Folk Event Analysis

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A folk or traditional event is, in the words of Barre Toelken, "a discrete set of actions and expressions that are motivated and directed more by group taste and demand than by the private idiosyncrasies of an individual" (Toelken 1996:157). In general, an event is shaped by the unities of time, place, personnel, activity, and purpose: a more-or-less homogeneous and stable group of people participates in primary or related activities in the same space throughout a specific time period for a common purpose. The primary activities in folk events give evidence of being based on pre-existing patterns and show continuity over time and consistency from place to place. Toelken goes on to declare that "life is full of events; some of them are folk performances," a statement that reflects a tendency to subordinate the event analysis to analysis of the performance. As used in this paper, the term "event analysis" refers to an approach that treats the whole of a folk event as a minimal unit of research.

In his seminal essay "Toward an Understanding of Storytelling Events," Robert A. Georges presents a holistic, rather than atomistic, approach to complex communicative events. He describes three procedures instrumental to this approach: (1) the development of a set of postulates describing various aspects of storytelling and the interrelationships among them; (2) the development of a model for representing diagrammatically these aspects and relationships; and (3) an evaluation of prevailing ideas about stories and storytelling in the light of the postulates and models provided by (1) and (2), together with a discussion of the implications for future research. Analysis of story texts, which once constituted the prevailing thrust of narrative studies, presents only a small part of the picture. What was ignored, or at best given short shrift, was the question of the social uses and functions of storytelling events (Georges 1969).

Georges's essay was an important contribution to a behavioral theory of folklore that was beginning to emerge during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Georges, Dan Ben-Amos, Roger Abrahams, Richard Bauman, Dell Hymes, Alan Dundes, Toelken, Elli Köngäs Maranda, and others rapidly developed approaches that examined individual and collective behavior through folklore. Many of their germinal contributions were published in

the special issue of the *Journal of American Folklore* published in early 1971 under the title of *Toward New Perspectives in Folklore.*

One perspective, initially proposed by Abrahams in his 1968 essay "Introductory Remarks to a Rhetorical Theory of Folklore," lays the foundation for a performance-oriented approach to folklore. "Items of expressive folklore," he writes, "differ from other modes of experience because they come to life only through that special kind of organized and habitual action called 'performance'" (1968). Performance studies developed rapidly over the next few years. Two key essays in the early development of a performance-oriented approach are Hymes's "Breakthrough Into Performance" and Bauman's "Verbal Art as Performance," both first published in 1975. Bauman, drawing on Hymes's essay as well as the work of Georges and Abrahams, refers to performance as "situated behavior," by which he means that it occurs in the context of an event, which he regards as the most important organizing principle in studying performance. However, it is clear that for Bauman the event is actually of secondary interest, the primary interest being the performance itself.

Michael Owen Jones has called for a shift from the usual attitude of researchers of material culture to include the behavior "involved in producing or responding to the physical dimension of our world....Material behavior includes not only objects that people construct but also the processes by which their artificers conceptualize them, fashion them, and use them or make them available for others to utilize" (1995:6). Thus sensory, practical, ideational, and therapeutic motivations are of legitimate folkloristic concern, as are the sensations and bodily movements involved in making objects or otherwise physically transforming the physical world, reactions to such objects and their manufacture, and so on. "Material behavior encompasses matters of personality, psychological states and processes, and social interaction in relation to artifacts," as well as ideas associated with them, meanings attributed to them, and ways they are used symbolically and instrumentally (Jones 1995:7).

To develop his case, Jones refers to and expands upon Georges's essay on storytelling events, applying the postulates enumerated there to studies of material behavior. Though Georges was writing about storytelling, Jones points out that the subject matter of folklore studies "consists not of isolated entities but cognitive, sensory, communicative, and interactional processes occurring within unique circumstances having their own dynamic" (1995:18). While Jones limits his discussion to material behavior, the implication is clear that the questions, problems, challenges, and ideas Georges raises about storytelling are relevant to

every area of folkloristic research. Behavioral theories of folklore need to incorporate event analysis as a standard tool of folkloristic research.

Georges's approach suggests that every folk event may be regarded as a communicative event as well as a social experience that, though unique in certain respects, nevertheless exhibits similarities to other folk events of its kind. In the course of his essay, Georges notes that all distinguishable communicative events (such as storytelling events) "have many different and interrelated aspects, all of which contribute to and are part of the whole event." The totality of the event comprises "a network of interrelationships among its many aspects." It is untenable to isolate or privilege one aspect of an event as dominant or determinative of the character of the whole event, and equally untenable to disregard any aspect as incidental to, subordinate to, or less important than all other aspects. The event is an indivisible whole. Any study of the event must proceed from a study of the interrelationships between aspects and between any one aspect and the whole event (Georges 1969:316–17).

