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BA English Honours | Semester V | Calicut University

# Folk and Oral Tales from Across the World

Course Code: ENG5EJ307 • Module 1 Notes

# Unit 1: Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction – Richard M. Dorson

## Richard M. Dorson and the Academic Institutionalization of Folklore

Professor Richard M. Dorson (1916–1981), widely revered as the father of modern American folklore studies, played a decisive role in liberating folklore from the condescending status of an amateur hobby or romantic curiosity, establishing it as a rigorous academic discipline. In the introductory chapter of his foundational volume *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction* (pp. 1–8), Dorson establishes the definitive taxonomy and conceptual boundaries of the field.

## The Four Great Sectors of Folklife

Dorson constructs a comprehensive fourfold matrix encompassing the entire spectrum of traditional culture:

1. **Oral Literature (Verbal Art):** Spoken, sung, and voiced traditional expressions transmitted primarily through word of mouth. This sector includes folktales (*Märchen*), myths, legends, epic ballads, proverbs, riddles, chants, and folk songs.
2. **Material Culture:** The visible, tangible artifacts of folk creativity, including vernacular architecture (log cabins, thatch huts), traditional boat-building, pottery, weaving, quilting, folk costumes, and artisanal tools crafted without industrial blue-prints.
3. **Social Folk Customs:** The communal rituals, rites of passage (birth, initiation, marriage, death), seasonal festivals (harvest dances, solstices), folk games, and customary laws that structure community cohesion and moral order.
4. **Performing Folk Arts:** Traditional performing arts that synthesize movement, music, and drama—such as folk drama, mumming plays, puppetry, mask dances, and traditional instrumental music.

## Folklore versus "Fakelore"

A crucial conceptual contribution by Dorson is his coining of the term **"Fakelore"** in 1950. Dorson vehemently distinguishes authentic folklore—which originates organically from genuine oral tradition, circulates within face-to-face folk groups, and undergoes continuous vernacular variation—from "fakelore," which consists of synthetic, commercially fabricated, mass-marketed pseudo-folk figures (such as Paul Bunyan or manufactured commercial legends) concocted by advertising agencies and tourist boards for profit. Authentic folklore belongs to the collective memory of the subaltern folk.

# Unit 2: Introduction to Folk Tales from India – Ed. A.K. Ramanujan

## A.K. Ramanujan and the Living Corpus of Indian Orality

A.K. Ramanujan (1929–1993), legendary poet, translator, and folklorist, transformed global scholarship with his landmark anthology *Folk Tales from India: A Selection of Oral Tales from Twenty-Two Languages* (1991). In his brilliant, lyrical Introduction (pp. 19–32), Ramanujan dismantles the orientalist and colonial obsession with classical, Sanskritized, written texts, directing scholarly attention to the vast, teeming, vibrant universe of spoken regional folk narratives (the *Desi* traditions).

## Oral versus Written: Context-Sensitive Aesthetics

Ramanujan demonstrates that while classical written epics like the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* are traditionally associated with public spaces, male Brahminical reciters, and universal moral edicts, folktales belong predominantly to the intimate, interior domestic sphere (the kitchen, the inner courtyard, the bedside). Folktales are told primarily by grandmothers, mothers, and subaltern women to children and peers.

In oral storytelling, the tale is not a fixed, sacred scripture; it is profoundly **context-sensitive**. The teller continuously alters details, accents, moral emphases, and endings depending on the listener's reactions, the hour of day, and the immediate domestic circumstances.

## Subversion of Hegemonic Morality in Indian Folktales

Ramanujan highlights how Indian oral folktales subtly yet subversively interrogate patriarchal and caste orthodoxies. In the great classical epics, heroes are spotless kings and ascetics; in folktales, the protagonists are frequently foolish younger sons, clever servant women, untouchable outcasts, animals, and wily tricksters who outwit pompous kings, corrupt priests, and tyrannical mothers-in-law. Folktales function as a counter-system: they express forbidden desires, sexual longings, domestic humor, and the quiet psychological resistance of women trapped within rigid feudal households.

