(Ad)Dressing Shibboleths
Costume and Community in the South of France

Since the late 19th century, the traditional feminine costume of Arles (Provence, France) has served as a shibboleth, a mechanism for differentiating insiders and outsiders. This article develops a new definition of shibboleth and, drawing on concepts of “descent” and “consent,” suggests that different types of shibboleths might monitor the boundaries of different sorts of imagined communities. By outlining the emergence of the Arlesian costume as a shibboleth, tracing its transformation into the complex practice it is today, and describing my own experience in wearing the dress, I suggest that shibboleths can both impede and facilitate the assimilation of newcomers into a community, while encouraging conformity among community members.

I climbed slowly up the concrete steps, lifting my heavy silk skirts and placing my feet with care. I couldn’t risk tripping and dislodging my pins or, worse still, tearing my fragile costume. I paused momentarily at the threshold. This was it. In a moment they would look at me and they would know—and so would I.

I had spent more than a year in Arles (Provence, France) studying the elegant local costume and documenting the diverse aspects of this complex tradition. I had listened to Arlésiennes explain to me the significance of their costume, how it had to be authentic to be beautiful, how their meticulous attention to its details revealed a passionate commitment to Arles, and how an Arlésienne had to do her costume justice. I had listened, too, as they told me how distressing it was to see girls in carelessly constructed costumes or women whose demeanor disgraced the Arlésienne image, turning the annual Costume Festival into a mockery, a masquerade. You really learn something about a woman when you see how she wears the costume, they said. I listened, nodded, and took notes, complacent in my short hair and street clothes.

But it would be disingenuous to claim that I had no thought of wearing the costume. I began growing out my hair as soon as I got to Arles, and when I returned to Arles in the fall of 1994, my friends suggested that it was my turn to wear the costume. They had taught me well, and it was high time to see what I had learned. The prospect filled me with mingled terror and delight, so I agreed. Jeannine lent

Jennifer Michael is Visiting Assistant Professor of Folklore at Indiana University

me her costume: Jeanne and Michèle volunteered for the arduous task of coaxing my now somewhat-longer hair into the upswept coiffé and helping me dress.\textsuperscript{3}

Over the three hours it took to get me ready, I grew increasingly anxious: Would I do the costume justice? Or would I wear it badly and shame those who had invested so much energy in teaching me? What would they know about me when they saw me in costume? Did I have what it took to pass as an Arlésienne or would my foreignness be immediately evident to all? These were questions of image and identity, of what it means to be an Arlésienne, and of how an Arlésienne may be recognized—and questions of what it means to be an American in Arlesian clothing. They were also questions about how this community imagined itself and how it drew its boundaries, who were insiders and who were outsiders.

*Descent and Consent*

In *Beyond Ethnicity* (1988), Werner Sollors articulates two ways of imagining communities: one based in immutable “facts” of biology, genetics, and inheritance, and another based in desire, volition, and choice. He proposes the terms *descent* and *consent* to describe “the conflict between contractual and hereditary, self-made and ancestral, definitions of American identity” (1988:5–6).\textsuperscript{4} While one must be born into a community of descent, one may choose to join a community of consent. How these disparate social imaginaries may be negotiated is a key theme of the present article.

I have shifted Sollors’s usage slightly here in writing of both *communities* and *identities* of consent/descent. A community of descent is composed of individuals who understand their relationship to the social body to be defined by certain inherited characteristic(s) (race, ethnicity, family, social class, region, et cetera). Each member of such a community may thus claim an identity of descent that relates him or her to the social body, and this identity—these roots, this birthright—is shared by other members of the community so imagined. Similarly, a community of consent is composed of persons who choose to be part of a social body because they are motivated by common interests, passions, convictions, or faith. An identity of consent relates each community member to the social body, and this identity—this passion and will—is shared by other members of the community so imagined.

Conversations are ongoing in Arles about how the Arlesian community is to be imagined. Is Arlesian identity, as many contend, strictly a matter of “roots,” of being born in Arles to parents and grandparents and great-grandparents who were also born in Arles? Or is it instead, as others argue, a question of “passion” and “faith,” of a deep and abiding love for local history, traditions, landscapes, and people? Can someone like me become Arlesian? The implications of such questions are profound, especially in the present climate of postcolonial demographics, when outsiders from so many unexpected places have settled in this Provençal town. How are the newcomers to be received? Can they become Arlesians, Arlésiennes? Or is descent so critical to this social imaginary that these “invaders” should never hope to be incorporated into the social body?
In Arles, dress has long played a crucial role in policing community boundaries. In the late 18th century, the emergence of a distinctive local costume offered the women of Arles a salient means of signaling local affiliation. But a century later, in response to the intrusion of Parisian fashions into the provinces, Provençal regionalists made Arles’s distinctive costume a shibboleth for Arlesian identity, a mechanism for differentiating insiders and outsiders and for containing and controlling Arlesian women. Since that time, the costumed bodies of Arlésiennes have become an important site for negotiating the nature of Arlesian identity: who may wear the costume, and who should wear the costume, remain consuming concerns in Arles.

The second part of this article outlines the emergence of the Arlesian costume as a shibboleth in the late 19th century and traces its transformation into the complex cultural practice it is today. By drawing on my own experience wearing the costume, I hope to begin to make sense of the ways in which certain shibboleths facilitate the assimilation of outsiders into a community. In preparation for that case study, the first part of this article explores the origin, evolution, and diverse uses of shibboleths. In an effort to suggest its usefulness to folkloristic research, I offer a new definition for the term and describe three types of shibboleths.

Shibboleths

The term *shibboleth* is biblical in origin:

The Gileadites took the fords of the Jordan against the Ephraimites. And when any of the fugitives of Ephraim said, “Let me go over,” the men of Gilead said to him, “Are you an Ephraimite?” When he said, “No,” they said to him, “Then say ‘Shibboleth,’ ” and he said “Sibboleth,” for he could not pronounce it right; then they seized him and slew him at the fords of the Jordan. And there fell at that time forty-two thousand of the Ephraimites. [Judges 12:5–6]

Since biblical times, the word has taken on a range of meanings; the 1989 edition of *The Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) helps to illuminate these changing nuances. In much academic writing, the term *shibboleth* has been used in ways that closely parallel its earliest definitions: first, the Hebrew test word used by the Gileadites and, later, any “word used as a test for detecting foreigners . . . by their pronunciation.” Biblical scholars have examined the historical context and implications of the original narrative (see Marcus 1992; Speiser 1967[1942]), and in a folkloristic discussion of the shibboleth story, Pack Carnes (1989) analyzes a corpus of analogous “neck-legends” that describe identity tests based on language stereotypes.

Two other distinct and expanded meanings of *shibboleth* may be discerned from 17th-century texts. The first definition abandons the notion of testing per se to focus on linguistic distinctiveness: “A peculiarity of pronunciation or accent indicative of a person’s origin” (OED). Linguists use the word mostly in this sense. In their studies, shibboleths serve as a means of defining isoglosses, boundary lines on a map defining “places where people use a linguistic feature in the same way” (Crystal 1997:28; cf. Bergsland 1967; Reenan 1989; Valdman 1991).5
All these uses of the term carry an implicit sense of borders, on either side of which people speak differently. By evaluating the performance of such shibboleths, observers can identify an individual as belonging to one side or the other and can trace the boundaries between groups. Thus a shibboleth is an obvious marker of both identity and division, of likeness and difference. Some shibboleths stress intergroup relations (separation)—as, for example, do certain strategic uses of language (cf. Ormsby-Lennon 1991; Tiessen 1988)—while other shibboleths emphasize conformity and solidarity (intragroup relations).

