

# Folklore\*

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Folklore comprises the unrecorded traditions of a people — the collection of traditional customs and stories passed through the generations by word of mouth (Brunvand, 1978). Beginning in the 19th century, folklorists began to compile and publish folklore. How does folklore shape violence and conflict? I first show that the discipline of folklore emerged under the influence of Romantic Nationalism and facilitated nation building in 19th century Europe. Secondly, I show that folktales contain negative stereotypes about minority groups, often perpetuating violence against them. Lastly, I introduce folklore genres containing violent content, including warfare, revenge and heroic tales.

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## 1 Overview

Folklore comprises the unrecorded traditions of a people — the collection of traditional customs and stories passed through the generations by word of mouth. The word was coined in 1846 by the Englishman William Thoms, who used the term to replace the terminology of “popular antiquities” or “popular literature”.

The emergence of folklore as a discipline was associated with the rise of Romantic Nationalism in the late 18th century and 19th century. Figures such as the Brothers Grimm began to collect folktales from the countryside and publish them. Stories previously transmitted orally were compiled and became permanent collections. Many of the stories later appeared in children’s books and have been taught to children by their parents or in school. Since then folklore has been an active ingredient in national independence movements.

The discipline of folklore studies bears a close relationship with history. “In the early stages of man, the teller of a tale had the same function in society

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as the present-day historian, that of saving the past from oblivion by retelling events from it” (Campa, 1965). Since the 1970s the shifting focus of history onto popular culture, micro-history and oral history has further strengthened ties between history and folklore.<sup>1</sup> In addition, folklore is in close relation to anthropology, religion, comparative literature, linguistics, psychology and child development. More recently, Michalopoulos and Xue (2021) have linked folklore to economics and political science by showing that folklore is an important contributor to contemporary economic and political beliefs.

Comparative mythologists built classification systems to index folklore. Two dominant classification systems are currently in use. The Aarne–Thompson–Uther Index contains 2,401 tale types and subtypes for 135 countries, but it is centered on European folklore and includes few tale types that are only found outside of Europe. Berezkin’s *Folklore and Mythology Catalogue* includes 2,564 motifs for 958 ethnographic groups. A *motif* is “the smallest element in a tale having a power to persist in tradition” (Thompson, 1977). Multiple tales with slightly differences among them can often be distilled into one single motif. Compared to tales, motifs emphasize the commonality between tales, tend to be more concise, and more distinct from each other. In Berezkin’s Catalogue, together the 2,564 motifs represent over 120,000 globally collected tales.

Built on the body of folktales collected by thousands of anthropologists and folklorists, these classification systems allow social science researchers to overcome the difficulty of accessing folktales from around the world—which is time consuming and requires a tremendous amount of linguistic skill—and concentrate their effort on analyzing a much more limited amount of text, i.e. tale types or motifs. In the rest of the article I heavily rely on the ATU Index and Berezkin’s Catalogue to examine violence in folklore.

There have been different views towards the origin or purpose of violence in folklore. In cautionary tales, when characters ignore warnings and break social norms, they suffer a range of consequences including injuries or death. The purpose of such tales is to warn the listener of a danger. These tales are told as children’s stories over the generations.

In the rest of the article I discuss in greater details ways in which folklore is linked to violence and conflict. In Section 2, I review historical episodes in which folklore was critical to nation building via the formation of national identity and the promotion of collective action. In Section 3, I show that folklore can be a vehicle of harmful stereotypes about minority groups, such as Jews and Gypsies, and perpetuate violence towards these groups. In Sections 4, 5 and 6, I introduce warfare, revenge and heroic tales as examples of motifs and tale types that depict violence and conflict and attitudes towards them. I conclude the article with Section 7 on future research.

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<sup>1</sup>According to Peter Burke, there have been three phases in the relationship between historians and folklorists: the “age of harmony” prior to World War I; the “age of suspicion” from the 1920s to the 1970s, when historians tended to define their field narrowly as the development of the nation-state and to rely on contemporaneous sources; and the “age of rapprochement” from the 1970s (Burke, 2004).

