

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

calumny of serpents, the cult of serpents in comparison with other animal cults (arthropoda, birds, bats, lions and other big cats, wolves and other canines, bears), serpent as sexual symbol, biological and protocultural expressions of ophidiophobia, anthropological and psychological perspectives. The fifth chapter in particular summarizes studies of primate responses to the sight or presence of serpents.

As a mechanistic biologist M. is unfriendly to psychoanalytic studies and theories concerning the fear and fascination of serpents. He tends to lump Freudian analysis with Jungian and Adlerian psychologies. But, as so often, his criticism of Freudian theories is superficial and sometimes mistaken. In treating sexual symbolism he believes that he has scored a point against Freud when he shows that the serpent is as often associated with female as with male genitals. Freudians are willing to accept these findings and to interpret them.

There is a great deal of learning in this book, in general expertly handled. We may expect some errors and dubious statements in the treatment of materials with which the author is less familiar.

P. 67. Of the figure on the Ishtar Gate in Babylon M. says, "To call this a dragon . . . is almost an injustice to the ophidian character of its forebears." Apparently M. supposes that "dragon" properly denotes the dinosaur-like figure of Chinese and medieval traditions; he seems unaware that "dragon" is Greek *drakon*, which simply means "serpent."

P. 276. "The Pythian Vale of the Greeks takes its name from the python dwelling in the slime from which Earth arose." M. is here subject to a common misconception: Python is the name of the giant serpent (*drakon*) that Apollo killed; the genus of snakes called pythons gets its name from Apollo's opponent, not the other way round. There is, moreover, no Pythian Vale; the place called Pytho (Delphi) gave its name to Python. Only in Ovid's version did he (not Earth) arise from slime, that left on earth after the flood—here M. seems confused, perhaps from not using primary sources.

P. 59. ". . . the Navajo [are] a Pueblo group akin to the Hopi, . . ." The Navajo are not pueblo-dwelling nor akin to the Hopi; they are Athapascan (Déné-speaking), whereas the Hopi are Uto-Aztecan.

P. 153. The Yakut are not Finno-Ugric but Altaic.

Pp. 61–62. I am loth to question M.'s interpretations of Sanskrit words, but I am sure that *āśiviśa* does not mean "poisoned blessing," but "fang-poison," a synonym of *ahi*, "snake." Another synonym is *uraga*, *uraṅga*, in which, according to M., *ag* means "to wind, curl" and *aṅg* means "body"; he interprets the words as meaning a serpent's "going over the breast" of e.g. a sleeping person. But the second element of both words is *ga*, "going," and the first is *ura*, "breast": the serpent is the breast-goer, i.e., it moves by means of its breast. Again he takes *urasgâmin* as "going over the breast," but it properly means "breast-going," i.e., "creeping," "crawling," often used to describe serpents' motion.

P. 69. "Among the goddesses prevalent in popular Hebrew religion up to the First Exile of 586 B.C., the Matronit, goddess of the Kabbala, figures prominently." All we know about pre-exilic Hebrew religion is found in OT, which mentions no goddesses except Asherah and Ashtoreth, who were not Hebrew. Matronit first appears in the Kabbala, which is medieval. M. has taken Raphael Patai's *The Hebrew Goddess* too seriously. Moreover Asherah is not the same as Astarte (Ashtoreth) as M. tells us on this page.

P. 299, note 15. "The expression 'sons of' is a common Semitic way of indicating abundance." Hebrew *benê Yisrâêl* means "Israelites"; *ben 'ish*, Aramaic *bar 'enash*, "son of man," can mean just "man"; *benê baqqâr*, "sons of oxen," means

simply "oxen." I have never encountered an implication of abundance in the usage.

P. 124. "Marduk, the national god of Assyria, . . ." Marduk was god of Babylon; Ashur was the national god of Assyria.

P. 182. "Despite these bisexual features, this individual is identified . . . as that of a *male* Celtic divinity ('Dieu androgyne')." The sentence structure is faulty and M. appears to misinterpret *androgyne*, not realizing the meaning of the second element.

P. 197. ". . . attempts at deciphering Cretan scripts (Linear A and B) . . . only show that the Cretan dialect was an early form of Greek." Linear B is Greek, the language of the Mycenaean Greeks who occupied Crete after 1500 B.C. Linear A has not been deciphered, and very likely expresses the language of pre-Hellenic Cretans.

M. as a competent biologist knows the meaning of biological terms, but he often seems to use "species" inexactly, applying the term, e.g., to serpents (suborder), bears (family), and toads (family).

Though born and reared in India M. writes good English prose; he knows English so well indeed that he falls into the bad habits of many academic writers in English. He resorts often to the usual counterwords, those often substituted for more precise terms. For example, "involve" (involved, involving, involvement) appears at least once on nearly every page. Others often used are area, items, surface (verb), feature (verb). Substandard are "intriguing" and the unnecessary and ugly Germanism "stem from," (*stammen von*; chapter 6 has a rash of "stem from" 's). M. adopts the loose use of "parameters," apparently meaning just "factors": it is properly a term of mathematics and statistics. And I for one can do without computer metaphors like "feedback." "To the contrary" (267) should be "On the contrary."

Nothing makes prose more prosaic than frequent resort to "one(s)" as a noun substitute, especially as a demonstrative, "the ones that" instead of "those that." It is often unnecessary and can always be avoided. For example, "the scales of the head are the only ones that vary, etc." (29) is more smoothly expressed by "only the scales of the head vary, etc." The phrase "for purely decorative purposes as for esoteric ones" (76) is better expressed by "for purely decorative as for esoteric purposes" or by simply dropping "ones." In "his remarks in this respect are fleeting ones" (275) "ones" is wholly unnecessary.

There are a number of misspellings: "diety/ies" occurs twice, though usually spelled correctly; others are "beatles," "oryxs," "oidipois," "Euripedes," "extremeties," "Thompson" (for George Thomson), "Asclepios" (Greek *os* with Latin *c*), which is also wrongly divided (Asc-lepios).

Wrong word-divisions are not the author's fault but the publisher's. Five times the division "so-metimes" is made. On p. 51 I find "so-uth," division of a monosyllable! P. 204 has "so-utheastern," and there are others. This is reprehensible practice for a state-university press, and it somewhat mars the book.

In spite of these blemishes this is a competent and interesting book, valuable to biologist, folklorist, and humanist alike. It is equipped with a good bibliography and indices as well as with many figures and tables.

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