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The Concept of Genre in Folklore

Abstract
If the concept of genre appears inadequate and the definitions of forms are vague, if the arguments about classifications are tiring and the debates about standards seem futile, the fault is not only in the genres, but also in ourselves. The terms for genres are an integral part of any language. They are the words for speaking about speech and for conceiving of categories of tradition. Myth, tale, legend, and song, and their correlates in other languages, existed long before the idea of folklore dawned upon scholars. When folklore became a discipline, and its research assumed scientific garb, we took these existing terms and canonized them as scientific concepts. We transferred them from the context of ‘natural language’ in which ambiguities, ambivalences, and multiplicity of meanings appear to reign, and attempted to consider them terms in the language of science, whose meanings are clear and specific referents.

Disciplines
Folklore | Near and Middle Eastern Studies | Oral History
If the concept of genre appears inadequate and the definitions of forms are vague, if the arguments about classifications are tiring and the debates about standards seem futile, the fault is not only in the genres, but also in ourselves. The terms for genres are an integral part of any language. They are the words for speaking about speech and for conceiving of categories of tradition. Myth, tale, legend, and song, and their correlates in other languages, existed long before the idea of folklore dawned upon scholars. When folklore became a discipline, and its research assumed scientific garb, we took these existing terms and canonized them as scientific concepts. We transferred them from the context of 'natural language' in which ambiguities, ambivalences, and multiplicity of meanings appear to reign, and attempted to consider them terms in the language of science, whose meanings are clear and specific referents.

Our failure is common knowledge and hardly a surprise. Natural and scientific languages do not easily mesh. Words retain their previous connotations even when they are redefined as terms for classes, and the blurred boundaries which exist in reality affect the analytical categories of formal models. Self reflective essays in folklore have already revealed some of the flaws in previous notions about particular forms as well as in the concept of genre in general. Robert Georges, for example, has examined an hypothetical synthesis of legend definition and finds it illogical, inconsistent, and hence dismissable. Linda Dég and Andrew Vázsonyi challenge the conventional concept of the legend on empirical grounds, and discover that it does not correspond to narrations they encountered in reality. Belief, the primary defining feature of legend, appears to be a criterion which is both too inclusive and too exclusive. On the one hand, the attitude of belief is held toward narratives which are not necessarily legendary, on the other hand, some objects and beings exist nowhere else but in the belief system, and are subject to a variety of attitudes ranging from doubt to ridicule and complete disbelief. In these cases, the narratives do not function as legends in culture. Furthermore, the concept of belief itself appears to have a broad semantic range and hence fails to serve as an unqualified criterion for the analytical definition of genre.

The imminent collapse of the legend as a category of folklore classification compels a reconsideration of the value and function of the concept of genre in folklore research in general. Alan Dundes has suggested that this concept impedes folklore research, preventing scholars from examining the folk ideas which underlie and permeate verbal expressions. The concept of genre has become too narrow and too shallow as an explanatory principle for the dynamics of tradition. He points out that there is a wide domain in folklore which does not fit into the constraints of any existing categorization system, and consequently has not been and will not be fully explored as long as the genre research paradigm prevails. In contrast to Dundes, Honko proposes to rescue genres from the pitfalls that folklorists have created, and to consider them as "ideal types," that is, as models which each particular expression could only approximate. By espousing two systems which in principle could never correspond to each other, he accepts and justifies the gap between the classification models and reality. In the process, as I shall later explain, he comes to treat genres as if they were merely technical terms, instruments of research that have, at most, notational, but not conceptual value. Honko sets up his categories to serve technical use; they are neither aimed at a theoretical purpose, nor derived from a cohesive theoretical system, nor from a cultural world view. In order to formulate a single genre he employs such concepts as contents, form, style, structure, function, frequency, distribution, age and origin, which are drawn from different, often conflicting, theoretical systems.

