Folk Ideas as Units of Worldview

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Folk Ideas as Units of Worldview

For some time now, folklorists have become increasingly annoyed at what they regard as a nonprofessional and indiscriminately extended use of the term "myth" to apply to a wide variety of materials. Accordingly, folklorists are wont to shudder when they read discussions about the "myth" of capitalism or the "myth" of race by different social scientists, who often use "myth" simply as a synonym for "error" or "fallacy." These definitely are not what the folklorist means by the term "myth," folklorists carefully explain to questioning students. To the folklorist, a myth is first of all a narrative and that alone rules out most of what modern social scientists refer to under the rubric of myth. Generally speaking, social scientists' use of the term "myth" has little or nothing to do with traditional narrative forms. Rather it has to do with a belief or a belief system. Moreover, their use of the term "myth" nearly always carries an explicit negative connotation as in Ashley Montagu's book in which race or racism is referred to as man's most dangerous myth.¹

If folklorists wish to guard their own narrow definition of myth in the sense of a sacred oral narrative, explaining how the earth or man came to be in their present form, then they ought to offer some constructive terminological alternative to refer to those cultural phenomena that nonfolklorists persist in calling myths. The mere insistence by folklorists that such phenomena as political "myths" are not really true myths doesn't solve the problem. If these materials are not myths, then what are they? And should they, whatever they are, be studied by folklorists or not?

I believe that there are traditional notions or conceptions that properly belong in the province of the professional folklorist but which have never been fully recognized as being part of folklore because of the folklorist's obstinate tendency to be bound by traditional genres. There can be no question that genre theory has been instrumental in shaping the discipline of folkloristics. Once any corpus of folklore has been collected, it is to matters of genre classification that folklorists invariably turn. Obviously the exigencies of archiving have forced the folklorist to think in terms of classification and genres. "What do I call this?" and "Where do I file it?" are common questions in folklore archives around the world. Within

¹ Ashley Montagu, Man's Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race (New York, 1945).
conventional genres, for example, myth, folktales, and games, there are, of course, elaborate refinements of subclassification schemes created in order to facilitate "information retrieval." But despite the practical necessity of defining and refining genre categories, the fact remains that the folklorist's habit of thinking of his field almost exclusively in terms of traditional genres tends to be a limiting one. It is a habit which leads him to emphasize certain kinds of folkloristic materials and to totally ignore others.

The genre divisions often artificially limit research. For example, a scholar may write about themes in mythology or even in a single myth and pay no attention to the occurrence of the identical themes in other genres. Even course offerings in folklore, and occasionally whole research institutes, are organized by genre. Yet surveys or even partial surveys of various supposedly established genres reveal that there is frequently little agreement among folklorists as to precisely what a given genre is. Are genres cross-cultural or not? Is what American folklorists consider under the genre label "proverb" the same as what a German folklorist calls a Sprichwort or what a Japanese folklorist calls kotowaza? We are aware of the fact that in any one culture there may be a difference between folk or native categories on the one hand and analytic categories on the other. What the folk in the United States might term "old sayings," the American folklorist might group under "superstition," "proverb," etc. But what are the criteria for the establishment of these various analytic categories? And to what extent are these criteria applicable to folkloristic materials from other cultures?

Let me illustrate some of the difficulty by citing a concrete example. Most American folklorists would probably agree that "Lightning never strikes twice in the same place" is a bona fide item of folklore. But to what genre does it belong? I believe that depending upon the specific context and use of this item in a particular situation, the item may be either a superstition or a proverb in terms of conventional genre distinctions. If the item is believed literally to be a fact of nature—an individual in the midst of a thunderstorm consciously standing on a place where lightning has previously struck to avoid being hit—then the item would normally be classified as a folk belief or superstition. If, on the other hand, it is taken metaphorically to mean simply that history is nonrepetitive and that an individual who has suffered one misfortune is unlikely to suffer an identical one, then the item would most probably be labelled as a proverb. Incidentally, this example demonstrates the fallacy of simply collecting folklore text items without regard to context and publishing long lists of raw data without accompanying full explanations.

