

The following essays were taken from presentations at the 1997 Iowa Folklife Education Seminar. The seminar, a collaborative venture between the State Historical Society and the State Arts Council's Folklife Program, was held in conjunction with the conference "Vital Communities: Showcase the Past, Imagine the Future," sponsored by the State Historical Society of Iowa.

How Community Can Be Understood & Studied Through Ethnic Contributions

Forum Participants:

Sue Eleuterio, Andrea Graham,
Gail Matthews-DeNatale, Rachelle Saltzman

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Sue Eleuterio:

A community is a collection of formal and informal networks. One way to study community is to get a sense of what kinds of knowledge (skills, beliefs, arts forms, stories, etc.) is shared by the community, and what happens when this knowledge is transmitted from person to person. Each time knowledge passes hands, some aspects of that knowledge change, while other aspects stay the same. This is called "the folklore process." How do insiders learn the core competencies of their community? How and when do they learn the flourishes or specialized knowledge of the community? What is the critical mass of knowledge and understanding that needs to be reached before a "child" is considered to be a full-fledged adult, or an outsider is considered to be an insider (or is insider status even possible for someone who wasn't born into the community)?

There are some caveats to studying community. It's very easy to do superficial research with a community and to think that you've "got it," that you have a definitive understanding of the group. Whenever a process of community-based research begins, the first people involved are usually people who represent the power structure -- the "official" representatives and the people who know how to access system resources. To get a nuanced understanding of community lore, the researcher needs to talk with representatives from all (or most) of the community's many facets or sub-communities.

If we only speak with one segment of the community, we risk re-stereotyping the group in our representation and interpretation. For example, Eleuterio teaches many Mexican-American students. At times, she's discovered that some of her prior knowledge about Mexican-American culture doesn't hold true for these

students. She wrongly assumed that most of the students would know about *Los Dias de las Muertos* (the Day of the Dead), since this is a Mexican-American celebration. But many of these students were born and raised in the United States, and the custom may not be celebrated in their immediate families.

When groups of people migrate, they bring their customs, foodways, and other forms of lore with them, but the exact way the lore is practiced may change. When people experience major life changes, such as a move, their lore often changes in subtle or major ways. For example, critical ingredients for recipes may not be available in the new location. In studying celebrations and other forms of folklife, pay close attention to who's celebrating, recent or past influences, location, etc. Whenever a major change takes place in the lore of a community, you can bet there is an interesting story or insight to be gleaned.

As you develop your plans for documenting the networks and informal systems of a community, remember to talk to people. This may sound obvious, but it's something that's often forgotten during historical research. For example, perhaps you're involved with developing an interpretation strategy for an outdoor museum. Let's say the buildings date to the 1860s, so all the original occupants are deceased. Most researchers would think to look in census records and old newspapers, or perhaps even peruse mid 19th Century literature for information about the details of daily life at that time. But few researchers will think to interview the children and grandchildren of the occupants, many of whom may still be living in the community!

Depending on the culture group you're working with, objects, music, and dance may illustrate stories that are important to the community. Eleuterio used a Hmong story cloth as a case in point. Hmong communities put lots of energy into the arts as a way of passing information on from one generation to another.

"Story Cloths," squares of intricately appliquéd and embroidered fabric that are usually at least several feet in diameter, illustrate daily life events (such as crop planting and harvesting) and special occasions (such as weddings). In a manner similar to medieval paintings and cartoon strips, the placement of scenes on the cloth indicates a moment or episode in the narrative. Choice of thread color also carries special meaning, as do the seemingly abstract borders, which look like triangles to the outsider, but signify mountains to the Hmong. While the beauty of this fine craftsmanship can be enjoyed at first glance, understanding deeper levels of meaning requires dialogue with the cloth's maker and other members of the Hmong community.

Andrea Graham:

Most people think of community as a physical place, but actually the root of the word is "common." Communities are groups of people who have something in common. Graham used a documentation project that her agency did in Las Vegas

as a case in point. When the fieldwork team took a geographical approach to their community research methodology, they found little of note. Most Las Vegas residents are relatively new to the area, and "neighborhoods" where people know and care about each other's lives are rare.

When the Las Vegas research team shifted its focus, looking for the things that people in Las Vegas have in common, examples of folklife became more visible. For example, there is the gambling and entertainment industry, which is a form of occupational culture -- a community whose membership is defined by common work interests, knowledge, and responsibilities. One researcher documented the artistic traditions of local neon sign makers.

So community sometimes is evidenced by shared a sense of place, but it's not limited to place. Community is a shared sense of (it's up to the researcher to find out what each unique "community" has in common, then fill in the blank).

Community also involves networks of knowledge and interaction -- communication between people across time and space. For example, Graham has done research with western ranches. Ranches can be very large, so the distance between buildings on one ranch and buildings on another is often vast. Yet, even though these groups of people live miles apart, everybody seems to know what's happening on each other's ranches, whereas in Las Vegas people usually don't even know the identity of the person sitting next to them. Buckaroos are one medium of communication between ranches. Buckaroos are cowboys for hire that move from farm to farm, bring the most recent news and gossip with them. In ranching communities, people are motivated to swap stories because they share common interests, common political needs, etc.

