The Mutability of Meaning: Contextualizing the Cumbrian Coin-Tree

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Abstract

This paper examines the mutability of the 'meaning' of folklore, as articulated by Lauri Honko. It aims to illustrate the amorphous and ambiguous nature of customs and traditions by considering the multiple 'meanings' ascribed to a contemporary British folkloric custom: the Cumbrian coin-tree.

Introduction

The vast log stretches west away from the footpath, unremarkable but for the thousands of coins embedded in its bark. They cover its surface in uniform lines, faithfully following the log's curves and crevices, forming waves and ripples of copper and silver. Sunlight filters in through the canopy of leaves above, reflecting off the coins so that they glint, contrasting bright, lustrous metal against the dull, grainy texture of the wood. This is the primary coin-tree of Aira Force, Cumbria.

A family, the tenth witnessed so far today, notices the tree instantly. Its members are awed by the sheer volume of coins and immediately decide to contribute some of their own, searching their purses for small change. They notice a conveniently-sized piece of limestone perched atop the eastern end of the log and, having chosen a location for their deposits, they use the rock to hammer them into the bark. A few comments are exchanged, a few photographs are taken, and the family is on its way once more.

A family, the eleventh witnessed so far today, notices the tree instantly. Its members are awed by the sheer volume of coins and immediately decide to contribute some of their own, searching their pockets for small change. They notice a conveniently-sized piece of limestone sitting on the ground beside the log and, having chosen a location for their deposits, they use a rock to hammer them into the bark. A few comments are exchanged, a few photographs are taken, and the family is on its way once more.

A family, the twelfth witnessed so far today . . .

These examples are used here to illustrate that participation in a custom or ritual tends to offer little variation; it is imitative, formulaic, homogeneous. Physical actions are often uniform; physical structures, analogous. Twenty miles away from this particular log is another large coin-tree, on the shores of Tarn Hows; the structure is little different, apart from a smaller quantity of coins, and people's physical reactions to it are similar—in fact, nigh identical—to those at Aira Force. They make their declarations of awe and then, utilizing a nearby rock, hammer in their own coins.

However, as uniform and formulaic as folkloric structures and customs can be, they do not necessarily indicate a homogeneity of personal purpose, motivation, and 'meaning'. Folklore is not fixed. Folktales and traditions are malleable; they have a tendency to change over time, and many scholars have focused on this element of mutability, exploring how traditional folktales and customs have been gradually acclimatized to modern culture, from Donald McKelvie's survey of folkloric survivals in the West Riding of Yorkshire, and John Niles's review of the modern modifications undergone by traditional fairy tales, to Ronald

Dore's consideration of how traditional practices have persisted in the world's largest metropolis, Tokyo (McKelvie 1963; Niles 1978; Dore 1958).

However, while folklore changes over time, it also varies in the present, and the primary objective of this article is to emphasize how even a folkloric custom which is considered statically—within one geographic region at one specific time—can offer great insight into folklore's malleable and mutable nature.

As John Skorupski argues, 'to explain a ritual is to explain why it is performed' (1976, 46-47); a folkloric ritual or custom can only be contextualized with an understanding of why the practitioners, the 'folk' themselves, participate in it. Too often, however, assumptions are made by ethnographers and folklorists concerning these reasons (Wuthnow 1989, 124), and the most misleading assumption is that of homogeneity.

In 1985, Lauri Honko posed the following questions:

> Our concept of meaning is derived from a linguistic stereotype maintained by dictionaries, according to which meaning is conceived of as verbal, clear-cut, and stable. But is it so? What if meaning were something totally different, namely, to a large extent non-verbal, amorphous, changing (becoming more precise, for example), and of relatively short duration . . . ? (Honko 1985, 38)

'Meaning' is presented here as a mutable, transient, and varied aspect of folklore. Scholars may seek to unearth *the* meaning of a custom, but when that custom is observed by multiple practitioners, in numbers that can range from 'several' to several million, how can one single motivation be ascribed to every individual? Humans are distinct, emotionally heterogeneous creatures. Granted, physical actions are widely imitated and homogeneous; participation in folk customs tends to be formulaic and ritualized. However, the reasons behind participation and the 'meanings' ascribed to the custom will be as varied as the practitioners themselves.

The Multiplicity of Meaning: An Overview

The prevalence of ambiguity in ritual is clearly evident in numerous anthropological studies, in which multiple practitioners have been shown to observe a custom or perform a ritual in identical homogeneity, and yet interpret both the ritual and their participation quite differently. For example, when James Fernandez interviewed twenty members of the Bwiti cult of the Fang peoples of northern Gabon, it soon became apparent that identical ritual actions do not necessarily indicate identical ritual perceptions or motivations. Despite the fact that the night-long ritual, which Fernandez studied, was intended to promote the unity—or *nlem-mvore*, 'one-heartedness'—of the cult, there were vast discrepancies within the various personal interpretations of the ritual's key symbols and actions (Fernandez 1965).