There are many other perplexing problems having to do with genre assignment. To what genre does "All signs fail in dry weather" belong? I would be tempted to classify it as a metafolkloristic proverb commenting upon the lack of reliability of sign superstitions having to do with predicting rainfall. How would American folklorists classify the idea that when it thunders, God is moving his furniture, or that potato carts are rolling across the sky, or that two clouds are

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bumping their heads together, or that angels are rolling stones downhill? The variant which ascribes thunder to gnomes' bowling up in the sky is probably related to Washington Irving’s story of Rip Van Winkle. To say that such items are used to allay the fears of small children when they hear thunder is not to say to what genre of folklore they belong. Other weather phenomena are similarly described: "The old woman is picking her geese" means it's snowing, with the falling snow presumably being the plucked goose feathers, and the rain is "Angels crying." These are not proverbs and they are not superstitions. They are rarely if ever believed to be true and they are hardly traditional causal statements of the form "If A then B, unless C." Kuusi in his excellent study of "The Devil is Beating His Wife," said when rain falls but the sun continues to shine, uses the term circumlocution. Of course, one might argue that it doesn't really matter to what genres such items belong. It is sufficient to collect and analyze the items without worrying about how to classify them. The practical question of where to file them in folklore archives still remains, however.

One could imagine that in time folklorists might agree as to the generic nature of fictive weather descriptions, but what about a notion found in American culture that everything or every person has its or his price? There are numerous traditional expressions concerning the measure of money, for example, "Money isn't everything but it helps," "Money talks," "What does it mean in dollars and cents?" In fact, Americans are suspicious of items priced too low. Bargains are desirable, but "something for nothing" may be of poor quality. The rule of thumb seems to be "You get what you pay for." This idea that any object can be measured in monetary terms seems to be a traditional one in American culture; but it is not always stated in fixed-phrase form, and therefore it is probably inappropriate to call it a proverb. Moreover, if it is not a traditional statement of cause and effect we folklorists would probably not feel comfortable in classifying it as a superstition—though possibly we might attempt to label it as a folk belief. In any event, I suggest that the idea that any thing or any person can be "bought"—whether or not it is ultimately true—is a part of American worldview. Furthermore, it is an important part of American worldview inasmuch as Americans may deal with peoples from other cultures who do not share such a materialistic, capitalistic view of the world. To the extent that such premises or ideas are traditional, I believe they are part of folklore and that they should be studied by folklorists. As a concession to our nominalizing penchant, I propose we term such notions "folk ideas."

By "folk ideas," I mean traditional notions that a group of people have about the nature of man, of the world, and of man's life in the world. Folk ideas would not constitute a genre of folklore but rather would be expressed in a great variety of different genres. Proverbs would almost certainly represent the expression of one or more folk ideas, but the same folk ideas might also appear in folktales, folksongs, and in fact almost every conventional genre of folklore, not to mention nonfolkloristic materials. However, insofar as folk ideas are the unstated premises

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5 The story in which the hero bluffs the ogre by claiming that the thunder is the noise made by the rolling of his brother's wagon is classified as Arne-Thompson tale type 1147.

which underlie the thought and action of a given group of people, they are not likely to appear consistently in any fixed-phrase form.

There may well be other terms that might be considered more appropriate than "folk ideas," for instance, "basic premises," "cultural axioms," or "existential postulates." The particular term is really not the point. What is important is the task of identifying the various underlying assumptions held by members of a given culture. All cultures have underlying assumptions and it is these assumptions or folk ideas which are the building blocks of worldview. Any one worldview will be based upon many individual folk ideas and if one is seriously interested in studying worldview, one will need first to describe some of the folk ideas which contribute to the formation of that worldview. Sometimes, folk ideas may be articulated in a particular proverb or exemplum, but if folk ideas are normally expressed not in one but rather in a variety of genres, then it is imperative that the folklorist make the attempt to extrapolate such ideas from the folklore as a whole. To do this, the folklorist must of necessity escape the self-imposed bind of genres and categories. Once one has identified a number of folk ideas present in a culture, one may begin to perceive what the pattern, if any, of these ideas is and how each of the ideas is related to the total worldview of that culture.

