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Abstract
The concept of folklore emerged in Europe midway in the nineteenth century. Originally it connoted tradition, ancient customs and surviving festivals, old ditties and dateless ballads, archaic myths, legends and fables, and timeless tales and proverbs. As these narratives rarely stood the tests of common sense and experience, folklore also implied irrationality: beliefs in ghosts and demons, fairies and goblins, sprites and spirits; it referred to credence in omens, amulets, and talismans. From the perspective of the urbane literati, who conceived the idea of folklore, these two attributes of traditionality and irrationality could pertain only to peasant or primitive societies. Hence they attributed to folklore a third quality: rurality. The countryside and the open space of wilderness was folklore's proper breeding ground. Man's close contact with nature in villages and hunting bands was considered the ultimate source of his myth and poetry. As an outgrowth of the human experience with nature, folklore itself was thought to be a natural expression of man before city, commerce, civilization, and culture contaminated the purity of his life.

Disciplines
Cultural History | Folklore | Near and Middle Eastern Studies | Oral History

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THE IDEA OF FOLKLORE: AN ESSAY

DAN BEN-AMOS

The concept of folklore emerged in Europe midway in the nineteenth century. Originally it connoted tradition, ancient customs and surviving festivals, old ditties and dateless ballads, archaic myths, legends and fables, and timeless tales and proverbs. As these narratives rarely stood the tests of common sense and experience, folklore also implied irrationality: beliefs in ghosts and demons, fairies and goblins, sprites and spirits; it referred to credence in omens, amulets, and talismans. From the perspective of the urbane literati, who conceived the idea of folklore, these two attributes of traditionality and irrationality could pertain only to peasant or primitive societies. Hence they attributed to folklore a third quality: rurality. The countryside and the open space of wilderness was folklore's proper breeding ground. Man's close contact with nature in villages and hunting bands was considered the ultimate source of his myth and poetry. As an outgrowth of the human experience with nature, folklore itself was thought to be a natural expression of man before city, commerce, civilization, and culture contaminated the purity of his life.

The triumvirate of attributes — traditionality, irrationality and rurality — was to dominate the concept of folklore for many years to come; often it still does. It provided standards for inclusion or exclusion of stories, songs, and sayings within the domain of folklore proper. Those which possessed at least one of these qualities were christened "folkstories, folksongs, riddles and folk-sayings"; those which did not were reprovingly rejected.

In their turn, these terms of meaning generated additional attributes, which together comprised the sense of the concept of folklore in common use, in print, and in speech. The cloak of tradition concealed the identity of those who authored folktales, ballads, and proverbs, and transmission from generation to generation obscured their origins.
Thus, by default rather than merit, anonymity became an earmark of folklore. Indigenous prose or poetry became part of folklore only after the memory of its creator had been erased. Then, the seal of anonymity sanctioned tradition as genuine. It legitimized songs and tales as integral parts of the cultural heritage of society.

Yet, the anonymity of folk narratives, rhymes, and riddles hardly solved the enigma of origin. The responsibility for authorship had to be placed in the hands of some creator, divine or human. So, in the absence of any individual who could justifiably and willingly claim paternity of myths and legends, the entire community was held accountable for them. After all, the existing evidence appeared to support such an allegation. Narrators and singers often attribute their tales and songs not to a single individual, but to the collective tradition of the community. Even in the exceptional cases in which they indeed claimed authorship, they succeeded in unveiling analogues in their own and other traditions. Such parallels cast doubt upon any contentions for originality and sustained the assertion of the communality of folklore.

In fact, communality has become a central attribute in the formulation of the concept of folklore, and is rivaled only by "tradition." There is no room in folklore for private tales and poems. Any expression has to pass through the sieve of communal approval before it can be considered folklore. But the identification of the processes that would justify the attribution of communality to any story or song has proved to be rather complex, even logically thorny. Are folktales and folksongs only in the communal domain, free to all to speak and sing, or should these "property rights" be limited to the moment of origin, thus regarding folk expressions to be of communal creation and solving along the way the question of authorship. Furthermore, how does the community foster its bond between people and their folklore, and exactly which of its aspects relate to the society at large: the themes, the language, the forms, or the particular tales, songs and proverbs? These and other issues are the whetstones that have sharpened debates that were crucial to the idea of folklore. From various viewpoints the attribute of communality implies communal creation, re-creation or, simply, expression.