The OED’s other definition of shibboleth that dates back to the 17th century also includes the notion of borders, but gives the term a figurative sense: “A catchword or formula adopted by a party or sect, by which their adherents or followers may be discerned, or those not their followers may be excluded.” This is the use of the term most familiar to readers of the popular press, where journalists describe shibboleths as “precious beliefs that we think are unshakable truths” (Kroll 1997).

Such beliefs, often codified into a creed, motto, or watchword, may have the force of a political or cultural imperative—“truth[s] that must be obeyed” (Kane 1997)—a sine qua non for certain affiliations. In contemporary U.S. politics, for example, catch phrases such as “family values” or “right to life” might be considered shibboleths for certain interest groups.

While based in language, shibboleths of this sort are closely allied to beliefs and attitudes; they both encode and reveal sentiments. Speaking a shibboleth may thus demonstrate not only an identity of descent (one’s home region, ethnicity, social class, or native language), but may similarly mark an identity of consent (beliefs and attitudes, political or religious affiliation). At the same time, we begin to get a sense of the power dynamics implied by shibboleths: groups may insist that their adherents know and use the shibboleth, and in some instances, as the biblical story reminds us, the consequences for failing to do so are dire.

In the 19th century, the word shibboleth began to describe more than just language behavior: “A custom, habit, mode of dress, or the like, which distinguishes a particular class or set of persons” could also be a shibboleth (OED). More than any other definitional shift, this expanded meaning encompassed a range of cultural practices of interest to folklorists. Ironically, however, with the exception of Carnes’s article (1989), students of culture have all but ignored the notion of shibboleth. And not until Dorothy Noyes’s brief but insightful discussion (1995) was the concept applied to nonverbal practices. I propose to refine the definition of shibboleth so as to make the concept more useful in the analysis of a broad range of cultural practices and contexts. Because of their boundary-marking and boundary-making functions, shibboleths may prove of particular interest to students of intergroup relations, ethnic conflict, and border culture.

Shibboleths depend on the assumption that certain behavior, verbal or otherwise, is characteristic of and specific to a given group: all group members know and can perform this behavior. Nonmembers, it is likewise assumed, do not and perhaps cannot do so. A shibboleth uses such distinctive behavior to test group membership: someone whose identity is in question may be required to perform the shibboleth so that he or she may be identified. A shibboleth may thus be
defined as any distinctive cultural practice or performance which serves as a test of identity. Shibboleths presuppose specific cultural knowledge that is demonstrated in performance or specific beliefs or convictions that are enacted in observable practice. Shibboleths assess both identities based in descent and those based in consent.

In situations of intergroup contact, esoteric and exoteric beliefs and stereotypes inevitably arise (Jansen 1959). Such notions often invoke an us/Them contrast such as “Xs do that, but we Ys do this.” Shibboleths, in turn, extend such a contrast into a clear dichotomy, drawing boundaries. A given identity test may pro-voke a range of performances, but from the point of view of the insiders wielding the shibboleth, only one response is acceptable. The realm of possible performances is divided into those “like us” and those “not like us”: while the first sort of response locates an individual on “our” side of the imagined dividing line, the second places him or her on “their” side. What is relevant is whether or not an individual deviates from the prescribed standard, not what forms that deviance might assume. The shibboleth “draw[s] a sharp boundary between ‘us’ and ‘them’” (Carnes 1989:21).

Grouping a range of traditional identity tests under the rubric of shibboleth may help folklorists draw parallels between diverse folkloric phenomena. Noyes cites several Catalan examples, including “certain gestures, exclamations, [and] nuances of dress,” a tongue twister, dancing the sardana, and “the willingness to eat low-status foods like lentils” (1995:465). To these I would add such diverse forms of identity testing—real and fictional—as formulaic dialogues (Dundes 1989:30–31; Kelly 1997:B2), elaborate or secret handshakes, marriage tests and neck riddles (cf. Carnes 1989:16, note 5), certain “catches” (Arriaga 1987; Dundes 1989:16–17), and dress codes.

A shibboleth test may be “administered” in a variety of ways, from an explicit command performance (“Then say, ‘shibboleth’ ”), to a more subtle verbal or behavioral tender that must be answered in a specific way (such as formulaic dialogues or elaborate handshakes or the offer of a significant food item). In other such tests, the shibboleth behavior is not explicitly cued but is nevertheless the object of intense scrutiny (dress or accent or dance).

Emergence of Shibboleths

Shibboleths may develop in response to at least two sets of interrelated circum-
stances. First, they may arise as a strategy for decoding the identity of ambiguous individuals so as to locate such persons in relation to an imagined border. In the United States, adolescents frequently impose tests of gender identity on one another. Your friends might say to you, “Look at your fingernails! Look at the sole of your foot! Sit down and cross your legs! Hold these books!” As you obey each dictate, they study your every move, analyzing your style, comparing it with their imagined standard, and proclaiming the results with glee. Do you curl your fingers into your palm in order to examine your nails? Only boys do that! Do you lift
your foot behind you, hopping awkwardly as you do so, and turn your head over your shoulder so as to see your sole. That is what girls do!10

A second phenomenon fostering the emergence of a shibboleth is a group’s perception that their integrity, culture, and identity are embattled.11 Under such circumstances, a shibboleth may become part of a strategy of encapsulation, a “closing of ranks in conditions of threat” (Noyes 1995:463). For example, when interaction with outsiders threatens community integrity by encouraging insiders to leave the community, a shibboleth can help define who remains loyal and who has crossed over. Alternatively, when an impression of threat derives from increased interactions with unfamiliar others, as during periods of immigration into an otherwise stable region, a shibboleth may help reinforce the boundaries of the “host” group by clearly distinguishing them from the newcomers.12

Types of Shibboleths

If shibboleths are “boundary mechanisms,” as Noyes suggests, it may be useful to consider the nature of the boundary. Borrowing a page from cell biology, boundaries can be thought of as permeable, selectively permeable, and nonpermeable. A permeable boundary, of course, is one that allows ready passage from one side to the other; a nonpermeable boundary prevents such passage. A selectively permeable boundary, in contrast, would allow some to pass and prevent others from doing so.

Let us look at this another way: how, we might ask, does a community imagine itself? A community might, for example, define itself strictly by descent; such a community could not be joined except by a happy accident of birth. One might characterize such a community as having a nonpermeable boundary. On the other hand, a community might imagine itself strictly in terms of consent; this sort of community would have fully permeable boundaries, allowing anyone who wished to join its ranks to do so. Between these two, one might imagine a community such as Arles’s traditionalists form today, a community struggling to negotiate between descent and consent. Such a community, as I will discuss in detail below, has a selectively permeable boundary, allowing entrance only to those whose sustained and serious efforts signal their commitment to being part of the group.

Drawing on these observations, it is possible to distinguish three sorts of shibboleths: exclusion, inclusion, and assimilation shibboleths. These shibboleths function in distinct ways.

An exclusion shibboleth is a clear and deliberate strategy of discrimination, designed to identify outsiders and prevent them from infiltrating a community. The biblical shibboleth story is the paradigmatic example, but parallel occurrences have been documented (cf. Carnes 1989; Garcia 1996:120, 129–130; Marcus 1992). Those imposing such shibboleths assume that the outsiders they seek to identify are so fundamentally and irretrievably different from themselves as to be incapable of learning and performing the shibboleth.13 Such an attitude suggests that the insiders in these accounts understand their community to be based in
descent; no one can join a community based on birthright. An exclusion shibboleth allows no room for negotiation; judgment is summary and execution immediate.

If exclusion shibboleths rigidly police community boundaries, *inclusion shibboleths* facilitate the incorporation of newcomers. Noyes mentions “the willingness to eat low-status foods like lentils and to drink cognac with Pepito” as shibboleths in the bar in Berga frequented by aficionados of the Patum (1995:465). “This sort of shibboleth,” she notes, “demands less competence than volition, and the newcomer’s agreement to make this declaration of allegiance earns him or her a place in the network” (1995:465).

