst connects repeated action across oral, social, and material forms. Some folklorists who are concerned for folklore’s artistic or performative aspect might question the absence of “artistic communication” as a criterion. However, I introduce a broader conceptualization of folklore’s significance as cultural phenomena in relation to popular and elitist forms in terms of phemic processes identified by sociolinguists. The definition of practice begins with the identification of knowledge gained or learned typically from phemic (i.e., stylized, culturally situated, or expressive) processes of repeated, perlocutional communication in visual, oral and written means as well as imitation and demonstration (often for social and material traditions) (see Austin 1968; Bronner 2016).

Let me explain my use of “phemic” as an additional qualifier to folklore’s characteristic of variable repetition because it is critical, I maintain, to a theory of folk practice as evidence of mind. Many utilitarian practices that are socially or geographically situated such as craft, medicine, and agriculture would not be perceived as art, performance, fantasy, or play and yet are viewed as noticeable traditions by virtue of their repetition through time and space. *Phemic* material denotes an implicative message that impels transmission, and the material becomes associated with the process of its transmission. Philosopher J.L. Austin approaches the analysis of these messages similarly to pragmatic gestures to account for the way they are *ordinarily used*, or transacted with others, to produce symbols and elucidate meaning (Austin 1961; Austin 1968; see also Warnock 1989). To be sure, folk practices can be artistic, such as the creative adaptation of a song or story, but what connects these practices to quotidian behaviors such as choosing a favorite seat and ritually arranging food on a plate is the implicative or phemic messages of activities as the outcomes of traditional

knowledge.

Linguist J. L. Austin's contribution to a theory of tradition based upon practice is to rubricate forms of transmission that result in actions (he called them "illocutionary acts") that people recognize as traditional. Austin calls the production of sound a *phone*, whereas a *pheme* is a repeated utterance with a definite sense of meaning (a subset of a *pheme* in his system is a *rheme* to refer to a sign that represents its object). Colloquially, the *pheme* may be said to "say something" that might be used on different occasions of utterance with a different sense (Warnock 1989, 120). The nuance to tradition as "regularities" that Austin introduces is that the illocutionary act is one performed *in saying something*; the locutionary act is one in the act *of saying something* while the perlocutionary act occurs *by saying something*. Indeed, the example in everyday life that Austinian philosopher John Searle uses to exemplify this distinction among the acts invokes the role of the hand as the response that signals a transaction and the occurrence of a tradition. The locution might be a query of whether salt is on the table and the illocution is of requesting it. The perlocution is causing someone to hand the container of salt over or "pass it" (Searle 1969, 53). The frames or traditions governing the transaction are often unstated and learned by participation in cultural scenes or regular responses to what Searle calls "the presence of certain stimuli" or "intentional behavior" (1969, 53; see also Cothran 1973).

The term *pheme* comes from the goddess Pheme of Greek mythology who personified renown and was characterized by the spreading of rumors. Symbolically important to the idea of folklore as phemic is her status as a daughter of the earth and one of the mightiest, if not the most elegant or beautiful, of the goddesses (Burr 1994, 231). She had a proclivity to repeat what she learned for better or worse (in art, she is often depicted with multiple tongues, eyes, and ears or with a trumpet broadcasting messages), to the point that it became common knowledge. Along the way, though, the information had varied greatly and was often made larger or stylized in proportion to the original bit of news. Pheme did not fabricate knowledge; her skill was in framing material in such a way that it would be passed around in ways that drew attention to itself or formed localized versions. She was a relay station of sorts, serving as both recipient and transmitter of earthy material that, being shared from person to person, became aestheticized, elaborated, and localized. The knowledge transmitted was known as much for the process it went through as for its content; in its expressive forms, it carried a message, often symbolized, or connotative. The process became manifested as a recognizable, differentiated practice, so a story was conveyed within the expectations of storytelling, or cultivating crops became identified, and potentially symbolized, as plowing in a certain fashion for a particular place or people. Because a message, action, or gesture was subjected to this verbal and non-verbal transmittal process associated with earthy rumor, the content invited evaluation as to its truth and value. In its "larger" form, the material raised questions about its sources and its combinations and reconfigurations, forming a whole with multiple connotative layers created along the path of transmission.

