the way of style and performance than specific content. We may say that folklore itself is characterized by (1) certain cultural rules that determine strongly what gets articulated and how and when, and (2) by a looseness, an informality, an inclination toward rephrasing and change, that will eventually result in an individuation on the surface of all articulations (variants, as they are called by folklorists). How does such a complex of rules and freedoms operate? How are their forms to be studied? Where to begin and how to define such a vast spectrum of human expression, complete with its cultural matrix?

**DESCRIBING FOLKLORE**

Since the time of the Grimm brothers in Germany, scholars have sought out vernacular artists, studying their language, tales, customs, and beliefs, first in fear that the traditional world was disappearing (or becoming moribund), and more recently in the belief that only through a study of folklife can we ever understand the nature of human cultural history and expression. Some have concentrated on those particular genres (forms) of folklore listed in the introduction, while others have concerned themselves with certain categories of genres (for example, oral lore to the exclusion of material objects or vice versa). Others of a more anthropological orientation have centered their attention on traditional groupings of people (ethnic, regional, religious, occupational) and have concentrated on how folklore codifies and articulates the dynamics of the group itself. More recently, scholars have studied the interactive expressions of any group of related people: computer users, gays and lesbians, gangs, and lawyers, to name only a few.

Nonetheless, in spite of more than one hundred years of intensive study in Europe and America, folklorists have produced neither a satisfactory definition for that body of materials on which they fondly spend their scholarly lives nor an acceptable, consistent set of critical terms with which to discuss it. Certainly, one reason is the almost startling variety and superficial dissimilarity of the materials themselves, ranging as they do from barns to ballads. The study of this vast array of cultural expression needs to be interdisciplinary in nature, and this has resulted in the amalgamation of a field that carries a sense of diffuseness, one that sometimes encourages scholars in other fields to disbelieve that folklorists know what they are doing or that they are doing anything at all. Another lamentable result is a lack of precision in scholarly conversation as folklorists attempt the theoretical study and discussion of a constantly evolving field.

**The Term Folklore**

Still another problem, which seems at first more complicated than it really is, is that most folklorists today do not even feel that the word *folklore* itself adequately identifies or defines the area they are talking about. For one thing, they voice sincere doubts that there is any such static group as might be implied by
the folk. Indeed, the closely associated German term, das Volk, means something like a genetically similar group, like the way ethnic group is used in English. But we know very well that most people in the world belong to several close groups, each based on different kinds of interactions, learning processes, and expressions. We are recognizing now, at least, that the idea of a single folk unit as the defining feature of the human context in which an individual grows up must probably be rejected.

Further, the word lore, even though it does indicate something about learning or knowledge, does not cover the wide range of communicative expression and experience and performance that has become the focus of the professional folklorist. It suggests that vernacular traditions are learned, not practiced; actually they are both known and done. William Thoms, who made up the term folklore in the nineteenth century, and many of those who first became involved in the study of what were then called popular antiquities, were not trained as professionals in this field nor could they have anticipated the development of their elite hobby into a demanding academic discipline. As a result, subsequent folklorists have had to create their own conceptions of a field of inquiry along the way, often using terms (and biases) drawn from their own academic specialties. Nonetheless, the word folklore is in widespread use and seems to be here to stay. And most scholars have at least some notion of the kind of thing they are talking about, even though its precise outlines and definitions are not easy to produce.

Actually, folklore is a word very much like culture; it represents a tremendous spectrum of human knowledge and expression that can be studied in a number of ways and for a number of reasons. Its primary characteristic is that its ingredients seem to come directly from dynamic interactions among human beings in vernacular performance contexts rather than through the more rigid channels and fossilized structures of technical instruction or bureaucratized education, or through the relatively stable channels of the formally taught classical traditions.

**Naming of Parts**

In the introductory comments to his anthology *The Study of Folklore*, Alan Dundes suggests it is inadvisable even to try to define folklore. Instead, he gives an inclusive list of items and genres that have been studied by folklorists over the years: in this view, folklore is as folklorists do. Each folklorist, of course, specializes in only a few topics on any comprehensive list, but in spite of the varying interests and definitions urged by different folklorists, there should be in fact an area of general agreement among them from which a unified description of folklore dynamics may grow. It should be as applicable to string figures as to ballads, to barns as to oral epics.

Because a number of folk genres are simply not oral in nature, oral transmission can never be definitive for folklore. As well, an insistence on a certain kind of content is unworkable because of the great disparity between the genres,
some of which—hand gestures, for example—may be said to be entirely lacking in content or to be entirely content, depending on one’s viewpoint.