Examples of inclusion shibboleths abound: speaking the Nicene Creed functions as a shibboleth in many Christian churches; similarly, the use of approved watchwords or slogans constitutes an inclusion shibboleth in certain religious or political interest groups. In other contexts, singing the right songs (Vikis-Freibergs 1975:19), sporting the approved colors, eating the right foods (Gutierrez 1984), or merely owning the appropriate object (Casmurro 1997; Parker 1997) secures one’s place in the ranks. Inclusion shibboleths are common in communities eager, or at least willing, to embrace newcomers. Such communities, based in consent, have permeable boundaries. In these contexts, inclusion shibboleths are strategies of belonging rather than of discrimination. Instead of finding out and punishing infiltrators, these shibboleths give a community stamp of approval to those who seek to join their ranks. Passing such “tests” requires only good will and perhaps a modicum of effort.

In contrast, assimilation shibboleths demand a “possible but still effortful act of mastering the culture” (Noyes 1995:465). Consider, for example, the complex eating patterns that constitute the central symbol of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON). ISKCON initiates are converted in large part through the mastery and practice of the community’s restrictive foodways (Singer 1984). Taking prasadam, as the devotees term their food, is an assimilation shibboleth for ISKCON members. Many other rites of initiation that similarly indoctrinate outsiders into the symbols and practices of a religious, fraternal, age, or other group could also be said to rely upon shibboleths of assimilation, whose mastery both effects and reflects the neophytes’ incorporation.

Communities that trouble themselves to enculturate newcomers in this way are clearly open to outsiders, but their boundaries are only selectively permeable. Substantial commitment is required of any possible initiate. As Singer’s discussion suggests, such communities are grounded not in mere consent, but in passion, faith, and conviction.14

The traditionalist circle in contemporary Arles is such a community. Its members pride themselves on their love for and knowledge of the culture and history of their region. Arlesian women, in particular, take special pride in understanding and wearing the elegant local costume. Their dress is a shibboleth: wherever an Arlésienne goes, others scrutinize her, seeking to discern—in the harmonious elegance of her silk, lace, and ribbons; the precise folds of her fichus; the immaculate cast of her coiffe; and the proud set of her head—her “faith” and “passion” for local traditions. The remainder of this article fo-
cuses on the emergence and transformation in Arles of what I call a *somatic* shibboleth, a form of dress used to evaluate identity.

**Somatic Shibboleths**

Dress refers to all of the ways, both temporary and permanent, that the human body is adorned, manipulated, marked, and transformed (Roach-Higgins and Eicher 1992; Wilson 1996). Dress includes not only clothing, jewelry, and things carried or wielded (e.g., a walking stick, scepter, handbag, or parasol), but also hairstyle and cosmetics; more permanent alterations like tattoo, scarification, piercing, branding, and surgery; as well as the more subtle and transient transformations of posture, gesture, stance, and gait.15

Dress in its various forms is a cultural *practice*, a form of *behavior* (e.g., posture or gesture) or the product of behavior. One’s clothing, for example, while not a behavior in itself, is the end product of getting dressed. What one observes—dress—is the result of the relevant behavior—dressing.

In its various visible forms, dress has certain advantages as a shibboleth: immediately evident to the onlooker, dress signals both affiliation among those similarly clothed and distinctions between those differently attired.16 Scholarly descriptions of the shibboleth function of dress abound, though not under this rubric. Le Witt (1994:57–71), for example, describes some of the sartorial markers that distinguish the discreet charm of the French bourgeoisie and allow members of this elite to recognize one another. Studies of the dress of U.S. religious sects (Yoder 1969), African American fraternities (Holloman 1990), various subcultures (cf. Cosgrove 1988; Hebdige 1988; Laude 1993; Wojcik 1995), and national, regional, or ethnic groups (e.g., Geum and Revell 1992; O’Kelly 1992; Payne 1964; Turner 1993; Welters 1985; Williams 1993) document somatic markers of membership in other communities.

The folk metaphor “to show one’s true colors” (i.e., to reveal one’s true identity) suggests the shibboleth function of dress. In a group wishing to sharply separate its members from outsiders, dress may shift from a mere descriptor to a prescription for membership: if you are one of us, you must dress as we do. Such was the attitude of Provençal regionalists who, in the late 19th century, initiated a campaign to persuade Arlesian women to continue wearing their traditional costumes.

**Arlesian Costume and the Féligrée**

The latter half of the 19th century was a time of modernization and industrialization throughout France. Mandatory school attendance, improved lines of transportation and communication, military service, and efforts to establish national standards in such areas as money, weights and measures, and language, all conspired to eradicate local particularities in a nation that was beginning to imagine itself as French. Regional dress, too, was increasingly abandoned, not through
direct mandate but through national hegemony and the desire for upward mobility (Weber 1976).

In midcentury Arles, the effects of these transformations were keenly felt in the decreased use of the Provençal language and in the progressive disappearance of the local costume. During the latter part of the century, more and more Arlesian women divested themselves of traditional dress in order to emulate fashionably modern outsiders. Affiliation and focus visibly shifted away from the local (traditional, Arlesian) toward the national (modern, Parisian)—changes perceived by Provençal loyalists as symptomatic of the slow bleeding away of local autonomy and traditional culture.

In response, Provençal poet Frédéric Mistral and a small group of writers and artists founded the Félilibre, an organization devoted to preserving and promoting Provençal culture. Even today, félibréen ideas continue to define the terms through which Provençal identity is discussed. The félibres, as they called themselves, seized upon the costume of Arles as one means of affirming and displaying the Provençal attachment to local ways of life and asserting local ownership in the face of encroaching Parisian hegemony. True and loyal Arlésiennes, they declared, could be recognized by their traditional dress. Costume became shibboleth.

Because feminine dress in Arles had emerged as a distinctive local style that differentiated the women of this region from those of other parts of France, it was ready-made to serve as a shibboleth. At the same time, defining the costume as a shibboleth raised important questions about what it meant to be Arlesian. No longer was it sufficient to be born in Arles of Arlesian parents: the behavior of many such women suggested that their hopes and prospects, if not their roots, were elsewhere. For this reason, the félibres recognized that descent alone was no longer a sufficient measure of Arlesian identity. To their way of thinking, the only true Arlesian was one who actively demonstrated his or her passion for local culture (consent); the shibboleth offered a means of doing so. By wearing the costume, true and loyal Arlésiennes expressed their consensual membership in this community.

As part of this shift in the location of identity, the félibres argued that the legendary beauty of the women of Arles was due not to their ancestry but to their distinctive costume. For more than a century, travelers and other writers had lauded the extraordinary beauty of Arlesian women and summarized their charms in a physical “type.” Said to be the legacy of the ancient Greeks and Romans who once populated the region, the Arlesian type consisted of dark, wavy hair, sparkling black eyes, a straight “Greek” profile, and a proud bearing. In contrast, félibréen writings eschewed the emphasis on type: “Never forget, women of Arles: the charm that gives you immortality . . . , the charm that makes you empresses, resides almost entirely in your admirable costume” (Flandreysy 1922:121).

In fact, in the félibréen imagination, the new shibboleth was more important to the Arlesian community than descent. Arlesian identity was no longer something one was born into (descent), but rather something one did (shibboleth) that expressed something one felt (consent). Before Mistral’s time, as local scholar
Nicole Niel phrased it, “women did not dress as Arlésiennes, they were Arlésiennes” (1989:31).