It would be folly at this point even to speculate about the possible number of folk ideas in American culture, but it might be useful to discuss several tentative folk ideas as a means of illustrating the nature of such ideas and how they are manifested in folklore. Let us assume for the sake of argument that one American folk idea is that there is no real limit as to how much of any one commodity can be produced. The traditional phrase "There's (plenty) more where that came from" could refer to an invitation to eat heartily as there is an abundant supply in the kitchen or it could refer to a warning to a bully that there is more punishment in store for him if he doesn't keep his distance. If we wished to label this particular tentative folk idea, we might term it "the principle of unlimited good."

One advantage of this label is the contrast it affords with the "principle of limited good" which anthropologist George Foster has suggested as a characteristic notion in Mexican (and other) peasant cultures. This also raises the interesting question of how folk ideas as units of worldview of the "scientific" observer might influence what "folk ideas" the folklorist might discover in the other cultures he studies. The notion of "limited good" is obviously particularly striking to members of a culture who share a notion of unlimited good.

There seem to be numerous expressions of the folk idea of unlimited good in

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5 There is simply no agreement in the anthropological literature as to what to call what I am terming folk ideas. Clyde Kluckhohn, for example, was extremely interested in the "unstated assumptions" that a people take for granted. In his exemplary discussion of nine such assumptions among the Navaho, he referred to them as "Some Premises of Navaho Life and Thought." See Clyde Kluckhohn and Dorothea Leighton, The Navaho, rev. ed. (Garden City, N. Y., 1962), 303–314. E. Adamson Hoebel speaks of "cultural postulates" in his textbook Anthropology: The Study of Man, 3rd ed. (New York, 1966), 23; and he has delineated sixteen major basic postulates underlying Cheyenne culture in The Cheyennes: Indians of the Great Plains (New York, 1960), 98–99. Hoebel does see postulates as providing the frame of reference for a people's worldview.

American society. "The sky's the limit" would be one expression while "shooting the moon" in the card game of hearts or "going for broke" might be others. The idea that "Any man can be President" (despite that fact that no woman and no Negro has ever been President) suggests the lack of limit to opportunity. Politicians who promise "a car in every garage and a chicken in every pot" could only be convincing in a culture where there were a virtually limitless number of cars and chickens possible.

Another illustration of the principle of unlimited good is perhaps provided by American buried treasure legends. In this context, it may be significant that most accounts end with the treasure still not recovered. This suggests that Americans think that America remains a land of opportunity, that boundless wealth is still readily available to anyone with the energy and initiative to go dig for it. The fact that the legends are open ended—they do not end as some legends do—may indicate that they are standing invitations to Americans to dig and provide their own happy ending to the story. This may have to do with other American folk ideas such as: "Hard work will pay off," "Where there's a will, there's a way," and more precisely with the proviso that the "pay off" and "way" will consist of material reward, for instance, treasure or money. American buried treasure legends afford an interesting comparison with Mexican treasure tales insofar as the latter traditions include the finding of the treasure. In fact, as Foster observes, it is the finding of buried treasure that is used to explain the appearance of sudden wealth in a Mexican peasant community where the principle of limited good prevails. Normally, with such a view, one could only obtain wealth at someone else's expense. The discovery of buried treasure may represent a form of supernatural aid for fortunate individuals. In contrast, in American worldview, the good fortune of one individual does not necessarily mean misfortune for another. With a notion of unlimited good, there can be good fortune for all.

The contrast between limited good and unlimited good is one which could be extended way beyond discussions of buried treasure legends. For instance, a comparison of Mexican (and for that matter, European) universities with American universities in the area of professorial appointments reveals the same contrast. In the hierarchical European system, there is usually only one professor in a subject at a particular university or at any rate only a few professors. There is thus "limited good" and one cannot obtain a "chair" unless it is vacated, for example, by the death of an incumbent. This is why young academicians are forced to wait expectantly—almost vulture-like—for an opening to occur. They must then fight each other for the post. In the American system, there are many professors in a subject at a university. In theory, there is room for all to be advanced and one need not wait or hope for a colleague's misfortune in order to be promoted.