Certainly, as instruments of research Honko's proposal represents a technical improvement upon previous classification systems, and as he points out, it also allows for further refinements. However, at this point, technical improvements are no longer sufficient. The incongruities between classification systems in folklore are conceptual not technical. As I hope to demonstrate, the diversified methods for genre analysis involve different, often incompatible, ideas about the nature of this basic category of folklore and literature. Neither folklorists nor literary critics have really come to grips with the existing differences in the concepts of genre that underlie their various categorization systems. Claudio Guillén, for example, who examines systems of poetics from historical perspective, deliberately avoids facing "the problems posed by the concept of genre itself." Yet, it is these problems, rather than their surface manifestations, which are responsible for the incongruities, discrepancies, and divergencies between the various models for genre distinctions. The choice of features for defining genres is secondary to the ideas about what folklore forms really are.

In the course of time, students of folklore have attributed to the term genre, its correlates, and the particular forms which are subsumed under it, at least four distinct meanings: A. classificatory category, B. permanent form, C. evolving form, D. form of discourse. Each concept serves a specific research purpose, but would not be applicable to other analytical problems. Once the limited capacities of each concept are recognized, the respective notions of genre can continue to function in folklore scholarship and provide a framework for suitable projects.

1. Genres as Classificatory Categories

During the late nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century, the formulation of a classification system in folklore was considered a prerequisite for any progress in scientific research. Such a strategy had pragmatic and logical foundations as well as precedents in other disciplines. A coherent classification system introduces principles of order into an apparent chaotic mass of information, by establishing features,
forms and subjects as criteria for organization, and revealing patterns in multitudes of details and individual cases. The eighteenth century Swedish botanist, Carolus Linnaeus (1707–1778), provided a model. His classification revolutionized the biological sciences, and by inference, students of folklore projected that a folklore classification system would have the same effect on research into traditional life and literature.

Theoretically the different genres of folklore could have been ideal categories for such an organization scheme. Goethe’s analogy between forms in nature and genres in poetry would have yielded support to such a system. In fact, neither assumption proved true. Classification systems did not have the same effect in folklore that they had in natural sciences, and genres played a secondary role in their formation. While Linnaeus discovered the order inherent in nature, folklorists constructed models of ideal order and imposed them upon the reality of tradition. Their purpose was not the discovery of regularities and patterns, but the design of a system which would facilitate the historical reconstruction of themes, tales and motifs and tracing of their geographical distribution. In the pursuit of that goal they preferred to ignore, rather than to accentuate, the boundaries between genres of folklore. For example, Walter Anderson, whose monograph, Kaiser und Äbt, was hailed as a classic example of this kind of scholarship, draws freely upon exempla, ballads, Märchen and jokes, to trace the history of his narrative. In fact the fundamental historic geographic metaphor of diffusion, “like ripples in a pond,” enforces the neglect of genre distinctions. They are insignificant in light of the major research aim of the historic-geographic method. Since “the same tale in different lands takes on varying forms and is variously received by hearers and readers,” and since themes and motifs are transmitted from one Märchen to another and then migrated farther in a new form until they have entered a new union and then move on a new path, there is neither sense nor purpose to the delineation of the actual distinctive features of forms of folklore.

Consequently, the notion of genre has had only a secondary role in the classificatory effort of folklore scholarship. It was either taken for granted, or became a criterion for sub-divisions of folk narratives, but was never defined as a conceptual category. Except for Stith Thompson, Motif-Index of Folk-Literature, 6 vols, which has a comprehensive design, the indices, anthologies and collections of folklore often use a generic framework. Tales and songs, like the biblical linen and wool (Deuteronomy 22:11), did not mingle well in the same work. Within each volume, terms of genres designated chapters and sub-divisions. For example, The Types of the Folktales is organized in terms of “animal tales,” “ordinary folk-tales,” “jokes and anecdotes,” “formula tales,” and “unclassified tales.” Save the last, each of these groups is apparently a prose narrative genre. However, it is the last division that gives away the concept of genre that underlies this and other similar works. These terms for genres designate classificatory categories. They form a storage and retrieval system which facilitates the archival filing of texts and their usage in research. Historical research in folklore has been content oriented and has used existing terms of folklore forms to identify similarities and variations in the content of narratives, for example, without regard for the cultural perception or conception of genres, nor for their intrinsic literary qualities.

