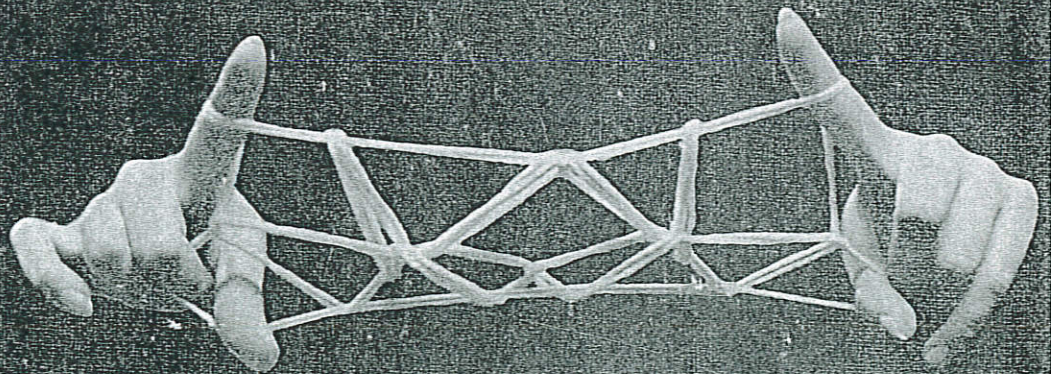


THE
DYNAMICS
OF
FOLKLORE
TOELKEN



3

THE FOLK PERFORMANCE

IT IS DIFFICULT, IF NOT IM- POSSIBLE, TO DESCRIBE THE DYNAMICS OF A FOLK GROUP WITHOUT REFERRING TO A TRADITIONAL EVENT OR PERFORMANCE, SOMETHING expressive that has taken place among members of a high context group. Just as the dynamics discussed in Chapter 2 mean little if nothing happens, so a traditional performance or event means little if it does not occur in a traditional framework. This chapter focuses on the performance as a particularized aspect of dynamics by showing some details of traditional expressive interaction.

PERFORMANCE IN SITU The following anecdote of a Navajo storytelling event concentrates on the people and how they did what they did, their ideas concerning what happened, their reasons, how they got into the event, and how the whole interaction was seen by three non-Navajo visitors. A later chapter focuses on the inventory of ingredients for events themselves; obviously, in reality, events as

dynamic performances and people as dynamic participants cannot be separated.

CONTEXT Background: Three folklorists (Barre Toelken, Jan Brunvand, John Wilson Foster) have arrived at a Navajo home after a long drive. Toelken is already known to the family; the other two are interested observers.

Setting: A small frame house in a desert town in southern Utah, just north of the Navajo reservation. The inhabitants of the house are Navajo and have moved off the reservation because of hard times. The children go to public school but their parents try to keep home life traditional. Everyone speaks Navajo at home; the parents speak only a few words of English.

Time: About 9:30 P.M. in late December; there is snow on the ground, and it is very cold. This is the time of year when Coyote stories can (and should) be told. And this is the only season when string figures can be made.

Situation: The father sits in a chair, dozing; small children are playing on the floor. The mother weaves on a loom on the far side of the room. The folklorists sit quietly, talking occasionally in low tones. In white American terms, nothing is happening, although in Navajo custom this is a common way of enjoying someone's company. One hour passes in this manner. The teen-age children of the family come in suddenly, accompanied by a Mormon missionary. The missionary wakes up the father, reminds him that the children should be in church this coming Sunday, then notices the white visitors. "You fellows with the Bureau of Indian Affairs?" "No, just friends, visiting." There is a puzzled look from the missionary; he departs. The teen-agers say hello and sit down quietly; the father returns to a half-doze. After about fifteen minutes he says sleepily, in Navajo, "Perhaps these visitors are Mormons, too?" "No," I reply, "this one is from back East originally; he likes to study old stories, as I do. This other one is from Ireland."

This translates in Navajo as "He comes from beyond the ocean," and the mother turns suddenly from her loom, grins, and holding her hands as if using a machine gun, makes a whispered *t-t-t-t-t* sound. "What does she mean?" asks Foster. "She thinks you're from Vietnam; that's also called 'beyond the ocean.'" Foster replies, "Tell her Vietnam is a vicarage tea party compared to Northern Ireland." The translation suffers. There is some puzzlement, but general cheer ensues because the visitors are not Mormons. "Now let's have some coffee," the father says.

