A Companion to Folklore
Edited by Regina F. Bendix and Galit Hasan-Rokem

This book presents challenging and inspiring essays about a field that is often misconceived as the harbor of tradition. The volume succeeds in representing folklore as a vital component of human existence and folkloristics as an indispensable discipline within the humanities.

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Neighborhood: Jewish Narrative Dialogues in Late Antiquity (Berkeley 2003); “Dialogue as Ethical Conduct: The Folk Festival that Was Not,” Research Ethics in Studies of Culture and Social Life. FFC 292 (2007), eds. B. G. Alver et al., pp. 192–208; “Jews as Postcards, or Postcards as Jews: Mobility in a Modern Genre,” Jewish Quarterly Review 99/4 (2009): 505–546. She has served as President of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research (1998–2005), and as Head of the Mandel Institute of Jewish Studies at the Hebrew University (2001–2004), as Visiting Professor – among other institutions – at the University of California, Berkeley, the University of Pennsylvania, and the University of Chicago, and has been Fellow at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, at the Institute for Advanced Studies, and at Scholion – Interdisciplinary Research Center in Jewish Studies at the Hebrew University.

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INTRODUCTION

Regina F. Bendix and
Galit Hasan-Rokem

Once, a number of blind men encountered an elephant. Every one of them touched one of the parts of its body with his hand and imagined the animal in his mind. Then they turned away. The one who had touched the leg said that the shape of the elephant was long and round like the trunk of a tree or a palm tree. The one who had touched the back thought that its shape was similar to that of a high mountain or a hill. The one who had touched its trunk described it as something smooth without any bones. And the one who had touched its ear thought it to be of a large size, thin, and constantly moving. In that manner, each of the blind men described that part of the animal that he himself had sensed. At the same time, each of them said something different from the others and accused them of misjudgment and inaccuracy in relation to the elephant’s shape as sensed by himself.¹

What do people in general think of when they hear the word folklore: stories, festivals, open air museums, holiday greetings and party games? Masks, riddles, lullabies, and fortune cookies? Crafts and knowledge of healing plants? All of these and much more is comprised in the term folklore and much as in the ancient parable about the wondrous elephant, the field of folklore research unfolds as a multifaceted array of learning, best understood when many views, perspectives, and experiences are combined. This book is meant to introduce its readers to folklore studies by illustrating how folklore has stimulated imaginations and sent individuals to places near and far, to forgotten books and internet blogs – all to study folklore where it lived and lives. Becoming a folklore scholar involves questions about the things that people in general call folklore. Some of the answers may grow out of looking at a number of phenomena that are called folklore or, as in some international contexts, traditional cultural expressions. Yet another set of questions deals with the context and the circumstances in which a thing, an event or a creative expression conceived of as folklore unfolds or materializes. Documenting such phenomena in the here and now, comparing them or

following their transformations through time and space are all approaches to begin understanding how individuals and groups create and transform expressive forms.

The *Companion to Folklore Studies* seeks to represent the state of the art for readers intrigued with the field’s theoretical potential and international scope. The volume has grown out of our conviction that there is not one unambiguous way of defining what folklore is and what its study comprises. For although folkloristics has always been international in aspiration, the field is also closely tied to the politics of groups and states and hence its flourishing has depended on the vagaries of state institutions. The best approach to unveil this elephant appeared thus to be an assembling of answers from colleagues engaged in the subject, its study and history around the globe: to comprehend an elephant, it is necessary to consult as many experts as possible who are situated at diverging angles in relation to the object of our investigation. As our object is not really a humongous mammal but rather a complex, multi-layered and fascinating cultural phenomenon and the equally complex intellectual engagement with it, the discourses unfolding in this book will tell more intricate tales than the leg, the tail or the trunk of the elephant.

This volume is rooted in the awareness that in the present, academic folklore studies find themselves situated among a number of other fields and sharing large portions of discourse with them. With its inconclusive situation between the humanities and the social sciences, folkloristics has lost its maverick status by being joined in this hybridity by many other fields such as large elements of, for instance, geography, psychology, archeology, and even history. The rise of inter-disciplinarity itself – in some places growing into a veritable norm of good research – has renewed the vision of folklore studies in the eyes of its practitioners and others.

