**What Is Folk life and Why Study It?**

**Part I: Defining Folk life**

**What do people mean when they use the word "**[**folk life**](http://www.louisianavoices.org/edu_glossary.html#folklife)**?" Scholars often use different terms to say the same thing. For example, they might use "**[**folklore**](http://www.louisianavoices.org/edu_glossary.html#folklore)**" or "folk culture" or "traditional culture" instead of "folk life." But all these terms refer to the same concept: traditions that we usually learn from people we know—not from reading books or at school from our teachers. To avoid confusion, we're going to use the word "folk life."**

[**Folk life**](http://www.louisianavoices.org/edu_glossary.html#folklife) **is the living traditions currently practiced and passed along by word of mouth, imitation, or observation over time and space within groups, such as family, ethnic, social class, regional, and others. Everyone and every group have folklore.**

**But what does this mean? We are talking about the traditional stories, songs, customs, activities, objects, and beliefs that people pass along.**

**Sometimes we don't even remember when or how we learned a tradition. We learn our folk life traditions in an "everyday way." In other words, we might see or hear somebody else do something in a certain way, and then we do it as they did it.**

**For example, do you remember when you learned Pig Latin? *Aybe-May ot-Nay!* Someone taught you how to speak it (and they had learned it from another person), and then you probably taught it to someone else, and they probably taught it to someone else—and it just keeps going and going. As you grow older, you might even forget who taught you. Learning Pig Latin is just one example of a tradition that you might have learned from a friend in an everyday way.**

**Pig Latin fits the definition of folk life because it is "living," meaning that it is a tradition that hasn't died out. People—usually children—are still teaching Pig Latin to each other today as they have for generations. It is a "tradition" because Pig Latin has been "passed down" from person to person. People teach it to each other in everyday ways. Often this is done face-to-face. We might learn by hearing, watching, and imitating others. If you had learned Pig Latin in a formal classroom, your teacher would probably have given you a test on it at some point. And it would be a subject on your report card. But that probably isn't the case! So Pig Latin is a traditional word game that has been part of your growing up—that has been part of many Americans' childhood years. What's more, Pig Latin has been passed down "over time," meaning that it has kept on going from generation to generation. It has also been passed down "over space," which means that it has spread from place to place. You can find children who know about Pig Latin from California to Alabama and even in different countries like Canada. Pig Latin is a living folk life tradition, usually taught and passed around by children.**

**Traditions don't have to be "really old" to be considered folk life, however. Folk life is not "old-fashioned" or "ignorant." Rather, it is done today, as well as having been done in the past. Everybody has many kinds of folk life they can call their own. And while some things stay the same, folk life can change somewhat from generation to generation, or from person to person, or from place to place. For example, your family may, right now, be changing one of its annual traditions. Imagine that your whole family has become vegetarian. What would you do at Thanksgiving, about the "traditional turkey?" You could replace it with "traditional vegetarian lasagna," perhaps based on a family recipe. Thanksgiving can still be traditional for your family, even without the turkey. The important thing is that you share the new tradition as a group.**

**While many traditions are learned in everyday ways, the Internet now makes it possible for people to participate in "high-tech folk life." Do your friends send you jokes or stories over email? Do you use instant messages? When you're chatting on line, do you use the letters "LOL" to say you're "laughing out loud?" If so, then you are passing on folk traditions, using the most recent technology, sometimes even within very large groups of people.**

**Folk life traditions are also often "anonymous," meaning that we don't know the name of the person who first started a tradition. When a joke arrives in your email inbox, do you wonder who came up with it in the first place? Who was that first five-year-old to ask, "Why did the chicken cross the road?" We'll never know, and that's what makes it anonymous.**

**Folklore is usually anonymous, meaning that we often don't know where it comes from. Computer virus hoaxes, knock-knock jokes, babies in King cakes, tunes for songs, tricks for making a roux, barn styles, jump rope rhymes, ghost stories--there may be no definitive author of these whom we can track. Family folklore, differs, however, since sometimes a creator is known: Uncle Percy's adventure with an alligator, Maw Maw's sweet potato pie recipe, or Daddy's nickname for Mama.**

**Part II: Folk Groups**

**Folk life happens in** [**folk groups**](http://www.louisianavoices.org/edu_glossary.html#folkgroup)**, communities of people who share traditions. Your family is a folk group. Your friends at school are a folk group. And they can be subdivided into smaller groups, such as skateboarding friends or cheerleading friends. The members of a religious organization are a folk group as are people with the same job, age group, or gender. People within an ethnic community can be part of a folk group. Louisiana has many different ethnic folk groups, including Native American, African American, Cajun, Creole, German, British, Hungarian, Asian, to name some.**

**People of different regions can also be members of a folk group. Two people from Louisiana who meet in Europe, for example, will be able to strike up a conversation about what they have in common. Even if one person is from Shreveport and another from New Orleans, they'll both know about the significance of crawfish to Louisiana, while a person from, say, New Jersey might not know that many Louisianans love to eat crawfish.**

**A folk group doesn't have to be big. In fact, folk groups are often small so that the people within a group understand what their traditions and culture mean to each other. People within folk groups, who share traditions and customs, are called** [**insiders**](http://www.louisianavoices.org/edu_glossary.html#insider)**. People who watch a folk group from the outside are called, not surprisingly,** [**outsiders**](http://www.louisianavoices.org/edu_glossary.html#outsider)**. Insiders are group members; outsiders are not.**

**Part III: Folk Genres**

**When we talk about grouping folk life into different categories, we are talking about different** [**folk genres**](http://www.louisianavoices.org/edu_glossary.html#genre) **or categories or types of traditions. But what does that mean? It simply means that we want to group similar kinds of folk life together according to their shared qualities. Doing so makes it much easier to talk about all the different kinds of folk life we can see.**

