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FOLKLORE, REFLECTING AND INFLUENCING CULTURE

Sumlin Pate
Southeastern University - Lakeland, sumlin.pate@gmail.com

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Abstract: Folklore is a unique form of storytelling that is culturally specific. This thesis argues that folklore has a dual role as it reflects a given culture and also actively shapes culture. To support this argument, opinions of various writers and folklorists are considered as well as folk ideas from various societies. Two folktales are taken from two different countries - Saudi Arabia and Estonia. In these folktales three things are considered: the qualities of the characters, the overall themes, and the morals of the folktale. This is then compared to the modern society of each culture, to see if these same themes and relationships exist within the society. Finally, the thesis considers the importance of folklore being both reflective and influential.

Folklore, Reflecting and Influencing Culture

“For most of human history, 'literature,' both fiction and poetry, has been narrated not written — heard, not read. So fairy tales, folk tales, stories from the oral tradition, are all of them the most vital connection we have with the imaginations of the ordinary men and women whose labor created our world.” —Angela Carter

As a little girl my mother would sing a song with her Granddaddy Pete about a monkey who wrapped his tale around a flagpole and faced an unfortunate outcome. She
vividly remembers this song and has now realized its cultural implications. Places around the world have individual tunes and stories like this one, that have a set of views, ideas they use as a lens to interpret the world and themselves. We can understand the views and beliefs of people in a given culture by hearing and reading the stories they tell (Bronner 55). These stories are often referred to as folklore and just as Angela Carter said, folklore is vital to understanding a given culture.

There are two approaches anthropologists have engaged to define folklore. Some believe folklore reflects culture, and define folklore as “Autobiographical ethnography – that is, it is people’s description of themselves” (Bronner 55). Alan Dundes’ definition claims that folklore is a community’s own portrayal of their views and ideas and Mubarak Altwaiji agrees stating, “Folk literature serves to sanction and validate religious, social, political, and economic institutions,” (Altwaiji 162). Altwaiji supports the idea by studying two forms of folklore within Saudi Arabia, namely poetry and music. Poetry reflected the society during Islamic and Bedouin times and acted as a way to remember events, beliefs, and views while music specifically reflected Bedouin culture, which was influenced by African and Indian cultures. Songs were written for specific festivals, jobs, livelihoods, and times of the year (Altwaiji 166, 169). The subject matter and cultural implications of both poetry and music in Saudi Arabia exemplifies how folklore reflects and preserves culture, and thus opens a window into the lives of a deceased generation (Altwaiji 170). Both Dundes and Altwaiji agree that folklore reflects and preserves culture and this is one process of viewing folklore.

Another way folklorist Alan Dundes as well as various other writers approach folklore is by claiming that folklore shapes modern society. They argue that folklore does
this by carrying the core beliefs of the past into the future, thus influencing society. They explain how folklore is filled with symbolism that conveys those beliefs (Bronner 64). Along with symbolism, world views are carried in folktales through repetition, wording, and assumptions that are all specific to that culture (Bronner 65). Dundes refers to these world views in folklore as “folk ideas,” meaning that they are fashioned by the commoner people of a society (Bronner 185). It is these “folk ideas” in folktales that can effect the beliefs of future generations. Why is folklore suitable for conveying “folk ideas?” “If one is interested in learning about folklore, one must elicit oral tradition.” Dundes believed folklore was first communicated orally, and still retains the makeup of an oral story (Bronner 59). This is fundamental to how folklore can convey these ideas. Oral communication refers to anything passed through memorization from a song to a dramatic interpretation. So, unlike a book where details are permanent, folklore is subject to many changes and evolves over time (Popescu 268). Folklore is suitable for shaping the future generations with folk ideas because it can adapt to the society around it while retaining its cultural beliefs (Dorson 24). Dundes believes this view of folklore is vital to understanding it because, “We are all folk, listen and learn, and you will understand your heritage” (Bronner 66).

