

# COMMUNAL LIFE

AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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## THE CREATING OF THE KIBBUTZ FOLK STORY

What is a folk story? Is it actually created by the "folk" – that is by a group of people together in the process of creativity or by one person alone? Is it necessary that in order to be called a folk story a tale must be told by many people through several generations? This type of questions and many others still guide folklore researchers and especially those researching the folk story which is an essential part of folklore. We shall see that there is no clear and definite answer to these questions.

The traditional definitions of folklore demand the following criteria:

1. the material must mainly be passed on by word of mouth.
2. The material must be passed on from one generation to the next.
3. A complete society must pass on the material and guard it for posterity.

"In short, from one generation to the next, by a society and particularly by word of mouth" (Dov Noy).

Is it, therefore, truly possible to give the name "folk" to a story that is quite new and has not undergone the metamorphoses caused by the passing generations? According to the definitions cited above it is clear that before anything can be recognised as genuine folklore it must pass by word of mouth through several generations.

These opinions on "the length of the transference period" and "the formation of a tradition" were of interest mainly with regard to the manner in which the material was handed on and do not actually define the essence of folkloristic material. Researchers of folklore and the folkstory are still troubled about defining various aspects of the subject, but regarding

"Transference" and "tradition" counter-arguments have definitely been raised.

Sometimes the use of the word "tradition" is nothing but a rhetorical trick. According to Professor Dan Ben Amos, "the stamp of tradition can be used to give legitimacy to new ideas.... the traditional characteristic of folklore is transient... it is not a qualitative one." With regard to oral transference, with the development of twentieth century means of communication, "folk" texts are moving from oral to written literature and to television and radio and are taken from these to be related orally – to friends, children etc. Many interchanges go on between the various means of communication and different cultures.

In the school of thought that has crystallised around folk literature and is called the "Geographical-Historical School", the emphasis is placed on the actual collecting and classifying of the literary material. The main purpose was to reproduce the earliest forms of folk creations, based on the knowledge of different versions of the same theme or versions similar one to the other. In addition to "first forms" this school of research also sought the place and the time of birth of each story and was interested in learning the means by which the stories were circulated in different areas and how they were consolidated.

We see that the direction of this school was to research the origin of the story in order to arrive at "earliest forms" and "places of birth" These researchers go from the complete story backwards and attempt to find varying forms of the same story and similar literary motifs from the earliest period.

In the method of research that I have suggested for "kibbutz tales" the opposite direction is used. We are able to examine how the stories are born even before they have passed the test of the generations and we have the opportunity to test the story in all its variations during two or three generations only. The special quality of the folk tale is that it is both organic and inorganic. An inorganic creation, once it has been formed, its original environment and socio-cultural connections cease to be essential for its continued existence. All removal of such songs and stories from their original time and society will cause fundamental changes. ①

The stories with which I am dealing are mainly still organic for they are found and told in the places where they came into being. Some of them, however, have already become inorganic since they exist independently ②

within an atmosphere that is far removed from the experiences that created them.

The examination of the Kibbutz folk story is also based on several fundamental suppositions raised by twentieth century researchers especially in recent years.

According to Professor D. Ben Amos, "Folklore is artistic communication within limited groups...." Folkloristic communication occurs when and where people turn to each other and have a direct relationship with each other.... "Folklore is true to its character when it takes place within the group itself".

Where do situations form which cause folklore to be born? Naturally, within the family but also in factories, farms and other work places, schools, markets, churches, synagogues, mosques, village halls, etc.

The Kibbutz, which is a closed society providing most of its own material and spiritual needs from within itself, and which is guided by several fundamental ideals held jointly by all its members, is potentially an ideal laboratory for studying the birth of original folklore.

The Kibbutz way of living naturally created out of the ordinary human relationships is particularly suited to it. Thus, in all kibbutzim there will be similar approaches to the collective institutions and activities of the Kibbutz movement as a whole with local variations. Such institutions include the dining hall, children's houses, clothes' store etc., and the activities include the general meeting, arrangements for putting the children to sleep, guard duty, etc.

Because the Kibbutz is an extraordinary human melting pot, many stories are told about it, some of them only relevant at the moment of telling but many remain relevant for future generations. Amongst the latter are those relating to events that made a deep and lasting impression such as wars, fires, floods and also special joyful or successful occasions or exceptional deeds by one or more of the members, amusing or even ridiculous happenings and also extreme criticism of the kibbutz way of life – its forms and institutions. All these found expression in various types of stories, straight forward tales, jokes, verse, fables, etc.

With the disappearance of once hallowed institutions that were of great importance to the kibbutz – for example the gong that once woke up the members and called them to work, the communal showers, the cobbler's shop etc., many stories disappeared but new forms take their places.

The folk story is a means of communication, it is alive, dynamic, developing, a mutual social activity within limited groups. It may petrify at a certain stage when it is put on paper but can be restored to life when it is again communicated orally. On each Kibbutz there is usually one or more eloquent members who are the recognised story tellers and they are active on various occasions such as parties, festivals, intimate social gatherings in the dining hall, in the children's houses, especially at bed-time, etc.