Communal creation involves some anachronistic reasoning: the tales, songs, and sayings that the community shares together, it also creates together. Such an explanation may solve the problem of authorship, but our inferring origins from results might not be logically valid. In the cultural and social spheres, the mode of existence cannot necessarily
attest to the genesis of forms. Historical processes such as diffusion of themes, dissemination of ideas, and imitation of manners do affect the state and nature of folklore. Consequently, collective knowledge of tales and songs cannot be an unequivocal indicator of creation. The notion of communal re-creation counters this dilemma. It prolongs the moment of origin over historical periods and conceives of the formation of songs, for example, not in a single exhilarative burst of poetic creativity, but through repetitive recitations of singers on communal occasions. Each improvises and embellishes the text, yet conforms to the communal aesthetic and ethical standards. Such an interpretation of the communality of folklore also allows the viewing of folk prose and poetry as expressions of social fears and wishes, ideals, and values. Folklore reflects the collective experience of society and is the mirror which the community constantly faces.

Paradoxically, intertwined with the attribute of communality is the idea that folklore is universal. While folksongs and tales might be forged within a particular community and express its unique experience, they also transcend the boundaries that language and space impose and emerge in diverse groups and remote countries, still maintaining a fundamental unity. The attribute of universality appears to be both formal and thematic. All peoples distinguish poetry from prose, pithy sayings from epic poems; all construct narratives, fictional or historical, by stringing events in sequences; and all can combine music and movement with words and can sing and dance to their harts’ content. These are inherent abilities of being human/human beings.

In that sense, folklore withstands the test that language has failed. While modern discoveries about animals clearly demonstrate that some master the rudiments of language communication (e.g., whales sing), so far neither monkeys nor rats have been caught telling legends to their infants. But the universality of folklore is not confined to the formal basis alone. The themes, the metaphors, and the subjects of stories, songs, and sayings of peoples who live in countries remote from each other and who speak completely unrelated languages exhibit a high degree of similarity that history could not explain. Migrations, contacts in war and peace cannot account for the common features that the tales and poems of native Australians, Africans, and Americans share. All include stories of gods, of creation and of destruction; all tell about marvelous events, beings and places; and all dwell upon the supernatural, the extraordinary, the absolute, and the incongruous. Their metaphors relate to nature, beliefs, and societies, and their songs
celebrate victories and lament failures in the struggle for survival. Often, similarities are even more striking when the same narrative episodes and verbal or visual images appear in the expressions of unrelated peoples.

The dual attributes of universality and communality are locked together and create an apparent paradox in the idea of folklore, converging the general and the particular into a single concept. Evidence supports both. The themes and forms of folklore appear to be universal, yet no other expression is so imbued with regional, local, and cultural references, meanings, and symbols. There are two ways to resolve this contradiction. First, universality and communality can be viewed not as contradictory but as complementary attributes. Universal are the relations that govern folklore; specific are the references to culture and history. Universal are the principles of distinctiveness in form and in theme — the unusual, incongruous, and, conversely, the absolutely harmonious — but communal are the languages, the social and historical experiences, the religious systems, and the moral values that make up the substance of folklore of respective societies. Secondly, these two attributes can be historically related, one preceding the other. If folklore were originally communal, then its properties would have achieved universality by historical processes, such as diffusion of themes through population contacts in migration, trade, or warfare. Such an assumption would imply a single source, or place and time of origin, from which folklore features were universally diffused. But if folklore were first universal, then its basic forms and themes should have been formulated prior to any historical and evolutionary developments. In such a case, folklore embodies the original homogeneity of the culture of man, before the diversity arose. Consequently, folklore also possesses the attribute of primariness, an attribute that makes the impact of folklore on modern thought and art so powerful.

According to the above premises, the mythology of all nations not only tells about but is the dawn of humanity. It incarnates the commonality in all communities and voices the primordial expression of man. In its fundamental forms folklore emerged before human diversity developed and thus embodies the most rudimentary forms of verbal and visual symbols. The primariness of folklore has historical and evolutionary aspects. Historically, folklore allegedly dates to time immemorial, and, hence, at its original stage, preceded any known recorded history. When man hunted and gathered his food, or even when he began to farm the land and to herd his cattle, without quite mastering writing, he already narrated and sang tales and songs. The
folklore of the world, it is hence assumed, abounds with symbols, themes, and metaphors that pertain to the beginning of human civilization and could shed light on the dark corners of history which no other document could illuminate. The forms of folklore are thus regarded as the cores at the hearts of artistic forms. They are the primitive, crude expressions out of which the literary, visual, and musical cultural heritage of the peoples of the world has emerged. Folklore comprises the symbolic forms at the base of the complex expressions of literate societies.

Naturally, folklore in its primary stage could not have been accessible to modern man, and this attribute would have been completely lost had it not been for the attempt to recapture tales and songs as they existed in non-literate societies — that is, as they are told and sung orally without recourse to any written devices to aid in memorization and transmission of texts. None have claimed that current prose and poetry of peasants and non-literate cultures reflect human expression in its archaic, primordial form. Repeated recitations, loss of memorization, creative improvisation, and more general historical processes of cultural contacts and technical evolution have contributed to the alteration of particular themes and the general tenor of folklore. However, in spite of the recognition of such historical factors, a basic assumption in folklore is that those stories, songs, and sayings at least exist in the same way that their ancient predecessors did — that is, in oral performance — and that they are transmitted from generation to generation only verbally, as they were before the advent of literacy. Hence, the oral nature of folklore had become one of its crucial attributes, the touchstone of authenticity and originality. As long as stories, songs, and proverbs conform with the principle of oral circulation and transmission, they are qualified as “pure” folklore, but when, alas, somewhere along the line they contact written texts, they are branded “contaminated,” since they no longer represent the primary expression of man.

