UNIT 1  DEFINITION, FUNCTION AND GENRES

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1.1 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit you will be able to:

- understand the concept of folklore;
- define folklore;
- discuss the background of the history of folklore studies;
- identify with its components and characteristics;
- list out the functions of folklore; and
- explain the genres belonging to folklore studies.

1.2 INTRODUCTION

Folklore covers almost our entire life experience. It is present in our daily life. We cannot deny its presence in speech such as riddles, jokes; it is present in our games, dance and song. None of the studies of human life, from ethnography, history, linguistics to literature can ignore folklore. It is acquiring more and more importance as a separate field of study and discipline. In order to grasp the scope and importance of folklore, we need to first understand the historical development of the discipline in itself.
1.2.1 History

The history of folklore studies began in the 19th century. However, one can trace its roots back even further. According to Max Muller, it is said that all races find their origin in certain basic tribes, originating from the ancient Medes or the Persians. Certain linguistic, physical, social and cultural symbols seem thus to be common. The word father, for example, can be seen in the German *vater*, old German *fatar*, Greek and Latin *pater* and Sanskrit *patar* or *Petri*. Hence, we can determine how folk speech and utterances had some common generic roots. It is also said that certain folklore ideas of modern European nations belong to paganism and Hinduism.

Systematic study of folk material began from the 18th century onwards. Johann Gottfried von Herder, a famous scholar in his famous book *Stimmen der Völker in Liedern* (1778-79) had used the term Folk with *Volk* and described folk songs as *Volkslied*, Volksseele as the soul of folk and Volksgläube as the belief. He saw in the arts of common people a reflection of nation state and its consciousness. It was after the 18th century that the study of folklore began as a separate discipline and got due importance. The contributions of the Grimm brothers who published their work in 1812 cannot be undermined. They used the term *Volkskunde* for folklore.

The term ‘folklore’ was established by a Briton, William Thoms in 1846. Nationalistic fervour and patriotism gave folklore a special impetus, as it was felt by many, for the need to save and document their cultural heritage. As a result, many national societies in folklore came into existence in the 19th century. The English folklore society was formed in 1878 and the American in 1888. Folklore has thus played a very important role in cultivating and creating a national identity and consciousness amongst the people.

From the definitions of Thoms, the word folklore is now an internationally accepted word. It should be noted here that the term *Volkskunde* is increasingly avoided in Germany as Hitler used it for propaganda reasons. Many scholars especially from Latin America associate folklore with colonial imperialism. They prefer the term popular antiquities. In India we see that this term is strongly associated with *Janapada* or *Lok*. At the same time folklore studies is strongly nationalistic in content. The folklorists have always set out to collect, preserve and document their national heritage.

During the 19th and the 20th century scholars studied songs, tales and games and defined them as folklore. However, today it includes a wide range of meeting points and comprise of a large range of oral and verbal practices as well as material performances including songs, theatre, weaving as well as something like building houses and cooking.

1.2.2 Definition

Folklore has always been associated with simple, ignorant people as compared to the high classical arts, which are seen as being elite. It is strongly seen with the rural peasant folk. It is said to be different from the literate elite. It was seen that folk was more or less uncivilized. Folk has always been seen to survive along with the elite group but yet very different from it.
These definitions cannot be valid. According to Dundes, “The term folk can refer to any group of people, whatsoever, who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is – it could be a common occupation, language, or religion – but what is important is that a group is formed for whatever reason it calls its own.”

Folk culture cannot be demarcated through geographical notions or by literary reasons alone. It can belong to people of similar race, gender, religion or occupation. It can cut across geographical boundaries and have close human to human interaction. It can also be shaped by technology and modern society. For example, net surfers all across the world can have their own kind of folk culture that distinguishes them from others. Folk always implies some kind of collectivity as it is a shared experience, common to more than one person. Even though it is created by one individual, a folk culture cannot become one unless it is shared and is collective. It is not necessary that all the folk members should know one another. They can be distant and not connected in any manner.

Folk does not necessarily imply rural or lower class. There can be a strong urban literate folk. As discussed above, television, computers, telephone all have impacted folk genres such as jokes, songs, stories and myths. It also has become a great tool in the transmission and the generation of new folk culture.

