



NEBRASKA BY HEART

Folk Arts • Traditional Arts • Folklife
Curriculum Unit • Grades 6–8
nebraskafolklife.org



Glossary

Acculturation — modification of groups' and individuals' culture, behavior, beliefs, and values by borrowing from or adapting to other cultures.

Aesthetics — the sense of what people consider beautiful or culturally appropriate, varying from folk group to folk group and individual to individual.

Áo Dài — the most popular and well-known of the national costumes of Viet Nam. Meaning literally “long dress”, the Áo Dài (pronounced ‘Ao Yai’) is most often seen worn by women in Viet Nam and the U.S., although there have always been versions for men as well. In the woman’s version, the bodice is fitted, with a high collar and a diagonal closing. The skirt portion is made in two panels, a front and a back panel, with slits on the sides. Long, flowing pants are worn under the Áo Dài, often made of white material. Vietnamese tradition dictates that younger women and girls wear lighter colored Áo Dàis and older women wear darker colors, although this is changing. Men’s Áo Dàis are less fitted, cut shorter and are usually made in black or other dark colors.

Assimilation — the process by which a minority cultural group gradually adopts a majority groups’ cultural ways as their own. In this process, the minority cultural group gives up their previous cultural practices in preference for those of the majority group.

Coming of Age Ceremonies — rituals carried out to recognize when young people of a cultural group have reached a certain milestone on their way to adulthood. Some notable examples are quinceañeras (traditional Mexican religious and social celebrations of a girl’s 15th birthday), and bar mitzvahs and bat mitzvahs (religious rituals and celebrations held by Jewish families to acknowledge that their sons or daughters have attained the age at which they are responsible for their own actions and for following the Commandments. That age is 13 for boys and 12 for girls.)

Community — a specific group of people who share a worldview that is based on cultural and/or biological commonalities and shared traditions.

Context — the overall setting, history, and situation in which a cultural expression is based.

Contextual Information — Observances, directions, and other information about the setting, history, or meaning of a folk art or other cultural expression.

Culture — the customs, values, worldview, attitudes, expressive behaviors, and organizations of a folk group. This refers to their way of life, which is learned through observation and imitation, not inherited genetically. The Webster's II New Riverside Dictionary defines culture as "The totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions and all other products of human work and thought typical of a population or community at a given time."

Cultural Expression — a verbal or non-verbal communication or an activity that serves to communicate some aspect of a culture from one person or one group to another person or group. Sometimes called expressive behaviors, or performances. These can range from a single gesture or saying to an elaborate ritual or ceremony.

Custom — a common practice of a folk group.

Cyberlore — cultural expressions that are circulated through electronic means rather than the more traditional face-to-face methods. Some of these are Internet hoaxes, urban legends circulated on the Internet, and the special symbols and abbreviations used in email and cell phone text messaging. This is an area of modern folklife in which some folklorists specialize.

Dance, Folk or Traditional — stylized, rhythmic movement, which is learned within folk groups and transmitted in a traditional manner. Some of these stylized movements may not be considered dance by those who are members of the culture and, if so, they can be considered "folk movement" by persons documenting them. Ballet folklorico (traditional Mexican regional folk dances), Native American dancing, such as the grass dance (done with movements to suggest flattening grass for a camp and wearing fringed regalia that simulates the movement of grasses in the wind), the Hawaiian hula, the traditional dances of India, the Asian lion dance (a group dance using a lion-headed costume), and various traditional dances of the Czech, German, Greek, Irish, Scottish and Scandinavian ethnic groups are examples of folk dance performed in Nebraska.

Discrimination — acting unfairly toward or making negative values judgements of others, often based on stereotypes or other misinformation about their cultures.

Documentation — the collection and presentation of research results in writing, tapes, photography, etc.

Dowsing or Water Witching — a method of divination that identifies the location of underground water, gas or electric lines, graves, etc. The dowser normally uses some sort of a tool such as a forked willow stick, two l-shaped metal rods, or a pendulum to assist him or her in the process. Dowsing has a long history, especially in Europe and in many parts of the U.S., including the Great Plains. Although the effectiveness of witching has never been scientifically supported, many people still swear by the technique and there are many stories of success in locating appropriate sites for water wells, etc.