If we examine this case more closely, we may observe that the shibboleth had two purposes: to distinguish loyal Arlésiennes from those lacking such feelings and to urge conformity upon the in-group so defined. Put another way, the shibboleth sought to define the boundaries of a community of faithful and to contain its members within those limits.20 According to félibréen ideology, the costume was the preeminent sign of loyalty for Arlesian women; wearing the costume, or not wearing it, placed a woman on one side or the other of the border dividing Arlesians and outsiders. At the same time, the shibboleth imposed conformity: the costume was defined as the most significant way for women to express their passion for local culture. If a woman wore it, she was seen as faithful; if she refused, she was faithless.

The physical and social restrictions of this dress were so great, however, that many women otherwise loyal to Arles abandoned it despite its symbolic import. The costume was constricting and uncomfortable, requiring daily effort to maintain and construct. It marked a young woman as old-fashioned, even backward, and largely limited her possible suitors to local men. Adopting modern dress offered not only a step forward in time but a possible step up into higher social and economic status. And for some women, abandoning the costume was a deliberate act of resistance against male authority.21 The exclusion of many loyal Arlésiennes who chose to wear fashionable clothing from the category of “true Arlésiennes” suggests that, as a tool of discrimination, a shibboleth is too blunt an instrument to make consistent and accurate distinctions. Moreover, the rigidity of this judgment suggests that in this period the costume functioned as an exclusion shibboleth, designed to sanction those who refused to conform.

If shibboleths can be tools of discrimination, they can also be tools of power and oppression. In 19th-century Arles, those who defined and promoted the costume shibboleth set the terms and framed the categories for the discourse on Arlesian identity and thereby located themselves in a position of authority over those urged to follow their dictates. As Noyes reminds us, those who wield a shibboleth—“the drawers of boundaries”—derive their strength from their centrality (1995:463). It was through the drawing of boundaries and through the imposition of the costume that the félibres were able to consolidate their own centrality and reinforce their power.

We may note in passing that speaking Provençal also became a shibboleth for Arlesian identity, a strategy open to men, who did not wear a distinctive costume, as well as to women.22 In fact, for the male félibres, using the Provençal language was the preeminent shibboleth. Their discourse suggests, moreover, that speaking Provençal offered men strength and liberation, while the same shibboleth(s) worked to circumscribe women’s lives:

Instead of being raised to scorn our language, we want our sons to continue to speak the language of the earth, the language where they are masters, the language where they are strong, where they are proud, where they are free. Instead of being raised to disdain our Provençal customs, instead of
setting their ambitions on the baubles of Paris or Madrid, we want our daughters to continue to speak the language of their cradles, the sweet language of their mothers, to remain unaffected in the house where they were born, and to always wear the Arlesian ribbon like the diadem of a queen. [Frédéric Mistral, Speech to the Félíbres of Catalonia, quoted in Pasquini 1988:258]

The allotment of power in Arles was clearly demarcated by gender: all those defining the costume as the paramount symbol of Arlesian identity, all those promoting it as the singular source of feminine beauty, and all those insisting that women continue to wear it—even when modern dress was clearly more practical and comfortable—were men. All those expected to conform to the established standards were women. More broadly, between insiders who wield a shibboleth and those obliged to perform under their scrutiny lies a clear power differential. In submitting to the costume shibboleth, Arlesian women acquiesced to its oppression.23

Reviving the Arlesian Type

Félíbréen dictates notwithstanding, by the eve of World War I, the Arlesian costume had essentially disappeared as everyday dress; loyal Arlesians, in félíbréen terms, had shrunk to a select circle of traditionalists, and regionalist impulses had given way to modern fashion and practicality.24 After the war, however, Arlesian dress reemerged as festive attire, when young women dug out their mothers’ and grandmothers’ costumes to wear for the city’s newly organized festivals.25 Thanks to Arles’s concerted efforts to promote its festivals and its beautiful costumed women, large numbers of tourists visited the city. From the traditionalists’ perspective, tourists were never a threat to Arlesian culture: they came, they admired, and they left little behind but their francs. And their interest encouraged the presentation of local traditions.

The flood of tourists, however, was matched by a troubling “invasion” of new residents. Around the turn of the century, agricultural workers came from Italy to work in the vineyards of Provence and Languedoc; some settled in Arles. During the 1930s and 1940s, large numbers of refugees from the Spanish civil war fled to Arles, and since World War II, there have been waves of French “northerners,” first pushed by the war and then pulled by the opening of the refineries in nearby Fos. Many Corsicans have also made a home here (Dignan 1981).

This influx presented a challenge to traditionalists: how to differentiate these newcomers from “real” Arlesians? In the early years of the festivals, only young women whose Arlesian ancestors had bequeathed them sufficient wardrobes wore the costume, but as newcomers settled into permanent residents, they and their sisters, wives, and daughters began wearing the local festive dress as well, making their own costumes, as necessary. In this new environment, the costume itself no longer proved an effective shibboleth.

In its place, Arlesian traditionalists led by painter Léon Lelée revived the notion of an Arlesian physical “type” in order to redraw the boundaries of Arlesian womanhood. Through his sketches, posters, and paintings, Lelée disseminated images
of beautiful Arlésiennes in whom the classical charms of their Greek and Roman forebears were reborn. In addition, Léée actively encouraged the election of Maryse Orgeas as second Queen of Arles in 1947. Orgeas’s classical looks, particularly her straight “Greek” profile, had caught the painter’s eye, and he could imagine no better candidate for the role that epitomized Arlesian womanhood (Gay 1989).

The influence of Léée’s work, which was widely reproduced during his lifetime (1872–1947), cannot be overestimated, and Orgeas, still hailed today as the most typical of the elected Arlesian beauties, provided an equally potent model. Changing the félibréen formula that stipulated that their costume was responsible for the Arlésiennes’ beauty, traditionalists in the mid–20th century contended that only the type qualified a woman as truly Arlesian and thus permitted her to wear the costume. Only the beauty of typical Arlésiennes, it was argued, was enhanced by the costume. So powerful was this revived notion of type that even girls from old Arlesian families were strongly discouraged from wearing the costume if they did not have the type—which, in practice, meant having dark hair. In fact, the single blonde or redheaded child in a family of several daughters was often excluded from wearing the costume because of her atypical looks.

The inevitable question arises: can physical type be a somatic shibboleth? Or, to put the issue in terms more familiar to contemporary readers, is racial discrimination a form of shibboleth? My answer is no, and for several reasons. Somatic shibboleths do share many characteristics with racial discrimination, which often arises from circumstances similar to those that foster the emergence of shibboleths (cf. Wieviorka 1992). Both strategies reflect and enact a power differential between insiders and outsiders, and both also lack the finesse to make consistent and accurate differentiations. While both somatic shibboleth tests and racial discrimination evaluate appearance, the similarities end when we consider which aspects of appearance are scrutinized. Somatic shibboleths appraise cultural practices, which may be mastered and performed. Racial discrimination, in contrast, evaluates genetically determined characteristics that, with admitted exceptions, cannot be altered.

Racial discrimination relies on diverse physical features, but somatic shibboleths may arise where physical features are similar or ambiguous. When clear racial categories are not available—when “they” look like “us”—our inclination is to turn to somatic shibboleths to make the distinctions that keep us safe within our imaginations. In the case of Arles during this period, however, type was thought to be distinctive enough to serve as a gauge of Arlesian identity. So, instead of replacing one somatic shibboleth with another, Arlesian traditionalists turned to racial discrimination as a means of reinforcing the boundaries of their feminine community. Type, however, proved to be no more effective than a somatic shibboleth in keeping Italians and especially Spanish on their side of the borderline. Perhaps because these groups share with Arlesians a common Mediterranean heritage (in terms of both culture and ethnicity), many women from these groups slipped through the net of type, continued wearing the costume, and became passionate supporters of local culture.
**Authenticity as Shibboleth**

Despite the restrictions of type, throughout the 1950s and 1960s the popularity of the Arlesian costume continued to expand. But as its adherents grew, its beauty withered, as argued by local scholars Pascal and Pascal (1992).\(^30\) Her historical research revealed that the costume, still a potent image of Arles, had drifted away from its 19th-century moorings and into “aberrant” eddies that were undermining its elegant aesthetic and turning it into a “caricature.” “[S]hort hair; inauthentic ribbons bought by the yard; too-long or too-short skirts and fichus; zippers; costumes made of upholstery fabric; no petticoat; feet shod in boots, clogs, or bare; modern jewelry; cigarette in the mouth; chewing gum; total ignorance of the art of the traditional hairstyle”: these were among the “extremely shocking errors in taste” committed by costume wearers in the early 1970s (*Le Provençal* 1977).

