Exploring Folklore
Introduction and History

Have you ever heard the song “My Darling Clementine”, counted out “one potato, two potato,” played baseball in a sandlot, or rubbed a rabbit’s foot for luck? Then you have experienced what scholars call folklore.

Folklore is the beliefs, customs, and traditions within a culture that people pass on from one generation to another. Some examples of folklore are songs, games, superstitions, rhymes, proverbs, riddles, and holiday celebrations. Folklore also includes folk stories, folk songs and even arts and crafts.

The Origin of Folklore

The word folklore comes from the combination of folk, meaning people, and lore, meaning traditional knowledge. Where did folklore come from? Well, folklore is as old as humanity. As soon as people began to communicate with one another, they began to pass traditions on to younger generations. For as long as people have gathered in groups, there have been stories and traditions to define those groups.

People who study folklore believe that the idea of folklore itself developed in the 1800s. Traditional stories had been passed through families and communities for generations before then. In the 19th century, though, there was an interest in how people are defined by their traditions, and so there was a big effort to collect and document these traditions. Before that time, most people had lived in relatively closed rural communities. However, there was an increased movement to the cities during that century. Many people met others with different folklore for the first time. Some traditions didn’t transition from the country to the city very well, but many of the traditions were preserved.

Folklore can differ from place to place, just as people do. Generally speaking, folklore is consistent among a group of people who have at least one thing in common. This common factor can be geography. For example, people who live in the Ozark Mountains of the United States have a great deal of folklore that is unique to that region—it’s not found anywhere else in the United States. The commonality could also be a shared interest: people who go to baseball games know, regardless of where they are from, how to do a “wave” and most of them have heard of the “Curse of the Bambino.”

What is Folklore Like?

Folklore can be short and simple or long and complicated. Sayings such as “a penny saved is a penny earned” are quite brief. On the other hand, some legends can take hours to tell!

Folklore is not instantly created. It is passed from one generation to another because it has meaning to those who pass it on. This meaning is the reason that people continue to remember and pass on the folklore. For example, your mother will pass on traditions that have meaning for her on to you, and you will in turn pass them on to your children.

It is interesting that although each culture has its unique folklore, there are similarities in folklore that are cross-cultural. Sometimes the story traveled from one place to another; sometimes different cultures came up with the same folktale independently. An example of this is the “Cinderella” story. Scholars have found that there are at least a thousand different versions of the story.
Exploring Folklore

Kinds of Folklore

There are several different kinds of folklore. Myths and legends, folktale, folk songs and music, folk sayings, folk dancing, and folk art are all considered folklore.

Myths and Legends

Why does the sun rise and set? What causes lightning? Why is the sky blue? These are some of the questions that people have always tried to understand. Today, we have scientific knowledge to help us explain these natural events, but in earlier times and even in some parts of the world today, people use stories to explain nature. Myths are different from other forms of folk stories because they are considered to be true among the people who developed them.

In some ways legends are like myths, but whereas myths describe events often occurring outside of specified time (“a long, long time ago” or even “when the world was young”), legends tell of events woven in history. Some legends tell of good behavior. For example, the story about George Washington cutting down the cherry tree and confessing that he did so is probably not true but most people like to believe it because it shows that it is a good thing to be honest. It is a legend because even if the story is not true, George Washington was certainly real.

American folklore includes many stories of legendary heroes. A seamstress named Betsy Ross became a popular figure in American folklore with the legend that she had sewn the first American flag. John Chapman, better known as Johnny Appleseed, planted apple trees from Massachusetts to the Midwest. Those two people were real, but the tales of their deeds have been exaggerated and changed through history until they are often more fiction than fact. Other legends concern people who probably never lived… these legends serve to teach values rather than history. For example, the story of John Henry, who raced against a steam drill to see whether a man with a hammer or a machine with a drill could dig a tunnel faster, is probably not true, but it is significant as a symbol of the importance of hard work. The same can be said about Paul Bunyan.

Legends are not just about people. There are also legendary creatures, such as Bigfoot or the chupacabra.