Emerging Tradition — new tradition arising within a region or folk group

Ethnic, Ethnicity — used to describe a culture that is different from the “dominant” or “mainstream” culture, in terms of language and linguistics, race, religion, national origin, and various combinations of these factors. An ethnic group is a subculture and it is usually based on shared traditions and characteristics. Ethnicity is different from race. The term “race” is used to denote biological traits. “Ethnicity” is used to describe cultural traits that may very well cross racial lines. Latino, a term describing a large and diverse Spanish-speaking ethnic group with members from many different countries and several different racial groups, is a good example of this distinction.

Farm Culture — the customs, values, worldview, attitudes, and expressive behaviors associated with farming, especially family farming in which the participants live on the land and pass their culture onto to subsequent generations. Some examples of farm folklife include traditional methods of planting, pruning, weeding and harvesting crops, traditional recipes, traditional remedies for animal or human ailments water witching, and weatherlore.

Fieldwork — methods and ways folklorists and other humanities scholars and social scientists use to identify and record traditional culture through directly observing tradition bearers and cultural processes.

Folk Arts — sometimes used generically (like “folklore” or “folklife”) to mean the traditional ways of making things or performing things that are passed on informally in groups. Also used to mean the objects and materials themselves, which are made by hand using traditional methods. A third meaning, used most often by art historians, is “informal (or self-taught) artwork that makes its way into museums or galleries.”

Folk Artist or Tradition Bearer — individual who practices folk cultural expressions passed on within a folk group. Such a person is often, though not always, an elder member of the folk group who is known within the group as especially knowledgeable or skilled.

Folk or Traditional Culture — culture and knowledge passed on over time informally (by word of mouth, imitation, and observation). Ever since the advent of radio and the record industry in the 1920s, it is almost impossible for folk cultures to be devoid of any influence/interaction with other cultures, except in rural areas that have no contact with mass media. Such communities no longer exist in the U.S., although some do in other parts of the world. Thus there is virtually no music in contemporary America that is created and passed on exclusively within a folk group. It is a testament to its strength that people opt for their folk culture and choose to pass it on when bombarded with other choices from mainstream culture on TV, radio, and the Internet. Also known as traditional culture and used as another term for folklife.

Folk Dance — see “Dance, Folk or Traditional”

Folk Group — a group of people who share some identity and cultural expressions.

Folk Genre — categories or types of traditions; Ways of saying or doing things that are recognizable within a culture as distinct from other ways. More general categories are oral traditions, music, dance, material culture, beliefs, customs, and body communications such as signs or gestures. Examples of more specific genres are ballads or quilts.

Folk Music — see “Music, Folk or Traditional”.

Folklife — used like the word folklore, folklife refers to the living traditions passed down informally among groups of people over time and space.

Folklore — traditions, which are not necessarily old, that are passed on informally (by word of mouth, observation, and imitation) over time and through space. Folklore is usually anonymous, has motifs or patterns that stay the same, yet also varies as it is passed on.

Folklorist — scholar of folklore who conducts fieldwork and studies the culture of folk groups.

Folktale — a traditional tale. Usually refers to a tale that was orally transmitted, at least in the beginning.

Foodways — traditional ways of obtaining, preparing, and serving food. Also includes stories and beliefs about food. In every folk group, for example, even some of the smallest ones like families, certain foods are considered “comfort foods” because they remind us of times when we have been happy, or safe, or well taken care of. These might be foods that our mothers made for us when we were sick or a special holiday dish that the family always made for celebrations or anytime when everyone was together.

Games, Traditional — games that folk groups create and pass on within the group over time. Many children’s games have been passed down over hundreds or even thousands of years and are widely spread throughout the world. Cat’s cradle is an example of such a game. In it, two people make a series of string figures that they pass between them. String figures are an important part of many cultures. Long before TV or any print media, people were using string figures to illustrate the stories they told around the campfire. Other common traditional children’s games include hide and go seek, hopscotch, jump rope, marbles, “Red Rover” (A variation of British Bulldog, Red Rover is a game of two sides in which runners from one side attempt to break through a line of players on the other side who are holding hands.), and various games of tag.

Generation — a group of people who share age-related customs, traditions, and worldviews.

Germans from Russia — an ethnic group originating in Germany who immigrated first to Russia during the time of Katherine the Great and then came to the United States, Canada, and others countries between the 1860s and World War I.