Politically, the rise of folklore and its study has been associated with the grand transformations entailed in democratization and industrialization, in short, the powers of (Western) modernity (Bauman and Briggs 2003). Modernist thinking rejected the traditional – long perceived as the seedbed of folklore. In tandem with such rejection, the documentation and preservation of folklore began to flourish as a testimony to a given society’s recognition of its movement forward. Yet in the present era, we acknowledge multiple modernities unfolding at different rates within the cultural poly-systems of the world. Detraditionalization and retraditionalization have often gone hand in hand, and the state of folklore research in history and in the present has been intertwined with this dynamic, while simultaneously offering a reflexive accompaniment to it.

As a subject, folklore is vast, for there is hardly a facet of cultural practice that is not in some way shaped by expressive forces. “Folklore is everything” may sometimes be a sour judgment of those who marvel at a field that may stretch from interpreting Homeric texts to investigating immigrant gardening in a Scandinavian capital, to name just some concrete examples of the variation everyone who has been at a folklore studies conference instantly recognizes. Folkloristics comprises the study of many phenomena and areas that are studied by other disciplines. Scholars are engaged in a continuous search for the coordinates which may provide for a common ground for a disciplinary discourse of folkloristics on the one hand, and may shape a graspable entity of knowledge that can be fitted into the existing academic structures on the other hand. The history and sociology of knowledge teaches us that institutionalized forms of transmitting a collectively accumulated set of concepts and a shared methodology and terminology reifies the existence of fields. The congregation of a scholarly collective, albeit on the pages of an edited volume, marks a stance in the
INTRODUCTION

persistence of a disciplinary biography. Or, using our own disciplinary tool, a compendium such as this represents one possible incarnation within the field’s ethnography. This is also an opportunity for claiming, in addition to genealogy, the charting of new terrain.

We might propose that the striking consciousness about “Uprootings/Regroundings” (as in the title of a contemporary volume, Ahmed et al. 2003) has actualized the kinds of discourse that folklore scholars have developed in their disciplinary dialogues. Terms and concepts such as actors, creative subjects, and locality in performance have been made usable for and by folklorists themselves but also facilitate communication with other fields as a result of new geo-political and geo-cultural configurations. Fresh streams of theory and thought rejuvenate the discussion of the subjects and processes that have been at the center of folklore studies. So, rather than feeling that by composing this reader we are sending out a voice in the wilderness, we instead sense that we are in the midst of a vivid blend of voices and ideas that we can only represent here in part, but hope to stimulate even more.

In putting together this volume, we have chosen the terms “concepts and phenomena,” “location,” “reflection,” and “practice” as organizing principles for bodies of knowledge comprising the field. While we do not consider this order as constitutive or deterministic, we rather saw in sections thus named an opportunity for effective communication with the reader. Approaching folklore through its phenomena allows for an engagement at once with expressive practices and forms and theoretical approaches developed in an effort to circumscribe and understand them. Thanks to the fact that the disciplinary bookshelf is populated by works introducing folklore’s subject matter as well as by reference works offering detailed work on folklore genres and folklore in specific geographic regions and groups, we are privileged here to concentrate on overarching concepts that problematize the field rather than describe it. Our format also refers to the history of concepts launched by Reinhart Koselleck (2002), focusing on the historicity of concepts and their socially interactive power, while also throwing light on the time bound ontology and epistemology of phenomena.