Recently Lauri Honko has spelled out the concept of genre that underlies the historic-geographic research method. He attempts to offer us a string which will guide us in the labyrinth of genre definitions and provide direction for the future; but in fact he elucidates the past. He borrows a concept from Max Weber and an approach to literature from Benedetto Croce and, applying them to folklore scholarship, Honko proposes to regard genres as “ideal types” and not as real entities. Each text constitutes a particular constellation of relations between stylistic, structural, thematic and functional and historical factors which only approximate an ideal system. The relationship between single texts, recorded in tradition, and the ideal type — the classificatory category — needs to be defined anew in each case. While Honko, no doubt, provides a broader base for classification of folklore forms than that espoused by the historical-geographic method, he still maintains their concept of genre. It is basically a category for classification. Honko’s suggestions to consider functional, structural and other attributes of a genre, indeed increases the number of factors for which there is a need to account in the formulation of a classificatory category. But the combination of criteria does not amount to a new systemic theory. Rather it is merely a restatement, albeit refined, of a concept that has been employed in practice until now. In the conduct of historic-geographic inquiry genres have been regarded as ideal types in archives, museums and libraries; there they have been instruments of storage and retrieval of information. The addition of elements to the ideal construct does not change this basic concept of the newly formulated category of genre. These “ideal types” of folklore forms exist in filing cabinets and analytical dialogues of scholars; in culture itself, according to Honko, there is only a multitude of texts, each of which embodies a unique constellation of relationships between these elements.

The concept of genre as a classificatory category is not limited to past scholarship and the historic-geographic method. Modern scholars incorporate it into their generic formulation of genres and utilize the notion in discussing the systemization of performance and literary analysis, as, for example, Roger Abrahms and Wolfgang Kosack have done. These two scholars consider genres as classificatory categories which relate to each other in addition to the individual texts. They order genres along a scale between polar opposite of “total interpersonal involvement” and “total removal” in Abraham’s scheme or between rhythmic and prosaic text on the one hand and religious and suspense narration on the other hand in Kosack’s model. Each genre has a position in relation to all other forms within these frameworks of polarities. At the same time each individual text approximates one of these classificatory categories, and as the resemblance to one of these ideal types decreases, it increases in relation to the next category along these scales.

While the same notion of genre could serve more than one research method, it often happens that within a single school two or more of these concepts are employed. For example, scholars who shared the historic-geographic interest in folklore did not consistently maintain the concept of genre as a classificatory category, but changed their notion of genres as they shifted their scholarly concerns. For example, Carl W. von Sydow, in spite of his ardent criticism of the Aarne-Thompson classification system, has actually conceived of genres in the same way as most folklorists who traced the history and the geographical distribution of themes. He has coined new terms — the memorate, the fabulate and the
chimerate — each having certain distinctive features, but, like Honko after him, he improved the system of classification while maintaining the same concept of genre. However, when von Sydow formulates principles of narrative migrations, he shifts gears and concepts completely. In his theory of diffusion of themes he carries out the analogy between oral tradition and nature to the extreme, suggesting that versions of tales be considered as the products of a distinct cultural and linguistic area. The use of the botanical term ‘ocicotype’ is symptomatic of his conceptual shift. While, in the main, he employed the term ‘ocicotype’ in regard to the diffusion of particular narratives, von Sydow also applied the principles of this idea to genre theory. He suggested that not only a single tale, but an entire folklore form could be indigenous to one, and only one, cultural environment. The Märchen is Indo-European, the novella — Semitic, the fable — Hellenistic, and so on and so forth. When literary history contradicts his premise he explains it away by borrowing and assumes that the purity of the form has been affected. Such a theory relies on a completely different concept of genre. These kinds of folklore are no longer abstract classificatory categories, but forms that have a historic and linguistic reality in cultures and societies.