Folk culture is alive and vibrant. In the 19th century folklore was considered to be a dead culture. However, it would wrong to assume so. It is deeply connected with a vibrant ever changing cultural tradition of any region. It can change its meaning and significance over time but the essence remains the same. For example, certain jokes and proverbs have no longer any social significance. However, they still will belong to folk culture.

To many, folklore implies some kind of falsity and fantasy. Folk tales and stories often are considered to be based on incorrect facts and myths. While it is true for some genres of folklore, like tales and stories, it would be wrong to imply that all forms of folk culture have some notions of falsehood inherent in it. It is very much based on the material life of the people and some forms like theatre and performance are very much based on tangible truths.

Folk culture comprises of learned habits, beliefs, rituals, institutions and expressions of the people. However this is not strictly limited to oral habits and could include material culture as well. This is closely associated with the notions of a folk society which is a group of individuals who are organized around some common interest. Both folk culture and folk society thus go together. As described earlier the notions of folk culture has greatly changed. The initial ideas of folk culture were based on ideal, romantic ideas and saw the folk culture as that of the rural and common people. It was also linked up with nationalism. However folk culture truly encompasses all.

Definitions of scholars of folklore range and differ. According to Klintberg, it stands for, “traditional cultural forms that are communicated between individuals through words and actions and tend to exist in variation.” However folk are comprised by all and everyone in society. Scholars have long believed that folklore is communicated orally through informal methods or means. They also believe that since folklore is largely verbal it can differ greatly with every instance of communication.
However, informal means of communication should not be seen as the sole methods as it can be transmitted through a variety of methods and numerous ways. Both print and visual media often communicate folk ideas. Well known artists also have communicated their thoughts through their artistic creations such as theatre, dance or paintings. For example, the very famous playwright Girish Karnad has explored folk motifs in his plays Hayavadana.

Folklore is deeply connected with tradition. As tradition involves change and continuity, cultural symbols, items and icons of folklore all undergo a process of change. Folklore, hence, is in a continuous process of flux and is inherently dynamic. Folklore is deeply connected to the social life and its processes of change and alterations. Hence this is an artistic process that is both creative and imaginative and in a state of flux and change.

Folklore often has an inherent inconsistency in it. Often we see that certain principles and standards held by the people are often challenged. On the other hand, folklore also maintains set and standard cultural values. This can be seen in folksongs where values such as love between the mother and child, family bonding, patriotism, unity between man and nature etc are constantly upheld. Folklore hence can bind people together like in the case of songs or separate them as in the case of humiliating jokes. Contrasts are hence inherent in folklore.

Folklore can be global or local, national or international, personal or public. For example, folktales of the hero rescuing a princess from the clutches of evil are universal but tales from the region of Rajasthan, like that of Dhola maru, are local in nature. Folklore is deeply connected with aesthetics and the appreciation of beauty, for example, art and folk crafts. This is defined by the folklorists in the sense of style and artistry. Some scholars do not consider jokes, riddles or everyday art objects like clay pots and fabrics as being creative or aesthetic. However, art objects or everyday idioms, speech patterns and verbal utterances are artistic patterns of communication.

Folklore also remains deeply authentic and reliable. This is in contrast to high culture where authenticity rests with the individual and this also determines originality. In folklore on the other hand authorship is anonymous. However, in folklore the continuity of tradition proves to its authenticity.

As defined earlier folklore is also deeply connected to the social process and its functioning. It cannot exist on its own and needs to work within the context of society and community. Hence family life, economic structure, education, aesthetic and cultural values, religion and political set up of any society are also important. The interaction of the individual and his interaction in the social, cultural economic and political set up play a pivotal role.

Many scholars believe that family defines folklore. They see this social organization as being the primary one that brings forth the entire process of folklore be it communication, preservation of culture or conservation of cultural symbols. Patterns of belief, behaviour, art, rituals, institutions and expressions are often mediated through the family. We can add to this by saying that folk culture represents the representation and the reaffirmation of the total identity of a particular group whether it is a family, community or nation.
Folk life is always viewed in contrast to the elite which are seen as being civilized, urban or high. Some believe that folk culture belongs to small technologically backward group. Folk culture is much broader and this can be seen in urban settings as well, like in the instances of migrant labourers in big cities of India or petty shop keepers in metros. Folk thus constitutes of group of persons that have some common features that allows for cohesion.

