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African Folklore: An Encyclopedia (review)

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agement transcends the issue of how tobacco is used. The farmer's harvest represents a fully reciprocating humanity, where neighbor helps neighbor, where people nurture the land, where the land provides for the people, and where the flora nurtures both the people and the land. The elegy invoked in *Tobacco Harvest*, then, is a celebration of that human ecological spirit that Berry has witnessed eroding over the decades.

I recommend reading *Jayber Crow* at the same time as *Tobacco Harvest*, because absorbing the synaesthesia of *Harvest* while inhabiting the lives of the farmers and townspeople of *Crow* will enrich both works for any reader, while making the world seem, at least for a moment, comprehensible.

African Folklore: An Encyclopedia. Ed. Philip M. Peek and Kwesi Yankah. (New York: Routledge, 2004. Pp. xxxii + 593, introduction, 7 black-and-white maps, 87 black-and-white photographs and illustrations, list of contributors, list of entries, appendices, filmography, acknowledgments, list of M.A.s and Ph.D.s in African folklore in the United States, index.)

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A timely book in all senses, *African Folklore: An Encyclopedia* is the most accurate as well as the most recent English-language reference tool on African folklore. There are more than three hundred alphabetically arranged entries in this text. In addition to the expected discussion of oral and musical traditions, the encyclopedia provides entries on ethnic groups and communities (for example, "Jews in Ethiopia" and "Oyo Tunji: A Yoruba Community in the USA"), concepts ("Cosmology," "Myths," and "Religion"), material culture ("Musical Instruments"), and a few persons important in the study of African folklore (including "William Bascom," "Daniel Crowley," "Leo Frobenius," and "Robert Rattray"), as well as many examples of classic case studies. Only the entries about countries (mostly one-page articles, from "Algeria" to "Zimbabwe") lack biblio-

graphical references. However, these entries give population numbers and key historical facts for every African country, including island nations—Cape Verde, Mauritius, Madagascar, and Comoros. In this international reunion of scholars, almost one third of the 150 contributors are Africanists or ethnologists from African countries. About another third are from the United States, while the remaining third hail mostly from Europe, Canada, and South America.

In their introduction, Peek and Yankah define folklore as "those esoteric traditions (oral, customary, or material) expressed in the form of artistic communication used as operational culture by a group within the larger society (primarily to provide group identity and homogeneity)" (p. xi). In the following pages, one finds entries related to almost every imaginable kind of traditional folklore. Entries include "Animals in African Folklore," "Body Art," "Children's Folklore," "Dances," "Dress," and of course "Folktales," "Food," "Gestures," and "Superstitions," plus many more on music and songs in specific countries. The average entry is about one page long; most overviews are twice that length. Among the most comprehensive entries, Jean-Paul Colley's ten-page chapter titled "Films on African Folklore" not only lists numerous examples of ethnographic films related to ritual, gender, funerals, games, and masks, it also provides a fine analysis of several documentaries, using concepts and core themes included in other entries of the encyclopedia (pp. 125–34).

The very first entry in the book is a reference to "African Americans," an indication that the general sentiment here is comparative and interdisciplinary. Several other articles seem inspired by the thoroughly cross-cultural perspective of Atlantic studies, notably those on African diasporas (in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Brazil) and on the presence of the Jamaican Rastafari in Africa.

Some fine entries emphasize historiography, such as "French Study of African Folklore" and "Japanese Study of African Folklore." The entry "Institutional Study of African Folklore" provides an account of the many existing approaches and key scholars in this field. The

detailed overview of North African folklore begins with the "Ancient Egyptian Legacy" and continues up to recent decades, highlighting important books and current trends. Researchers looking for a variety of sources and accurate references will also appreciate the entries on education ("Folklore in Schools") and libraries, as well as the appendices, especially the comprehensive treatment of films related to folklore listed in the last pages.

Since we are dealing with African folklore, there are countless entries for oral traditions and heritage: "Jokes and Humor," "Oral Narrative," "Oral Performance and Literature," "Performance in Africa," "Proverbs," and "Verbal Arts," plus an original text, "Gossip and Rumor." All of these, as well as the accurate entry on popular culture, insist that Africa be viewed as a diverse continent, not a cultural monolith.

The contributors to the encyclopedia are clearly aware of the developments and crises that have occurred during recent decades in Africa, and some authors discuss the presence of folklore in new media and technologies ("Electronic Media and Oral Traditions," "Radio and Television Dramas"). On a tragic note, one article refers to tales of genocide in Rwanda.

An exemplary effort, *African Folklore: An Encyclopedia* is the kind of book that one can read for hours, since each article invites the reader toward another, and so on. One of the work's strongest points is its accurate portrayal of the current state of research on every topic discussed. Readers and critics in the field would be unfair to ask for more entries or to try to indicate the missing elements in such a hefty reference book. Perhaps its high price may keep younger scholars from buying it, but most university libraries should acquire a copy. My only complaint is that there are too many bibliographical references in English for an international encyclopedia; I would have liked to find even more French authors mentioned. This marvelous encyclopedia confirms once again Routledge's expertise as a publisher of fine, up-to-date, readable reference books. I recommend that any scholar in ethnology or African studies be aware of and use this fine work.

Words on Fire: The Unfinished Story of Yiddish. By Dovid Katz. (New York: Basic Books, 2004. Pp. xvi + 430, acknowledgments, notes on transcription, introduction, 58 photographs and illustrations, index.)

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Dovid Katz's *Words on Fire* thoroughly lays out the history (and prehistory) of the Yiddish language. Starting with earliest antecedents of Yiddish in pre-biblical Aramaic and Canaanite, the book examines its birth in medieval Germany, its development throughout the European continent, the literary flowering of the language during its nineteenth-century "secular outburst," and its most recent innovations in grammar and Internet content. As much a history of the Ashkenazi Diaspora as (in his phrase) a "linguography" (p. 9), *Words on Fire* is a richly informed, well written, and critically engaged work.

In his historiography, Katz pays a good deal of attention to the cultural baggage that the language eventually accumulated, in particular the rise of various gendered understandings of Yiddish's place in the world of Jewish Europe. In one form or another, Yiddish speakers have for centuries figured their native language as feminine or feminized. Rabbinical Judaism discouraged women from studying sacred texts, leaving educated women only Yiddish writings to enjoy. As Ashkenazi culture established itself, the social divide between educated men who mastered the Hebrew of the Bible and the Aramaic of the Talmud (the "real men" of traditional Jewish culture) and uneducated men who generally could read only Yiddish fomented an additional derogatory association with Yiddish as the province of the unprestigious (and to a degree, unmanly) majority of the population. As Katz demonstrates, the dismissal and derogation of Yiddish as an effeminate language persists up to the present day in some quarters—this, despite Yiddish modernists who revalued their literary medium as a constant lover and Hasidic sects that declared its sanctity as the proper language for the Diasporic faithful. Yiddish presents a fascinating case study of the intersections of language