THE PERFORMANCE Everyone converges on the kitchen. While coffee is being prepared, Brunvand asks for a piece of string; he has a game he wants to show the children, and he pretends not to know the Navajos' great interest in string games. He makes a simple cat's cradle and shows it to a nearby child of about ten. "Could you do that?" The boy asks him innocently to do it again, slowly. Then, with mock care and deliberation, the boy reproduces the same figure perfectly, holds it up briefly, and then starts quickly on a more complicated one. He asks Brunvand with a grin, "Could you do that one?" Brunvand acts stumped. The boy produces another and another. The string passes to others in the family, and in rapid succession we see a Navajo rug, a bolt of lightning, arrowheads that race away from each other, a bat, and a worm that crawls over and under two parallel strings.

"Where did you learn those designs?" we ask. The children confer with their father for a while, then answer, "I don't know. I guess it's all from Spider Woman. They say if you fall into Spider Woman's den she won't let you out unless you can do all these. And then if you do these in the summer you won't get out at all anyway."

"Why is that?"

"Well, we're only supposed to do it in the winter when the spiders are hibernating, because it's really their kind of custom to do things with string." During this conversation, the mother has gone back to weaving momentarily, and the other children are still doing string figures.

"The Spider Woman taught us all these designs as a way of helping us think. You learn to think when you make these. And she taught us about weaving, too," a teen-age daughter puts in.

"If you can think well," the first boy adds, "you won't get into trouble or get lost. Anyway, that's what our father says."

Toelken: "But Spider Woman didn't teach *you* these things, right? Where did *you* learn them?"

"Well, we probably picked them up from each other and from our father, but they were already around, you know. All the people know about them. Spider Woman taught us."

The father speaks now for the first time and, taking the string, makes a tight design. "Do you know what that is?" he asks us. We do not. He shows his children and they all respond: "Sg' Tsó" (Big Star). He nods with satisfaction and makes another figure; he holds it up to us, and we shake our heads. He holds it up to the children, and they respond, "Dilyéhé." Since I have never heard the term I ask one of the children to translate it; everyone looks blank. "That's the only word there is for it."

Suddenly, in an attempt to explain, the father motions us all outside. There, shivering in the night wind, we watch him carefully hold the string figure above his head and point beyond it with pursed lips to the Pleiades.

Back inside, the father helps cover our embarrassment at not knowing our astronomy by making string figure caricatures of those present: a face with vague glasses to represent Brunvand, another with a loop hanging down for Foster's beard, another with a piece of string trailing down to depict the power cord on Toelken's tape recorder.

Finally, the father puts the string down and says seriously, "These are all matters we need to know. It's too easy to become sick, because there are always things happening to confuse our minds. We need to have ways of thinking, of keeping things stable, healthy, beautiful. We try for a long life, but lots of things can happen to us. So we keep our thinking in order by these figures and we keep our lives in order with the stories. We have to relate our lives to the stars and the sun, the animals, and to all of nature or else we will go crazy, or get sick."

Now a silence of about ten minutes occurs, but no one moves away from the table. There is an air of expectancy. The mother comes in and pours more coffee for everyone. We start the tape recorder. The father clears his throat and begins speaking slowly:

Ma'i [Coyote] was walking
along over by Kayenta, up by
those cliffs.

He was hunting for something
to eat but he wasn't having
any luck.

He got very hungry, going along
there,

And his stomach was making
noises.

He couldn't take it.

He was almost crying, he was
so hungry.

*children exchange quick glances,
smiling broadly*

*one girl giggles, quietly
(Navajos generally do not
complain about hunger.)
smiles, heavy expelling of breath*

[pause: four seconds]

Ma'i was going along and he
met Golízhí [Skunk].

He said, "Come along with me
and we'll hunt together.

*narrator smiles; audience smiles
(Golízhí, literally "one with
stinking urine," is often the*

Maybe we'll find some prairie
dogs and cook them up."
"I'm not a hunter," Golízhí said
to him.
"I won't be any help.
The prairie dogs will smell me
and run into their houses.
You should get someone else."

"There isn't anyone else
around."
Ma'i was starting to get angry.
He was so hungry he could eat
a skunk
If he could find some way not to
get urinated on.
"Come along anyway.
We'll find something."
Ma'i asked him that four times,

So Golízhí went along with him.

