

"FOLKSONG PERFORMANCE IN FRENCH-NEWFOUNDLAND CULTURE: A RE-EXAMINATION OF PUBLIC AND PRIVATE DIMENSIONS OF EXPRESSION"*

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The performance of folksongs is commonly regarded by specialists as consisting of traditional texts sung in traditional contexts which are characterized by the observance of behavioural norms and expectations by participants involved in the communicative event. A folksong tradition therefore consists of textual, contextual, and behavioural dimensions, all of which must be identified and their respective parameters delineated if the researcher is to succeed in the construction of an ethnography of communication — "an ethnography of singing" so to speak — of the musical tradition. Viewed in these terms, a folksong tradition is an inherently prescriptive process of cultural retention and performance, encompassing both active individual performers and their receptive co-participants, and determining the nature of their interaction.

As a result of this concentration upon the means by which the determinant force of tradition directs individual behaviour in context, it is easy to overlook the idiosyncratic manipulation of tradition by the performer for the realization of more personal, non-collective goals. Obviously, the emphasis of research initially falls on the description of collective, shared norms, for only then may behaviour which deviates from these norms be identified. However, care must be taken to ensure that an overly prescriptive model is not constructed and proposed as the one, authentic tradition. Indeed, it is the recognition of this *cavate* that has permitted scholars investigating a variety of folkloristic genres to identify public and private dimensions of performance, and to elaborate the real social implications of such variation within a single tradition.¹

In this paper, I will extend the public-private continuum farther to include the level of personal, idiosyncratic performance. Through an examination of an individual folksong performer, the late Mme Joséphine Costard, a French-Newfoundlander of Cap-St-Georges, Port-au-Port Peninsula, I will try to demonstrate how she manipulated the folksong tradition of her culture to create and maintain an identity and social status within that culture.

The history of research in French-Newfoundland culture is relatively short, and despite extensive early collections of folksong corpora elsewhere in the province, Newfoundland's native French folksong tradition did not become the focus of serious inquiry until comparatively recent years. As early as 1929, Greenleaf and Mansfield spent a substantial amount of time on Newfoundland's West Coast. Greenleaf even reports visiting the Port-au-Port Peninsula, where she admits her initial surprise upon hearing folksongs "sung in literary French which I could understand."² However, no examples of this tradition appear in her subsequent publication. The reason for this absence lies no doubt in Greenleaf's limited ability to cope with the French-Acadian dialect typi-

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cal of the area; Greenleaf herself implies that she preferred to leave the study of this tradition to "a collector with a knowledge of these tongues."³ In the same year that Greenleaf and Mansfield embarked upon their fieldwork, Maud Karpeles commenced a similar project, but her aim was the collection of "folk songs of English origin,"⁴ and no mention is made of the French tradition in her eventual publications.

For reasons such as these, and because of the extreme geographic and linguistic isolation of the area's inhabitants, the French-Newfoundland folksong tradition remained unexplored for some thirty years. Finally, in 1959, Kenneth Peacock visited the Port-au-Port Peninsula as part of his broader survey of the folksongs of outport Newfoundland, and brought serious attention to bear upon the singing tradition of this minority group.⁵ One of Peacock's major informants was to be Joséphine Costard.⁶

Joséphine (Josie) Costard was born in 1904 in La Grand' Terre, a tiny, isolated fishing community located on the western coast of Newfoundland's Port-au-Port Peninsula.⁷ Her father, Théophile Dubé, was a native of La Rochelle, France; her mother, a first-generation Newfoundlander of Breton parents, was born in La Grand' Terre. Josie remained in her home community until the age of seventeen, when she married and moved to Cap-St-Georges. Her husband, Raphaël LaCosta (Costard is apparently an anglicization of this Basque family name), was a widower some twenty-five years older than his new wife. Josie thus inherited an already large family and eventually bore eight children of her own.

