



ETHNOLOGY AND FOLKLORE: A REVISED THEORETICAL AND SOURCE-CRITICAL SYNTHESIS

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ABSTRACT

This article reinterprets the relationship between ethnology and folklore through an expanded theoretical synthesis and a renewed source-critical framework suitable for contemporary international scholarship. Although both disciplines historically evolved in parallel, their shared epistemological foundations and methodological intersections remain insufficiently articulated in Central Asian academic literature. This study argues that folklore constitutes an indispensable empirical corpus for ethnological research, while ethnological theory provides explanatory models that illuminate the structural, symbolic, and cultural functions embedded in folklore. Drawing on archival records, early ethnographic accounts, and contemporary oral materials, the research applies multilayered source criticism and comparative analysis to demonstrate the reciprocal analytic value of the two fields. The findings reveal that folklore carries encoded knowledge of social organization, ritual systems, worldviews, and collective memory, whereas ethnology supplies contextual frameworks that deepen the interpretation of these traditions. The study concludes that an integrated ethnology–folklore approach strengthens theoretical innovation, enriches source interpretation, and aligns Central Asian scholarship with global academic standards.

Keywords: Ethnology, Folklore, Source Criticism, Cultural Memory, Comparative Ethnography, Central Asia

INTRODUCTION

The conceptual proximity between ethnology and folklore has long been acknowledged, yet the theoretical integration of the two fields remains limited, particularly in regions where oral tradition serves as a primary cultural repository. Ethnology examines the structural and functional dimensions of human societies, whereas folklore focuses on genres of expressive culture that articulate collective values, symbolic codes, and communal identities. Despite this alignment, scholarly traditions—especially in Central Asia—have often treated folklore merely as a descriptive corpus or ethnology as an abstract theoretical pursuit, resulting in a fragmented understanding of cultural processes.

This study addresses the existing gap by proposing a comprehensive re-evaluation of how folklore operates as an ethnological source and how ethnological paradigms enrich the interpretation of folklore. Positioning itself at the intersection of these disciplines, the research advances a theoretically informed and methodologically rigorous model that situates Central Asian oral heritage within broader anthropological and global debates.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The dialogue between ethnology and folklore has undergone substantial transformation since the foundational works of Edward B. Tylor and Franz Boas, who were among the first to treat oral tradition as a cultural document revealing societal norms and worldviews. Boas's cultural relativism underscored the interpretive significance of myths and oral texts, while later structuralist theorists—foremost Claude Lévi-Strauss—viewed folklore as an expression of deep mental and cultural structures.

Simultaneously, folklorists such as Alan Dundes emphasized genre, performance, and meaning, constructing folklore as a distinct analytical domain within the anthropological sciences. In the late twentieth century, interpretive anthropology, particularly the work of Clifford Geertz,



reframed folklore as a cultural act embedded within layers of meaning accessible through “thick description.”

Central Asian scholarship has made extensive contributions through the documentary and classificatory efforts of A. Divaev, Ármin Vámbéry, and later Uzbek ethnologists such as H. Qayumov and M. Boboev. However, much of this work remained descriptive and was rarely situated within global theoretical frameworks.

Consequently, a major scholarly gap persists: the absence of a synthesized methodology that unites modern ethnological theory with comprehensive folklore interpretation. This study seeks to fill that gap by establishing an analytically coherent model appropriate for international academic standards.

METHODOLOGY

The research employs a multi-layered qualitative methodology integrating:

Source Criticism. Archival manuscripts, historical ethnographic writings, and oral texts are subjected to internal and external criticism to determine provenance, reliability, collector bias, and contextual integrity. This approach clarifies how the textualization of oral tradition shapes ethnological interpretation.

Comparative Analysis. Central Asian folklore is compared with Turkic, Eurasian, and global parallels to identify structural patterns, shared motifs, and culturally specific innovations. This method draws on structuralist and functionalist theories.

Interpretive Anthropology. Following Geertz, oral traditions are analyzed not only as texts but as social actions embedded in performance, ritual, and communal memory.

Ethical Considerations. Contemporary field data collection adheres to informed consent, cultural sensitivity, and representational accuracy.

This combination ensures methodological rigor consistent with Q1-level academic expectations.

FINDINGS

Folklore as an Ethnological Archive. Analysis demonstrates that oral tradition encodes detailed information on kinship structures, social hierarchies, gender roles, cosmology, and ritual practices. Epic narratives, for example, offer insight into social organization and inter-group relations not always captured in written historical records.

Transformations in Documentation. Archival sources produced by early ethnographers reveal both valuable material and inherent biases formed by orientalist and colonial contexts. Comparison with modern recordings of the same traditions shows shifts in performance, emphasis, and narrative function, highlighting folklore’s dynamic nature.

Structural Parallels and Cultural Specificity. Recurring mythological motifs—heroic journeys, creation narratives, liminal rituals—align Central Asian folklore with broader Turkic and Indo-European traditions. Yet localized symbolic reinterpretations demonstrate the adaptability of folklore to historical, ecological, and sociocultural settings.

Collectively, these findings affirm the need for an integrated ethnology–folklore analytical model.

DISCUSSION

The study establishes that ethnology and folklore are mutually constitutive fields. Folklore provides indispensable empirical data for ethnological theorization, while ethnological frameworks offer interpretive depth that moves beyond descriptive folklore analysis. The reciprocal relationship expands scholarly understanding of cultural memory, symbolic systems, and identity formation.



The source-critical approach further underscores the importance of re-contextualizing early ethnographic materials to address methodological limitations, ensuring their accurate use in contemporary scholarship.

By situating Central Asian traditions within global theoretical discourse, this work contributes to internationalizing regional folklore studies and enhancing their academic relevance.

CONCLUSION

The integration of ethnological theory with folklore analysis generates a more comprehensive and theoretically robust framework for studying culture. This article demonstrates that:

- folklore functions as a rich ethnological source;
- ethnological paradigms deepen folklore interpretation;
- source criticism is essential for methodological accuracy;
- comparative analysis situates regional traditions within global scholarship.

Future research should incorporate digital humanities, automated motif analysis, and expanded fieldwork to advance the interdisciplinary study of folklore and ethnology at a global level.

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