

Dan Ben-Amos (author), Henry Glassie, and Elliott Oring, eds., *Folklore Concepts: Histories and Critiques*

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Since the publication of his seminal essay “Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context” in 1971, Dan Ben-Amos has been one of the intellectual leaders of international folkloristics. This collection, edited by Henry Glassie and Elliott Oring—two other masters of the discipline—brings together twelve articles representing the theoretical views, methodological principles, critical statements, and scholarly creeds of Ben-Amos. The first articles in the book were written in the 1960s, while the last, “A Definition of Folklore: A Personal Narrative,” appeared in 2014. Although the sequence of articles does not follow the chronological order of writing, the outcome is a coherent and consolidated work, expressing systematic thinking that ties the volume together. As the author himself notes in the final passage, the concept of folklore defined by him in his early career sustained him and continued to be the fundamental premise of his studies (215).

Thematically the book mainly reflects trans-Atlantic folkloristics: American, European, and Israeli scholarship and their mutual relations, on top of which the temporal scope of the book is vast. Starting from references to the folklore of ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Classical Greece, it ranges to the Hellenistic author Marcus Terentius Varro and extends to sixteenth-, seventeenth-, and eighteenth-century Europeans, such as the cosmographer Sebastian Muenster, the Swedish king Gustavus Adolphus, and the philosopher Giambattista Vico. The focal points of the book are linked with the formation of the academic study of folklore in the nineteenth century and the developments of the discipline in the twentieth century, with scholars such as Roger Abrahams, Richard Dorson, Alan Dundes, Kenneth Goldstein, and Dell Hymes as its pioneers. There is one limit, however. Thematically, Ben-Amos addresses the pre-internet age of scholarship, which does not mean that his theoretical deliberations are not relevant to digital-age researchers. They certainly are.

Next, let us study some of the thought lines that link different articles and their conceptual foundations. The short Preface by Ben-Amos is the only text written by him in this volume that has not been published before; it offers a concise outline of his understanding of folklore as a distinct phenomenon of culture and category of knowledge. Ben-Amos firstly sees folklore as a system of communicative acts within a broad framework, as it is related to “other social and cultural systems, such as those of religion, art, law, values, governance, kinship, and, in literate societies, literature, art, popular culture, film, and social media” (xx). Secondly, folklore appears as a cultural symbol in ideological movements, starting with Romantic nationalism, and thirdly, as a research subject. The preface takes the reader to the first essay, “The Idea of Folklore: An Essay.” It outlines some attributes of the concept, such as traditionalism, irrationality, rurality, and orality, which regrettably became its normative traits, defining its substance in early

scholarship. In the second article, Ben-Amos shows that some of the premises of folklore studies in Europe derived from the other side of the Atlantic, specifically in the cultural encounter between Europeans and Native Americans, which invigorated the discussion about barbarians as the stigmatized others and led to the discovery of “folklore” among native European cultures. The third article, the beautifully written “Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context,” liberates “folklore” from the burden of substantialism and famously identifies it as “artistic communication in small groups” (34). The essay belongs to the set of absolute classics of folklore studies—a handful of evergreen fundamental texts, such as “Epic Laws of Folk Narrative” by Axel Olrik, “Folklore as a Special Form of Creation” by Roman Jakobson and Peter Bogatyrëv, “Four Functions of Folklore” by William Bascom, and “Who Are the Folk?” by Alan Dundes. (The defining folklore article by Ben-Amos is complemented by the final essay in the book, offering several insightful reminiscences of its genesis and somewhat troublesome early reception.)