2. Genres as Permanent Forms

Von Sydow is still wavering between two concepts of genre, but the evolutionary, functional, and structural studies in folklore consistently maintain that genres are real cultural entities. They exist in the oral traditions of the world, constituting the backbone of folklore. They are, to use Kenneth Burke’s term, the permanent forms that underlie both changing historical emphases and differing cultural views and usages. They have an independent literary integrity which withstands social variations and technological developments.

2.1. Evolutionary Approaches. The evolutionary emphasis in nineteenth century anthropology and folklore in Britain was on ideas and mental capabilities, not on literary forms. In the views of Tylor, Lang, Frazer and Gomme, man progressed toward rationality, and evolved from magical to religious to scientific thought. But throughout man’s evolutionary phases his folklore forms remained constant. The proverb of Tylor’s animistic man does not differ in kind from the proverb of the rational man, only their position in culture and society change. In fact folklore genres stand in reverse order to the evolutionary phases. As permanent forms they continue their existence in a changing society, but as the culture progresses upward, their position in society, and in the hierarchy of genre, is down-graded. Folklore forms that were central in the cultures of early evolutionary phases, remained identical in form in later stages of progress, but began to occupy peripheral positions. Tylor is very specific in that regard. He contends that “the proverb has not changed its character in the course of history; but has retained from first to last a precisely definite type.” However, while in earlier stages of civilization they had indeed a vast importance, in modern times they are only “relics of ancestral wisdom.” Proverbs are a constant factor in an otherwise changing society, they are a permanent form, an invariable element, which survives progress yet loses significance as man advances in knowledge. Other evolutionists viewed the relationship between genres and cultural advances somewhat differently. For Alice B. Gomme, for example, evolution acted, in regard to folklore genres, like a centrifugal force, pushing themes from culturally central genres to the marginal forms. With the evolution of man there is a different distribution of subjects and forms. The subject of a central ritual of human sacrifice, which is the focus of social actions at one stage, becomes the theme of a nursery rhyme and children’s game at later years.

The concept of genre as a permanent form in changing cultural situations was not confined to nineteenth century British anthropologists and folklorists. In fact, earlier the Grimm Brothers formulated a similar concept of genre, although they described and interpreted change in historical not evolutionary terms. Cultural contacts and religious conflicts affected the relations between form and content in oral tradition. Under the impact of Christianity the themes of European pagan myths broke down into fairy stories, proverbs, riddles and verbal images and manifested themselves in peasant customs and dialect expressions. In other words, historical circumstances, rather than evolution, change the distribution of themes among the forms of folklore. Each genre has distinct attributes and capabilities, but under differing historical and cultural circumstances the same subject would appear in other genres that correspond to these changes. Myth, for example, requires the attitude of belief, but in its absence the same theme would be transformed into a fairy-tale.

Their theories still have currency in modern scholarship, and even serve as a basis for a classification system of genres. Without necessarily alluding to his illustrious predecessors, C. Scott Littleton has proposed “A Two-Dimensional Scheme for the Classification of Narratives.” He suggests that, in the course of progress and historical developments, European societies change their attitude to their narrative themes in oral tradition along the axes of the factual and fabulous, and the sacred and secular. With the increase of rationality in European civilizations Littleton assumes, there had been a constant re-evaluation of narrative themes, changing of their positions along these axes. Each position, however, means a definite genre of oral tradition. As the cultural attitudes toward a theme change and there is an increase or decrease of either factual or fabulous, sacred or secular elements in a narrative, there is a shift in its position along these axes. Thus according to this view, the genres are permanent and their place in the scales of truth and religiosity is constant, only their themes may vary.

