

Georges, Robert A. and Michael Owen Jones. *Folkloristics: An Introduction*.
Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995. ix + 336 pages.
Illustrations, musical examples, index. Cloth US\$39.95; ISBN
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As soon as folklore or folkloristics began to be recognized as a respectable discipline, particularly on the university campus, reading materials or what we sometimes call “textbooks” for classroom use began appearing. These readings, more often than not, also helped the layman if he was interested in knowing what folklore or oral tradition was all about. At least in the English speaking world, as far as my knowledge goes, a dozen or more such books are still in use in almost every country where folkloristics or folklore studies is taught or researched as a discipline. Indeed, I myself wrote in English two such books for use in India.

Writing such books was not a fashion, but a necessity for folklore studies. Folklore as an important discipline was given recognition reluctantly—and this is still true in many parts of the world. It also was misunderstood for a long time due to the inherent controversies in respect to the definition, methods, and boundaries of folklore. Therefore, it became important for scholars to justify the claim that folklore was as serious a discipline as any other. I guess it did make an impact and the labor of these scholars did not go to waste since today we find that folklore is considered a respectable discipline and flourishes in many countries.

With the growth of folklore as a discipline, its areas of operation began widening and, accordingly, its theoretical discourse also began changing. This growth put new demands on scholars and provided new concepts with wider theoretical bias that were incorporated in books that were designed for the study of this important phenomenon as a scientific inquiry. This has happened with other disciplines as well.

The book under review is a departure from the traditional frameworks of studying folklore. For instance, traditionally folklorists used the term “folklore” for both the data and its scientific study. This book uses “folkloristics” for the study of folklore. Similarly, some books that were meant to present scientific frameworks for serious study of folklore either depended heavily on the genres (although the concept of genre in itself was blurred and remains so even now) or the theories and methods that they intended to present. This book offers a new way of understanding and looking at folklore as outlined by the authors. Consider for example their following remarks:

This book differs in that it focuses on the study of folklore as a discipline, identifiable as *folkloristics*. For there has been a community of scholars who focus upon folklore solely or principally in their inquiries and who have created through their research, teaching, and publications a distinctive field of study. We have organized the book around the principal perspectives that have developed in and guided the discipline.... folklore can be conceptualized and studied in four ways: as (1) historical artifact, (2) describable and transmissible entity, (3) culture, and (4) behavior. (22)

In the first part of the book, “Folklore as Historical Artifact,” for example, the authors discuss in detail folkloristics as a historical science in the context of the seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century European intellectual models: the “mechanistic” and the “organic” model. The evolution of folkloristics was triggered by the organic model; nationalism and comparativism became its serious theoretical concepts and the “adoption and application of the Indo-European hypothesis... provided a means of avoiding a potential conflict between a monocultural and multicultural approach to folklore study” (41). The survival of folklore, its continuity and revival, and folklore as historical source—concepts which gave rise to a variety of theoretical perspectives in folkloristics—are also very nicely discussed in the same section with a fresh outlook.

In the second section, “Folklore as Describable and Transmissible Entity,” folklore is discussed as “genre” and “type.” This chapter “establishes folklore’s categorical variety by focusing on the expressive forms of which the data for folkloristics are most often examples”

(93). This chapter also makes it very clear that folklore is transmissible through space and time, and addresses the questions about the nature and consequences of transmission. The importance of genre and type are, according to the authors, fundamental in folkloristics, and the creation of generic and type sets is a basic and essential task that every folklorist must carry out. While discussing and explaining the dissemination of folklore, the authors explain at length the concepts that have been highly important for the growth and development of theoretical folkloristics and yet have been misunderstood or misinterpreted both by students and scholars of folkloristics. These concepts include “normalform,” “diffusion,” “type distribution,” “oicotypes,” “monogenesis,” “polygenesis,” and “automigration.”

The third section, “Folklore as Culture,” deals with folklore as an aspect of culture, its relationship with other cultural phenomena, its appearance in national and tribal contexts, and its status in social subgroups and communities. This section also discusses what we these days know as “multicultural communication,” which deals with contact between immigrant groups and host societies as a result of travel and migration, and offers entirely new dimensions to the diffusion of folklore in the modern world. These dimensions include the bilingual or multilingual nature of some societies, their world views, etc., as well as the status of folklore in creole and pidgin conditions. Of course very few folklorists have seriously studied such dimensions of folklore in the modern world.

Similarly, in the fourth section, “Folklore as Behavior,” the relationship of human psychology and folklore are described at length and supported with sufficient examples. The authors, unlike similar earlier attempts, interestingly discuss in detail the concepts of psychology before relating it to the theoretical framework of folkloristics. They discuss Skinner’s concept of “operant behavior” in relation to Clyde Kluckhohn’s principle of “reinforcement” in explaining the persistence of myths or other items of folklore among ethnic communities. How psychology has been used to interpret and explain folklore is discussed in detail in a part of this section entitled “Psychoanalytically Oriented Studies.” The modern concerns of folkloristics such as the “biographical” context of folklore or folklore as “event,” which gave rise to such theoretical perspectives as personal narrative, oral history, the performance theory, etc., are equally well discussed in the same chapter. This is followed by “Conclusion: In Retrospect” in which the whole idea of this very neat and fresh book is summarized and repeated—repeated because books that break new grounds need to repeat what such books have to say.

Traditionally such books on folkloristics have been highly dependent on textual folklore, sometimes called “folk literature.” These attempts excluded folklife studies from the theoretical discourse these books presented, which by and large followed a chronological order in the presentation of narrative theories in the strict sense. Naturally the whole perspective suffered from overlapping and confusion. The book under review has avoided those pitfalls and views the entire theoretical perspective of folkloristics entirely differently, and on more firm philosophical foundations. Every page in this book is filled with sufficient examples, pictures (some of them rare), cartoons, and drawings, which make it much easier to understand the concepts presented in the text. Although the book is, in my opinion, written primarily for the American audience, it offers enough examples from other continents: Europe, Asia, and Africa, for example. In that sense I would like to honor this excellent attempt by calling this book on folkloristics a “New Generation Book.” Since the book has appeared at the close of the millennium, I guess this name becomes more meaningful.

I would like to congratulate the two authors for this remarkable work and recommend it to every serious student and scholar of folkloristics.

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