

# Section

# 1

## Africana Folklore

### Definitions

#### General Categories

- I. Oral Lore
- II. Customary Lore (Social/Folk Customs)
- III. Material Culture

#### I. Oral Lore

Folklore encompasses all the traditional beliefs, customs and knowledge of a people that have been passed down and repeated over several generations. Stories, legends and tales are examples of *oral lore*, which as the name suggests, refers to folklore that is transmitted by word of mouth. Oral lore also includes sayings and expressions that are not always considered “folklore”, such as sayings or phrases from popular music. However, the most basic quality of oral lore is that it spoken, sung or in some way comes from a person’s mouth. In addition, unlike contemporary books, films, and songs, oral lore often has no “author.” The collective memory of the people is the primary record.

#### *Examples of oral lore*

- ❖ Nursery Rhymes, Animal Tales, Fables, Fairy Tales
- ❖ Myths, Epics, Origin Stories, Explanatory Stories
- ❖ Legends, Saints Legends, Urban Legends

- ❖ Oral Histories
- ❖ Hero Tales, Trickster Tales, Ghost Lore
- ❖ Jokes, Riddles, Curses, Prayers, Proverbs
- ❖ Folk poetry, folk songs, ballads

## II. Customary Lore (Social & Folk Customs)

Customary lore includes those parts of folklore that people physically do with their bodies: that includes all their social actions and customs. These customs may revolve around celebrations, rituals, rites of passage (such as marriages and funerals), and holidays. Some examples are:

- |                              |                            |
|------------------------------|----------------------------|
| ❖ Birth and Death rituals    | ❖ Folk Games               |
| ❖ Courtship rituals          | ❖ Folk Medicine            |
| ❖ Rites of Passage           | ❖ Graffiti                 |
| ❖ Marriage                   | ❖ Holidays & Festivals     |
| ❖ Folk Beliefs               | ❖ Kinesics (Body Language) |
| ❖ Superstitions              | ❖ Music and Dance          |
| ❖ Pranks and Practical Jokes | ❖ Folk Humor               |

## III. Material Culture

Material Culture consists of those parts of folklore that one can touch: such as

- ❖ Folk Architecture (houses, monuments)
- ❖ Folk Art (traditional arts, "Naive" arts)
- ❖ Folk Costumes ("native" dress)
- ❖ Folk Crafts
- ❖ Food lore (cuisine)

\*Do Exercise #1 now.

\* \* \*

All human societies have all three types of folklore. Our focus in this course will be on the folklore created by people who are part of the African Diaspora. That is, we will examine some examples of folklore created and transmitted by peoples in Africa and of African descent. We will begin in Africa, follow the path of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade to South America and on the Caribbean.

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Current archaeological and biological evidence suggests that modern man (*homo sapiens*) originated somewhere on the continent of Africa. There are arguments about precisely when and where in Africa this actually took place. However, geneticists have traced the genes of all the peoples on Earth and have found one group of people whose genes go back to the roots of our species. These people, known as the Khoi and San, inhabit Southern Africa. As some of our oldest ancestors, they have some of mankind's oldest folklore.

Africa is a continent with thousands of different "folk" traditions, and no single tradition represents or illustrates them all. There is no one African folklore; there are, however, folkloric elements that are commonly found in Africa and among peoples who have been influenced by Africa and Africans.

The telling of folktales, for example, is a common tradition among most African societies. Since ancient times, adults and children would gather around a tree or central meeting place in the evenings to hear about the day's events and to listen to stories. Nowadays, of course, television has replaced story-telling in many places. Yet, the tradition of story-telling continues to exist, even if it happens through new media.

One bit of folklore that is found among all people is the "tale of origin": the story that explains how people were created or came to be. Even today, no matter how technologically advanced the society, these stories remain some of the most important. One of the qualities that seems to make us human is that we still search for explanations of our origin, and we all accept some explanation, whether scientific, religious, or a combination of both.

## EXERCISE 1

Place the folklore into the proper category. Is it Oral lore, Customary lore, or Material culture?

1. Folk Architecture .....
2. Folk Art .....
3. Holidays & Festivals .....
4. Music and Dance .....
5. Rites of Passage .....
6. Marriage ritual .....
7. Legends, Saints Legends, Urban Legends .....
8. Oral Histories .....
9. Animal Tales, Fairy Tales, Nursery Rhymes .....
10. Myths, Epics, Origin Stories, Explanatory Stories .....
11. Birth and Death rituals .....
12. Courtship rituals .....
13. Hero Tales, Trickster Tales, Ghost Lore .....
14. Jokes, Riddles, Curses, Prayers, Proverbs .....
15. Folk poetry, folk songs, ballads .....
16. Superstitions .....
17. Folk Medicine .....
18. Graffiti .....
19. Folk Costume .....
20. Food lore .....

B. Give an example for five (5) of the above from your own experience. For example, "rice and beans" is an example of number 20 above. Be as specific as you can.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_