This 'variation in the individual interpretation of commonly experienced phenomena', as Fernandez terms it (1965, 906), is clearly noticeable in numerous other anthropological studies. Edmund Leach's work on the rituals of the Burmese, the Shans, and the Kachins of the Hukawng Valley reveals a similar superficial facade of unity of intent and interpretation, as does David Jordan's work on the Taiwanese Jiaw, a large, ceremonial supplication to the deities, in which 'there is not a single theological justification given for the event by all informants' (Leach 1964, 281; Jordan 1976, 104).

Christianity is equally subject to divergent perspectives. Peter Stromberg's analysis of the perceptions of religious symbolism among Swedish Protestants clearly highlights the extent to which personal backgrounds and characteristics can influence an individual's interpretation of ritual and doctrine, as does Glenn Bowman's study of pilgrimage to Jerusalem, presenting contrasts in the behaviour and motivations of pilgrims, which are repeated in Michael Sallnow's examination of pilgrimages in the South American Andes and in Ian Reader's description of a Japanese pilgrimage to the Buddhist temples on the island of Shikoku (Stromberg 1981; Bowman 1991; Sallnow 1991; Reader 1993).

The homogeneity of the physical observance of a custom is clearly not evidence of a uniform 'meaning'. For this reason, close comparisons should not be made between the contemporary British coin-tree and the various customs worldwide and historically which involve hammering small objects into larger bodies of material. We would not, for example, assume that the reason a person today chooses to insert a coin into the bark of a tree is identical to the reason a person in the nineteenth century chose to insert a nail into a tree, no more than we would assume synonymous motivations for why a person in the Democratic Republic of Congo would choose to insert a nail into a Mavungu *nkisi* figure (Morton 2010). We should not assume that similarities in the physical adherence to a custom equate to similarities in the 'meanings' attributed to that custom.

This article aims to apply this assertion to the material and ethnographic evidence of the coin-tree, a contemporary British folkloric custom, and to consider how the mutability of meaning is not an incidental aspect of folklore—a mere by-product of the variance of its practitioners—but is in fact integral to its continued perpetuation.

The Coin-Tree: An Introduction

For those readers unfamiliar with the term, a coin-tree is exactly what its name would suggest: a tree—occasionally a living specimen, but most often a log or a stump—which has coins inserted edgeways into its bark. The earliest known coin-tree is an uprooted oak (*Quercus*) on Isle Maree, Loch Maree, in the north-west Highlands of Scotland (Figure 1). The first reference to a tree's employment in a folkloric custom on Isle Maree comes from Thomas Pennant's 1775 *A Tour in Scotland and Voyage to the Hebrides*, in which he describes a holy well located on the island, consecrated by Saint Maelrubha (or Maree) in the eighth century and widely purported to cure insanity (1775, 330).

Beside the well was a tree which, at the time Pennant was writing in the 1770s, was being utilized as an 'altar'; pilgrims who sought a cure from the holy well would deposit their tokens of thanks to Saint Maree on this particular tree (1775, 330). Originally, these tokens appear to have been rags,[1] but during the nineteenth century, pilgrims began depositing other objects such as pins and nails (Campbell 1860, 134; Mitchell 1863, 253). These metal objects had originally been employed to hold the rags in place on the branches and trunk of the tree, but had gradually become offerings in and of themselves (Dixon 1886, 152).

Figure 1 hereabouts

By the late nineteenth century, coins had replaced rags, nails, and pins, and had become the predominant offering at the site. For example, when Queen Victoria visited Isle Maree on her tour of Scotland in 1877, she described the tree in her diary, in an entry dated 17 September 1877, as follows:

> The boat was pushed onshore, and we scrambled out and walked through the tangled underwood and thicket of oak, holly, beech, etc., which covers the islet, to the well, now nearly dry which is said to be celebrated for the cure of insanity. An old tree stands close to it, and into the bark of this it is the custom, from time immemorial, for everyone who goes there to insert with a hammer a copper coin, as a sort of offering to the saint who lived there in the eighth century. . . . We hammered some pennies into the tree, to the branches of which there are also rags and ribbons tied. (Duff 1968, 332-33)

By 1898 the tree was being referred to by James Muddock as 'the money tree' (1898, 437), and in 1927 it was described by Colonel Edington, a visiting doctor from Glasgow, as 'studded with pennies driven in edge on . . . the effect is that the tree for about eight or nine feet up from the ground is covered with metallic scales. The scaly covering forms armour something like what is depicted on a dragon' (McPherson 1929, 75). The original rag-tree had subsequently become a coin-tree; possibly Britain's first.