Phemic transmission can be distinguished from *phatic* communication in what

anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski characterized as a “type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words” (Laver 1975, 215; see also Warnock 1989, 120-22). As action, *phatic* speech corresponds to the routine intended, according to linguist John Lyons, “to establish and maintain a feeling of social solidarity and well-being” (1968, 417). Tradition often serves this social function as well, but it is distinguished as purposeful activity with a repeatable, multi-layered message that can be called *phemic*, because it compels “handing down/over” and variation in the long term by means of social interaction. Saying the greeting “How are you?” might appear routine/*phatic* (characterized with the folk term of “small talk”), but the responses of “Hunky dory,” “Just ducky (peachy, dandy),” “Fair to middling, mostly middling,” “Couldn’t be better,” “Can’t complain,” “Still among the living,” “Still breathing (standing, living),” “Fine as a frog’s hair,” “Fine as a frog’s hair and twice as fuzzy,” “Not dead yet,” and “Old enough to know better, And you?” often ritually signal a special connection between the speakers/texters. Further, the practice contextualizes *phemic* or connotative meanings characteristic of a folkloric frame of action (such as references to aging, anxiety/“troubles,” lifestyle choices, medical inquiries, friendship or family relations, and insider, localized knowledge) (see Coupland, Coupland, and Robinson 1992; Coupland, Robinson, and Coupland 1994; Rings 1994; Wright 1989).

The action of producing or transmitted “lore” is perceived or constructed as traditional, characteristically through its repetition and variation, and connotative evocation of precedent. It can be viewed as distinct from, although, sometimes integrated into, the notion of popular culture as fixed in form and commercialized (folklore can also be “popular” and broad-based beyond the small group or subculture). Reference to the actions of “put into and drawing from” suggests the framing of connotative, purposeful enactments as an adaptation from precedent or an outcome of repeatable behavior. This outcome can be material and social as well as verbal. It can be created by and enacted for the individual.

Think for a moment of the practice of hitting one’s head with the palm of the hand and saying, “What was I thinking?” The words alone might be rendered literally but rhetorically framed in action and intent as folklore. The symbolic gesture in words and action that are recognized from precedent carry meaning, usually of having made a preventable mistake. The person hits the head to indicate that the brain was not working correctly, much as one might in fact, hit a machine to get the gears moving. The interrogative phrase might not even be heard by another person, but it constitutes a framed, stylized, repeatable, variable action along with an uttered text that is based on precedent, even if it is individualized. It can be visualized on the Internet and sent to a friend who probably recognizes the reference to tradition. It might be used in popular culture by writers and filmmakers, but they use “folklore” rhetorically whereas individuals hitting their foreheads with their hands are enacting, or practicing, the lore.

Even without the utterance, the gesture of hitting one’s head could be construed as a signal of consternation. Combining the gesture towards the thinking “head” with the line, “What was I thinking?” and, typically, facial gestures of dismay, persons

symbolize the precarious connection of their reasoning to action. The utterance could be varied with the insertion of a swear word or a metonymic phrase such as “What the hell (fuck, crap)?” or clipped as “What the?” In the absence of people witnessing the gesture, the practice based upon traditional knowledge connotes motivations occurring in various circumstances or contexts that merit explanation. Indeed, the agent’s account of the practice might be insufficient explanation, because persons might not be fully cognizant of their reasons for saying or doing what they did. The analyst therefore strives to discern what people are thinking from the practices they frame and explain in a range of possible behaviors why they do what they do.

Praxis as an Answer to Analytical Challenges

By way of conclusion, and I hope further dialogue and test my definitional hypothesis, I will revisit the five challenges I previously mentioned to view how a practice-centered definition addresses concerns and shapes analysis. Concerning the challenge of digital culture, the rhetorical use of practice as a repeatable, variable activity suggests that speaking is not the only form of expressive activity made traditional by individual agency. The use of technology channels communication in ways that are different from face-to-face interactions but nonetheless produces actions that are recognizable as traditional. The actions of forwarding, replying, and photoshopping are part of the process that give these technologically mediated messages and images dynamic qualities that can be called folk. Yet the idea of practice, rather than performance, does not negate applications in “analog” and pre-industrial culture, for folklorists can study reasons for why people repeat themselves beyond the supposed forces of tradition or isolation. The identification of practice presumes a comparability of forms and contexts that allows for analytical operations without sacrificing attention to process.