While these two approaches are well supported alone, can they coexist and bolster one another? Through comparing three different cultures with a folktale from each, we can determine if the two approaches can coexist. In each folktale the theme and ideas are identified along with any cultural or societal specifications. We will consider if the ideas introduced in the folktale exists in modern culture of that nation and a short explanation of the culture in each nation will be given to best comprehend the societal
weight of each folktale. The three nations considered in this thesis are the United States of America, Estonia, and Saudi Arabia. We will reflect on a single folktale from Estonia and Saudi Arabia while considering a genre of folktales from the United States.

For us, the culture of the United States of America is accessible and easy to understand, so the thesis will consider it first. In the US there is a multitude of ideas, views, and beliefs due to its diverse culture, yet there are still nationally specific ideas in the country one of which is the view that America has “unlimited goods” (Bronner 185). This idea originated from a period when America seemed to be a land of unlimited resource and manifests itself in phrases like “The sky’s the limit” or “Anyone can be president.” The view is so deeply ingrained in commoner people that it can be found in folktales as well, the most common which is treasure tales (Bronner 185-186). Treasure tales are told all over America, from Wild West bandits, to haunted graveyards in New England and greedy plantation owners in the South. They are both reflective of American society and retain ideas that can influence future Americans. Treasure stories are told as fact, including historical details, and actual places, and always start at a given period or time, there are no “once upon a time” beginnings in treasure tales. Treasure tales are reflective of a characteristic in many American men and women of the past and present by being straight forward (Hurley 197, 198). The main theme in treasure tales can also be found in modern society, namely that wealth is available to all people. This idea still exists today taking the form of the “American dream” where hard work and determination will provide you with the life you desire (Bronner 186). America treasure tales are reflective of the factual and straight forward culture they exist in with the idea that life changing opportunities are available to all people. This idea continues to
influence modern society today. Reflecting on American folktales identifies a few things to consider when approaching other societies. These two things being the themes and mechanics of the folktales. Next we will study an Estonian folktale and the culture surrounding it.

Estonian folklore is a rich part of the history and national identity of the country. Over the course of the past eight hundred years, the folktales and cultural heritage have been tested. Estonia was not an independent country, but a land passed from one empire to the next, beginning with Germany and ending with Russia (Kallas 104). Estonian folklore became the national identity of this weary nation, and a source of Estonian pride (Kallas 105). Because of this, many Estonians had a strong desire to preserve their folklore through books, beginning in 1608, when the first book of Estonian tales was published. By 1891, an entire association was fully developed with the goal of preserving Estonian folklore (Kallas 102).

The folktale considered in this thesis is “The Peasant and The Fiend.” In this folktale a peasant’s horse dies. This peasant cannot work without a horse so he must go buy a new one. On his way, the peasant stops to eat when a gentleman passes him on a fine horse. The gentleman discovers the peasant was traveling to buy a horse and tells the peasant he will sell him his horse for a ruble, with the condition that the peasant never feeds the horse and lashes it often. The peasant agrees, and the gentleman leaves. For many years, the peasant obeys the gentleman’s orders and the horse behaves perfectly. Then one Christmas day, out of compassion for the horse, the peasant feeds it. The horse transforms into the peasant's old landlord who had died seven years ago. The landlord explains that because he had done awful things when living and avoided his salvation, he
must toil as a horse, belonging to the gentleman. The gentleman suddenly appears to take
the landlord away because the peasant had disobeyed his orders. After whipping the
landlord several times, the landlord is transformed back into a horse and they vanish
(Yolen 433-434).

To understand how this story reflects and influences Estonian culture, it is
important to recognize the characters and themes involved (Jorgensen 42). The three
characters involved are the peasant, the horse, and the gentleman. The peasant has three
specific character qualities to notice. First, the peasant is hopeful, despite the death of his
horse. Along with this the peasant is determined to keep his livelihood. His determination
leads him to obey the gentleman’s cruel demands for selling the horse. Finally, the
peasant is compassionate by giving the horse bread on Christmas day. Another important
character is the gentleman. He first seems odd and mysterious. The gentleman strangely
offers the peasant his horse for a mere ruble, and then tells the peasant to treat the horse
cruelly and he mysteriously vanishes. After discovering that the gentleman has enslaved
the landlord, treating and turning him into an animal, it can be certain that the gentleman
is evil. Probably the “fiend” mentioned in the title of this folktale is, in fact, the
gentlemen. Through these observations, the peasant is the protagonist while the
gentleman is the antagonist of this folktale (Yolen 433-434).