A group can thus be large or small, or in other words primary or secondary. This can be differentiated on the basis of some criteria that include size, purpose, duration, patterns of communication, type of social control and the amount of involvement of the individual in the group. Typically a primary group can be small and the interaction between community members are face to face and often direct. By contrast a secondary group is larger and may be long lasting.

Scholars have thus defined folk in several ways:
1) Folklore is deeply connected to the nation.  
2) It is said to belong to the lower levels of the social hierarchy.  
3) It is said to be old fashioned as compared to the complex civilization.  
4) It is believed that it belongs to large societies with a large population.  
5) Folk is said to be a social group connected through a common tradition and a particular feeling of communication.

From the above discussions it can be defined that Folklore is a broad category that can be said to be the culture of any group that is communicated through verbal or expressive literature, behaviours visible through the material life (including customs, rituals) and performances and public displays of the individual.

As folklore is deeply connected with the society it fulfills several functions. The next section will discuss this in detail.

### Check your progress 1

**Note:**
1) Your answers should be about 30 words each;
2) You may check your answers with the possible answers given at the end of the Unit.

1) Can any folklore die?

Folklore belongs to all. It contains the whole gamut of the society. It can be said here that it also fulfills and satisfies certain basic functions. This will be discussed in greater details in the coming unit. Some of the major areas that it fulfills certain functional roles are as follows:

**1.3 FUNCTION**

Folklore belongs to all. It contains the whole gamut of the society. It can be said here that it also fulfills and satisfies certain basic functions. This will be discussed in greater details in the coming unit. Some of the major areas that it fulfills certain functional roles are as follows:
1) Psychological or individual

Folklore is largely personal and is shaped through people’s behaviours, motivations and habits. By and large folklore is entertaining; it thus fulfills an amusement amongst the community members. Jokes, riddles, metaphors, tales and performances as well as the arts highly entertain the people. These forms of folklore provide entertainment to the people. It is a well thought out distraction from the humdrum and the daily needs of life.

Stories and anecdotes assert often cultural symbols and values and shape individuality. Archetypes and heroic figures instill courage and love amongst the listeners. Folk customs, rituals and narrative enrich individual interaction with the community. Stories that emphasize good over evil, wicked demons getting slain, witches getting locked up in cages and thrown away immediately gratify the viewer.

Folklore maintains group cohesion and interaction, for example children’s games further bond the child not only to his mother but also make him cooperate and bond with his entire community. Superstitions, games and riddles often reflect the social context. Individual and social taboos are also either reinforced or denigrated by the folklore. For example, we find several jokes on toilets and excretion or we see in folksongs certain taboo relations such as between the wife and her brother-in-law are often talked with great freedom and no restraint is placed on such topics.

Myths and legends either mirror or distort the reality of the society and reflect the individual’s position in society. In the famous Hindu ballad, the Ramayana, a position of the woman shown as Sita is banished from her kingdom but at the same time she has an exalted position as she is considered to be virtuous and has all the qualities needed for a good wife.

1.3.2 Functional

Folklore gratifies or expresses the hostilities found in the culture and society. Proverbs can help solve legal decisions, while riddles sharpen wit and humour and reinforce cultural values, myths validate conduct in the society, and satirical songs release pent up feelings and tensions. All the above folklore helps the individual to remain in the society. Some tales about nature also talk about how to grow crops and folk medicines help to cure diseases.

Some customs are purely social and can be described as rites of passage. They help the individual to come closer to society. One such major rites of passage ritual in India are the thread or the Upanayana ceremony. Weddings can also be seen as a rite of passage or the new born baby birth ceremony. These customs
accompany the change of place, state, social status and age. In this the social and the physical position of an individual is either altered or reinforced. It is a cultural socialization process. Some of these transitions might take place once in an individual’s life for example birth, initiation, death etc.; and may occur daily like when we do our daily prayers, the change coming from profane to sacred. This theory has been propounded by Van Gennep who believes that rites of passage accompany every change of place, state, social position and age. Many of these rites are made public and open to the whole society.

Important symbols and values of the people are often expressed in traditions and passed down from one generation to another. Folklore hence passes on preexisting ethics and standards of the society. This gets also reinforced through performances. This hence helps one to connect to the heritage of the society.