Pascal was influential and adamant: the costume could not be allowed to continue its wayward drift but had to be purged of its aberrant elements and reanchored in “authenticity.” In response to her efforts, the “Friends of Old Arles”—a historic preservation group—organized an ad hoc “Commission for the Defense of the Costume of Arles” to address the “regrettable degradation of the established norms which have forever earned the Arlesian costume its renown” (*Venture* 1978:2). The Commission began a series of “interventions” intended to encourage a return to authenticity and aesthetic rigor.

One immediate effect of these efforts was the elimination of type as a prerequisite for wearing the costume. Pascal’s research had cast doubt on the validity of type by revealing that many Arlésiennes of the preceding century had lacked what were now considered essential physical features. In light of a new emphasis on authenticity, type was no longer seen as an adequate tool for proving the identity of an Arlésienne.\(^31\)

Not only was type discredited as a gauge of Arlesian identity, but merely wearing the costume remained an inadequate measure, since women from many backgrounds were now wearing it. In place of these ineffective tools arose the notion of authenticity, whose myriad dimensions have given rise to a new, more complex somatic shibboleth. In the new system, a real Arlésienne is a woman whose exquisite and authentic costume reveals her deep passion for Arles and, specifically, for the history and aesthetics of its dress tradition. Arlesians use the terms *passion* and *faith* interchangeably to refer to this commitment. The production of authenticity, as Arlesians understand it, grounds the shibboleth function of their costume.

Among the “interventions” carried out by the costume commission, the most significant was the enumeration and dissemination of the costume’s “rules.” Commission members collaborated on a brochure that detailed the costume’s elements and the proper techniques for preparing and assembling them. The flyer was distributed to the leaders of all the folklore clubs in the region (Chauvet 1978).
The rules were based on the idea, derived from Pascal’s research, that only faithful imitation of the aesthetics and practices of 19th-century Arlésiennes could produce appropriate costumes. In the 1990s, 20 years after the codification of these rules, the understanding and practice of authenticity means much more than the rules stipulated: it includes making use of authentic costume elements and materials whenever possible, copying 19th-century aesthetics, mastering the technical skills necessary to construct the coiffe and chapelette, dressing appropriately for any given occasion, and adopting certain bodily habits and disciplines.32

Assembling the elements for an authentic costume takes a substantial financial investment; even if you are lucky enough to inherit pieces from a generous ancestor, you will still want to invest in more than one costume so that you may attend both formal and informal events in warm weather and cold. Learning to construct an authentic costume requires study and practice, training the eye (aesthetics) and training the hand (skill). Arlésiennes estimate that it takes at least a year of observation and practice to master the turn of hand required to twist and roll and pin the hair into a perfectly symmetrical and flattering coiffe, to place and anchor the ribbon and its accoutrements at a pleasing angle, and to fold, pin, and coax the diverse elements of the chapelette into an airy architecture (see Figure 1). Preparing one’s costume and developing one’s skills are year–round pursuits, while research into the costume never ends. This is an endeavor to be undertaken seriously or not at all; there are no shortcuts and little tolerance for ineptitude.

Because mastering the costume lore requires such commitment, doing so is seen as a sign of an Arlésienne’s passion for Arles and its traditions. Only upon acquiring such expertise will she be able to construct an authentic costume. For this reason, one can evaluate an Arlésienne’s identity by examining her costume: its authentic details are a complex somatic shibboleth that exhibits her passion. This equation suggests that Arlesian identity in the late 20th century is understood as a matter of consent, and the costume is an assimilation shibboleth.

How does this shibboleth function? By codifying the costume rules, the Commission established itself as the ultimate arbiter in matters of costume, enforcing its authority by disinventing noncompliant folklore clubs from the prestigious annual Costume Festival.53 Two decades later, this practice is continued by the Festival Committee (the Costume Commission now being defunct), but the shibboleth is more effectively wielded at an unofficial level. All those who consider themselves insiders with expertise in the costume tradition—whether or not they participate in folklore clubs, whether or not they even wear the costume themselves—make use of the authenticity shibboleth to evaluate and critique would-be Arlésiennes. The shibboleth works mainly through gossip.

By their own account, Arlésiennes are “wicked gossips” (très mauvaises langues) who delight in dissecting the appearance of others. Imagine yourself standing with your friend Céline along the Boulevard des Lices looking for friends and acquaintances among the costumed festival participants. There is Marie-Louise in her new green silk costume! And Laurence and Christine! You and Céline watch critically, whispering and snickering together as you run down a mental checklist for each Arlésienne you see: authentic costume? no jarring anomalies? appropriate
Figure 1. Dominique Gazzan stands in costume before Arles’s Roman arena. Her hair is drawn up into the traditional coiffe topped with a multicolored antique velvet ribbon. Her intricately folded chapelle, pinned atop a fitted bodice (esd), features an unusual raw silk fichu with a border of hand-embroidered grape leaves. Photo by Jennifer Michael.

to the occasion? well-constructed? balance of volumes? well-harmonized colors and textures? worn well? Each element evaluates a part of the complex shibboleth the passing Arlésiennes are performing.

Whispers of criticism hum among the traditionalists: “Not bad, on the whole.” “Oh, what a lovely ribbon—wish I had one like that!” Or, more likely, “See how her fichu is hanging crooked?” “I can’t believe she used that material to make a skirt! It looks like upholstery fabric!” “Look at that one—what is she doing wearing velvet in this heat?” Such comments are usually made behind the victim’s back, but a particularly egregious infraction of the costume rules may treat the offender to a face-to-face critique—as, for example, when one of the maids of
Figure 2. Arlésiennes scrutinize the pageantry at the annual costume festival. Women in costume often carry parasols or fans to ward off Arles's intense summer heat. This fan was designed by Léo Lelée, an artist famous for his depictions of Arlésiennes. Photo by Jennifer Michael.

honor (to the Queen of Arles) wore a black-and-white guimpe and plastron, traditionally worn only for mourning, to a festival.34

Such intensive scrutiny is daunting, almost palpable: you know the experts are watching (see Figure 2). If you have made aesthetic or technical mistakes in your costume, you may be sure someone will notice. Carole Bressy, a former Queen of Arles, confided that because as the most visible Arlésienne, she could not afford to appear other than perfect, she always allowed herself three hours to get dressed before any public appearance. Other less prominent Arlésiennes occasionally choose to stay home on a day when, for example, they cannot coax their hair into the necessary symmetry.
Such drastic responses suggest the success of the shibboleth in controlling this tradition: being a "real" Arlésienne can be an intimidating affair. For this reason, some impassioned Arlésiennes, including the local costume scholars, elect not to wear the costume, choosing instead to demonstrate their expertise by critiquing others. While critiques are not so easily and immediately evaluated as a costume, they are generally deemed an acceptable means of expressing one's faith, although some Arlésians note wryly that the costume is more easily critiqued than perfected.

