EDITORIAL

Most of us have some sort of ethnical system to operate by; essentially, it is a matter of understanding *why* we do what we do and *how,* of having a context that makes sense of our activities and beliefs. Our lead article this month by Gerald Thomas deals with the problem of ethical responsibility in folklore. The specific question he raises is that of professional responsibility to one's informants. The method he has used in the fiekd when collecting has been to assimilate as completely as possible with the group he is studying. He believes that this is most important, as it encourages a greater sensitivity., and hence a greater understanding of the group and the material collected. While complete assimilation is impossible, it is much easier to understand a person or group one is involved with. He points out some of the dangers of lacking such an involvement, and concludes that a collector's ultimate responsibility lies with the people he receives his material from.

The questions Thomas raises have wide implications, for such a sense of responsibility has been sadly lacking in the field. All too often the collector suffers from a severe case of cultural élitism, regarding the informant as an interesting but somewhat inferior natural resource, somewhat like an ore field, there for the exploitation of those with the superior understanding and appreciation to utilize it properly. This attitude does not result from any particular lack of character on the part of the collector, but from our society's attitude toward private property. The rewards of any resource are considered to belong to whoever manages to exploit it first. When it became clear that there was some financial value to folklore, the question of ownership suddenly became important, and there was a rush to stake claims in the ready-made form of copyrights. Intense competition for material followed, with various confusing, elaborate, and mendacious methods used to establish ownership. For a while very little remained unclaimed; material which had "belonged" to everyone for centuries suddenly was privately owned. Many reputable and well-meaning collectors, finding their material and their livelihood threatened by predatory claimjumpers, were forced to pursue this course simply for self-protection, but of course such a system, followed for whatever reasons, is self-perpetuating and ultimately leads to confusion and stagnation.

Copyright laws have subsequently been clarified and rewritten, so that ownership of folklore is much more difficult to claim, but the attitudes previously engendered still persist. Those who hold the material but do not exploit it are considered to have no rights to the profits of

exploitation, nor to deserve them; any such rights naturally belong to those who have the knowledge and ability to use the material "properly", because ownership is seen as synonymous with exploitation. Thus an informant rarely benefits from the passing on of his material to a collector. The fact that the material may actually be fulfilling an active and important function in the lives of the informant, his family, friends, and community, is considered of no consequence. This may seem somewhat ironical in view of the collectors' customarily professed desire to return the material to the "people", a term which in this sense seems to be rather vaguely employed and to bear little relationship to reality. It all follows logically, however, given our society's attitude toward "ownership".

Gerald Thomas provides some insights on the subject in his article, and suggests some alternatives with regard to the questions raised. These insights and alternatives on ethics and ethical systems are applicable on a wide front, and should be considered by anyone interested in any aspect of the fields of folklore and folk music.