1.3.3 Religious

Religion is a part of the daily existence of life. This is expressed in everyday belief, speech, story and song. It also affects both the private practices and public ritual activities and also the material life like clothing, food and objects. Legends about saints like that of Sant Kabir and Tukaram, supernatural narratives like the myths of Krishna, magic and occult practices all are deeply religious in content. Talismans and totems, proverbs and sayings, folk songs, dance and theatre, use of devotional texts etc. are all replete with the concerns of religion.

Folk religion however differs from formal state religion. Religious motifs hence integrate the individual’s ideas and practices into a smooth transition into human society. Folk belief also gets manifested in healing contexts such as magic, occultism and medicine. Individuals hence hold these belief systems and express them in personal and communal demonstrations. It is within this context of religious beliefs that one can see several instances of human religiosity. The belief system is largely communicative.

Furthermore a ritual can be easily observed in the group and is also an expressive form of any religion. Rituals have social dimensions and they are quite different from personal actions of an individual. They consist of number of rites or verbal and non verbal communications. Some rites are performed to remove some crisis, for example the practice of occult and shamanism to remove illnesses. These are attempts to make normal life restored.

Some rites are performed periodically, like special rites are performed while cutting the grain (like that of baisakhi) and rituals for New Year (Gudi padwah in Gujarat and Pongal in south). The other major rites are initiation rites or the rites of passage that are associated with different phases of human life such as puberty, birth, old age, marriage etc.

Rituals are an important constituent of religion and are often psychologically determined. It also has hidden social goals that make ritual symbolic. Rituals also can create a strong sense of body awareness. For example, in the Ramleela festival ordinary humans are worshipped like gods. Hence their physical bodies are given much importance. Folklore is not static and requires performance; it also becomes goal driven. Rituals hence play an important role in transmitting cultural knowledge and religious symbols and it maintains the functioning of the society from the past to the present.
1.3.4 Historical-national

Folklore is a strong cultural symbol that advocates national and ethnic pride. This is primarily done through the development, preservation, imitation and collection of literature, language and traditions. These ideas of a strong historical and cultural nationalism arose in the 18th and 19th century. This greatly emphasized the ideas of the individual and creativity and also it inspired an interest in antiquity, tradition and folklore.

The ideas of Goethe and Rousseau were developed in the 18th century and a greater need arose to recreate and preserve the past. The most significant contribution to this field was the collection of folktales of the Grimm brothers. This served as an impetus for the recording and publishing of folklore material all over Europe.

The romantic nationalism also provided for the inspiration to create national epics. In Europe, great interest was generated in Homer’s works. For example, Elias Lonnrot compiled the Finnish national epic The Kalevala on the basis of folk poetry. Romantic nationalism also arose in the Soviet Union with a creation of high cultural form, socialistic in content and international in spirit. In the mid 1930s many cultural clubs began to be formed, in which the programs consisted of pure folk performances and gradually texts propagating the political systems began to be devised. They were based on folk models and new melodies that greatly resembled the older folk songs began to be composed.

During the 20th century we come across the strong notions of nationalism emerging in Asia, Africa and South America. The role of folklore was diverse in these countries as it ranged from efforts being made to collect folklore and to also use in various national and cultural movements. Such collections are crucial therefore in creating a sense of national identity, cultural life and sometimes they have also provided the impetus to develop a written language. This interest was generated from a deep desire to reinforce the nation’s self image and to arouse interest in the nation’s own language and culture.

This has also prompted the formation of national archives and publication of folklore material all over the world. Many performances also have been based on traditional themes and elements. It is important to note here that this arose from a perspective towards modernity. People thus created their national language and formed national myths and symbols such as flags, national anthems and national festivals. It can be said here that Bal Gangadhar Tilak, a very famous freedom fighter of India revived the Ganesh festival to arouse nationalistic sentiments. Rabindranath Tagore also is said to have composed many songs that were based on folk songs of Bengal.

Some difference should be made here from political nationalism. A deep interest in folklore studies created a cultural consciousness or a cultural movement. In this national and patriotic fervor was created through the use of folklore in music, art, dance, drama and literature. However it should be noted that nationalism created through the study of folklore can greatly vary according to the different socio-cultural and political contexts of different nations.