Assuming that there is a folk idea in American culture having to do with the notion of unlimited good, we can see that it may be manifested in materials as diverse as proverbs and legends. But are there folk ideas which are without expression in traditional folklore genres? If so, then this would present special methodological problems for the folklorist who was anxious to identify folk

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ideas. Let us consider as a possible American folk idea the notion that if something is good for you, it must taste bad. If it doesn’t have a bad taste, then it probably won’t help you. This notion could apply to food; for example, to vegetables which children are asked to consume in the name of good health, or to bitter medicines. (One popular brand of mouthwash even features the bad taste of the product in its 1970 advertising as though its awful taste were somehow conclusive proof of its effectiveness.) This possible folk idea may or may not be related ultimately to the Puritan attitudes towards pleasure and pain to the effect that pleasure is sinful and that one must experience pain and the denial of pleasure to achieve salvation. (This association with the Puritan ethic is also suggested by the corollary idea that if something tastes good—like candy—it must be bad for your health.) In any case, the point here is simply that the folk idea of bad-tasting things being more likely to be good for one than good-tasting things is, in my opinion, a part of traditional American thought that is likely to be overlooked by folklorists whose powers of observation are limited by conventional genre categories.

Both ideas, that of unlimited good and that of salvation through suffering, share a commitment to progress. Tomorrow will be better than today, and today in turn is better than yesterday. The future orientation in American worldview is tied to a “bigger and better” principle. However, it is “achieving” rather than “achievement” that counts and the folk ideas lead ultimately to frustration. This may be seen by considering some of the many forms and symbols of success in American culture, for example, position in a rank-order scheme, as in football teams or automobile rental agencies vying to be “number one,” the acquisition of sizable financial resources—the size often indicated by the number of figures in one’s annual salary, the number of acres of one’s estate, the number of rooms (especially bathrooms!) in one’s home, and the number of cars that one owns. But it is not success per se that is worshipped. Rather it is the process of becoming a success that is admired. Once one has achieved success, one is established and it is time to look for a new achiever. There must always be new losers or underdogs to root for. Americans love upsets; they love to see favorites and front-runners get beaten. “Records were made to be broken.”

These folk ideas produce frustration. On the one hand, there is a drive towards success, but on the other hand, attainment of success can, by definition, be but a temporary one in the context of a progressive continuum of change. Whatever the success is, it is bound to be surpassed by a new success, probably by someone else. This is noncyclic worldview. It is linear and it builds from successful climax to successful climax. This means that with an open system, one can never achieve the ultimate climax, one can never achieve perfection. With the principle of unlimited good, there are always more mountains to be scaled, problems to be solved, money to be made. This suggests a worldview which allows satisfactions, but only limited ones. In other words, the principle of unlimited good in and of itself implies frustration since one can in theory never acquire all the good however good is measured.

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The linearity of American life so beautifully described by Dorothy Lee⁹ and so evident in the American definitions of success and progress should not blind us to the possibility that two or more folk ideas in a single worldview system may be in opposition. One need not assume that all the folk ideas of a given culture are necessarily mutually reconcilable within a uniform, harmonious worldview matrix. For example, the line is one model of American thought. One respects directness and "straight" talk. One dislikes people who are "crooked" and one hopes they will eventually go "straight" and get "squared" away (for example, ex-con Square Johns). People who get "out of line" need to be "straightened out." In business, one tries to get a "line" on something, a "line" of goods perhaps. One must be "sharp" and look for "angles." In general, the line is opposed to the circle. Circular reasoning is despised, as are most roundabout ways of speaking. "Going around in circles" is a traditional metaphor for ineffectiveness and futility. It is believed that people who are lost go in circles. One of the traditional goals of mathematicians is to "square the circle," a neat encapsulation of the "line conquering the circle."

