

ON THE INTERPRETATION OF SOUTH AMERICAN FOLKLORE

FOLK LITERATURE OF THE SELKNAM INDIANS. By JOHANNES WILBERT. (Los Angeles: University of California at Los Angeles Latin American Center, 1975. Pp. 266. \$8.95.)

FOLK LITERATURE OF THE YAMANA INDIANS. Edited by JOHANNES WILBERT. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977. Pp. 319. \$12.95.)

English-reading scholars everywhere are indebted to Wilbert and his colleagues for the translation of Gusinde's collections of Selknam (Ona) and Yamana (Yahgan) folktales from Tierra del Fuego. These two volumes, together with Wilbert's previous publication on Warao "folk literature" (Orinoco Delta), contribute significantly to the documentation of aboriginal lore from lowland South America. Along with Metraux's account of Chaco myths and tales, they provide a unique resource in English for comparative interpretation of oral traditions among what have come to be known as the "marginal" populations.

Wilbert's objective in the two publications under consideration here is clearly stated in the Preface to the Selknam volume: "My project makes no further claims beyond the initial purpose of documentation and baseline work of presenting the narrative material of each society in a single language and furnishing for each corpus a motif index. By doing so, I hope to pave the way for scholars pursuing comparative research in the oral traditions of South American Indians." Accordingly, fifty-nine Selknam and sixty-six Yamana narratives were translated from their original German, except for explicit sexual references that Gusinde had recorded in Latin, and a summary was provided for all but the shortest tales, followed by a listing of motif content. This is followed by a major section entitled "The Motif Indices." The latter follow Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*, with adaptations indicated for those topics that do not fit precisely the Thompson model. The indices are divided into four groups: a motif distribution by narrative, a topical motif index, an alphabetical motif index, and a motif distribution by motif groups.

Given the considerable amount of time and energy devoted to the construction of the motif inventory, it seems cruel to criticize the approach, particularly since the motifs appear to have been selected with no apparent awareness of the critical problems involved. Yet it must be obvious to contemporary scholars of folklore that formalist and structuralist approaches have rendered virtually obsolete the notion of motif analysis. This observation is of particular significance given that Claude Lévi-Strauss is quoted in a blurb on the cover extolling the "paramount importance" of the UCLA publications project. The point is, of course, that the categories that permitted Wilbert and his colleagues to identify motifs reflect their own understandings, but they certainly do not provide unambiguous insights into Tierra del Fuegian understandings, as the indices are

wont to imply. The problem is aggravated by the consideration that no living members of the two societies survive to offer commentaries on the motifs selected. At their worst, the motif indices impose meanings on the Ona and Yahgan narratives and tend to obscure, rather than elucidate, the materials recorded.

This argument can be illustrated by reference to a specific example. One brief Selknam narrative, consisting of thirteen short sentences, is entitled "A Flood Myth." It describes how a flood forced the people out on the rocks where some turned themselves into sea lions and others into birds. The account affirms that shamans had not become aware of the danger in time to avert disaster, but that when the waters rose on a later occasion, the shamans were able to control the elements and no such trouble occurred. Following this story, seven motifs are identified: deluge, flood as punishment, escape from deluge, various haunts of animals, transformation: man to sea lion, transformation: man to bird, and magic control of the elements. The story itself makes no reference to punishment, nor is it implied that the transformation of humans into animals in any way represents punishment. In fact, another story describes how a man gradually turned himself into a bird in order to gain revenge on his brother who had seduced his woman.

The concept of flood as punishment would appear to have been directly influenced by the flood account as portrayed in Judeo-Christian mythology. Many other motifs identified as punishment could more characteristically be described as revenge. In fact, the notion of punishment does not appear to have any meaningful referent in Ona culture. Other criticisms could be made of the motifs analyzed in the flood story. For example, the Ona almost certainly did not conceive of the shamanic control of natural elements as magical. In fact, the point of the story seems to be that of shamanic control, yet no shaman motif is indicated. These observations are beside the fundamental point under consideration here, however, which is that the motifs selected tend to impose a structure on the narratives that is alien and inconsistent with the Ona and Yahgan meaning systems. Analysis of the narratives that reveals their internal coherence and structural features is much more likely to depict understandings that were communicated by those recounting and hearing them. Used critically for purposes of identifying particular themes and topics, the motif concordances can be of some assistance. For most analytic purposes, however, they must be ignored completely.

