

BOOK REVIEWS

GENERAL

DAVIES, CHRISTIE. *Ethnic Humor around the World: A Comparative Analysis*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990. xii+404 pages. Bibliography, index. Cloth \$39.95; ISBN 0-253-31655-3.

Christie Davies has done a remarkable job of sifting through hundreds of joke sources (the bibliography runs to fifty-five pages) to present a model of the ethnic-joke process. Although the jokes and situations are culled from various nations, the core is English-speaking humor. Nevertheless, the model Davies has developed opens the door to studies of humor in other language and nationality areas. Asian folklore scholars, especially, could contribute much to the verification of the model.

This model concerns who tells the jokes, about whom, concerning what. In investigating these jokes, Davies has discovered that ethnic jokes are told about a people similar to the teller but noted for some characteristic that the teller's dominant group considers strange. If the group were not similar, the "strange" elements would be considered natural to that group. However, when a group is similar to the teller's, then the "strange" features become a source of humor.

In addition, the similar group is at the fringe of the teller's society. Since they have not been successful in the teller's perspective, they are considered stupid. They may speak the language improperly, suggesting a lack of education. They are often engaged in unskilled labor. On the other hand, if the dependent group puts an undue emphasis on striving for success, its members are considered canny.

At times, a group categorized as stupid or canny, in turn jokes about a group within its midst, attributing to a fringe sub-group the features that make the whole ethnic group a butt of jokes. As an ethnic group rids itself of the elements perceived as strange, the focus of the jokes may move to another group (e.g., in the U.S. jokes about stupidity moved from the Irish to the Polish).

A people's attitude towards war, if either too enthusiastic or too lax, gives rise to jokes about militarism and cowardliness. Davies points to historical situations that may have formed the impression of a people as militaristic or cowardly.

The chapter on foods substantiates Davies's model about ethnic groups. Meat is food for the dominant. Those without the economic power to afford meat are looked down upon. In this perspective, ordinary foods, like unskilled labor, become a source of jokes. Yet there are jokes about sausages because it is meat in an ambiguous form. It is similar to, yet is perceived to be humorously different from, real meat.

In summary, the characteristics of the model are: a dominant group that tells jokes about a culturally similar people; and a dependent people whose language and occupations appear outside the norm and, hence, humorous to the dominant group. The jokes attack characteristics that are considered to be outside the norm either by surplus or deficit.

The book is tightly constructed, moving from chapter to chapter to present the

model. Individual chapter summaries are reinforced by the concluding chapter. Points are clearly established before offering contradictory cases or qualifications. Davies approaches the material scientifically, refusing to consider subjective factors involving the tellers, listeners, and objects of the jokes.

Such a scientific stance is perhaps the only way this book could have been written. Surely it is successful in producing a clear model. To take into account the effects of the jokes or the subjective states of the tellers would have resulted in an entirely different book. Also, the subjective aspects have already been treated by Sigmund Freud in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905).

However, Davies insists on repeating a sub-theme that runs throughout the book. Namely, the jokes should be considered merely as humor and should not be subjected to censoring even if they contain material that the butts of the joke may consider offensive. Davies maintains that though the jokes imply, indeed draw upon, a stereotyped, if not prejudiced, view of a group, they are not a significant weapon in the arsenal of prejudiced people (cf. 129, 126).

Granted that jokes may not be a fundamental part of a prejudiced view, nevertheless, the fact that these jokes are chosen instead of some other, less offensive, type of joke says something about the teller. The telling of such jokes may not point to an aggressive bigot, but it indicates at least an insensitivity to the struggles of others. And even Davies admits that jokes against "excluded enterprisers" (a form of jokes about the "canny," involving Chinese and Jewish people) may indicate danger (323).

Secondly, from the reactions of the butts of the jokes, the jokes seem to be less than just good fun. For example, Michael Novak objects to Polish jokes because the public stereotype is internalized by the groups: "We do not have in our family experience many models of learning, status and public grace. We have sufficient sense of our modest origins. The sting of Polish jokes is that they make our deepest self-doubts public. They keep us in our place" (1976, 13). A book such as *Brothers* shows the effect of repeated negative images on Blacks (MONROE and GOLDMAN 1988). The negative image grinds the people down and causes them to give up, thus fostering a situation in which the stereotype receives foundation and perpetuates the "joke."