Recently, the line versus the circle opposition has taken a new turn. It has been restated in terms of straight versus groovy. Curves mean "curvaceous" and sex; lines mean "straight" or "square" and the denial of sex. There is a movement away from the "straight and narrow" towards the "groovy and broad." It is possible that part of the shift has come from American Negro subculture. For decades, American Negroes accepted the straight world of the dominant white culture, even to the extent of trying to "straighten" kinky, curly hair. But finally, American Negro culture has begun to stop denying cyclicity and circularity. In fact, middle class whites have even begun to imitate American Negro culture. This may be seen in folk and popular dance. The "square" dance and the standard popular dance step known as the "box step" have yielded to twisting, rotating round dance movements as the American white body has sought release from the restricting confines of Puritan strait-jackets. Professor Roger Abrahams has suggested to me that the circular worldview may stem from the cyclic nature of rural country life with its calendrical cycle as model. Following this reasoning, one is tempted to see urban life as insisting upon the more efficient line as in square city blocks and actual efforts to eliminate curves in well-travelled roads.

There are other examples of folk ideas in opposition. For instance, in American culture there is the folk idea that all individuals are or should be equal in terms of opportunity. We have already mentioned the "Any man can be President" philosophy. Through rugged individualism, any person can in theory move "from rags to riches" in a Horatio Alger–like pattern. This folk idea is supported by the Puritan ethic and capitalism. At the same time, there is the folk idea, intimately related to the notion of democracy, that political decisions should be made not on the basis of individual wishes, but on the basis of what is deemed best by and for the majority. Thus if social security and a welfare state are adjudged best for the majority, then individuals must turn over the fruits of free enterprise to

the state for redistribution to the less fortunate. It is not easy to reconcile pure capitalism and pure socialism. It is just as difficult to reconcile pure rugged individualism with the idea that the individual must deny individualism in favor of what is best for the group. Both principles are taught to American children and the fundamental opposition is left unresolved. (In some sense, of course, all human societies have to wrestle with the problem of the rights of the individual versus the rights of the group to which that individual belongs.) This is why American children may become confused when they learn on the one hand that leadership is a good and necessary thing but then, on the other hand, that in an ideal democracy, everyone is equal and leaders are resented.

One solution to the leadership-democracy paradox is suggested by a children’s game. It is variously titled “Patterns” or “Find the Leader.” A group of children gather in a circle and send an individual who has been chosen “It” out of the room or away from the playing area. One child in the circle is then selected as “leader” and all the others have to imitate his actions, such as handclapping, jumping up and down, and whirling around in place. The leader changes the motions at intervals of his choice. “It” is summoned and given three guesses to identify who in the circle is the leader, that is, who is responsible for causing the various changes in the group’s movements. Obviously, a successful leader is one who can artfully conceal the fact that it is he who is the first to start a new body movement. By the same token, the other members of the circle must be able to follow without revealing to “It” that they are following rather than leading. This children’s game may thus be providing a model for an ideal leadership role in American society, namely, that one should lead without making it obvious that he is leading. Americans in positions of authority may be forced to give orders in a nonauthoritarian way in contrast to leaders in societies who do not share the folk idea of egalitarianism (“anybody is as good as anybody else”) and who are free to lead in autocratic, authoritarian fashion. This may be why in American culture one may ask rather than order a subordinate to perform a certain task. Moreover, subordinate employees may be given some of the accouterments of higher status positions, for example, enlisted men wearing officer-style caps or janitors being rechristened custodians.

There are many other folk ideas in American culture which could be mentioned; an important one is the idea that science and technology can eventually solve any problem. Any problem which has not yet been solved could in theory be solved if enough money could be poured into appropriate research efforts. Here we see a combination of the folk idea concerning the infallibility of science and technology and the idea of the “everything having its price.” (Also implied is the folk idea that man can control his environment—rather than the environment controlling man.) However, the purpose of this essay is not to attempt even a partial itemization of American folk ideas but only to call attention to the possibility of the existence of folk ideas.