They went along together but
they didn't find anything to
eat.
It was getting dark
And Ma'i was so worried about
being hungry that he could
hardly walk.

"Let's stop and make camp here,
Shikna'ash," Ma'i said.
"We'll build a fire and play
some games."

butt of Ma'i's attempts to
manipulate others.)

[pause: three seconds]

laughter (Ma'i is too anxious to
get food.)

(Ma'i is trying hard to get a
recognizably poor hunting
companion.)
(Four requests usually create an
obligation to respond.)
smiles, expelling of air

[pause: four seconds]

laughter, including narrator

[pause: four seconds]

(Shikna'ash, literally "one who
travels with me," is a term
used for close friends and
relatives.)

[pause: two seconds]

"I don't know about that;
I don't know any games,"
Golízhi said.

"Well, I'll teach you a game I
learned from the birds.
We'll take our eyes out and
throw them up into the air.
Then we'll catch them in our
eyesockets," Ma'i said.

"I don't know that game."

"It's a good game," Ma'i said.
"You can see for a long distance
when your eyes are up in the
air."

"I don't know how to play it;
You go first."

Ma'i pulled out his eyes and
threw them up in the air.
He said, "Come back to my
sockets!
Come back to my sockets!
Come back to my sockets!
Come back to my sockets!"
Ma'i said.

They came back to his sockets.

Then he did it again, and he
threw them higher.

[pause: two seconds]

(In another story Ma'i has lost
his eyes by throwing them in
the air as the birds do.)

*one boy looks up at the ceiling;
others giggle; narrator smiles*

[pause: two seconds]

[pause: two seconds]

everyone laughs

[pause: two seconds]

[pause: four seconds]

[pause: two seconds]

expelling of air; smiles

[pause: two seconds]

"Come back to my sockets!
Come back to my sockets!
Come back to my sockets!
Come back to my sockets!"

*much giggling (Ma'i is carrying
his example to excess.)*

[pause: two seconds]

And they came back to his
sockets.

[pause: four seconds]

He did it again.
He threw them way up.
He could see all around the
countryside while they were
up there.
He said, "Come back to my
sockets!
Come back to my sockets!
Come back to my sockets!
Come back to my sockets!"
Ma'i said.

*narrator slows down, sounds
nasal and almost tired (Ma'i
has "committed himself" to
the usual fourfold pattern,
totally ignoring Golízhi,
totally carried away by his
own pleasure.)*

[pause: two seconds]

They came down and got caught
around the branches of a tree.

*extended laughter, lasting seven
seconds*

Everything got dark for him.
He couldn't see.
He groped around all over and
finally found the tree.
It was an old tree with pitchballs
all over it.
He could feel them with his
hands.
He pulled two of them off and
put them in his eye sockets.

*narrator laughs so hard that
these lines are distorted*

laughter

[pause: two seconds]

He couldn't see very well with
them,

So he got too close to the fire.
All that pitch melted down into
the corners of his eyes.

laughter

[pause: two seconds]

That's how coyotes got all that
brown stuff in the corners of
their eyes.

[pause: five seconds]

That's what they say.

*audience looking at floor,
general smiling, expelling of
air*

[pause: ten seconds]

Now let's hear that back.

*narrator looks at visitors for the
first time and acknowledges
the tape recorder*

INFORMANT'S COMMENTARY After a replaying of the tape, general conversation ensues, and we ask if he knows the other story where Coyote does the same things with the exception of the ending: "That's how coyotes got those yellow [amber] eyes." I ask which is the final story: Do coyotes have pitchballs for eyes, as in the one story, or has the pitch melted, as in the one just told? And in either case, how can coyotes see?

The narrator answers, "Coyotes can see. Everyone knows that. Just watch them. Why do you ask?"

"Do you believe these stories?" we ask.

"Of course. That other one is where Ma'i learned about throwing up his eyes from the birds. Birds are *supposed* to see up in the air."

"Then do you believe a person can see with pitchballs for eyes?"

"No. This is Ma'i. He can do anything he wants. But anyway the story isn't about eyes, it's about what Ma'i is doing. He cries about being hungry, he chooses a poor hunter for a partner, then he calls Golizhi *shilna'ash* even though he might eat him. Maybe he shouldn't see those things. It's not right to fool around with our bodies that way. It can make you sick. That's how eye diseases came to be. That's the important thing. That's what the story is about. If my children hear these stories they'll grow up to be good people. They won't play around with their bodies and they won't try to see things they shouldn't. You people are teachers, but I think you don't know these things."

