

Folklore and Educational Administration in Alaska: An Ethnographic Study of Rural School Administration

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This paper describes the use of folklore (the telling of tales, stories, etc.) by school administrators in five rural Alaskan communities as a tool for communication of complex cultural issues. It is suggested that occupational phenomena as well as cross-cultural ideas are communicated and that such communication is important in recruiting and retaining school administrators in such settings

The purpose of this presentation is to relate the author's attempt to identify selected ideological characteristics of the cultural world of rural Alaskan school administrators. The ideological component of culture is seen as manifest in the world view of rural school managers. It is the author's thesis that the interaction between administrators and staff, students, community members, and visitors is influenced by the administrators' world view concerning the nature of man and his activities and that this world view can be identified from the folklore of these school administrators. It is the author's contention that an analysis of the administrator's cultural behavior, in this case the telling of stories, tales, sayings and proverbs, will lead to a more lucid picture of school decision-making in a cross-cultural context. A related position is that the village setting presents an alien cultural context for the school administrators, and there is frequent need to justify and explain his/her behavior. Folklore appears to function as a medium for the administrators to explain their actions and to rationalize the irrational.

The fieldwork for this study began in 1979 with the intention of producing a monograph on the bush principal and his or her cultural activities in a cross-cultural schooling environment. The need for such a study is suggested in the writings of Wolcott [21] and Barnhardt [1]. In his study of an urban principal Wolcott states:

As administrators, they (principals) need skill in recognizing when conflicts between the community-at-large and their own norms and values lie at the root of sometimes seemingly minor problems at school, especially those concerned with manners and morals [p. 323].

The author of this paper maintains that to understand the functioning or nonfunctioning, of another culture, one must have some intimate awareness of how one's own, or an aspect of it, functions or fails to function. Since most administrators are not explicitly aware of their own culture this, then, handicaps them in dealing with other cultures [17].

This study, then, began as a more or less standard ethnography of school administrators in a select number of rural Alaskan village schools. The primary purpose was to examine the behavior of school principals in a cross-cultural context. Little had been published on

school administration [18] and it was necessary to conduct such a study to gain an accurate picture of the variety of roles and responsibilities of a school principal or principal-teacher in a cross-cultural setting. Anthony F.C. Wallace remarked concerning the study of administrative work that it had been ... largely neglected in anthropological writing [17]. The author had a "foreshadowed" notion of the nature of the role from an earlier experience as a rural administrator and nearly two years as an ethnographer of school administration in a contract setting with a private research concern in an urban area.

This study is seen as ethnographic to the extent that the principals who provide the focus for it are seen as interacting members of a cultural system. Unlike Wolcott's earlier case study of a single principal, this author was interested in a composite picture of the behavior of school administrators. While there are some comments in this paper that indicate comparisons, it is not a methodological concern. The comparisons arise in a non-systematic way, but, in several instances such data shall inform the text of this paper. Psychological or psychoanalytic interpretations are avoided and, if evident, are included by accident. The study does, however, speak to cognitive aspects of cultural behavior.

The methodology of this study seems relatively important to the theme of this paper and, therefore, it will be discussed briefly. George Spindler stated in a position paper for his recently released text, *Doing the Ethnography of Schooling*, [16] that:

...the object of ethnographic research by anthropologists is to discover the cultural knowledge that people hold in their minds, how it is employed in social interaction and the consequences of its employment [p. 10].

Spindler lists criteria for a good ethnography of schooling [16]. The author feels that the methodology and techniques employed in this presentation fit adequately into Spindler's suggestions. Due to the time restrictions of this presentation I can only list several briefly and acknowledge their central influence on the study: (1) observations were contextualized in the subjects immediate setting; (2) hypothesis emerged as the study proceeded; (3) observations were prolonged and repeated; (4) the participants view of reality is brought out by

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references from observation and interview [cf. 16, p.6].

