

REVIEW ARTICLE

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Indexing Folk Literature of South American Indians

WILBERT, JOHANNES and KARIN SIMONEAU. *Folk Literature of South American Indians: General Index*. UCLA Latin American Studies 80. Los Angeles: UCLA Latin American Studies Center Publications, University of California, 1992. ix + 1,323 pages. Introduction, concordance of new motifs, bibliography. Cloth US\$65.00; ISBN 0-87903-081-X.

WILBERT, JOHANNES and KARIN SIMONEAU. *In Their Own Words: Folk Literature of South American Indians. Introduction, concordance of new motifs, and bibliography*. Cambridge: Harvard University, Center for the Study of World Religions, 1992. x + 280 pages. Paper US\$19.95; ISBN 0-945454-02-3.

WHEN *Folk Literature of South American Indians: General Index* was published by the UCLA Latin American Center in 1992, it was the crowning achievement of decades of work by the two editors and their many coworkers, researchers as well as culture-bearers. This heavy volume contains not only the research aspect of the work but also a complete motif index for the twenty-three volumes of tales earlier published by the team. The index, which contains an amazing total of 10,150 motifs, is divided into three parts:

- a. Motif distribution by narrative (which is to aid location of those tales where a specific motif is found);
- b. Topical motif index (which lists all motifs according to the Stith Thompson system);
- c. Alphabetical motif index (which corresponds to Thompson's index volume and lists the key words from the individual motifs in alphabetical order).

The *General Index* is thus a gold mine for folklorists working with motifs. The 4,256 new motifs found in the corpus are listed in a section entitled "Concordance of New Motifs" that precedes the motif index.

The volume *In Their Own Words* is a reproduction of the sections representing the research aspect of the *General Index*. It retains the "Concordance of New Motifs," but the motif index has been left out. With the publication of these two volumes students of South American Indian lore no longer have an excuse for not being able to find suitable topics for research.

The editors deplore the fact that anthropologists have paid so little attention to Thompson's motif index. On the other hand, they mention that the present volume has been found valuable by many specialists in fields outside of anthropology, including archaeologists, biologists, ethnologists, ethnopharmacologists, and toxicologists. Now researchers in

yet another discipline appear to have discovered the usefulness of *In Their Own Words*, as indicated by the fact that it was published by the Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions. Although it is true that "Thompson would bemoan the persistence of the mutual lack of interest and the chasm between anthropological and literary folklorists," the present works do much to bridge that chasm.

The sections of the *General Index* that have been reproduced in *In Their Own Words* appear unchanged — even the same page numbers have been retained. It is somewhat confusing at first to find sections that deal with totally different topics (e.g., "The Indians," "The Narratives," and "The Motifs"), and that were separate chapters in the earlier work, all placed in a single introductory section. The explanation is that all of this information serves as an introduction to the motif index in the *General Index*. (This arrangement somewhat complicates the reviewer's task; readers should keep in mind that most of what I say below pertains to both volumes.)

Despite this problem, it is my hope that this slender introduction will catch the attention of all folktale researchers, for it has much to offer those working in areas other than South America. It would, I feel, be of particular value to scholars working in East and Southeast Asia, for the Asian and South American situations resemble each other in many ways, including the diversity of languages and the inhospitableness of the terrain where certain of the ethnic groups live. Such difficulties can be overcome only through cooperation on a grand scale: the work under review involved 111 authors and nearly 500 field assistants. Although the corpus of tales consists of thousands of narratives, it was collected from societies with an estimated population of no more than 240,000 people.

Perhaps researchers in Southeast Asia can cooperate in doing something of a similar kind for the indigenous peoples in that part of the world. How many thousands of tales will be lost forever if they are not collected now? There are in Southeast Asia at least several groups that seem destined to share the fate of three of the ethnic Indian groups represented in this study. Two of these groups, the Yamana and the Selknam, are now extinct, but 127 of their myths and legends are preserved in the 23-volume series of tales. The other group, the Tehuelche, is culturally extinct, but 110 of their narratives will still exist when their descendants begin to search for their roots. When, one wonders, will languages such as Mlabri, Kucong, or U be used for the last time, and what will be left for the descendants of the peoples who now speak them?¹

The authors' discussion of the motifs in Indian tales is of great value, since it is based not on theory and speculation but on the authors' experience in handling a large corpus of material. They summarize what has been done on indexing during the last century,² and explain why they selected Thompson's system for their own work despite their awareness of the various criticisms it has been subjected to.

The index uses the system of plus-motifs to handle the problem of adding new motifs to Thompson's work. The procedure is explained in detail in the section "Motif Indexing of South American Indian Folktales" (50–63). All 4,256 new motifs thus appear with a + instead of a new digit. Following the text of the new motif is the motif from which it is derived (within parentheses): "B430. + Helpful anteater. (B430. Helpful wild beasts)." Other authors, such as Rüdiger SCHOTT in his work on the tales of the Balsa in Northern Ghana (1994), use a slightly different form: "A0210.0 + Sky-god, here: People in God's house are of both sexes (men and women)."³

Both forms mentioned are acceptable, as they make it perfectly clear as to which Thompson motif the plus-motif is derived from. In a large corpus, however, they involve much repetition. Thus in the examples above, the text of motif B430 ("Helpful wild beasts") is repeated nineteen times in the index, while that of A0210.0 ("Sky-god") appears no less than twenty-two times. Surely it would have been easier, and equally clear, to put the text of the original motif text above the new motifs. If the original motif is not found in the corpus, as sometimes happens, it could be put within parentheses.