Arlés's somatic shibboleth actually evaluates only a small segment of the population; it has, one might say, limited range. For example, members of old Arlesian families who have no interest in traditional culture are left out of the equation; so are disinterested newcomers as well as long-time residents who participate in the tradition solely through critique. Men are also excluded. Only women who wear the costume are examined, including both local women and members of folklore clubs from as far away as Avignon and Nîmes. Thus, those who are subjected to the scrutiny of the somatic shibboleth are only those whose sartorial claim to Arlésian identity must be evaluated.

Awareness of this critical gaze engenders a profound self-consciousness and an intense bodily awareness that relate to one of the most challenging aspects of the authenticity shibboleth: wearing the costume well. In addition to constructing an immaculate and authentic costume, an Arlésienne achieves authenticity by enacting a set of bodily transformations that are collectively referred to as "wearing the costume well." To wear it well is not only to avoid the anachronisms of chewing gum and cigarettes, but to adopt the erect posture, the proud and stately walk, and the deliberate and graceful mannerisms imagined to characterize a 19th-century Arlésienne. More generally, to wear the costume well is to look comfortable in it, to wear it as if it were your everyday attire, to carry out daily activities with ease. No fidgeting allowed! An Arlésienne in costume, they say, "feels neither heat nor cold, hunger nor thirst"—or, at least, she does not let these minor concerns affect her demeanor. This is not as straightforward as it might sound, as I learned when I appeared en Arlésienne.

The costume pressed against my skin: the tightness of the bodice, the weight and tension of the coiffe, the occasional prick of a wayward pin, the tickle of crisp lace edging. These small discomforts, I realized over the course of the evening, served as initial cues and then as repeated reminders to my body: Sit up straight! Hold your head up! Don't slouch! The costume itself encouraged me to pay greater attention to my posture and movements. Its reminders became sharp, even pointed, when my erect posture occasionally slumped and a pin punctured my skin. By the end of the evening, my back and shoulders ached with the strain of unaccustomed attention, my head throbbed, and the teeth of the comb were digging into my scalp. But I gritted my teeth and straightened my back: this is what it means to be in costume.

Although some would like to portray the Arlésienne's posture and attitude as a matter of genetics—"It's got to be in the chromosomes somewhere!"—her characteristic bearing, like the manual skills required for constructing the chapelle and coiffe, is clearly a matter of practice prompted by passion. Girls are taught the
appropriate posture and gestures, and the rules now distributed by folklore clubs often include codes for behavior. When you have learned them well—when they inhabit your bones as well as your mind—it is time to put your knowledge to the test.

In my borrowed finery, I walked slowly through town toward the meeting room. Jeanne and Michèle, who had dressed me, followed in my wake. As we crossed the Boulevard des Lices, an elderly woman sitting on a bench with her husband called and beckoned to me. I went over to see what she wanted. “Oh, Madame,” she said, “I have permitted myself to address you because you are in costume. I just wanted to tell you that my mother was a beautiful Arlésienne—I have her photograph on my mantel. Since her I have never seen such a beautiful Arlésienne as you are.” As she continued on in this vein, I grinned and nodded, while Jeanne and Michèle laughed to themselves. I had passed the test!

Even more than the cries of approval that greeted me when I finally crossed the threshold to join the party, the reaction of this stranger validated the shibboleth. By seeing only the Arlésienne rather than the American beneath the costume, she affirmed what everyone had been telling me: it is your passion, not your birth, that makes you a true Arlésienne and allows you to wear the costume well. Although I do not claim the name, I share with other Arlésiennes a deep love for Arles and its traditions.

If wearing the costume well is the ultimate expression of an Arlésienne’s passion and identity, the reverse is also true. For a woman who lacks faith, dressing in costume is tantamount to putting on a disguise, Arlésiennes say; wearing these clothes creates a sense of artificiality, incongruity, and even deception—a wolf in sheep’s clothing. The most damning criticism of an Arlésienne is to accuse her of “masquerading” when she wears the costume.39 The term implies that, even though perfectly dressed in a costume that is authentic in every detail, her body betrays her disinterest, her shallowness, her lack of genuine feeling. Traditionalists believe they can see through the “disguise” to the wolf underneath.

Although it is understood that an impassioned Arlésienne will learn how to construct her own costume, it is possible for a woman to borrow costume elements from a friend, hire someone to dress her, and masquerade as an Arlésienne.40 Such practices raise the uncomfortable possibility that a careless outsider might be able to pass herself off as an Arlésienne.41 The comforting notion that only a true Arlésienne will wear the costume well helps allay Arlesian fears about such possibilities, and completes the shibboleth.

In its multiple dimensions, Arles’s shibboleth of authenticity accomplishes several things simultaneously. First, it delimits the community, drawing a boundary between authentic Arlésiennes and the so-called masqueraders. Second, it protects the center against the periphery, promoting conformity and discouraging innovation. Finally, and perhaps ironically, the shibboleth suggests a way of traversing the boundary it so carefully erects. More specifically, it offers a strategy for incorporating outsiders into the Arlesian community: it is an assimilation shibboleth.

Assimilation is becoming something like a process through which one gradually comes to resemble members of the community one wishes to join by mastering
Arlesians would become of interest have and worth wearing. The women worry over, with some anxiety there. Many and many others have found that, if they wish to locate themselves as insiders, they must conform to the norms dictated by the shibboleth. So, for that matter, must everyone wishing to locate herself as an insider. One becomes a real Arlésienne by mastering the art of the authentic costume.

Debates are ongoing as to whether Arlesian tradition is stagnating or is being safeguarded by the rigidity of the shibboleth. What is clear, however, is that contemporary Arlesian women now valorize the same strictures that many of their 19th-century counterparts rejected. Shibboleths once imposed by men upon women are now imposed by women upon other women. Context is important to keep in mind here, though: for many women of the last century the costume was a daily drudgery. Arlésiennes today, in contrast, might wear the costume a dozen times a year, if that, and the practice is generally seen as pleasurable.

Descent, Consent, Ascent

The foregoing discussion could suggest that Arlesians have resolved the location of identity in favor of consent. Likewise, Arlesians’ insistence on the centrality of passion and faith, and their shift in discriminatory strategy away from type and back to a form of somatic shibboleth, both support a similar conclusion. The comments of Arlesian traditionalists, however, make it clear that the debate is not entirely over. Many continue to resent the “invasion” of “strangers” to the region and worry that outsiders will somehow contaminate or dilute local traditions. Such anxiety is one factor that often leads to the emergence of shibboleths. Some Arlesians still wonder whether newcomers can ever really feel a deep sense of connection to their town. And, while most can quickly cite a few “strangers” who have become integrated, the same examples are mentioned repeatedly and are generally framed as exceptional. The conventional comment that “so-and-so has become more Arlesian than the Arlesians” tends to veil an abiding disquiet about outsiders.

Significantly, however, Arlesians never voice concerns about non-Europeans wearing the costume, perhaps because the prospect is so unimaginable as to not be worth mentioning. Virtually no immigrants from Southeast Asia or sub-Saharan Africa take part in local traditions, nor do members of Arles’ “Arab” community play a role in traditional life.45 Although it is not clear that these groups are deliberately and specifically prevented from participating, their physical appearance would make them extremely atypical in a context where “racial” features controlled
participation for so long. Arlesians' silence on the subject may suggest that racial "others" do not figure into their social imaginary, or at least play no part in the assimilation scheme controlled by the costume shibboleth. Perhaps assimilation accommodates only those who already meet certain unspoken criteria of descent.

Impassioned Arlésiennes sometimes refer to themselves as les mordues (those who have been bitten). The analogy humorously likens passion for the costume to the disease contracted from the bite of a rabid dog. If somatic shibboleths have emphasized a consensual community defined by passion, this metaphor recasts that passion as something corporeal, something visceral. Arlesian passion, the analogy suggests, is a fever running through one's veins: one is thus Arlesian in one's body, in one's blood. Pressing the metaphor, I might also suggest that costume fever is something you can catch from your friends. Because, like identities of descent, it is something one can pass on to others, costume fever seems to express metaphorically the mordues' yearning to locate themselves in a community based in some sort of biological connection.