Josie was exposed to the French song tradition from a very early age. Both her maternal and paternal grandparents had been respected singers, as was her father, whose talents are still spoken of with respect by older inhabitants of the Peninsula. Indeed, Thophile Dubé was a singer of some renown among the French settlers and his presence was frequently sought and highly appreciated at local gatherings, or "veillées,"⁸ in the community. It was as a child balanced with her sister, Mary-Jo, on her father's knees that Josie first heard many French songs. Indeed, Josie sang more songs learned from her father than from any other single source, and the influence this man appears to have had on her repertoire warrants some discussion of his life history.

Thophile Dubé's background, compared with those of most of the settlers who arrived from France, makes him a somewhat exceptional character. During his youth in France, Dubé earned his living as a singer. He later entered into training for the priesthood and spent some fourteen years at college and in religious instruction. According to Josie, her father spoke several languages, including French, Breton, Spanish, Latin, and some English. Yet, for some unknown reason, 'le Vieux Dubé' suddenly abandoned his seminary training in France and came to Newfoundland's French Shore as a simple fisherman. He settled at La Grand' Terre and soon became known and respected for his singing ability, for his talents as a 'docteur,' and for his literacy.

As mentioned above, Théophile Dubé was immensely popular as a singer at the public "veillée" which was, during Josie's youth and until recently, the principal form of traditional entertainment among Newfoundland's adult French population. These "veillées," or "times," were essentially house parties and took place most frequently during the

long months of winter, when occupational activities were limited. People from the community would gather at one home or another to play cards, dance, tell tales, and sing. Towards the end of the evening, a light lunch would be served by the hosts.

Josie remembers clearly these "veillées." When she was a child, she was permitted to be present when the gathering was held at her parents' home. Later, when she was of an appropriate age, she attended these social gatherings at the homes of others as well. Josie started singing at public "veillées" when she was just fourteen and continued to perform in this context until the demise of the tradition many years later.

The decline of the "veillée" did not have the same detrimental effect upon Josie's singing as it did upon the repertoires of the traditional storytellers, or "conteurs." Unlike these latter, many of whom gradually forgot their tales as a result of the absence of contexts in which to perform (but note Thomas, *Les deux traditions*), Josie continued to sing her songs, albeit in a different setting. She now sang within what might be considered a 'private' performance context. However, a close examination of this context will demonstrate that this term may not be altogether appropriate.

Josie was seventy-six years old when I last met and talked with her. Understandably, therefore, she did not leave her home often and spent most of the day dealing with her household chores, watching television, and entertaining the occasional visitor. She would, however, spend much of her time alone, singing to herself the old French songs which she had known most of her life. What is more significant, her singing did not consist of mere snatches of verse sung quietly to herself; rather, Josie's singing was performed in a strong, even voice, and the songs were uninterrupted, full-length versions.

While I was visiting one of Josie's grandsons in Cap-St-Georges in 1978, he and his wife remarked that Josie could often be heard singing to herself, that this often lasted the entire day, and that the performance was audible for a considerable distance from her house, certainly to any passers-by. This was, in fact, the case during my visit. During the summer, Josie would move her rocking chair outdoors onto her small porch, where she would sing and rock to her heart's content.

This discussion of Josie's singing practices raises a number of points which have an immediate bearing upon the question of whether Josie's performance may be considered as occurring within a private or a public context. If one dismisses for the moment the informant-collector context as being artificial, one is left with what appears to be a private performance situation. Josie's performance does not correspond to Ives' definition⁹ of the public tradition, as there is no audience present and, thus, there is no immediate audience-performer interaction generated. The singing does not occur within the context of a social gathering designed with the express purpose of mutual entertainment and to which all participants contribute as performer, audience, or both equally. Most often, Josie was alone when she sang.

Nor does Josie's singing correspond entirely to Ives' definition of that which he considers the private, or "domestic," tradition of performance. The performers whom Ives considers as operating within this context sing only for their own self-entertainment and, at most, in the presence of members of their immediate family. The private context of their perfor-

mance is a tradition which is, and has been in the past, divorced from any connection with the public context. Josie, however, had been a public performer in the "veillée" context. In addition, she had occasionally performed, albeit infrequently, in what the Cohens have termed the "assembly context"¹⁰ at a number of folk festivals in Newfoundland. In contrast, Josie also participated in activities where a number of women would gather informally to knit, chat, and sing to each other, and she professes having learned a number of her songs during such gatherings. While this context corresponds, in part, to Ives' definition of the domestic in that it was work-oriented and exclusively female, it also corresponds to some degree of Ives' all-male public performance context.

