

Holidays and Schools: Folklore Theory and Educational Practice, or, "Where Do We Put the Christmas Tree?"

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One of the most obvious areas in which folklore is relevant to education is that of holiday celebrations. While much of that use is limited in schools to simply presenting tales, art, and customs drawn from popular interpretations (and inventions) of holidays, folkloristic theory and methodology provide insights into some of the issues arising from the acknowledgement of holidays in a culturally diverse society and in educational settings. I relate here an experience I had several years ago, one in which I found that folklore offered possible directions for action.

In 1992, I was approached by the director of the school two of my young children attended to develop a display for a community open house held at our county history museum. The open house consisted of local businesses and civic organizations decorating rooms in the museum (originally the county poor house and insane asylum). Each room generally had a theme, such as teddy bears, the color purple, Christmas books, Christmas foods and recipes, and so on. All were related to the European- American experience of Christmas.

Because of the ethnic make-up of the school (not particularly varied but as diverse as possible in a small Midwestern town) and the school's character (private, Montessori), I felt that a multicultural exhibit would be more appropriate and would draw more enthusiasm from parents (which is always important when dealing with volunteers). The school administration was agreeable and supportive, so I set out to design an exhibit and solicit input from other parents.

Responses from parents ranged from highly enthusiastic to highly offended. Some people felt that the school had no business celebrating a religious holiday; some felt that the inclusion of non- Christian holidays was just a token gesture representative of the Christian hegemony; some felt that their own heritage was finally getting its due. A number of extremely emotional discussions followed, particularly over the question of the placement of a live fir tree offered by one family. (Some families thought that I was conniving with the administration to have a more Christian influence in the display and in the school; other parents wanted to put the tree at the entrance of the school for artistic reasons, not realizing the connotations such prominent placement might have.)

The tree became the focal point of discussion and served as a catalyst for exploring the complexity of holiday celebrations. During these discussions, it was evident that there was a great deal of misunderstanding over the nature of holidays and of cultural symbols. Folklore, I felt, offered models that would help in these discussions, so I suggested an evening workshop with parents and faculty in which I would present some of these models. The meeting was successful, and afterwards we were able to move forward, not always in total agreement but with respect and tolerance for dissension.

I outline here the basic ideas I presented. Some of the ideas are fundamental to understanding cultural behavior in general, not just holidays. The discussion on the nature

of symbols seemed particularly helpful. I also distinguished between holiday as concept and the actual practices surrounding the celebration of a particular holiday, a distinction that was helpful in that it personalized holidays and grounded the discussion in actual experiences.

1. Holiday celebrations are complex cultural, symbolic events. Customs, artifacts, and rituals surrounding celebrations represent other ideas: heritage, identity, and values.
2. Symbols can have multiple interpretations. Symbols can be given new meanings; old ones can be forgotten. Symbols can be interpreted differently from how they were intended. Symbols have emotional associations as well as logical ones.
3. Holiday celebrations are expressions of identity: national, regional, ethnic, religious. Many holidays commemorate historical events or individuals significant to the development of a nation, culture, or religion. Disagreement can arise over the significance of the event, over whether the event actually affected history, or whether that effect deserves to be recognized. Many holidays celebrate themes or values considered central to a culture, but contrasting themes can be read into them (e.g., Christmas--charity and generosity vs. consumerism and greed; Veteran's Day-- loyalty, bravery, patriotism vs. militaristic, violent culture). Public holiday celebrations are intrinsically political in that they raise the questions of whose holidays get celebrated and who gets to choose the symbols.
4. Holiday celebrations usually contain a mixture of public and private activities, not all of which are appropriate for display to outsiders.
5. Holiday celebrations serve important social and psychological functions (e.g., affirming community, connecting individuals to larger seasonal cycles, and providing times of release from the mundane) that make holidays emotionally laden for people.

Following this presentation, I asked for personal accounts of experiences with Christmas trees. Parents were eager to share their own histories, and their narratives illustrated the concepts I had discussed in a non-confrontational manner. Their experiences ranged from warm memories of family togetherness to nightmares brought on by parents' accounts of the Jewish Holocaust. People began to understand that the seemingly simple Christmas tree could evoke a wide range of emotions regardless of the intentions of the people displaying such a tree.

At this point we were able to proceed with planning the exhibit, keeping three concerns in mind:

- How to be sensitive to other cultures without denying one's own heritage;
- How to present unfamiliar cultures respectfully and with as much richness as familiar ones; and
- How to present religious beliefs without proselytizing or evaluating.

I suggested that the exhibit be approached as an oral history and family folklore project. The focus would be on the specific winter holidays each family in the school celebrated and on the ways in which those holidays were recognized. Older students would write and illustrate reports on family celebrations, while younger children would draw pictures depicting family celebrations or symbols associated with holidays. Parents could be involved in several ways: by assisting their children with their projects, and by bringing in artifacts, recipes, and written explanations of family celebrations. I would function as

coordinator of the exhibit, which involved contacting parents (particularly ones who might be hesitant or lack time to be involved), writing labels for all displays, giving historical and personal information, and designing the exhibit itself.

The result of this cooperative effort was an exhibit titled "Winter Holidays Around the World". The response to it was overwhelmingly positive, and it sparked an on-going project at the school of including children's holiday projects in the curriculum and including parent presentations of family traditions for every major holiday. A poster I created giving information on winter holidays is displayed every November and December and has been used in other local schools. Furthermore, several teachers from other schools, public and private, have heard of the project and found the family tradition approach to holidays useful, particularly in a public school setting. I worked with one kindergarten teacher, Myrl DenBestin of Kenwood School in Bowling Green, Ohio, to develop a handout for parents to fill out with their children.

And the fir tree? The tree was part of the exhibit, but it was displayed alongside prominent artifacts of other holidays. It had a label card just like all the other artifacts. And afterward the school planted the tree, but not as a "Christmas" tree and not in a central location. Since then, people have tried to invent traditions around the tree. Some have used it as a Mitten Tree, to be symbolic of generosity associated with many holidays; others have tried to make it represent, as an Evergreen Tree, the lasting effect of the Montessori philosophy of education.

The experience of developing the "Christmas" display sparked my own interest in folklore and education, and I have continued to work in this area (primarily as a volunteer presenter in schools). It also proved to me the usefulness of folklore in addressing issues of emotional and political significance.

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