

## The Possible Range of Folk Narrative

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If narrative, generally speaking, means a story, or the telling of a story, then folk narrative, more specifically, means the transmission of stories, most often verbally, in forms such as poems and ballads/songs, myths and legends, tales and tall stories, proverbs, yarns, jokes and riddles between the ordinary, everyday 'folk' or people of a society. It is separate from and different to the information and narratives transmitted by a society's official institutions such as the government, educational organisations or the mass media.

Throughout Australia's history, the creation of various forms of folk narrative has been integral to the conservation, continuation and evolution of Australian values, beliefs, customs, and traditions, central to which is the communication and understanding of our national identity, both as individuals and as a country as a whole. Folk narratives help to define, however informally and unofficially, the collective character and nature of the society which creates them. They help to keep a culture's history alive, and to ensure the continuance of its self-expression through narrative, by providing a verbal record of what is meaningful in a society at any given period of time. However, the possible range of folk narrative is very broad, given the many forms it can take and the aspects of society, culture and people it can represent. The breadth of this range perhaps signifies the importance of story-telling in its efforts to capture and describe, universally, the complexities of the human condition as it has been experienced across time and history.

The following is a necessarily selective table showing some of the key characteristics of different types of folk narratives using specific Australian examples,<sup>1</sup> followed by a brief analysis of the possible meanings of the narratives, and some of the conclusions which may be drawn from such examples.

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<sup>1</sup> All examples of folk narrative have been sourced from the representative volume: Davey, Gwenda Beed and Graham Seal, *A Guide to Australian Folklore: From Ned Kelly to Aeroplane Jelly* (East Roseville, NSW: Kangaroo Press, 2003).

<i>Example of Folk Narrative</i>	<i>Type of Narrative</i>	<i>Some Important Characteristics of the Narrative</i>
'Van Dieman's Land'	Ballad	Convict lore. Expressive of the woes of convict life and lamenting of the life left behind at 'home.' Cautionary and sentimental, regretful of previous criminality.
'Click Go the Shears'	Song	Lyrics laden with occupational (i.e. shearing) terms (e.g. 'ringer' – fastest shearer). Expressive of the camaraderie and competition which is part of the work ethic of harsh, rural Australian life but expressed in a humorous, resigned manner.
'Ned Kelly'	Legend/Tale	Legendary bushranger and folk hero—an outlaw who has been wronged by those in authority, therefore, representative of the struggle against oppression, anti-authoritarian.
'The Slouch Hat'	Yarn	WWI Digger yarn, representative of the effectiveness/necessity of Australian humour when faced with adversity/ atrocities of war.
'Various Nursery Rhymes'	Verse/Poetry/ Story/Song	Children's folklore—good example of continuing folk narratives passed from generation to generation. Generally of educational and entertainment value. Mostly of British origin—possible Australian example 'Kookaburra Sits on an Old Gum Tree'
'Various Jokes/Stories about Immigrants'	Jokes/Tales/ Folk Speech	Migration lore. Expressive of fears/ prejudices about newcomers and/or humour towards newcomers (e.g. widespread jokes about 'wingeing Poms' and 'stupid Irish'.) Included here also is folk speech such as colloquial, derogative names for immigrants (e.g. 'wogs' for Europeans, 'chinks' for Asians).
'Various Urban Legends'	Urban Legends/ Contemporary Folktales	Often cautionary and moralising tales designed to instil fear and/or prejudice but seemingly believed by tellers, hence wide circulation (e.g. AIDS-infected needles found in cinema seats, or the hitchhiker who turns out to be murderous).

As the table shows, folk narratives have developed which reflect the significant events and important issues of the day. A closer look at their characteristics reveals certain Australian character traits and the events across different periods of time which contributed to their formation, including:

- the wealth of folk narrative inherited from the British and Irish convicts which is telling of life before being transported to Australia and often graphic about what life was like once ‘settled’ in Australia;
- the harsh realities of bush life, the heritage of which is found in the pioneering of the vast interior of Australia post British colonisation;
- the grisly atrocities of wartime and the peculiarly Australian way of using humour and being irreverent in the face of hardship;
- the difficulties of accepting others’ ways and languages when confronted with cultures and traditions very different to those of the Anglo-Celtic British heritage;
- the existence of cautionary tales and urban legends using fear as a subversive means of instilling particular morals.

These patterns of story/actual narratives mirror the concepts we have created about ourselves (and others), our lives and how they might be lived. As Australia changes and grows, so do the stories people create to explain and define this evolution, demonstrating the importance of folk narrative with its inevitably broad range and the role it plays in helping us, as Australians, to grasp who we are, where we’ve come from, where we might be going, and indeed, what it all may mean.

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### *Interest/Significance of the Folklore/Popular Culture Interface*

Before discussing the interest/significance of the folklore/popular culture interface, it may be helpful to provide a definition of each, and in doing so highlight some of the areas in which the two interact, or, in other words, where there is an interface between the two.

