

BOOK REVIEWS

GENERAL

EUGENIO, DAMIANA L., general editor. *ASEAN Folk Literature: An Anthology*. Manila: ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information, 1995. xvi + 813 pages. Illustrations, glossary, bibliography, index of titles, general index. (Not for sale)

It is a most longed-for volume that is now lying in front of me, and it is really a disappointment to find when you turn the title page over: "This book is not for sale."

One wonders why the Committee has decided not to sell the volume. Could it be that one in 1995 could foresee that more states soon would enter into the ASEAN? The states represented in the book are Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand, which, of course, means that only part of the Southeast Asian cultural unit is included. It is, indeed, somewhat peculiar to find Thailand but not Laos in the work; but is that a reason for not selling it? Or could it be that the Committee felt that the book is uneven? As a matter of fact it is extremely uneven.

As I see it, the unevenness and uncertainty is a good reason to sell as many copies of the book as possible. A volume on something we know so very little about as Southeast Asian folk literature cannot possibly be the great final work that brings research on the topic to a close. Instead it should serve as an eye-opener and a source of inspiration for students of folklore all over the world, and it is difficult to imagine a work more suitable for that purpose.

The lore of each country has been selected by one editor, and the final edition has been undertaken by Professor Emeritus Damiana L. Eugenio who has done so much to preserve Philippine folk literature. It is pleasant to find that the editors are presented in short notes at the end of the volume. Each one of them has also written an introduction to the folk literature of his or her home country.

Not only narrative folk literature but also riddles, proverbs, and folk songs are represented in the book. As short a section as the forty-five pages of riddles, where the text is also given in the original language, shows how very complicated the work on the lore of Southeast Asia is. Take for instance the Singaporean riddles. They are in Malay, Tamil, Chinese, and Baba/Peranakan, using the script of the various languages. The Thai section is somewhat longer and contains riddles about animals, plants, nature, people, and things, as well as some (totally untranslatable) plays on words and brain teasers. The riddles are difficult to understand even when you get the answer and an explanation, but the proverbs are even worse. Among the Indonesian proverbs you find a seemingly very simple one: "As a monkey sees a flower." The words are easy enough to understand, but what do they hint at? How does a monkey see a flower? One is thankful where an explanation is given, but this one is not explained. The proverbs from Indonesia again demonstrate the many difficulties involved, in that there are proverbs from Gayo, Minangkabau, Lampung, Sundanese, Java, Bali, Bugis, and Maluku.

The folk songs deserve special praise, because the melodies have also been noted down with the texts in the original language. The section on folk songs is quite long, over 100 pages,

and it must be a treasure chest for music anthropologists. For the common reader it is both pleasing and amusing to read the song texts and try to play the music.

As would be expected, narrative lore occupies the major part of the volume. The 455 pages are divided into myths, legends, and folk tales, and these terms are defined in the general introduction. Many of the tales deserve detailed research, both because they are superb literature and because they are extremely difficult to understand. More could have been done to help the readers, and what one misses most of all in the book is explanatory footnotes.

In order to understand the myth "The Origin of King of Minangkabao" from West Sumatra, one would need a profusion of explanations. It is one of the most intriguing stories I have ever read, and I would very much like to know more about it. It seems to be a mixture of Islamic and local lore, and even the colonial states enter into it in that one of the sultans (?) had a *cukai tapawi* (whatever that may be—in the Glossary it is said that the meaning is not clear) from France, England, and the Netherlands.

The story starts from the beginning of the world, and we are told that Adam and Eve had thirty-nine children. The last son could not find a wife for himself on earth and the angels carried him up to heaven. There he got golden horns, which scared his family when he came down for a visit. So far the story is understandable, but then we read: "So the horns were cut into *mangkuto sanggahhani*, a piece into *lembing lembuara*, a piece into *kumala sati*, a piece into *tudung saji pinang pasir*, a piece into *sirih udang tempo uri*." A footnote saying that these are the royal regalia would not be out of place here since the words are not found in the Glossary; but then the rest of the story is almost as enigmatic as this sentence, although it is in English.