In sum, the methodological aspects of this study can be summarized as: the data were collected over a two year period of 3-5 day visits a month into the several research settings. The visits included many hours and days with each principal from 6 a.m. to the late evening. From his office to the village store; or, the local tribal headquarters. Sober and not so sober, with his wife and children and without. In other words, in nearly every setting that a principal might interact each day. Soon into the study it became apparent that the administrators with whom I was working had an interesting common behavior — they loved to tell stories. Some were more proficient than others, but *all* subjects told stories. Initially, I did not record the stories in detail, nor did I tape record them; rather, I took them to be an integral part of the principal's behavior and no more or less important to my study. In reviewing my field notes, I saw emerging a pattern of behavior and a set of common themes in the stories: it was a serendipitous finding. I began to note, therefore, the story and the social and physical context within which it was related. In fact, this particular part of the study became a preoccupation. Coincidentally, part of my duties during this period included teaching an anthropology of American Culture and an introduction to folklore course. The light went on!! I was hearing genuine and authentic occupational folklore [cf. 5; 6]; indeed, folklore presenting themes that apparently fit the American core value system [cf. 13].

It was at this time (several months into the study) that an hypothesis for this study emerged. The hypothesis was informed by Levi-Stauss's assertion that "the dominant cultural constructs shared by members of a social group are often unconscious and encoded in a variety of empirical phenomena" [9]. The usefulness of the study is suggested in the work of Alan Dundes.

One of the essential tasks of anthropologists and folklorists is to make people aware, consciously aware, of their cultures [4, p. 101]

The empirical phenomena that was selected for this study, then, was occupational folklore. But just as important was the application of folklore to the concept of world view. Clifford Geertz asserts that the

...cognitive, existential aspects (of culture) have been designated by the term "world view" [8, p. 122].

World view, Geertz continues, is "their (informants) picture of the way things in sheer actuality are, their concept of nature, of self, of society" [8, p. 127]. By way of contrast, ethos is defined by Geertz to be the "...tone, character, and quality of their (informants) life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood; it is their underlying attitude toward themselves and their world" [8, p. 127]. World view, then, is fundamental reality, in a cognitive sense, and ethos is the quality of life. While the present study focuses on world view we shall discuss ethos where appropriate.

Dell Hymes in his forward to Keith Basso's book, *Portraits of the Whiteman*, states:

The mind of man seems every where to analyze, and reassemble, something of the fabric of a cultural order, often in the mode

of mockery [12, p. xiii].

The question asked, then, was why not folklore as a piece of cultural behavior that will inform us on world view.

This paper, then, will adhere to Geertz's admonition that "... we begin with our own interpretations of what our informants are up to, or think they are up to, and then systematize those" [8].

Alan Dundes defines *folk* as ... any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor [5]. The group of people under consideration in this paper have an occupation and cross-cultural context as the common factor to establish them as a type of folk. That an occupational group in cross-cultural context can have folklore is discussed by Ben-Amos:

No matter how defined, its (folklore) existence depends on its social context, which may be geographic, linguistic, ethnic, or occupational grouping [2, p. 5] (italics mine).

This paper will address the text and context of the folklore under consideration in order to provide a satisfactory analysis of the data. The author will not, however, engage in the current debate among folklorists as to whether a significant criterion for defining a folktale is whether or not it was transmitted orally or in some other medium. This paper will focus only on oral examples of folklore [6].

Context

The ethnographic context for the study is five rural Alaskan villages in a region inhabited by Alaskan Natives of three different linguistic groups. The villages are all permanent year round settlements with subsistence living as the primary source of economic activity. The subsistence patterns center around sea mammals and reindeer herding with some reliance on riverine resources. Several villages are known for their whaling activities and it is a vital and important focus of their cultures.

The villages display many differences and similarities with respect to the following physical characteristics which I would like to sketch.

The similarities are that all villages are located on the ocean shore; they all have a prominent air field with at least two bush flights each day (weather permitting); they all have large and conspicuous fuel oil tanks; most housing is of the wooden frame type; they have a pick-up truck that travels from "down town" to the airstrip; they have several small general stores; a myriad of CB antennas, snow-goes, ATV's and dogs. Also, there are seal skins, fish racks, whale or sea mammal bones, and outhouses to be seen in each village. Finally, each community has, as its most prominent building, a school.