The principles of the indivisibility of an event and the "democracy" among its component parts are of critical importance to event analysis. As the Danish semiotician Louis Hjelmslev observes, dividing the object of study into its component parts—the approach associated with naïve realism—encounters an initial difficulty in the multiplicity of ways of achieving such a division. "It soon becomes apparent," he writes, "that the important thing is not the division of an object into parts, but the conduct of the analysis so that it conforms to the mutual dependencies between these parts, and permits us to give an adequate account of them." The object of study and its parts exist only by virtue of their dependencies—that is, their interrelationships. Thus:

> The whole of the object under examination can be defined only by their sum total; and each of its parts can be defined only by the dependencies joining it to the other coordinated parts, to the whole, and to its parts of the next degree, and by the sum of the dependencies that these parts of the next degree contract with each other. (cited in Deely 1990:64)

Event analysis based only on division of an event into component parts is inadequate. To analyze folk events with any degree of thoroughness and relevance requires that we see the event as a totality characterized by a network of interrelationships among all its component parts, both those identified by the researcher and those that the event's participants regard as essential.

Identification of component parts of an event is a practical starting point for compiling and organizing descriptive data about events, however. Toelken provides a useful checklist of describable aspects of folk events

that includes "apparent" and "esoteric" aspects of events, corresponding to what is seen by the researcher and what is experienced by the participant: context and occasion; framework (apparent and esoteric beginnings and ends); participants and their roles; apparent and esoteric sequences; simultaneous and overlapped elements and intersections with other events; and apparent and esoteric significance of event components. Toelken is careful to point out that native categories of preparatory and consequential behavior, for example, may differ significantly from those initially identified as significant by the researcher. He cites a Navajo film about weaving in which weaving occurs only briefly at the end, the rest of the film showing the raising of sheep, shearing, and so on, all activities that are of greater significance to the Navajos than might appear to a non-native researcher (1996).

Another checklist is that developed by Hymes, who uses the mnemonic acronym SPEAKING to describe eight aspects of a speech event: Setting (the time and place of occurrence); Participants (including everyone present or involved in the event); Ends (goals, results); Act sequence (including apparent and esoteric sequences); Key (emotional tone); Instrumentalities (the communicative channels used); Norms (social rules); and Genres (1974:3–66). Hymes's checklist has proved useful to a number of scholars, including Elizabeth C. Fine, who makes use of this schematic in her study of the problems of describing narrative and other verbal folklore performances (1994:36–37).

However useful such checklists may be at the descriptive phase that precedes analysis, they are no substitute for analysis itself. This must begin where description leaves off, and must include not only the social functions of events, which are inferred by the researcher, but social uses as articulated and communicated by participants. This is a point emphasized in Georges's 1969 essay on storytelling events. Instrumental to Georges's approach, and by extension to folk events in general, are a set of four postulates that establish the basis for analysis and a model that serves to suggest processes and interrelationships among them, to communicate the nature of the event being studied, and to suggest resemblances between theoretical aspects and the real subject matter.

Summarized and adapted to general use (the reader is referred to Georges 1969 for the full description), the postulates may be stated as follows:

1. Every folk event is a communicative event, characterized by message encoders and decoders, direct person-to-person communication, message transmission through multiple codes (linguistic, paralinguistic, kinesic, etc.), and continuous response to transmission and reception ("feedback").

2. Every event is a social experience with social uses and social functions, the participants establishing a specific set of identity relationships through one or more social identities, and behaving in accordance with a specific set of status relationships.

3. Every event is unique in terms of time, space, set of social relationships, and "unique systems of social and psychological forces, which exert pressure on the social environment and upon those whose interactions create that social environment" (Georges 1969:319).

4. Events exhibit degrees and kinds of similarities that enable members of a society to group them, according to culturally determined criteria.

The model developed by Georges consists of a diagram, whose elements represent symbolically various aspects of the social relationships and interactions among participants in the course of an event, and an analytical description of the diagram and its elements. He uses amoeba-like figures to represent social personas whose social identities develop during the event; arrows within and outside the figures to represent social forces acting on these personas; overlapping and intersection of the figures to represent varying degrees of interrelationship, intensity of interaction, and relevance of social forces; and changes in figure size to represent varying degrees of prominence during the course of the event. The diagram shows a sequence of stages through which the event unfolds, the motion understood as being continuous.