Whereas the section on phenomena situates the concepts discussed in a timeframe, our next section pays full tribute to the weight of local specificity and “local knowledge” (Geertz 1983) in the field of folklore studies. Notably the terminology of folklore seems to have been particularly context-sensitive: early on there has been a tension between the need for a universally applicable term, such as “physics” or “philosophy” or even “geography” on the one hand, and on the other an emically recognizable category intelligibly referencing the subject matter and its producers, such as “Volkskunde” (German), “folklivsforskning” (Swedish), “kansanrunoudentutkimus” (Finnish) or “minsuxue” (Chinese). Each of these terms also demarcates clearly the focus of the field in particular linguistic contexts, so that, for instance, the Finnish term that has now been largely replaced by the universalizing “folkloristiikka,” reveals the preponderance of the research of epic poetry in the formative stages of the discipline there. It may be suggested that the prevailing sentiment among folklorists to deal with something of “our own” intensified the need to forge a local term in the local language. The blatant absence of a pre-existing term in classical antiquity – which provided the terminology for sciences and disciplines established much earlier – is another reason for the diversified emergence of names for our discipline, the Greek effort to revitalize “laographia” notwithstanding. This terminological multiplicity has far-reaching epistemological consequences for instance on the level of genre, so that
despite efforts being made to translate ethnic genres into analytically comparable categories (Ben-Amos 1969), the overlap very often shows discernable gaps.

The “discovery” of the expressive power of group cultures has almost always occurred at moments of political transformation in territorial histories. Such discovery has been a part of firming and defining identities, often vis-à-vis other groups vying for space and control. It is not just during the often mentioned period of Romantic nationalism that this can be observed; liberation movements, especially in postcolonial situations, but also other subaltern assertions such as ethnic or social minority group rights’ struggles, show this propensity to mobilize via taking recourse to expressive traditions (Gramsci 1985: 189–195; Scott 1990). Folklore studies could thus take shape in what one might term revolutionary or transformational moments of history, with each of these situations differing in terms of the sociopolitical goals sought and – not always – achieved. Once successful, folklore studies often found themselves in a position of assisting in the preservation of the materials that had contributed to a new political matrix, turning from a revolutionary force to a guarantor of stability and continuity. Folklore thus evolves in peculiar cycles of innovation and conservatism, which also fed into the evolving discipline and is reflected in some of the institutions established both to preserve folklore and to ensure the continuity of the field devoted to its study. Inherent to folklore is, however, the power of subversion and parallel to sanctified forms of folkloric expression, new forms constantly evolve, evading the centralizing cultural institutions responsible for canonization and similar processes. Despite such consistencies observable in the tandem workings of folklore and folklore studies (a phrase that will recur many times in this volume), every location will generate particular situations marked not just by the specificity of the political systems within which actors are engaged, but by the composition of groups present or migrating in and out of a given territory, the legitimacy they are endowed with, and, among other considerations, the languages and religions that have to come into negotiation with one another. Another continuity observable even in the selection of locations assembled here is the dialectics between academic folkloristics and public folklore practice. This is a tenuous relationship which awaits further analysis, as the political contingency of folklore and/or folklore studies within a given type of political system is far from predictable.

In addition to what we have presented as concepts and phenomena, folklore’s versatility in the cultural arena is expressed in reflexive modes that make folklore perform cultural work in the context of other registers and an array of media. We would not necessarily claim a linear order of primary-secondary on an ontological level between what we have categorized as phenomena and reflections, but the analytical procedure of observing them is easiest accomplished by positing such a relationship. Thus the respective status of source and elaboration between folklore and other media with which it is brought to interact constantly oscillates in diachronic sequences, destabilizing any hierarchical order that one might attempt to introduce into the complex. Reification and codification are thus, to an extent, brief moments of stability in a continuously and dynamically unfolding process.

Under the heading of practice, we have assembled contributions that look at the work of folklorists themselves in various arenas of professional life. What do folklorists actually do? From among the many possible answers, this section affords insights into three realms of activity: folklorists’ approach to conducting research in the field, folklorists engaged in work with and for the public sector, and folklorists building institutions to promote the endurance of the field and its subject matter.
To pay tribute to the foundational internationalism of folkloristics and to honor the profoundly different research histories and current perspectives of the field in different places around the globe, we approached both authors who were intimately familiar with (their) national research traditions and authors who have by training and fieldwork gained deep knowledge of a region or a central phenomenon. We were as pleased to win the participation of authors deeply grounded in an area as to convince scholars to tackle a subject they had thus far never considered assessing in the handbook format required here. As life takes unexpected turns, not everyone who initially committed to participate in this endeavor could ultimately complete the task in time for the present publication. Readers will undoubtedly note what appear to be glaring omissions. As editors, we have our sights firmly set on a future second edition where we would hope to include further contributions on Africa and the Middle East, ancient and historical folklore issues, theoretical aspects that have not been specifically treated here such as embodiment, gender, ecology and place-making, as well as the interfaces between folklore and other fields of expressive culture such as sports, politics, medicine, painting and sculpture, and so forth.