People who share a common occupation, religion, regional identity, etc. can constitute a community. Ethnicity is another kind of community, one which is organized according to shared cultural heritage. In studying the folklife of each of these different kinds of communities, it's important to identify the elements or practices that become part of the community's folklife repertoire. With ethnicity (and with many other types of communities), certain kinds of food are central to the group's identity. When you're conducting folklife research, be prepared to eat!

Gail Matthews-DeNatale:

The building of community involves layers of culture -- *patterns* of culture serve as indicators of the ethnicities of people living in any given community. Community patterns may also be layered, as tracks left by past groups blend or overlap the marks of current occupants. Two examples illustrate this point:

1. In Arlington, Virginia, there is a shopping center called Eden Center. At first glance it is a typical '50s strip mall, with non-descript buildings laid out side by side around a gaping parking lot, tied together with ribbons of concrete sidewalk. But within the past few decades, recent Vietnamese

immigrants have made Eden Center their own, recreating both the use of space and patterns of commerce common to life in Vietnam. The name Eden Center may not mean much to outsiders, but Vietnamese patrons know that this is the name of a marketplace in their country of origin.

2. Matthews-DeNatale grew up in the southeast. Her father was raised in Canton, NC, a paper mill town in western North Carolina. When she went away to graduate school in Indiana, she developed an interest in international cuisine. Proud of her newly acquired skills, she returned to western North Carolina for a family vacation and offered to make homemade egg rolls for the family. It was easy -- buy wrappers at the store, chop ingredients, mix the filling, wrap the rolls, and fry them up. Only one problem -- no egg roll wrappers could be found in any of Haywood County's grocery stores. Now, close to 20 years later, egg roll wrappers can be purchased in most major grocery stores. Other foods that used to be region-specific, such as bagels, are also widely available. This is an indication of a subtle layering of culture that is taking place in the "new" south, in which corporate relocation and subsequent newcomers are expanding the local culinary palette.

When we speak of ethnicity, we often deal with it as an all-or-nothing thing when it's not. We all have multiple identities, a reality that Mark Hicks (GMU, Institute for Educational Transformation) calls the "multicultural self." Even in seemingly "monocultural" situations, multiple identities become apparent when we scratch the surface. For example, Matthews-DeNatale's husband is Doug DeNatale. Italian, right? Not quite -- his mother's family is comprised of German immigrants. But Doug's father Joseph, whose parents immigrated from Italy, has one coherent ethnicity, right? Not quite -- Joseph's mother was from northern Italy and his father was from southern Italy, a regional and cultural difference that is very significant to most Italians.

For teachers, this means that regardless of whether we're working in a classroom or doing community-based fieldwork, our assumptions are always being challenged (and the whole point of folklife is to help us find joy and excitement in this process of shattered assumptions).

For example, when Matthews-DeNatale entered the first grade, she attended a school run by the church at which her father served as a rector. Since he was a well-known figure whose parents regularly came for holidays, the first grade teacher probably knew all about little Gail Matthews' ethnic heritage, right? No, Gail's background was a little more complicated than that. In addition to Xavier Vigeant, Gail's deceased French-Canadian grandfather who worked with the Bureau of Indian Affairs before his death, the teacher didn't know that Gail had recently had changed her last name from Sangster to Matthews. Gail's biological father had been killed in a plane crash and her stepfather had legally adopted her. This invisible third branch of Gail's family tree included Scottish-American relatives and a grandmother registered in the Dawes Roll of the Cherokee Nation.

How could this teacher have known the ethnic diversity represented in this young child? The only way to discover our multicultural self (and the multicultural selves of others) is to establish extended conversations with those around us.

Rachelle Saltzman:

Saltzman started studying community when she stumbled into a folklore class in school. Since then she has discovered that the way people tell stories is not always the way they actually happened -- but even distortion and outright fabrication tells a form of truth.

For example, Saltzman's mother is from Lithuania, but was born on a boat in New York Harbor. The boat was named *The Clintonia*, so Clintonia is her mother's middle name. Growing up, Saltzman heard stories about how difficult it was for her grandmother to make a long journey to a new country, all alone, without her husband, and eight months pregnant. Saltzman later discovered that the grandmother wasn't alone, she was accompanied by an aunt. But the truth is that she felt alone, and that loneliness and a longing for one's home culture is a very real part of the immigration experience.

Another thing to remember is that cultures which initially seem dissimilar may have common threads. For example, Saltzman is Jewish, but when she came to Iowa and began working with Mennonite communities, she felt a connection. Because many Mennonites and Jewish immigrants came to the United States from relatively similar places, members of the two communities sometimes have things in common, such as similar last names.

Despite the fact the groups which seem different on the surface may, in fact, share similar folkways, it is also true that the same word may have a different meaning from group to group, region to region, or ethnicity to ethnicity. For example, in Indiana, "mango" is a slang term for a green pepper.

In selecting a topic for community-based research, consider the major life needs, passions, and passages that all humans care about. Food, faith, birth, death -- topics like these are fertile ground for the development of folklife traditions. Saltzman mentioned researching the Tai Dam section of a local cemetery, noticing the differences between the burial traditions of this group and other Iowa communities. Folklore is all about the ways that people organize themselves. By comparing and contrasting the organizing principles of various communities, we learn more about the values, perspectives, and truths that are an integral part of each and every culture.