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## Gender and Genre in the Folklore of Middle India

Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger

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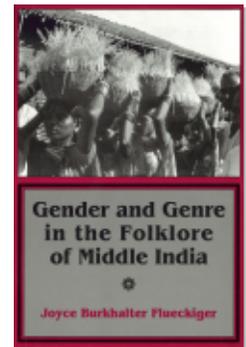
Flueckiger, Joyce Burkhalter.

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## Foreword

GREGORY NAGY

*Gender and Genre in the Folklore of Middle India*, by Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger, demonstrates the necessity of defining any given genre as a part of a system of genres as they exist at a given time and place within a given community. Thus we cannot speak of, say, epic as a “genre” of and by itself until we establish how the form that we call “epic” fits into a system of other forms that are complementary to it. Moreover, we cannot expect a genre such as “epic” to be a constant—let alone a universal—since different communities are marked by different systems of complementarity. Even a single community may have had different systems at different phases of its existence, so that the nature of a genre like epic may change over time.

Together with another book in the Myth and Poetics series, Dwight Reynolds’s *Heroic Poets, Poetic Heroes: The Ethnography of Performance in an Arabic Oral Epic Tradition*, Flueckiger’s work will force a radical revision of the concept of epic. In Reynolds’s book, epic is seen as crossing class boundaries. In Flueckiger’s we see epic crossing gender boundaries as well. Such shifts, Flueckiger argues, can be understood only within an overall system of genres.

From earlier studies of the occasions of public performance in the living epic traditions of India there arose the scholarly consensus that epic is performed almost exclusively by male singers. The rarely found “exceptions,” however, are particularly revealing, and Flueckiger has been a pioneer of research in such crossovers of gender and genre. Moreover, her discoveries of “exceptional” epic crossovers in the repertoires of women performers provide a major impetus for comparative study. We can now see in a new light, for example, the song of Sappho about the wedding of Hektor and Andro-

mache, considered exceptional in the history of Greek literature: that song, composed in a meter cognate with but distinct from the epic dactylic hexameter, treats in a nonepic manner themes that are otherwise characteristic of epic.

Flueckiger's book, the result of fieldwork conducted over a period of fifteen years on the oral traditions of the Chhattisgarh region of Middle India, describes in detail six genres that typify this community. These genres define themselves through their interrelationships in performance traditions and, implicitly, in the repertoires of individual performers. By closely studying these interrelationships, the author has succeeded in capturing the essence of what is known as a song culture, that is, a kind of social setting in which the performances of songs are not distinguished from the performances of rituals that happen to be basic to that setting. To the extent that a community identifies itself by way of its rituals—and by way of the myths to which they are connected—a song culture is the sum of its myths and rituals. The six genres studied in this book illuminate a new way to look at poetics, that is, through the lens of an indigenous song culture.