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BOOK REVIEW:

A HYBRID PERSPECTIVE BETWEEN WORLDS

Mishra, Mahendra Kumar 2007: Oral Epics of Kalahandi. Chennai: National Folklore Support Centre. 303 pages.

Frog

The primary intention of Mahendra Kumar Mishra's *Oral Epics of Kalahandi* is to introduce Kalahandi epic traditions, providing a survey of the epic traditions of five tribes and two castes. Kalahandi is a district of Orissa in eastern India and this is the first work focusing on the region's epics and their interrelationships. The work's success is mitigated by its many problems. Many issues are superficial and could have been resolved with the assistance of a thorough editor; others are a consequence of the author's unusual hybrid perspective.

OVERVIEW BY CHAPTER

Three chapters introduce the region, study and singing traditions generally, after which each cultural group is presented in its own chapter. The first four (Gond, Kondh, Kamar, Bhunjia) are Dravidian language family traditions followed by one (Banjara) in a form of Rajastani Hindi, after which epics of the Gaur and Debgunia castes are presented. A chapter on songs related to historical droughts follows almost accidentally. These chapters present epic texts in English translation followed by discussion. The penultimate chapter presents an overview of the survey. The conclusion offers a brief but insightful discussion of processes of cultural change which have led oral epic to become an "endangered genre" and an assertion that epic traditions are significant in the maintenance of group solidarity and ethnic identity.

A HYBRID PERSPECTIVE

The author is from the Kalahandi region and has witnessed epic performances since his childhood. He has been collecting folklore in the region since (at least) 1986: this book appears to be the offspring of two decades of collection. The volume is intended to engage an international audience of folklorists. This intent is less attributable to the author's expertise than to the significance he attributes to the traditions of Kalahandi. He hopes that the academic audience will stimulate interest and help sensitize communities to the significance of their own traditions "so that they will patronize the singers" (p. 286) and revitalize the oral epic tradition. To this end, the author caters to the anticipated interests of an academic audience in the English language, which clearly poses challenges for him.

The author's perspective is not simply informed by an intimate understanding of the cultural milieu of the Kalahandi region, it is permeated by it – and indeed my first response to reading was something akin to culture shock. The author's ostensibly etic analytical discussion is infused with the sort of emic perspectives and interpretations we might anticipate from the singers he has interviewed. A striking example is found in the chapter on Gond epics:

Women are by nature kind hearted, courageous, cooperative, and helpful to their husbands. Chital's wife helped him during his fight, and gave him hints to attack the enemy. This signifies that Gond women are equally courageous and brave. Therefore, a Gond woman is portrayed as the tigress in the jungle. (p. 82.)

Problems emerge where the author has clearly moved out of his element. He states in the preface: "I am not a trained folklorist. Although I feel comfortable as an interested field worker, I am not comfortable as a desk worker" (p. 8). In essence, he enters into an academic discourse which (partly owing to challenges of the language) he does not appear equipped to maintain. The work also appears to have been written too quickly, as though the author did not anticipate the time and energy (and patience!) it would demand. Nonetheless, it is filled with a wealth of material and cultural information. The presentation simply emerges as a hybrid of the objective analytical presentation *that it is attempting to be* and a self-reflective emic perspective embedded in the cultural milieu. By shifting focus from what the work is attempting to be to *what it is*, the cacophony of issues recedes somewhat into the background and the values and insights offered by the work become available through the noise.

The emic perspective is not identical to that of any epic singers. It is clearly tempered by the author's role and priorities as a collector of a specific social and cultural background. He is, however, presenting and discussing the tradition from a perspective within the cultural milieu. His regular quotation of proverbs as exemplars of social relations between cultural groups betrays this curious hybrid of emic and etic perspectives behind the work. He is a mediator of collected texts and cultural information, but in order to access the author's valuable knowledge and insights

concerning traditions, it is sometimes necessary to navigate his interpretations and conscious displays oriented to the anticipated interests of his audience.

EPIC TEXTS AND SECONDARY SOURCES

Epics are presented in English translation without original text (with a few exceptional passages). The vast majority were collected by the author. It is not always specified whether the text is complete or abridged, or the degree to which the text may reflect a summary or paraphrase. Parentheses appear to be used for explicatory comments, but other strategies also appear (dashes; asterisks with notes). Other editorial emendations and assertions may have been inserted elsewhere without indication. An appendix was added to chapter 3 between pages 58 and 59 (pp. 58A–58B) providing the name, age and addresses of each singer and relevant epics collected from him, as well as other resources. This makes up for the sometimes vague (e.g. “Singer of version documented by author”) and missing attributions of quoted epics. The work benefits from the author’s emphasis on context of performance and application. Unfortunately, information on contexts of specific performances is not generally supplied and the wealth of contextualizing information presented in the work is often embedded in the discussion and must be extracted. Little perspective is offered on the size of the documented corpus or the nature and range of variation either within that corpus or in the living tradition.

