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THE HISTORICAL FOLKLORE OF DAN BEN-AMOS

News of the passing of eminent folklorist Dan Ben-Amos on March 26, 2023 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, at the age of 88 invites reflection on his many contributions to folklore studies over a long career. Although inexorably linked to the keyword of *context* and the presentist, situational perspective of folklore as “artistic communication in small groups,” Dan insisted throughout his writing and teaching on an historical understanding of folklore as a subject and its historiography as a discipline (Bronner and Mieder 2019). Self-aware of a new “paradigm” that he and fellow performance-oriented folklorists of the 1960s fermented, Dan embarked at various points in his career on a critical evaluation of key terms such as text, context, motif, type, and genre to mark continuities as well as points of departure across the long span of international folklore studies (Ben-Amos 1976, 1980, 1993; see also Zhang 2019). He viewed folklore as an emerging discipline, and, applying the concept of “paradigm shift” from philosopher Thomas Kuhn (1962), he argued that “the folklore paradigm should be examined within the larger social context of scientific research” (Ben-Amos 1973, 121). Central to his questioning was the historical connection of *tradition* in folklore studies to the meaning and performance of oral expressions and within the history of science as a social concept fusing the past and present (Ben-Amos 1984). The underappreciated historical component of Dan’s theoretical and methodological perspective that I highlight in this essay provides a background for Dan’s desire to culminate his series of critical evaluations with consideration of *heritage*. The essay that percolated in numerous drafts and presentations in the last fifteen years of Dan’s life turns out to be his parting advice to folklorists and should be read closely not only for its comments on an ascendant folkloristic keyword of the twenty-first century but also for its revelation of Dan’s thinking and reflection on the discipline he helped to build.

Dan was born on September 3, 1934 in Tel Aviv, British Mandatory Palestine into a Jewish family from Eastern Europe. Schooled in

the secular workers' movement in Petah Tikvah, Dan became sensitive as he came of age to the use of ancient biblical sources in contemporary literature and songs that functioned to establish a modern Israeli national life (Ben-Amos 2014c). Upon entering the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Dan turned to study both the past and present in his declaration of dual majors in Biblical Studies and modern English Literature. Dan felt a tension between the subjects, since most Biblical Studies students took courses on ancient or religious topics, whereas most devotees to English literature combined it with humanities and European history. Wanting to focus on a single major but desiring to keep the credits that he had already earned, he turned to Hebrew Literature. That is when he fell under the influence of his first folklore professor, Dov Noy—one of the first recipients of the Ph.D. in folklore from Indiana University in 1954 with a dissertation supervised by Stith Thompson on the motif-index of Talmudic-Midrashic tales (Ben-Amos 2014b). After Dan received awards for his folkloristic papers on motifs and tale types in folk literature, Noy advised Dan to continue his studies in folklore at Indiana University in the United States.

At Indiana's Folklore Institute, Dan embarked on his first fieldwork by interviewing a Jewish storyteller and he was influenced by his theoretical discussions of structuralism in the social sciences with fellow students, including Alan Dundes, Robert Georges, and Elli Köngäs-Maranda (Ben-Amos 1963, 1967, 1970). Heading the Folklore Institute was Richard M. Dorson, who advocated for embracing historical perspectives on folklore and developing national histories of folklore as a distinctive academic discipline (Dorson 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1976). It was Dan who wrote the retrospective on Dorson's "historical folklore" for a special memorial issue of the *Journal of Folklore Research* (Ben-Amos 1989). Dan's critique in this retrospective is that Dorson's linkage of history and folklore was marred by "misapplication of motif-analysis to historical research," especially evident in his dismissal of African precedents for African American folklore (Ben-Amos 1989, 58). Dan reflects that the emerging contextual approach that Dorson appreciated, if not himself applied, would have allowed for the synthesis of history and folklore that Dan would work throughout his career to achieve (Dan credits Dorson for the suggestion of the title of Dan's breakthrough 1971 article "To-

ward a Definition of Folklore in Context”; see Ben-Amos 1989, 51). In Dan’s words, “An examination of folklore as it is performed in social life would free it from the monolithic imprint of a period, or from the singular pattern of a culture” (Ben-Amos 1989, 59). One can read Dan’s summary of Dorson’s unfulfilled goal as his own:

It is a history that moves away from the collective construct and into the realm of the individual in his community or communities, and explores his use and performance of folklore in relation to other individuals, times, places, and languages. It is a history that examines the folklore of a period not as a by-product of any creative impulse, but as a dynamic process that individuals and institutions employ purposefully or even aimlessly. (Ben-Amos 1989, 59–60)

In other words, Dan was thinking of “historical context” as precedent connected to cultural values apparent in small group settings rather than in national historical events. In Dan’s historical view, individuals are agents rather than passive recipients of culture, and he urges folklorists in the new paradigm to record those precedents to analyze how and why “texts and genres shift meanings in relation to their historical circumstances” (Ben-Amos 1989, 59).

The seeds of Dan’s view of integrating history with folklore studies are evident in his first publications. While still a graduate student, Dan provided annotations for *Folktales of Israel* by Dov Noy (1963) in Dorson’s monumental *Folktales of the World Series* for the University of Chicago Press. Growing out of his dual undergraduate paths in biblical and modern literary studies, Dan showed an incredible command of folk literary sources in annotations from antiquity to the present (for examples of Dan’s biblical studies, see Ben-Amos 1994, 2014c, 2016). This broad knowledge of historical and contemporary sources became manifest in his magnum opus: the multi-volume *Folktales of the Jews* (2006, 2007, 2011), drawing on folktales in the Israeli Folktale Archives. More than marking motif and type numbers as was the practice in earlier headnotes, Dan’s commentaries provide a gathering of available comparable texts and their location in social reality. In this analysis, he proposes multiple, shifting meanings as the story was used in different situations and forms. He does refer to motifs, treating them as structural units that show the function of

symbols that change over time. In this way, Dan addresses what he identifies as “polarities” that Dorson had earlier established between “historical coherence vs. folkloric diversity” and “cultural dominance vs. ethnic plurality” (Ben-Amos 1989, 55–60). Dan goes further than Dorson in developing historical folklore, however, with an interpretative model considering the agency that individuals in communities employ as folk narrative themes and plots diffuse across time and space. Inspiring this model for Dan was contemplation of the diasporic patterns of Jews as minority communities in host societies carrying historical traditions and adapting others to the contemporary customs and conditions of the surrounding society.

In the late 1960s, Dan embarked on fieldwork among non-Jewish storytellers and what he called “local historians” in Benin City, Nigeria, and that led to his first presentation on conceptualizing folklore as “artistic communication in small groups” in addition to developing structuralist ideas in the distinction between “ethnic” and “analytical” genres (Ben-Amos 1975, 1976, 1978). Joining the graduate department of folklore and folklife at the University of Pennsylvania in fall 1967, Dan was part of the early generation of scholars entering the academy with degrees in folklore. Mindful of a lack of a disciplinary historiography for folklore and folklife studies, at Penn Dan introduced the first course in the United States on the history of folklore studies. Sparking the creation of the course was the publication of *The British Folklorists* (1968) by his mentor Richard Dorson. The same year that the book was published, Dorson—as President of the American Folklore Society (AFS)—formed the Historiography Committee to promote historical studies of the discipline, and the committee sponsored a panel at the 1969 AFS annual meeting that was published as a special issue of the *Journal of the Folklore Institute* edited by Dorson, who also provided the afterword. Recounting the work of the committee in 1973, Richard Reuss wrote that Dan was especially active in the committee (1973, 4–5). Dan’s summative article “A History of Folklore Studies—Why Do We Need It?” anchored the special issue (Ben-Amos 1973, 113–24). In this article, he uses the other papers in the issue to identify existing patterns of historiography and lays out research goals for future historical work. He notes that the papers “revolve around the very process of paradigm formation in folklore; that is, they narrate the attempts to lay the foundations

for research in terms of the identification and selection of a unique subject matter, the construction of a theoretical framework, and the proposal of methodological procedures" (Ben-Amos 1973, 121). Perhaps indicating the attention of his work on styles and personalities of individual storytellers, Dan observes the biographical focus of the papers and hopes that they consider "intellectual development not as thought but as an experience" (Ben-Amos 1973, 124).