These attributes of traditionality, irrationality, and rurality; anonymity, communality and universality; primacy and oral circulation have consolidated in the idea of folklore. They cluster, implying each other and suggesting that intrinsic relations exist between them. The occurrence of one quality in a song or tale often implies most of the others. A peasant song, for example, is considered as having long-standing tradition in the community. The possibility that it might be either a recent composition or one borrowed from some external source such as an urban center would deny the song its folkloric nature and
contradict the basic assumptions held about it. Being rural, other attributes similarly follow: the author is anonymous, and the song belongs to the cultural heritage of the entire community. Most likely, as poetry, it would express deep, seated emotions or uncontrolled desires, which, in turn, project universal primary human qualities, unaffected by civilization. Thus, combined in a hypothetical song, these attributes convey the meaning of the concept of folklore.

Consequently, these attributes, which are only descriptive and interpretive terms at best, have acquired a normative status, setting the standards and boundaries for the substance of folklore proper. They become defining terms, bound by an a priori notion of what folklore should have been, but only occasionally was, transforming the desired into necessary conditions and injecting interpretations into alleged observations. They have become terms of value with which to state the worth of songs and sayings and to rate their import in the light of ideals only implicitly understood.

In the process of research and interpretation, desired goals can often turn into a priori assumptions and serve as initial premises rather than final results. This, in fact, has often happened in qualities attributed to stories, songs, and sayings which have become the basic premises upon which research was designed and theory constructed. Naturally, there have been examples that have supported these contentions. Stories have circulated orally, existing in the traditions of rural communities for many years, their authors — if there were any — long forgotten, and their analogues recovered in distant lands. But even if there were texts that measured up to all the criteria of folklore, these standards should not have been the defining terms for the substance of folklore.

The penalty for transferring norms into premises and ideal goals into a priori conditions is a limited range for research and theory. Past folklore scholarship paid its dues twice over. The diversity and richness that folklore is was confined by the constraints that the notions about it imposed. The study of traditions in villages flourished, but the equivalent activities in cities went unnoticed. Anonymous tales and songs were avidly recorded, stored, and dissected, but equally entertaining songs and stories, whose authors were alive and known, were ignored as irrelevant. Other attributes became frames for interpretation. The relationship between expressions and the community has been and is a major paradigm for analysis. The implicit irrationality of ideas found in tales and metaphors has been the only basis for their explanation and has opened the gate to a slew of
psychological interpretations. Significant as they are, these notions have blocked the way for alternate modes of explanation, directions of research, and construction of theories. They have pre-defined and identified the substance and the problems of study, silencing the expressions and the people themselves. In recent years the clouds of *a priori* premises have begun to disperse. Still, with a sense of innovation and intellectual rebellion, Hermann Bausinger (1961) expounded upon folk-culture in a technical world (*Volkskund in des technische Welt*), and American folklorists gathered to discuss *The Urban Experience and Folk Tradition* (Paredes and Stekert, 1971). But these are recent developments in which scholarly traditions yield to the demands of reality. Throughout the formative years of folklore study and in the many years that followed, the attributes of the idea of folklore dictated the conception of its substance and the limits of its research. They became unchallenged premises and assumptions which were taken for granted.

Regardless of the validity of these attributes, they contributed to the popularity of the idea of folklore. At the same time, however, these very qualities impeded the transformation of folklore from an idea into a field of scholarship. These attributes burdened folklore research with unproven assumptions, untested beliefs, and with the projection of popular attitudes toward the substance that makes up the subject of folklore inquiry. In order to progress with research in the field of folklore, it is necessary to do as some have already done, to unload the attributes of the past and to observe folklore freshly, as it exists in social reality. Within this context, folklore is a culturally unique mode of communication, and its distinctiveness is formal, thematic, and performative. There is a correlation between these three levels of expression, by which the speakers of folklore set in apart from any other communication in society.

As a distinct mode of communication, folklore exists in any society; it is the sole property of neither peasants nor primitives. No doubt folklore could be traditional, but it is not so by definition; it could be anonymous, but it is not essentially so. Any of the qualities that were, and still are, attributed to folklore might be inherent in some forms, in some cultures — and any time they are it is up to the folklorists to demonstrate it anew.
Studies in Aggadah and Jewish Folklore

Edited by

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