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# Folklore: Cultural Roadmaps to Creating, Perpetuating, Resolving and Evolving Peace and Conflict

TATIYANA BASTET  AND CERI HOULBROOK 

Given folklore’s quiet pervasiveness in all our lives, it is unsurprising that it has often been used to think through the big issues faced by a community. Folklore is at once a useful lens, permitting focus and diverse perspectives, and an adaptable tool in the handling of such matters. Stories and customs travel, taken as cultural luggage as people move in and out of communities. And just as folklore is not sedentary, neither is it stable. Practices and beliefs that appear ancient and unchanging are often surprisingly recent inventions, adoptions, or adaptations. Folklore is by necessity fluid – otherwise it would not retain its relevance. This Special Issue is concerned with how folklore has been used as such in engagements with two particularly big – and equally pervasive – issues: managing conflict and striving for peace. It is an invitation to consciously and deliberately engage with and explore the interdisciplinary nature of folklore; to experiment with a different lens, a shift in perspective to see if, perhaps, the mechanisms for understanding and positive change are magic beans that we already possess.

## INTRODUCTION

**N**arratives and storytelling are terms often used in peace and conflict discourse, in fact the Institute for Integrated Transitions has an Inclusive Narratives Practice Group<sup>1</sup> and while mythology is recognized

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<sup>1</sup>This global team is comprised of 300 people (inclusive of advisors) and is dedicated to modelling and shaping narrative to further peace initiatives. <https://ifit-transitions.org/people-thematic-practice-groups-inclusive-narratives-practice-group/>

as a narrative source, folklore is not. Folklore, in both narrative and practice is often described as a source of conflict and resolution narratives (Bronner 2019) but is neither named nor explicitly examined. Even as the current Ukrainian/Russian war continues, Alexander Marc writes that, in order for a resolution to be achieved, the narratives of each country must evolve (Marc 2022). Yet there is no mention of folklore and how it may be employed to expedite a resolution. This lore comprises our current living narratives, ever evolving, out of the stories of our most recent ancestors and, as such it seems that folklore and its contextual cultural heritage would be central to PACS discussions.

Folklore teaches us how to navigate and understand our world, creating or perpetuating conflict, yet the grassroots nature of folklore narratives may also be where solutions and resolutions to issues begin. It is the beliefs we hold, and the customs we practice, irrespective of culture, class, or creed coded in stories we used to tell and the stories we tell now. Where conflict has torn the narrative, active practice can help to repair it as demonstrated in the Stories for Hope project in Rwanda in which Tutsi survivors were paired with younger Tutsi to hear stories of the 1994 genocide and to reconnect with the folklore of their ancestors (Wallace et al. 2014).

Anywhere you find people, you find folklore. It may not always be recognized as ‘folklore’. In fact, it rarely is. So bound up in our everyday lives, it is often taken for granted. And if it is recognized, it may instead be labeled ‘intangible cultural heritage’ (at best) or ‘superstition’ (at worst). But whether or not it is acknowledged as folklore, it is there and it is part of our social and cultural DNA.

Given folklore’s quiet pervasiveness in all our lives, it is unsurprising that it has often been used to think through the big issues faced by a community. Folklore is at once a useful lens, permitting focus and diverse perspectives, and an adaptable tool in the handling of such matters. Folklore is also intrinsically linked to place. Not just rural landscapes, but any place trod by human feet, from the woodland dell to the city street, from the desert to the suburb. Places have their folklore; stories and customs that are character traits of particular locales. This localized element of folklore has been widely harnessed in the processes of community identity building. It can be a shared source of pride that brings people together. However, it can also be divisive; a political tool for creating an ‘us versus them’ mindset, as it was so horrendously applied in Nazi Germany. But while folklore is bound up in a sense of place, it is not bound *to* a place. Stories and customs travel, taken as cultural luggage as people move in and out of communities. And just as folklore is not sedentary, neither is it stable. Practices and beliefs that appear ancient and unchanging are often surprisingly recent inventions, adoptions, or adaptations. Folklore is by necessity fluid – otherwise it would not retain its relevance.

For those of us who are of multiple cultures, lores, and heritages, folklore is an opportunity to explore - to find threads of curiosity and understanding - in our attempts to weave new folklores reflective not only of our experiences but to elucidate methods of mediation and understanding that set the stage for positive peace from the personal (generally based on our families and immediate communities) to communal and national/international experiences. To this end the non-western voice is not simply encouraged, but is actively allowed space to express its non-western, non-colonial sensibilities. This offers opportunities for cross-cultural pollination of a different kind as it allows for the possibilities of understanding, compassion, and friendly curiosity toward differences that arise from the excitement of recognizing a familiar story in an unfamiliar space.

