

TOWARD THE FORMULATION OF A FOLKLORISTIC THEORY OF MIND: THE ROLE OF PSYCHOANALYSIS AND SYMBOLIST APPROACHES TO TRADITION

Folklorlara Özgü Bir Zihin Kuramı Tanımlamasına Doğru: Geleneğe Yönelik Psikanaliz ve Sembolist Yaklaşımların Rolü

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ABSTRACT

In the twenty-first century, the study of folklore and particularly folk art has given increasing attention to the individual as an agent of tradition, but has avoided psychological approaches, and especially psychoanalytic interpretation, to locate cognitive sources for cultural practices. Discourse on the value of psychoanalytic interpretation is traced to Ernest Jones's 1928 presentation to the Folklore Society (the major international learned organization for folklore study founded in London in 1878), but the consideration of folk art as a projection of anxieties onto expressive material forms did not become prevalent until the late twentieth century. This essay argues for more of a "psychological ethnology" in the twenty-first century to achieve more insightful explanation, rather than mere description, of folk art and artists with their symbolization of the touch-oriented world aroused by the hand and handiwork. Using examples of whirligigs and carved wooden chains as examples, the essay proposes the need for a goal to address a symbolist theory of mind centered on developmental ideas of play and art as human strategies of coping and adapting. Such a theory would incorporate concepts of frame, practice, and projection in work with individual folk artists.

Keywords

Psychoanalysis, folk art, frame theory, practice theory.

ÖZ

Yirmi birinci yüzyılda, folklor ve özellikle halk sanatı alanında gerçekleştirilen çalışmalar, geleneğin aktarımını sağlayan bir araç olarak bireye özel bir önem atfetmekle birlikte kültür pratiğinin bilişsel kaynaklarını saptamak üzere psikolojik yaklaşımlardan ve özellikle psikanalitik yorumlamadan uzak durmuştur. Psikanalitik yorumlamamın değerini ön plana çıkaran söylemin kökenleri Ernest Jones'un 1928 yılında Folklor Cemiyetinde (1878 yılında Londra'da kurulan ve folklor çalışmaları alanında önemli yeri olan bilimsel bir kuruluş) gerçekleştirdiği sunumuna kadar uzansa da, folklorik sanatın endişe/arzuların somut ifade biçimlerine yansıtılması olarak algılanması yirminci yüzyılın sonuna kadar yaygınlık kazanmamıştır. Bu çalışma, folklorik sanatın ve sanatçının el sanatları ya da elle yarattıkları dokunmuş-odaklı dünyayı sembolize edişlerini tanımlamakla kalmayıp, söz konusu sanat ve sanatçıların derinlikli bir açıklama çerçevesinde ele alınabilmesi için yirminci yüzyılda "psikolojik etnoloji"ye daha çok önem verilmesi gerektiğini savunmaktadır. Bu çalışma, topaçlar ve oymalı ahşap zincirler örneğinde, insanın çare bulma ve uyum sağlama stratejileri olarak oyun ve sanata yönelik gelişimsel fikirler üzerine odaklanan sembolist bir zihin kuramı oluşturulması konusundaki ihtiyacı gerekçelendirmeye çalışmaktadır. Böyle bir kuram; çerçeve, pratik ve tasarım kavramlarının bireysel halk sanatçıların çalışmalarıyla bağdaştırılmasına olanak tanıyacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Psikanaliz, halk sanatı, çerçeve kuramı, pratik kuram.

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The renowned British psychoanalyst Ernest Jones (1879-1958), born and raised in a smoky industrial village, must have thought of the paradox of speaking at a meeting devoted to vernacular subjects amid the splendor of London's Burlington House, a seventeenth-century Palladian mansion, whose furnishings and resident learned societies surely impressed attendees as anything but folk. Often credited as the first English-speaking practitioner of psychoanalysis, Jones was there on September 25, 1928 at the Jubilee conference of the British-based Folklore Society to introduce the morning panel of three psychologically oriented scholars. The significance of this event, Jones proclaimed, was that it represented the first full-fledged session at a scholarly forum for exploring the linkage of psychoanalysis and folklore. Although Jones's mentor Sigmund Freud and his fellow psychoanalyst on the panel Géza Róheim had presented and written previously on the two fields (Freud 1999 [1916]; Jones, E. 1951; Róheim 1992), both of which had risen in prominence in the late nineteenth century, the Jubilee conference was a milestone event in Jones's estimation because psychoanalysts were directly addressing folklorists instead of referring to folklore among clinical psychiatrists. He did not come to chastise folklorists for their neglect of advances in psychoanalysis but to note generally, in his words, "the anti-psychological bias that prevails among young scholars and men of science" (Jones, E. 1928, 220). Whether or not his audience accepted his psychoanalytic interpretations, the key lesson of Freud's ideas,

