

6-1-2003

# If You Don't Go, Don't Hinder Me: The African American Song Tradition

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## Recommended Citation

Goertzen, C. J. (2003). If You Don't Go, Don't Hinder Me: The African American Song Tradition. *Journal of American Folklore*, 116(461), 366-367.

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come to see what is actually meant by the term *folklore scholarship*.

*The Hebrew Folktale* traces evolutionary relationships between successive bodies of traditional Hebrew literature and gains access to their cultural meaning by examining each corpus in its own historical and societal context. Noting that transitions from orality to literature serve the political interests of the transformers and that literacy varies with respect to period, locale, gender, and class, Yassif approaches these transitions, as well as translations and innovations, with the same critical eye. All are thoroughly examined as dynamic social forces with significant expressive consequences.

In his acknowledgments (p. xviii) Yassif explains that he has divided the book in two, directing his notes at scholars and students, his text at the general public. The notes comprise a book within a book, filled with condensed monographs on sources of the tales and their variants, relevant scholarship on controversy, methodology, and interpretation, and ample bibliography. But in the body of the text, terms like *oicotype*, *motif*, and *tale type* go unexplained for lay readers. Time and again, it is hard to account for the author's (or perhaps the translator's) choice of esoteric terms, left unexplained for a general audience. Literary genres like myth and legend are defined, but even these definitions can be problematic because of the inclusion of technical terms that are not explained. For example, readers are told that "the fable in folk literature is a story that takes place in the world of animals, plants, or inanimate objects, told in the past tense but applied to the present day by virtue of the epimythium" (p. 23).

It is difficult to do justice to a major work of this proportion. Both text and notes seem best suited to trained folklorists or others with access to definitions of folkloristic terms. Had Yassif avoided words like "epimythium," and defined folkloristic terms as they arose in the text, his general audience would be better served. Nevertheless, from the biblical and Second Temple periods, through rabbinic and later generations, with special attention to the Hasidim, and to tales of faith in modern secular Israel, Yassif's knowledge is encyclopedic. His contribution is unrivaled, illuminating historical periods while adding deep and meaningful insight into the spirit and mentality of the

many different peoples who have maintained, modified, and transformed the Hebrew folktale.

**If You Don't Go, Don't Hinder Me: The African American Song Tradition.** By Bernice Johnson Reagon. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001. Pp. iii + 155, bibliography, illustrations of song texts.)

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This short but eloquent and pedagogically useful book consists of four essays revised by the author from lectures given at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. The first essay, "Twentieth-Century Gospel: As the People Moved They Sang a New Song," traces the evolution of gospel music by briefly visiting the lives of central figures. The first of these, Charles Albert Tindley, wrote music that welcomed the stream of blacks who moved to the city during the Great Migration. A meticulous discussion of Tindley's famous song "Stand by Me" demonstrates how gospel quickly conjoined oral tradition and the Western notion of fixed composed music. Thereafter, Reagon discusses the contributions of Thomas A. Dorsey, Roberta Martin, Pearl Williams-Jones, and Richard Smallwood.

The second essay, "The African American Congregational Song Tradition: Deacon William Reardon Sr., Master Songleader," is the only chapter in which the overt subject matter is explored in more detail than one can find elsewhere. Congregational singing offered migrants from country to city continuity in musical style, and thus helped them face their new lives by being able to vividly recall the past, just as gospel aided adjustment by embodying the new urban realities. In this chapter Reagon alternates between biographic narrative and her memories of Reardon's funeral. In the third essay she moves back in time to discuss "Spirituals: An African American Communal Voice." Her combination of crisp scholarly narrative with passionate opinion in treating this fiercely complicated subject amazed and humbled me. She notes that "once performing spirituals from the concert stage became a commodity, an open dialogue was played out in practice" (p. 87). I know I will quote her persuasive dismissal of

G. P. Jackson's carefully researched but ultimately wrong-headed derivation of black tunes from white sources (pp. 77–84).

The last essay deals with gender issues, the intersection of autobiography and biography, and intimate analysis of folk lyrics. Reagon describes how the life work of three African American women of the past became a source of strength in her "development as an African American woman, singer, fighter, and scholar" (p. 100). Bessie Smith, of the Georgia Sea Island Singers, was a "breath of fresh air in a stagnant church-based dialogue on morals with little accounting for the sexually pressured reality of girls' and women's lives" (p. 116). Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman also served as models for Reagon. Her careful and flexible analyses of song lyrics associated with each woman refract on the specific songs, on the subtleties of African American lyric expression, and on traditional poetry in general.

Footnotes are few in this book, the bibliography brief, and musical transcriptions absent. None of this matters, because the real topic is Reagon's personality and spiritual life as revealed in her manifold connections to song. "At this point we are not talking about songs as music. We are talking about what people believed you needed in order to be a whole human being" (p. 66). This short book serves to remind us that no deployment of postmodern theoretical apparatus can measure up to honest and vigorous reflection coupled with clarity concerning whose voice is being heard at a given moment.

**Myths and Legends from Korea: An Annotated Compendium of Ancient and Modern Materials.** By James H. Grayson. (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2001. Pp. xx + 454, preface, bibliography, appendices.)

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This book is proof positive that someone has invented a time machine—one that sends people from the past into the future. James Grayson, the author of this book, has been living in a time warp and is approximately fifty years late.

Grayson has collected 177 tales "from the oral literature of the ancient and modern peri-

ods, serving to illustrate the continuity and differences in Korean cultural tradition over a thousand years or more" (p. xv) and included another sixteen tales from China and Japan for comparative purposes. The author states:

This work differs from a certain form of folklore research in that it is not concerned with traditional typological comparisons, but with an analysis of the function of the tales, the purpose which these tales had for the listeners. This functional analysis follows a more traditional anthropological approach to the analysis of oral literature. This approach to the study of the content of the folktales is complemented by a form of folktale analysis I call 'dramatic structural analysis,' in which the narrative format of the tale is seen to be like the structure of a drama or play (p. xv).

In his introduction Grayson informs us that he has found the use of tale types and motifs, citing the work of Stith Thompson, to be problematic. His discussion of the limitations of these concepts displays a complete lack of knowledge or understanding of the scholarship over the last fifty years dealing with this topic. We are next informed that his approach to these tales will depend almost exclusively on William Bascom's 1954 article, "The Four Functions of Folklore" (*JAF* 67:333–49), while also citing Linda Degh's 1957 article, "Some Questions of the Social Function of Storytelling" (*Acta Ethnographica* 6:97–146). While these are both fine articles, Grayson's knowledge of functionalist studies is forty years out of date.

Grayson's knowledge of the various ways and reasons for compiling collections of folk narratives, whether the collections were made one thousand years ago or today, is also problematic. For example, he states:

I have taken the view that even though these stories now only exist in a written form which is itself quite ancient, and in spite of the layers of redaction found in many of these tales, recorded narratives from the ancient period of Korean history came neither from the hand of a writer nor from the hand of a compiler of tales, but were the result of the anonymous oral transmission of the tale from the distant past. This is a view which obviously cannot be proven from documentary evidence, but I take it to be a self-evident point (p. 10).