These factors all have important implications for the categorization of the performance context under consideration, and this categorization is of importance in determining the social and personal significance of this form of traditional behaviour to our performer and her community culture. Our contention here is that, although the solitary setting in which Josie would perform was indeed private and domestic, the context of the performance was, in a very real sense, public in import. Josie would indeed perform for the purpose of self-entertainment; but an unseen and 'absentee' audience would react to her performance. Josie was renowned for her ability and talent as a traditional singer, and all members of her community had, at one time or another, heard her singing alone in her home or on her porch. Researchers interested in the folk-song tradition of the Port-au-Port Peninsula French were invariably directed to Josie and conversation dealing with this tradition invariably included some mention and praise of Josie's singing. Thus, even though Josie's performance was self-directed, it was, at the same time, other-directed, in result if not in intent. This last point will be discussed later.

It might be argued that Josie's singing was more an idiosyncratic than a traditional phenomenon. Viewed synchronically in terms of the contemporary state of French-Newfoundland culture, this would appear to be true. However, her singing was not founded upon the dictates of contemporary group cultural norms, but rather represented the product of Josie's personal adaptation to culture change in her society. Her singing began in an earlier period and was molded by the requisites and expectations engendered by an earlier stage of the culture. As the culture evolved, so too did the context of Josie's performance, as she adapted to new cultural and social conditions around her. For this reason, her performance may be evaluated only through a diachronic analysis of the factors involved. As Arensberg points out:

The social system of each group possesses three components: the structure of interaction, termed a relational system, a system of customary behaviour, and a system of values. Inevitably, all three systems are interdependent and support and modify each other. The whole exists in time and space and in a given environment. The environment is in some measure modified by and reflects the system. Changes in either affect the other.¹¹

The structure of interaction with which we are concerned is that which obtains between performer and audience within the singing context; the system of customary behaviour is that of the performer, as well as that of the responding audience; and the system of values is that which results

from the enculturation of these participants and which determines why the singer sang the songs she did, and why she elicited the favourable response from the community. These may be fully understood only through an examination of how they relate to modifications of the sociocultural environment. In this instance, we are concerned with the manner in which the relational and behavioural systems of the public "veillée" context have been modified by a corresponding change in the sociocultural milieu of the Newfoundland French. The value placed upon the singing and songs of this former context, as interviews with Josie's contemporaries have shown, has not diminished.

Some brief mention of those factors which contributed to the decline of the "veillée" tradition is appropriate at this point. One such factor was the change in the work patterns of the Newfoundland French of the Peninsula. With the installation of the Harmon Air Force Base in Stephenville during the early 1940s, the advent of winter no longer entailed the necessary curtailment of work, as employment was available on the base. The arrival of radio and, more importantly, of television to the area provided alternate forms of entertainment. Eventually, if gradually, the youth rejected the "veillée" tradition in favour of more 'modern' forms of entertainment.

With the disappearance of the "veillée," the corresponding relational and behavioural systems were, per force, modified. That the value system influencing Josie's own choice of songs and singing style had not changed is evident from an examination of her own evaluation of her repertoire. She sang primarily French language songs and, whenever possible, preferred to speak French rather than English, although she was fairly proficient in the latter. She particularly emphasized her enjoyment of "les vieilles chansons françaises de France," thereby adding the stipulation that her preferred songs were those which were French both in language and in country of origin. She was also proud of the fact that the French in her songs, so she had been told, was more easily understood than that of many other performers in her community. Indeed, the texts of her songs are, linguistically, remarkably conservative, and make use of lexical items and grammatical forms which occur rarely, if at all, in French-Newfoundland dialect. A final criterion of evaluation was that the songs be long (Josie preferred "les vieilles chansons longues"), and line repetition was an important feature ("Faut que ça soit répété à deux fois.").