1.3.5 Economic

Folklore has also made great contributions to the economic life style of the people. This can be seen in the creation of material culture that has economic as well as
utilitarian skills. Crafts are one such example. This is a process through which goods are created by hand. Craft can become essential to the daily utilities of life as well have some decorative and spiritual functions. They also provide with the basic equipment needed for domestic life be it tools, furnishings, houses, clothes etc. Craft hence has both utilitarian as well as aesthetic characteristics.

Many scholars today feel that crafting is the process of doing rather than creating. In addition to historical crafts such as pottery or weaving some scholars feel that non-canonized traditions such as cooking meals, building houses etc. should be seen as processes of crafts. Folklore also presents opportunities for consumption and for selling. It has become a pivotal point through which tourists are attracted. Many crafts bazaars are held all over India that create an opening for sale and economic transactions. The Dilli haat in Delhi is one such famous crafts bazaar.

1.3.6 Cross-cultural

All folklore material is based on commonality and intercultural diffusions. If one understands the above statement, it can create a cultural cooperation amongst nations. For example, myths seem to originate in ancient sacrificial fertility rituals. With the passage of time the myths went their separate ways and rites became customs. This helps us to imagine that we all live in pluralistic, open ended and free world in which every society possesses its own unique history and values.

Folklore hence creates several opportunities and fulfills several functions. Hence it has several meanings and creates many new opportunities. It also becomes important to study the various genres of folklore. The next unit will discuss this in detail.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: 1) Your answers should be about 30 words each;
2) You may check your answers with the possible answers given at the end of the unit.

2) What are the main functions of folklore?
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1.4 GENRES

It is generally accepted that folk life embraces the whole panorama of human life and traditional culture that includes traditional art and craft as well as oral culture. The various genres of folk culture can be divided into four main headings:

1) Oral literature
2) Material culture
3) Social folk custom  
4) Performing folk arts

1.4.1 Oral literature

Under this category are spoken, sung or merely voiced forms of verbal communications that show some repeated behaviour. This is sometimes defined as verbal or communicative arts. The details of the various subgenres are given below:

**Oral narratives/stories/tales**

The need to tell a story and the need to listen to it is ageless. Folk narratives encompass all genres of oral literature. The tale provides a sense of fantasy to the listener. Industrial expansion and urbanization has also floated a large number of tales. These tales can be having fictitious, historical, revered or ridiculed treatments and plots. The characters may be mortal, divine, supernatural or human. The *Panchatantra* stories from India are very popular folk narratives.

**Folk poetry**

This can be differentiated from narrative in the manner of its transmission. Sometimes they do not concentrate on a single poem on its own. Oral epics come under this group. Poetry is often repetitive, dramatic and exaggerated. This often deals with materials of dramatic local significance. Epics on the other hand are poems that are highly ornamental dealing with the adventures of extraordinary people. They can be heroic, romantic and historic. The *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* are the two major epics of our country.

**Proverbs**

This can be easily observed and collected and they have been a part of everyday verbal recourses. These are short, witty traditional expressions that arise as part of our everyday discourse as well as in highly structured situations like education. For example the saying “from the frying pan into the fire” They often take a personal circumstance and embody it in a witty form.

**Riddles**

Riddles are questions that are framed with the purpose of confusing or testing the wits of those who do not know the answers. Usually they have confusing descriptions and often describe a scene.

**Folk speech**

This is a highly informal way of talking that is learned by linguistic acculturation and by observing language patterns from ones family, friends and associates. Often one describes this as dialect. They are often subject to regional, class and community peculiarities. It is distinguished from cultivated and common speech through its pronunciation.

1.4.2 Material culture

In direct contrast to the oral folklore is the physical folk life that can be described as material culture. This responds to the techniques transmitted across generations and all the processes that are hand made fall under this group. Some of its important sub genres are described below:
Crafts

Any item having artistic or utilitarian functions, that is hand made and has been passed down by tradition come under crafts. This is different from art and an occupation. It has immense aesthetic appeal and requires workmanship.

Art

Any object that gives some pleasure and also serves some practical social or economic purpose can be called folk art. It should be noted here that if the pleasure giving function predominates, then the artifact is called art and if a practical function predominates it is called craft. The main purpose is aesthetic appeal. This object can be more popular and will not be subject to rapidly changing fashions.