**Here are some examples and explanations of folk genres:**

* **Oral tradition: Oral traditions include spoken words, sayings, jokes, legends, riddles, stories, poems, etc. that are passed down by people within a folk group. Oral traditions can be written down, but they are often best when told, face-to-face. In fact, the use of the word "oral" means that the information is spoken, not written down. Isn't it better to hear a joke than to read it? Oral traditions also include** [**personal experience narratives**](http://www.louisianavoices.org/edu_glossary.html#personalexperiencenarrative)**.**
* **Folk Music: Folk music includes traditional songs and styles of music shared in folk groups. Some examples are lullabies, ballads, Cajun music, zydeco, blues, and jazz. You might hear folk music on the radio or on TV, but it first started in relatively small folk groups.**
* **Folk Dance: Folk Dance is rhythmic movement, learned within folk groups and passed on in a traditional manner. The "Cajun Two-Step" is an example of folk dance. Or the Hawaiian "Hula Dance." Some of these movements may not be considered "dance" by group insiders. For example, people who clap their hands and move rhythmically at church may not call it dancing. It is important to look at the situation—or context—of the movement, and to call it what the** [**insiders**](http://www.louisianavoices.org/edu_glossary.html#insider) **call it—not what you think it is.**
* **Material Culture: Material culture includes artifacts, objects, and** [**foodways**](http://www.louisianavoices.org/edu_glossary.html#foodways)**. In other words, material culture is the stuff that people make, and people learn how to make these things in a traditional manner. Examples include quilts, handmade baskets, costumes, and family recipes. There may also be oral traditions, beliefs, and customs about the object. Is there a story behind a quilt in your family, for example? If so, the story is part of your oral tradition, and the item is part of your material culture.**
* **Belief: A belief is an acceptance that something is true. People who are really frightened of "Friday the 13th" truly believe that something bad might happen on that day. This category is very tricky because some outsiders will call someone's "belief" a "superstition" and mean that they do not believe it is true. It is important to group beliefs from an insider's point of view. Whether or not something is true is another subject for another time!**
* **Custom: A custom is a common practice or habit of a folk group. The custom is important to the group, and is often expected or even required. Giving birthday gifts is probably a custom in your family, for example. Certainly, many children expect it!**
* **Body Communication: Some body communications are certain gestures, facial expressions, or whole body movements that are learned in a traditional manner. Many gestures are "culture specific." In other words, you must know what culture the person is from to understand what the movement means, if indeed it means anything at all. A gesture can mean one thing in one culture, and another thing in another culture. In the United States, it is not considered offensive to let somebody see the bottom of your shoe, but this should never be done in Arab countries. In such places as Saudi Arabia or Egypt, it is an insult to show someone the bottom of your shoe.**

**Why is it important to divide folklife into certain genres? Because there is so much folklife around us that if we didn't group it, we'd spend a lot of time being really confused when trying to talk about our own folklife. Grouping folklife into genres helps us to understand each other better when we talk about traditions.**

**You always need to remember, though, that guidelines are not strict rules. Some folklife traditions may belong to more than one genre. For example, you might have a favorite item of folk material culture. Something you never want to throw away. Something you might even want to save to give to your own child. It may be a special Christmas ornament, a quilt, a handmade toy, or a basket. The possibilities are endless! But think about why it is important. Is it important because someone in your family made it? Is it because you only use it at special times of the year? It may be for both reasons! If so, your favorite item can be grouped into at least two categories:** [**material culture**](http://www.louisianavoices.org/edu_glossary.html#materialculture) **and** [**custom**](http://www.louisianavoices.org/edu_glossary.html#custom)**.**

**In addition, some things may be part of culture that is mass produced (TV, for example), but used in a "traditional" way. For example, you might eat an Oreo cookie in a certain, "traditional" way: by unscrewing it first and then licking off the white cream or dipping it into a glass of milk. However, Oreo cookies are part of American mass-produced culture. They are produced on a large scale, and they are sold to make money. But if you were to visit another country, you'd soon realize that Oreo cookies are a big part of traditional American culture. Why? Because people from other countries may not eat Oreos the way many Americans eat them—by "first unscrewing" then "licking" then "chewing." Of course, not all Americans eat them this way. But a lot do! And because so many Americans eat Oreos in this traditional way, the mass-produced cookie is one of our** [**foodways**](http://www.louisianavoices.org/edu_glossary.html#foodways)**.**

**Part IV: Why Study Folklife?**

**If you think about these different genres of folklife, you'll realize that they are important in many different ways. First, they are important to you, *individually*. What is your favorite holiday? Answering that question tells you something about yourself.**

**Folklife is also important to *families*. Traditions, customs, stories, and special objects help us to feel connected to each other. Ask some family members about what traditions they love, and you can learn about what is special in your family.**

**In addition, folklife can help you to learn about what is important in your groups. When you travel far from Louisiana, someone will inevitably ask you about our food. Does it make you feel proud?**

**Every culture is proud of some sort of folklife, in one way or another. Cajuns are proud of their food. Native Americans are proud of their baskets. African Americans are proud of their music. What are you proud of?**

**Sometimes people are embarrassed by their own folklife traditions because they believe outsiders will not understand them. But when we study each other's folklife traditions, we often learn that other people's traditions are quite similar to our own. And they are similar, despite some differences. We are all much more alike than we realize. Just think about it. No matter where people come from, their birthday will probably be an important day for them, even though they may celebrate it in different ways.**

**Folklife is important because it tells us about who people are, where they come from, what they are connected to, and what makes them unique.**

**That's why we study folklife.**