## 2 Folklore and Romantic Nationalism

Folklore as a discipline emerged in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, under the influence of Romantic Nationalism (Abrahams, 1993). The movement of Romantic Nationalism led to calls for self-determination of nationalities and the quest to develop an identity free of foreign influences (Anderson, 2006).

A systematic effort was made to create a national literature that would arise organically from a nation's own history and cultural traditions and that would simultaneously capture the unique essence of a nation, fueling the interest in folklore collections. Folktales that were previously transmitted by word of mouth were written down and published. Aided by newspapers and radio, folk culture that used to be regional became increasingly national, facilitating nation building and national independence movements.

In an edited volume by Baycroft and Hopkin (2012), scholars shed light on how this vernacular revolution shaped Europe's peoples and politics. They investigated nationalism and folklore in the contexts of Ireland, Scotland, Finland, Germany, France, and German-Annexed Alsace among others. In considering the relative importance of scientific accuracy in folklore collections to that of providing political legitimacy, Baycroft remarked, "much of the work done on folklore in the 19th century was not overtly political in intent at all, and was undertaken because of a romantic interest in the people, or as part of wider scientific investigations by those interested in sociology or anthropology such that they could be understood through the study of folklore, folk customs, and tradition."

The origins of modern Irish nationalism, like those of other modern nationalisms, were based on propagating an Irish national identity to build on the existing culture of a group (White, 1999). While it had long been the case that native Irish society's primitive national consciousness operated primarily through its oral tradition, particularly its songs and legends, it was not until the 19th century that Douglas Hyde and Irish poets such as Charlotte Brooke and Thomas Moore pushed Irish folklore to the forefront. This effort resulted in a literary revival as well as a political revolution (Thuente, 1989). The nationalist movement in 19th century and early 20th century Ireland eventually led up to its independence from Britain.

In Nazi Germany folklore was used to create a unified Germanic identity (Kamenetsky, 1972; Dow, Dow, and Lixfeld, 1994). German folklore professors joined in the search for Nordic-Germanic symbols and gave priority to matters of immediate ideological importance to the Party (Kamenetsky, 1972). They followed the guiding principles of folklore studies which were the chauvinistic and anti-Semitic policies that governed Germany at the time.

## 3 Negative Stereotypes Towards Minorities

As a repository of historically-rooted beliefs, folklore can be replete with negative stereotypes towards minority groups, such as Jews, Gypsies, Witches,

American Southerners, First Nations and immigrants. Many such stereotypes are portrayed in cautionary tales. When characters in these tales ignore warnings, they end up being treated poorly by members of minority groups.

In the past century, folktales portraying minorities in a negative light were weaponized in times of political turmoil. In Nazi Germany, the propaganda employed proverbial slurs and stereotypes (Mieder, 1982). When the National Socialists found anti-Semitic quotations, slogans, phrases, and proverbs, they used them to spread stereotypes about Jews. Mieder concluded, “Proverbs in themselves might be harmless pieces of folk wisdom, but when they become propagandistic tools in hands of malicious persons, they can take on unexpected powers and persuasion.”

Both the Aarne–Thompson–Uther Index and Berezkin’s Catalogue include a variety of tale types or motifs that feature members of minority groups. The ATU index has as many as 40 tale types or subtypes that are related to witches. Some of the tales portray witches as evil cannibals. Tale Type 334 (“Household of the Witch”) says, “A girl or woman disregards the warning of friendly animals (or parts of her body) and visits her godmother (or grandmother) who is a cannibal. The girl sees many gruesome things (e.g. fence of bones, barrel full of blood, and her godmother with an animal’s head). When the girl tells her godmother what she has seen she is killed (devoured).”

It is noteworthy that among all 12 tale types pertaining to “cannibal” or “cannibalism”, about a quarter of them are about witches. That is to say, conditional on a tale is about cannibals, there is a one-in-four chance that it is a tale about witches. A routine association between cannibalism and witches helps to breed and perpetuate the stereotype of flesh-eating witches.