Folk architecture

This can be said to be traditional architecture. It is concerned with all traditional aspects of building, the shapes, sizes and its layouts, such as barns and sheds; the material used and the tools and techniques of building; the sites chosen and the placement of the various buildings; the uses and functionality of such buildings.

Folk costumes

The dress of all traditional, ethnic, occupational and sectarian groups that is determined geographically and expresses the region or the locality comes under this category. This can also be different for different sects and religions. For example the Muslim ladies wear purdah and the sardars a turban.

Folk cookery

This can be defined as traditional domestic cookery marked by regional variation. It is the opposite of commercial and institutional cookery. This includes the study of food themselves, their composition, their preparation, their preservation, social and psychological functions. It also includes attitudes, taboos and food habits.

1.4.3 Social folk custom

In between the oral literature and material culture lie areas of traditional life that we may call social folk customs. This is based on group interactions rather than individual skills and performances. Some of the subgenres include:

Celebrations and festivals

Almost all societies periodically set aside some time for celebrations. These are moments of special significance to the entire community. They can be seasonal, anniversaries of historical events, birth or death of a hero or god or religious in significance. They might be moments in which some living or dead person is honoured with feasting and some performance.

Recreation and games

This is a form of expressive behaviour and can be non-productive in nature. This is separated from reality and the goals are in built. The main idea behind the game is recreation and pleasure. Many folklorists have paid attention traditional games and pastimes.
Folk medicine
This consists of natural or herbal folk medicines and magical religious folk medicines. In the former cure is sought from herbs, plants, minerals and animal substances while the latter attempts at curing through charms, holy words and actions, in other words occultism. Ayurveda is one such popular form of folk medicine.

Folk religion
These are orally transmitted popular beliefs amongst the people. This recognizes one or more deity, spirits ad demons, personal and impersonal power, ghosts, fate, luck and magic. In this rationalism and science makes very little impact. They also embrace the attitudes, behaviours and cultural values of the people.

1.4.4 Performing folk art
These are conscious presentations by individuals or groups with folk instruments, dance, costumes and props. Some of its subgenres are discussed below:

Folk drama
They are performances that occur in festivals and rituals. They use conventional symbols such as masks and costumes and the performance takes place through stylized actions. It is essentially a public performance and is easily understood by the audiences. They often use many techniques such as dancing, singing, bombastic speeches to attract the audiences.

Folk music
This is all traditional music that is aurally transmitted and passed down by ear and performed by memory. It is not written down and also does not have any musical score. The origin of the music remains largely unknown. It can get highly diffused as it passes down from one individual to another.

Folk dance
A traditional, anonymously choreographed dance that is communally derived can be called folk dance. It has strong regional or local characteristics. It is usually also expressed vernacularly and is often a product of change and innovation.

Check Your Progress 3
Note: 1) Your answers should be about 30 words each;
2) You may check your answers with the possible answers given at the end of the Unit.
3) What are the main genres of folklore?
1.5 LET US SUM UP

Folklore means the learning, communication and transmission of any community or group that may or may not have regional and national features. It encompasses all knowledge that is either transmitted through word of mouth and all arts and techniques that passes from generation to generation. This discipline generated an interest in the 18th century onwards. It belongs to all the people whether rich or poor, urban or rural and educated or uneducated. This includes art, crafts, costumes, customs, beliefs, religion, food, medicine, speech, songs, poems, dance, drama and song. Folklore studies forms a very important discipline on its own right.

1.6 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READINGS


1.7 ACTIVITIES

1) Describe any one major festival of your region.

2) What are the local crafts found in your region? Describe any one.

3) Have you been to any crafts bazaar or mela? If yes, describe what you saw in it.

1.8 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

1) While some folklore ceases to exist and does lose its significance by and large folklore constantly modifies itself and is always in a state of flux. Folklore is inherently dynamic.

2) Folklore fulfills many functions and they are religious, economic, social, cross cultural, historical-national and psychological or individual. It encompasses all aspects of human life be it individual or based on the society.

3) Folklore consists of all aspects of social behaviour and the genres include: Oral literature (ballads, riddles and proverbs), material culture (food, dress), customs (rituals and festivals) and performing art (music, theatre and dance).