Gossip, the Game of — a traditional indoor game in which participants line up in a row. The first person on one end of the row thinks of a phrase but doesn’t share it aloud. He or she whispers the phrase as quickly and softly as possible to the next person and so on down the line. It’s important to whisper quickly and to pass on whatever you think you heard quickly. The last person in the line speaks the (by now very garbled and often hilarious) phrase out loud. Then the first person reveals what the original phrase was. Good for all ages.

Group Identity — behaviors and characteristics shared among the individual members of a group that set it apart from other groups.

Hairstyles, Folk — types of hairstyles which have cultural significance or connections such as cornrows (very tiny braids, often worn by Africans and African Americans), braids, Mohawks (shaving the head except for a center section of hair which stands up from the scalp, named after the Mohawk Native American tribe, who originated the style), skinheads (shaved heads, often connected to European and American extremist groups), and various kinds of “rapper” hairstyles.

Healing, Folk or Traditional — includes home remedies and methods of treating illness or injury that have been passed down from one person or generation to another. In some societies, practitioners of traditional medicine are consulted more often than doctors and the knowledge is passed down through formal or informal apprenticeships. The many forms of “faith healing” are traditional medicine that rely on prayer and sometimes on touch, as in “laying on of hands”, to cure illness. Curanderismo is a type of traditional medicine that is practiced in Latin American cultures that involves herbal remedies, physical treatments and prayer.

Hieroglyphic — picture writing in which the symbols stand for an entire word or idea, rather than individual sounds, as in an alphabet.

Hmong — an Asian ethnic group who used to live in the highland areas of Laos, and Viet Nam. Many of them became refugees and eventually came to the U.S. because they assisted the U.S. troops during the Vietnam War. The Hmong are famous for their embroidered “story cloths”, which tell of their homeland and their experiences as refugees, and for their other needlework, which incorporates reverse applique, cross stitch and other techniques. A small group of Hmong families lived in Omaha in the 1990s and a few remain in Nebraska, although many have moved to locations with larger Hmong communities, such as the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul in Minnesota.

Holidays, Latin American — the holidays from Latin America that have been most often celebrated in Nebraska in the past are Cinco de Mayo (May 5th, the anniversary of the Battle of Puebla, an 1862 Mexican victory over invading French troops), el 16 de Septiembre (September 16th, Mexican Independence Day) and las Posadas (“the Inns” in English), which is a nine day Christmas celebration from December 16th through December 24th. Las Posadas reenacts Mary and Joseph’s search for lodging in Bethlehem. In recent years Nebraskans have also begun to celebrate el Dia de Los Muertos (the Day of the Dead) on November 1st and 2nd. On these days some families honor and celebrate the spirits of their loved ones who have passed away by decorating graves, making home altars in remembrance of the dead, and eating festive traditional foods.

Identity — the set of behaviors or personal characteristics by which an individual is recognized as being a member of a group.

Idiosyncratic Arts — the term that folklorists use to designate the type of informal arts that come strictly from an individual artist’s imagination and have no identifiable history or tradition within the artist’s community or folk group. Art historians usually refer to these, as well as traditional arts, as “folk arts.”

Indigenous — native to a region, whether people, plants or wildlife.

Indigenous Teachers — people who pass on knowledge and skills outside a school setting and within a community or folk group.

Informant — a term that folklorists use to describe the person they are interviewing. The term interviewee is also common.

Jazz, Kansas City Style and Omaha Style — a transitional style of jazz music that developed and flourished in Kansas City Missouri during the 1930s and marked the move from the structured, big band style of jazz to the much more improvisational style of bebop. Saxophonist Charlie “Bird” Parker was one of the most famous of the Kansas City jazz musicians. Omaha Nebraska had a similar style of jazz playing during the 1930s and 1940s that grew out of the Kansas City style.

Legend — a tale or story that typically recounts great achievements which often reach heroic proportions. Such tales may be passed down for generations, or describe contemporary events. They may be completely accurate, factually based yet exaggerated, or entirely fictional. These varied approaches all illustrate different aspects of the folkloric process. The heroes or main characters of such tales are also known as legends. In Nebraska folk culture, some historic figures such as Willa Cather, and Chief Red Cloud, or popular football heroes, such as Johnny Rodgers, are regarded as legends, with little exaggeration of their life stories and accomplishments. Other figures, such as Buffalo Bill Cody and Antoine Barada, a nineteenth century Richardson county pioneer noted for his feats of strength, are also considered legends, but considerable misinformation and exaggeration surrounds them. There are also legendary supernatural figures, such as ghosts or Bigfoot, that command belief in some circles, yet cannot be verified by orthodox science.

