

## Culture



# Alan DUNDES, *Interpreting Folklore*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1980. 304 pages, US \$9.95 (paper)

Elli Kögäs-Maranda

Volume 3, Number 1, 1983

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1084176ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1084176ar>

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie

### ISSN

0229-009X (print)

2563-710X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this review

Kögäs-Maranda, E. (1983). Review of [Alan DUNDES, *Interpreting Folklore*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1980. 304 pages, US \$9.95 (paper)]. *Culture*, 3(1), 141–142. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1084176ar>

Tous droits réservés © Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie, 1983

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

**Érudit**

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

Alan DUNDES, *Interpreting Folklore*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1980. 304 pages, US \$9.95 (paper).

By Elli Kõngäs-Maranda  
Université Laval

This collection of essays on the interpretation of folkloric facts contains writings from almost 20 years. Most of them are directed towards psychoanalytic interpretations of folklore themes of various orders ; some of the articles have upon appearance shocked even faithful Dundes readers. Now, brought together, they form a more satisfying picture than the parts did in isolation.

The volume consists of thirteen articles, certainly a folklorist's subtle joke. The underlying axiom of most of the article is : the deep meaning of most folklore patterns is unconscious. Some of the patterns are formal (and cognitive, says Dundes), as demonstrated in the much-quoted and quite excellent paper "The Number Three in American Culture" (pp. 134-59). Some of the patterns are semantic and symbolic, such as the hitherto-hidden meanings of American football, fundamentally a homosexual drama enacted for women to see, women who are not to be heard except as cheerleaders ("Into the Endzone for a Touchdown", pp. 199-210). And some of them are just miscellaneous.

Let's first consider the number three. Dundes insists on the idea that the "subconscious trinity" is derived from the parts of male genitals ; since American culture is male-dominated, the pattern must repeat itself endlessly to enforce, assert and reaffirm the subconscious "Urform". I yield the point that not only American, but probably all Indoeuropean cultures favour the number three. But American culture and these others are not the only male-dominated ones. Amerindians hold the number four in place of privilege ; so do the Melanesians (for whom eight is the equivalent of *all* : the Lau term for world is *kwalu tolo naagi*, these eight islands, i.e., the totality of all there is). My theory, less romantic than that of Dundes, is that in languages with singular, dual, and plural, three is the first plural ; in languages which also have a trial, four is the first plural. I am aware that we cannot present better than feeble hypotheses for the ultimate reasons for our magic numbers. But of all the possible hypotheses, the phallus-cum-two-testicles theory is surely one of the most infantile imaginable.

Of the psychoanalytic notions used in these essays, certainly the most fruitful is that of projec-

tion. This runs through the volume but is most explicit in "Projection in Folklore : a Plea for Psychoanalytic Semiotics" (pp. 33-62). Here projection and inverted projection start posing problems : if everything is the same as its opposite, where is the thing? And, in any case, how do we finally decide what the opposite of something is? This is, for me, a problem in logic and in ethnography ; whatever Dundes thinks of structuralism, the native's hocus-pocus IS the structuralist's God's Truth, and we have no other worry than to figure out how to find it. Linguists long ago said that the native is always right ; but of those things that natives don't talk about, how will we ever know?

What Dundes means by semiotics is hard to grasp after the following proclamation : "I wish to reiterate my firm conviction that semiotics must ultimately be concerned with meaning" (p. 45). What else? This is what they always said, de Saussure, Jakobson, the whole gang. Semiotics was founded to study meaning. But if semiotics is, as Dundes suspects, "the science of the seamy" (p. 47), then we must start considering once more the meaning of meaning. It is quite neat to say that the bride throws her bouquet "signifying her willingness to be, or intention of being, *deflowered*" (p. 46). At least here we have *an overtly innocent sign that has a covert sexual meaning*. But it is also one of the facts of life, one of the necessary operations of symbolic behaviour and for the efficacy of symbols that where the overt signifier is sexual, the covert signified is something else : a successful sign bridges well-separated domains of meaning. Here I take a well-known example, the Trobriand myth of the origin of love magic and the origin of clans. This is Malinowski's tragic and beautiful story of brother-sister incest where, by accident, they poured a love potion over themselves, fell into each other's arms and perished in water, starving to death—loving each other to death. This myth, I am convinced, does not concern itself with sex. It speaks of the existential and societal problem that Tylor, and Levi-Strauss after him pose as the fundamental rule for creating society, to "marry out or die out".