Are legends only from the past? Of course not! Culture is constantly growing and evolving, and so does folklore. One type of legend still very much in existence today is the “urban legend.” These concern newsworthy stories that are probably not true, and they usually start, “This really happened to my friend’s cousin’s classmate…”

Folktales

Folktales include animal tales such as “Brer Rabbit.” In stories such as these animals can think, talk, and act like human beings. Many animal tales are “trickster” tales. Folktales also include fairy tales and fables. Many folktales are stories that teach a moral lesson. Nursery rhymes are also a form of folktales. These rhythmical poems are intended to amuse children and stimulate imagination. “Mary Had a Little Lamb” is a famous nursery rhyme. Can you name others?
Exploring Folklore
Folk Songs

Throughout history people have sung folk songs. These songs range in subject, tempo, and difficulty: what unites them is that they are so well-known that they continue on from one generation to the next. The folk song “Home on the Range” has been sung for many generations. Some folk songs are sung on specific holidays and some are good for any time. Some folk songs are related to work. Records show that many of these work songs originated with early laborers who found that singing as they worked helped to set a rhythm that eased their work.

Another kind of folk song is the lullaby. Parents sing these songs to babies. Their soothing melodies help babies to fall asleep. “Rock-a-by baby” is one of the best-known lullabies.

Ballads, long songs that tell a story, are a common form of folk song. Like folktales and legends, folk songs are often meant to tell a story with a meaning that reflects the values of the people who pass the song on, but sometimes the meaning is lost and it is the beauty of the melody for which the song endures.

Folk Sayings—Proverbs, Riddles, Jokes, and Taunts

Proverbs are short sayings of wisdom and truth. “A stitch in time saves nine” and “don’t cry over spilt milk” are examples of proverbs. Proverbs are usually based on common sense or practical experience. Most proverbs give advice about life. Some phrases recently seem to have become instant proverbs; other proverbs date back as far as written language.

Riddles have fascinated and entertained people for hundreds of years. A riddle is a question or statement that contains a hidden message. Riddles are meant to entertain and amuse. “What has four wheels and flies?” is an example of a riddle that relies on a pun for the answer. (The answer is “a garbage truck.” It has four wheels and is likely to have flies around it.)

Like riddles, jokes rely on the listener understanding the language and culture of the teller in order to understand the joke. If you have ever tried to explain a joke to somebody, you know how quickly it can stop being funny. Shared cultural knowledge makes the joke work. In this way, jokes are a part of folklore.

The language and gestures that we use for teasing are also part of folklore. “I know you are but what am I?” or even wordless taunts like “Nyah, nyah!!” are used and passed on just as often as wise proverbs.

Folk Dancing

Throughout history, people of every culture have created their own folk dance and passed it down to succeeding generations. Folk dances have been performed to honor such events as birth, marriage, and even death. At other times, they were performed to cure diseases, to obtain favors from the gods, or to celebrate winning a battle.

Today, folk dancing is basically learned as a form of recreation. The square dance is the most popular form of folk dancing in America. During the dance, couples swing about, change partners, and perform lively movements when directed to do so by a caller.
A custom is a practice or way of doing things that has been handed down from one generation to another. Some customs are practiced because “that’s the way it’s always been done.” For example, the custom of shaking hands when meeting seems standard to many Americans, but it is not practiced throughout the world. Other customs have practical uses, such as standing in line at the store instead of everyone shoving to the front. The stores don’t post the rules, but all the people from the culture understand and follow the rule. Sometimes customs are useful because people can relax when they know that other people will also be following the same customs. For example, it is good to know that all the people on the road will be driving on the same side. A custom is a social action that is usually done at a particular time or event. It does not have to have any practical use, and it’s often true that things could be done another way and make just as much sense.

Holidays always bring out celebrations of special customs. Americans tell stories of Pilgrims at Thanksgiving. Parades and fireworks are customary ways to observe Independence Day.

Folk Art

Folk art reflects the values and interests of the people by whom it is created, rather than reflecting a wider standard of art. It is usually created with materials grown locally and shows either realistic scenes of local life or scenes from well-known folktales and legends. Folk artists have rarely had any formal training; they may be self-taught or taught by a parent or mentor in a less formal setting than a school. Folk art includes items are useful, such as handmade quilts; items that were once functional and are now decorative, such as costumes that are no longer used; and items that have always been largely decorative, such as paintings.”

Superstitions

Some people believe that if a black cat crosses their path or if they break a mirror they will have bad luck. Some people will not walk under ladders, because they think that it will bring them bad luck. Others think that finding a four leaf clover will bring them good luck. Such beliefs are called superstitions. A superstition is a belief that a certain action can cause or foretell another action. There are superstitions about nearly every human activity, whether it is eating, sleeping, working, playing or getting married. A large number of superstitions and customs supposedly help to control and predict the future. Superstitions will probably be shared for as long as people have uncertainties about the future.
Exploring Folklore

Answer the questions about FOLKLORE in complete sentences.

1. What is folklore?

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2. What are some examples of folklore?

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3. What are variations of folklore?

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4. Name several kinds of folklore.