The second challenge was the reconfiguration of tradition for a modern context. Tradition in practice theory has both an emic and etic dimension. Folklorists should note the ways that people invoke, and evoke, tradition as a term as well as a force in their lives. Indeed, the invocation of phrases such as “It’s a tradition in my family,” “Here’s a traditional dish,” or “For tradition’s sake” are themselves phemic practices that carry metafolkloric implications. Although I noted that folklorists working with contemporary materials use tradition to represent a mode of thought rather than a historical authority, one can trace different manifestations, and sometimes conflicts, of tradition within communities. From an analytical vantage point, folklorists in a practice orientation are concerned with the often individualized permutations of traditional knowledge in repeatable, variable practices, or folklorists trace the thinking (i.e., analogical, associative, and symbolic reasoning) behind the formation of traditional knowledge back from practices.

The identification of *praxis* as a basis of practice-oriented methodology addresses the fourth challenge of finding sources and explanation for what people do. Indeed, Zygmunt Bauman (1999) characterizes the symbolic quality of connotative, repeatable action, or *praxis*, in custom and tradition as the heart of what we come to know as culture and its influences. To explain the analytical purpose of *praxis*, I need to distinguish the

use of practice as a traditionalized genre in the Latin sense of *traditum* (and therefore a reference for custom, item, or version in folkloristic rhetoric of cultural practice”) versus the theoretical orientation of practice as a perspective and process (*tradio*). A prominent way that this distinction has been made is to use the Greek root of practice, *praxis*. Unlike the bifurcation of action into performance and everyday, the basis for *praxis* is a trichotomy, with Aristotle’s categories of knowledge resulting from activities of *theoria* (knowing for its own sake or intellectual processes that result in truth), *poiesis* (in which the end goal is production, such as building a house or writing a play), and *praxis* that results in actions accomplished in a particular way (e.g., organizing, speaking, celebrating, making) and therefore connoting or symbolizing the meaning of its action. A parade, for example, is recognizable as an organization of walking, and within this framed, stylized activity, it takes on the meaning of celebration. Often associated with the production of noise, a parade in silence displays a distinctive *praxis* and takes on a different meaning as protest, often with the connotation that the surrounding society is conflicted or “sick” (Margry 2011). Even if one does not perform the silence, or gives a eulogy at a memorial service, it might be said that one participated in a practice because he or she “went” and therefore shared in a cultural meaning within the framed action.

The binary of *praxis* and *theoria* is often constructed in the philosophy of science to differentiate what scholars do from the ideas they contemplate, but that does not mean that *praxis* does not have a psychological or ideational component as *praxis* is concerned with activities predominant in ethical and political life. Thus philosopher Richard Bernstein writes, “A person with this characteristically contemporary sense of ‘practical’ in mind may be initially perplexed when he realizes that what we now call “practical” has little to do with what Aristotle intended by ‘praxis’” (1971, x). In emphasizing the actions of individuals’ free will as *praxis*, Aristotle opened inquiry into the way that decisions are made about activities in diverse, everyday life situations in interaction with others and within the context of the *polis*, the traditions and rules imposed by or perceived in a society. Following attention to practice, one can identify many methodological applications of *praxis* that appear quite different but owe essentially to the Aristotelian distinction of *praxis* as meaning arising from doing as a social and ethical act. To get at the folkloristic implication, I will employ the *praxis* of sorting through the top five.