In sum, I would have been much more satisfied had not Davies enlisted ethnic-jokes-as-mere-humor as one of his sub-themes. The jokes are not just simply, to use Davies's comparison (9), a thermometer that registers heat; by necessarily building upon "a common set of cultural rules linking particular ethnic groups with particular comic qualities" (217), these jokes give a kind of legitimacy to judgments about the disparaged groups. They help reinforce the stereotype. A simple statement at the beginning of the study that the effects of the jokes would not be treated, would have sufficed.

Despite my reservations about this sub-theme, I think that Davies has done fine work in explicating the content of ethnic jokes and providing a model for similar studies. Anyone interested in oral transmission or minority groups should read this book for its clear, sober presentation of ethnic humor.

REFERENCES CITED:

FREUD, Sigmund

1905 *Jokes and their relation to the unconscious*. Trans. James Strachey. New York: Norton, 1963.

MONROE, Sylvester and Peter GOLDMAN

1988 *Brothers: Black and poor—A true story of courage and survival*. New York: Morrow.

NOVAK, Michael

1976 The sting of Polish jokes. *Newsweek* 12 April 1976: 13.

David R. MAYER
Nanzan University
Nagoya

DAVIES, GLENYS, editor. *Polytheistic Systems*. The Yearbook of the Traditional Cosmology Society (Volume 5). Edinburgh University Press, 1989. iv+245 pages. ISBN 0-7486-0135-X.

A growing consensus seems to exist that in our world of overspecialization we need more interdisciplinary exchange. It is therefore a welcome event that more and more opportunities are given for people from various disciplines to meet with one another and to discuss themes of common interest from their own particular viewpoints.

The Traditional Cosmology Society—of which the present volume constitutes the fifth yearbook—was founded in 1984 precisely for this purpose: to provide a forum for discussion and to promote interdisciplinary exchange in the study of myth, religion, and cosmology. In line with this policy, the Society's annual Summer Conference in 1988 dealt with "polytheistic systems" and brought together a wide range of participants—students of archaeology, folklore studies, social anthropology, religious studies, literature, and other disciplines—who exchanged views on the phenomenon of polytheism in various cultures and religions of the world. Among the many papers presented at the conference, a few were selected for publication and edited by Glenys Davies, Treasurer of the Society.

After a short Introduction by the editor explaining what the conference and the book are all about, fourteen chapters—of uneven length and structure—open for us a world of deities, ranging from India to Central America, from Classical Greece and Rome to the Celtic and Germanic tradition, to finish with a comparative study of polytheistic forms of life in Japanese Okinawa and Indonesian Bali. To describe in detail this "smorgasbord" of various approaches to the general theme would take too long. Moreover, this is also next to impossible, since most of the contributions are so extremely specialized and detailed that even a lengthy introduction could not possibly do justice to their rich contents. This is, in the eyes of this reviewer, at once both the strength and the weakness of this volume.

On the one hand, it is a vigorous reminder of how in the course of human history polytheistic systems have taken on such a variety of forms that we cannot but admire the genius they manifest and feel compelled to reflect upon the influence they have exerted upon our own contemporary ways of thinking. This point is convincingly expounded in the first chapter by Deirdre Green, "Towards a Reappraisal of Polytheism," who points out how many approaches to polytheism have been based upon ethnocentric and evolutionist assumptions, and vividly illustrated in the chapters that follow and that, each in its own specificity, describe the richness of polytheistic systems wherever in the world, making it impossible for us to dismiss them as mere phantasies of primitive minds.

On the other hand, however, most of the papers in this volume present such detailed analyses of particular manifestations of polytheism that their readability becomes greatly impaired, at least if the reader is not directly familiar with the specific theme dealt with in a specific paper. In other words, interdisciplinary exchange does not