Some differences in the physical setting are that two villages have a predominance of government housing. Two villages are renowned for their polar bear hunting, one village for its reindeer herds, one village for its whaling and walrus hunting. Several villages are located on a North to South Axis; others center around the school; while two are stretched two houses deep along the ocean front. Two villages have television; and telephones are

available if desired or affordable. Three villages do not have television and in these communities there is only one village telephone, usually located in the "Native" store. The smallest community has 200 inhabitants; the largest, 400 inhabitants, depending on season.

The inhabitants of the villages under consideration are Eskimo. Three languages are spoken; in one village nearly all the Native people speak Siberian Yupik; one community is Central Yupik with all adults fluent and the children not so fluent; three communities are Inupiaq speaking with most adults fluent and only a small percentage of the children have any degree of fluency. Only one of the communities has had an anthropologist conduct a research project. The other four have only heard about such a phenomenon.

The schools are usually the center pieces of the villages. Several are in the geographic center of the village, with housing strung along on either side. Unlike the pattern in other parts of rural Alaska, where the schools are physically removed from the village, these communities envelope the school building. The school gymnasium or recreation room is a source of community participation and in all locations is in use night and day by the local residents. Most village residents describe the school as the most important structure in their community and express pride in their school.

The village schools are operated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs or the State of Alaska. The BIA operates the K-8 component in several villages; the State, the high school. In two villages the state, through a regional school district, runs the total program. The BIA provides housing, with running water and flush toilets, for its employees; the State does not. In villages with both BIA and State schools this is a significant source of discontent. Maintenance on these relatively huge structures can run, considering light, heat, and repair, in the \$100,000 range each year—that is, unless something unusual occurs, and as any of you familiar with rural Alaska know—if it can go wrong, it will go wrong.

The focus of this paper is the school principal and his or her oral tradition and world view as it affects school decision-making; thus, we now describe the informants. All the subjects had Alaska teaching certificates, even though several were certified only in special education. With respect to advanced credentials, 60% had a masters degree and one, significant course work beyond the M.Ed. The BIA does not require the same academic credentials as the State (that has now changed); thus, the BIA informants are less credentialed, in general, than the State employed managers.

All the subjects are male, not unusual in educational administration; therefore, it is not possible to ascertain if a female also engages in folkloric behavior or if it is a uniquely male characteristic. Many female teachers do not tell tales, whereas male teachers seem so disposed. It would be an interesting study to compare folklore behavior on a sexually based division of informants. The profiles of informants for this study do not fit, very well, the description of the typical principal found in Wolcott [20] that ... the average American elementary school principal is a married male between the ages of 35 and 49,

has had between 10 and 19 years of total experience, and was an elementary classroom teacher just prior to assuming his administrative post. As he indicates, "It does not offer insight into what it is like to be one of these people" [20].

The principals in this study consider themselves the most educated, most authoritative, most experienced, most influential persons representing western cultural institutions in each village; therefore, they may perceive themselves as the prime repositories of a western society's world view. As Wolcott indicated, principals are frequently perceived as change agents, but seldom function that way; in fact, they most frequently reinforce the status quo [21]. It makes sense, then, to focus on their folklore to investigate the type of influences that exists in village schools. A further task of the analysis should be to demonstrate an adherence of the folklore to an American core value system [13]. This analysis examines the tendency of principals to plan ahead, get ahead, to stress self reliance, to stress dominance of the environment and achievement without substantial regard to the cross-cultural context.

Analysis of the "texts" of the folklore presentations indicates that the stories were adjusted for each audience in that the raconteur would use a common theme to involve different groups. The tales, then, could have positive or negative overtones depending on social context. Some of the themes, or genre, of folklore are exemplified in the following texts:

1. Airplane Tales

We were coming back from Anukville and we had to get below the clouds to see. We were almost on the deck! The pilot didn't seem to know where he was. Everyone was panicked because we knew there were hills between us and St. Joseph. I'm not going to say I was scared but they will have to replace the seat cover in the plane. The pilot finally saw a clearing and he sat it down—we waited out the weather.

