

MYANMAR

ABBOT, GERRY and MIN THANT HAN. *The Folk-tales of Burma: An Introduction*. Handbuch der Orientalistik, Dritte Abteilung: Südostasien; Band 11. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2000. xiv + 392 pages. Illustrations, bibliography, ethnological notes, index. Cloth G 204.95/Euro 93.00/ US\$114.00. ISBN 900-411-8128.

It is, indeed, a great pleasure for any folklorist to get a large new volume of tales from Burma. Here we find good translations of no less than 101 tales, and many of these come from minorities. The minorities are also described in the section "Ethnological Notes" at the end of the book.

The volume is divided into two parts: Part one, "A Frame of Reference"; and Part two, "A Selection of Burma's Folk-tales." In the first part, a short but instructive history of folklore studies is given that especially focuses on the collection and study of lore in Burma. It is peculiar to see that British researchers regarded Burma just as a part of India and therefore neglected the lore of both the majority and the many minorities there. Burma was, however, fortunate enough to have remarkably energetic folklorists of her own, and both Ludu U Hla's and Maung Htin Aung's work is given due attention.

Considerable attention is given to Htin Aung's uncertainty regarding the classification of tales. This is probably because the authors themselves are very much in doubt concerning the questions "What should be collected and included?" and "How should we classify Burmese folk-tales?" To me, the answer to the first question is obvious—collect and store everything you possibly can! The second question does not only concern Burmese tales but tales from all over the world, and it can only be hoped that folklorists soon will come to an agreement. Until then, the best thing one can do is to explain the classification used, and this is done very clearly and carefully here.

The tales are presented in three sections and are all preceded by a commentary:

- I. (A): Human origin tales; (B): Phenomena tales
- II. (A): Wonder tales; (B): Trickster/simpelton tales etc.
- III. (A): Guidance tales (lay); (B): Guidance tales (clerical)

Short summaries of tales then follow to illustrate the use of the different categories. The summarized tales are all found in full in the main body of the book.

In the index at the end of the book there are lists under the headings "Authors Cited," "Cultural Comparisons Made," and "Selected Tale Elements." The last may function as a kind of simple motif index. The list of cultural comparisons is astonishing because, although all the five continents are mentioned, we only find from Asia Borneo, China, India, Japan, and the Middle East, with Southeast Asia being conspicuously absent. The subtitle of the book is "An Introduction," so perhaps we may hope that comparisons with other Southeast Asian countries will appear in a following volume.

Not surprisingly, most comparisons are with Myanmar's neighboring countries. Story number 4 "Why the Kachin have no alphabet" (also given among the summaries) says that the Kachin lost their script because they ate the hide where the Great Lord Spirit had written the letters. This is an explanation used also by other ethnic groups in the area. The Akha draw a different conclusion: by eating the text they obtained knowledge that they keep inside them and therefore they do not need an alphabet.¹

The story is also known among the Kammu,² and it may be a serious obstacle to their

studies. When I began to teach two young Kammu men to read and write Thai, one of them told the story and said that it was no use for them to try to learn such things. Since their ancestors had eaten the hide with their alphabet written on it, Kammu people could not learn to read and write. At first I did not know what to say, because I certainly did not want to make them despise their own sacred tales. Then I found a solution: I said that this tale explains why the Kammu have no script of their own, but it did not say that the Kammu could not learn the alphabets of other ethnic groups. The two young men became fully literate in an amazingly short time.

In the comments to the Burmese wonder tale "The Snake Prince" it is said that in that tale "a woman actually gives her third and youngest daughter to a snake" as if this were unique. We do, however, find the same idea in our Kammu tales. There a woman gets envious when she sees how prosperous a neighbor's daughter becomes after marrying the Snake Prince. She goes out, finds a python, carries it home, and lets her daughter sleep with the snake. Precisely the same conversation between mother and daughter as in the Burmese version is carried out during the night while the snake is swallowing the girl, and in the morning the girl is dead.

Contrary to the Kammu tale, the Burmese version is of special interest because it not only has an unhappy ending but also a happy one. Both of these are given, and they sound like two totally different tales with the section quoted above as a common introduction.

This would be enough to show that even more important and enjoyable than the folklore discussions in Part 1 is Part 2, which consists of 101 priceless tales. With these and the 114 tales found in Annemarie Esche's *Märchen der Völker Burmas* (Leipzig: Insel Verlag, 1976) and the many tales in the minor publications listed in the bibliography, we begin to get at least some idea about Burma's rich and variegated lore. It is especially gratifying that both the volume under review and Esche's work present tales from several of the many Burmese minorities. For the minorities, it is not only the folklore but also the languages that are in danger of extinction.

NOTES

1. Personal communication from Inga-Lill Hansson, Senior Lecturer in East Asian Linguistics, Lund University.

2. So far only a slightly divergent version has been published (see "The Flood: Three Northern Kammu Versions of the Story of Creation," by Lindell, Kristina, Jan-Öjvind Swahn and Damrong Tayanin in Alan Dundes's *The Flood Myth* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988]).

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AUSTRONESIA

FOX, JAMES J. and CLIFFORD SATHER, Editors. *Origins, Ancestry and Alliance: Explorations in Austronesian Ethnography*. Canberra: The Australian National University, Department of Anthropology, 1996. viii + 336 pages. Maps, tables, index. Paper A\$35.00 (sea); A\$40.00 (air); ISBN 0-7315-2432-2.

This book contains fourteen articles or chapters including an introductory chapter written by