

cultures. The Dalai Lama's love and esteem for his culture is tangible on every page, but he also says that when he meets people he tries not to think of himself "as an Easterner or a Tibetan or a Buddhist, but simply as a human being who wants to exchange different ideas and experiences with other human beings" (33). This attitude is firmly grounded in his appreciation of Tibetan culture and yet does not attempt to use (real or assumed) cultural specifics to attain political or other selfish goals. From this point of view *My Tibet* certainly merits being meditated upon also by students of folklore, to help them avoid reducing folklore to a matter of national(istic) endeavor.

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INDIA

BLACKBURN, STUART H., PETER J. CLAUS, JOYCE B. FLUECKIGER, SUSAN S. WADLEY, editors. *Oral Epics in India*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989. xi + 290 pages. Figures, tables, maps, appendix of performance features, glossary, bibliography, index. Cloth US\$40.00; ISBN 0-520-06324-4.

Although Blackburn acknowledges the importance of textual and textural features in defining Indian oral epics, he suggests they "are better understood as traditions, as transmissions of story and performance that create cultural identity for large regions and often support complex religious cults" (15). His comment indicates the orientation of this volume, the fruit of a 1982 conference on South Asian oral epics held at the University of Wisconsin, sponsored by the Social Science Research Council. In part one of the book, papers analyze specific epics; part two presents a useful reference guide to selected Hindi, Tamil, Chhattisgarhi, Rajasthani, Telugu, and Tulu oral epics.

The volume places oral epics within the contexts of both wider recent knowledge about the extent of this genre and new methodology. Until the 1960s most scholars assumed the performance of oral epics had become nearly extinct. Recent fieldwork, however, has uncovered many ongoing oral epic traditions, especially in South Asia. Further, because scholars have moved beyond older scholarship that sought to record "the" authoritative text, they have uncovered varying ways in which narrative incidents have been sung and enacted, framed or punctuated by ritual possession or clowning, generated from and intended for a variety of social contexts.

Blackburn's introduction argues that the usual definition of oral epics as narrative, poetic, and heroic must be expanded for South Asian materials to include both song as well as poetry and also female and non-martial heroes as well as male martial ones. Blackburn classifies South Asian epics as martial, sacrificial, or romantic. Thus, in addition to what is often considered oral epic, he includes a number of fascinating Indian oral traditions that focus upon the death and/or apotheosis of women (labeled "sacrificial epics") as well as those that celebrate the pursuit of love and individual achievement, often achieved in ways that threaten societal norms (labeled "romantic epics").

The next three papers discredit the idea of a single authoritative version of an Indian oral epic existing in isolation; instead, they demonstrate how oral epics emerge from social and performance contexts. Joyce Flueckiger's paper effectively contrasts two tellings of the Lorik-Canda epic in two different communities: in Uttar Pradesh the epic dramatizes the solidarity of a single caste (the Ahir) and its values, but in the Chhattisgarh region, Madhya Pradesh, the epic is identified with the whole region

rather than a single caste and, further, has more action initiated by women, a change appropriate to the relatively freer social atmosphere of Chhattisgarh. Peter Claus, analyzing Tulu epics, explains how they become “an instrument of social action in the performance context of public ritual” (61). Blackburn’s speculative essay suggests factors that lead to the generation of epic traditions, refuting the thesis that oral epics are mere fragments of classical and written literature.

The following three papers dramatize why listeners care about and flock to hear certain oral epics. Especially successful is Susan Wadley’s analysis of an artist’s performance strategies during a Dhola recitation in Karimpur village, Uttar Pradesh. Through an ingenious system of performance score notation, Wadley suggests the humor, suspense, musical variety, and ornamentation found in a single performance. GoldbergBelle’s essay about the clowns who frame Rāmāyaṇa performances in Telugu shadow puppet theater demonstrates how these clowns blithely cross boundaries and break social rules, to the delight of audiences. Kothari’s essay on Rajasthani folk epics emphasizes their continued existential importance to people because of links with the cult of dead heroes.

The final set of papers, on connections between oral epics and the Sanskrit epics (Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa), remains the least developed section of the book. Despite the emphasis on performance and context in the stated methodology of the book, Karine Schomer’s paper on the Alha epic, still performed widely throughout north India, seems to draw primarily on two short articles on the epic by Grierson in the late 1800s and an edition by Elliott in 1865. Brenda Beck’s attempt to analyze Indian epics as a whole in terms of core triangles of characters seems reductionist and relatively unenlightening, while overlooking features that are among the most vital and diverse in Indian oral epic traditions. More insightful is John Smith’s careful comparative essay suggesting how both Sanskrit and oral epics share particular assumptions about gods, humans, and suffering.