I was coming back from a principal's meeting and the weather rolled in—we couldn't see shit. The pilot really looked scared—his radar didn't work. We called Anukville for permission to come back but they were weathered in too, the pilot decided to get below the weather. We saw the ground! We were about 300 feet up—the guy in front of me wet his pants. I won't tell you what I did in mine.

2. New Teacher Tales

I was waiting at the airstrip for my new teaching couple to arrive. The plane sat down and I walked over to see if they were on board. There was a couple—but they didn't seem to be getting out. The pilot said that they were the Jones' but they saw Fishcamp Village from the air and said "return us to Anukville." I tried to talk them off the plane but they said you'd have to be crazy to teach here. You know—they were right—you have to be tough or crazy and after two years I'm a little of both.

The presentation format does not provide time to give textual examples for each category nor to relate the context for each genre but the remaining dominant topics are:

3. Visitor-related
4. Central-office
5. Native or Village
6. Staff (includes union)
7. Spiritual or Metaphysics
8. Ground Travel (modes of conveyance)
9. Domestic Difficulty

10. Drinking Behavior

Because the author is an extensive traveler throughout this region it often creates the "wandering minstrel" effect on participants (i.e. intensive exchange of tales, stories and news). The author hopes by this participation he avoids Fred Erickson's fourth level of merehness of ethnography, which is "lack of participation" [cf. 7]; but, also that the sacred cow of ethnography, that of "not creating intentional changes in the context", is not violated.

In order to qualify for this study it is necessary for a tale to be told (with variations on a theme) in at least three locations. The where, when, who and what is recorded. There is no attempt to assess the veracity of a tale—it is not important, given the theoretical orientation of this study.

It is during group meetings attended by all administrators in a district or region that a critical aspect of folklore behavior occurs. This is the time when geographical distribution of the tales takes place. The function of folklore seems to be to *recruit* new members into the occupational "brotherhood." In addition to recruitment, folklore appears to function as an orientation into appropriate ways of acting. This recruitment process is accompanied by a need for *maintaining* allegiance to this occupational group. The highlight of the informal sessions is when the "new guy" begins his attempts to become a raconteur. Finally, the stories help to provide *continuity* in a very mobile population. The average tenure of a bush principal is about two years. Folklore provides cultural continuity and provides guidelines to assist the new principals in behaving appropriately.

Another function of folklore in this context appears to be that of attaining *compliance* to a set of norms. Normative compliance is not unknown to organizational theorists and is probably a common occurrence amongst managers, rather like an indirect order. The principal's story or tale usually expresses what is appropriate or inappropriate behavior and, in the cases under discussion, the sanctions that were to be imposed. The audience for this type of behavior was usually younger colleagues, teachers or students. Organizational scholar Louis Pondy, for example, states:

...meanings will frequently be "stored" in organizational myths and metaphors to provide rationales for both membership and activity in organizations. The role that institutional leaders play in the creation of myths and metaphors is a worthwhile focus for study [14, p. 33].

Significant to this study is Pondy's suggestion that organizations should be viewed from the perspective of "extreme phenomenology" as represented in the subjective experience of individual participants. He and others argue that organizations create meanings which are stored in myths and metaphors. Myths and metaphors, he continues, are implicit in the organizational educational, and managerial platforms of schools [15, p. 239]. While Pondy's terminology is not in agreement with that used by folklorists and anthropologists—his ideas match those of the current presentation. Alan Dundes and others prefer to use myth for sacred matters and folklore for

secular tales. Further, Dundes speaks of folk ideas and folk fallacies; but, our purpose is not to quibble terms; rather, we agree with the intent of the Pondy conceptualization of the ideological component of organizational behavior.