One way of resolving the tension between an Arlesian community defined by roots (descent) and one based in faith and passion (consent) is to locate Arlesian identity in what might be termed a community of ascent. Consider, for example, that some women, fascinated by Arlesian traditions but discouraged from wearing the costume for fear of being accused of masquerading, choose instead to dress their young daughters in costume. (Young girls are allowed greater latitude by the costume critics, because it is recognized that they must mature into the tradition.) Such a strategy, paralleling Noyes's observations about Catalonia, might be stated: "I am Arlésienne because my daughters will be" (Personal communication, July 1997). This approach, which grounds identity in the future rather than the past, can be thought of as an identity of ascent. Like a community of descent, a community of ascent emphasizes continuity over time: certain newcomers, mastering the shibboleths and teaching them to their offspring, become part of a community that stretches forward into an imagined future. Instead of looking downward toward their community's roots, Arlesians can look upward toward its branches and the blossoming of a shared future.

Notes

This article is based on fieldwork conducted in Arles, France, between 1991 and 1994. Among the many Arlesians who assisted me in this project, I would like especially to acknowledge the members of Reneissenço, who welcomed me into their midst and answered my interminable questions with unfailing patience and grace. Their expertise is further acknowledged by the use of their names in this text. I wish particularly to thank Jeanine Castanet and Jeanne Tomasi, both of Reneissenço, who made themselves my surrogate mothers during my months in Arles. They took me under their wings, fed and lodged me, lent me their costumes, and patiently shared with me their considerable knowledge and insights into Arles's costume tradition. Any mistakes here are despite and not because of their determined efforts to make sure I got it right.

The results of earlier attempts to sort out these issues were presented in 1995 in papers to the American Ethnological Society and the American Folklore Society. Much of my thinking for the present article has been inspired and influenced by Alan Dundes's "Defining Identity through Folklore" (1989) and Dorothy Noyes's 1995 article on "Group" in the keywords issue of this journal.
have also benefited greatly from the thoughtful comments and helpful suggestions of Regina Bendix, Rudy V. Busto, David L. Closson, Dorothy Noyes, Leonard N. Primiano, and Nancy Waterson. Many thanks to them all for generously devoting precious hours to reading and critiquing this manuscript. They have helped immensely. Alas, any remaining shortcomings are my responsibility alone.

1 Although *dress* is the preferred term for describing the multiple ways people mark and modify their bodies (Roach-Higgins and Eicher 1992), I have, for two reasons, chosen here to refer to the traditional dress of Arlesian women as *costume*. *Costume* is not only the English analog to the term used locally for this dress, but the word also reminds us that this clothing is unusual attire distinct from everyday dress and worn with special attention and self-consciousness. As costume designer and historian Pamela Keech argues, the line between costume and clothing is “in the motivation. A person who gets up in the morning and gets dressed without giving it much thought is putting on clothing. But a person who gets dressed for the effect it will create is putting on a costume” (1992:34, emphasis in original).

2 In this text, *Arles* refers to the city so named and to its surrounding region, sometimes called the Pays d’Arles (Land of Arles). I use *Arlesienne* here to refer to a woman of this region, particularly one who wears the local costume; Arlesian both describes something from Arles (e.g., “Arlesian traditions”) and denotes a person of either gender from that region.

3 The Arlesian traditional hairstyle, or *coiff*, consists of a sort of chignon anchored with a comb to the top of the head, plus a fabric construction affixed atop the chignon.

4 Similar categories have been proposed by other scholars. Ralph Linton (1933), for example, distinguishes between ascribed and achieved status; Fredrik Barth separates ascription and performance as forms of ethnic identity (1969:28).

5 The *Routledge Dictionary of Language and Linguistics* defines shibboleth as “a linguistic characteristic that is unique to a certain group and serves to distinguish that group from other groups” (Bussmann 1996:432–33).

6 In “Defining Identity through Folklore,” Alan Dundes emphasizes the dual aspects of group identity as being based in both sameness and difference (1989:6–7). Although he does not use the term *shibboleth* in this article, Dundes includes a section called “Identification of Strangers” (1989:30–33) in which he discusses several strategies for discerning the identity of a stranger. Many of these tests would fit under the rubric of shibboleth.

7 Categorizing shibboleths as “stale,” “timeworn,” “ancient,” “traditional,” “weary,” “mossy,” or even “insidious” or “meaningless,” journalists frequently use the term to describe something that should be “jettisoned,” “knocked down,” “punctured,” “skewered,” “shattered,” “challenged,” “denounced,” “put to rest,” “toppled,” or “destroyed.” In the wake of such hoary shibboleths, it is implied, come freedom, fresh approaches, and progress.

8 Valerie Elliott (1997) describes Britain’s new treasury minister as challenging one of Whitehall’s “shibboleths” by “refus[ing] to take home a red box with overnight work.” This usage, as well as Kane’s definition of shibboleth as “a truth that must be obeyed,” suggests that shibboleths refer not only to beliefs per se but to beliefs put into practice.

9 A shibboleth sets up an opposition between the insiders who impose the shibboleth and the outsiders who are subject to it. In this article, I use *insiders* to refer to those who define and promote and wield a shibboleth, and *outsiders* to refer to those who must pass its muster.

10 Dundes (1989:16–17) describes additional examples of such testing, including an episode in chapter 11 of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Twain 1996).

11 Carne’s contention that language tests “are found almost always in the context of war” (1989:15) represents an extreme version of this idea. A shibboleth can occur, he says, “as a function of armed conflict, with its corresponding need for an instant tool for identification” (1989:21).

12 Martin Marty’s (1992) description of the emergence of fundamentalism contains striking parallels to the present discussion, including a mention of the use of shibboleths (1992:21). Marty’s outline suggests that a detailed comparison of the strategies of religious fundamentalists and the encapsulation strategies employed by secular traditionalists would be fruitful. I thank Rudy Busto for bringing Marty’s article to my attention.
While it is true that the phonemic features of some verbal shibboleths are nearly impossible for certain nonnative speakers to pronounce correctly—the tongue twister mentioned by Noyes is a good example (1995:465)—the contention that other sorts of knowledge and skill cannot be acquired by outsiders is less persuasive. Perhaps this is why documented exclusion shibboleths are nearly all based in language.

Paul Celan’s poem “Shibboleth” (1996:99) suggests that shibboleths can reveal political allegiance as well as passion—aspects of identity that, like faith, are borne in the heart. As Singer’s example illustrates and Marty’s discussion (1992) suggests, the study of shibboleths may likewise have intriguing implications for the study of other religious phenomena, particularly in relation to conversion and to the parallels between sacred and secular communities.

In addition, dress may include nonvisual modifications of the body, including those that affect smell (e.g., perfume, deodorant), texture (e.g., scarification), sound (e.g., jangling jewelry, bells worn for their sound effects), and taste (e.g., mouthwash, flavored lipstick).

Of course, some aspects of dress are either small, subtle, or hidden by outer garments and therefore not immediately discernable. This does not prevent such features from becoming shibboleths, however, as Jewish circumcision demonstrates. But invisible signs may function in different ways from obvious ones.

My dissertation (Michael 1995:17–40) includes a more extensive discussion of the félibréen program; see also Pasquini 1988.

This was not the case for men’s dress, which resembled the peasant costume worn elsewhere in France.

As early as the 17th century, Chapelle and Bachaumont (Chapelle 1933) remarked that “The ladies [of Arles] are clean, gallant, and pretty. . . .” (quoted in L’Homme de Bronze 1902b:21). The comments of numerous other enthusiasts are quoted in a 1902 series of articles on “Les Filles d’Arles” in L’Homme de Bronze (1902a, 1902b, 1902c, 1902d).