Jones announced, was that folklore is crucial evidence for formulating a symbolist theory of mind. Nonetheless, fifty years later, Alan Dundes, arguably the most famous folklorist of the twentieth century, complained "As far as mainstream folkloristics is concerned, it is as though Freud never lived" (1987b, ix).

And why should folklorists, or any "young scholars," build on Freud's pathbreaking ideas, even as a point of departure? The quick answer is to find the source in mind for cultural action and thought. This goal means shifting the Victorian idea of culture as a superorganic force upon which individuals as members of societies at a fixed level of progress have little control to one of individual, creative agents of tradition and identity. As comparativist scholars applying evolutionary doctrine toward the goal of a theory of progress from the lower rung of savagery to the higher one of civilization along the lines of natural history, the Victorians were primarily concerned with literal readings of texts and historical reconstructions of relict survivals—both consequences of beliefs and ideas rather than sources—instead of viewing folklore as a vital functioning force in modern life. Emphasizing the keyword of analysis, psychoanalysts challenged the folklorists to find meanings in the contemporary needs of individuals to engage in behaviors that could be called folkloric: joke-telling, crafting, engaging in rituals, and expressing beliefs. The vanguard psychoanalysts cut against the Victorians' evolutionary grain by studying customs, beliefs, crafts, and narratives for sign of what Jones called "various

longings, fears, aversions, or desires” and products of “dynamic mental processes” that I would summarize as humans’ symbol-making capabilities. It is on this basis, in fact, that some psychologically oriented folklorists today refer to “psychodynamics” or “psychological ethnology” to separate the clinical application of psychoanalysis from the field-based psychological study of symbolic expressions and projections in culture. In the classic Freudian formulation, people produce symbols to externalize feelings and often to represent anxieties and emotions in a sublimated, redirected, or disguised form. Folklore, as a socially acceptable outlet for fantasy and emotional expression, integrally features symbols that serve to convey meaning for the artist working within the dynamic, or interplay if you will, of individual creativity and social tradition, identity and personality, conscious and unconscious mind. The trouble with this processual model of action from the viewpoint of Jones’s audience is that it suggested motivations and functions outside of the awareness, or in Freudian terms, consciousness, of participants. Although the Victorians might have been ready to pathologize folkloric behavior because they imagined it as a strange or “curious” survival of a ruder, less refined level of society, they were not quite ready to view the “dynamic mental processes” relating to folklore as something engaged in by rich as well as poor, factory workers in addition to peasants, and city dwellers besides rural folk. For the Victorians the operative question was how civilization had progressed at different rates, with industrialized powers such as England

taking the lead and “savage” and “barbaric” societies below them marked by a reliance on folklore.

Ernest Jones as a psychologist was asking his evolutionist audience to consider the enactment of folklore to be a normal and pervasive contemporary phenomenon related to fundamental human needs. One of the Victorian leaders of the Folklore Society R.R. Marrett recognized that this view presented problems for the evolutionists because it undermined the hierarchy they had established along natural history lines from savagery up to barbarism and finally to civilization. In this model, folklore in contemporary usage was meaningless; it was a survival of a past superstitious, illiterate stage of cultural development. The emphasis on survivals, Marrett observed, meant that psychology as a search for inward causes of behavior was inevitably left “out in the cold” (Marrett 1920, 11). The Victorians, if they referred to mind, assumed a psychic and social unity among groups on the lower rungs of the evolutionary ladder. Marrett urged his folklorist colleagues to expand their views to question, for example, folk practices “near at hand” to civilization instead of journeying to remote mountain villages and distant primitive islands, but he still considered folklore a relic of the past rather than a common strategy of modern living. Partly to underscore the irrationality and backwardness of pre-industrial cultures, the Victorians denied the thoughtfulness or self-consciousness of participants in tradition or that customs could be strategically enacted for reasons at anything but the most literally perceived reasons

(e.g., entertainment, initiation, education). Indeed, they often posited that these customs not only lacked meaning but were irrational in the sense that they had devolved from sacred ancient myths and rituals and were enacted in the present without forethought or rational purpose. Of social significance to the hierarchical Victorians, the idea of projection of emotions, longings, and anxieties to folklore as a fundamental cognitive process also extended the “folk” from an unlettered group or caste to a dynamic in which all humans engage.

