

Introduction to Folklore II: Folk Genres and Analysis

2010-01-24 Danielson's "Religious Folklore"

**FOLK AND FINA 113**

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# THE DILEMMA

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- ✘ What is “religious folklore”?
- ✘ How do we distinguish “religious folklore” from institutional religious practice?
- ✘ If the two are distinct, how do we study the former without impugning the integrity of the belief stance of the adherents?

# WHAT IS RELIGION?

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- ✘ A set of traditional belief practices rooted in narratives
- ✘ Narratives recount direct encounter with supernatural/transcendent/”supranormal”
- ✘ Narratives purport to be the communication of a greater understanding of the nature of existence – “Revelation” (the Xian term)
- ✘ Narratives express or implies a set of imperatives/proscriptions



## (MORE)

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- ✘ Narratives (and commentaries thereof) are formalised and become subject to special processes of transmission, either committed to a tangible medium (paper, etc.) or entrusted to special practitioners in oral tradition (elders, etc.)
- ✘ These *texts* become basis for faith communities
  - + *Myths*

# NARRATIVE: THREE MAJOR GENRES

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- ✘ Märchen (tale) – fictions, take place in a time out of time, told as entertainments but (often) with a pedagogical function, public performances
- ✘ Legend: opportunities for the negotiation of an underlying belief or assumption, take place in recognizable history, private performances, non-specialised practitioners.
- ✘ Myth: absolutely true (within its performance context), left to specific members of the community to perform, tells of foundational – existential – events.
  - + (More about this on Valentine's Day!)

# FAITH COMMUNITIES

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- ✘ Built upon the interpretation of these texts
  - + but also
- ✘ Built upon the cumulative history of that interpretation
- ✘ Typically develop specialised practitioners
  - + For ongoing interpretation
  - + For enactment of *ritual*
- ✘ Loosely, the model for “institutional religion”



# WHAT IS RITUAL?

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- ✘ An enactment, a performance that is based in part on foundational narratives
  - + Informed by the cumulative history of the ritual's prior performances
- ✘ This enactment is a re-enactment of a pivotal moment in the sacred narrative
- ✘ By *imitating* it, one transcends the spatio-temporal distance between self and the original protagonists

# EXAMPLES OF RITUAL

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- ✘ The *bris*, the ritual circumcision of Jewish boys, repeats and re-enacts the circumcision of Abraham and Isaac, which was a sign of the covenant and a promise that God would never ask for the sacrifice of one's own son
- ✘ The *Eucharist*, the communion of bread and wine among (most) Christians, repeats and re-enacts the Last Supper in the Garden of Gethsemane, the night prior to Jesus' execution



# RITUALS (CONT.)

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- ✘ Take place at a sacred time
- ✘ Take place at a sacred place
- ✘ Are expressly offset from the ordinary, profane time and place
- ✘ Imply a certain amount of *magic*

# MAGIC

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- ✘ James Frazer's idea of "Sympathetic Magic"
- ✘ Things can have an effect on other things
  - + If they are similar to each other – "homeopathic magic"
  - + If they have been in contact with each other – "contagious magic"
- ✘ Ritual is magical because:
  - + In imitation it resembles the original action
  - + Special practitioners or objects have been (or are claimed to have been) in a chain of contact

# WHAT ABOUT “FOLK RELIGION”?

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- ✘ People are born into faith communities
- ✘ These communities are informed by – perhaps even checked against – institutional religion
- ✘ Have a history equally informed by other “common factors” (i.e. by other folk groups)
  - + Nationality, region, language, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, occupation, etc.
- ✘ Negotiate those various identities



# FOLK RELIGION IS THUS...

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- ✘ The set of practices on the vernacular level that communicate the common religious belief of the group to itself
  - + Informed by an understanding of institutional religious expectations
  - + Specifically addresses those areas about which institutional religion is largely silent or indifferent
- ✘ Can occasionally be in direct conflict with institutional religion

# GO AWAY FROM THIS PLACE

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- ✘ Read “Ethnicity and Citizenship” by Deshen, from the *Reader*
- ✘ I’ve never taught this reading before: should be fun.