Berezkin’s Catalogue includes 72 motifs containing words such as “witch”, “witchcraft”, “wizard”, “magic”, “magician”, “sorcerer”, “sorceress” and “enchantress”. These 72 motifs span 615 ethnographic groups.

In terms of negative ethnic stereotypes, the ATU index has 26 tale types related to Jews, spanning 84 different countries. Tale Type 890 is linked to the “a pound of flesh” plot. The basic version can be stated as follows: “a contract entitles the lender (Jew, merchant, usurer, nobleman) of a sum of money (that has been used to woo or to buy a woman) to cut a pound of flesh (eye, head, single limbs) from the debtor’s (Christian or Muslim merchant, goldsmith, Jew, nobleman) body if the loan is not repaid in time. ”

Tale Type 1855 is a miscellaneous type of various anecdotes about Jews, and “most of the anecdotes are anti-Semitic”, a comment made by the author of the index.

Besides tale types about Jews, the ATU index has 48 tale types about Gypsies. These tale types can be found in 91 countries, including 34 out of 35 countries in Europe, and 27 out of 34 countries in Asia. In the tales, Gypsies are commonly portrayed as tricksters, thieves, liars, farmboys etc. Below are a few examples:

Tale Type 1082 (“Carrying the Horse”): “An ogre (giant, devil) and a man (Gypsy, shoemaker) take turns in carrying a horse. The ogre carries it on his back and is soon exhausted. The man takes the horse between his legs,

i.e. rides, and thus “carries” it without effort.” The tale type above can be found in Belarus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Russia, Slovak and Ukraine.

Tale Type 1333 (“The Shepherd Who Cried “Wolf!” Too Often”): A shepherd (Gypsy, woodcutter) repeatedly makes fun by crying that a wolf (tiger, lion, panther, robber) is attacking his herd. He laughs when the farmers approach in haste to help. When the wolf really comes, no one believes the shepherd’s cries and he loses his sheep. The tale type above can be found in 25 countries.

Tale Type 1541\*\* (“The Student Betrays the Shoemakers”): “A student (Gypsy) orders the same kind of new shoes (boots) from two shoemakers. He tries on those of the first shoemaker and says that the left shoe needs adjustment, and keeps the right shoe. He goes to the second shoemaker and says that the right shoe needs adjustment, and keeps the left. He leaves town with one shoe from each shoemaker, without having paid for them.” The tale type above can be found in Greece, Hungary, Poland and Spain.

## 4 Tales of Conflict

There is a great variety of war deities in worldwide mythologies. In Chinese mythology, Guan Yu is a warrior deity, traditionally described as having a long beard and a red face. Ares was the main god of war in Greek mythology; his sister, Enyo, often went into battle with him. For the Yoruba, Ogun is the god of hunting, iron-making, and warfare.

The ATU Index has 77 tale types about “kill”, and 13 tale types about “war”. Tale Type 103 (“A Drop of Honey Causes Chain of Accidents”) narrates a chain of accidents which result in a bloody war: A hunter is about to buy some honey, but he drops it. A weasel eats the honey and is chased by a cat. The hunter’s dog kills the cat, and the grocer beats the dog to death. This causes a bloody war between two villages.

In Tale Type 875\* (“The Women of Weinsberg”), the king permits the women to leave Weinsberg when it is besieged, taking only what they can carry; women all carry their husbands from the city; the king appreciates the women’s clever plan and declares his promise to them must be kept.

The vast majority of countries have folktales about warfare and violence. Out of 135 countries, only 40 countries do not have any war-themed tale type; only 23 countries do not have any tale type involving killing.