First, we address the concern for “usages” in English or “Brauch” in German as a trend in European ethnology and folklife studies. It subsumed oral traditions or verbal art under social and material practices and set them in the context of community. Of folkloristic import is that *praxis* in this view necessitates studying others to know what works in a situation that is often defined by residence, for the end itself is only specified in deliberating about the means appropriate to a particular setting. In Hultkrantz’s *General Ethnological Concepts* (1960), this use of practice underscores the importance of repetition with reference to the past. Custom is distinguished by its sanctioning force and is more normative. In addition, unlike habit, practice encompasses custom and usage presupposes tradition. One might argue that American folkloristics is not

usually concerned with these distinctions, especially in relation to issues of authority imposed by tradition and particularly not within communities that may be class or geographically bound. The European intellectual heritage of *Volkskunde* or ethnology has been to divide practice into cultural and behavioral patterns, with the former being within the purview of the folklorist who uncovers the sources and functions of repeated actions perceived as traditional. It therefore does not invoke the dramaturgical metaphor of performances or arts, but instead constructs tradition around the idea of activity within the course of life. More than other definitions, Georges and Jones's categorization of folklore as behaviors "based on known precedents and models" and that "customarily learn, teach, and utilize or display during face-to-face interactions" appears to follow this approach, especially when they divide actions of people "as we interact with each other on a daily basis" into practices denoted as folklore or activities that are "readily distinguishable, often [in] symbolic ways" (1999, 1). Toward the advancement of a discipline, this statement suggests that activities are comparable, and generalizations about the relation of practices to one another, across time and space, are possible. The *praxis* of the folklorist is to engage in fieldwork as an action comparable to custom; the activity captures and in some regard, constructs, the enactment of culture.

From this first sense of *praxis*, a question arises about what is to be analyzed in enactments of culture. The French sociologist Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) argues for identifying the rules of operation in daily life, which he dichotomizes into practices of making and using. Advocating for a structuralism of cultural behavior, he declares, "There must be a logic of these practices" (de Certeau 1984, xv). Folk culture can be read in the reference to "local stabilities," which he argues, "break down... no longer fixed by a circumscribed community" (1984, xx). Folklorists might infer from de Certeau, that folklore is a form of marginalized cultural production that, in his words, is "massive and pervasive" (1984, xvii). With its special purview, another significant place for folkloristics is in the logics (construed as a process in the sense of *traditio* differentiated from *tradtum*) that communities devise for themselves. Inasmuch as logic suggests constraints as well as form for improvisation and variation, they invite analyses of power because one set of rules may be in conflict with another as local stabilities come up against dominant systems.

One can read this Marxian basis in the use of *praxis* by Pierre Bourdieu in the proposition that people who impose "practical taxonomy" wield power. In this view, the cultural activity of naming, categorizing, and organizing is critical to shaping worldview, and analysts need to consider the way that they respond to, as well as enact, the typically invisible, constructed structures of culture. Bourdieu's *praxis* relates to performance because of the emphasis on an actor's understanding of engagement with the world. Thus cultural theory supposedly moves away from the study of rules and to the analysis of practice. From fieldwork in Algeria and France, he adopted terms to further the relation of rules to practice. The *doxa* are aspects of the society's norms and values that are not discussed or challenged because they are deeply rooted through socialization and taken for granted. *Habitus*, relating to usage, are normative aspects

of behavior or dispositions that are acquired through socialization, but are produced unreflectively rather than totally unconsciously. In Bourdieu's theory, practice is based on the dispositions inherent in habitus and takes the form of strategic improvisations, goals, and interests pursued as strategies, against a background of *doxa* that ultimately limits them. Unlike the ethnological application of usage as practice, though, Bourdieu disavows rational choice and implies that socialization guides behavior. To be sure, performance-oriented folkloristics has embraced some of Bourdieu's ideas about the inequality of power in particular "social fields," but has been open to the charge leveled against Bourdieu of a functionalist tautology in which the consequences of action are mistaken for their causes. Bourdieu's *praxis* relates to Goffman's social interactionism (1967) and Geertz's "interpretive anthropology" (1973) in interpreting bounded events as texts of social structure. Instead of describing processes of *praxis*, critics have sought a psychological praxeology by which, in the words of Gunnar Skirbekk, author of *Praxeology*, "human activities are interwoven with their agents and with the things at which they are directed within our everyday world" (1983, 9).