There are a number of other coin-trees which boast similarly lengthy biographies throughout the British Isles: a coin-tree in Argyll, Scotland (Mabey 1996, 214; Rodger, Stokes, and Ogilvie 2003, 87); another near Clonenagh, County Laois, the Republic of Ireland (Roe 1939, 27; Harbison 1991, 231; Simon 2000, 28; Morton 2004, 195); and another in Ardboe, County Tyrone, Northern Ireland, which has been removed since its fall in 1997 (Grimes 1999). These coin-trees have been in existence since the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, and although there have been changes to the custom throughout this period, they have evidently undergone many years of folkloric appropriation. However, of the thirty-three coin-tree sites (containing at least one coin-tree, but often more) catalogued thus far across the British Isles, the majority are relatively recent in origin, having been created within the last twenty years.

The Cumbrian Coin-Trees

These recently 'coined' coin-trees are distributed throughout England, Wales, and Scotland, but there are two distinct clusters: in the north-west and south-west of England, with the most concentrated group of coin-tree sites situated in the Lake District National Park, Cumbria. The coin-trees of Cumbria only are the focus of this paper, in order to examine how mutable and malleable the meaning of a folkloric custom can be even in its most static form, when restricted to one regional area at one specific time. The following information and figures are based on data collected during fieldwork in the area, conducted in June 2012.

There are six coin-tree sites in the Lake District National Park, Cumbria, and these are situated at Aira Force (which contains seven coin-trees), Claife Station (one coin-tree), Grizedale (five), Rydal (three), Stock Ghyll (eight), and Tarn Hows (twenty-two) (figure 2). In total, there are forty-six coin-trees distributed throughout the Lake District, an area which

covers 885 square miles. The lands—and consequently the coin-trees—at Aira Force, Claife Station, Rydal, and Tarn Hows are managed and protected by the National Trust; Grizedale is managed by the Forestry Commission; and the coin-trees of Stock Ghyll, situated beside a road leading out of the town of Ambleside, are managed by South Lakeland District Council.

Figure 2 (the map) hereabouts

The earliest to have been 'coined' is the primary coin-tree at Aira Force (Figure 3)—a beech (*Fagus*) log, 9.5 metres in length and containing over 26,500 coins, the vast majority of which are pennies and two-pence pieces—which is believed to have been created in 2002 (Stephen Dowson, pers. comm.). According to Stephen Dowson, National Trust Ranger, the tree was felled for safety reasons and apparently, once the log was positioned beside the main public path leading to the popular tourist attraction of Aira Force Waterfall, 'visitors started knocking coins in more or less straight away'. Following the popularity of the Aira Force coin-tree, the custom spread, manifesting itself elsewhere as late as 2008 at Tarn Hows (Figure 4) and 2010 at Claife Station (Sam Stalker, National Trust Ranger, pers. comm.).

Figures 3 and 4 hereabouts

According to the coin-tree custodians, the custom of inserting coins into these trees is initiated and perpetuated purely by members of the public, with no measures being taken by the landowners either to encourage or discourage the custom. The general consensus amongst the coin-tree custodians over the proliferation of this practice is that tourists, having seen, or read about, or heard of, older coin-trees elsewhere, such as in Scotland or Ireland, imitated the custom when opportunity presented itself in the form of a large, felled log situated beside a heavily-traversed path (as at Aira Force). The presence of a few coins, inserted by these unknown initiators, was noticed by other passers-by, who chose to add their own coins to the log. The accumulation grew, spreading to surrounding trees, and subsequently to the trees of other popular tourist destinations within the Lake District. Since 2002, over 35,600 coins have been inserted into the trees of the Lake District.[2]

The Coin-Tree and Folklore

Despite the theories of the coin-tree custodians, the motivations behind participation in this contemporary custom—which basically consists of inserting a coin (usually of low denomination) into the bark of a tree, sometimes with the aid of nearby rocks as tools of percussion—remain obscure. The practice was first brought to The Folklore Society's attention in 2004, when Mavis Curtis reported the Bolton Abbey and Hardcastle Crags coin-trees in *FLS News* 42 (2004, 14). Following this, it has been the subject of online articles, such as John Billingsley's 'Coin Trees: A New Tradition, or a New Artefact?', published on the *Northern Earth* magazine website in 2005, and further queries and speculations have been included in later editions of *FLS News* (2009, 2; 2010, 6-7). However, to the author's knowledge, this practice has not been the central focus of an academic study.

The lack of scholarly attention this custom has received is possibly due to the ambiguity of the topic, specifically in relation to discipline. Should a study of coin-trees really be classed as folklore? Or would it more accurately be defined as social history, material culture studies, anthropology? These disciplines are far from mutually exclusive, and the coin-tree need not be stringently pigeon-holed into one category. However, the practice of the coin-tree is referred to as a 'folkloric custom' throughout this paper and so a few sentences will be spent justifying this classification.