Several articles in the book examine the semantics and application of basic concepts in folkloristics. “Analytical Categories and Ethnic Genres” highlights the important distinction between etic and emic outlooks and nominalistic and realistic approaches to the genre. Ben-Amos outlines the ethnic genre as “a verbal art form consisting of thematic and behavioral attributes” (54). “The Seven Strands of Tradition: Varieties in Its Meaning in American Folklore Studies” offers a concise analysis of the uses and meanings of the term “tradition” in the works of American folklorists. Consciously omitted from the communication-oriented definition of folklore by Ben-Amos, “tradition” appears as a dominant marker in folkloristic discourse worldwide. As a semantically overloaded word, it expresses diverse meanings, pinpointed by Ben-Amos as lore, canon, process, mass, culture, langue, and performance. The article on the history of folklore studies reflects on the marginal status of the discipline in the American academy. Remarkably, Ben-Amos also notes the close interrelationship of folklore studies “with nonacademic trends of thought and action” (104), which today appears as one of its major assets and resources, definitely not a weakness. “The Concept of Motif in Folklore” reflects the meanings of the term in international scholarship, ranging from the smallest persistent elements in narratives, as understood by Stith Thompson, to artistic transformations of life situations in the ideas of Wilhelm Dilthey. Whereas some concepts appear as distinctly defined in the works of single scholars, the general trends in folkloristics expose broad variation in meaning-making and usage of basic vocabulary. “Context,” which is analyzed in the next article in the book, reveals the epistemological shift from explanations to interpretations in scholarship. As the meanings of texts are shaped by their contexts (141), the attention of scholars has shifted from genre-specific contexts to the contexts of the situation and of culture. Whereas the situation appears as “the narrowest, most direct context for speaking folklore,” culture is its “broadest framework for the perception and interpretation” (146).

In this book, Ben-Amos has analyzed folkloristic discourse with methods similar to those used in the study of folklore. The early article “Two Benin Storytellers” is an exceptional piece of scholarship in this volume, which addresses folkloric performance in a social context. Ben-Amos examines storytelling through the prism of tradition and innovation, with a focus on artistic communication with the audience. The article on “induced natural context” is also linked to fieldwork—conceptualized by Kenneth Goldstein as a lab of folkloristic experiments. Goldstein’s idea of simulating natural folkloric events was motivated by the conceptual dichotomy between the authentic

and fake and his efforts to document “pure” folklore that has not been contaminated by “artificial” interview situations and the presence of a scholar. Folkloristics has today moved far beyond the category of authenticity, but as Ben-Amos shows, there is something much more in these early ideas of Goldstein: the new theory of cognitive folklore studies. Generally, Ben-Amos maintains a constructive relationship with the past, and his critiques help to formulate scholarly agendas for the future of the discipline. His strongly polemical article “The Name Is the Thing” also carries the positive agenda of maintaining the identity of folkloristics as a distinct discipline. At the American Folklore Society meeting in 1996, some of his colleagues had called for the term “folklore” to be abandoned in scholarship because of its ideological baggage and negative connotations in the American academy. Ben-Amos resolutely argues for maintaining the term and declares “the evaluation of folklore as a discipline depends on the quality of our scholarship, not our name” (191).

It is hard to imagine the possible mess that might have been caused by wiping the word “folklore” from American research journals and the name of American Folklore Society—with likely conflicts and splits between the “traditionalists” and the “revolutionaries”—and the weakening of the academic standing of the discipline. This would also have sent a confusing signal to international folkloristics (comparable to smaller disorienting steps, such as renaming the well-established journal *Asian Folklore Studies* to *Asian Ethnology*). As we know, in many regions, including Asia, “folklore” does not carry negative connotations, and the related discipline is developing rapidly as new folklore programs and departments are opened. The work of Dan Ben-Amos has contributed to the prestige and advancement of international folkloristics. Remarkably, his first reader was published nearly forty years ago, in India, with “intention to advance the systematic study of folklore” (Ben-Amos 1982, vii). Now *Folklore Concepts* is a more comprehensive anthology, and its significance equals the “greatest hits” volumes of other leading folklorists such as Alan Dundes (2007) and Lauri Honko (2013), whose works belong to the primary readings in academic training. The editors Henry Glassie and Elliott Oring have done an impressive and thoughtful job in selecting the articles, tying them together, and writing the introductions. Perhaps the next print of *Folklore Concepts* could be even more inclusive? There might be a place for other articles by Ben-Amos, such as the polemical texts “Do We Need Ideal Types (in Folklore)? An Address to Lauri Honko” (1992) and “Straparola: The Revolution That Was Not” (2010), as well as “The Concepts of Genre in Folklore” (1976), which expresses comprehensive typological thinking about the genre as an orienting concept in folkloristics. Perhaps there could also be space for new works, yet to be written by Ben-Amos, whose ideas and works have inspired folklorists worldwide.

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