2.2. Functional Approaches. The functional theory in anthropology and folklore adds a dynamic aspect to genres as permanent forms of expression. They do not merely exist as constant verbal forms in culture, but also play an active role in social affairs. Malinowski, who considers genres within his general functional theory of culture, reifies them as effective acting entities. His functional theory serves as the basis for an explanation of the biological, social and cultural survival of the group. In reaction to cultural evolutionary theory in anthropology, he changed the focus of inquiry from the explanation of surviving relics in modern life, to the survival of a group as a whole. Every single element in culture, including folklore genres, is a contributing factor to the maintenance and continuity of social groups. Accordingly, “Myth expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouchers for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man. Myth is thus a vital ingredient of human civilization; it is not an idle tale, but a hard worked active force; it is not an intellectual
which fulfill these functions constitute only a relative system bound by ethnic cognition, performance and language. Aware of the difficulties involved, Bascom nevertheless attempts to synchronize between the native and the analytical categorization of prose narratives.

Myth, legend and folklore are not proposed as universally recognized categories, but as analytical concepts which can be meaningfully applied cross-culturally even when other systems of 'native categories' are locally recognized. They derive from the tripartite classification employed by students of European folklore, and presumably reflect the 'native categories' of the 'folk' of Europe; but they are easily reducible to the dual classification recognized in those societies which, as we shall see, group myths and legends into a single category ('myth-legend'), distinct from folktales which are fictional.

Actually the discrepancy between the native categories and analytical concepts is not the only difficulty that Bascom faces. More crucial are the differing concepts of genre upon which the ethnic-particular and the cross-cultural systems are based. If forms such as myth, legend, and folklore are analytical concepts, then they are ideal types which each tale only approximates. But ideal types cannot be subject to the attitude of belief and cannot have a cultural context of narration — only individual tales can. If, in spite of that predicament, Bascom applies the criteria of time, place, and belief to genres and proceeds to construct a classification system on that basis, he must consider them as permanent forms and classificatory categories at the same time. However, while each of these two concepts of genres has its own logical validity, the irreconcilable differences between them do not allow for their combination without bending ethnographic information or sacrificing consistency.

2.3. Structural-Morphological Approach. Structural-morphological analyses of folklore forms avoided vacillating between concepts of genres, and consistently assume their exististance in oral tradition. Such a premise has actually been the only justification for the structural-morphological analyses of riddles, proverbs, tales and legends. Had these types of folklore been merely conceptual classificatory categories there would have been no reason to define their formal features. Structuralism would have amounted to a chess-game one plays with himself. The ultimate purpose of structural-morphological studies in folklore is the discovery of the distinctive features of each genre, their relations within the respective forms, and their capacity to differentiate genres within the totality of oral tradition. Whether these attributes are universal and common to respective genres in all cultures, or whether they are particular and are part of the cultural system of communication is still a controversial point. Alan Dundes, for example, has made the boldest statements in regard to the universal existence of genres. Not only does he assume genres to be permanent forms of oral tradition, but he also imposits upon the methodological priority of structural analysis in the scientific inquiry of folklore. He states "the primary need of folklore as a science is a descriptive structural analysis of all genres of folklore." Together with Robert Georges he claims that "an immediate aim of structural analysis in folklore is to define the genres of folklore. Once these genres have been defined in terms of internal morphological characteristics, one will be better able to proceed to the interesting problems of function of folklore forms in particular cultures." Georges and Dundes thus assume the universality of folklore genres, and the universality of their structural-formal features. Myth, legend, tale, riddles, proverbs and songs are subject to variation and change only on the thematic and stylistic levels; their structural features are assumed to be universal. The communicative attributes of genres in each particular culture are considered a surface structure based upon universal principles of generic differentiation. Any historical changes and cultural modifications in forms of folklore are just variations on basic structures which are permanently rooted in human thought, imagination and expression. Or to employ another metaphor, folklore genres are like solid vessels: they have their own structures and each society may fill them with its own appropriate cultural, historical and symbolic substance.

