

## May 9, 2012: Individuals, Stories, and Concepts

*While ethnography often emphasizes the life of a group, in some texts, individuals and their stories emerge in clearer focus. Anthropological concepts can be used to help understand an individual's life, and a person's experience can also illumine larger concepts. Today's lecture introduces folklore and then considers how concepts introduced in the last few weeks might apply to the ethnographic situation around Swamiji, a Hindu holy man who told stories as a form of religious teaching.*

(Swamiji: the storyteller that Professor did her fieldwork on)

### A. Folklore

- a. Subject/discipline associated with **expressive culture**
- b. Professor Alan Dundes lecturing at U.C. Berkley
- c. **Folk** – groups of people
- d. **"Volk"** in European nationalism – "spirit of the people" (i.e., The Grimm Brothers)
- e. "Any group whatsoever who share at least one common factor"
- f. **Lore** – genres of expression
- g. **Genre** – (French) "kind" – patterned forms (moving from normal expression to a more specialized form)

**Hearing a narrative, we interpret its content and meaning through cues about its genre; the frame of a performance reminds us that we're entering a different space. i.e. we hear "once upon a time" and we know we're entering the space of a fairy tale.**

### B. Folklore Genres

- a. Performance Frame: aesthetically highlights communication
- b. Verbal lore (once upon a time)
- c. Material culture (i.e., ceramics, folk creations)
- d. Folk custom (i.e., women drawing on thresholds, dressing up)
- e. Performing folk arts
- f. Can be emic: i.e., "suhag"
  - i. And etic: "folksong"

### C. Oral Narrative

- a. Reshaped by teller in interaction with listeners (in context to who is the listener)
- b. Subtly changed in each retelling (how these stories change as they move)
- c. **Three main oral genres:**
  - i. **Myth:** sacred narrative (Greek *mythos* – "true tale")
  - ii. **Legend:** historical aspect (involve noteworthy events with humans or superhuman/deities)

iii. **Folktale**: make-believe characters

- d. What about **personal narratives**?
- i. These also have a collective aspect; people speak of experience in culturally appropriate forms, elaborating cultural themes.
  - ii. All these oral forms of storytelling are reshaped by a teller in interaction with listeners and subtly changed in each retelling

D. Folklore as a site of creativity?

- a. Exhibits multiple existence and **variation**
- b. Often anonymous in origin
- c. Expresses what matters to a group (people's concerns are revealed in the way that they tell a story)
- d. Can be a way for the powerless to speak out safely (to challenge dominate perceptions)

Moving from folklore to consider **Concepts and Lived Contexts** through considering the field research in Nasik (now Nashik) written up in Kirin Narayan's *Storytellers, Saints and Scoundrels: Folk Narrative as Hindu Religious Teaching*. How might concepts discussed in previous lectures relate to ethnographic context?

E. Cultural encounters?

- a. (Where Swamiji was living; also example of how globalized Chungking Mansions is) Intersection of different flows:
  - i. Of people
  - ii. Ideas and stories
  - iii. Food and things...
- b. He had Darshan hours (when he told his stories)
- c. Languages: Sanskrit, Hindi, French, etc.

F. Social Roles?

- a. Swamiji was a *sadhu* or holy man (though he did call himself a *sannyasi*, one who has renounced worldly life, stepping away from ties of caste and kinship)
- b. He was also a *yogi*, doing meditation practices ("yoga" – to yoke, join together, control the mind and inner energies)
- c. A Guru or teacher
- d. Many of Swamiji's stories were about *sadhus*
- e. He was also an "Agaram-bagaram Baba" or *Topsy-turvy holy man*
- f. The subtle energy body
  - i. Shakti –energy
  - ii. Yoga – to yoke, join together, control one inner energies
  - iii. Charka locuses – increase energy

- g. **Exchange?**
  - i. Food offerings and other gifts made to Swamiji would be redistributed to all. Stories exchanged too
  - ii. PRASAD: food offerings that are then distributed to all
- h. **Gender (only 15% of sadhus are women)**
  - i. Fellow disciples of the mother goddess or gurus (emotional ties)
  - ii. Swamiji as a man in a mostly male world of sadhus; genders separated in the room; Mother goddess as focus of worship; all girls and women addressed as 'Mother'
- i. **Kinship**
  - i. Alternative kinship relations elaborated around the Guru-disciple relationship; i.e. Guru-brothers, Guru-sisters bonded in a community
- j. **Indigeneity? Adivasi (local people in the region)**
  - i. Swamiji built a school (feeding program for children)
  - ii. Adivasi "original inhabitants;" Swamiji's program for feeding and helping educate Adivasi children return us to the theme of shared food in the opening story.

**To summarize: In addition to introducing folklore, this lecture attempted to show how some very basic concepts discussed over the past few weeks illuminate an individual, stories, and social life as described in one ethnography. I hope that the toolkit of anthropological concepts shared this semester might be drawn on and built on when encountering other individuals, their stories, and their lived contexts.**