It was in 1846 that William Thoms first coined the term 'Folk-Lore' (later to become 'folklore'), suggesting it in a letter to *The Athenaeum* as an alternative to 'what we in England designate as Popular Antiquities, or Popular Literature' (Thoms 1846, 862). He recommended, instead, 'a good Saxon compound, Folk-Lore, --*the Lore of the People*' (1846, 862). 'Folklore' is, therefore, simply the 'lore of the people', further detailed by the *Oxford English Dictionary* in its 2013 online edition as the 'traditional beliefs, legends, and customs, current among the common people; the study of these'.

The insertion of a coin into a tree certainly constitutes a 'traditional custom' judging by the antiquity of the practice (see Isle Maree above), and those who participate in it—a wide sample of the public representing a range of ages and races, and of both genders—can easily be classed as 'the common people'. The coin-tree is, therefore, the material manifestation of a folkloric custom. It is, however, perhaps the methodologies employed in this study which are a little more equivocal. My approach was primarily ethnographic, with arguments drawn from participant observations. In this case, Roy Vickery's advice was instructive. Bemoaning that '[a]ll too often writers on folklore have quarried for fossilized information in printed books', he advocates that an effort is made instead to 'collect fresh, living, and lively material from the true authorities—the 'folk' themselves' (1995, vii).

In June 2012, therefore, I undertook ethnographic fieldwork at each of the coin-tree sites. I spoke with fifty people who had either inserted coins themselves or had stopped to examine coin-trees, usually to watch a companion participate. The ages of these practitioners ranged greatly, from families with young children to participants in their seventies, and while one couple resides in Whitehaven, Cumbria, none of the participants considered themselves local residents, indicating that this custom (in Cumbria, at least) is primarily observed by tourists. Some practitioners heralded from a wide range of locations, such as France, Holland, the United States, Australia, and China, but the majority of the participants were British. Each participant was interviewed and asked to consider the question of why he or she had chosen to participate in this custom. As Honko (1964; 1985) would no doubt have predicted, there was not a uniform response.

'Queue Mentality' and the Lure of Aesthetics

In speaking with the participants, it soon became clear that ascribing a 'meaning' to the custom occurs surprisingly late in the chronology of a person's engagement with a coin-tree. Indeed, it perhaps would not occur at all if they had not been prompted in the interview to consider what the trees' purposes might be. Unless a participant is with a child, or indeed is a child (an element explored below), then he or she is not likely to discuss what the 'meaning' of the custom might be. Indeed, when asked why they had participated, or why they believe

others had done so, many of them appeared flummoxed. People who had, seconds before, inserted coins into a coin-tree, could not offer a firm explanation as to why they had done it.

In fact, many practitioners appeared embarrassed by my attention, as if they had been caught participating in some childish act, and they were quick to assure me that they were not 'superstitious'; they had only participated because others had done so. In fact, eighteen participants judged imitation to be the primary motivation behind the insertion of a coin, explaining that they had inserted a coin 'because other people had done it'. An American couple claimed that they had seen another group insert coins and had 'wanted to know what all the fuss was about', while one man believed that the participants are 'just copying, adding to it . . . I don't think there's any deeper reason than that'.

One man termed this process of imitation 'the queue mentality', explaining that if 'you see enough people doing something then you join in, and you don't really ask why'. This theory is certainly supported by my observations; after only a short time at each site, it soon became clear that people are much more inclined to approach a coin-tree if there is already a group gathered around it, and they would be more likely to insert a coin if they had witnessed others doing so.

Another motivation for participation appears to have been aesthetics. Many people commented on the appearance of the coin-trees, describing them as 'pretty', 'beautiful', 'striking', and 'so impressive', and many people (whether they had inserted a coin or not) photographed the coin-trees, either taking photographs of each other inserting a coin or standing beside or sitting on the tree. One woman suggested taking a photograph, but another woman pointed out that a photograph would not 'do it justice', indicating that to some at least, the most significant aspect of the coin-tree is its physical appearance.

Some people viewed the coin-trees as pieces of art or sculptures, claiming that they should be protected and preserved as such. Two people believed that coins had been utilized in this way for purely aesthetic reasons, one woman commenting that 'it's quite effective having the metal of the coins against the wood of the tree. Quite a stunning contrast'. Several others opined that it is the opportunity to contribute to these 'sculptures', these pieces of 'art', that makes the custom so appealing. One woman stated that inserting a coin is 'leaving something of yourself for others to see', while three others claimed that they had participated because they had wanted to 'add to' this 'pretty' and 'interesting' monument. Another woman likened the custom to graffiti ('*artistic* graffiti', she stressed) with people's individual contributions producing a monument that could be considered art.

However, just as the aesthetics of the coin-trees attracted some people, to others it was the striking appearance of the trees that actually *discouraged* participation. Six people admitted to originally perceiving the coin-trees as official pieces of art, possibly sponsored by the National Trust, and were unsure whether or not they would be 'allowed' to insert a coin of their own. One woman claimed to not 'even know if we should touch it', and it was often the 'neat rows' of coins and the 'symmetrical' or 'wave-like' patterning (see Figure 5) that led several people to believe that the coin-trees had been created by a single artist.