3. Genres as Evolving Forms — The History of Civilization Approach

The difference between the second and the third concepts of genre is fundamental, in spite of the apparent similarities. Folklorists who take either of these positions employ the same vocabulary. In particular, there is an apparent similarity between the structural-morphological approach and the analysis of forms in the history of civilization. In both case terms such as 'form,' 'gestalt,' 'relations,' and 'pattern' frequently appear. But the resemblance ends there. The premise of the structural-morphological approach is that at the basis of each text and genre there is a fundamental 'deep' structure expressed in the relations between the narrative components of a particular story. This structure has not an historical but a cognitive primacy in the formation of folklore. In contrast, the idea that genres are evolving forms is based on the premise that at the roots of each genre there is a distinct field of meaning. Folklore and literary types are historical variations evolving from simple to complex forms of
the respective fields of meanings manifested in human and verbal expressions.

André Jolles, who has developed the thesis of evolution of genres from simple (primary) to complex forms, bases his theory of the formation and transformation of genres on three fundamental ideas. a. Language has an inherent ability to transform words into forms, under precise conditions. This process is a fundamental mental activity (Geistesbeschäftigung). b. Words crystallize into forms centering around distinct fields of meanings (Bedeutungsfeld). c. When the conditions for the existence of a genre change the genre is transformed into a new type which corresponds to meaning to the earlier find. The einfache Formen are the primary, most elementary manifestations of these fields of meaning; Kunstformen, artistic genres, are more complex, historically more recent representations of the same fields of meaning. The primacy of the einfache Formen is cultural and historical. They appeared among the allegedly, most primitive peoples and in ancient times. In the course of human progress and the advance of civilization they evolved into more complex forms, still maintaining the same field of meanings.

In most cases, the criticism of Jolles has been trivial in its concern with the classification system, or, irrelevant in pondering the unverifiability of his metaphysical thesis. Those who share Jolles' views on the evolution of narrative forms have often modified his theory to such an extent that the basic concept of genre has changed. For example, Jan de Vries adopts Jolles' notion of the transformability of folklore forms in the context of changing historical circumstances, but avoids the issue of origin and primacy of forms. In his view, historical events, instead of fields of meanings, are at the core of any literary creation, within the confines of heroic legends, heroic poetry, myth, and Märchen.

According to de Vries events which are inherently extraordinary are part of an heroic life which “is a life sui generis” and does not belong to the narrative of history and cannot be lived by ordinary people. He suggests that heroic legends and heroic epics constitute the myths of society and culture and they evolve in connection with the cult of the hero. However, as the distance between this initial situation and the present social condition grows, myth is transformed into a new genre, the Märchen: it loses its pathos and becomes a projection of wishful thinking rather than a sanctification of ritualistic acts, and the unrealistic optimism which is essential to this genre turns it into a trite and insipid narrative. In other words, de Vries suggests that the transformation of myths and heroic legends into Märchen is not a formal mutation of structure, but a shift in social perspectives. This new vantage point eliminates the fundamental attitude towards myth, namely belief, and substitutes amusement. In the process the recitation of songs moves from the royal court to the children's bedroom, and the narrators change from courtly bard to nursing maids and elderly women. The urbanization of society has historically whirled myths and heroic songs from the center to the periphery of culture. Thus instead of evolution from primary to complex genres, de Vries postulates transformation of folklore genres, simple forms, into one another. But then, according to de Vries, myth, legend, song, and Märchen are no longer elemental; only the historic event retains a position of primacy. However, all are part of a sequence which is affected by social conditions and which centers around a single field of meaning, that of the heroic life.

While de Vries conceived of Jolles' concept of primary forms in historical terms, Kurt Ranke introduced to the theory of folklore genres a functional psychological dimension. He regards the primary forms of folklore as expressions which have evolved in response to basic psychological human needs. Since these needs are fundamental to the individual and society, Ranke postulates that they existed since the dawn of humanity and have continued into modern life. Consequently the folklore forms that evolved in response to these psychological conditions have not necessarily been transformed into a more complex form but have maintained their primary nature. Because of their roots in basic human needs Ranke considers them “irreducible archetypal types.” Since these forms have a psychological rather than social or cultural basis, they are universal forms of human expressions. Ranke, thus, maintains the primary nature of Jolles' einfache Formen, but discards their mutability into other complex forms. At the same time, while he substitutes the notion of a psychological function for a field of meaning, he conceives of the narrative-poetic effect of genres as if they are literary semantic fields. Any motifs, themes or plots that drift into a particular genre, transform to conform with the particular requirements and demands of the given kind of folklore. Thus, in developing Jolles' notion of einfache Formen, Ranke changes the concept of genre from an evolving to a permanent form and at the same time adopts some of the principles that underlie yet another notion of genre, that of a form of discourse.