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5. What is the difference between a myth and a legend?

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6. Name some legendary figures, either from the article or from your knowledge.

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7. Use an encyclopedia, the internet or other resources to read about at least three legendary figures. Which story was the most believable? Why?

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Exploring Folklore

Answer the questions about FOLKLORE in complete sentences.

8. What are the four types of folktales?
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9. How is a folktale different from a legend?
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10. What is purpose of folktales?
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11. What do folk songs all have in common?
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12. Who originated many of the work songs?
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13. What are lullabies? Can you recite at least the first few lines of a lullaby? Write about it.
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15. What is the purpose of riddles?

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16. Tell a riddle that you have heard.

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17. Are jokes considered part of folklore? Why or why not?

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18. What is a superstition?

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19. Give an example of a superstition.

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20. How is square dancing done?

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21. What is folk art? How is it different from fine art?

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22. List at least three examples of folk art.

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Answer the questions about FOLKLORE in complete sentences.
Observation Activity

With your parents’ permission and/or help from your teacher, arrange to observe one or more of the places or events listed below:

1. Visit a folk arts and crafts show. Observe the different kinds of crafts on display. If possible, observe crafts being made.
2. Observe small children playing on the playground. What kind of games do they play? Do any of them jump rope, play hide or seek, or perform hand-clapping games?

Contact and Interview Activity

Follow these instructions in the contact and interview activity:

1. Contact a grandparent or any other person of that generation
2. Explain that you are working on a school assignment to learn more about their background and customs and some of the history and traditions of their community. Ask the person if they will be willing to give you an interview. If they are willing, make an appointment at a definite time and place. Be sure that the time and place is convenient for both of you.
3. Be sure to set aside enough time for the interview.
4. Ask the person’s permission to record the interview. If they give it, prepare and test your tape or video recorder before the interview.
5. Arrive at the interview on time. Try to interview in a place that is free from distractions.
6. Ask some of the following questions and record the answer on your paper, video, or tape recorder:
7. During (or after) the interview, ask to see the family photo album, and other family heirlooms such as old quilts, embroidery, tools, musical instruments, etc.
8. After the interview, thank the person for their time. Later, you might send a thank-you card telling them how much you appreciated their time and information.

Formal Essay Activity

Use the information from your interview and from your observation to write a report. Give your report an interesting title and tell all about the things that you learned from doing these two activities.
Exploring Folklore
Interview Questions

Part 1: Personal and Family History

1. What is your full name?
2. Are you called by a nickname? What is it?
3. What kind of work do/did you do?
4. When and where were you born?
5. Where did your ancestors come from?
6. How much schooling have you had?
7. Do you know any stories about your family history? Can you tell some?

Part 2: Family and Traditions

1. What do you remember about the house where you grew up (size, number of rooms, shape of house, special construction features) etc.
2. What are some of the holiday customs and traditions that your family observed on Christmas or New Year’s Eve?
3. Do you have a special family recipe that has been handed down from one generation to another? Would you like to share it?
4. Name and describe some of the games that you played as a child.
5. What was your favorite game to play? How was it played?
6. Did you or your parents have any special hobbies or crafts, such as knitting, quilting, basket-making, crocheting, etc.?
7. Do you remember any stories that were told to you as a child? (ghost stories, local history stories, stories about famous people or unusual people in your community)?
8. Do you remember any jokes or riddles that you have heard or told as a child?
9. Do you remember songs that were sung when you were growing up? What kind of songs do you remember being sung?
10. What were the titles of some of the most popular songs during your teen years?
11. What were the names of some of the most popular singers during your teen years?
12. What were some of the popular dances that you did as a teenager?
13. Name your favorite dance and tell how it was done.
14. What kind of medicine did your family use to treat illnesses such as a coughs, stomachaches, hiccoughs, upset stomachs, or wasp stings?
15. What were some of the sayings or proverbs that you heard as a child?
16. What were some of your favorite proverbs?
17. Please share some jump rope or counting out rhymes.
18. What were some love verses or love poems that you said, wrote or heard?
19. Do you carry a good luck charm? Did anyone in your family carry one? Tell what they carried and what it was supposed to do.
20. Tell about beliefs or superstitions about the weather, good luck, bad luck, marriage, death or birth that you have heard.
Exploring Folklore
Group Project /Role Playing Activities

Situation 1: You are a parent whose concern is that your child is not getting enough education on local folklore and history. You and some of your supporters are meeting with the local Board of Education to discuss adding local history and folklore courses to the school curriculum. Your neighbors and their supporters differ with you. They think that students already have enough courses and that additional courses will overburden students and that local history and folklore “isn’t all that important anyway.” Role-play the parents of both groups presenting their argument to the Board of Education. Students not directly involved in the role-playing will act as members of the Board. After the presentation by both sides, the Board members will vote to decide if the curriculum should remain as it is or if courses in local history and folklore should be added.