These stories are often told several times about the same event by the same person but with variations depending on who the listeners are – visitors or members, older persons or young ones and also when the relating takes place – whether on an ordinary day or on a special occasion.

The community as a whole knows most of the stories and at gatherings such as those mentioned above, there will be someone to approach one of the recognised tellers with the invitation "Please tell us about..."

Some of the better known stories are so concise that a simple phrase can replace a full story and immediately be recognised by those members who participated in some special experience or those who have already absorbed the stories about it. For example "to eat tea-time" on my Kibbutz, Maayan Baruch, means to go hungry as in the time of acute shortages in the early days of Israel generally and the kibbutz in particular. "Tea-time" then was the brand name of a fish paste that was bought by the kibbutz cheaply, in bulk, from a firm that had gone bankrupt when the British forces left Palestine. It was the main item on the menu of two of the daily meals.

*pinch-line in joke*

Some of these stories are given a literary form which remains close to the original. Amnon Shamosh – an author and member of Maayan Baruch, used this development in "Icebergs and Bells", a children's book, in "Paris Calling", a comedy of errors about the communal shower and in his play "Evening Comes to the Kindergarten", based on his experiences at bed-time in the children's houses.

In the books of Yigal Mossensohn, David Maletz, Amos Oz, Aharon Meged, Nathan Shaham and many others, it is possible to find in the literary background or even in parts of the plots, stories that were originally written as short pieces for kibbutz weddings or other festive occasions. In paintings and especially cartoons the kibbutz way of life has been preserved and it has also served as the source of many children's stories.

*highbrow dit*

The folk story thus plays the role of a mirror and a society can look at itself and judge its past actions.

There are for example, a host of stories about the tragic schism in the Kibbutz movement. From the perspective of time it is possible to see certain situations that arose then, as amusing or even absurd. This is a form of self defence against criticism and against arriving at negative conclusions and moral judgements.

"The folk story is used as a means of expression for ideas and feelings that cannot be openly expressed. There is in it a purifying and liberating element and through it, social conflicts and struggles between ages and classes are often revealed and even resolved" (Aliza Shenhar).

It sometimes happens in the Kibbutz stories that people with whom we are closely acquainted change their image and with the passing of time become to a certain extent legendary figures. The extraordinary and interesting actions they performed obliterate the small every-day ones. The new image is born out of the exaggeration of certain points and it could even be said to reach super-human dimensions.

Some of the Kibbutz stories disappear soon after their creation due to changes in the society that made them (members left or grew old) or there was a deep cultural gap between various groups within the society (sabres versus immigrants) or a social gap (that of the generations). It will be of interest for researchers to examine why these particular stories have vanished.

To us, members of kibbutzim, these stories are of value because they bear witness to our past, to our roots and to the dynamic early days of the Kibbutz movement. They will also be of interest to historians, sociologists, psychologists and anthropologists doing research on the birth and development of the kibbutz.

In some kibbutzim stories are passed from generation to generation in the manner of the classical folk story. Can we learn from these particular stories about the strength of the society that created them? What can we learn from the changes – additions to and subtractions from the original versions of the stories?

It seems to me that the task we must set ourselves is to collect all the various stories, so that we can pass them on to future generations whilst we

ourselves learn about ourselves as we are today and what should be our direction in the days to come.

#### APPENDIX:

##### RUTHIE FINE'S STORY

"It was winter. The milkers in the sheep pen worked at night in the cold winter of Maayan Baruch. When they finished their work, they walked through the deep mud to the communal shower, which was made of aluminium sheeting.

That night there was a dreadful, awful "Sharkia" – a very strong eastern wind. One of the milkers, Menashe (Kadishman) lit the burner of the hot water boiler with diesel fuel. Next to the showers stood a barrel of this fuel, standing on a similar barrel and the fuel used to drip into the burner. In this primitive way the water was heated.

Mickie, who was in her sixth month of pregnancy, finished milking on the night shift and went into the women's side of the showers. Menashe entered the men's side after he had lit the burner.

The strong wind blew the burning fuel onto the aluminium walls of the shower room, and within minutes it began to burn. The flames were so terrible and the heat from them so great, that it welded the sheets altogether.

Menashe shouted to Mickie "Get out of the shower room – it's on fire". At first she didn't hear him, but when she did, she ran to the door but couldn't open it. Menashe kicked it in from the outside and Mickie burst out, covered in soap, but otherwise quite naked. Seconds after she got out, the whole shower room collapsed. The next day her watch was found completely burnt in the remains of the showers and given to her as a souvenir.

When she ran to the tents, quite naked, someone jumped out from a tent and covered her with a blanket. Maxi ran to her, covered her eyes, and said to her "Don't look at the flames; otherwise your baby will be born with a red birthmark."