Part two of the volume contains, alphabetically arranged, synopses of basic plots and a discussion of the performance context of twelve oral epics (including ones beyond the scope of the volume’s papers, such as the Telugu Palnadu tradition) and the two Sanskrit epics. Concise and focused accounts, accompanied by a map of the epic’s provenance, make this section a valuable reference work.

The contributions of this volume are many. Because authors have carefully examined the role of caste and gender in the production and performance of these epics, our understanding of Indian oral epics becomes more sophisticated and nuanced. The clear importance of middle and low castes in oral epic traditions helps balance the extensive attention paid to Brahmanical written epics in India. The papers also contest the standard notion of an epic performance as one that runs from the beginning of a story to its end; in some cases incidents of greatest importance to caste identity in an oral epic may be performed repeatedly, while other parts of the epic are rarely performed. Further, contributors convey the vulnerability of certain epics and the resilience of others, in competition with electronic media. Finally, the volume as a whole rightly emphasizes the features surrounding the actual narration—such as ritual possession, clowning, and the showing of narrative scrolls.

Although this volume represents a good deal of the current research on Indian oral epics as of 1982, by the time of publication (1989) research on oral epics had advanced. In that light, the volume’s more comprehensive claims were ambitious but sometimes proved to have been premature. A few essays get bogged down in details or abstractions, but these are minor flaws.

This book will interest anthropologists and folklorists in and outside South Asian

Studies. Scholars concerned with the theoretical issues of defining and categorizing oral epics, or with creating notational representations for them, will find the book useful. Historians of religion should read this book to expand their understanding of non-Brahmanical ritual specialists in India.

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FUCHS, STEPHEN. *The Korkus of the Vindhya Hills*. Tribal Studies of India Series T 124. New Delhi: Inter-India Publications, 1988. 443 pages. Maps, figures, tables, illustrations, appendix, bibliography, index. Hardcover, Rs315; ISBN 81-210-0203-6.

The Korkus, numbering more than 200,000 members (according to the Census of India, 1961), are the westernmost of the Munda tribes of India. They inhabit mainly the central section of the forested Satpura ranges of Madhya Pradesh (about 2,000 to 5,000 feet above sea level), especially the area encompassing the Mahadeo Hills. Besides being skillful bamboo workers, manufacturing mats and baskets of various shapes, most of the Korkus are occupied with agricultural work, as farmers or field-labourers. In recent times, plough cultivation has largely been adopted, shifting cultivation being retained only in some remote areas.

Until recently, anthropologists who wished to inform themselves about the Korkus had to rely on a few (mostly out-dated) gazetteer or census accounts published 80 to 100 years ago, and some 15 papers dispersed in various journals. Thanks to Stephen Fuchs, a renowned scholar in the field of anthropology, we now have before us a monograph on the Korkus that offers a comprehensive and exhaustive description of the Korku way of life. Unlike so many other present-day studies in anthropology, which merely concentrate on one or two aspects singled out of a chosen culture, Fuchs provides a holistic view. The favorable fact that he had the opportunity to visit the Korkus "many times in the past" enabled him "to study all the aspects of their culture at leisure and record them in this monograph" (6). Although a holistic description of a culture harbors the disadvantage that one or other cultural aspect might not be dealt with to the specialist's satisfaction, its invaluable advantage and merit are more than obvious and need not be elaborated.

The monograph opens with an informative and detailed introduction (13-38), followed by four main sections. Part one covers a description of the material culture of the Korkus (Korku possessions, dress and ornaments, food and meals, agriculture, crops, husbandry, and other occupations), while part two deals with sociology (family and kinship, village communities, tribal organization), and part three with the life history of the individual (birth and childhood, marriage, death and funeral). Part four will be particularly welcomed by students of folklore: it is devoted to Korku religion, furnishing information on gods and spirits, feasts and mythology, magic beliefs and practices. The book is rounded off by a brief conclusion; a valuable appendix giving information on leading (Mowasi) Korku families; a useful general index; a comprehensive bibliography; a map showing the geographic distribution of Korkus and Nahals; seven line drawings of agricultural implements; and four tables and 21 photographs.

Here and there, unfortunately, the author was betrayed into remarks that, lacking the required objectivity and displaying a presumptuous, Eurocentric attitude, could