Ernest Jones let the audience of folklorists know that psychologists could benefit from more folkloristic knowledge. His fellow psychologists drew his ire for not paying enough attention to folklore which would allow the scholars to move beyond, by Jones’s measure, a shallow psychology of “relatively superficial mental processes.” The depth “analysis” in psychoanalysis is the operation of identifying symbols as projections of anxiety, longing, and emotion, particularly evident in folklore approached as an expression of individual intentions and needs against the pressures of societal forces. Freud tended to universalize this analysis and often centered the dynamic mental processes in childhood development. Freud, like most Society folklorists, considered folklore as an oral tradition as distinct from art, dress, and craft. To be sure, the Jubilee conference featured an exhibition of objects but the display was meant to *illustrate* folklore as story and belief rather than constituting tradition as folk objects.

The contribution of the psycho-

logical ethnologist (the post-Freudian folklorist) is to contextualize symbol-making within a historical and cultural context, the changing priorities as people age, and chance or ritual encounters, such as creating “inside” jokes or socially bonding expression. Ethnographers call such encounters a cultural “scene” or “frame” in which people feel free to express themselves or connect to participants in ways that would be different outside the frame. In addition, psychologically oriented folklorists consider symbols as an expression of repressed sexual and scatological impulses as well as other needs and desires (Dundes 2007, 280-4; see also Carvalho-Neto 1972). These folklorists also seek to view the dynamic of tradition in material and social forms as externalizations of feelings as much as narrative.

Freud for his part surrounded himself with antiquities that suggested, in his words, a “dreamlike world” (Gamwell 1989, 24) befitting his theories on the wish fulfillment function of fantasy narratives deriving from dreams. In various writings, he addressed uses of fantasy in the form of fairy tales, myths, and jokes, particularly in childhood development, and in so doing drew attention to the label of “folk” as a special cultural location for a connection to tradition and a frame for messages that might appear inappropriate in daily conversation (Freud 1999 [1916]; Freud and Oppenheim 1958). In “The Occurrence in Dreams of Material from Fairy Tales” (1913) Freud comments that “it is not surprising to find that psycho-analysis confirms our recognition of the important place which *folk* fairy tales

have acquired in the mental life of our children” (Freud 1997 [1913], 101; emphasis added). He suggests that parents allow children to develop fantasy worlds based upon symbols and traditions that they inherit as a normal way to deal with repressed desires as they move beyond the oral and anal stages of development. Freud the clinician observes that “in a few people,” that is, adult patients, “a recollection of their favourite fairy tales takes the place of memories of their own childhood; they have made the fairy tales into screen memories” (1999 [1913], 24). In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), Freud also treats the relation of another folk narrative genre to dreams, namely jokes, but considers them more socially sanctioned in adulthood, yet indicative of anxieties stemming from childhood. In a letter he sent to classicist D. Ernst Oppenheim, Freud writes that he wanted to expand his psychological inquiry with the help of a folklorist. “I have long been haunted,” he muses, “by the idea that our studies on the content of the neuroses might be destined to solve the riddle of the formation of myths, and that the nucleus of mythology is nothing other than what we speak of as ‘the nuclear complex of the neuroses’—as I was able not long since to bring it to light in the ‘Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy.’ Two of my pupils, [Karl] Abraham in Berlin and Otto Rank in Vienna, have ventured upon an attempt to invade the territory of mythology and to make conquests in it with the help of the technique of psychoanalysis and its angle of approach. But we are amateurs, and have every reason to be afraid of mistakes. We are

lacking in academic training and familiarity with the material. Thus we are looking about for an enquirer whose development has been in the reverse direction, who possesses the specialized knowledge and is ready to apply to it the psychoanalytic armory that we will gladly put at his command—a native enquirer, as one might say, who will be able to achieve something quite other than we who are intruders of another species” (Freud and Oppenheim 1958, 13-14).