Marty’s image of the castle (1992) provides an apt metaphor for the keeping-in and keeping-out function of this shibboleth.

There are also indications that the imposition of the costume shibboleth was an attempt to contain dangerous female sexuality. See Michael 1995:27–40 for a more detailed discussion of these issues.

For a parallel case, see Tiessen 1988 on Canadian Mennonites.

In questioning whether women’s ways of speaking count as shibboleths, Ole Togeby points to the shibboleth’s function as “a means for social discrimination and oppression,” that is, as “indices by which interlocutors label each other as young, lazy, stupid, etc.” (1992:64–66). Togeby is referring specifically to the ways in which insiders can discriminate against and oppress outsiders on the basis of their failure to master certain shibboleths, but I wish to emphasize here that shibboleths can also oppress those who choose to conform to them.

I use the term traditionalist with James McKay’s (1982) matrix model for characterizing “ethnic phenomena” in mind. This model, which allows one to “track” changes in ethnic groups (1982:409–410), is useful for describing the changing character of Provençal and Arlesian regionalism after World War I, when the “ethnic militancy” of Mistral’s era began gradually to give way to “ethnic traditionalism.” As the century wore on, “primordial interests [became] much more salient than material ones” (1982:403–406); by the 1970s, Arles’s shift to traditionalism was essentially complete.

It is important to note in passing that, although they did not perform their identity through dress, Arlesian men had—and still have—other activities that allowed them to express their passion for local culture in both private and public ways. In particular, the vigorous cowboy culture of the adjacent Camargue offers masculine alternatives (bullfighting, riding, ranch work) to the dress tradition. Provençal language, dance, and music, promoted through the region’s numerous folklore clubs, are activities open to both men and women. With the exception of the Provençal language, all of these practices figure prominently in Arles’s festive calendar. See Michael 1995 for more details on the gendering of Arlesian culture.
Since 1930, Arlesians have regularly chosen a young woman to serve as Queen of Arles. The Queen, who personifies Arlesian beauty in costume, presides with her demoiselles d’honneur (maids of honor) over all the major cultural events in the city. See Michael (1995:48–51, 221–222) for more details on this tradition.

Comparisons between somatic shibboleths and racial discrimination suggest the general ambiguity of the body: what is constructed and what is given? (Thanks to Dorry Noyes for pointing this out.) This discussion also raises other intriguing issues: does racial discrimination always precede the use of somatic shibboleths as a means of drawing boundaries? In other words, is race always a primary category and dress a secondary one? Or do there exist racially diverse communities where race is not problematic but dress is? How should we interpret contexts in which differential dress practices coincide with racial categories?

There were no similar efforts to preserve and constrain masculine identity in Arles, which suggests both that men were still mostly in charge and that women’s role as an emblem—like Marianne, the Statue of Liberty, and other female incarnations of the body politic (cf. Babcock 1987; Mosse 1985)—was of great symbolic importance to Arles’s sense of itself.

The result of Spanish immigration to Arles was an accommodation, a shared cultural space in which Spanish cultural elements coexist with Provencal ones, separate but more or less equal. Today, corridas and Provençal courses camargaises enthrall local bullfight enthusiasts, Provençal farandoles and Spanish sevillanas alternately engage dancing feet, and a paella is nearly as likely to be served at a community celebration as an aioli.

With her daughter Odile (tenth Queen of Arles), Pascal is writing a three-volume study on the history of the Arlesian costume. Only the first volume (1992) has appeared.

Many older women, however, have had difficulty relinquishing this notion. Redheads and blondes forbidden to wear the costume as children still cannot imagine doing so. Moreover, the idea of type still influences the triennial election of a Queen of Arles, the most conservative aspect of the costume tradition.

The chapelle consists principally of elaborately folded fichus that are placed and pinned around the neck and over the bodice of the costume. See Michael (1995:133–162) for a more complete discussion of these aspects of authenticity; for broader discussions of authenticity, see Bendix 1997 and Appadurai 1986.

Although the Costume Commission has been disbanded, its former members are still central to the costume tradition. While scholars Pascal and Nicole Niel remain as independent authorities, others, like Marcelle Ginoux and Jeaninne Castanet, now lead local folklore clubs. In light of the social network model discussed by Noyes (1995:457), each of these clubs can be seen as a dense cluster within the larger network. While they come together on festival days, the clubs also compete with one another for attention and resources.

A plastron, also called a devant d’estomac, is a triangular piece of fabric—generally white or off-white—pinned to the front of the bodice above the waist; a guimpe is a band of similar material that is draped around the back of the neck and along the edges of the plastron to the waist. These pieces form the base of the chapelle upon which folded fichus are pinned.

Another reason for not wearing the costume is having to wear one’s hair long and without bangs—the style mandated by the costume. If you choose to wear the costume regularly, you must maintain some variation of this unfashionable style throughout the year. For this reason, Arlesian women over the age of 25 who wear their hair long are easily recognizable as costume wearers.

The traditionalist network maps onto the local geography: those living closer to the center of Arles are, to Arlesian ways of thinking, closer to the heart and core of the tradition and, therefore, are more authentic, while villages and cities on the perimeter are more distant in terms of both kilometers and aesthetics.

Wearing the costume well is distinct from being well dressed. Both relate to ideas of authenticity and passion, but being well dressed is the result of everything that takes place before you are dressed, while wearing the costume well depends on what you do after you are in costume. It is, therefore, possible to wear the costume poorly even when you are well dressed.
38I have no illusions about Mme Constant's—this was her name, we learned—appraisal of my appearance! Jeanne and Michèle had spent three hours preparing me, so if I looked good, they had a lot to do with it. Moreover, I was wearing a black costume, the color most often worn by women of Mme Constant's mother's generation. In the late 19th century, most Arlésiennes put on black when a grandparent died and kept it for the rest of their lives. In contrast, most Arlésiennes today prefer brighter colors; a black costume, although appealing in its severity, is a rarity at festivals. My guess is that, in this dress, I reminded Mme Constant of her mother, whose mantel picture was surely also in black and white!

39The actual expression in French is être déguisée. I have chosen to translate this as masquerading because this term evokes both the sense of being dressed up in unfamiliar clothes—clothes that are not yours—and a sense of festivity that mirrors the contexts in which the costume is most often worn.

40There are a few Arlesian women who earn extra money dressing others in costume.
41Goffman's discussion of "imposters" (1959:59) makes a similar point.
42See Park 1930 for a more extended discussion of assimilation. And see Jennie Livingston's 1992 film Paris Is Burning (Academy Entertainment) for a poignant study of the complex interrelationship between shibboleth, assimilation, and "passing."
43I borrow this phrase from journalist Jim McCue, who defined shibboleths this way in a 1997 article for The London Times.
44An extreme example of this attitude may be found in the politics of the National Front's leader Jean-Marie Le Pen, whose strident anti-immigrant rhetoric has made international headlines, according to the National Front's web page.
45I know of only two examples: I observed one African child in costume and was told of a Laotian girl who had joined a folklore club in St. Martin-de-Crau. Also, Arlésiens, and the French in general, rarely differentiate among the various communities of North Africans and other Muslim immigrants, referring to them collectively as "Arabs."
46I have already described the correspondences between exclusion shibboleths and communities of descent and between inclusion shibboleths and communities of consent; we can further note the correspondence between assimilation shibboleths and communities of ascent. More research is needed to further detail the relationship between shibboleths and the cultural ideals to which they point.

References Cited

Flandreysy, Jeanne de. 1922. La Femme Provençale. Marseille: F. Détaille.
Kane, Pat. 1997. Labour Truth That Must Be Obeyed. The Herald (Glasgow), March 6, 21.


