

IN MEMORIAM

DAN BEN-AMOS

September 3, 1934 – March 26, 2023

Dan Ben-Amos, professor at the University of Pennsylvania, folklorist, and member of the editorial board of our journal, died on March 26. He was a kind-hearted and incredibly creative colleague, whose idea of folklore as an artistic creation of small groups as well as research into the relations between text and context influenced the development of folkloristics in the 1970s and also later on, considerably widening the perspectives of folkloristics.

Dan Ben-Amos grew up in Petah Tikvah, Palestine. His parents came from Belorussia and Lithuania, and left these countries in search of better opportunities. As he came from a religious family, he started, after military service and being a member of the unit that guarded the Prime Minister of Israel, studies at the Department of Bible Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, yet continued at the Department of Hebrew Literature, focusing on comparative folklore studies with Dov Noy, one of the most renowned Israeli folklorists. He received his bachelor's degree in 1961 and continued his degree studies at Bloomington, the only university in the USA awarding degrees in folklore, where he defended his master's degree in 1964 and doctoral degree in 1967.

In Pennsylvania his teacher was Richard Dorson, and together with other young folklorists – Roger Abrahams, Alan Dundes, Robert Georges and Kenneth Goldstein – they formed a group who started to expand and reform folkloristics. One of the landmarks on this way was Ben-Amos's essay "Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context" (1971).

Ben-Amos started teaching at the University of Pennsylvania, and in 1977 became professor of folklore and folklife. After the reforms of 1999, he continued



work as professor of Near-Eastern languages and civilizations and folklore, also being chair of the graduate program in folklore and folklife.

Ben-Amos's scholarly interests included Jewish and African folklore, humor, the history of folklore, and structural analysis of folklore. He was editor of several folklore series (*Translations in Folklore Studies*, *Jewish Folklore and Anthropology*), and editor of the *Journal of American Folklore*, always an amiable mentor for his younger colleagues, and interested in the folklore and folkloristics of different peoples.

Dan Ben-Amos was a humorous and profound lecturer, who visited Estonia twice. After the Göttingen congress, we started with the process of translating his articles into Estonian, and Dan was very helpful with obtaining permits and cover letters. For most our translators-folklorists this was the first in-depth contact with African and Jewish folklore.

Dan suggested an idea to compile a new overview of the development directions of European peoples' folkloristics, especially concerning the peoples of Eastern and Central Europe in the sphere of influence of the Soviet Union. When I took it up, I realized that in many European countries folkloristics was undergoing a period of stagnation – not in the meaning of the number of congresses and conferences or various studies, but great personalities and theorists had left, and new ones had doubts about stepping up. On the other hand, however, exciting developments had taken place in the republics of the Soviet Union and national regions in the 20th century, and in the 20th and 21st centuries folklore studies of many small and big nations had evolved, and new trends had emerged and were still doing so. This is what we should write about and what time was ripe for, I suggested at the folklorists' congress in Miami. Yes, why not, it is something unexpected, he agreed.

During his career, Dan Ben-Amos was fortunate to meet excellent and enlightened academics, talented colleagues, yet he was also profoundly influenced by fieldwork in Benin City, Nigeria, where he studied Edo culture, as well as delving deeply into the folkloristics of his own people.

Mare Kõiva