As described in *The Hidden Culture*:

Folklore is a continuing, informal process of generating/perpetuating and communicating culturally significant information outside of, but in relation to, the official institutions of a society (government, mass media, education, corporation). It is a universal human phenomenon manifest in certain identifiable forms of group expression (song, joke,

tale etc.) and practice (custom, material forms, dance, gesture etc.) that typically have a multiple existence in time and space.<sup>2</sup>

Popular culture could be described as being the product of an industrialised, modern society whose commodities are broadly marketed to its members who part with their money in order to partake in the advertised advantages of popular expression (for example, the enjoyment of modern music and dance videos, the viewing of modern ‘mainstream’ films, the acquisition of clothing targeted at various age groups such as teenagers, the status attached to the ownership of certain communication devices such as mobile phones etc.) It is a highly commercialised and economic process which relies on the media and other official, mainstream organisations (such as the retail and advertising industries) to operate.

However, and as also noted in *The Hidden Culture*:

[although] folklore has characteristics and functions that mark it out as a distinct aspect of culture, it operates in close conjunction with all other aspects of culture. In the case of the industrial, mass cultures of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this implies a complex array of interactions and influences around and between folklore, social groups (education, politics, mass media, etc.). (p. 6)

The above quotation encapsulates the significance of the folklore/popular culture interface not simply because it broadly states their possible points of interaction, but because it highlights the fact that both forms of ‘culture’ operate simultaneously and in a relationship of ongoing interdependence.

Popular culture tends to have mass appeal, hence its ‘saturation’ in society. Folklore is not actually ‘marketed’ to as many people as possible, yet it affects and influences the majority of people because the common ‘folk’ are the creators of it across time and history. It is generated through the mere act of humans living together and interacting. Popular culture is also generated from the same source but is susceptible to and dependent upon the changing whims of a mass marketing and consumption process.

In these ways the folklore/popular culture interface is significant—they each spring from the same source and rely, to a large extent, on collective acceptance, yet their worth and meaning is of entirely different value and importance in society at large.

<sup>2</sup> Seal, G., *The Hidden Culture: Folklore in Australian Society*, 2nd edn (Perth: Black Swan Press, 1998), p. 9.

*Interest/Significance of Feklore/Folklorismus*

While a clear distinction can be drawn between those things which are considered to be 'folkloric' in nature, and those things which are products of 'popular culture', the concept of folklorism (or as originally defined by the German term 'folklorismus') is less easily distinguished from the idea of authentic folklore (see above definition) because it is essentially another aspect of folklore itself, as opposed to an entirely different area of cultural interest. As explained in *The Hidden Culture*:

in Germany...the term and concept of 'folklorismus' was developed to denote the selective retrieval, packaging and presentation of folk cultural heritage to consumers other than those to whom such heritage belonged...[and as such] it is thrown most sharply into relief by the marketing and consumption process of the tourism industry.<sup>3</sup>

As the above definition shows, there is an economic imperative which exists in the promotion of folklorism (not dissimilar to the mass process of popular culture), and in this way the more negative aspects of folklorism come into focus. The question of to what extent is folklorism an accurate or meaningful depiction of the diversity of Australian culture and society, is therefore raised.

Given the selective nature of folklorism and the fact that its promoters are fundamentally financially motivated, there is a strong possibility of folklorism presenting images and perceptions of Australia which are not, for example, inclusive of minority groups such as indigenous Australians and non-Anglo Australians. The potential for folklorism to be disparaging of or untrue to, or to exclude or marginalise the many varied aspects of the Australian experience, past and present, demonstrates its limitations and its potentially negative impact on Australia's folk cultural heritage.

Conversely, and this is where folklorism is perhaps a double-edged sword, and where it is at its most culturally significant and interesting, is that it can also play a positive role in the conservation and perpetuation of Australian folklife and Australian life in general. As explained by Regina Bendix in her article *Folklorismus/Folklorism*,<sup>4</sup> a heightened awareness of society's folk origins can be a result of folklorism, as can the potential effect of it providing a counter-balance to the ever-increasing globalisation of culture. Additionally, and on a more philosophical level, folklorism may indeed help to boost one's sense of nationalism, however 'romantic' a notion this might be.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 29.

<sup>4</sup> This article originated in Thomas A. Green (ed.), *Folklore: An Encyclopedia...*(1997), pp. 337-339.

As the *The Hidden Culture* proposes:

if one of the functions of folklore is to transmit past to present, either in traditional wisdom such as remedies, recipes, proverbs, etc. or as information about what happened in the past conveyed in the form of songs and other verbal genre... (p. 29)

then perhaps the claim of spuriousness levelled at folklorism becomes less significant when placed in the context that it may help to sustain society's knowledge and sense of heritage, and in doing so, provide a stronger vision of what and where the future might lie.

Perhaps the question which remains, however, is to what extent is folklorism an accurate and complete portrayal of Australian heritage and identity, and what costs on the community, cultural and otherwise, are involved in its selectiveness, exclusivity and choice of presentation and transmission.

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#### *Bibliography*

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