These criteria are obviously those principles, or cultural norms and expectations, of the French Newfoundland of Josie's youth and which she learned through the enculturation process which prevailed within the context of the "veillée." In his discussion of musical behaviour, Merriam describes such a process as follows:

Conceptual behaviour, ideation, or cultural behaviour involves the concepts about music which must be translated into physical behaviour in order to produce sound. Here lies the entire process of determination of the system of moods and sounds of music, as well as the system of normative and existential concepts.¹²

This enculturation process explains how Josie learned the songs she sang, as well as the reasons for the criteria that governed the evaluation of appropriate song texts and style by both performer and audience. The

members of the enculturating group were, in large part, metropolitan French who transplanted their standards for performance item, style, and context into the Newfoundland environment. Josie's values were, in part, their values.

The decline of the "veillée" restricted Josie's performance to the all-female 'knitting bee' context, but with the television and the tremendously popular 'soaps,' this occasion too disappeared.¹³ Ultimately, Josie's singing became restricted primarily to the solitary context described above. Doubtless, nostalgia, personal gratification, and pride were among the reasons that Josie continued to sing. However, there was another factor which was of equal, if not greater importance, this being the status which Josie's singing reinforced for her in Cap-St-Georges, and the role definition it furnished an otherwise socially inactive, aged widow.

As mentioned above, Josie was renowned in Cap-St-Georges for her "old French songs"; but she was also equally known for her talents in the other French communities on the Peninsula, La Grand' Terre and L'Anse-à-Canards. As would be expected, her contemporaries were most fond of their past traditions and all knew and admired her. Nevertheless, the younger generations of Cap-St-Georges were equally aware of Josie's singing habits, although they accorded less respect to the French songs than did their elders, considering them too old-fashioned. Consequently, they were somewhat less appreciative of the significance of Josie's ability.

This variation of opinion across social groups is to be expected when one examines affect and valuation intra-culturally. As Arensberg notes:

Value systems may also be differentiated on the basis of the type of relational system with which they are associated. The evaluational responses which each individual makes to events occurring within a system ... are manifestations of the values held by the individual.¹⁴

The value system of the older members of the community was similar to Josie's own, and reflected their shared enculturation with reference to the "veillée" tradition. This shared value naturally elicited the normative responses corresponding to that which Josie's customary musical behaviour and the system of interaction dictated.

There were, therefore, in Josie's singing many elements which warrant its classification as a type of public performance. There was the performance of a socially sanctioned mode of expression which continued to elicit the approval of an 'absentee' audience. That Josie's singing provided her with some degree of high social status appears evident. That her performance was private in setting while public in import explains the bestowment and reinforcement of this status. What is more, Josie was aware of this approval and of the status which this involved. The community did respond to her singing, albeit indirectly, and this response was directed back to her in various manners. Finally, Josie had been interviewed and recorded a number of times by "people from the University" a fact the import of which was lost on neither the performer nor the community.¹⁵

It is the combination of these factors that suggests that Josie's performance was other-directed not only in practice, but also in intent. Certainly, the responses of outside interviewers and her own community

would have tended to encourage her to sing and to conserve its value in the minds of both her and her community. That the younger residents of Cap-St-Georges recognized Josie's talents, even if they did not respond to them as did their parents and grandparents, suggests that commonly shared enculturation and respect for Josie's past celebrity as a "veillée" performer were not the only sources of Josie's status. In a very real sense, Josie's status was the result of both historical and contemporary determinants.

This study has concentrated in large part upon the concepts of public and private performance contexts. We have employed this public-private dichotomy as a referential point of departure, to focus attention upon the role of the individual in traditional processes. The perspective adopted and the hypothesis developed are not intended as a replacement for the original performance model. Rather, the public-private model has been extended to include our data and, consequently, to present a more accurate representation of the relationship binding performer to tradition, and individual behaviour to collective societal values.

A distinction must be made between those folklore activities and processes which operate within a public setting and those which operate in a private setting but which serve a public function, both on the level of the individual and of the community. The public performance in a public setting might be defined as that which involves intimate contact between participants engaged in a culturally significant activity wherein a temporally immediate performer-audience group dynamic develops and reaffirms the values of the group. Such a context was that of the public "veillée." The public performance in a private setting does not entail this immediacy of participant contact or this temporal immediacy of interaction. Nonetheless, contact, interaction, and reaffirmation of cultural values are features of both examples of folksong performance. The private performance does not necessarily involve these components.