Situation 2: An old house in your community is said to be haunted. Many people from surrounding communities have come to see the “face in the window” of this house. Some officials are making plans to tear the house down because they say that they need the space to build a much-needed apartment complex. You feel that to destroy this house will be to destroy a part of the community’s history. You want the house to continue to stand because it is one of the things that your community is known for. Local officials say that the house is old and in need of repairs and that money is not available for such projects. You circulate a petition explaining your views. You present it to the local officials who will then make a decision on the matter. Students not role-playing will act as city officials.

Situation 3: You are a local folklore buff. You have been asked to speak on the subject of local history at a civic club meeting. Pretend that your classmates are the civic club members. Prepare and deliver your speech about the history of your town. You may get information from your local library, your parents, or other older people in your town. Ask members of the class to evaluate your speech.
Exploring Folklore
Personal Projects

1. Imagine that you have become a legend in your community. Write a poem or song about yourself, telling what you have become famous for.
2. Research and report on folktales of regions or countries other than your own. Dress up as one of the characters in the folktales and tell your story to the class.
3. Bring samples of folk art to display in your classroom or library (crafts such as homemade quilts, dolls, or baskets). Tell something about each item.
4. Invite a local historian or folklorist to speak to the class about his or her interests.
5. Make a list of superstitions and research their origin.
6. Learn some folk games, chants and rhymes. Teach some to the class.
7. Find out about the Old Farmer’s Almanac. Tell how it is used for planting crops and gardens. Ask your librarian, your teacher, or your parents for help if you need it.
8. Talk with people in your community about local legends. Prepare a booklet with illustrations or photos of places in your community that are connected to these legends. Write the story next to each photo or illustration.
9. Dress as children did in “Grandma’s Day” and tell how school was for children growing up in that time period. Ask your grandmother or a senior citizen to help you.

Internet Activities

If you or your school has access to the Internet, go online to the following web sites for some fun learning activities.

1. Read some weather folklore at www.almanac.com/holidays/summer/
Scroll down to “Folklore for the Season”.
2. For a fun folklore activity, go to www.scijinks.jpl.nasa.gov/weather/people/folklore.
At this site you can scroll across a map of the world and select a country and learn about its weather folklore and scientific facts.
3. Go to www.brownielocks.com/foodfolklore.html to find out about the history and beliefs behind some of the food and spices that we eat.
4. At www.halloweencat.com/ read about cats, superstitions, vampires, bats and witches.
5. Folklore, superstitions, nursery rhymes and other fun activities can be found at www.sniksnak.com/folklore
Exploring Folklore

Answers

1. Folklore is beliefs, customs, and traditions that people pass on from one generation to another.
2. Some examples of folklore are games, nursery rhymes, old sayings, riddles, songs, superstitions, holiday and religious celebrations.
3. Variations of folklore are changes that occur to folklore when it is passed from one generation to another.
4. Several kinds of folklore are myths and legends, folktales, folk songs, folk sayings, folk dances, and folk art.
5. Myths are considered to be true among the people who developed them. Myths describe events that occurred outside of history. Legends tell of people, places, and/or events that happened within recorded history.
6. The legendary figures mentioned in the article were: George Washington, Betsy Ross, Johnny Appleseed, John Henry, and Paul Bunyan.
7. Answers will vary.
8. The four types of folktales are animal tales, fairy tales, fables, and nursery rhymes.
9. A folktale concerns impossible situations (animals talking, etc.). A legend has some element of historical truth.
10. Folktales usually teach a moral lesson.
11. They are passed on through generations.
12. Laborers originated many of the work songs.
13. Lullabies are soothing melodies that help babies fall asleep. Answer will vary.
14. Proverbs are short sayings of wisdom and truth. Proverbs are based on common sense or practical experience. Examples will vary.
15. Riddles are meant to entertain and amuse.
16. Answers will vary.
17. They are considered part of folklore because they are understood within the culture but not always outside the culture.
18. A superstition is a belief that a certain action can cause or foretell another action.
19. Examples will vary.
20. Square dancing is a form of folk dancing that is done when couples swing about, bow, change partners and perform other lively movements when directed to do so by a caller.
21. Folk art is art produced to reflect culture. The material and themes are often local. The artists are not formally trained.
22. Examples will vary.