The clearest theme in this story is that human existence of some kind continues
after death. This theme develops when the horse turns into a landlord. As he describes his
sufferings over the past seven years, two things are evident. The first is that people
continue existing after death and can return to earth and interact with other people. The
second is that actions during this life will bear consequences in the next. The landlord
specifically mentions that he wishes he had realized his need for a savior, which hints at Christian influence in Estonia (Yolen 434).

There are two points from this folktale to compare to the current Estonian culture and society. Due to the economic shift of the Soviet Era, an economic relationship similar to that of the peasant and the landlord no longer exists. When Estonia became a communist country, any economic divide among citizens, was abolished (Tannberg). Though the dynamic of peasants and landlords is extinct today, it is reflective of a past Estonian society. Prior to the economic shift, Estonia consisted of peasants and lords (Jürjo). This society began in the Middle Ages when Germans invaded Estonia in the thirteenth century (O'Conner 7). The Germans quickly became political, social, and economical heads, while Estonians rapidly declined to peasants (O'Conner 13). This class system was ingrained in Estonia for years, leaving Estonians little room for acquiring wealth (Jürjo). Because of a loss of identity during this time, Estonians took pride in their cultural heritage through tradition and folklore. It makes sense then that the peasant would be the protagonist of this story because Estonians were peasants during this time of folklore (O'Conner 14). It can also be assumed that the cruel and now deceased landlord in the folktale was based on real landlords during the time, “The Baltic German landlords were thought to be particularly harsh with their peasants” (O'Conner 14). In the folktale the peasant is suddenly the owner of the landlord and even whips and starves him. This could reflect the desire of Estonians to become masters of their landlords and treat them as they had been treated (Yolen 434). It can be concluded that though this idea has not influenced current Estonian society, it captures past Estonian society.
The second theme in this folktale is the existence of a spiritual realm. Estonians still practice funeral customs that ensure the dead will not return to haunt the living. Some of these customs include cleaning the room the deceased died in, placing smoking juniper branches in the room to cleanse the air, thus guaranteeing that the soul of the dead would not come back, and taking the coffin to the graveyard quickly, on a winding road, to ensure the spirit could not return to the house (öunapuu). So whether people believe in ghosts today, these ideas surrounding death still exist (O'Conner 117). Furthermore, today many Estonians openly believe in spirituality (Ringvee). There are a few reasons for the growth in Estonian spirituality. Estonians were originally pagan but when Christianity entered Estonia it came through force and power (O'Conner 37). So unlike America, where Christianity was part of liberty and the founding of a new nation, or Saudi Arabia, where Islam began a time of strength and unity for the people, Christianity was a sign of oppression for the Estonians and was merely practiced from societal pressure. During this period of oppressive Christianity, folklore and pagan practices became the means for Estonians to identify and separate themselves from Christians (O'Conner 35). The presence of Christian ideals in Estonian folklore is only a reflection of the society in which Estonians were forced to live in. For example, in “The Peasant and The Fiend” there is both the idea of salvation and hell, that stems from Christianity, and more importantly the common idea of ghosts and evil spirits, that stem from pagan beliefs (Yolen 416). Estonians believe that the ghosts come to peasants when they are in unique situations (Valk 33). This happens in the “Peasant and the Fiend,” the peasant rarely ever goes horse shopping in the middle of the day, and yet when he does he ends up buying a horse that is a ghost (Yolen 415).
The presence of superstitious beliefs in modern Estonia suggests that the ideals of this folktale influence modern Estonia. The history of Estonia over the past hundred years has changed how Estonians approach religion. This begins with the Soviet Era, where Estonia was again under foreign authority. This time though, Soviets banned all religion, and forced most Estonians to be atheist (Tannberg). When communism did fall, Estonians found national identity and strength in their old folklore (Valk 31). Estonia is now an atheist country, however, many practice spirituality and are open to the belief in ghosts, and an afterlife (Ringvee). In folklore, Estonians found a common, unique part of their culture. Because Estonia has not had the liberty to develop, there folklore has remained unchanged and central to their identity (Kallas 116).