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# Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 1 Comparative Folklore & Orality Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 1)

## 1. Structuralism, Morphology, and the Archetypal Mechanics of the Folktale

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Complementing Propp's formal structuralism, the Aarne-Thompson-Uther (ATU) Tale Type Index provides a massive comparative classification system, proving that folktale motifs—such as the stolen fire, the creation from primordial clay, the animal bridegroom, and the treacherous partner—circulate across vast geographical, linguistic, and cultural boundaries. This universal distribution reflects what Carl Jung termed the "collective unconscious"—primordial archetypes that represent universal human psychological confrontations with mortality, desire, social initiation, and ethical responsibility.

## 2. Orality, Performance Theory, and Subaltern Resistance

As theorized by Walter J. Ong in *Orality and Literacy*, primary oral cultures possess a distinct cognitive psychology: oral thought is additive rather than subordinative, aggregative rather than analytic, redundant, conservative, and intensely situational. In the performance theories of Richard Bauman and Dell Hymes, a folktale cannot be understood merely as an isolated written transcription on a printed page; it is a live, performative communicative event where vocal intonation, somatic gestures, facial expressions, and active audience participation co-create meaning.

Throughout world history, folklore has served as a primary weapon of subaltern resistance against oppressive ruling elites. In slave plantations of the American South and the Caribbean, enslaved Africans used the Anansi spider and Br'er Rabbit trickster tales as coded survival manuals, teaching young people how to navigate and subvert the overwhelming physical power of white masters through clever dissimulation. Similarly, among indigenous and Dalit communities in India, folktales, ballads, and village performance arts provide counter-narratives that celebrate subaltern rebellion, mock caste arrogance, and preserve sacred histories suppressed by dominant written archives.

## 3. The Decolonial and Ecological Imperative in Contemporary Folklore Studies

In our contemporary era of globalized digital homogenization, the study of oral and folk tales assumes an urgent decolonial and environmental mission. The relentless expansion of corporate consumer culture threatens to extinguish indigenous oral libraries, local mythologies, and vernacular storytelling practices—a cultural tragedy that folklorists describe as the loss of biocultural diversity.

By recovering and honoring oral creation myths, trickster wisdom, and Gaia care narratives, contemporary scholars and students participate in an essential act of epistemic restoration. These ancient stories teach humanity that we are not solitary masters of a dead planet, but humble members of an interconnected cosmic family. Folktales remain living fountains of wonder, ethical resilience, and imaginative vitality, guiding humanity toward more compassionate, sustainable, and democratic futures.

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# Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 1 Comparative Folklore & Orality Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 2)

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# Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 1 Comparative Folklore & Orality Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 3)

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## 3. The Decolonial and Ecological Imperative in Contemporary Folklore Studies

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# Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 1 Comparative Folklore & Orality Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 4)

## 1. Structuralism, Morphology, and the Archetypal Mechanics of the Folktale

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## 2. Orality, Performance Theory, and Subaltern Resistance

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## 3. The Decolonial and Ecological Imperative in Contemporary Folklore Studies

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# Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 1 Comparative Folklore & Orality Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 5)

## 1. Structuralism, Morphology, and the Archetypal Mechanics of the Folktale

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## 2. Orality, Performance Theory, and Subaltern Resistance

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## 3. The Decolonial and Ecological Imperative in Contemporary Folklore Studies

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# Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 1 Comparative Folklore & Orality Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 6)

## 1. Structuralism, Morphology, and the Archetypal Mechanics of the Folktale

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## 2. Orality, Performance Theory, and Subaltern Resistance

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## 3. The Decolonial and Ecological Imperative in Contemporary Folklore Studies

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# Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 1 Comparative Folklore & Orality Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 7)

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## 3. The Decolonial and Ecological Imperative in Contemporary Folklore Studies

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# Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 1 Comparative Folklore & Orality Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 8)

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# Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 1 Comparative Folklore & Orality Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 9)

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