Life Transitions — important life changes characterized by a sharp discontinuity (major change) from the past. These are big events such as birth, coming of age, graduating from school, marriage, serving in the military, becoming a parent or grandparent, retirement from work, serious illness, the illness or death of parents and other loved ones, and finally, one’s own death.

Low Riders — cars (and bicycles) that are customized and altered to run lower to the ground. The cars often have hydraulic systems in their trunks that will raise and lower them and etched glass designs on their windows. Both the cars and bikes are usually decorated with custom painting, chrome details and other unique accents. Creating low rider cars and bikes is a pastime often shared by fathers and sons (and now sometimes daughters) in Nebraska’s Mexican American communities.

Material Culture — a broad genre of folklore including a vast array of traditional artifacts or objects from fence types to quilts, musical instruments to foodways.

Motif — an element that stays the same within a tradition. Motifs are used by scholars to study and classify similarities in traditional folk tales from different regions of the world. For example, there are many traditional tales that, like the story of Cinderella, contain the “slipper test” where the mysterious heroine is identified by her lost slipper. Likewise, a recurring design in basketmaking or beadwork can be termed a motif.

Music, Folk or Traditional — music that folk groups create and pass on within the group over time.

Some Mexican American examples are conjunto (also called norteño (northern), Tejano (Texan) or Tex Mex) music which features lively polkas and other tunes on the accordion and a special twelve string guitar called a bajo sexto, and mariachi, a type of traditional music group that features spirited harmony singing and consists of at least two violins, two trumpets, one Spanish guitar, one vihuela, (a high-pitched, five-string guitar) and one gitarrón (an acoustic bass guitar).

Other types of traditional music played in Nebraska include tamburitza (Serbian and Croatian folk music played by ensembles combining a number of slightly different, long-necked fretted string instruments called tamburas), and many kinds of polka music with lyrics sung in Czech, English, German, or Polish. A special kind of polka music, the “Dutch Hop” features both a hammered dulcimer and an accordion playing leads and is the traditional music of Germans from Russia.

Vocal folk and traditional music also abounds in Nebraska. Some of the oldest is that of Native American drum groups who sing traditional songs ranging in age from hundreds of years such as tribal sacred, family, clan, and warrior songs to the newer flag, social dance and “49” songs (contemporary songs sung late at night after the closing of the powwow arena.) Other kinds of singing found in the state include African American choirs, quartets, and other groups who sing gospel music and spirituals, Czech singing groups, German Russian church choirs, Hmong singing games (traditionally a competition between young women and young men of courting age), Jewish cantorial singing, Mennonite four-part acapella singing, and Welsh choral singing, among others.

Music, World Beat — a modern blending of many types of traditional music found around the world with added elements from contemporary music such as jazz, pop, and rock.

Musical Instruments, Traditional — instruments, often hand made, which are identified with the traditional music of particular ethnic groups. Some examples used by Nebraska ethnic groups now or in the past are the Russian balalaika (a distinctive triangular, three (or six) stringed instrument), the Iraqi oud (an eleven stringed, unfretted instrument ancestral to the European lute), the Iranian tar (a six stringed, fretted instrument shaped like a small guitar but with a skin head), Japanese taiko drums (large round drums struck with heavy sticks in a dramatic and athletic group performance), Native American flutes, and the German Russian hackbrett (hammered dulcimer.)

Myth — a sacred story that often explains the origins and worldview of a culture. Creation myths are ones that explain the origin of the world and of human beings, for example. Notable creation myths have been passed down from one generation to the next for centuries in societies around the world. Myths should not be confused with legends or other tales. “Myth” should also not be used as a synonym for “untruth.”

Narrative — a synonym for “story.”

Native American Visual Folk Arts — some examples are: beadwork (generally small beads sewn on cloth or hide. Also can be woven on a loom), quillwork (a forerunner of beadwork but using flattened and dyed porcupine quills sewed onto leather), leatherwork (painted, or otherwise decorated leather garments and other items), “ribbon” shirts and dresses (brightly colored ribbons are sewn in rows along shoulder seams and neck openings and on shirt and skirt hems) and intricate cloth appliqued skirts and shawls. In Nebraska, the cloth applique work is seen mainly among the Omaha and the Ho Chunk (Winnebago) tribes.