Berezkin’s Catalogue includes 34 motifs about war and conflict, spanning 482 ethnographic groups. These include motifs such as “Fish and birds shoot arrows into each other. Since then there are many small bones inside the fish (b64a)”, “Gods fight with their powerful adversaries at the decisive battle that changes fate of the world (c36)”, and “A man throws his evil wife into the pit or well. After some time he drags a devil (snake, etc.) out of it who thanks the man for being saved from the woman (asks the man to save him). Usually the devil helps the man and after all the man scares the devil telling him that the woman climbed out of the pit and is coming (k152).” The three motifs can be

found in 10, 7 and 49 ethnographic groups, respectively. k152 is most commonly found in the Near East, Middle East and parts of Scandinavia.

A fraction of the war-related motifs feature heroes' activities. In those motifs, heroes fight in the battle and win victories over adversaries. Such motifs are simultaneously labeled as war-related and hero-related. Hero-related motifs are discussed in Section 6.

## 5 Revenge Tales

Revenge is a popular theme in folklore. For instance, the plot of a vengeful ghost seeking revenge for harm suffered during their lifetime can be found in many societies.

Revenge is deemed as necessary for restoring justice in the absence of third-party enforcement such as the court or state. One such example is revenge in societies with a culture of honor (Horowitz and Schwartz, 1974; Cohen, Nisbett, Bowdle, and Schwarz, 1996). In those societies insults and threats are dealt with through violence or the threat of violence ("honor-related violence"), and revenge is a common form of honor-related violence.

In the ATU Index, 46 tale types are revenge-themed, distributed across 100 countries. Below are a few examples from the ATU Index:

Tale Type 179A\*\* ("Man and Bear Hold Each Other Around a Tree"): "A man and a bear take hold of each other around a tree and will not let go. Another man hurries home for help, but does not come back for a long time. When he comes at last, his comrade, who is holding the bear's paws, makes him to take his place and goes away. He also stays away for a long time, to take revenge for his friend's thoughtlessness." This tale type is found in Estonia, Finland, Latvia and the United States.

Tale Type 248 ("The Dog and the Sparrow"): "A man inadvertently runs over a dog, the friend of a sparrow. The sparrow takes vengeance and annoys the man. He tries to kill it but, in so doing, he kills his horse or destroys his cargo. The man catches the bird and devours it alive. When the bird looks out from his backside or his mouth, his wife tries to kill it. Instead, she hurts or kills her husband." This tale type can be found in 26 countries.

Tale Type 960B ("Late Revenge"): "A poor man (farmhand, boy) wants to marry a rich widow (mistress, daughter of a rich merchant). The woman favors him but does not like his poverty. In order to please her and to be able to marry her the young man murders a merchant and seizes his property. He presents himself as a rich man to the woman, who wants to know how he became rich in such a short time. When he (out of love) confesses the truth to her, she asks him to watch at the murdered man's grave for one night (as a condition for their marriage). He does so. In the middle of the night the dead man rises from his grave, and asks God for justice. Thereupon a (God's) voice comes from heaven saying, "30 (40, 50) years from today you will be avenged". The young man reports his experience. Knowing that the revenge will take place only after 30 years, the woman agrees to marry him. At the appointed time the couple is

invited to dinner in a castle and the prophecy is fulfilled. A minstrel who had left the festivity earlier (because he was forewarned), returns to the castle in order to fetch his forgotten glove (book, another object). He sees that the castle (together with all people) has sunk into the earth and only a well remains.” The tale type 960B can be found in Belarus, Bulgaria, China, Czech Republic, Finland, Ireland, Israel, Lithuania, North Macedonia, Poland, Portugal, Sweden and Ukraine.

Berezkin’s Catalogue includes 34 revenge-related motifs, spanning 452 ethnographic groups. These include motifs such as “People who have climbed up a tree do not share food with a person who remained below. He or she revenges on them destroying the tree (d4b)”, “One man puts another into a box, closes the lid (or ties him to a board, to canoe, etc.) and puts the box adrift. It floats to another land, man is released there, returns home, revenges on his enemy (k59)”, and “A bird (that usually emerges from the remains of a murdered person or being incarnation of his or her soul) punishes the murderer or tells people about the crime (k80a1).” The three motifs are found in 6, 25 and 37 ethnographic societies, respectively.

