

Moral Fictions: Tamil Folktales in Oral Tradition

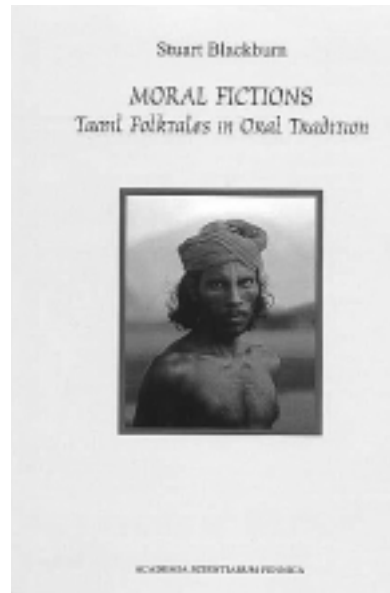
India represents a special conundrum for scholars working with folktales. Such early tale collections as the *Panchatantra*, the Buddhist *jataka* legends, and the fables of the Jain elders point to the existence of a long-standing and diverse body of tale-telling traditions, giving the folklorist a feel for historical continuity and change that is often absent among traditions of tale-telling in non-literate environments. Yet, at the same time, the literary nature of such collections presents problems of its own. The same is true for Indian folktales collected by European folklorists.

Review >
South Asia

By Nile Green

The relatively widespread presence of Europeans in nineteenth-century India resulted in the publication of a number of collections of folktales from different regions of India, including the famous collections of William Crooke from across northern India, Richard Carnac Temple and Flora Steele from Punjab, and Mary Frere from the Deccan.¹ However, with the increasing sophistication of folklore studies in the second half of the twentieth century, the use of such collections as primary material has become increasingly difficult. Contemporary perceptions often lead us to problematize their colonial context no less than the methodological lack of sophistication with which they were sometimes collected.

The publication of Thompson and Balys's index of Indian tale-types in the late 1950s represented a watershed in such studies.² In its wake, a number of important studies of folklore traditions in India have been methodologically circumspect enough to satisfy the specialist and include the important contributions of Indian scholars. However, as in so many other academic fields, a paradox remains between a richness of primary source material and its frequently relegated position in publication. Given the temptations and rewards of the analysis of folktales,



Stuart Blackburn is therefore to be applauded for his efforts in the painstaking and time-consuming work of translating a large number of tales from a single regional tradition.

Moral Fictions brings together translations of one hundred folktales that Blackburn collected in different regions of Tamil Nadu during the mid-1990s. Treading carefully the path between the too widespread and the too specific that can easily characterize such enterprises, the collection is significant in the context of Indian folklore studies in providing a broad selection of tale-types told by no fewer than forty-one tellers that allow an overview of one particular cultural/linguistic folklore tradition at a given point in space and time. As a methodological exercise in the writing of folktales, the volume is also of interest for its attempt to make the construction of the text as close and simple as possible a mirror of the ethnographic experience, while not allowing details of recording to interfere with the tales themselves. The volume is organized by story-telling 'sessions', keeping tales together by author, time, and loca-

tion of their telling. As well as the clarity this allows into the contexts of the tales, as Blackburn himself remarks this approach also reveals something of the 'narrative logic' through which different tales relate to one another within a given session.

There is a minimum of authorial comment on the tales outside of the 'Introduction' and 'Afterword'. However, in these two short pieces that frame the collection, Blackburn is careful to draw our attention to the moral dimension of the tales. He comments that the weight of opinion among folklorists is to view fantasy as the main characteristic of the folktale and the topic of morality as only a peripheral theme. Yet, for Blackburn, the most striking characteristic of the Tamil folktale is its emphasis on crime and punishment. Citing Maria Tatar's argument that violence and sex represent the 'hard facts' of folklore,³ Blackburn offers what he sees as the unifying characteristic of the folklore tradition he is presenting in the claim that '[T]hese Tamil folktales are moral fictions.' Thus in one story from Panaiyakkottai, a female practitioner of 'country medicine' steals fingers from corpses for her cures and so becomes involved with a group of thieves who try to burgle her house and kidnap her. In the denouement, we find the woman suitably admonished through a short jail term and the thieves who molested her condemned to death. In another tale from Tanjavur, a cruel mother-in-law is tricked by a young bride's faked return from the dead into arranging her own death and funeral. With its mixture of helplessness and the catharsis of revenge, the story of the young bride is one with resonance for any patrilocal society based around the extended household.

Such recurring societal references suggest that Blackburn is right to take issue with aesthetic arguments about the intrinsic narrative freedom of the folktale, since such a perspective takes shape only by comparison to (and so very much in the presence of) writing. Like the genesis of folklore studies itself, however useful such aesthetic approaches are, they are very often the product of a literate sensibility and can

do much to ignore more societal and even functional dimensions of given folklore traditions.

The tales are translated into a highly readable style and present much that will be enjoyable to specialists and non-specialists alike. The tales present insights into the religion and social structure of their tellers' communities no less than the particular modalities of the Tamil folktale to which Blackburn draws our attention. However, perhaps the most lasting contribution of the volume is its ability to draw the reader into the dazzling parallel universe of the tales themselves and in doing so communicate something of the peculiar narrative magic that sustains successful story-telling traditions, wherever they are found. <

- Blackburn, Stuart, *Moral Fictions: Tamil Folktales in Oral Tradition*, FF Communications No. 278, Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica (2001), pp. 338, ISBN 951-41-0898-1

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Storyteller Ettirajalu inside his house in Karaiyamputtur, 14 November 1995.



Taken from the book under review.

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- 1 See: Crooke, W., *Religion and Folklore of Northern India*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1926); Frere, M., *Old Deccan Days: or, Hindoo Fairy Legends Current in Southern India*, London: J. Murray (1870); Steel, F.A., *Tales of the Punjab Told by the People*, with notes by R.C. Temple, London: Macmillan (1894).
- 2 Thompson, S., and J. Balys, *The Oral Tales of India*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press (1958).
- 3 Tatar, M., *The Hard Facts of Grimms' Fairy Tales*, Princeton: Princeton University Press (1987).