Needlework — a generic term that covers many traditional types of textile arts, especially those that use only one or more needles or bobbins and some type of yarn or thread. Some of the traditional needlework styles found in Nebraska include Danish bobbin lace, embroidery, filet netting (a type of needle weaving), crochet, knitting, and tatting.

Occupational Folklife — the knowledge, customs, traditions, oral narratives, music, and lore of occupational folk groups. Songs and stories of miners and cowboy poetry are some well-known examples of occupational folklife.

Oral History — collecting interviews of ordinary people to get their stories about their participation in events. These stories are collected to fill the gaps in written records and many times they include the experiences of those who are often absent from official histories. Oral history is a technique that is not only used by historians but also by folklorists and many other scholars.

Oral Narrative — includes many types of spoken folk genres from jokes to legends.

Ranch or Western Culture — the customs, values, worldview, attitudes, and expressive behaviors associated with ranching, especially when the participants live on the ranch and pass their culture on to subsequent generations. Some aspects of ranch folklife include boot making, “boot fences” (the practice of placing worn out cowboy boots upside down on the tops of wooden fence posts) cattle brands, cowboy poetry and song, homemade ranch signs, saddle and horse tack (bridles and other gear) making, leather braiding, and horsehair hitching.

Ritual Greetings, Farewells, Insults and “Battles” — a wide category of verbal folklore that reinforces group membership, while at the same time containing elements of humor, satire, or competition. In one ritual farewell often heard among Nebraska’s Germans from Russia, for example, one person will say “Macht’s gut!” (“Make it good!” or “Do good!”) and the other person will say “Macht’s besser!” (“Make it better!” or “Do better!”) “The dozens” is an African American oral tradition in which two people take turns insulting one another until one or the other can’t think of a comeback. It is part of an overall African American oral tradition of word play and verbal sparring that is evident in the development of hip hop performance and culture, especially the practice of “freestyle battling” where two or more rappers compete by insulting each other with clever lyrics.

Stereotype — an inaccurate belief about an individual that is based upon a conventional, oversimplified view of a group to which that individual belongs, rather than fact. Stereotypes about ethnic cultures and other groups of people are often negative, but even so-called “positive” stereotypes can cause problems. Assuming that all Asian people are good in math, that all people over 70 are in poor health, or that all females like to shop, are all misconceptions that could be unfair to individuals in those groups.

Tradition — a cultural expression that a folk group continues to pass on or practice. Traditions may be old or newly emerging.

Tradition Bearer or Folk Artist — an individual who practices folk cultural expressions passed on within a folk group. Such a person is often, though not always, an elder member of the folk group who is known within the group as especially knowledgeable or skilled.

Traditional Arts — a synonym for folk arts. This term is often preferred by folklorists.

Urban Legend — Not really legends and not always urban, these are told as truth. They are stories about the modern world and are often passed on through media such as newspapers and, especially, the Internet. The stories are often portrayed as true because they came from a “friend of a friend” or some similar source. The website www.snopes.com is a good place to check out such stories.

Variant — a variation within a tradition. A different version of a song or joke, for example.

Vernacular — the everyday expression of cultural groups. Can be applied to expressions from language to architecture.

Vernacular Architecture — generally refers to homemade structures. Many of these are or were numerous in Nebraska, such as hand-built barns and outbuildings, Native American earth lodges and teepees, dugouts, adobe or sod houses, and structures built of hay bales covered with stucco or other siding materials. There is an historic hay bale church in Arthur Nebraska, for example.

Wiping of Tears Ceremony — a traditional Lakota ritual used to release the spirits of the dead and heal those who are grieving. One of the many traditional observances held by plains Native American tribes, this ceremony is held one year after the death of a loved one. By tradition, prior to a year the spirit of the departed one is still with the family members and they cannot sing, dance or attend any large powwows or gatherings. After a year has gone by the family holds a “give away” at which time they give gifts and mementos to friends and family of the deceased. After that family members are forbidden to shed any more tears and they let their loved one go on to the spirit world to join the other family members already there.

Work Songs — traditional songs or chants that are specifically created to help groups maintain the rhythm of their work. Sailors’ “shanties”, railroad gandy dancer’s songs (used when maintaining track), and fieldworkers’ “hollers” are examples.

Worldview — abstract cultural ideas and aspects that give value, meaning, and order to the experiences of a folk group, often embodied in folklife.

Some definitions are adapted from a glossary by the *Louisiana Voices Folklife in Education Project*