That is, in response to the post-structuralist lack, or avoidance, of explanation as arbitrary and uncertain, inquiry into *praxis* allows for consideration of the symbolic ways that activities are expressive and can be traced to sources in cognition. I would characterize Alan Dundes's "modern" definition of folklore as socially sanctioned expression that can be semiotically and cognitively explained fits into this praxeological perspective, even if one did not follow his Freudian analysis (Bronner 2008). The psychological processes of projection and projective inversion he suggested along with Gregory Bateson's idea of "play frames" are important examples of identifying cognition representative of "traditional knowledge drawn from or put into practice" (Bateson 1972; Dundes 1976; see also Briggs 2015; Bronner 2010; Mechling 2008; Wallis and Mechling 2015).

This praxeological idea of explanation in cognition for behavior that composes the third analytical challenge is based on the psychology guiding repetition of customs to manage social relations. The fourth challenge owes more to the individual construction of self as a cultural *praxis*. Although some critics might view the examples by Mechling and Jones of individualized "traditions" as anomalous, they represent a broader expectation in modern societies that individuals create an identity out of many cultural options and demonstrate this identity in practices that might only be known to the individual. The individualized use of *praxis* by Mechling, Abrahams, and Jones anticipates social philosopher Zygmunt Bauman's idea of culture arising from the mediation of tradition and creativity, but is distinguished by a behavioral component. Folklorists want to know how tradition is expressed and how people behave when it is enacted. Jones, Mechling, and Abrahams go further in suggesting certain actions, such as "organizing," "playing," and "speaking" as pivotal and aesthetic activities that underlie rather than divide everyday life or has it has been conceptualized recently, "public culture" (Abrahams 2005; Jones, M. 1987; Mechling 2008; Mechling 2009). They have been reflective on pragmatism as a philosophy, particularly the work of William James in *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), in

which he explores the instrumental functions that beliefs bring to one's life rather than dismissing them as irrational. In 1985, when introducing a special section of *Western Folklore*, "William James and the Philosophical Foundations for the Study of Everyday Life," Mechling underscored that folklorists have a special role in a modern practice theory, because, "The folklorist brings to the interpretive approach the additional insight that practical reason is 'artlike,' that we are studying not 'mere' discourse but stylized communication that is often as expressive as it is instrumental. In fact, despite some careless lapses, folklorists have tended to see the 'consummatory experience' as being both expressive and instrumental, rejecting again the Cartesian dualism" (1985, 303-4). At the same time, Mechling complains that folklorists, as pragmatists, have not sufficiently sought a philosophical basis for their discipline. By his account, what is necessary is not an accounting of performative acts but their basis in mind and belief.

For my part, in shaping my perspective on *praxis*, I have looked to another pragmatist, George Herbert Mead, for more specifically proposing that a social act rather than social interaction is the central symbol that pairs divergent attitudes within a situation. He emphasized that the most complex intellectual processes "come back to the things we do." Although Mead was often accused of being ahistorical, I have tried to show in *Grasping Things* (1986) to *Folklore: The Basics* (2016) the significance of historical as well as cultural contexts for the perceptions of actions as symbolic by different participants often at odds with one another in social scenes, whether at a pigeon shoot, football game or presentation of a carved chain. Its generalization for folkloristics, taking into account the intellectual heritage of folkloristics in identity, expression, and representation, is to suggest analytic purpose in uncovering the repetition of individual acts involving taking the attitude of the other, the formation of significant symbols, dynamic qualities, and rhetorical agency.

Philosophically, as evident in the fifth analytical challenge of practice as a key to the conduct of everyday life in modern settings, folklore's significance in the study of repeatable practices—stylized, ritualized, and often organized—that people deem traditional, connotative, and meaningful is its evidence of the thinking that goes into the formation of culture on various levels from the individual to the nation. The manifestation of folk practice individually and socially indicates that humans have a psychological need for tradition and reshape traditions constantly in negotiation with various cultural forces (Bronner 1992; Bronner 2011, 1-62). The definition of "traditional knowledge drawn from or put into practice" not only serves to identify the cyclical link between thought and action in the organization of culture—folk, popular, and elite as well analog and digital—but also encompasses an array of materials with similar dynamic qualities. As many of us have learned, the more we practice the luckier, or more folkloric, we get.

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