Folklorists might understand Ernest Jones’s plea as an extension of Freud’s call for collaboration and synthesis with less emphasis on the role of the unusual dream and more on the process of projection through folklore in ordinary life, including non-verbal children’s genres such as games and toys. Rather than isolating orality and antiquity as key criteria of folkloric genres that express symbols of inhibitions, Freud and Jones imply that the framing of play around the expression is significant for giving the creative agent license to do and say things that would be difficult to do outside the frame, or reality dominated by the moral super-ego. Jones, for instance, told his Jubilee audience that “both their [children’s] *spontaneously invented* games and the tradition ones they adopt so eagerly are often the symbolic expression of...infantile sexuality...” (Jones, E. 1928, 233; emphasis added). Thus they suggested analyzing not only the utterance but also the entire scene and mental state of participants for clues to symbolic usage and meaning. For instance, in his summons for cooperation between folklorists and

psychoanalysts on the meaning of supernatural belief, Jones states,

It is surely clear that a limit is soon reached if we confine our investigation of ghosts (and allied spiritistic phenomena) to examination of the purely objective aspects, without taking into account the subjective state of the witnesses. In such studies we cannot distinguish between the parts played by the inner world and the outer world so long as we attend, as is nearly always the case, to the latter only. Psycho-analysis is naturally concerned with the former problem and often enough has to investigate the fear of ghosts, the proneness to see them, and so on. After unraveling and curing such mental states, it is possible to say something pretty definite about the genesis and meaning of them, and a great deal of evidence has accumulated to show that this is intrinsically connected with unconscious death wishes relating to one or both of the parents, the strength and ramifications of which are difficult to overestimate. (Jones, E. 1928, 235)

An important document of the merger of psychology and ethnology can be found in Freud's foreword in 1913 to the classic folkloristic tract *Scatologic Rites of All Nations* (1891) by American folklorist John G. Bourke (1843-1896). Freud shows that he feels an affinity with the emerging rebellious scholarship of folklore studies when he notes that "science is prohibited from dealing with these proscribed aspects of human life [excretion], so that anyone who studies such things is regarded as scarcely less 'improper' than someone who actually *does* improper things. Nevertheless

psychoanalysis and folklore [studies] have not allowed themselves to be deterred from transgressing these prohibitions and have been able as a result to teach us all kinds of things that are indispensable for an understanding of human nature" (Freud 1994 [1913], 6-7). For Freud, the major implication of Bourke's comparative study of scatological rites around the globe is the correlation of life-span rituals with the "repression of coprophilic inclinations" in childhood. Although Bourke maintained an evolutionary perspective, Freud observed that "Folklore has adopted a quite different method of research, and yet it has reached the same results as psychoanalysis" (Freud 1994 [1913], 8). The equivalence is not in the progress of civilization reflected in the degree of cleanliness in a society by removal of feces, but rather in the idea that an inherent human shame about excretion developed in childhood finds manifestation in adult folk practices in various ways but with a common symbolic purpose of projecting anxieties about defecation imaginatively to external objects or narratives.

By the mid-twentieth century with the impetus of Columbia University anthropologist Franz Boas' relativistic notion of folklore as a mirror of the differences between cultures, folklorists had turned away from the evolutionary doctrine of unitary cultural development to consider the distinctive functions that folklore serves for different societies. He and his students, such as Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, and Zora Neale Hurston, interpreted folklore in the context of the particular societies, such as Sa-

moa, Jamaica, and Honduras. This attention to the functions of folklore within a cultural matrix led to folkloristic work in complex societies treating individual tradition bearers as creative artists and performers. Such an approach often raised psychological questions about the motivations of individuals in perpetuating, adapting, and creating traditions.

If the spotlight had shifted to individual creativity and social function in modern life, why was Dundes frustrated at the lack of psychological interpretation in folklore studies or scant attention to the folkloristic contributions of Freud and his followers? Dundes complained because folklorists focused on the outward, observable features of folk stories and pictures at the level of consciousness, and not explanations of *why* those practices and performances emerged from the unconscious. He criticized trends of study that described the outcomes, or performances, of tradition rather than analyzing the psychological reasons for producing them (Dundes 2005). Folkloristic contemporaries of Dundes who were associated with a medical school, such as David Hufford, were more likely to apply psychological perspectives that reflected (observable) behavioral and (quantitative) biological factors rather than their (hidden) cognitive sources (see Hufford 1974; Hufford 2003). Dundes' interpretations of narratives, jokes, speech, and legends raised awareness of the use of symbols in folklore, and suggested the application of Freud's clinical theories to fieldwork in folklore. One difference from Freud is that Dundes considered folk ideas as originating in the "wis-

dom" of proverbs, speech, and narratives of particular societies, rather than being universalized (Dundes 1971). In an essay with relevance to whirligigs, Dundes compared wooden folk playthings with moving figures of fowl known as "pecking chickens" across cultures and surmised that the grain on the board showed folk ideas about food scarcity, or a worldview of abundance in the American versions (Dundes 1989, 83-91).