Finally, it is a great pleasure to thank a number of people without whom this endeavor would not have seen completion. First, we want to express our appreciation and admiration to the contributors; as we realized ourselves, compiling any one of the chapters enclosed proved to be a challenge so as to find an acceptable balance between choosing the most essential aspects of a given corner of disciplinary practice and representing adequately what may be most important to knowledgeable readers. From the cooperation with our authors, we have not only learned a great deal but have also enjoyed their intellectual patience and generosity. Further, we owe thanks to our mentors, colleagues and students who all have enriched and widened our view of the field that we share. Our thanks also go to Rosalie Robertson who approached us to take on this task and to Julia Kirk who has devotedly accompanied our toil. We place this volume into the hands of hopefully many interested readers whose criticism, reflection, and perhaps also some approval, we are expecting with some trepidation. Finally, we thank each other.

NOTES


2 We would like to refer the reader here to a small selection of introductory works, largely in English, that have to our knowledge been widely used over years or even decades: Bausinger (1980 and 1999), Brednich (2001), Dorson (1972), Dundes (1967), Oring (1986), and Toelken (1996). We would expect that there exists a range of introductory works in all languages in which folklore is taught, though given the heterogeneity of the field, producing introductory texts is also one of the most difficult tasks confronted by educators working in the field.

3 The encyclopedia on folk narrative, in German, is perhaps the major ongoing reference endeavor in the field (Brednich 1975–); the following is a selection of more concise, recent encyclopedic and handbook efforts: Brown and Rosenberg (1998), Brunvand (1996), Claus *et al.* (2003), Clements (2005), Green (1997), Haase (2008), Korom (2006), Prahlad (2006), Peek and Yankah (2004).

4 For the emergence of the term “folklore” itself which has become the most, if not totally accepted term, see Dundes 1967; cf. also Dundes 1999 for a collection of classic contributions on folklore spanning two centuries which may serve as a companion to the present volume.
REFERENCES


PART I

CONCEPTS AND PHENOMENA
INTRODUCTION TO PART I
Concepts and Phenomena

Regina F. Bendix and
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In our initial chapters we would like to introduce folklore as it is dialectically and hermeneutically processed by its practitioners as well as by those who study it. As revealed by the frequent appearance in our writing of the twin expression “folklore and folkloristics,” much of folklore studies is invested in the negotiation of the field’s epistemology between the production of folklore in communities and the definition of it as a distinct field of academic research. This peculiar interrelationship also accounts for much of the sociological reality which is perhaps unique for this field, i.e. the intense communication between the creators of folklore, on the various levels of its production, and its scientific researchers.

Investigating the social base of folklore is thus the logical point of departure of our exposition. Class, gender, age, occupation; local, linguistic, ethnic or national identity – all these are defining features of the phenomena of folklore. However, only occupation receives separate treatment among the chapters here presented, whereas the presence of the others is interlaced in the other phenomena discussed, especially in the first chapter of this section.

Tradition has always been a major term in the definition of folklore (except for pronouncedly present-oriented definitions). Tradition is of course defined relative to the culture from which the particular definition grows. What is common, however, to all definitions known is their dialogic and dialectical relationship to modernity, to which it most often serves as a foil. Post-modern thought may present some alternative configurations in which tradition becomes intertwined in the contemporary world, due to both inherent theoretical development, but perhaps even more so due to the emphatic mobility of our time where societies earlier conceptualized as traditional become in various modes suffused with characteristics of modernity (technologies, social modes of behavior, etc.). On the other hand, many societies that have been
conceptualized as modern are hosts to populations stemming from less modernized contexts.