In his assessment of the history of folklore studies, Dan recognized the importance of the process of institutionalization around individual figures and movements. His perspective on institutionalization was certainly shaped by his own affiliation with a relatively new department of folklore and folklife at the University of Pennsylvania that was locating its distinctive niche within international folklore studies (see Miller 2004). Taking on the role of historical theorist and historiographer in the department, Dan states that the research goals of both history and historiography are to examine "the theories and ideas that underlie the research activities in different periods of folklore scholarship" so as to build a foundation, indeed a "tradition," for future formations (Ben-Amos 1973, 123). Paraphrasing pragmatist philosopher William James, Dan notes three developmental stages for a new theory: (1) attacked as absurd, (2) admitted as true, and (3) acknowledged as important, but no longer new. Using historiography of folklore studies as evidence, he claims, perhaps wishfully, that "at long last our discipline has reached this third developmental stage" (Ben-Amos 1973, 113).

Aware of criticism of his definition of folklore as "artistic communication in small groups" that omitted any mention of "tradition," Dan contextualized "tradition" historically in the folkloristic lexicon as the third developmental stage which was expanding during the 1980s as more universities granted degrees in folklore. His 1984 article "The Seven Strands of *Tradition*: Varieties in Its Meaning in American Folklore Studies" in a special issue of the *Journal of Folklore Research* on "Culture, Tradition, and Identity" shows his mind for historical development when he writes "Definitions flourish when the semantics are vague, and the neglect from which the term *tradition* has suffered reflects, paradoxically, a healthy position in scholarly and literary discourse" (Ben-Amos 1984, 98). Much as he viewed folkloric events as dynamic and complex, so too did Dan

approach intellectual history as a structured multi-perspectival search for meaning—and memory—in different social and political contexts (Ben-Amos 1999). Instead of using the usual classificatory metaphor of categories or types for rhetorical differences, in this article Dan visualizes interwoven *strands*. Beginning with the foundational idea of “Tradition as Lore” from American Folklore Society founder William Wells Newell, Dan moves on to “Tradition as Canon,” “Tradition as Process,” “Tradition as Culture,” “Tradition as Langue,” and ends on a self-critical note of “Tradition as Performance.” Having unraveled the strands, he weaves them back together in the tapestry of folklore by identifying *tradition* ultimately as “a symbol of and for folklore,” indeed a principal metaphor “to guide us in the choate world of experiences and ideas” (Ben-Amos 1984, 124; see also Blank and Howard 2014; Bronner 1998, 2011, 2019; Glassie 2003). He concludes that one strand is not more proper than the other, and each can be analyzed much as a narrative for the functions it served for “different periods and different persuasions” (Ben-Amos 1984, 124). In other works, he calls for treating folklore not only as a form and process in social reality but also as a significant concept in the philosophy and history of ideas (Ben-Amos 1983). As a broad-visioned folklorist, he reached back to the historiography of folkloristics as a way of thinking about theory, to help shape present practice as well as to forecast future trends and questions (Ben-Amos 1984, 124; see also Ben-Amos 1973, 1985, 2014a, 2014d). This contribution was a major consideration in the American Folklore Society’s Lifetime Scholarly Achievement Award bestowed upon him in 2014. I know because I prepared the nomination package filled with letters from colleagues crediting Dan with opening their eyes, and the discipline’s, to historiographical and historical matters. Many were former students who were profoundly influenced by his course on the history of folklore studies.

Dan’s thinking on “heritage” followed from his contemplation of “tradition,” but whereas he viewed the latter as beneficial to the institutionalization of a folkloristic discipline, indeed of the very idea of folklore, he saw problems with the twenty-first-century folkloristic embrace of the former. It should be noted that much of the essay is a critique of Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s articles on “Theorizing Heritage” (1995) and “Mistaken Dichotomies” (1996); it should also

be noted that they were collegial and embraced debate on this and other matters. Indeed, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett gave the closing keynote speech in 2017 at a special symposium at Penn in honor of Dan on the occasion of his fiftieth year of teaching folklore (<https://jwst.sas.upenn.edu/events/2017/04/23/dan-ben-amos-fifty-years-jewish-folklore-penn>). Citing Dan's terminological critique of the growing wave of folklorists attracted to public folklore in his article "The Name is the Thing" (1998), Kirshenblatt-Gimblett continued her advocacy for "heritage" study as the next paradigm shift (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, 284). Dan did not immediately respond but announced that he stood by his views as he was working on the essay that ultimately resulted in "Between Intangible Cultural Heritage and Folklore."

