

REVIEWS

A Catalogue of Khoisan Folktales of Southern Africa. Part I: Introduction, Types, Indices, Sources; Part II: The Tales (Analyses). By Sigrid Schmidt. Köln, Germany: Rüdiger Köppe, 2013. 841 pp.

Anyone who has worked with African oral traditions probably was intrigued by the fabulous tales of the Khoisan peoples of Southern Africa. The beginning point of this engagement was most likely the seminal work of missionary-scholar Wilhelm H. I. Bleek and his family members and collaborators. Most of this work focused on the Xam and Naron groups and was collected and then published throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century. The tales felt substantially different from those of the neighboring Bantu-speaking peoples. Plots and characters often verged on the surreal and the awkward, and stilted English translations furthered the exotic feel of the narrative texts. Researchers from the area and from Europe and the United States have produced further scholarship and collections of oral traditions from numerous Khoisan groups, over regions covering several national boundaries, including South Africa, Namibia, and Botswana. Given that these linguistically related societies have relatively small populations, the scale of scholarly attention paid to them testifies to their enduring presence in the imaginations of academics in various fields. Indeed, the broader appeal of these cultures is often perpetuated by romantic constructions of pristine peoples “unspoiled” by contact with other more “developed” societies.

Sigrid Schmidt does an immense service to scholars of Khoisan verbal arts by producing an impressive and seemingly exhaustive two-volume catalog and index of oral narratives from this cluster of ethnic groups. As someone who rarely refers to folk literature indexes in my own work, I maintain a healthy respect for the prodigious effort entailed in compiling and organizing this material. There is also a commensurate difficulty in trying to evaluate this sort of scholarly effort, especially one so comprehensive as these volumes seem to be. It is not the kind of work that one would usually read cover to cover. The greatest value of this particular project is its multitude and breadth of sources

and the obvious care with which these tales have been categorized and cataloged. As such, I save any suspense by proclaiming this collection to be astoundingly detailed, clearly organized, and most impressive in the obvious care that went into its production. It is an invaluable resource for any scholar working on Khoisan cultural production and for researchers who want to do comparative work with neighboring African oral traditions.

Schmidt provides a brief but helpful introduction to the catalog. She first specifies the three main groups that are covered by the index: “the Bushmen (San, Masarwa), the Khoekhoe(a) (Khoikoi, Hottentots) and the Damara (Dama, Bergdama)” (1: 1). She rightly refers to the problems with the names historically given to some of these groups and their derogatory nature. There is a brief but precise discussion of the interactions between these groups and neighboring peoples, mostly Bantu-speaking societies. In some cases these interactions have had long-lasting effects as far as the sharing of language traits and cultural practices. The catalog includes narrative traditions of numerous genres, “myths, trickster, animals and fairytales,” and “anecdotes and legends,” including “novelistic tales and legends” (1: 2). Schmidt explains that her volumes differ significantly from the classic Aarne-Thompson-Uther (ATU) type classification “because many of the Khoisan tales do not belong to these types” (1: 2). Further, and more significantly, whereas the ATU catalog is more of an overview of world folk literature, Schmidt’s Khoisan catalog strives to be an exhaustive and all-inclusive indexing of all available Khoisan narratives, many of them heretofore unpublished.

Schmidt provides a thorough explanation of how the catalog is arranged, particularly illustrating how the types and motifs are numbered and indexed and identifying a number of other valuable abbreviations and symbols that tie each item to its source and context. “Arrangement of the Tales,” divided into headings such as “Celestial Bodies and Natural Phenomena,” “The Anthropomorphic Tricksters . . .,” and “Man and Animals of the Primeval World (Non-Trickster)” lists a wide variety of categories of tale types. Then, in an impressive display of thoroughness over 24 pages, Schmidt provides the specific tale types for the cataloged stories. There follow more than 50 pages listing the already published Khoisan motifs from Thompson’s motif-index combined with the many others she identifies in her research. A helpful chapter titled “The Traditions of the Individual Ethnic Groups” provides a list of the specific Khoisan groups (by geographic location and name), the scholars who collected the material, and dates of publication. There is a 95-page “Subject Index” that is amazingly detailed as well as two lengthy bibliographies of “Sources” and “References.” The entire second volume consists of 541 pages of items, describing and occasionally commenting on individual tales. The stories are organized by the same tale type outline or index as presented earlier but filled in with details

on specific stories and listing versions of the same tale found in other collections.

Finally, I have to admit that I have not followed this kind of scholarship for many years. Initially, overweening philological impulses propelled the Grimm brothers and early as well as later folklorists to compile and organize copious descriptions of tales and later to divide them into types and motifs. However, since Stith Thompson himself questioned the validity of diffusion theories, this methodology has lost its attraction for many scholars working in this and related fields. The lack of actually analyzing the content and meaning of narratives in these indexes is somewhat frustrating for those wanting a better sense of the historical context of both the stories and their collection. I therefore value the work of such scholars as Michael Wessels who delve in great detail into Bleek's early work and raise questions about translation and whether or not Kaggen, the long-celebrated "trickster," actually merits that title. I believe the product of indexing efforts is most valuable when paired with a deeper and contextualized treatment of the stories and peoples reflected in these volumes.

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Baba Yaga: The Wild Witch of the East in Russian Fairy Tales. Edited by Sibelan Forrester, Martin Skoro, and Helena Goscolo. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013. 202 pp.

The collected tales in *Baba Yaga: The Wild Witch of the East in Russian Fairy Tales* offer readers an experience akin to a fairy-tale museum visit. Each of the twenty-nine Russian stories stands as its own exhibit, a tale complete unto itself. Annotations quietly follow the collected narratives in the endnotes, and the editors have adorned the pages with depictions of Baba Yagas taken from art, film, theater, and even a pair of shoes. The ornamentation includes modern folk art by British painter Rima Staines, classic Russian illustrations by Ivan Bilibin, and contemporary interpretive forms such as Mike Mignola's illustrations for the *Hellboy* comics. All depictions present perspectives with generally minimal context, mirroring the spare editorial hand given to each tale. Readers stroll from story to story, absorbing the variable narratives, which sometimes feature a Baba Yaga (as in "Ivanushka," translated from Khudiakov 52) and sometimes include her only in passing (as in "The Bear Tsar," translated from Afanas'ev 201). The collection follows no distinctive pathway, and stories do not build on one another. Even the editors recognize the ambling nature of their anthology, including "Finist the Bright Falcon II," twelve stories before what ostensibly seems to be the "first" version, "The Feather of Finist the Bright Falcon." The body of the resulting book can therefore feel disconnected, but