This Special Issue is concerned with how folklore has been used as such in engagements with two particularly big – and equally pervasive – issues: managing conflict and striving for peace. It is an invitation to consciously and deliberately engage with and explore the interdisciplinary nature of folklore; to experiment with a different lens, a shift in perspective to see if, perhaps, the mechanisms for understanding and positive change are magic beans that we already possess.

## FOLKLORE AS AN ACTIVE TOOL FOR CONFLICT MEDIATION AND RESOLUTION

As a first thought regarding the connection between folklore and peace, it may be natural to think of stories that specifically relate to some form of fight or method of restoring peace. **Francis Mbawini Abugbilla**, however, asks that we look beyond narrative to practice, not even historical, but current Ivorian practice of Under the Palaver Tree, a community-based system of conflict resolution. Abugbilla proposes a hybrid approach of leveraging local practiced folklore to be incorporated within a larger framework. We are immediately offered an enmeshment of folkloric lens with regional and cultural sensitivities while acknowledging the challenge of the approach to broader applications.

Maintaining the regional folkloric lens, **Shafiq Ahmed and Raveena Kousar's**, and **Amrita Saikia's** articles examine the current situations in Jammu and Kashmir and Assam, India respectively. These decades long conflicts have resisted any and all attempts at resolution to date, making these articles even more important as they further the question explored by Abugbilla, do we already know why the conflict exists and how to resolve it by examining the stories that are being enacted? If so,

then the question becomes: how do we move people into the resolution narrative of the folklore?

The fourth and final article in this section is by **Sophia Moskalenko**, whose analysis of folklore and fairy tales illustrates how conflicts begin, transitioning from story to active reality (and potentially vice versa). Moskalenko also shows us how our conflicts are committed to collective memory *via* folklore, introducing aspects of memory keeping and continuity of communal identity.

## THE FOLKLORE OF COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND IDENTITY

**F**olklore actively weaves social and cultural narratives, shaped by communities, that tend to both collective memory and identity (Armstrong and Crage 2006). Because we now live in a more globalized society, symbols and narratives from other locales are adopted and adapted more quickly, though still reflective of cultural variation. **Neha Khetrapal's** "Khadi Marigolds for the Martyrs of Jallianwala Bagh (India)" illustrates active engagement of people to accept or reject folklore and symbolism that shapes both collective memory and current identity. The fabric flower is an adaptation of the western red poppy used for remembrance of World War II and all that was lost. The Khadi Marigold shows an appropriate cross-cultural learning though adaptation of a widely recognized symbol: the fabric flower as memory trigger for an impactful historical event with great loss. It also places the fabric flower as being on its way to potentially becoming mythologized, where mythology is positioned as the archive of folklore.

Such connections transition from the communal to the deeply personal, often affective on both levels simultaneously. **Dr. Amirhossein Sadeghi's** preliminary survey of the principles of conflict and the cultural value placed on preventing or mitigating circumstances is directly illustrative of that quiet pervasiveness of folklore in our lives. In this case, an examination of Persian poetry reflects a preference for positive peace and how to achieve this within a specific cultural context. He opens an avenue of analysis and discussion using the folkloric lens that allows for a different type of interdisciplinary perspective from the prevalent religious readings.

Concepts of personal peace often move from religious to spiritual, while maintaining the cultural folkloric context. Much like poetry and African story cloths (van der Merwe 2019), **Kari Sawden** supports **Saeedeh Niktab Etaati's** journey as an Iranian-Canadian, processing her

experiences, specifically during COVID, through embroidery. Design, color, and art are used as practice to emote and evolve personal lore, particularly during times of feeling displaced and grieving. This curation of memory and identity as an act of personal peace calls for an examination of this collective or communal to personal continuum. How much of what we learn from folklore of personal peace come from or can be expanded to the communal? Perhaps a more appropriate question is: how can we understand this entanglement such that an act of personal peace can ripple, affecting communities and vice versa?

### PEACE AS RITUAL AND (INNER) LANDSCAPE

Working through our exploration of internal conflict and acts of positive peace, creating in various forms is explored as a means of working toward inner peace by **Sarah Bellisario**. Here the focus is on ritual – defined for the purpose of this introduction as a series of symbolic and stylized bodily actions. Bellisario characterizes the artist as ritual maker, exploring the ways in which art creation is ritualized, with their own artwork created in response to past trauma provided as powerful, poignant examples of art therapy. Drawing on symbols, folklore, and notions of sympathetic magic, Bellisario demonstrates how the process of creating art can be cathartic for the artist – and also, as a shared healing experience, for their audience. The artist thus becomes the magical healer, with the potential for evolving a personal folklore from the communal.