The last item under the heading "Myths from Singapore" is not a story at all but a description of a celebration in honor of the Kew Ong Yah "Nine Emperor Gods." In the year 1933 the celebration was staged for the last time, and the author (the editor?) remembers it very well. There must be many others who remember this both magnificent and charming feast, and it is to be hoped that all possible information on it is collected and published. And why not let this short description serve as inspiration to revive the festival? The religious fervor is probably not there anymore, but a pleasant and beautiful festival is never out of place.

It is an almost hopeless task to decide the age of a tale, but among the Philippine materials we find a Rizal legend of which we are able to fix the time, even the date. That legend cannot possibly have been told before 30 December 1896, when the nationalist poet Jose Rizal was executed. It would have been helpful if there was a note telling us whether the story as such was new at that time, or if it is just an old tale attached to a new name. I have not found a motif "Dead body exchanged for banana stem," but it seems likely that it is found in countries where there are bananas.

Also the Cebuano legend of Lapulapu can be dated, as it deals with the battle of Mactan in 1521 where Magellan fell. We have our knowledge of the incident from Antonio Pigafetta only, and his interest did not center on the planned single combat between Lapulapu and his rival for the hand of a beautiful princess. When the rival was killed by Magellan himself, the legend says, Lapulapu finished the Western intruder off with a pestle. Perhaps one should compare Pigafetta's work to the stories told by the indigenous population?

The historical legends, of which there is an abundance in Southeast Asia, are always problematic and would really need special studies. The Lapulapu story is not 500 years old and may have been preserved in a rather exact form. Should it be regarded as oral literature or perhaps as oral history?

In the Thai part, under the heading "Legends," you find a learned article on the "Romance of Khun Luang Viranga." Viranga was the Lawa chief in the northern part of what is now Thailand. Before his time a hermit built the city of Lamphun by magic. The hermit

asked the Mon king of Lopburi for a ruler, and the king sent a woman, his daughter Chamadevi.

Perhaps the king just wanted to get rid of his daughter, because she was pregnant although she was not married. In her childhood she had also stepped over a burning lamp in front of a Buddha statue. For this unpardonable sin she was cursed, and for the rest of her life her body stunk so badly that the stench could be smelled for many miles. On the way to Lamphun she bathed in a river, and afterwards the water stunk so horribly that vultures gathered, believing that there was a dead elephant near the river.

It was this woman the Lawa chief tried to marry, not only because he wanted the Lamphun city but also because he loved her. She certainly did not reciprocate his love, and it was dreadful for her “to think of marriage to a heathen, a barbarian, and an ugly, dark, curly-haired, and flat-nosed, uncultured man”—racism is not something new. In order to avoid the marriage Chamadevi used all sorts of flat lies, evil tricks, and fabrications. Finally she put Viranga to a test in which he was to throw a javelin into the city from an impossible distance, and to her horror he nearly succeeded with his first throw. She then used a petticoat stained with menstruation blood to make a hat for Viranga; when he put it on he lost strength and could not throw the spear very far, but he bared his chest and let the weapon fall down and penetrate his heart. Chamadevi was happy and ruled the city for the rest of her life.

For many years I have been wondering why the main characters are described the way they are in the chronicles. The Lawa chief is an honest, upright, and unsuspecting hero, while the Mon princess is a stinking, false, unreliable hag. The article gives no answer to this, and I still wonder if it is a question of contempt for women. Is the idea perhaps that a woman has to be a wily trickster in order to come into power?

As is usual with tales from the area it would be impossible to give a good list of tale types for the work. Instead it may serve as a reminder of the necessity to revise the Aarne-Thompson catalogue in such a way that it can be used for tales all over the world. On the other hand it would, of course, have been possible to trace the motifs, but it would have been a tremendous job. Presumably no more than one volume was to be compiled. The present one is a bit unwieldy as it is, and with hundreds of pages of motifs, it would have become too hard to handle. There is also a useful General Index of headwords that makes it rather easy to find one’s way around in the volume itself.

Only a few of the stories are published for the first time, and for most of them the printed source is given in a footnote; sometimes you also get the name of the teller. The bibliography shows that the majority of the tales have been published in the original or the national language of the country. When will we have all the volumes translated? On page 157 it is remarked that H. Otley Beyer has said about an Ifugao myth that “it is worthy of its little niche in the world’s literature.” The same could be said of many of the tales from all the countries represented in this volume.

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