One problem arising from the discussion of folk ideas has to do with traditional stereotypes. The question is: are traditional stereotypes folk ideas or not? By traditional stereotypes, I refer to such notions as “The French are great lovers,” “Negroes have a natural sense of rhythm,” or “Jews have big noses.” These might well be examples of what political scientists or sociologists would
call "myths"; but a folklorist would surely not call these myths. But just what would he call them? Are they folk beliefs? I am tempted to term such traditional statements "folk fallacies" rather than folk ideas. They would be folk fallacies because they are demonstrably false. Of course, there is always the matter of "proving" to everyone's (including bigots') satisfaction that folk fallacies are in fact fallacious. No doubt, if the distinction between folk fallacies and folk ideas were to be accepted, there might well be disputes about where individual items should be appropriately placed and in this way should be plunged once more into the hopeless quagmire of genre-type classificatory arguments. Yet I do think there is value in making a distinction between folk fallacies and folk ideas. One difference is that the folk are normally consciously aware of folk fallacies (though not necessarily that they are fallacies) and can articulate them without difficulty. Folk fallacies are part of the stated premises of a culture. In contrast, individuals may or may not be consciously aware of folk ideas and they may not be able to articulate them at all. In this sense, folk fallacies tend to be "native" or folk statements as opposed to "analytic" statements which are descriptions of reality made as a result of and only after analytic study. Folk ideas would be more a matter of basic unquestioned premises concerning the nature of man, of society, and of the world, and these premises although manifested in folklore proper might not be at all obvious to the folk in whose thinking they were central. Folk fallacies such as stereotypes would therefore be part of the conscious or self-conscious culture of a people whereas folk ideas would be part of the unconscious or unself-conscious culture of a people.10

The distinction between conscious and unconscious culture is not always easy to draw. By unconscious culture, I do not mean repressed culture in any Freudian sense. Rather I refer to the fact that individual members of a culture are not able to consciously articulate all aspects of their culture. Fortunately, people with virtually no conscious idea of the nature of the grammar of their language are able to speak perfectly well and be understood by other members of their culture who likewise have no conscious awareness of the grammatical nature of their language. There have been many metaphors for this lack of consciousness (for example, a fish is not aware it is in water since it knows no other medium), but one of the most apt was used by Ruth Benedict when she remarked that "we do not see the lens through which we look."11

One of the essential tasks of anthropologists and folklorists is to make people aware, consciously aware, of their cultures. However, if people become conscious of what was formerly unconscious, will the cultural patterning change? In the present context, the question would be: if unstated folk ideas become stated folk ideas, will this have any effect upon the influence of these ideas? It is a moot point. On the one hand, one could argue that if more Americans were consciously aware of the folk idea that everything has its price, it would not necessarily alter this mode of perceiving reality in the slightest. On the other hand, if one wished to offer alternative measurement schemes, it would obviously be extremely help-

10 Traditional stereotypes about other nations and cultures are normally grouped by folklorists under such labels as ethnic slurs or blason populaire. See Alan Dundes, ed., The Study of Folklore (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1965), 43–44.
ful to know what measurement criteria were already being employed. Thus making
the cultural unconscious conscious is the first step toward change—if that is what
is desired—much as psychoanalytic therapy aims to help individuals by first mak-
ing their unconscious conscious.

A final point should be made with respect to the relationship between folk
ideas and folk values. In discussions of worldview, there is commonly a distinction
made between worldview and ethos. Worldview refers to the cognitive, existential
aspects of the way the world is structured. Ethos refers to the normative and
evaluative (including esthetic and moral judgments) aspects of culture. Hoebel’s
terms are “existential postulates” as opposed to “normative postulates” or values,
though he seems to include both types of postulates in the all encompassing term
worldview. In my opinion, it is possible if not probable that there may be value
judgments surrounding a folk idea, but the folk idea in one sense can be con-
sidered independent of such value judgements. Assuming there is an American
folk idea that there is an unlimited amount of good, one can imagine that some
individuals might feel that this situation was a desirable one while others might
feel that it was undesirable. The folk idea per se would simply be an empirical
description of the nature of reality (or at least a segment of reality as perceived
in one particular culture). Folk ideas, then, are no more than descriptive con-
structs and as such they are neither good nor bad. The idea that everything has
its price could be either good or bad or neither. In contrast, the proverb “Money
is the root of all evil” takes a definite moral position.