The first stage shows the situation in which "two or more people whose interactions constitute communication" meet:
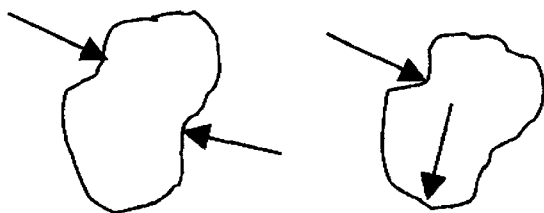
As interaction occurs between storyteller and audience, the diagram becomes a complex network of inner and outer motives and constraints:
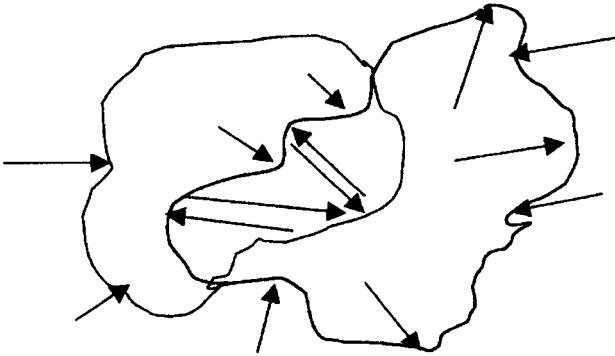
As the event concludes, the boundaries separating the roles of storyteller and audience reach their maximum fusion:
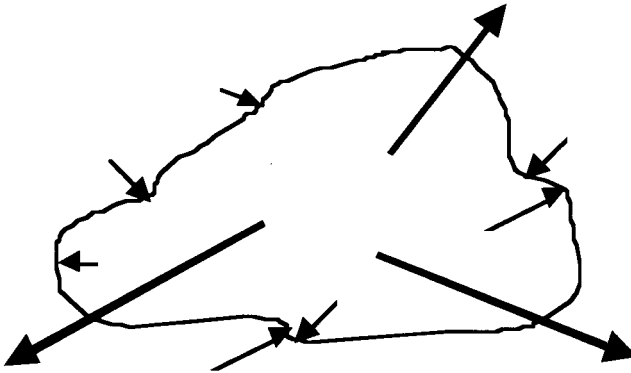
This in turn leads to a return to the initial situation of separation (diagrams after Georges 1969:320–21).

Georges points out that there are inherent difficulties in creating and using models as a means of analysis. One of these is that "models of dynamic phenomena inevitably overlook certain variables whose predictability and effects are often unmeasureable or unknown" (1969:319). Another is that

models depend on arbitrary divisions in order to represent the totality of an event, and these can be mistaken for component parts, rather than prominent features. As long as these reservations are taken into consideration, the researcher's analysis of events can yield fruitful results. The arbitrary nature of the divisions can provide a bonus in terms of generating alternative models and analyses by other researchers, whose combined efforts can lead to a deeper understanding of the events being studied.

Two fine examples of event analysis are Mary Douglas's 1972 study of the structure of ordinary meals in American life and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's "A Parable in Context," published in 1975. Sharon Sherman's film on the folklore of a Passover Seder yields important insights into the social dynamics of a family event (Sherman 1983). Her description of making the film contains valuable discussions of the difficulties in capturing the total event (1986). Studies of festival and ritual also deal with special cases of folk events in which the prevailing social code may be even violated or temporarily replaced by a special one. These shed light on the existence of the code and the complex network of interrelationships among participants, but also raise intriguing questions about those events that, replete with folklore, occur on a regular basis and may conform closely to the prevailing social code.

Douglas's analysis of the implicit social code governing the structure of meals in her own home exemplifies the application of event analysis to ordinary events. Studies of American contra dance events by Mary McNab Dart, Dorothea Hast, and others (including the author) also make use of event analysis. A kinesic code might be thought dominant at a dance event, perhaps because researchers have preconceptions of the event in terms of dancing. For musicians, however, it is a "gig," an occasion for them to demonstrate musical competence. For the caller, it is an occasion to demonstrate verbal agility and choreographic expertise. For the sound technician, a dance event represents a complex technological challenge that must be interwoven with social interactions with other participants in their various roles. For organizers, cashiers, and a host of other kinds of participants, all of whom are essential to the whole event, it has significance often quite other than it has for the dancers. Moreover, for all participants before, after, between, and even during individual dances, it is a communicative event and a social experience characterized by continuous linguistic, paralinguistic, and kinesic communication among the participants, whatever their social role might be. A model of a contra dance will include preparatory behavior such as organization and advertisement, selection by the dancers of what to wear, tunes (musicians), dances (caller), equipment (sound technician), and so on. Consequential behavior might include payment

(sound technician), and so on. Consequential behavior might include payment of musicians and caller by the cashier, after-hour gatherings of "endorphin-charged" dancers, and post-mortem evaluations by various participants, including those who organize such events and hire bands and callers (Dart 1995; Hast 1995; Jordan-Smith 1995, 1996, 1997).

Summary

In this paper I have presented the idea that folk events are complex, structured expressions of group meanings and values, and as such need an analytic treatment independent of related studies such as performance analysis. The work of Abrahams, Bauman, Hymes, Toelken, Georges, and Jones has done much to advance the principles upon which event analysis must be based. At the time of this writing, more attention is being given to folklore as situated performance than to the event considered as a folklore item unto itself. The book is still to be written that definitively describes event analysis as an approach. One thing is clear: event analysis is much more than a set of techniques subordinate to performance analysis. Many studies are bound by the constraints of naïve realism in which subdivision into component parts is the fundamental analytic technique. As Georges points out, the only valid approach is a holistic one that treats the event itself as a minimal unit of analysis. Functional studies are useful only to the degree that they include the social uses of events—those defined and articulated by participants—as at least of equal importance to the inferences drawn by the researcher. Studies that focus on special events such as rituals and festivals can contribute much, but it must be remembered that social rules, functions, and uses are particularized in such events and need to be understood in relation to ordinary events within a society. While a generalized model of the folk event is desirable, it is likely that this can only come about through a collaborative effort among students of specific types of events, including those everyday events that make up our lives.

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