The simple list of traditional items (taken from those areas we have been interested in because they seem traditional) is also inadequate for definition, for if it remains open-ended, it will remain non-definitive. If it is a closed list, it will represent only a parochial prescription and will be almost irrelevant for anyone who may want to expand or contract the list. Moreover, a list based on genre overlooks the fact known to any field researcher that folk expressions seldom occur in one genre at a time (the ballad text is related to its tune; the written graffito may have been learned in conversation; the carved “witching” stick or dowsing rod owes as much to popular belief as to the whittler’s craft). We are obviously talking about a multidimensional set of occurrences and contexts. Single genre designations, while they may help us to think more clearly about the ingredients and forms of the folklore field, also help us to overlook the dynamics we seek to understand. Thus, for purposes of discussion, the “dangers” in the open-ended list are probably more acceptable for us to put up with as we scrutinize a field characterized by variety and dynamism.

Let us then assume that folklorists may be said to have some generally informed, if not precisely charted, notion that vernacular traditions exist, and that expressions made by an individual under the influences of culture-oriented traditions will share some characteristics that will argue for grouping them in a common field. Implicit in the study of folklore today, moreover, is the understanding that we may add to our list as the field becomes more clearly defined and as new cultural expressions are better understood. As with other disciplines (such as history, literature, music, mathematics), the term folklore will no doubt continue to be used in reference both to the content of the field (the material we collect and study) and to the discipline itself.

Variety and Variation

What element or elements do the ballad and string figure have in common? On what grounds may one place *barn* and *folksong* on the same list? What similarities exist between a quilt and an oral epic? How may we speak of latrinalia and folk dance as being in the same academic area? There may be in fact several elements shared by some of these items, but there is only one that works in them all. It has nothing to do directly with content or with genre, with method of transmission, with the definition of the group, or with level of literacy. The similarity lies in a common process. All these items have the common quality that—as long as they continue to exist in their natural habitats—they are in continual and dynamic variation through space and time.

Since variety is not in any way limited to folklore, since all things in a culture change through time, how are the items on our list to be differentiated from other entities that vary: Shall we include automobiles, clothing fashions, telephones? For several reasons, no. The items and events of folklore are recurrent
forms of local, dynamic human expression—artifacts and performances created one at a time under particular circumstances. A quilt or a barn, as practical as its use may be, extends far beyond its mere thingness or its function. It is designed or phrased in such a way as to express and reflect the personal and cultural values in design and workmanship out of which the artisan works, and it is these designs and values, not the quilt or barn itself, that may be said to be dynamic, and thus to be folklore. Moreover, the traditional artifact is not usually produced with the sharply varying demands of a vast, paying, consumer market in mind. Traditional expressions, whether they be lingual, musical, gestural, or physical, reflect the notions of the performers in relation both to their own peculiar talents and aesthetics and to the tastes of the local network of people for whom they perform—the group whose members are familiar with their art: those from whom they have learned through traditional exchange.

This should not be construed as excluding folk crafts, in which certain technical demands are made on the artists for which they must be trained by their mentors. Any chair must have enough legs to stand, and any pot must be able to hold something. Different materials and aims require particular handling by the potter or weaver or carver, and these are usually transmitted to them by someone else so that they will not spend their early careers creating attractive blunders. We are, then, distinguishing between traditional ideas about “pot-ness,” say, and those technical devices through which the pot itself is produced.

To put it another way, the barn, pot, ballad, or tale as we find it in vernacular performance is a particular rendering of a pre-existing idea, produced at a particularly appropriate time. The prototypes of barn-, pot-, ballad-, and talelessness that circulate among members of a group are based more on cultural attitudes than on technology. In these terms, our critical job is to present and study the processes of folklore that exist through time in a group of people by a comparative study of the items produced from the cultural premises of that group.

Thus, while certain technical competences often must come into play, the production of any traditional item is not chiefly related to professional training or to the external demands of technical or economic necessity. Of course some crafts become popular, and the artisan may make money. Some artisans are able to support themselves through their crafts. But their work has primarily local and cultural origins, and most often this is precisely why outsiders seek to buy it.

The process of folklore may be said in this sense to be local, communal, and informal. This does not argue that formal people have no folklore, or that folklore is not shared among members of a highly trained profession. Rather, it suggests that even in the most formal groupings of any society, active traditions are passed not as a part of the formal training but as units of meaning interchangeably enough with other familiar people that a recognizable clustering of premises, formulas, and styles is built up and transmitted out of which the informal performer acts. Formal opera singing itself is not regarded as a part
of folklore, for example, but opera singers may possess and transmit jokes, tales, beliefs, and customs ("break a leg") informally that particularly reflect the traditional values, beliefs, and attitudes of opera singers.

