

The word *folklore* stands for both the subject matter of traditional culture and the study of that subject matter, just as *history* refers both to past events and to the study of those events by historians.

Folklorists analyze the materials of folklore in a variety of ways. They seek to reconstruct the origin and spread of a folk tale, folk song, proverb, house type, festival, or other genre. They attempt to determine whether a ballad was composed by one bard or by a singing and dancing group, and whether a myth was once a narrative explanation of a fertility ritual.

They endeavor to explain the functions of folklore in rural and urban society. Riddles may sharpen wits. Proverbs may transmit tribal wisdom. Supernatural beliefs may offer security in a hostile world. Tales may reinforce the moral code, or provide homemade fun and fantasy.

Folklorists attempt to uncover the meaning of the traditions they record and observe, sometimes through psychoanalytical symbolism, through cultural factors, or through historical processes. Legends glorifying a hero, for example, may exalt values cherished by a given society.

Students of folklore are giving increasing attention to the structural patterns of folk materials. These structures, basic in the human mind, are thought to determine the forms of the folklore genres. It has been shown that American Indian tales, once considered formless, follow definite narrative sequences.

Other problems investigated by folklorists concern the literary use of folklore, the historical reliability of oral traditions, the aesthetic and stylistic aspects of folk literature, the correlation between folksong style and general culture traits, the effect of city life on transplanted rural and immigrant folk traditions, and many related questions. Folklore is the only subject among the humanities and social sciences in which an emphasis is placed on the ways of ordinary people, some of whom prove to be extremely gifted.

Unlike its sister subjects, folklore has not easily won its way into university curriculums, largely because of the misconceptions surrounding its name. Many European universities assign professorships and research institutes to folklore studies, but in the United States the academic recognition of folklore has only developed within the past decade. Today it is possible for a graduate student to obtain a doctor of philosophy degree in folklore and folklife at Indiana University, the University of Pennsylvania, and the University of Texas, and a master of arts degree in folklore at the University of California at Los Angeles and at Berkeley, and at the Cooperstown branch of Oneonta State College in New York. Harvard University graduated in 1970 its first group of undergraduates concentrating in folklore and mythology. Some thirty-five doctorates in folklore have been awarded by Indiana University since the first one was granted in 1953. All these degree holders have established themselves professionally and teach some folklore courses, often

THE STUDY OF FOLKLORE AND FOLKLIFE IN AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES

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on joint appointments between departments of English, anthropology, history, American studies, or modern languages.

To gain a master's or doctor's degree in folklore, the graduate student must learn the special techniques of the folklorist, such as field work, archiving, and indexing, and he must become acquainted with the worldwide scholarship on folklore. A number of Peace Corps volunteers, realizing the gaps in their training after working with peoples in underdeveloped countries, have returned to the United States to enter folklore programs. Black students, from the United States and from Africa, are also beginning to turn to advanced folklore studies, the better to appreciate and investigate the riches of their own oral cultures. Talented and inquiring students of many backgrounds are finding in folklore programs the concepts for comprehending alien and misunderstood peoples, some on their doorsteps, some in distant lands. The Ph.D. in folklore may soon become a commonplace on college faculties.

Undergraduate courses in folklore and folklife introduce the student to a new subject. He learns about the broad categories of oral traditions and material culture, and becomes aware of the pervasiveness of folk ideas and folk behavior, in the mass media as well as in the back country. College students even have their own folklore about eccentric professors and dormitory ghosts. The graduate student learns how to obtain folklore through his own researches, by interviewing and recording carriers of tradition and by combing printed sources, and how to analyze these materials comparatively. Folklorists have written doctoral dissertations on folklore in the writings of John Greenleaf Whittier, and of Rabindrinath Tagore; on the folk beliefs of villages in Thailand and Ghana; on the legends of the Hasidim in Brooklyn, and of the Yagua Indians in the forests of Peru, and on the lore of Finns, Greeks, and Danes in America. Their investigations cover the world and its peoples.