

a group defined by cultural rather than racial characteristics; it refers to a sub-ethnic group which should be classified by ethnicity based on language, daily customs, and a consciousness of ethnic identity.

As for the structure of this study, after the introduction chapters 1 and 2 give an overview of Baba history and demography, outlining the basic structure of the Baba community and the process whereby it was formed. Chapters 3 through 8 concern the main theme of this study, i.e. what are the Baba? Tan presents the Baba's ethnic identity (ch. 3), their language (ch. 4), their customs and religion (chs. 5 and 6), kinship (ch. 7), and ethnic change (ch. 8).

Tan writes concerning Baba ethnic identity that "Baba are both 'Baba' and 'Chinese'" (89); i.e., they have a double identity. He then comments on the process of acculturation as reflected in the case of the Baba. Acculturation does not necessarily imply a total assimilation into the host culture. Tan reaffirms Paden's idea that in multi-ethnic societies a "situational ethnicity" is brought forth at the level of the individual.

Chapter 5 focuses on the fact that the Baba share Chinese folk religion with non-Baba Chinese, and that the Baba ethnic identity is both Baba and Chinese. Chapter 6 on death rituals shows that Islam and Chinese religion are conspicuous symbols which indicate ethnic boundary and ethnic identity. Baba are more active than non-Baba Chinese in maintaining traditional rituals which have filial piety as their core. Also, although traditional rituals have been influenced somewhat by Malay culture, the world view and ethos remain practically unchanged. Chinese customs and Chinese religious ideology are steadily maintained, almost as a substitute for the loss of Chinese language, and act to strengthen Chinese identity. As the author of several studies on Chinese religion, including one in this journal, Tan's strengths are clearly revealed in these two chapters.

As a conclusion, I was impressed with the effectiveness of Tan's work, and it seems that he is indirectly criticizing the Malaysian Bumiputra-policy through his study of the Baba.

This study is not only a comprehensive ethnography of the Baba, but also contributes (with the Baba as an example) to the discussion of the relationship between acculturation and ethnic identity. The author is himself a Chinese Malaysian; he contributes theoretically to this theme through discussing it from his individual point of view. How worthwhile it is to learn about the special characteristics of the Baba and compare them to Chinese descendants in other areas: the Peranakan Chinese in Indonesia, the Luk Chin of Thailand, and Chinese descendants in North America, Hawaii, and Japan; this is the impression I get from Tan's study.

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INDIA

BLACKBURN, STUART H. *Singing of Birth and Death. Texts in Performance.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988. xxiv+263 pages. Maps, plates, figures, glossary, bibliography, index. Cloth US\$31.95; ISBN 0-8122-8097-0.

At the tip of South India, in a remarkably self-contained geo-cultural region called

Nāñcil Nāṭu, performers sing Tamil stories while accompanied by the striking of bows upon which bells have been hung. The majority of Stuart Blackburn's book (chapters 4–6) consists of a translation and analysis of three bow song performances filled with violence, humor, auspicious events, acts of social defiance, and local color. The preceding chapters survey the region's history, the composition and performance of bow songs, and the accompanying ritual events. A well-trained and thorough ethnographer, Blackburn has written a first-rate work with much to challenge our present understanding of Hinduism and oral tradition in South Asia.

Despite the vitality and antiquity of the bow song tradition, scholars knew little about it until Blackburn's work began to appear. Nāñcil Nāṭu is anomalous in many ways, not least of which is its character as a Tamil village culture overlaid with a Malayalic court culture. Its social composition is unusual as well: a single *jāti*, the Nadars, comprise more than half the population. The resulting conflicts between Tamil (patrilineal) and Malayali (matrilineal) systems of inheritance and between the low caste Nadars and the higher caste Pillais are well represented in bow song tradition.

Blackburn's idiomatic, spirited, dramatic, witty, and fast-paced translations convey the power of the originals. The stories vary from terse recountings of violent murder to lighthearted recitals of the foibles of the gods. In each case, Blackburn picks appropriate language—colloquial or formal—to replicate the effects in the original Tamil.

According to an indigenous classification upon which Blackburn bases much of his theoretical analysis, bow songs are of two types: birth songs and death songs. During the festival in which bow songs are performed, there are three "slots" for major bow songs. A birth story occurs first, a death story always occupies the central slot, and another auspicious story (e.g. the birth of a deity, an account of a wedding) culminates the performance. Blackburn has borrowed Clifford Geertz's phrase "ritual depth" to denote the level of ritual activity, primarily possession, accompanying the recitation. Ritual depth is weak in the first and last slots, but extremely strong in the middle slot. During the middle performance, the increasing violence of the events narrated is mirrored in the increasing activity of possessed dancers who carry swords and staffs, some acting as mediums. Blackburn replicates the pattern of a festival by providing a translation of one story from each slot.