The folklore of the principals demonstrates several significant motifs. The one of most importance to this study is similar to what Francis Hsu has labeled "self-reliance." This is *the* core American value according to Hsu [10]. Analysis of the folklore, regardless of genre, illustrates this core value as a distinct orientation of the informants. The texts of their stories reveal verbal illustrations of their own independence, uniqueness, individualism, and economic, social and political equality. That this core value is important to school managers is anticipated by Hsu as he asserts:

But American self-reliance is a militant ideal which parents inculcate in their children and by which they judge the worth of any and all mankind [10, p. 249].

The tales that led this author to the association of folklore, core values and world view stressed Native dependence on the "whiteman." For instance, stories dealt with Native alcohol abuse, welfare abuse, intellectual inadequacies, and a general dependence or lack of self-reliance of the local people. Conversely, most positive tales lauded the ability of the school administrator in coping with difficult circumstances. There were principals who disarmed villagers who came to school drunk; there were villagers who had to be persuaded not to shoot up school equipment because they were mad at the government; there were instances of the brave and plucky administrator who rescued Natives from the ice flow: on and on.

A typical example of folklore to support my analysis demonstrates the notion of principal as folk hero [cf. 3]:

I was just about to hit the sack—we put the kids to bed and we were really tired. It had been a hectic day. The villagers had received some dividend money, and booze was everywhere. Just then I heard a volley of shots—I looked out the window and some drunk was shooting the school snogo. I got on some boots and my parka and went outside. I was not going to let some drunk ruin the machine. Well, I talked my ass off and he went away. When I got back in the house my wife asked, "Didn't you worry about him shooting you?" I honestly didn't think about that until after—I guess I was rather foolish—but only the good die young.

This tale related to the author in three villages, without acknowledging the fact that it happened to someone else or in some other place and time. It was part of the repertoire of folklore of the informants and it did express the self-reliant nature of the folk knowledge of that region.

The stories recorded were not always checked for accuracy. In fact, many of them are probably folk fallacies [4]; however, they may be no less real to the teller and audience than a story that is legitimate oral history.

The folklore or folk fallacies almost universally demonstrated the non-Native as self-reliant and the Natives as dependent. This perceived dependence by the principals can be seen as affecting their ability to make rational decisions with regard to the conduct of education in a cross-cultural setting. This is the case if Hsu is correct in his assertion that:

In American society the fear of dependence is so great that an individual who is not self-reliant is a misfit [10, p. 250].

It would appear that an individual expressing self-reliance as an important component of his/her world view would have a basic conflict with "folks" from cultures that do not rate self-reliance as a high priority in their world view or core values.

It is intuitively comfortable to assume that a culture bearer expressing self-reliance as an important component of his/her world view would come into ideological conflict with culture bearers that may not rate self-reliance as an important part of their world view. This appears to be the case in rural Alaskan schools where the school leader is the apparent personification of that core value system: indeed, the independent, self-confident, self-assured and self-reliant principal! Wolcott (personal communication) feels that they are more like Boy Scouts which may differ from my interpretation. Analysis of the principals' folklore seems to support my conclusion. And, as Hsu indicates:

This is also the self-reliance taught in today's American schools [10, p. 249].

Through our analysis of rural school principal folklore we can readily see that self-reliance is an important core value that is a component of a world view that affects the outlook the administrator has on the process of formal education. Decisions and policy will favor, then, an orientation towards self-reliance. If the receiving culture is not perceived to be in possession of this value in the same priority, then conflict will arise. It is the author's contention that a close scrutiny of the curriculum, texts and teaching methods encouraged by bush administrators will reveal values that are not thought to be held by the receiving culture, and education will certainly represent a form of antagonistic acculturation [cf. 19]. In conclusion, it was not the proposed goal of this study to compare world views. Dundes indicates, though, that such studies are needed:

One is tempted to undertake studies comparing the world view of two or more cultures. There are few enough attempts to describe single world view systems; consequently, the literature on comparative world views is, to put it mildly, very sparse [5, p. 79].

Since it was intended that the folklore of educational administrators performing their duties in cross-cultural settings would be the focus, such an apparent conflict of world views as represented here could be addressed only briefly, but it demands further investigation and clarification.

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