

Festivals as Vessels for Storytelling

As a first-year graduate student in Folklore, I am focusing my studies – and my thesis, next academic year – on festival as a vehicle for storytelling and folklore. I hope to learn how festivals function as vessels for stories, as well as how these stories shape and even maintain the festivals they are a part of. Consequently, I intend to study festivals as a behavior and phenomenon and all folkloric genres of stories– myths, legends, and folktales. Through this research, I wish to address the relationships between these festivals and their stories, and analyze how the stories shape the festivals (and vice versa).

Though not all festivals involve storytelling or stories, many do, and those that have stories involved with their tradition would often not be the same without them– if they remained extant at all. The festivals that structure themselves around stories both benefit from the storytelling – by drawing in audience, creating emotional connections to the festival, and carrying on community, religious, and/or cultural tradition – and act as vehicles for the stories themselves, ensuring they are told year after year. In this sense, storytelling through festival can be seen as an important example of intentional transmission of folklore.

Where do we see this happening? Let's look at some examples:



Semana Santa
Sevilla, Spain

Semana Santa (Holy Week, the week between Palm Sunday and Easter) is celebrated in Spain with *procesiones* (processions) run by *cofrades* (Catholic brotherhoods), whose members are called *nazarenos* (lit. Nazarenes) or *penitentes* (penitents) when they participate in this event. It is a lengthy festival period for all of Spain, but most especially Sevilla, which is internationally known for its extravagant *procesiones*. Religious festivals are almost always vessels for religious stories; the expression of religion around a holiday or other sacred event is a prime time to share sacred and traditional stories. Here, the stories are mostly shared visually rather than orally: the carried centerpiece is wholly sculptural (no matter how realistic it might look) and sumptuously dressed and decorated. Each *procesión* relates to a story from the Bible, providing a visual retelling for those who already know the story and a teaching aid to inform those who do not. The stunning artistry of each *procesión* brings the story to life for the audience lining the streets, keeping ancient stories forefront in the minds of modern people.

La Cena – Virgen del Subterráneo (left)
San Bernardo – Cristo de la Salud (right)
Santa Marta – Cristo de la Claridad (bottom)

Las Cigarreras – Cristo de la Columna (left)
Las Aguas – Cristo de las Aguas (right)
La Redención – Jesús de la Redención (bottom)



Vinotok
Crested Butte, Colorado

Vinotok is a self-termed "grassroots festival" unique to the Gunnison Valley, combining myth, ancestral and local folklore, and ritual. Its main productions are mummum (storytelling inside of local bars and restaurants), a public play, and the burning of the Grump. Characters in the prevalent myths include the Red Lady (a local mountain), the Green Man (nature and balance), and the Knight (destructive consumerism). The burning of the Grump is symbolic of destroying your cares and woes so that you can treat each other better in the long winter ahead. The story related to the Grump is different every year, but the core of the tale remains the same.

The Grump (top); the Green Man (left); the Knight, booted by Maidens (right); the Red Lady and the Harvest Mother (bottom)



Chinese New Year Cultural Fair
Portland, Oregon

Though no stories were told outright at this event, the traditional stories behind the festival were still made clear through festival events. For example, the god of wealth, Caishen, (as represented every year by a local man) relates to the stories of Zhao Gongming and Bi Gan, and the lion dances are traditionally believed to bring good luck and prosperity. Similar to the other New Year festival discussed above, stories are also shared informally as people get together and recognize tradition and heritage.

Lee Association lion dance team holding a sign that says "Happy New Year" (left); Stephen Ying as the god of wealth (right); the lion "eating" lettuce (bottom)



Samhain Celtic New Year Festival
Salem, Oregon

This festival served as an overt vessel for traditional Celtic myths and folktales, which were brought to the festival by a professional oral storyteller. Other stories and ways of culture spread informally through participants interacting with each other around the festival, with the festival acting as a set place and time to discuss traditions, stories, and culture. Tales of "the old country" (whether that be Ireland, Scotland, Wales, or England) were often overheard, sometimes hand in hand with personal and family accounts.

Traditional dancer (left); bagpipe players (right); storyteller Gordon Munro telling the story of Tam-Lin from memory (bottom)



Colorado Renaissance Festival
Larkspur, Colorado

Renaissance Festivals are a unique case in that they are not tied to a specific culture, tradition, or set of stories, but rather a generalized idea of a historical period blended with fictional ideas. While many of the stories shared through Renaissance festivals are fantastical and unreal, the events also serve as vehicles for real cultural traditions. For example, traditional Irish ballads, jokes, pub songs, and outright storytelling (though all of those mediums are, arguably, stories) are frequently popular aspects of these festivals.

Musical groups Craic and Daphne and the Roustabouts performing traditional Irish pub songs (top); cosplayers dressed as popular fantasy characters (left); Jessie Keith (self), in work uniform/full costume (right)

Why does this matter?

Festivals aren't all just fun and games. Further research into the relationship between festivals and storytelling could...

- ...provide modern research opportunities for the mechanics and impacts of oral storytelling
- ...allow folklorists to examine the way stories are shared in and out of festival settings and what that means in regards to other fields of study (sociology, anthropology, ethnology, etc.)
- ...clarify the cultural impact of festivals, which can help festivals get funding and patronage

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