



Howard W. Odum's Folklore Odyssey: Transformation to Tolerance through African American Folk Studies

Lynn Moss Sanders

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Howard W. Odum (1884-1954), the pioneering social scientist and founder of the University of North Carolina's department of sociology, played a leading and well-documented role in the modernization of the South. This is the first book-length study of Odum's contributions to southern folklore, which had important but largely unappreciated consequences for his legacy of social justice.

Lynn Moss Sanders shows how Odum, as a collector of African American blues and work songs, anticipated some important precepts of modern folklore. Notably, Odum perceived the benefits of a collaborative and nonhierarchical approach to folk studies. Influenced by a racially tolerant former student and by one of his black folk informants, Odum changed his previous paternal, segregationist attitudes about race.

Comparing Odum's two song collections, *The Negro and His Songs* (1925) and *Negro Workaday Songs* (1926), Sanders links the growing influence of Odum's coauthor and former student, Guy Johnson, to a decrease in instances of racial condescension between the first and second book. The three "folk" novels in Odum's Black Ulysses trilogy (completed in 1931) also reveal a progressive refinement of Odum's racial views. The change, Sanders believes, came with Odum's growing ability to see John Wesley "Left-Wing" Gordon, the black, working-class model for the trilogy's hero, as a friend rather than simply as a representative of "the Negro."

From his authorship of *Social and Mental Traits of the Negro* (1910), now a relic of scientific racism, to his final publication, *Agenda for Integration*, Odum exemplifies how the study of folklore changed the folklorist--a change felt by a whole generation of southern liberals whose work Odum encouraged and shaped.

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