Secondary source citations sometimes exhibit minor problems. They appear variously in parentheses within the body text, in a chapter endnote, both and neither. Endnotes include a complete presentation of bibliographic information. The bibliography (pp. 289–290) includes only a fraction of these works. Grammatical mistakes in secondary source quotations betray discrepancies from the original text. For example, the quotation on page 23 cited as Oinas 1972: “99–101”, reads, “folk or oral epic songs are ornamental style dealing with the adventures of extraordinary people.” The sentence appears on page 99 of Oinas’s essay (bold font indicates missing/changed elements): “**Folk (or oral) epic songs are narrative poems in formulaic and ornamental style dealing with the adventures of extraordinary people.**” It is easy to make a slip in a language which still poses challenges, but the issues exhibited here have broader implications for the author’s critical standards.

THEORY

It is not always clear that the author understands the theory and concepts which he introduces. *Oral Formulaic Theory* opens the first paragraph of the preface (p. 1) and will serve as an example. The chapter on Kondh epics includes a subsection “Singer” followed immediately by a second (alternative?) heading “The Oral Formula” consisting of two brief paragraphs describing Kondh performance practice without mentioning formulae (p. 127). “Epic Texture” is the heading of the following subsection (*ibid.*). No corresponding sections on the formula or texture are encountered

until the penultimate chapter, where “Texture” appears as a section spanning several pages (pp. 266–273). It contains a wealth of interesting information on the comprehensibility, applications and significance of epic and epic language. “Oral Formula” is here a subsection of “Texture” (distinct from “Language of the Singers”). It presents a fascinating overview of the dialectical relationships between epic and proverb in their cultural activity, describing the use of proverbs in epic, relationship between proverbs and epic content, and quotations of epic as proverb. The “oral formula” is only introduced in the final sentences of the section:

The oral formula in the epic was to know [sɪɕ] the social events and rules and customs and to follow them. If some social rules are violated, the evidence of the epics and myth are quoted to resolve the dispute. Similarly the creation myths, which are recited during rituals, also have the same formula [sɪɕ]. The sequencing of events is recited and the stock language, phrases, and the proverbs are used to keep the story intact. (p. 272.)

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF EPIC IN KALAHANDI

Kalahandi emerges as a fascinatingly dynamic tradition area. In spite of its shortcomings, *Oral Epics of Kalahandi* presents a wealth of information related to the living traditions. This book is rich in information and the presentation of collected texts offers foundations for future study – they must simply be approached with care and a modicum of reserve. The author’s attempts to reach out to international folklore research on its own terms seem to trip over theory and periodically stumble into speculation. Overall, the treatment is more intuitive than analytical, yet that should not blind us to the insights developed in the fields of the author’s own experience and expertise – in the social arenas of folklore performance and the living discourse of societies. The author’s handling of Oral Formulaic Theory is not comparable to his ability to address and describe aspects of the traditions based on his own experiences as both a product of the region and as a fieldworker, as in the case of his discussion of interrelationships between epic and proverb.

Perhaps the two most interesting facets of the work provide the basis of the work’s goals in production. The first is that even within the dialectical matrix of Kalahandi’s regional traditions, epic genres nonetheless emerge as intimately associated with ethnic and cultural identities. The second is the discussion of presently observable historical processes which have resulted in epic becoming an endangered genre – processes which have been and still are underway. The discussion is primarily descriptive, yet it is of value insofar as it reflects actual social processes. Simply put, the author asserts that the significance of epic for the solidarity of these ethnic and social identities has come under the threat of extinction by the desire of patrons to identify themselves with non-tribal traditions for political reasons – i.e. to affiliate their own social iden-

Frog: A Hybrid Perspective between Worlds

tities with those of individuals higher up in socio-political hierarchies – and without that patronage, epic singers are being forced to change profession or be reduced to beggary. The conclusion of the work emerges as a plea, raising more questions than answers, such as how can oral epic traditions maintain their social functions in rapidly changing cultural contexts, and more pointedly, where exactly do the researcher's responsibilities toward an object of research lie – should he try to act, or just take notes and watch the tradition die?

LITERATURE

Oinas, Felix J. 1972: Folk Epic. – Dorson, M.R. (ed.), *Folklore and Folklife*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

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