Folklorists in deciding whether or not they wish to make use of a concept such
as folk ideas should probably consider a number of factors. First of all, there is
the question of the traditionality of unstated premises. It is one thing to call a tale
type traditional and quite another to call the one or more folk ideas expressed in
that tale type traditional. Moreover, if folk ideas are articulated only after analysis,
aren’t there a considerable risk in calling such ideas traditional? Might not one be
in danger of labelling a particular analyst’s idiosyncratic formulations as “tradition-
al”? Although an analyst might claim that his formulations of “folk ideas”
were extrapolated directly from folklore, they might perhaps be little more than
figments of his fertile imagination.

Secondly, doesn’t the proposed emphasis to be placed upon the search for folk
ideas constitute a serious threat to the continued research on individual genres?
Aren’t folk ideas in fact a kind of glorified super-genre supposedly underlying
all other folklore genres?

There is also the question of methodology. How precisely does a folklorist
determine what the folk ideas of a given folk group are? How can one work
inductively from folkloristic data to arrive at a delineation of one or more folk
ideas?

There are certainly legitimate questions to be raised about the conceptualization
of folk ideas and their utility and practicality for folklore research. Nevertheless,
I believe the fundamental issue is the nature of the discipline of folkloristics. If

12 This involves another thorny theoretical controversy. I follow Geertz’s distinction between
ethos and worldview. See Clifford Geertz, “Ethos, World-View and the Analysis of Sacred Sym-
bols,” The Antioch Review, 17 (1957), 421–437; reprinted in Dundes, Every Man His Way,
301–315.
13 E. Adamson Hoebel, Anthropology, 23, 500.
folklorists are interested only in collecting and preserving the heirlooms of the past so as to produce a permanent, antiquarian "museum of the mind," then they need not concern themselves with the possibility of studying folk ideas. However, if folklorists view folklore as raw material for the study of human thought, then they might wish to seriously consider adopting this concept or an improved analogous one. Folk ideas are not limited to folklore and they can surely be found in movies, television, and the mass media generally. (In theory, a given folk idea might pervade nearly every aspect of a culture.) Anyone therefore truly interested in folk ideas—as opposed to being interested only in proverbs or in jokes—will have to cast his net widely enough to include popular or literary culture as well.

If one is intrigued by the possibilities of examining folklore as source material for the study of worldview, he might welcome a smaller unit of analysis. The concept of worldview is too vague and diffuse to be of obvious use to folklorists. However, folk ideas as units of worldview are much more manageable. Moreover, those writers who have long been accustomed to using the term "myth" in a loose sense might be encouraged to use "error" or "folk fallacy" where such is their meaning (as in the "myth" that Negroes have a natural sense of rhythm) and to use "folk idea" where that is appropriate, such as, the "myth" of the frontier in American thought is clearly related to the folk idea of unlimited good (with good expressed in space and opportunity), among others.

Finally there is the matter of the relevance of folk ideas to comparative studies and applied folklore. It is perfectly conceivable that the identification of sets of folk ideas from different cultures will facilitate valuable comparative analyses. No doubt when two cultures come into contact, it is the conflict of folk ideas which causes the most difficulty. Yet inasmuch as these folk ideas are unconscious, unstated premises, it is almost impossible to place one's finger on the specific details of the conflict. If folklorists can aid in the task of identifying folk ideas, they may be able to assume a key role in improving communications between peoples (and subcultures) and reducing the number of misunderstandings which might otherwise arise. This would permit the study of folklore to take its proper place among the "applied" social sciences.

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