Folklore from Saudi Arabia links Bedouin world views with Islamic ideas. Prior to the rise of Islam, Saudi Arabia was filled with various types of people: some nomadic Bedouins who lived together in compounds, and some foreigners from African and middle eastern countries who congregated at large trading centers (Alwaiji 164). Bedouin were specifically influential in creating folktales so we should first answer the question, who are Bedouins (Altwaiji 170)? “Bedouin” refers to a group of people who practice the same way of life in the region from southwest Asia to North Africa (Cole 236). Bedouins lived isolated lives as the name means “desert dweller” in Arabic. Some Bedouins were nomadic while others lived in one place. Though their lifestyle had differences, they all had a common livelihood of raising livestock (Cole 237 239). Bedouins were also identified by their food, dress, and communication (Cole 237). In modern Saudi society Bedouin nomadic herdsmen, no longer thrive, however, “Today, Bedouin refers to less a way of life than to an identity,” (Cole 237).
This thesis will consider the Saudi story “The Bedouin's Gazelle.” The folktale begins with a Bedouin who goes out with his son to gather herbs and let his camel graze. On their way home, a herd of gazelles comes by and the father chases after them in hopes of killing one. The son is told to stay with the camel until the father returns. While the father is away, a monster known as a She-Ghoul, appears and eats the child. The father returns with no gazelle only to find his son is missing. He panics when he sees blood on the ground around his camel. On his way home he sees the She-Ghoul in her cave. Realizing the monster had eaten his son, the father kills her and retrieves his son from her belly. He takes the son's body home wrapped in cloth. When he arrives home the grieving father tells his wife he had gotten a gazelle and to go find a cauldron that has not cooked for a meal of mourning. The wife goes from house to house but cannot find a cauldron that has not cooked a meal of mourning. The husband then tells her, “Now our home will cook a meal of mourning, too.” He pulls back the cloth to reveal her dead son. The folktale ends with a proverb, “Of such things and the life is the world made, but lucky is the soul that God loves and calls to Himself” (Yolen, 415-416).

The language surrounding this story gives clarity to the relationships and themes of the folktale (Jorgensen 42). There are two characters to take into account: the Bedouin man and his wife. The child will not be accounted for because he dies early in the story. The Bedouin is described as a “keen hunter” who “loved nothing better than the chase” (Yolen 415). He is described this way as he hunts after gazelles and also when he kills the She-Ghoul. He also is deeply attached to his son. He is very distraught when he realizes his son is dead and treats the body with care and respect when he finds it in the She-Ghoul. These instances show that the Bedouin is strong and fatherly. The wife on the
other hand is not as thoroughly described. However, she does obey her husband when
told to go retrieve the pot. Along with this, she has connections with the other families
giving her the ability to go ask for a pot (Yolen 416). The relationship between the
Bedouin and his wife is not covered deeply in the story. The Bedouin does refer to his
wife as “dear” and she does respect and obey him. However, the Bedouin chooses to
avoid telling his wife the truth about their son’s death until after she has gone everywhere
to find a pot. Despite this, their marriage seems respectful and peaceful. There are two
themes from this folktale to compare with modern Saudi Arabia. The first is the
relationship between women and men and the second is the view of death.

To fully understand Saudi folklore, one must understand that Saudi culture has
two strong influences, “Bedouin practices and Islamic beliefs” (Altwaiji 164). Due to
heavy isolation up until the early 20th century, these two influences have retained their
power in modern Saudi Arabia (Long 18). In this folktale, both Bedouin and Islamic
influences seem evident in two themes: death and the role of men and women. After the
Bedouin reveals to his wife that their son is dead, the story ends with a moral “Of such
things and the life is the world made, but lucky is the soul that God loves and calls to
Himself” (Yolen 416). The view seems to be that all people will suffer. It is added then in
the conclusion that only those who serve God will avoid suffering after death. Today in
Saudi Arabia there remains strong cultural tradition around death including a period of
mourning three days after death. However, after this period, any form of open misery if
discouraged (Long, 71). We see in the story how the wife is unable to find a single pot
that has not cooked a meal of mourning which tells us that no one is without sorrow
(Yolen 416). Since the moral of the folktale is ‘all will suffer,’ mourning after the time of
mourning belittles other’s sufferings. Along with this, there is an Islamic belief that all are equal in the eyes of Allah (Long 39). Therefore, when the proverb says, “Of such things and the life is the world made,” it may be saying all are equal and all will have some pain (Yolen 416). This view of death is still evident in Saudi society.

