

Chapter 18

Folklore as a Response to the Pandemic: Rumors About the Coronavirus

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has shaken to the core the daily life of the world's population and made fundamental changes to how people relate to one another. Like all great changes, this new situation has caused a variety of reactions, and as is always the case in troubled times, people have used folklore to express their concerns and fears. This chapter analyses some of the rumors that have circulated about the coronavirus and which exemplify how people have reacted to these circumstances in an attempt to find (very often quite unlikely) answers to questions and doubts about the origin of the virus, how to cure it, and vaccines. The aim is to use folklore to show how people express their doubts and fears in the face of the changes that are transforming society and even resort to humor to relieve the tension of such delicate situations.

INTRODUCTION

Understood as a form of artistic communication that occurs within a small group (Ben Amos, 1971) and which is used in certain difficult, delicate or potentially disturbing situations (Pujol, 2013), folklore logically has close ties to society. It reflects the changes it undergoes, and shows and expresses the problems and conflicts of people's daily lives. In this regard, the samples of folklore that can be grouped and classified in a particular genre system (such as the one proposed by Jason, 1977) also evolve and transform over time. So some genres cease to have relevance (for example, threshing songs because in an industrialized society threshing is done by machines), others evolve (for example, jokes, which can now be told in the new media of the social networks) and yet others emerge for the first time (for example, memes would not exist if it were not for the Internet). All of these genres show what people are

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like and how they behave. As Pujol says (2013, p. 272), folklore is double faceted: as a communicative act it has an external function and in terms of content it has an internal, psychological one. So folklore can be likened to matter because it cannot be created or destroyed, only transformed and its continued existence is guaranteed as long as people have contact with one another.

One of the major genres of narrative folklore that has proved to be able to adapt to change is the legend, a genre that describes extraordinary events, makes the story being told believable and has an exemplary function. Legends narrate extraordinary events that are situated in a specific time and place, and their function is to give guidelines to the people of a particular community about how to behave (Oriol, 2019, p. 7). Because of their links to reality and the fact that they interpret the world, legends underwent a considerable transformation as rural society transitioned to the industrialized, consumer society we now live in (Pujol, 2013, pp. 55-56). This transformation and the differing subject matter has often meant that it is useful to distinguish between two types of legend: ancient legends and contemporary legends. While the former portray certain beliefs (religious or secular), the latter express current ideas, feelings, concerns, needs and fears (Brednich, 1994). One feature of contemporary legends is that it is impossible to find where they came from. Another is that they are highly adaptable because a story can be located in a place that is near the audience (the same neighborhood or city) or at the other end of the world. And despite the change of scene, the narrative parameters are the same. Some years ago now, these tales caught the attention of folklorists and also specialists from other disciplines (such as the cinema, literature or advertising), who adapted and used them for their own purposes. Studying contemporary legends is a good way of analyzing the present and seeing how difficult (and dangerous) situations, like pandemics, can affect present society.

Bearing in mind all of the above, the aims of this chapter are to:

- Review the characteristics of contemporary legends and rumors as examples of current folklore.
- Contextualize the use of folklore at moments of crisis.
- Discuss and analyze a corpus of rumors that have appeared as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Reflect on the use of humor in difficult situations.

BACKGROUND

Contemporary legends are known by a variety of names. Using one name or another usually depends on academic tradition and which background aspects are to be given most emphasis. They have been labeled “extraordinary stories”, “rumors”, “contemporary legends”, “urban legends”, “apocryphal anecdotes”, “modern myths”, “credible stories”, “legendary stories of today”, “repulsive legends” (for those that deal with a particular theme), “contemporary myths”, “urban tales” or “FOAF legends”, which uses the initials of the words “Friend of a Friend” in reference to a common way in which these tales are transmitted (“I was told by a friend of a friend”).

Questions of emphasis and academic tradition aside, strictly speaking, there is a difference between two of these terms (rumor and contemporary legend): while rumors are simple thematic statements, with no specific characters or narrative structure (templates for a tale rather than fully fledged tales in themselves), legends are genuine tales with narrative development and specific characters (Pujol, 2013, p. 351). This is what Renard and Campion-Vincent (1992, p. 8) propose in France when they speak of distinguishing between different levels: brief, one-sentence rumors; legends structured as narratives (short

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