The notion of "folk literature" itself poses a similar problem since it presumes the existence of a particular genre of literature among other comparable types. Here again preconceived categories appear to be operating that may well serve to obscure, rather than to clarify, the Tierra del Fuego materials. Categorical distinctions that have been made in Indo-European studies, such as Jakobson's contrast between secular oral poetry in Russia versus written ecclesiastical literature, or a common Western notion of myths containing "truth-value" versus tales with fantasy themes, are misleading when applied to oral lore in lowland South America. The problem is that these categories impose their meanings on the materials collected without conscious intention. Note, for example, the manner in which narratives have been classified in the publication

process, a categorical arrangement that almost certainly never occurred to an Ona. The Selknam narratives are divided into two sections: (1) prominent personages, and (2) other myths and legends. The latter section is subdivided into: the Selknam habitat, the flood, the ancestors (nonprominent personages?), the deeds of shamans, the Guanaco, animal myths with a fundamental idea (as opposed to those with nonfundamental ideas?), the Yosi ("wood") spirits, and the Klokoten ("initiation rites") myth. This arrangement implies a significant interpretation of the Ona lore that is not supported by closer analysis. The topics identified and the story groupings do not reflect what appears to be Ona thinking. It could be argued, of course, that the social scientist applies his own systematic categorization for purposes of arriving at a particular kind of meaning, so that it is unimportant whether or not Ona thinking is considered. The point being made here is that no such systematic approach is evident in the categorical arrangement and external meanings are imposed without the conscious awareness of either the editor or the reader.

This observation is perhaps strengthened by reference to the Yamana collection, which is also divided into two sections: (1) how the world came to be, and (2) myths and legends. This division is perplexing since the first section, subdivided into (a) heaven and earth, and (b) culture heroes, is also composed of myths and legends. The second section is subdivided into three parts: (a) explanatory myths, (b) ethical myths, and (c) tales about shamans, spirits, and ogres. The logic of this arrangement is again not apparent since the first section also contains explanatory myths, tales involving spirits are also found in explanatory and ethical myths, etc. etc. No coherent correspondence could be found by this reader between the classification of the narratives and either their structure or content. The argument is relevant only in that it demonstrates the extent to which the understandings of Wilbert and his colleagues have already shaped the materials presented, while the implication is that no such interpretation is given. Such categories should not be accepted at face value, they should be evaluated critically for the meanings they convey. It would be of interest to learn how Gusinde's various informants categorized their own stories, but this, alas, is impossible.

The problem of the imposition of external meanings on a coherent body of texts such as those published here is particularly acute when it occurs without the full awareness of the individuals concerned. That Wilbert intended to avoid interpretation is perhaps best exemplified in his statements concerning the translation of the texts: "The reader will notice a certain awkwardness of style which is the result of our own intent to translate as literally as possible" (Selknam volume, p. 15). While literal translation may be of concern to a fundamentalist affirming a plenary-verbal inspiration of the Bible, it would seem to have dubious relevance for the project here. Every translation involves interpretation, of course, and it is highly important that the translator be consciously aware of his own interpretative framework. It is this awareness that appears to be lacking in the works under consideration.

In an Introduction to each volume, Wilbert has provided valuable information on the occasion surrounding Martin Gusinde's four expeditions to Tierra del Fuego between 1918 and 1924, as well as the contexts in which the narratives

were recorded. It is pointed out, for example, that the Selknam recounted their "most sacred myths" only in a ceremonial hut, whereas other stories were told more freely by elderly males around a camp fire while women and young men listened. The extent to which Gusinde already "doctored" the tales also is indicated. With reference to Yamana narratives it is noted that Gusinde was obliged to rely primarily on female informants since males were no longer available. Not only did this influence the topics of the tales recorded, but the personal illustrations and contemporary elaborations with which the males embellished the tales are also absent from the female narrations. This has caused Wilbert to caution that, "the sex of the narrator and the form of rendition are both atypical of Yamana storytelling tradition" (p. 10). These selective factors are, of course, of little significance when analyzing the lore structure, but they do place limitations on the comparative study of thematic and topical content. Yet, it is the latter, obviously, with which the motif indices are concerned. It also calls into question the advisability of referring to these narratives as "the folk literature" of the societies involved.

My own analysis of Toba myths demonstrated that males can be identified with the key symbols fire, hunting, and curing, while females tend to be associated with the symbols water, procreation, and danger. Thus, the opposition male-female was found traditionally to be associated with the oppositions fire-water, hunting-procreation, and curing-danger. This analysis was found to be relevant for interpreting the transformations that resulted from interaction with an alien symbolic system; in this case, Pentecostalism. It was shown that the loss of the hunting-gathering milieu and the intense attention to Pentecostal symbols involving healing and speaking-in-tongues (*gozo*) served to transform the Toba system in a particular manner. A superficial reading of the narratives published here suggests that similar oppositional categories are to be found in the Tierra del Fuego, as well as the Orinoco Delta, materials. This is not to imply that these particular oppositions have any positive value, but rather that such an analysis can provide an alternative conceptual base for interpreting the oral lore recorded and published here.

ELMER S. MILLER
Temple University

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