In his portrait of a Newfoundland song-maker, John Szwed remarks that: "... there is one area of folksong scholarship that is a blank: it remains for us to discover what the songs mean to their singers and to their listeners."¹⁶ Although this study does not deal with particular songs or their texts, it does profess the same aim as that outlined by Szwed in that it has attempted to determine the significance of a particular mode of song behaviour to both the performer and the community of which she was a part. The situation described represents the results of tendencies towards cultural change and retention in the evolving society of the Newfoundland French.

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NOTES

1. Obvious examples include the differentiation of "public" and "domestic" folksong traditions in Edward D. Ives, "Lumbercamp Singing and the Two Traditions," *Canadian Folk Music Journal* 5 (1977): 17-23; and Gerald Thomas's discussion of "public" and "private" folktale traditions in his *Les deux traditions: le conte populaire chez les Franco-terreneuviens* (Montréal: Bellarmin, 1985).
2. E. B. Greenleaf and G. Y. Mansfield, *Ballads and Sea Songs of Newfoundland* (London: Oxford UP, 1932), xxv.
3. *Ibid.* xxxv.

4. Maud Karpeles, *Folksongs of Newfoundland* (London: Faber & Faber, 1971), 2.
5. It should be noted that since Peacock's seminal research, a considerable corpus of folk-song material of the Newfoundland French has been collected and is currently housed in Memorial University of Newfoundland's Centre d'Etudes Franco-terreneuviennes.
6. Some thirty of Josephine Costard's songs were subsequently published in Kenneth Peacock, *Songs of the Newfoundland Outports* (Ottawa: National Museum of Man, 1965).
7. The information upon which this article is based was collected during field research in Cap-St-Georges between 1978 and 1981. See MUNFLA 80-144, F3480c-F3482cc/C4818c-C4820c.
8. For a more complete description of the "veillée," see Thomas.
9. Ives.
10. Anne and Norm Cohen, "Folk and Hillbilly Music: Further Thoughts on their Relation," *JEMF Quarterly* 13(1977): 50-57.
11. Conrad M. Arensberg, *Culture and Community* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1965), 269.
12. Alan P. Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1964), 14.
13. For a discussion of the impact of television soap operas on French Newfoundland culture, see Gerald Thomas, "Other Worlds: Folktale and Soap Opera in Newfoundland's French Tradition," in Kenneth S. Goldstein and Neil V. Rosenberg, eds., *Folklore Studies in Honour of Herbert Halpert* (St. John's: Memorial U of Newfoundland), 19.
14. Arensberg, 269.
15. It is probably no coincidence that Josie was chosen by the French-Newfoundland community to perform for the Secretary of State of Canada during his trip to Stephenville in 1974. My thanks to Gerald Thomas for this information.
16. John Szwed, "Paul E. Hall: A Newfoundland Song-Maker and Community of Song," in Henry Glassie, Edward D. Ives, and John Szwed, eds., *Folksongs and their Makers* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green U Popular P, 1970), 149.

Resumé: Gary R. Butler est spécialiste en l'étude du folklore franco-terreneuvien, et son article porte sur une chanteuse traditionnelle du village de Cap-St-Georges, Mme Josephine Costard [1904-1982]. Il examine certaines des dimensions "performatrices," sociales, et contextuelles de la tradition musicale franco-terreneuvienne afin de démontrer les fonctions culturelles et personnelles qui lient l'individu à sa création. Finalement, il reprend le modèle "public-private" proposé par plusieurs folkloristes et l'applique à un cas précis de performance.

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Resumé: Jennifer C. Connor a rassemblé et a comparé les maintes versions différentes de la ballade traditionnelle [Molly Bawn]. Après l'analyse de trois de ces versions, elle juge que cette ballade, qui portait jadis une signification mythologique, se base sur une épisode réelle dans l'histoire d'une communauté irlandaise.