Another precedent for Dan's essay on heritage is the book of his previous theoretical essays, edited by Elliott Oring and Henry Glassie as *Folklore Concepts: Histories and Critiques* (2020). It includes "The Name is the Thing" as the penultimate chapter in which he raises protest by proclaiming that a correlation existed between the departure of folklorists from the academy and their move into the public sector and what he calls "the devaluation of the meaning of folklore" (Ben-Amos 1998, 257). In "Name is the Thing" Dan does not explicitly discuss "heritage," although he does point to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's proposal to "change our name [of folklore] to enhance our survival" (1996, 252). And into the twenty-first century, Dan worriedly spoke about the increasing replacement of folklore with "intangible culture" and the alliance of folklorists with UNESCO's advancement of "world heritage" (Lowthorp 2020, 131–34; see also Foster and Gilman 2015). Half-jokingly calling himself "public enemy number one" among public folklorists, Dan wanted to mount a defense for the use of folklore in public as well as academic settings and the use of historiography to formulate a theoretical goal of advancing the discipline. Weighing on his mind was the deinstitutionalization of folklore and folklife at the University of Pennsylvania in 2008, when admissions to the graduate program (before 1999 a department) were suspended (see Hufford 2020). He thought that a contributing factor to the program's decline was in fact the devaluation of academic folklore studies caused by the heritage movement.

An opportunity for voicing his concern arose when he was invited to be a keynote speaker at an interim conference in 2015 of the

International Society for Folk Narrative Research at the University of Hacettepe in Ankara, Turkey. The organizers' call for papers listed their primary topic as "cultural heritage" with the description asking for participants to investigate "The role of narratives and narrating in creating and transforming cultural heritages." Challenging the use of "cultural heritage" rather than "folklore," Dan delivered the paper to a group for whom "intangible cultural heritage" had become mainstreamed (in Turkish, "Folklor" had long been used for folklore but using "Somut Olmayan Kültürel Miras" for "intangible cultural heritage" was relatively new). Referring to his presentation as "walking into the lion's den," Dan sent me a draft and asked me for comments as I was working separately on a paper with a critique of the growing use of "vernacular culture" in place of folklore (Bronner 2022). The text kept growing and delays mounted as Turkish editors rejected it for being too long, if not for its controversiality. Frustrated, Dan asked me about publishing it in *The Folklore Historian*, in which he had recently published "Notes Toward a History of Folklore in America" (2014c). Finally, however, the Turkish folklore journal *folklor/edebiyat—folklore & literature* agreed to publish it in 2023. He read part of the paper at the 2022 American Folklore Society conference in Tulsa, and I asked him about using an excerpt. He replied that he wanted to check with the Turkish editors.

I had not heard from him for a while and then Dan's wife Batsheva Ben-Amos reached out and told me that Dan was in the hospital and wanted to talk to me. I called and heard a shaky voice on the other end giving me instructions to contact the Turkish editors about obtaining permission to publish the heritage essay in addition to other projects he wanted me to advance while he was in the hospital. Dan predicted that he would be back on his feet in the classroom in a few weeks, but later Batsheva confided that this was unlikely as he was seriously ill. I did follow up with the Turkish contacts, including Hicran Karataş, a former student of Dan's at Penn whom I met when she was a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Missouri. She wrote that Dan was indeed persuasive at the Ankara conference and that the paper had a great impact on the skeptical audience. She gushed that "the content of this article, its technique, strength, and style, will guide folklorists throughout our lives" (correspondence April 14, 2023). Working with Michael J. Bell (who was part of the original

panel in 1969 on American folklore historiography) and Anthony Bak Buccitelli (a folklorist with “communications” in his professorial title), I am pleased to be able to present the full essay in this first digital issue of *TFH: The Journal of History and Folklore*. Dan would have wanted to engage folklorists to discuss his ideas, and we invite responses and reflections not only on this essay but also on Dan’s career, thinking, and teaching.

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