

BOOK REVIEWS

BEN-AMOS, DAN. *Folklore in Context. Essays*. New Delhi: South Asian Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1982. viii+187 pp. Hardcover, US\$16.00 (Distributed in the US and Canada by Folklore Institute, P.O. Box 655, Cupertino, CA 95015).

It was not so very long ago that Dan Ben-Amos was being referred to as a "Young Turk" by Richard Dorson. Although, as he professes, the group may have had neither plot nor revolt in mind (p. 20), they have left their mark on the discipline of folklore, and Ben-Amos himself has progressed to the point of seeing his essays being published in collection. The "Young Turk" has evolved into one of the best known names in the business.

This volume is a welcome collection because many of the essays are hard to find in their original form; one suspects that this is doubly so in light of the fact that it has been printed and distributed in Asia, where the journals and volumes in which they first appeared are especially difficult to obtain. The book contains a total of nine essays, the oldest being "Analytical Categories and Ethnic Genres" (pp. 38-64), which was first published in *Genre* in 1969. The remaining eight were written during the 1970's. There is also a very brief introduction by Ben-Amos.

The book is broken into four parts, dealing respectively with context, genre, Jewish humor and folklore in Africa (where the author has done fieldwork). Although each essay was originally a separate and distinct piece, the categories established by the author do help the book to hold together as a book, and the reader senses a certain continuity that is often lacking in volumes of this sort. In my opinion, the two essays on "Genre" could have been best omitted, as they do not seem to add very much to the overall progress of the book and—especially "Analytical Categories and Ethnic Genres"—are so theoretical that they are virtually impossible to understand. But Ben-Amos sees them in a different light, and his reasons for including them are clear enough; he believes that knowledge of the genre in which a narrator is working is important in understanding how that narrator presents his tales.

Ben-Amos has long been one of the advocates of a kind of "communications theory" approach to folklore, and the essays in this book define his position admirably. One of his major contributions to the discipline has been to insist that folklore is as much a *process* as it is a set of printed texts, and he reminds us (especially in the first two essays) that to study only stories or songs, with no regard for the manner in which they have been transmitted, is really to have only an incomplete picture of "folklore." As he rightly points out, folklore is more than a series of texts waiting to be collected, and one must on occasion wonder if folklorists themselves, in their zeal to collect things, may not be relegating their objects of study from the realm of living tradition to that of fossil.

One might thus characterize Ben-Amos as a folklorist who has discovered ethnography, for surely there is nothing in his work that would overly surprise most anthropologists (however strange it might sound to the literarily oriented folklorist).

Ironically—and somewhat disappointingly—however, none of the essays really presents a detailed analysis of the context of a folklore event. One begins to wonder if such a study is indeed possible. Like so many of the best jokes, one has to have “been there” for the full impact of the importance of context to make itself felt, and one has to have “been there” as a member of the tradition in which the event has occurred. Though Ben-Amos believes that a knowledge of context and genre will help the outsider to understand a folklore event as its initial audience and participants understood it, the brief essay is obviously not the most ideal place to bring this understanding to life.

Perhaps it is for this reason that Ben-Amos, an Israeli, is at his most convincing when he writes about a subject he does not view as a total outsider, that of Jewish humor. In what I personally consider the most stimulating and decisive essay in the book, “The ‘Myth’ of Jewish Humor,” Ben-Amos takes the “general knowledge” (traced to Freud) that the “qualitative earmark of Jewish humor” is “self-ridicule” and smashes it to pieces on a bedrock of contextual observations. The essay brilliantly demonstrates the danger of judging a people’s “folklore” on the basis of isolated texts rather than on an examination of the total context of that folklore.

Those who think that all there is to folklore is the collection and classification of hoary tales from the antique past should read the essays in this volume. Unfortunately, Ben-Amos’ prose style tends toward the convoluted, and only a fairly dedicated reader is apt to make it through the lot. And the book is also rather poorly put together, not likely to survive the intensive reading and rereading that its contents deserve (and often demand). Even so, the editors are to be commended for their efforts in making these essays more widely available.

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MUNDKUR, BALADJI. *The Cult of the Serpent, An Interdisciplinary Survey of Its Manifestations and Origins*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983. xviii+363 pp. 107 figures, frontispiece, 10 tables, bibliography, indexes. Cloth US\$39.50, ISBN 0-87395-631-1; paper US\$12.95, ISBN 0-87395-632-X.

In his book Mr. Mundkur gives us complete information about all aspects of the cult of serpents. He is primarily a biologist, but is also learned in anthropology, folklore, and religion. His fundamental thesis is that fear of serpents (ophidiophobia) and worship of serpents (ophiolatry) have genetic roots in the evolution of primates; for snakes arouse the same responses in monkeys and apes as in human beings. No other animal, no matter how dangerous or repulsive—lion, bear, wolf, scorpion, spider, bat—provokes the same feelings in primates as serpents do, and harmless snakes inspire no less fear and awe than the venomous kinds. Scorpions cause many more deaths in Mexico and other lands than serpents do, but, although scorpions inspire some fear and awe and likewise enter into cult and myth, they nowhere rival serpents in these respects. Lions may cause fear, but they do not inspire dread and horror. Representations in art of other animal deities almost always have serpent features inserted or attached: we may recall Chimaira, Typhon, and Kerberos. The cult of serpents is the earliest animal cult, dating from early palaeolithic times, and is more widespread than any other animal cult—it is in fact nearly universal.

In six chapters M. treats interpretation of serpents’ fascination, veneration and