

## Virtual Special Issue of Folklore 6, 2015: *Folklore and Anthropology*

### Transcript of Dr Juliette Wood's Podcast introduction

In a letter dated 1906, the classical scholar H. J. Rose enquired whether The Folklore Society's role included the study of early institutions. In response, Charlotte Burne noted that the study of 'old customs (British and foreign) and all subjects relating thereto' was firmly entrenched in the Society's Handbook and had constituted a major section of the Folklore Congress organized in 1891. Folklore, as Burne defines it, is 'the non-material side of Anthropology' (Burne 1906). Her response is all the more interesting in the light of two earlier failed attempts, in 1893 and 1898, to amalgamate The Folklore Society with the Royal Anthropological Institute. These attempts polarized the anthropological folklorists such as Laurence Gomme and Andrew Lang against the newer diffusionist theories advocated by scholars like Alfred Nutt and Joseph Jacobs (Bennett 1997, Simpson 1999) and reflected deep ideological disagreements about the relative value of ethnological data in the study of folklore. This tension is certainly behind Gomme's criticism of Nutt's 1898 presidential address in which Gomme argues for the benefits of 'Ethnological Data in Folklore' (Gomme 1899). Nutt agreed that ethnology was an important factor in determining cultural origins, which was one of the primary objectives of folklore studies at this time, but defended what he considered the more nuanced view which also took account of literary material, especially relating to more 'advanced cultures' (1899, 143-49).

Gillian Bennett suggests that folklore's failure to amalgamate with anthropology may be one reason why, when anthropology became accepted as an academic subject at the beginning of the twentieth century, folklore languished as an essentially amateur pursuit (Bennett 1997, 122). Nevertheless, anthropological studies were an important element in the establishment of The Folklore Society and had helped the discipline develop a clear theoretical approach that moved it away from the idea of popular antiquities. In one of the earliest numbers of *The Folk-Lore Journal*, Andrew Lang evaluates the role of anthropology in studying ancient Vedic texts (1883, 107-14). For Lang, understanding the origin of civilization is a kind of 'cultural archaeology' (Duff-Cooper 1986, 190). If such notions of cultural survival were eventually abandoned by folklorists, Andrew Duff-Cooper's reassessment of Lang's contribution praises his critique of the *a priori* assumptions of the fashionable linguistic schools of the day in favour of understanding social facts in their social context (Duff-Cooper 1986, 199). W. H. R. Rivers had been a member of the Torres Straits expedition of 1898, which helped set British anthropology on a firm empirical basis before he joined The Folklore Society and served as its president (Bennett 1999). Rivers's address to the Society on kinship, 'The Father's Sister in Oceania' (1909), reflects the continued link between folklorists and anthropologists even after the unsuccessful attempts to amalgamate the RAI and the FLS (Bennett 1997, Simpson 1999). Rivers's

successor, Henry Balfour, in his presidential address acknowledges his predecessor's role as a bridge between folklore and other disciplines, in particular anthropology and psychology (Balfour 1923). Although the context of the address remains that of social Darwinism and imperial administration, Balfour recognizes the importance of environment and the interdependence of the cultural institutions (16).

The heavily anthropological content in the early decades of the journal's history, often in the form of case studies from various exotic places, dwindled somewhat in the 1950s. From this point, there seems to be more concern with what folklore and anthropology as disciplines might do differently from each other. R. U. Sayce was a prominent social anthropologist whose work encompassed his native Montgomeryshire, Scandinavia, and South Africa. In a talk delivered in 1956, he poses the question, 'What should be the respective tasks of the Royal Anthropological Institute and of the Folk-Lore Society?' (Sayce 1956, 69), which in some ways restates the problem posed fifty years earlier by H. J. Rose. Sayce regards the techniques of folklore and anthropology as essentially the same, namely the study of all aspects of culture conducted on a regional basis. However, he notes with approval that The Folklore Society at the time focused on Britain, while the Royal Anthropological Institute concentrated on non-British ethnology. Marian W. Smith, an American-trained anthropologist and secretary of the RAI, addressed The Folklore Society in 1959 on the importance of folklore studies to anthropology. She notes, for example the similar attitudes to fieldwork techniques in Franz Boas and Lawrence Gomme (Smith 1959, 303), and how the concept of folklore as dynamic rather than fixed contributes to the understanding in both disciplines of how cultures actually function (311).

Several articles reassess the role of earlier seminal scholars. Duff-Cooper re-evaluates Lang's role in the history of social anthropology and continued relevance to some current concerns (1986). William Bascom outlines Bronislaw Malinowski's contribution to the study of folklore, especially his stress on fieldwork and verbal culture. Malinowski, as Bascom points out, saw culture 'in terms of the interrelationships between its different aspects and the influence of these on one another' (Bascom 1983, 163-64), and Bascom's summary of Malinowski's work is an appropriate topic for a folklorist who himself contributed much to the importance of function in folklore and folk life studies. H. A. Senn makes much the same point in relation to Arnold Van Gennep. He stresses the contrasts between Van Gennep's approach and that of French folklorists of his day and highlights his role as an early structuralist (Senn 1974).

R. U. Sayce and Marian Smith took a wide view of the relation between folkloristics and anthropology, and while there are comparatively few anthropological studies as such in volumes of *Folklore* from the 1980s and 1990s, attention should be drawn to Mary Douglas's

analysis of Red Riding Hood in her Katharine Briggs lecture (1995). In the last ten years there has been something of a resurgence of contributions from anthropologists; for example, Borut Telban's study of the function of the flute songs in initiation rituals in Borneo (2014).

Simon Bronner has noted the recent convergence of anthropology and folk life studies and the shift away from regional studies to considerations of culture in terms of human behaviour (1984, 57). In his article 'The Early Movements of Anthropology and their Folkloristic Relationships', he highlights the importance of retrospective studies in understanding the field and providing a framework for reassessing core concepts, and his discussion of the 'analytical penumbra' between folkloristics and anthropology (1984, 68-69) provides a context for understanding the relationship between the two subjects in the pages of the Society's journal.