Another contribution by Dundes to psychological ethnology was to shift attention from childhood to adolescence and adulthood. Dundes agreed with Freud's social construction of gender, but he shifted the balance from Freud's insistence on female penis envy to male envy of women's procreative abilities. For example, Dundes connected Santa Claus to a male appropriation of pregnancy (Dundes 1980, 173-74). He questioned the emphasis on the large belly who provides for children when the historic characterizations of the figure from Saint Nicholas in present-day Turkey to the legend of *Sinterklaas* in western and central Europe tended to be shown with a flat front. The visualization of the male figure as pregnant in late nineteenth-century America appeared to be a compensation for the removal in an industrializing, urbanizing society of the male from the domestic sphere.

Dundes also reexamined the idea of projection and added to the psychoanalytic lexicon the term "projective inversion," which he defined as "a psychological process in which A accuses B of carrying out an action which A really wishes to carry out him or her-

self" (Dundes 2007, 282-84, 346-49). Dundes distinguished this kind of transposition from projection, which is the transference of feelings onto an external object. Examples of projection are "dead baby jokes," which he interpreted as expressing anxiety over abortion; "light bulb jokes," which showed the importance of social organization through the double entendre of technology and sex expressed by "screwing in a light bulb"; Jewish-American Princess jokes, which projected unease by adults over the independence of women generally through the stereotype of the self-centered Jewish daughter; and "Bloody Mary rituals" expressing fear of menstruation among pre-adolescent girls in rituals with the name of the girl represented in blood or by the act of drawing blood (Dundes 1987a; Dundes 2002).

Dundes maintained that people effectively project anxieties onto folk forms and at the same time relegate them to humor, play, and art, because this reduces risk of failure, rejection, or opprobrium. Humor, play, and art are non-threatening even when they carry pointed messages. Indeed, the use of these entertaining actions engages audiences and simultaneously shields participants from a disturbing "serious" confrontation. In Dundes' words, folk forms symbolically act as a "*veil* barely concealing an expression of most of the major problems facing contemporary American society" (Dundes and Pagter 1978, xviii; emphasis added). This idea of the inherent paradox of play builds on what anthropologist Gregory Bateson termed a "play frame," which has been widely applied to American culture by psychoanalyti-

cally oriented folklorist Jay Mechling. This view centered folkloric practice in individual rather than group action. This perspective is especially important in approaching individual creators of art who play/work with tradition and the social references of folklore. Mechling provocatively asked how the act of talking or even thinking to oneself may constitute folklore if it does not involve social interaction or overt communication. He wrote,

One way I can talk to myself is to use a proverb to remind myself to follow folk wisdom. If while hurrying to get something done I make a mess of it somehow, I think to myself, "Haste makes waste." Perhaps I even mutter the proverb aloud. If I need to remind myself to stop obsessing about some error and move on, I'll tell myself that "there's no use crying over spilt milk" or think "well, that's water under the bridge." If I see a penny on the street and bend over to pick it up, the proverb/charm runs through my mind or I even utter it to myself: "See a penny, pick it up, and all the day you'll have good luck." Curses, another of those everyday folklore genres, can also be performed in private. (Mechling 2006: 436)

Taking a cue from anthropologist Gregory Bateson's original conceptualization of the frame in "A Theory of Play and Fantasy" (2000 [1972]: 177-93), Mechling offers that "masturbation can involve elaborate fantasy frames" to make the point that a number of solitary activities rarely considered by sociologically and literary oriented folklorists (e.g., sexual play and daydreaming) have a folklore dimension (Mechling 2006, 440). He asserts

that the fantasy of such situations with their connection to tradition have a cognitive component suggesting, in Mechling's words, "that the observer's mind is the locus of reality of folklore," and therefore "folklore studies needs a theory of the mind in order to proceed" (2006: 444).