Second, the folktale identifies the role of men and women in Saudi society. The bedouin man provides for and protects his family while his wife is devoted to her family by obediently serving her husband. At the beginning of the story the Bedouin is out gathering roots and later hunts after gazelles (Yolen 415). Both instances demonstrate his provision for his family. The value of man as provider is still evident in modern Saudi culture along with the value of men protecting his family (Long 64 66). The view of men as protectors also appears in “The Bedouin’s Gazelle” when the Bedouin goes and kills the She-Ghoul hoping to save his son, and protecting his wife from the monster (Yolen 415). The Bedouin can be seen both providing for and protecting his family in this folktale. The folktale also considers the role of a wife. The Bedouin returns with his “gazelle” and asks his wife to go find a pot. She does not ask questions or resist his request, but obediently and diligently serves. The story tells that she knocks on every door to find her husband’s request, and only when it cannot be found does she return home empty handed (Yolen 416). In the story the Bedouin’s wife is devoted to her husband and this value persists in modern Saudi Arabian society through women’s loyalty to husbands, family, and children (Long 64). They demonstrate this devotion in their conduct and speech as they limit their interactions with the opposite gender (Long 17). This modern practice proves that the value of an obedient and devoted wife is still upheld. The role of men and women is wrapped around the value of family and despite
great economic shifts in the 1930’s in Saudi Arabia, cultural ties to Islam have kept
family at the center of social life (Long 37).

Estonia and Saudi Arabia are drastically different. While Saudi Arabia stayed
isolated from foreign religion and regulation until the early 1900’s, outsiders have ruled
Estonia, carrying with them a variety of faiths. However, despite these differences, both
folktales considered have world views that still exist today and both folktales are
reflective of their respective society. This proves that the two approaches to folklore -
reflective and influential - can coexist. Additionally, it is more significant when folktales
are both.

The song introduced at the beginning of this thesis best explains why this form of
folklore could be so important. The song my mother described to me went like this, “Oh
the monkey wrapped his tale around the flagpole, and caught a bad cold, in his ankle.” A
few things seem very odd in this song, the first of which is that there are no monkeys in
America. Following this, it seems odd that a monkey would specifically wrap his tail
around a flagpole. In all honesty, monkeys and flagpoles do not naturally go together.
Along with these two the monkey gets a cold in his ankle. At this point the song seems
like a very silly children’s song, which was how my mother saw it for many years.

Initially, this song does not appear to reflect the American society that I know. But my mother later described to me the culture she was raised in. For instance, her
mother was told by her grandfather to wash her hands after playing with black children.
My mother clearly remembers being told, “Black people are descended from apes, can’t
you tell by their coloring, the shape of their forehead, and their jaw?” Now I recognize
that my mother was raised in a racist culture and this song she learned as a child was a
reflection of that culture. The monkey in the song referred to an African American who was somehow tied to a flagpole and was most likely there to be lynched. I was also told that her grandfather did spare her one detail, the song did not actually say the monkey got a cold in his ankles, the story said the monkey got a cold in his asshole. The song reflected the views of my mother’s grandfather and many other men and women she grew up around. The song truly says, a black man is as stupid as a monkey, it is his fault that he’s tied around this flagpole and the stupid monkey now has a cold, in his ankles.

Because this song was remembered by my mother I have a better understanding of how black people were often viewed in the Deep South. This crude folksong does not just reflect a society at a point in time; it had the potential to shape my mother’s views then and now.

This folksong my mother learned demonstrates the subtle and powerful ways that folklore can reflect and influence a culture. The song is lighthearted and silly yet it describes and was intended to promote a sad and broken part of a culture. Being aware that folklore has this power should cause us to appreciate it, long to understand it, and use it to learn from our past. From looking at folklore we can learn from the mistakes of our past and pass along the tales that we hope will shape us.
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