One of the first and major areas of folklore collection and study was narrative, later termed verbal art so as to include the full span of oral expressive culture. During the initial phase of building the discipline, collecting and sorting the materials in a variety of archival modalities was a major preoccupation, linked not least to the nation building enterprise with which folklore studies was implicitly or explicitly involved. Once sizable amounts of particularly narrative and related materials (such as songs, riddles, proverbs, etc.) had been collected and published, attention increasingly turned to theoretical concerns about classification, origin, and distribution, while communities and individuals engaged in narration and transmission were largely ignored. The topics chosen to address phenomena in the realm of verbal art in the present volume represent approaches that amplified this early fascination with the materials’ existence and spread in folklore scholarship with new theoretical interests. These also reflect a new engagement with modes of producing folklore and, eventually, with actors. With poetics, orality/textuality, and performance, we direct attention to concepts that allow for the tracing of theoretical transformations which also had profound methodological consequences.

The relevance of the concept of poetics may initially be rooted in the early focus on texts and consequently in the theoretical engagement with textual disciplines, mainly literary scholarship. However, with the emergence of semiotics and its borrowing of theoretical models from verbal expressive modes, poetics has become available for the study of folklore in all its manifestations. Through the lens of poetics, genre emerges as a diagnostic, organizing, and interpretive principle, and new ways of considering issues of subjectivity, ethnicity, and universality become discernible.

Fieldwork within oral societies enabled scholars to experience narrative within settings not taking recourse to literacy and attendant canons of evaluation. Communicating such experience within the realm of folklore scholarship brought into focus orality’s creative universe, and allowed for the recognition of an emic aesthetics in counterdistinction to the analytic or etic perspective brought into the field by researchers. Scholars were challenged to evaluate and subsequently modify their own textualization practices analogously to later moves in anthropological ethnographies reflecting on “writing culture.” Performance, in turn, augmented such field experience with trajectories emanating from linguistics and rhetoric. Aided by ever more precise and mobile recording devices, scholars were able to study aspects of folkloric performance in finely grained detail, and could confirm the sophisticated behavioral repertoire and practiced skill constitutive of every instance of folklore production.

Thinking together symbol, myth and ritual is a statement on the interrelatedness of expressive media in folklore. The connection of cognitive, narrative and performative categories underlines the circulation of aesthetic as well as existential and social norms in genres that strongly emphasize the collective manifestations of folklore, often in socially privileged and revered contexts. This triad brings into the discussion established theoretical and terminological traditions that have long held sway in folklore studies and in neighboring disciplines, emphasizing the phenomenology of all three across divides of register and cultural value.

Similarly, religion as conceptualized in folkloristics today, has left behind a division into faith versus superstition and affords a holistic view of the span of devotional
practices actors engage in within established or institutionalized global religions, within the multitude of religious groupings deriving their legitimacy from localized authorities and texts, as well as within syncretistic expressions of belief. Here, as in the realm of narrative, participant observation has opened theoretically challenging vistas; in religion and its corollaries, this pertains particularly to embodied experiences of the numinous.

Work, another activity that has patterned human life most profoundly aside from religious devotion, stands out in its elementary, economic necessity. In the twenty-first century, leisure might appear to absorb creative energies even more, yet work encompasses the span from the routinized to invention, and is a domain within which human capacity for improvisation and traditionalization manifest in tandem. Work produces value in tangible ways and is thus deeply connected to another major field of folkloristic research, material culture.

Much as archives housed collected items of verbal art, museums were the home of collected material items amassed in a manner reminiscent of the accumulation of material goods through work. As sites of display and categorization, museums were the realm within which material culture studies were, for a long time, situated. Attention to processes of crafting and shaping on the one hand and the world of consumption on the other oriented folklorists to new ways of engaging with materiality intellectually while also leading to reflection of exhibitionary practice in museums.