Blackburn's first translation tells the story of a demon who receives the boon that he can kill anyone simply by pointing his thumb at him. After a series of hilarious adventures, the demon is tricked into destroying himself, eventually leading to the birth of the god Śāstā (Ayyappaṅ). In this text, the singers poke fun at Gaṇeśa (" [Have you seen] his stomach? Looks like a huge vat!" 68), Kṛṣṇa (" Whenever the sound of that flute is heard, there's always a crowd of oddballs that goes after it," 73), and Śiva (whom Kṛṣṇa forces to dress up as a cowherd boy).

Blackburn's translation of "The Death of the Tampimār (Little Brothers)" presents an excellent example of a death story, which always culminates with the violent end of the main character as a result of conflict over land rights or sexual rights. Historical sources tell of Maharaja Rāma Verma who designated his sister's son heir to the throne (matrilineal succession), rather than his own two sons, before he died in 1729. His sons gathered backing among Nadar peasants tired of excessive taxation and raised an army. Though successful at first, the two brothers were eventually defeated and executed. The bow song radically changes the perspective. The Maharaja's designated heir, a hero of Kerala's modern period, undergoes transformation into a lustful, power-hungry, and deceitful villain. His inappropriate demand for the Tampimār's younger sister outrages the brothers. Then he deviously swears never to harm the brothers so long as "this life" (assumed to be his self) lives. But right after

his vow he kills a fly that he has been holding, freeing himself to carry out his murderous plans. The story builds to a furious intensity as it recounts how one of the brothers has his throat slit on the temple steps, like a sacrificed chicken.

A contrasting tale from the third slot, "The Marriage of Muttuppaṭṭan," tells of a brahmin who marries two untouchable women, which Blackburn interprets as a fusion of opposite castes (144). But a closer look reveals more: a precipitous decline through the caste hierarchy and a clear call for ignoring caste distinctions. The brahmin (priestly) hero Muttuppaṭṭan botches a public recitation of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Humiliated, he goes off and gains employment as a king's minister, announcing that he is kshatriya (warrior). After insolently insulting the king and being cursed in return, he joins his brothers in setting up a long distance trade in spices and jewelry, thereby embracing the caste duties of a vaishya (merchant). While traveling, he spies two Cakkiliyar (untouchable) women. To win their hand, he does the work of an untouchable, stitching a pair of sandals. In language reminiscent of cultural anthropology, Muttuppaṭṭan denounces hierarchical distinctions in a song whose refrain is "What is a caste? It's a category of the mind!" (202).

These three examples demonstrate how bow songs challenge the reified brahmanically-oriented understanding of Hinduism in Western scholarship. The story of Śāstā's birth shows an irreverence towards the gods not generally associated with Hindu devotional behavior. The account of the Tampimār reveals how the Nadars identify intensely with past heroes who were treated unjustly. It is truly, as Blackburn puts it, history "from the vantage point of the disadvantaged" (9). The story of Muttuppaṭṭan deconstructs the notion of caste. The bow songs, like other regional performance traditions with similarly unique and well-developed world views, reveal the diversity of Hindu tradition. Blackburn's translations and analysis enable us to appreciate the antiquity, sophistication, and richness of a so-called "little tradition" of India. There is little that is small about this tradition, except people's knowledge of it outside of Nāñcil Nāṭu.

One hopes that Blackburn will publish more about the bow song tradition, especially concerning the issue of gender. In several places he indicates the central role of female singers, possessed women dancers, and songs whose protagonists are women or goddesses. Although all three of Blackburn's translations concern male protagonists, they contain songs about special foods made for women's rituals (the Auvaiyār Festival), about the agony of childlessness and widowhood, and about the problems of women married to much older men.

This book contributes a great deal to the scholarship on South Asia. Folklorists and those in the field of performance studies will find Blackburn's analysis of folk motifs, delivery styles, and bards enlightening. Cultural anthropologists will discover a wealth of material about social relations, cultural values, and ritual symbolism in Nāñcil Nāṭu. Historians of religion will appreciate access to these little-known but significant religious texts.

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DELIÈGE, ROBERT. *Les Paraiyars du Tamil Nadu* [The Paraiyar of Tamil Nadu]. *Studia Instituti Anthropos*, 42. Nettetal/Germany: Steyler Verlag-Wort und Werk, 1988. xiii+306 pages. Map, figures, tables,