

Folklore
In Perspective
1982

There is a rapidly growing public and scholarly interest in folklore, but some confusion exists about the meaning of the word. As an academic subject, the study of folklore has led to numerous theories concerning the origin and development of various aspects of folk culture. As the content studied by folklorists, the term includes a wide variety of traditional popular forms. Folk literature, which is oral rather than written in its original state, although it might later be preserved in writing, includes myths, fairy tales, legends, sagas, romances, fables, ballads, and jokes, as well as proverbs, toasts, superstitions, and lullabies.

Another major branch of folklore is concerned with material objects such as folk arts and crafts ranging from decorative and ceremonial artifacts to building designs and traditional ways of preparing food. A third category involves custom and ritual, a society's individual way of celebrating and mourning, of pleasing its gods, and defending against its demons.

The study of folklore helps us to understand both our own and other cultures. What fascinates folklorists is the almost incredible variety of detail from one culture to another superimposed on a few major themes. All human societies seem to have a common need to explain the origin of the universe, transcend their daily lives, and to preserve and justify their values.

One early folklorist was able to identify 345 different versions of the Cinderella story, and most societies from the ancient Egyptians and Hebrews to Native Americans, Africans, and Indians have creation myths and flood stories of remarkably similar outline. Our proverb, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do," is reflected in the Nigerian version: "If you visit the home of the toads, stoop."

It is both humbling and reassuring to realize that the joke you are telling a friend in Delaware, told to you by a friend in Pennsylvania, was invented by a travel agent in Thailand.