Such a theory of mind, Mechling muses, takes into consideration the co-evolution of the body and brain. Against this background by which consciousness is created, he queries the use of folklore in everyday human communication (in proverbs, and gestures, slang, for example) as part of the brain's signaling to people ways to move between literal and figurative meanings of utterances (Mechling 2006: 446; see also Bateson 2000: 180; Mechling 2000). Of great concern to Mechling is the way that individuals act collectively with shared ideas or set themselves apart. Extending the analysis of the message "this is play" that is communicated by an understanding of the surroundings by participants, whether in the course of everyday activity or a framed event such as a camp bonfire, he observes that "the competent person moves easily between metacommunication (the message 'this is play') and the messages themselves within the frame. The fundamental paradox of play, of course, is that the messages exchanged within the frame do not mean what they would mean in a different frame. They are untrue, unmeant. Yet, the players understand this" (2006,448).

Regarding children's gun play, for example, Mechling finds significance to the material "action" of pretend dying in the play frame. He notes that

gun play is evident among children because it works through fears and anxieties about dying with positive outcomes. I could comment that children may feel such anxiety more intensely because they weigh their vitality as youth against the idea of the end of childhood as a kind of death before the "aloneness" of adulthood. Masculine symbolism certainly can enter into the material constructions that children make from ejaculative slingshots to carved guns. A clue to the child-adult relationship enacted in gun play is the way that such framed play provides models of power ("action at a distance," he calls it) in which boys can play both the dominant and submissive role in formulaic enactments (Mechling 2008: 206). For Mechling, the ultimate explanation for the pleasure taken in pretend dying is "the sacrifice for others the death represents" (Mechling 2008: 207). He finds developmental evidence that such demonstration of selflessness (and separation from the feminine mother) is important in early adolescence for boys. Notable in this analytical path from identification of the frame to the postulation of social and psychological function is the importance Mechling places on the action or narrative referred to in the frame as tradition. He suggests that the frame is a metamessage drawing attention to itself because the communicated material invoked for its artfulness and traditionality gains, at least in the perception of participants, persuasion or power.

Folklorist Michael Owen Jones has contributed to a theory of mind through artistic action and, even more than Mechling and Dundes, has ad-

dressed the making of objects. He included in his study of a Kentucky chair maker, *The Hand Made Object and Its Maker* (1975), items that typically would not have been included in a folk art exhibition because their designs appeared idiosyncratic, even if they were made by traditional means. Jones found them crucial, however, to assessing the changing mental states of the maker and the way discomfort with changes around him became expressed in material form. As the maker felt withdrawn from his social surroundings because of marital difficulties and alienation from the industrializing Appalachian landscape, the objects he made had a strong sense of enclosure, with high dimensions and narrow sides. Jones generalized from this individual case that art can be viewed as a response to crisis and, with the aid of the life story, expresses conflicts of the self to his or her social environment over the changeable course of one's life (Jones, M. 1989). He continued this query in his study of Canadian icon painter Gary Robertson (Jones, M. 2000). The puzzle for Jones was that this son of a Scottish immigrant, who was raised in as an assimilated Canadian-Anglo in the city of Winnipeg and immersed throughout his youth in Roman Catholicism, nevertheless maintained in his art, dress, and demeanor in late adulthood an identity as a rural peasant Ukrainian of the Russian Orthodox faith. Jones observed that he created a home environment with his art that acted "as a bulwark against the stresses of modern life but also a lifestyle and a 'virtual' identity, expressed through diverse forms, in attempts to

resolve issues originating in his childhood" (Jones, M. 2000, 131). Noting that many folklorists often dismiss the symbolic importance of originality in favor of locating an historic tradition, Jones called for future research combining psychological and folkloristic perspectives on how individuals choose from tradition so as to symbolically construct an identity. Consistent with Ernest Jones, Jay Mechling, and Alan Dundes in charting the significance of folklore as psychological evidence, Michael Owen Jones sought explanation for how people cope with contemporary life by viewing their artistic work as adaptive strategies.