4. Folklore Genres as Forms of Discourse

Jolles' conception of forms in terms of fields of meanings generated a fourth concept of folklore genres according to which they are distinct forms of discourse. In terms of this view, each genre has its own rhetorical features, vocabulary, disposition toward reality, use of descriptive language, types of characters, and dominant symbolic meanings — all of which mark it as a distinct form of discourse within oral tradition.

Such scholars as Max Lüthi and Lutz Röhrich have defined these forms of discourse in terms of one another so as to delineate mutually exclusive categories, for example, the Märchen and the Sage. Probably the first to approach and conceive of genre in this way were the Brothers Grimm, who observed that the Märchen is poetic while the legend is historic. They so designated these genres not only in terms of their respective contents, but also in regard to an entire range of rhetorical characteristics which they either mentioned or implied. The qualitative characteristics of the Märchen and the Sage — considered as forms of discourse — has multiplied and varied since then. They have served as a paradigm for many contrasting features: amusement and instruction, fantasy and reality, optimism and pessimism are but a few of the qualities of these respective forms. These attributes constitute a complete set of discourse features, symbols, subjects and attitudes toward Märchen and Sage and the conception of social and cultural and cosmic realities expressed in them. While the Märchen plot takes place in an unspecified time and place, transcending the natural laws, and is completely fictive, the legend is a discourse which is bound by empirical reality and the traditional concept of truth. As an expression of man, according to Lüthi, the Märchen embodies the relationship within the nuclear family, while the legend represents actions of man in the society at large. As a form of discourse any genre constitutes an ontological entity with a definable set of relations between language
symbols and reality. Once a narrative motif or theme is incorporated into any such set, it is subject to the rules of discourse that prevail in the particular form. Thus genres are distinct entities dominated by unique qualities which transform all narrative features in accordance with their rules of discourse.

Conclusion: Genres as Cultural Cognitive Categories

The different concepts of genres are presented here not for choice or preference. Each is an integral part of a theoretical system in folklore; each could adequately serve the purposes for which it has been defined, not barring refinements. The concept of folklore genres as classificatory categories may be unsatisfactory for functional and structural analyses in folklore, but it answers the needs of storage and retrieval of thematic information of tradition.

Yet, in all this, the question of generic distinctions in oral traditions remains unresolved. Within formal models the coherency of generic definitions and delineations depend solely upon the consistency and logic of the constructed system. Even when models are metaphors for reality, they reflect and represent relations in society; they rarely duplicate them as a system. In order to examine genre categories and distinctions in the folklore which people speak and sing, it is first necessary to recognize them as terms in natural languages, not formal concepts, and to consider them in the environment in which folklore scholarship encountered them to begin with, that is in the context of folklore communication and performance.

In this perspective genres are not terms but subjects of analyses. They are not formal but cultural cognitive categories of verbal expressions.

Implicit in the cultural system of genres is the grammar of folklore communication and performance. Genres have a prescriptive capacity by which they delineate distinct themes, structures, and styles as appropriate for and co-occurrent in specific forms. They have also a distinctive capacity. The particular features of genres signify the boundaries of interpretations of folklore expressions, establishing the relations of belief, humor, or amusement in regard to narrated or sung messages. Last, but not least, genres have a taxonomic capacity, relating individual expressions of folklore to a verbal tradition, and placing any new folklore utterance within the established cultural system of artistic communication.