Similarly, nuclear physics per se would not ordinarily come under the scrutiny of folklorists, but there are numerous traditions passed among scientists (for example, legends of German rockets not lifting off properly until urinated upon); such traditions are clearly not connected so much to the formal or technical aspects of physics and rocketry as they are to the shared experiences and anxieties of simply being a scientist. Generally speaking, the performers of traditional expressions do so because they want to or must, and usually their audience is made up of participating members of the same group in which the dynamic exchange of traditions through the years has formed the matrix out of which the performer operates.

For these reasons we may characterize or describe the materials of folklore as culturally constructed communicative traditions informally exchanged in dynamic variation through space and time. Tradition is a compendium of those pre-existing culture-specific materials, assumptions, and options that bear upon the performer more heavily than do his or her own personal tastes and talents. We recognize in the use of tradition that such matters as content and style have been, for the most part, passed on by the culture, but not invented by the performer. Dynamic recognizes, on the other hand, that in the processing of these ideas in performance, the artist's own unique talents of inventiveness within the tradition are highly valued and are expected to operate strongly. Time and space dimensions remind us that the resulting variations may spread geographically with great rapidity (as jokes do) as well as down through time (good luck beliefs). Folklore is made up of informal expressions passed around long enough to have become recurrent in form and content, but changeable in performance.

**Mode and Movement in Folklore**

Our focus here is on the mode of transmission rather than on the medium. The critical factor is not whether an item is found in oral circulation or in print (or on a record), but whether it does or does not exhibit dynamic, substantive variation. Of course, the plain fact is that the informal, vernacular mode among humans is chiefly oral and gestural (we talk and gesture to each other more often than we build barns, for example). Folklorists are generally agreed that these everyday expressions tend to become viable over a period of time or across a geographical area mostly among people who share some basis for everyday communal contacts, some factor in common that makes it possible, or rewarding or meaningful, for them to exchange vernacular materials in a culturally significant way. Such human clusters have been called folk groups by many folklorists, but we should bear in mind that the grouping envisioned here is not static (as that term might imply) but is as dynamic as the materials it produces,
for most people belong to several such groupings, and some (such as occupational) are subject to constant change.

It is particularly to the element of dynamic variation through space and time that this book directs its attention, for these coefficients provide a subject area on which virtually all folklorists are in agreement, and for that reason it offers an acceptable set of premises that can be serviceable to our understanding of folklore without the necessity of abandoning critical interest in the continuing debates on structure, texture, function, and meaning.

Indeed, few folklorists would deny that folklore scholarship is based almost entirely on the study of variation. Nearly every scholar mentions the matter of variant study as basic to the critical examination of the materials. Weak folklore studies are often the hasty output of writers who have failed to take into consideration a fair or representative sampling of variants. The most heavily used critical tools in folklore, the type and motif indexes, are founded on the proposition that in folklore no single item can be called the tale or song or barn. It is axiomatic that we need more than one instance of a tale or motif or ballad or popular belief even to know whether in fact we are dealing with an expression shaped by tradition. If fifty texts of one ballad were unearthed that were all alike in every detail, most folklorists would argue that they were not traditional because their identical phrasing would be an indication they had been duplicated on paper and thus could not be individual transcriptions of live performances. Structural and comparative studies are predicated entirely on the observation that certain units are continually recombined within the frame of a genre or type, and that an examination of patterns thus produced leads to valuable insights into the genres themselves and into the processes by which they are developed.

Not only do folklorists examine a maximum number of variants before making critical approaches to a particular item or genre, but many folklorists see the process of variation itself as the very essence of their material. In the lingual, musical, and kinesic traditions the item is the performance, and the performance is nearly always a particular variation of a hypothetical prototype (one suspects Plato might have made a good folklorist).

In his study of traditional ballads, David Buchan declares that the story in a ballad is "a conceptual entity whose essence may be readily and accurately conveyed by different word groups." William R. Bascom, speaking of all forms of folklore, puts it this way, "Change occurs each time new variations are introduced and again these innovations are subject to acceptance or rejection. As this process continues, each new invention is adapted gradually to the needs of the society and to the pre-existing culture patterns, which may themselves be modified somewhat to conform to the new invention."