On the other hand, as Dundes says, but without seeming to notice what he is saying, meanings are multiple (p. 60). Folklorists, especially the psychoanalytically inclined ones, tend to neglect the fact that there is NO ULTIMATE, BOTTOMMOST, ORTHODOX, UNIQUE single meaning. Projective systems have multilevel applications. One image stands for several meaning simultaneously. Dundes' tendency is to discover the "real" meaning which he then proclaims and defends. But we are all storytellers and glance around when we deliver our

narratives to ask, "did they get this, this, THIS?" If carriers of folklore project into their expressive arts, so of course do folklorists. Alan Dundes is basic Freud. How does it happen that Freud got so fixed on his mother? Surely the more interesting incest would have been with the sister. That, it seems, has been a preoccupation of the Mediterranean world—the SISTER's virginity. It is not to my knowledge recorded that many knifed others to defend their mother's virginity... And how does Dundes remain so male chauvinist despite proclamations against male chauvinism? Witness: "In American culture, in contrast [to the children taking pride in their parents' achievements and boasting of their ancestors], it is the parents who boast of their children's accomplishments, while the children may actually consider it a disadvantage to be the *son of a famous father* (my emphasis)" (p. 81). What of: (1) the daughter of a famous father; (2) the daughter of a famous mother (cf. *Mommy Dear*); (3) the son of a famous mother; (4) the sister of a famous mother; (5) the brother of a famous sister...? The possibilities go on.

To sum up: Alan Dundes is a *seminal* thinker. In addition, he is fun to read, writes well and has a good if at times ancient bibliography at his fingertips. He does not change his angle very much: he discovered Freud 20 years ago and has not budged since. He has invented more gunpowder. But, it seems, we need enough of it to keep us aware, averted, and awed. Every field needs its cadflies, and Alan Dundes has taken on the role.

+ + +

About virgin mothers: in the purely Canadian application of the principle, there was a family consisting of:

an old father,  
a virgin mother,  
a child born on Christmas day

But then they overdid it: two years later they had another child born on Christmas day. This was considered hybris, so the holy family fell apart. After all, even God had only one son on Christmas.

+ + +

Second though about the virgin birth: for Christians it is surely a simple criterion of Christ's divinity. The Trobrianders think in an exactly parallel fashion except that for them the dividing line is not between divinity and humanity, but between humanity and animality: people, in their dogma, are conceived from ancestors while pigs and other animals are conceived in sexual relationships.

+ + +

Slightly annoying, in a collection of essays, is the fact that their format has not been made to conform. Thus, Dundes talks of Jesus' biography in the style of American Anthropologist but of the other topics in the style of the Modern Language Society. Can it be that the AA is more divine than the rest?

---

Anya PETERSON ROYCE, *Ethnic Identity, Strategies of Diversity*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1982. 247 pages (paper).

By Robert Paine  
Memorial University of Newfoundland

In the Introduction, Peterson Royce warns (or encourages?) her readers that they "will be forced to engage in creative reflection and analysis" as she pursues her aim of presenting "theories and analyses that reflect the eclecticism and contrasts that characterize the phenomenon of ethnic identity" (p. 13); further, her book will "revolve around the three factors of power, perception, and purpose" (p. 3); she also spots in advance for us certain key "contrasts" (or "oppositions" or "dichotomies") that will emerge. These are between institutions and individuals, ethnic content and boundary, the material and the ideological, persistence and change; and "the final and most important contrast is between 'us' and 'them'" without which "ethnic identity does not exist" (pp. 6-13). There follow 8 chapters arranged in four Parts; first, I will comment briefly on each of the Parts.

In Part One, "Definitional Debates and Theoretical Backgrounds", the author claims to have shown how "models and theories [of ethnicity] were related to trends in the social sciences in general" and "demonstrated the relationship between theory-building and the situations in which theorists are working" (p. 50). While this claim strikes me as much inflated, I am grateful for her discussion of Edward Spicer's view of ethnicity (pp. 44-49).

Part Two considers colonialism, nationhood and immigration as "the most important larger contexts" of ethnicity over the last two hundred years (pp. 140-41). Inevitably, treatment is over-compressed; this means that (save one possibility to which I return) the book suffers (also in other chapters) from a basic fault in design. For far from engaging in creative reflection, readers are likely to be held to the summarizing, narrative surface of things. Nonetheless, I was grateful for the discus-