Figure 5 hereabouts

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The incongruous appearances of the coin-trees evidently plays a primary role in attracting participants; like the colourful feathers of a male bird, the striking physicality of these structures draws people in, enticing them. Alfred Gell terms this process 'captivation' (1998) asserting that the causes of captivation are borne from the 'technology of enchantment and the enchantment of technology' (1999, 167); it is an observer's failure to understand the technical processes of an object's manufacture that reels him or her in. Simply put, we are attracted to objects that we do not understand; it is 'their becoming rather than their being' that entices and confuses us (Gell 1999, 166). Art historian Malcolm Baker is in agreement, opining that observers of a piece of art are 'lured by the narratives of making' (2005, 199).

In conclusion, the enigmatic object is the captivating object. And what is more enigmatic than the bole of a tree that has been embedded with thousands of coins for reasons that are beyond the observer's comprehension? In this sense, therefore, the coin-trees act as their own public relations officers, attracting participants and evoking 'social power' (Gosden 2005) through their material properties: the striking patterning of their coins; the eye-catching contrast of lustrous metal against the dull, grainy texture of the wood; and the sense of mystery behind their manufacture.

'Lore', but not of the 'Folk'

Many of the participants of this folkloric custom did not ascribe a folkloric 'meaning' to it, referring instead to participation motivated by imitation and aesthetics. However, there were many other participants who were inclined to view the custom as some form of 'folklore' or 'superstition', to use their words, but they could only guess at the origins or specific meanings. Indeed, the words 'I'm guessing', 'my guess is', and 'I have no idea' littered people's responses, and several practitioners answered my questions with tentative questions of their own: 'Is it a wishing thing?' and 'Is it a good luck thing?'

In other words, they did not know the purpose of the coin-tree, which is unsurprising considering how few of these participants had ever seen, read about, or heard of coin-trees before that day. Thirty-four of the fifty respondents had never seen another coin-tree, and thirty-eight had never heard or read about them. The vast majority of the participants, therefore, came upon the coin-tree without any prior knowledge of the custom. Their lack of solid knowledge, however, did not deter them from hazarding guesses and making impromptu judgments regarding the purpose of the coin-tree, often drawing upon more widespread and more familiar coin-centred traditions as analogies.

One might assume that the practitioners would draw on connections between the coin-tree and healing; after all, both coins and trees have been widely employed in folk-remedies in the British Isles. Coins, for example, have a long history of being considered curative tokens, from their uses as touch-pieces to cure scrofula (Billings 1906; Charlton 1914; Lane 1975; Deng 2008) and the practice of bending a coin (to make what is known as a bowed coin) as a healing rite (Finucane 1977, 94), to the belief in Scotland that coins minted during the reign of Queen Victoria were, according to Marc Bloch, 'held to be universal panaceas simply because they bore "the image of the Queen"' (1973, 223).

Trees, likewise, have been widely appropriated for their purported healing powers, to the extent that a detailed exploration of tree-related customs is far beyond the scope of this paper. Rag-trees are of particular note; trees and bushes adorned with rags and other objects as part of the healing rituals of nearby holy wells, examples of which are too numerous in the British Isles to list here (see note 1). Other examples of tree-related customs concern specific species, as described in Vickery's *Dictionary of Plant-Lore*: passing a patient suffering from hernia through a split in an ash tree, for example, along with the beliefs that ash trees can be used to cure impotence, warts, neuralgia, earache, ringworm, and snake bites; that holly can be used to treat chilblains; and oak, diarrhoea and ringworm (Vickery 1995, 17-19, 182 and 264).

However, despite the fact that the coin-tree combines two components—the coin and the tree—which, between them possess a wealth of folk medicine associations, not one of the fifty people questioned alluded to healing as a possible function of the custom. This is perhaps still more surprising when we recall that the Isle Maree coin-tree (the earliest known manifestation of this custom) was originally concerned specifically with healing. A folklorist with knowledge of the rich British history of the perceived curative powers of coins and trees would no doubt be thinking that surely at least one of the fifty participants I spoke with should have made this connection. However, perhaps this should not be so surprising.

Everett Rogers, examining the diffusion of innovations, asserts that in order for an innovation to be widely and successfully adopted, there must be some capacity for adaptation (1995, 330). Individuals can mimic the essential elements of a custom, such as the actual insertion of a coin into a coin-tree, but for the custom to be relevant to *them*, it must prove malleable enough for the participants to shape and colour it to their liking.

