Folklore Theory Article Analysis

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Article Summary

The purpose of this paper is to summarize three articles which touch on the field of folklore. Folklore is one of the fields of study alongside anthropology, American studies and other related fields. However, folklorists are peculiar in the sense that they do not theorize their study. What could be the reason behind this lack of theory?

Humble Theory

The article on *Humble Theory* was written by an American ethnologist and folklorist, Dorothy Noyes. Dorothy Noyes is a renowned researcher who has done historical, ethnographic, and comparative research on European immigrants in the United States. She has also made significant contributions to the field of ethnology and folkloristics. Moreover, she has paid keen attention to the status of provincial communities, creativity, innovation, politics and heritage policies. In *Humble Theory*, she highlights how folklorists can resolve their anxiety about a theory with which to identify.

Dorothy Noyes tries to advise folklorists to embrace the humble theory rather than the grand theory. That is the simplest way of resolving their angst for theory because the former draws from ethnography and practice, seeking to answer the ‘how’ questions instead of the ‘why’ questions. As Noyes (p37) expressly asserts, addressing the how question is the neutral ground between the commonly believed sublime laws and the lived experience. Folklorists should, therefore, focus on attaining such a middle ground if they desire to build a legacy for the discipline.

The word ‘humble’ means the exact opposite of proud. It implies being near the ground, and all folklorists can have a consensus that humility is the only kind of theory they should aspire to make. They should cultivate an aura of shamelessness and stop worrying about wearing the glowing F in their bosoms. More than that, they should continue taking pride in their being near the ground. That is one major reason why folklorists should embrace the humble theory instead of being anxious about a grand theory.

Folklorists never bother to theorize their study because their prime focus is on more autonomous matters like group and genre. They do not have a grand theory for two main reasons: one is forthright status anxiety and stigma of the F-word for which they invent either euphemisms or explanations, and

two is the need to map out a befitting work for themselves. Theorizing will mean that folklorists overcome reductionism. However, Noyes (40) would not vouch for a grand theory because grand theories basically construct the nature of society and human nature, which are irrelevant to folklorists.

In the same breath, folklorists have the scarlet F to ponder in addition to the limited ground they have to build on. They have to recognize that their ground is not infertile despite the fact that it is limited. Folklorists must also remember the ground upon which their society, the American Folklore Society (AFS), was founded: resistance to grand theories of that time (Noyes p41). They are, therefore, better equipped to censure grand theory than to build it. Hence, if they were to reclaim theory, folklorists would rather do so in a humble spirit.

America's Antitheoretical Folklorists

The article on *America's Antitheoretical Folklorists* is written by Lee Haring. Haring works at the City University of New York's Brooklyn College as a retired Professor of English. He is a passionate folklorist and has conducted several research studies in Mauritius, Madagascar, and Kenya. He is a renowned publisher of encyclopedic folktale analyses in the *Malagasy Tale Index*. In *America's Antitheoretical Folklorists*, Haring holds the same position as Noyes. Actually, his premise cements the fabric of Noyes' Humble Theory.

The most befitting answer to the question of why folklorists do not have a grand theory is that the American folklorists have thrown overboard the ancient orientation set by their antecedents, and they never care much about theory. They would rather focus on attaining vernacular practice. In that way, American Folklorists are better poised to accept a method instead of a theory (Haring p1). In fact, they have turned all their theoretical acumen into methods in tandem with Dell Hymes' advocacy.

Dell Hymes, the master of American folklorists, endeavoured to discover how to organize communicative means in terms of genre, activity, purpose and situation (Haring p5). Such an organization is definitely a method. The author of the article presents a great challenge to folklorists who wish to see a distinction between theory and method, and they should consider turning to other fields like cognitive science. The bottom line of Haring's argument is that if folklore gets separated from other fields like art, music, literature, and anthropology because of a mere debate on grand theory, then folklorists will not hesitate to disdain the contributions of other fields like psychology.

You Can't Teach Folklore

Jay Mechling, the author of the article *You Can't Teach Folklore*, works at the University of California, Davis, as a retired professor of American studies. He has authored other articles like *On My Honor: Boy Scouts and the Making of American Youth*.

In the article, *You Can't Teach Folklore,* Mechling labours to demonstrate a better methodology for teaching folklore and American studies. It is crucial that students in the fields of anthropology, folklore, American studies, and other related fields develop a reflective attitude and double consciousness (Mechling 26). Proper teaching of folklore should focus on equipping learners with life skills and psychological survival skills.

He developed the title during a dialogue with a graduate colleague after realizing that most students could barely think like folklorists. Therefore, instead of the general course goals like defining folklore and identifying folklore genres, Mechling crafted a better way of teaching the students to think and reason like folklorists. That would entail focusing on themes, interpretation techniques, cultural systems, human particularities, and the relevance of folklore in the lives of the students (Mechling p3).

Works Cited

Haring, Lee. "America's Antitheoretical Folkloristics." *Journal of Folklore Research* 45.1 (2008): 1-9.

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Noyes, Dorothy. *Humble Theory: Folklore's Grasp on Social Life*. Indiana University Press, 2016.