The burning diesel fuel from the shower rooms spread onwards, and when the farm manager saw that the barrels of fuel had started to roll down the incline, he shouted "Chaverim, the barrels are rolling in the direction of the "slick" (hidden armory) where a great deal of explosives is stored. Each adult grab a child and run away to the fields in the direction of Kfar

Giladi". Everyone ran to the babies' house, grabbed the babies and ran to the fields. But, miraculously, the barrels were stopped by a large rock, and didn't roll as far as the "slick" so there was no explosion.

That same night, the bakery, the shoemaker's hut and the power plant — a generator — all burnt down. So afterwards, for a very long time we had light only from kerosene lamps".

#### ANOTHER MALE VERSION – THE TALE OF HARRY SALBER, ONE OF THE FOUNDERS OF THE KIBBUTZ. (A SOUTH AFRICAN)

"Listen, I know that Mickie finished milking the sheep, and, as always, went to shower. She lit the stove, and diesel fuel started to leak. Everything caught fire! Apparently there had been a leak, and she didn't pay attention to it, because it was her habit to shower every night after milking.

Within seconds everything was burning!!!! She was in the shower room and she ran out, but it was too late. The whole area had started to burn.

Near the Communal Showers there was the store-room of the Iron Works, and at this place there was a slope, so the burning diesel fuel began to set everything on fire, and there were the most awful flames! What frightened us the most was that in that area there was a pit with explosives. We were afraid that the fire would reach it; that the burning fuel would get to the pit, and then it would cause the most terrible explosion.

We sprayed the area with water, and some of us carried large canvas sheets to the pit. We covered the pit with it so that it wouldn't be exposed. We watered the surroundings and dragged the canvas on the ground to this place, in the hope that we could put the fire out in this way. The heat was tremendous!!!

In the end, we succeeded in preventing the fire from reaching the pit, and then we threw sand there, and then we saw that we could control it. We prevented the flames from reaching the pit, but all the store-rooms burnt down, and everything went up in flames.

It was about April, and there was no mud. Everything was dry there! I remember it was completely dry!

Apparently, Menashe had been at the communal showers before Mickie,

and he didn't close the tap of the diesel fuel, and when she lit the stove, the whole thing went up in flames.

Mickie was caught inside, but somehow she managed to run out. Naked she ran out and screamed "Fire!! Fire!! Fire!!"

#### A STORY ABOUT BOAZ – THE BULL OF KIBBUTZ GINOSAR TOLD BY THE MILKMAID.

This story took place in 1936–1937, while we were still a "Work-Group" at the Moshava of Migdal...from there we went down to Ginosar. It is told in the first person in the milk-maid's own special style.

"We had a few cows and they didn't have a father. We had to have a Bull and we bought a one-week-old calf. We gave him milk. I fed him by putting my finger into the milk and then into his mouth... this I did three times a day. The calf grew and grew until he couldn't get through the door. He was a beautiful Bull. He had a star on his forehead, and white hoofs and a white tail — he was truly beautiful. But the most important thing was that he was fertile and roaring to go. Everyday he used to run away from his pen and then — from every watch-tower the guards would yell out: "The Bull has escaped... The Bull has escaped!!" And all of the mothers would gather their children into the house. Every day the fence of his pen was raised and everyday he jumped and jumped.

All of the details of how he ate the girls' beautifully embroidered blouses — their only ones — is another matter. How he used to get tangled in the wet sheets on hot days and the way the sheets would be wrapped all around him.

Finally the day came when we had to take him down to Ginosar.... I walked him, holding the ring in his nose in my hand and, alongside of us, went two boys with some more cows. Thus we went down to Ginosar.

At Ginosar he went wild and although the fence was higher it did not help. One day two girls were lying in their tent and suddenly the tent began to sway back and forth... they looked and there was the Bull, scratching his back on the tent... they fled as quickly as they could.

There was one boy that the Bull hated. His name was Benjamin. When the Bull saw him it was as though he saw a red rag. I told Benjamin, be careful because the Bull hates you. One day there was no water... suddenly I

saw Benjamin with his back to the wall... the Bull's horns at his stomach... Benjamin was blue in his face. I managed to get to the Bull and hit him on his head and Benjamin's luck was that the horns were so big that they didn't hurt him. I hollered "Boaz! Boaz! Run! Run! Benjamin Run! He ran but after him he pulled the Bull and his chain. He was saved at the last minute.

In the end we were afraid and had a General Meeting in order to decide what to do with the Bull. Suddenly the door opened and what did we see???? The Bull's head!! Everyone ran away through the windows and it was decided to sell him.

They came from Kibbutz Mizra to take him. The man saw that I handled the Bull with great ease, even stroking and petting him and he thought to himself "Nu, if a woman can do that — certainly I will do the same". I said to him, "be careful, he is terribly wild. He is simply used to me." When they put the Bull on the truck, you won't believe it but he shed big, big tears. It was terrible to see! After a year we learned that the Bull had broken the cow-hands ribs.

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## SECTION V

## FAMILY AND SEX ROLES