Alan Dundes stresses that 'folktales . . . must appeal to the psyches of many, many individuals if they are to survive' (1980, 34), and in order for a folktale or custom to appeal to so many, it must be receptive to numerous recreations and the addition of what Jan Brunvand terms 'editorial matter' (1983, 23-24). In other words, a tale or custom survives if it can be made relevant to modern participants. Take, for example, the Grimms' fairy tales, which, according to Jack Zipes, have been 'greatly commodified' since their first incarnations (1997, 9). The Grimm brothers themselves altered their fairy tales between 1819 and 1857 in order to make them more instructional and moral for their younger audiences (Zipes 1997, 5), while Disney added further 'editorial matter', transforming the 'evil mother' into the 'evil *step*mother', and having her meet her end by falling from a cliff rather than dancing to death in heated iron shoes (Stone 1988, 60).

Evidently, the folkloric associations between coins and healing, and trees and healing, are no longer entirely relevant to contemporary British society. This is hardly surprising. Illness and premature death were a much greater concern in the past than they are today (Vyse 1997, 12ff), and scientific and technological developments have meant that, in the majority of cases, those concerned for their health are more likely to visit a doctor than participate in a folkloric custom.

It is probably this decline in popular demand for folk remedies which led to a shift in the ritual appropriation of the Isle Maree coin-tree. When Pennant first wrote of the tree in 1775, the custom had been centred on the cure for insanity. However, by the time Queen Victoria was inserting her own coin a century later, her deposit was simply viewed as 'a sort

of offering to the saint' (Duff 1968, 332). Less than a decade afterwards, John Dixon describes how the custom had changed further still, writing of 'it being common report that a wish silently formed when any metal article is attached to the tree will certainly be realized' (1886, 150). In just over a century, therefore, the coin-tree's primarily reported purpose had shifted from healing to the granting of wishes.

Coin-trees are therefore no longer employed as folk remedies because the custom's participants no longer require or want such remedies. Likewise, the participants do not draw upon the coins' and trees' histories as curative elements because, as they are largely irrelevant to them, they are no longer aware of them; these histories are still 'lore', but they are no longer observed and purveyed by the 'folk'.

The Wishing-Tree

Everett Rogers and F. Floyd Shoemaker stress how crucial it is that new ideas and innovations should match what society already values and expects (1971, 22). The ideas which are compatible are successfully disseminated; the ideas which are not, fail (Bascom 1965, 29). Which ideas, therefore, have proven to be compatible with the contemporary coin-tree?

The most notable tradition drawn upon is that of the wishing-well or wishing-fountain. Fifteen people suggested that the custom of the coin-tree was similar to that of the wishing-well: 'I'm guessing people do it to make wishes, like in a wishing-well'; 'It's like throwing coins into a wishing-well'; 'I always thought it was like wishing-wells or fountains, which I guess go back to sacred springs and paganism', and so on. Indeed, this seems to be the prevailing analogy utilized. Four people termed the coin-tree a 'wishing tree', and many participants either claimed that they had inserted a coin to make a wish or they believed this had been the motivation behind other people's participation. Coins are inserted 'to make wishes', or equally, 'for good luck' or to 'bring them good fortune'.

Other traditions drawn upon involve the coin's connection with luck, with two people reciting 'find a penny, pick it up, and all day long you'll have good luck', and several other respondents claiming that coins are 'supposed to be lucky'. One man recalled being told that it is considered good luck to always carry a coin minted in your birth-year, while another man considered how people have certain 'lucky pennies'.

Apparently the coin's connection with luck or wishing is more relevant, and hence more familiar, to a modern-day participant of this custom, than a connection with folk medicine. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the practitioners would be more likely to create impromptu connections with the widely-known concepts of the wishing-well or the lucky penny, in their endeavour to attribute a 'meaning' to the custom, rather than with touch-pieces or bowed coins.

As Frank Cushing writes, the successful introduction of a new custom 'depends upon a great variety of factors, including such things as the similarity of the material to the already existing traditions' (1965, 269). Folklore, in the words of Iona and Peter Opie, 'feeds on other matter' (1978, 68), and there is much matter upon which the coin-tree custom can feed. Depositing a coin for luck or wish-fulfilment is so prevalent in the 'already existing

traditions' that very little effort is required to make the coin-tree compatible. However, this strategy of improvising an explanation for the custom by drawing on analogies with other, more familiar traditions is most evident when children engage with coin-trees.

'A Child's Kind of Fairy Tale'

Children appear to be the primary participants in this folkloric custom. From my observations, adults without children still appear inclined to insert a coin; however, a group travelling with children is far less likely to pass a coin-tree without inserting a coin than a group travelling without children. One father said: 'I don't think the children would let me walk past one [a coin-tree] without putting coins in', while a woman told me that she could not 'imagine just walking past one of these trees, especially not with children'.