Magical healing and ritual as reflected in external landscape are themes of **Claire Slack's** paper, which explores the sacred waters at the medieval Chalice Well, Glastonbury, England, a town well known for its spirituality. By enacting certain rituals at this site, from drinking to bathing in the spring waters, pilgrims – and tourists – have been seeking personal wellbeing and inner peace there for over 300 years. Delving into Glastonbury's Chalice Well and its marketed 'World Peace Garden', Slack examines how heritage sites, given enough history, water, and esthetic beauty, can be curated as sacred spaces and therapeutic landscapes, offering visitors of diverse spiritual inclinations the opportunity to experience inner peace.

Ritual and watery landscapes are central also to **Richard Bradley's** paper on the English calendar custom of well dressing. This form of folk art sees communal tableaux produced annually to decorate local water sources, a ritual enacted in gratitude for the gift of water – but also to foster and celebrate a sense of communal identity. Each year, different themes are chosen for the tableaux, and Bradley demonstrates how

conflict and peace are popular motifs. The folk custom of well dressing has thus become a lens through which a community engages with society's big issues, from the H-bomb and South African apartheid in the 1960s, to the First World War centenary in the 2010s. However, as Bradley demonstrates, this ritual is not only a means through which communities think through notions of conflict and peace; as a communal project, necessitating collaboration, it can also facilitate conflict and peace within the local community.

### ART AND ARCHETYPE AS EVOLVING FOLKLORE DRIVING CHANGE

The Witness Blanket is a collection of 880 items found in the debris of Canada's Residential Schools set in a quilt like pattern made of wood<sup>2</sup>. Artist Carey Newman and his team collected the items, their stories, oral histories, and folklore of Residential Schools across Canada. The Witness Blanket has been declared an entity in itself, living lore to remember, grieve, and hopefully heal. The interactive website <https://witnessblanket.ca> allows people to explore and experience the blanket, its items, and stories virtually. But the Blanket and its creators have also challenged our contemporary concepts and rituals regarding ownership, guardianship, and custodianship. The Witness Blanket, as a living entity, cannot be owned. guardianship, however, rests with the tribe local to where the Blanket is kept, and custodianship lies with the museum where it is housed. Artist and art have begun to change our perception of certain concepts through their storytelling.

While Bellesario's article focused on internal, personal challenge and transformation, here we look at those using art and storytelling to effect change. **Nocheva's** elucidation of how folklore operates in our lives and what it brings to communal relationships as we immigrate offers a way in which to examine folklores and how to gently shift and weave a way to more inclusive narratives. While **Williamson and Williamson** push at the edges of folklore by reframing the Barbie doll and all she stands for, into a trickster feminist, asking us to question standard historical narratives. If Barbie herself can live a new folklore, why can we not reframe – not erase – our historical lores?

<sup>2</sup>Further information regarding the Truth and Reconciliation Commission project that became The Witness Blanket, along with background information on Canada's Residential Schools can be found at <https://witnessblanket.ca>. The Witness Blanket is currently housed at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights.

**Hajianford and Ramli** would appear to have accepted the Williamson's challenge as they guide us through contemporary Malaysian artist's work, transforming metal waste from war into sculpture, among other transformative pieces. The practice of folklore, rather than a passive receiving of story, has become prominent in our explorations. Folklore is current, active, affective, changing. Who pushes for narrative change? How is it accepted? And, does national level narrative that conflicts with folklore actually have life in lore?

## CONCLUSION

While narratology is mapped and modeled to trees, and we discuss the need for inclusive and democratized narratives (Cobb, Marc, and Milante 2021), narrative and practice that is folklore must now be recognized and investigated as such. In a selection of articles from authors around the globe, we have seen how foundationally enmeshed folklore is to our perception and navigation of life. It affords us opportunities to adjust, heal, and change our worlds in a conscious, deliberate, and conscientious manner, at both personal and communal levels. At the same time, our initial explorations and discussions have shown that, in addition to attending to the complexities and politics of conflict, attention to folklore – both current and historic – may provide beginnings of solutions. In fact, it may be that the folk have already begun to resolve conflicts and issues, to repair and heal communities. If this is the case, understanding and creative support from researchers, NGOs and other frontline workers may help amplify a changed narrative.

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