Genres function in culture by means of sets of distinctive features which are operative on cognitive, pragmatic, and expressive levels. The taxonomic features, the conceptual categories, and the terms to name them are indicative of the cultural concepts of folklore forms, and underscore their symbolic meaning. The performance in distinctive social contexts, by socially designated persons, in relation to, or within the frame of, sets of appropriate occasions and situations, comprise the pragmatic generic features. The actual substance of genres, their themes, particular vocabulary, stylistic qualities of content and performance, and the structural relations in narrative plots, proverbial and metaphoristic expressions, constitute a set of expressive means for genre delineations and definitions. Together, all these distinctive features of all three levels, of cognition, behavior, and expression constitute a cluster of features which is a set of signs and meanings defining the symbolic significance of each genre in culture.

NOTES

1. Another version of this paper is forthcoming in the Introduction to Dan Ben-Amos (ed.) 1975. Folklore Genres. Austin. I am greatly indebted to Charles Adams, Kenneth Kenner, and Barbara Kieschnick-Ginsblett for their extremely helpful critical comments on an earlier version of this paper.

2. See Ben-Amos 1969, 275–301. Other discussions about the inadequacy of existing genre systems in folklore studies appear in most works which are cited below in the present article, and also in some general folklore studies, see for example Dorson 1972, 16–17.


7. Guillen 1970, 195. See also Schwartz 1971, 113–130. He notes that "critics have tended to stress clear of the topic of genre". An example for such a treatment of the subject is Herndal 1972. He surveys the generic theories of major modern critics without examining what is the nature of the concept they use for their poetics. In contrast, see Kohler 1940, 135–147, who discusses this very issue insisting that genres are real, not nominalistic entities. This position is a necessary important step in the explanation of the concept of genre. However, currently it is insufficient, since there is a need to explain the nature of this reality. Kohler makes fruitful suggestions in that direction as well.


9. See for example, Thompson 1955; von Sydow 1948, 69–61, 127. It should be pointed out that during his travels Linnaeus himself recorded traditional materials and proposed systems of classification for them. See von Sydow 1919, 31.

10. For a discussion about Goethe's morphological ideas, literary genres in general, and their relationship to morphological and classificatory concepts in folklore, particularly those of Vladimir Propp, see Breyer Mayer 1972, 59–66.

11. Taylor 1964, 120–121. See also Thompson 1946, 449.

12. Thompson 1946, 22.


17. Ibid., 60–87.

18. Ibid., 51, 243.


22. Ibid., 50. Note that Taylor's concept of genres associated with religious beliefs and practices differs from what has been stated above. For example, he regards formal prayers as genres that evolved from charm formulas. The contents of the two forms are similar, but their style and verbal renditions are different. See Taylor 1958 (1878), 456–459. This position is consistent with his theory about the evolution of man's religions.


24. Grimm 1883–1888 abound with examples illustrating their points of view. See also Thompson 1946, 368–372, and for quotation of their own statement in that regard see Peppard 1971, 50.


30. Ibid., 5.


32. Geoghegan and Dundes 1963, 111.

33. For a discussion of structural analysis in folklore and the question of universals see Voigt 1972, 57–72.

34. Jolles 1929. For a biographical sketch and a brief evaluation of his work see Thys 1964, 41–48.

35. For Jolles' linguistic contribution to this concept see Jolles 1934, 97–109.

36. See for example von Sydow 1948, 60–64. For explicatory, mostly favorable discussions of Jolles' approach to the problem of folklore genres see Bausinger 1968, 51–64; Berensohn 1930–1933, 484–498; Mohr 1958, 321–328; Petch 1932, 355–369.

37. See de Vries 1963 and 1954.


39. For a typology of discourse see Morris 1971, 203–232. Morris does not refer to any folklore genre as a form of discourse, although he considers 'mythical discourse' as a distinct type (Morris 1971, 213–214). 'The notion of 'form of discourse', is used here more
loosely than in the analytical system that Morris developed.


49 Brothers Grimm 1891, vii.


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