A motif index is a kind of table of contents for large collections of tales. The index itself may, however, indicate the interests and priorities of the peoples concerned. This is evident in table 3, for example, which shows the motifs distributed according to motif group and subgroup. The accompanying discussion is well thought out and lucidly presented (like everything else in the volumes), and anyone working with non-town-dwellers anywhere in the world has much to learn from it.

The only thing that surprised me was the fact that the authors found the rather high proportion (seventy-one percent) of new motifs in the etiologic subgroup to be "intriguing," and the large number of animal characteristics to be "unexpected." The newness should not be surprising — as far as I could see many of the animal characteristics pertain to animals not found on the Eurasian continent (I for one had to look up most of the animals mentioned), and their characteristics are often quite different from animals in the Old World. Also, having worked among the Kammu in northern Laos for decades, I know how extremely important

everything concerning animals is for such peoples. Although the Kammu are swidden farmers, they still procure a significant part of their food supply through hunting and fishing. Motifs dealing with animals may appear in any tale of any tale-type, and over the years I have come to regard them as a kind of teaching material. What is important is perhaps not really how or why an animal got a certain characteristic, but the very fact that it has that characteristic. Most if not all of the characteristics found in the long list of motifs are ones by which an animal is identified, so that the motifs may constitute “points to observe” for hunters-to-be.

The editors are proud of having enlarged our knowledge of folktales with their 4,256 new motifs, and we have every reason to thank them for this contribution. Still, it seems to me that the 5,894 motifs already found in Thompson’s index are of equal — perhaps even greater — interest. Yet they are given less attention in the introduction than the new ones. Is it not amazing, though, that Thompson’s index lists more than half of the motifs found in a continent on the other side of the planet? This is accounted for in part by the fact that the latest version of Thompson’s index includes some American Indian material (and by the fact that human beings share certain basic characteristics regardless of where they live), but is this a sufficient explanation? How, for example, did motif F547.1.1. (Vagina Dentata) cross the ocean? Did it go from east to west or from west to east? HATT (1949) suggests that it reached the Pacific coast of Asia from America, while HO (1971) believes that it originated in Asia and spread around the Pacific Ocean. In any event, one has to agree with both these researchers that it is undoubtedly a matter of diffusion and not of a self-evident idea arising independently in different parts of the world.

This is but one of the many “questions that as yet have no answers,” and one can only hope with the editors that these questions “will serve as an indicator of the riches that await anyone ready to explore what is still basically uncharted territory.”

SCHOTT ends his slightly satirical article on performance studies with a final volley:

I admit to being skeptical as to the value of performance studies with regard to folktales.⁴ Are the performance studies not one of the many on-line subterfuges we use in order not to get seriously involved with studying the contents of African folktales? I take the old-fashioned and maybe heretical view that it makes much more sense to study the meaning and the structure of the texts of African stories than to study the storytelling performance. Much more fruit-

ful than performance studies seems to be an investigation into the variation of African folktales according to the sociocultural context, but this is a different matter. (1994)

The final remark in the introduction to *In Their Own Words* is that "the index lends itself to mechanical sorting and other computer-based applications. The motifs of the Folk Literature of South American Indian Series constitute an on-line database that can be accessed and searched." One wonders when the Stith Thompson index and the various other indexes from different parts of the world will be properly edited and made available in database form.

NOTES

1. It should perhaps be mentioned here that the whole of Southeast Asia is still something of a blank spot on the folktale map, and that indexing is also necessary for the tales of the majority peoples. The majorities are very, very far from becoming extinct, however, and it has become more and more obvious, especially during the last decade, that they will never accept having their cultures repressed. Their respective countries also have their own folklorists who just need a little encouragement to get started.

2. It is surprising to find that the otherwise quite comprehensive bibliography does not include Hans-Jörg U_{THER} 1984.

3. The editors decided to use the plus-motif form instead of adding new digits in the belief that the creation of fixed numbers should be a worldwide cooperative undertaking. Given the number of researchers throughout the world presently engaged in indexing, this seems a wise move. I have therefore decided to follow their example in my motif index for Southeast Asian folk literature, where several cognates of the new motifs will be found.

4. I share his view as far as many Southeast Asian ethnic groups are concerned, among them the Kammu whose lore I have been studying for over twenty years. Yet I also realize that the telling of tales in several Asian cultures borders on theatrical performance that is of great cultural interest. However, performance studies should never overshadow the tale as such — it is and always has been the tale that is the heart of storytelling. It is the tale, not the performance, that may continue for thousands of years.

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