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Words on Fire: The Unfinished Story of Yiddish (review)

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detailed overview of North African folklore begins with the “Ancient Egyptian Legacy” and continues up to recent decades, highlighting important books and current trends. Researchers looking for a variety of sources and accurate references will also appreciate the entries on education (“Folklore in Schools”) and libraries, as well as the appendices, especially the comprehensive treatment of films related to folklore listed in the last pages.

Since we are dealing with African folklore, there are countless entries for oral traditions and heritage: “Jokes and Humor,” “Oral Narrative,” “Oral Performance and Literature,” “Performance in Africa,” “Proverbs,” and “Verbal Arts,” plus an original text, “Gossip and Rumor.” All of these, as well as the accurate entry on popular culture, insist that Africa be viewed as a diverse continent, not a cultural monolith.

The contributors to the encyclopedia are clearly aware of the developments and crises that have occurred during recent decades in Africa, and some authors discuss the presence of folklore in new media and technologies (“Electronic Media and Oral Traditions,” “Radio and Television Dramas”). On a tragic note, one article refers to tales of genocide in Rwanda.

An exemplary effort, *African Folklore: An Encyclopedia* is the kind of book that one can read for hours, since each article invites the reader toward another, and so on. One of the work’s strongest points is its accurate portrayal of the current state of research on every topic discussed. Readers and critics in the field would be unfair to ask for more entries or to try to indicate the missing elements in such a hefty reference book. Perhaps its high price may keep younger scholars from buying it, but most university libraries should acquire a copy. My only complaint is that there are too many bibliographical references in English for an international encyclopedia; I would have liked to find even more French authors mentioned. This marvelous encyclopedia confirms once again Routledge’s expertise as a publisher of fine, up-to-date, readable reference books. I recommend that any scholar in ethnology or African studies be aware of and use this fine work.

Words on Fire: The Unfinished Story of Yiddish. By Dovid Katz. (New York: Basic Books, 2004. Pp. xvi + 430, acknowledgments, notes on transcription, introduction, 58 photographs and illustrations, index.)

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Dovid Katz’s *Words on Fire* thoroughly lays out the history (and prehistory) of the Yiddish language. Starting with earliest antecedents of Yiddish in pre-biblical Aramaic and Canaanite, the book examines its birth in medieval Germany, its development throughout the European continent, the literary flowering of the language during its nineteenth-century “secular outburst,” and its most recent innovations in grammar and Internet content. As much a history of the Ashkenazi Diaspora as (in his phrase) a “linguography” (p. 9), *Words on Fire* is a richly informed, well written, and critically engaged work.

In his historiography, Katz pays a good deal of attention to the cultural baggage that the language eventually accumulated, in particular the rise of various gendered understandings of Yiddish’s place in the world of Jewish Europe. In one form or another, Yiddish speakers have for centuries figured their native language as feminine or feminized. Rabbinical Judaism discouraged women from studying sacred texts, leaving educated women only Yiddish writings to enjoy. As Ashkenazi culture established itself, the social divide between educated men who mastered the Hebrew of the Bible and the Aramaic of the Talmud (the “real men” of traditional Jewish culture) and uneducated men who generally could read only Yiddish fomented an additional derogatory association with Yiddish as the province of the unprestigious (and to a degree, unmanly) majority of the population. As Katz demonstrates, the dismissal and derogation of Yiddish as an effeminate language persists up to the present day in some quarters—this, despite Yiddish modernists who revalued their literary medium as a constant lover and Hasidic sects that declared its sanctity as the proper language for the Diasporic faithful. Yiddish presents a fascinating case study of the intersections of language

ideology and gender politics, especially in its relationship to the classical Jewish languages and the majority tongues that surrounded and overlapped its territory.

Although Katz painstakingly charts the history of speakers of Yiddish and provides an excellent framework for understanding how the language emerged and grew, he is rather parsimonious with the details of how the language itself changed over time and distance. He delves into this subject most deeply in the chapter "Genesis," in which he shows not only how historical analysis of word variants and grammar allows for a rough estimate of the place and time of the language's origin but also how newly arrived Jewish immigrants from southern Europe and the Near East to Germany acclimated to the environment, playfully assigning biblical names to the European territories in which they found themselves. (Ashkenaz, the name given to Germany and later to all of Yiddishland, comes from the Book of Jeremiah.) Then again, Katz is clearly concerned primarily with elucidating the social contexts of Yiddish rather than linguistic nuts and bolts. As a professional linguist, Katz has covered the technical details of Yiddish in depth in many previous publications.

The final chapter of the book addresses the most controversial aspect of Yiddish: its future. Katz treats this topic with admirable clarity and honesty, and he states unapologetically what Yiddish enthusiasts consider, to put it gently, to be a bitter pill to swallow: the linguistic and demographic evidence suggests that, outside of academia, the world of secular Yiddish is doomed to die a natural death, albeit one tragically hastened by the Holocaust and Stalin's purges. The future of Yiddish lies with the Hasidic sects for whom the language has always been their native tongue and an important literary vehicle. Katz makes the claim that Yiddish as a living language cannot exist without its speakers maintaining intimate contact with the world of traditional Jewish scholarship and its associated classical languages—what he summarizes as the "trilingualism of old Ashkenaz" (p. 56)—as well as retaining a privileged place in the home and in daily life. As he observes, even the most radical leftist Yiddish writers were steeped in traditional learning before breaking with religion. Without

the classical teaching, Katz argues, too many of the nuanced expressions of Hebrew or Aramaic derivation lose their psychosocial significance and disappear from the lexicon. Likewise, without pride of place in ordinary communication, Yiddish will gradually cede ground to the host languages that surround it in every community. In short, Yiddish cannot long survive outside of a Jewish community that largely keeps to itself and uses Yiddish in at least some aspects of daily life. Katz therefore ends with a call for linguists to focus seriously upon the living language of the Hasidim, even as masters of secular Yiddish literature offer a few last pearls of their craft for us to appreciate.

MennoFolk: Mennonite and Amish Folk Traditions. By Ervin Beck. (Scottsdale, NY: Herald Press, 2004. Pp. 231, foreword, preface, 47 photographs and illustrations, notes, suggested readings, credits.)

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The forty-sixth addition to the Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History book series published by Herald Press, Ervin Beck's *MennoFolk: Mennonite and Amish Folk Traditions* demonstrates that Mennonites and Amish constitute a religious faith with folk traditions that can be traced to the Anabaptists in Europe in the sixteenth century. The nine chapters cover diverse traditional genres such as ethnic slurs, origin tales and beliefs, trickster tales, urban legends, protest songs, material culture, and festival. The author was an English professor at Goshen College from 1967 to 2003 and is considered to be an insider of the Mennonite and Amish culture.

Beck's purpose for writing this book is to make both Mennonites and interested non-Mennonites more aware of the group's cultural traditions. These traditions have been learned by word of mouth or customary example and have been transmitted to succeeding generations of Mennonites. They involve both long-established materials and creative variants, and they express feelings, ideas, and values that are im-