One day Ma'i was walking
along out in the desert where
there used to be trees.

(Here another narration takes
place.)

CONTENT AND MEANING A careful observer will notice several important aspects of this performance. First and most evident is that the various observed events were very much conditioned by the presence of outsiders. How can we be sure that what we saw was in fact traditional if we recognize that much of it was brought about by our presence? What would have happened had we not been there? Here is a puzzle in the same category as the tree falling in the forest where no one can hear it (does it make a noise?)—with a major exception. Assuming our informants are not kidding us, we have their word that these things happen in the winter anyway. Indeed, from the testimony of the father of the family, these performances are not only appropriate, they are almost obligatory. Thus, while the particular event may have been sparked by a certain set of circumstances that included our visit, we are justified in believing that some other set of esoteric conditions would have brought about a similar performance at another time.

But our presence apparently did relate to another important aspect of this performance: the content. Take a closer look at the sequence listed above, and note that from the very first the traditional behavior throughout is related to the presence of guests:

1. A period of friendly silence occurs while the guests and hosts enjoy each other's proximity.
2. An interruption brings the family's new religious orientation to the attention of visitors, followed by a careful ascertaining of the visitors' religion so that they would not be offended by being offered coffee—a Navajo staple but a stimulant discouraged by Mormons.
3. Coffee is offered, and the visitors can now be brought even closer to a Navajo traditional family setting—one in which winter tales may normally occur.
4. String figures are begun innocently but end in the pointed demonstration that the visitors, for all their interest, are ignorant of important ways of avoiding confusion, getting lost, and sickness.
5. A Coyote story is told that dramatizes the foolish and competitive ways we may mistreat our bodies (which continues the topic of health brought up in the string figures and continues the thread of outsiders' ignorance).
6. A recognition of the tape recorder is made and an overt expression

of concern is voiced on the subject of teachers not knowing what is important.

One need not read very deeply to see the delicate irony of this performance situation, in which a father uses traditional modes of expression to show his children what they know in comparison to their potential teachers. Yet the subject is handled gently and covertly, showing respect and warmth for the guests while giving a tremendous boost of morale to the children.

Another important and obvious aspect of that rather full Navajo evening is the fact that for the Navajos it was a *high context* event—to use Hall's term—and not a series of separated genres, as a European-American scholar might set them down. By the scholar, the genres or forms of folklore might be listed as follows: greeting customs, weaving, foodways, games, folk astronomy, storytelling, folk philosophy. While the Navajo would certainly recognize these differences in behavior, it is likely that they would see no situational reason to separate them out; rather, they all fall into a more important category: those things performed between the first killing frost and the first thunderstorm—that is, in winter, as winter is defined by nature. The category foremost in the Navajo concern, then, is not "what kinds of traditions people practice," but "what traditional practices bind us to nature."

We can appreciate easily how much of the evening was based on the shared context of Navajo life, categories, and custom. The family literally flooded into the kitchen for coffee, obviously knowing what was to come. They already knew the string figures, and the star constellations and animals they represent (some Navajos still navigate at night by patterns so learned). They had already heard so many Coyote stories that they knew what was coming in this one, what Coyote's weaknesses are, and how those weaknesses represent ludicrous behavior or attitude for the Navajo (thus they knew when and why to laugh). They knew that what their mother was doing on her loom was directly related to what they were doing in their string games. And they knew, further, that all these matters related to rituals and dances that also are unavoidably a part of the winter season. In this context, the whole evening was a performance. Some of these ideas, fortunately, came forth in conversation, but one suspects that we visitors were only able to scratch the surface.

There are enough studies of separated folklore genres to make us aware that we sometimes amputate rather than dissect when we study tradi-

tional events. We become painfully aware of it when, as with a complex culture like that of the Navajo, a hundred years of anthropological and folkloristic study seem to have brought us very little closer to understanding. We need to guard against similar fragmentations when we study our own folklore or that of groups more closely related to us. Basically, we can say that a clear delineation of genre or structure of a folk item is only one small part of understanding a folk performance. Without the whole live context and the comment of the performers, it is unlikely that we will ever get very close to understanding—or even seeing—the dynamics that underlie the traditional process.