Many, if not all, of the groups with children acknowledged that they had only inserted coins for the sake of the children; 'because the boys wanted to'; 'the girls wanted to'; 'my daughter wanted to'; 'for the kids' sake', and so on. Parents seem to believe that participation in this custom will be 'exciting', 'interesting', and 'entertaining' for the children. One parent and a grandparent both expressed the opinions that it is important to encourage children's involvement in nature, art, and culture, and to provide them with unique experiences. While other parents believed that the coin-trees should be preserved for the benefit of their children, one father divulged, 'I like to think that my kids' kids will be able to come and see these trees in years to come'.

The custom of the coin-tree appears, therefore, to be very much oriented towards the entertainment of children. Indeed, many adults described the purposes of these trees by drawing on child-friendly concepts, such as fairies, and inventing improvised traditions on the spot, often for the benefit of their children. One pair of grandparents told their granddaughter that the coin-tree was a 'fairy tree': if you deposit a coin in its bark, the fairies will grant your wishes. Another grandmother made an ad lib connection between coin-trees and the tooth fairy for the benefit of her grandchildren, querying playfully whether the tree is where the tooth fairy sources the coins she leaves beneath children's pillows. She admitted to me that this was 'more of a child's kind of fairy tale', which is why she had chosen it.

It is unsurprising that such fairy-centred traditions are employed in explanations of the coin-tree custom. First, the mutable, amorphous nature of the term 'fairy' itself (Williams 1991) makes it easily adoptable and adaptable for a range of customs; and second, a 'fairy' is, in modern times at least, a very child-friendly concept (Wells 1991), which makes it particularly appropriate for a practice primarily observed by, or for the sake of, children.

Indeed, children undoubtedly stand at the centre of the dispersal and continuation of many modern western folkloric tales and customs. However, the coin-tree is not simply 'children's folklore'. As Richard Bauman writes:

> There is a large corpus of folklore which is often classified as children's lore, though its performance almost inevitably involves people who are beyond the age of childhood, suggesting that this lore might be more productively considered as structuring the interaction between members of different age categories. . . . The lore is shared in the sense that it constitutes a

communicative bond between participants, but the participants themselves are different, the forms they employ are different, and their view of the folklore passing between them is different. (1971, 37)

The example Bauman gives of this shared lore is the nursery rhyme, which is typically taught to children by adults for the purposes of instruction or entertainment. It is not wholly 'children's lore' because it is taught *by* adults, and it is not wholly 'adult's lore' because it is taught *to* children; instead, it is both. However, the adults and the children involved in this sharing of lore do not necessarily view it in the same way. The grandmother who tells her granddaughter that a coin-tree is a 'fairy tree' probably does not actually believe this to be the case. Her granddaughter, however, if young enough, will quite readily believe.

Adults and children, therefore, will not perceive the 'traditions' of the coin-tree with equal earnestness. Nor do adults and children play identical roles in the communication or performance of coin-tree lore, although they each contribute symbiotically to the sharing. The role of an adult guardian is to fabricate a 'tradition' that the child will readily accept. The role of a child is to provide an excuse for the adult guardians to justifiably suspend their disbelief, if only for a moment, and allow themselves to indulge in a little whimsical ritual-participation.

It is not surprising, for example, that adults who have inserted a coin for the sake of their children exhibited little embarrassment when I approached them, while adults without children appeared abashed and a little defensive when asked why they had participated. Without the child-half of the equation, there is no earnest ear to benefit from the adult's imaginative explanation, and therefore there is no need for an imaginative explanation—and indeed, as some seemed to believe, no justifiable excuse for participation.

What's in a Name?

The 'meaning' of the coin-tree custom remains largely unregimented because of a lack of official written doctrine, making it all the more fluid and receptive to adaptation. Oral traditions, or customs which are passed on through simple observational imitation, can easily be tailored to any given audience simply because they are not written down (Vansina 1985, 147). Granted, there are numerous articles, discussion forums, and personal blogs on the Internet which explore the custom of the coin-tree, but there is no official piece of writing—whether in book form, on the Internet, or at the coin-tree sites themselves—which states definitively the purpose of the coin-tree. Thus, the coin-tree custom can 'mean' whatever its participants want it to 'mean'.

A lack of official doctrine also means a lack of official title; as a result, the name of these trees can be changed at will. I have dubbed them 'coin-trees' because this is the most basic, neutral description of them. Others, however, use different terms for these structures, which invariably indicates something about how they are perceived. As Jacques Derrida observes, 'when a name comes, it immediately says more than the name' (1995, 89); and not only does a name reveal how we perceive an object, it also influences it (Lindsay and Norman 1972, 438).

Some names for these structures refer to their physical components: 'coin-tree', 'money-tree', and 'penny-tree', which simply reflect the fact that these structures consist of coins and trees. Names often draw upon description, especially when the namer is otherwise unfamiliar with an object (Soames 2005). However, other names for the coin-tree also indicate a perceived purpose, such as 'wishing-tree' and 'good-luck tree', and these also aid in making the custom more compatible with other traditions.