My query of the psychological "dynamics" of mental states and processes in relation to the production, and function, of culture has in the area of art been concerned with individuals embodying and ritualizing themselves with tradition (Bronner 1996; Bronner 2005; Bronner 2011; Bronner 2014). I, too, have examined folklore used by children and adolescents as an adaptation to the rapid changes occurring in youth, but also have posed questions about the life review and communication of meaning in creative work at the end of life, especially the supposed "whimsy" or play frame surrounding wooden objects made by men. I found patterns of production for men who adopt activities later in life that they did not embrace in adulthood. Often the objects related to work they recalled from childhood or family as well as community relations. Of special concern to many men who used creative traditions to express themselves, the father-son bond with its suggestion of dealing with competition and a

lack of intimacy often entered into the picture. Ritually in numerous social encounters, many older men sought out youth to whom they showed their work, perhaps to impress upon them that in a youth-oriented world, experience still counted or else to show values embedded in the masculine transformation of wood. The carvings frequently referred to their own concerns about their bodies passing away and their memories passing on by including in their work paradoxes that viewers beheld and mentally tried to order. Realistic carvings in wood of iron chains went unpainted and were free of screws or glue, suggesting their fragility and strength; wooden pliers opened to reveal smaller pliers and suggested a work that was both playful toy and mature message; balls inexplicably shake within the confines of a cage, inviting speculation on solving the puzzle of how the balls were “put there.” I have commented that these works represent messages in the form of “visual riddles” that are meant to be answered with commentary on the paradoxes in the conditions of the makers (worth in old age, family relations, bodily decline).

I see in whirligigs aspects of this cultural action that connect to the chains, caged balls, pliers, fans, crown of thorns, canes, barrel men, and men in coffins that time and again surfaced among home carvers. Indeed, several carvers used the whirligig planted in their yards as outward signs of the male presence and heritage continuity that was occurring inside their basement or garage workshops while women dwelled inside the domesticated home. Although they did not

hang out a shingle for their craft, they announced a distinction of what was inside for the outside passerby, or perhaps it was for their own peace of mind. One can speculate further on the liminal status of the whirligig as a special art form because it evokes both natural and human intervention. Driven by divine wind, earthly figures demonstrate their vitality and together invite a reading of another riddle-narrative of an object betwixt and between, inside and outside, tool and art, still and active.

To be sure, the carvers did not frequently identify their work as folk, but they recognized the significance of tradition in their work and saw something different from the art they usually associated with the gallery or studio. Their work invited sensory participation, often with touch, and often was engaged socially as carved pliers opened in a friend’s hand or the unsuspecting male buddy opened a coffin lid and saw a large wooden penis spring up from the body. This is not to say that every aging American man resorts to carving to deal with conflict; rather, the point is that psychologically oriented folklorists should recognize in various cultural practices a distinctive urge to create that can be connected to the construction of symbolic meaning in the way the self encodes it and others perceive or decodes it. It also suggests the interplay of various social factors—such as gender, family, region, ethnicity, sexuality-- that come together in expressive acts as a willingness to make one’s feelings known, and probably temper one’s vulnerability with symbolic redirection.

Critics often reasonably ask

whether anxiety, or elation for that matter, is necessary for artistic production as oral lore or material craft. Are there not conditions, or makers, that suggest facture for its own sake? Perhaps, but the analyst in the field working toward cognitive explanation seeks to find the frames of mind as well as cultural engagement that become evident of expressions as externalizations and embodiments of the dynamic between self and society, creativity and tradition, and now and then. It is a dynamic that changes over the life course, over time and space, and with personal circumstances, all of which presents questions for the individual case and suggestions of patterns that can be generalized to shed light on why people do what they do. If not labeled as anxiety, conflict, or trauma (or related to sexual and scatological repression in childhood), the question remains of contemporary motivations and circumstances that lead to symbolic manifestations of one's thought, aspirations, and experience. For some life review, whether in mid-life or old age, for instance, might not be traumatic but a part of expectations, often from the society as well as individually, that one goes through and expresses in oral lore or material craft.

The goal of explaining why we project our feelings onto objects and narratives, and repeat ourselves in the process, is what Ernest Jones wanted to impress on his audience of folklorists in London in 1928, to carry into the future. The means and sources for this psychological query have expanded and changed over the last eight decades, and there are signs of optimism for more insightful explanation, rather

than mere description, of folk art and artists with their symbolization of the touch-oriented world aroused by the hand and handiwork (Bronner 2013). Today, many mainstream students of folklore still do not fully acknowledge the importance of psychiatry, but a combination of these fields can break ground for a path leading to a symbolist theory of mind centered on developmental ideas of play and art as human strategies of coping and adapting. Addressing the cognitive sources of tradition in the analysis of folk practices in the modern world will set this process in motion.

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