One photograph of a Pennsylvania Dutch hex sign, one plowshare supporting a mailbox, one tale, one quilt, one ballad, one graffito can never be enough to establish the existence of a tradition. On the other hand, one hundred items
alike in every detail establishes nothing but the fact of duplication. Variation in the particular appearance of one item is probably the most reliable hallmark of live folklore available to the student. It is not based on the belief that folklore is more “pure” than anything else, but on the observation that folklore is produced and maintained in a distinctive way.

The Twin Laws

Variation, on the other hand, is not a random or a radical process. Balancing the dynamism of change in performance is the essentially conservative force of tradition itself. The weight of the familiar past continually exerts its subtle pressures on the bearers of these materials in at least two ways: The performers remember or adhere to some notions of the basic type (for example, in the use of their own language, or in the singing of a ballad like “Barbara Allen,” in which a woman forsakes a man and the man dies), and they are sensitive to the reactions of the audience, most of whom speak the same language or subscribe to certain expectations about the ballad (or the quilt, barn, tale) in content, style, and occasion. These considerations will limit in varying degrees the freedom for variation felt by the performers. They may institute change, either consciously or inadvertently, but they will do so chiefly within the framework of the familiar, acceptable, and culturally logical.

These two forces, or qualities—the one dynamic, the other conservative—are the twin coefficients of the particularized variation that finally does take place again and again in each traditional event—through space (geographical or human) and through time (moments or years). For simple reference, we may refer to these two forces descriptively as the twin laws of folklore process: conservatism and dynamism will probably be the two most prominent characteristics in our perception of (and discussion of) any item tentatively classified as folklore. We will want to know what features of content and style have been carried through from earlier sources (conservatism). And we will need to know the extent to which the bearers of the materials, or the context in which they operate, have worked upon these materials in such a way as to change them (dynamism).

Conservatism refers to all those processes, forces, and attitudes that result in the retaining of certain information, beliefs, styles, customs, and the like, and the attempted passing of those materials, essentially intact, through time and space in all the channels of vernacular expression. Traditional matters related to religious belief, cultural mores, and culture-specific worldviews seem much less open to change than, say, the styles and attitudes relating to jokes. Myths (stories that relate or embody sacred or cosmic occurrences) are expressed in terms of a “time before time began,” or in “collapsed time” or “distilled time,” and are supported by a whole range of religious belief that concedes to a sense of ultimate truth. Although it can be easily demonstrated that myths do in fact change through time, the attempt on the part of the believer is to transmit them
intact. They are not to be tampered with or rearranged, and often a special priesthood provides direct protective and conservative custody. Stylistic variation is suppressed or discouraged, for truth is not believed amenable to artistic manipulation. Even in some secular traditional forms, certain singers and storytellers sometimes do memorize their texts, or try to. The conservative dimension promotes retention and discourages change.

Dynamism, at the other extreme, comprises all those elements that function to alter features, contents, meanings, styles, performance, and usage as a particular traditional event takes place repeatedly through space and time. Matters of taste, context, art, playfulness, change of function or meaning, forgetfulness, translation (language or dialect), shift of audience, age or gender of performer (and many more), all encourage continual change in the particular utterance or production or performance of traditional items, even when the bearer of the tradition tries to avoid it. The reasons for this will become clearer in later chapters. Here it is perhaps sufficient to note that when a singer says she is singing a ballad exactly as her father sang it, she may refer to her fidelity to plot and symbol, not her attempt to produce an exact replication of a memorized text. In this sense, a person may indeed repeat a joke “exactly” without using the same words.

In general, oral tradition itself is more lively and variable than written tradition: we are not surprised to find that orally transmitted jokes are more dynamic in form, style, and content than those myths that have been written down for a considerable period of time. In the same way, written language and spelling rules tend to inhibit the natural changes that take place in the evolution of spoken language, and in some cases, as with English, spelling may lag conservatively two or three hundred years behind actual pronunciation.

The Spectrum of Dynamism

We must then envision a kind of model in which conservatism on one end, and dynamism on the other, exert an influence on the particular realization of vernacular expression. All traditional materials will fit somewhere on this model, some closer to one end than to the other. Myths, whose function in most cultures is to provide dramatic experiential models of protected truths and laws which would otherwise be very abstract, are most likely to be closer to the conservative end of our scale. Jokes and other kinds of orally transmitted materials, whose function is largely fictional and pleasurable, are likely to be closer to the dynamic end.

The most typical relationship shown by these laws might be expressed algebraically: C/D, indicating that the conservative feature being passed along is subject to modification by dynamic processes (ballads and barns and folktales are in this category). C/C might represent materials on one extreme end of the scale, in which both the item being transmitted as well as its performance or enunciation are under rigid control (such as might be noticed with some