

BOOK REVIEWS

GENERAL

BEISSINGER, MARGARET, JANE TYLUS, and SUSANNE WOFFORD, Editors. *Epic Traditions in the Contemporary World: The Poetics of Community*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999. ix + 314 pages. Index. Cloth US\$48.00 (£35.00); ISBN 0-520-21037-9. Paper US\$17.95 (£13.95); ISBN 0-520-21038-7.

Epic has lately emerged from oblivion to claim scholarly interest. The trigger for this development extends from M. Parry and A. B. Lord's work on the oral formula (LORD 1960), which drew attention to the aspect of oral creativity and to the 150th anniversary celebration in 1985 of the first publication of the Finnish epic "Kalevala," an artificial creation on the basis of oral texts. By now "epic" seems to have become a *dernier cri* in the world of scholarly fashion and can be used as an umbrella for general studies of culture. Does this new label come to replace the label "myth," which has been used and misused so much during the twentieth century? The volume reviewed here, interesting in itself, is a case in point.

The label "epic" is well suited for variegated use in non-focused discussions, as it is imbued with several meanings. "Epic" as a noun has variously been applied to traditional oral poems (in verse and prose!) of any length (both long and short) that deal with martial themes, and to book-length written or authored narrative poems dealing with various themes. "Epic" as an adjective has been considered a literary mode—namely, prose vs the lyric (verse) and dramatic (plays) mode of literary expression. Also, "epic" can imply "grandeur," and thus a long and complex prose novel also fits in (see page 2 of the book being reviewed). The definition given to "epic" by the editors of the volume reflects this vagueness: epic is "a poetic narrative of [some] length and complexity that centers around deeds of significance to the community. The deeds are usually presented as deeds of grandeur or heroism." Many literary genres fit this definition. Its parameters are loose: "length," "complexity," "grandeur," or "heroism" have first to be defined, delimited, and partly quantified before they can serve to define something else. (South Slavic epic, for instance, does not fit this definition: the poems are short and simple [what "is" complex?].)

The label "epic" allows the editors to cover the study of anthropological and sociological issues, seen through a philosophical prism. Such studies are fine in themselves; why cover them with such a fig leaf? The papers that use this or that oral epic or book-length written or authored poem—and these two are by no means identical literary genres!—as the material for discussing their point are mostly about other issues (allegory, metaphor, social issues of gender, caste, nationalism, etc.). Even those of the authors who investigated oral epic in the field as philologists and folklorists do not deal with the epic itself as a literary category but describe and discuss its social uses and the ways of its performance. All that is said in order to prepare the potential reader for what he or she has to expect.

The readers of *Asian Folklore Studies* will be interested in what is said in the reviewed volume about Asian cultures. Two of the papers are about India. Joyce Flueckiger, in her very informative paper, talks about the social image of the epic of *Loriki* and *Candaini/Canaini*,

widely known throughout central India. (The essay is reprinted from J. Flueckiger's book *Gender and Genre in the Folklore of Middle India*, 1996.) In one place (Chhattisgarh) the epic serves as one of the regional identification marks with emphasis on the female character's role (Candaini); in another province (Uttar Pradesh) the epic serves as a caste identification mark, with emphasis on the martial role of Candaini's male partner Loriki.

The other paper about Indian culture, by W S. Sax, does not deal with epic as such but describes (on a rather primary level) the worship in a remote Himalayan valley of certain epic heroes as divinities. The curiosity consists in that the worshiped epic heroes are the villains of the *Mahābhārata* epic and not its positive characters. The author does not offer analyses of the phenomenon. The phenomenon belongs more to the field of the phenomenology of religion than to studies on the epic. By the way, from the author's description it seems that these *Mahābhārata* characters are worshiped because they are feared; the worship is meant to appease them. As is well known, such fear-motivated worship is widespread and not unique to India. (Such worship is especially prevalent in South India; see WHITEHEAD 1988).

Two more papers will interest the readers of *Asian Folklore Studies*. Susan Slyomovics and D. F. Reynolds deal with the performance and wider social aspects of the same Egyptian oral epic, which both of them have studied in the field. Although nominally in Africa, Egypt, as is well known, is culturally part of the Mediterranean and Asia. Both authors offer valuable insights into the mechanisms of social use of the epic in regard to the exploits and battles of the Saudian tribe of Banū Hilāl. Their contributions are valuable to the study of the performance aspect of oral literature.

The other ten papers in the volume, except for one about the relation of nineteenth-century South Slavic literatures to the oral literatures of that area, discuss their points in relation to European works, especially Homeric works or those written or authored in ancient and medieval times.

REFERENCES CITED

LORD, Albert B.

1960 *The singer of tales*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

WHITEHEAD, Henry

1988 *The village gods of South India*. New Delhi: Asian Educational Services. (1921 reprint)

Heda JASON
Jerusalem, Israel

YEN PING-CHIU. *Proverbs, Songs, Epic Narratives, Folktales of East Asia: Selected Texts, Parallel Analysis and Comparative Approach*. New York: University Press of America, Inc., 1997.

The material for this book was mainly taken from China, Japan, Korea, and Mongolia. The first part discusses proverbs (in a very broad sense) from only this area, and demonstrates how the author's choice of subject was based on external and inner conditions. The author also divides the proverbs into two categories. One category is used for older proverbs that in most cases use analogies from different livelihoods (e.g., nomadism, hunting, fishing, and agriculture) with the aim of expressing a message. The other category mainly deals with "ethical well-being" and derives its origin from the teaching of Confucius and later philosophers, such as Laotzu. The influence of this second category of proverbs can be found also outside China.

After a detailed introduction to the musical tradition of the countries mentioned above,