## 6 Heroic Tales

Heroic epics and heroic poetry exist in a variety of forms, across time and space. The Odyssey, Iliad, Beowulf and Epic of King Gesar are some of the well-known heroic epics.

In heroic epics, the hero goes on an adventure, takes great risks, meets setbacks, and wins the final victory. In Joseph Campbell’s famous work, “The Hero with a Thousand Faces”, he proposed a single monomyth “Hero’s Journey” to all heroic tales. The monomyth describes how a hero sets out on a journey, undergoes an adventure, and returns home triumphant (Campbell, 2008). A hero’s journey has 12 stages: 1. the ordinary world 2. the call to adventure 3. the refusal of the call 4. meeting with the mentor 5. crossing the threshold 6. trials, allies, enemies 7. approach to the innermost cave 8. the ordeal 9. reward 10. the road back 11. the resurrection 12. Return.

Epic of King Gesar is part of the oral tradition of Tibetans and Mongolians. As one of the longest heroic epic in the world, the Epic was handed down from generation to generation through song and narration for more than 1,000 years. The core plot of the epic is as follows:

King Gesar had a miraculous birth. He experienced a difficult childhood, neglected and bullied. Later on he achieved rulership and won his first wife ’Brug-mo through several marvelous feats. The subsequent episodes show him launching campaigns to protect his people from terrible enemies. His death was not a normal one; instead, he went into a hidden realm to recover his soul to save his people at a later date (Samuel, 2005).

In Berezkin’s Catalogue, 295 motifs are related to heroes. These include

motifs such as “Supernatural woman who is a swan, goose, duck, or crane marries the hero and/or helps him (e9i)”, “Hero is grounded to powder but resuscitates (j24)”, “Baby heroes or embryos are found in a river or lake or come to people out of the water (j26)”, “A young hero obtains and uses weapons or other powerful objects which belonged to his murdered father (j31)” and so on. They can be found in 77, 10, 179 and 41 ethnographic groups, respectively. Almost all (875 out of 958) societies have hero-related motifs.

## 7 Future Research

Folklore emerged against the backdrop of Romantic Nationalism. Although folklore’s role in nation building in 19th century Europe has received wide scholarly interest, very little has been done on quantifying its impact. Moreover, the introduction of modern media and mass schooling influenced the spread of folklore, but there has not been a systematic analysis of their impact. An exception is Saldern (2004), which investigated what role *Volk* culture broadcasts played in the period of transition from Weimar to Nazi Germany.

Despite the relative abundance of research on folklore and nation building in Europe, there has been relative little research on the role of folklore in nation building elsewhere. How does folklore affect nation building outside of Europe, in the postcolonial world, or among the indigenous people? What was the impact of colonial policies on the creation and propagation of a national identity through folklore in former colonies?

If folklore is a vehicle of negative stereotypes towards minority groups, how do these stereotypes affect the status and well-being of the minority groups? Are these stereotypes more emphasized at certain times than others? Revenge tales and heroic tales depict violent images. How do folktales shape violent behavior, and affect modern violence such as war, ethnic conflict and crime?

Through the formation of beliefs, folklore has the potential to influence modern violence. More research is needed to understand the relationship between historical and modern violence and how folklore influenced the relationship.

Part of the answer might lie in the central role of folklore in children’s stories. Storytellers such as parents and educators are active agents in shaping the prevailing narrative around violence. For policymakers, a relevant question would be whether those storytellers should be more selective about the tales they tell their children.

While this article lays a focus on folktales, folklore also takes the form of folk songs, folk dances, folk poems and folk festivals. Heroic epics and heroic poetry mentioned in the previous section are a good example of folklore existing in a variety of forms, not just as tales. A deeper exploration of these repositories of historically-rooted beliefs can add to our understanding of historical attitudes towards violence, and how history influences modern violence through culture.



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