Rogers considers the importance of names in his examination of the diffusion of innovations; with words being the 'thought-units that structure perceptions', the name given to an innovation invariably 'affects its perceived compatibility, and therefore its rate of adoption' (1995, 236). I will explore this concept with a brief anecdote.

In early 2012, I met with a woman from a museum who was considering organizing an event about coin-trees. She, however, was not fond of the name 'coin-tree', and much preferred the term 'wishing-tree', claiming that the link it evokes with wishing-wells makes the custom more identifiable for her target audience: families with younger children. She believed, and rightly so, that the public are generally more likely to show an interest in a concept that they are at least vaguely familiar with, and that the name of that concept plays a key role in people's perceptions of it.

Evidently, names are flexible and arbitrary (Lindsay and Norman 1972, 438); they can be changed depending upon who is speaking and to whom. As Roger Brown notes, 'each thing has many equally correct names', and these different terms are employed depending upon the situation. When speaking to a child, for example, simpler and shorter names may be used, reserving the longer, possibly more specific, names for adult conversation (1958, 20): a 'tree' to a child may become a 'sycamore' to an adult and an '*Acer pseudoplatanus*' to a botanist. Likewise, an adult may refer to a coin-tree as a 'wishing-tree' when speaking to a child, but as a 'money-tree' when speaking with another adult. The name of the 'coin-tree' therefore proves to be as vague, mutable, and situational as the 'meaning' of the custom.

Concluding Remarks

Coin-trees are not diverse structures. Granted, some are logs while others are stumps, and some are still newly 'coined', containing only a few coins, while others are seasoned and well-established folkloric monuments, affixed with thousands. But essentially they are all alike: they are trees adorned with coins, and the custom of deposition is equally homogeneous. Even the historical examples of coin-trees, such as Isle Maree, are united with the contemporary examples through the similarities of their appearances, and the level of agency and 'social power' (Gosden 2005) they evoke through their appearances.

Through the processes of 'captivation' and imitation, the coin-trees attract their participants and encourage them to contribute a coin of their own; as Chris Gosden (2005) remarks, objects place 'obligations' upon people through their forms and properties. And the 'obligation' placed upon people who encounter a coin-tree is that of participation: through the neat, stylistic patterning of coins embedded en masse, the coin-trees oblige participants to imitate, to deposit the same type of object in the same way that others have done before. The

physical properties of the coin-trees, therefore, encourage uniform methods of physical participation.

Antithetically, however, the very nature of coin-trees, as unofficial and enigmatic structures often stumbled upon by chance, also encourages great variation in the 'why' of participation. What the coin-tree 'means' is dependent upon who the participant is, who he or she is with (alone, in a group of peers, or with young children), and what that person's emotional mood is on the actual day.

Physical evidence of homogeneity in how a structure is utilized or treated does not constitute mental or emotional uniformity; a group of people could insert coins into the same coin-tree at the same time, and their motivations may be antithetical—as might the meanings they ascribe to the coin-tree. One practitioner may acknowledge that his motivation stemmed from the desire to imitate, while another might note that she had simply wanted to contribute to what she considered a piece of artwork. To another, participation in the custom may be conceived as lucky, and to yet another, the coin-tree may be viewed in association with tales of fairies or other supernatural creatures.

This situational aspect of folklore is not incidental, but often integral to its survival. Because customs and symbols (such as the coin and the tree) can be variously interpreted, individuals can ascribe whichever ideas and practices they wish, choosing purposes and motivations more suited to their conditions at the time of participation (Fernandez 1965, 906; Gore 1998, 66). They thus become broadly inclusive; everybody can participate if they so desire. The coin-tree, therefore, acts as what John Eade and Michael Sallnow term a ritual 'void', a space which, free from authoritative prescription, can accommodate various meanings and practices (1991, 15). It is for this reason that mutability is often essential to a folkloric custom; 'integral to its efficacy', as Catherine Bell expresses it (1992, 184). Its participants must be given the freedom to interpret it as they choose; otherwise they may not participate at all.

Notes

[1] Rags and items of clothing have long been employed as votive deposits in the British Isles, most often affixed to the branches of trees and bushes within close proximity to a holy well. There are many surveys of such sites, and theories concerning the use of rags for contagious transfer (see Brand 1777: 85-86; Hardy 1840; Walhouse 1880; Walker 1883; Hartland 1893; Hope 1893; Rhys and Morris 1893; McIntire 1945; Jones 1954; Lucas 1963; Bord and Bord 1985; Shephard 1994; Rattue 1995; Healy 2001; and Rackard, O'Callaghan, and Joyce 2001).

[2] This figure constitutes the number of coins I was able to count, and consequently represents the minimum amount deposited, taking into account that some may have been removed (either through human intervention or natural causes). There may be coin-tree sites I am unaware of in the area, and the figure will have undoubtedly increased since my fieldwork was conducted in July 2012.

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