

THE VALUE OF FOLK-LORE TO MISSIONARIES

Two years ago, while enjoying the hospitality of that excellent body, the Neukirchen Mission, at Ngao on the Tana, I am afraid I sadly puzzled my kind hosts by my eagerness in collecting folk-tales. 'We have never troubled our heads about anything of the sort,' said one of them, in answer to enquiries. And the good old man—Abadula was his name—whom they turned on to satisfy my thirst for information, was also somewhat perplexed at starting. I tried to draw him by allusions to stories about the Hare—*Kitunguwe* (I had not yet learnt to call him *Mwakatsoo*, the Clever One). 'Oh! we used to have stories like that—but now that our people have learnt to read, they have forgotten all about them.' A little encouragement soon made it clear that his oblivion, at any rate, was incomplete. I suppose he had instinctively felt and adapted himself to the implied, if unexpressed, attitude of disapproval.

Something of the same attitude is indicated in a sentence of Moffat's, written in 1842, or thereabouts: 'My object here is not to give a description of the manners and customs of the Bechuanas, which would require a volume, while it would neither be very instructive nor very edifying.' Fortunately, his interest in his people was stronger than his theoretic sense of what was instructive or edifying, or I hardly think we should have possessed all the valuable information which is packed away between the covers of the *Missionary Scenes and Labours*.

A different view is taken to-day, when missionaries like Dr. Roscoe are among the most valued contributors to anthropological science and do not feel that they stand in need of any apology. A bare enumeration of the volumes

on folk-lore (in the narrow sense) produced by missionaries within the last thirty years (not to mention the older works of Steere, Callaway, Schlenker and others) would fill up more of our space than we can conveniently spare.

I say advisedly 'folk-lore in the narrow sense,' because there is a current impression that folk-lore is limited to the collection of folk-tales and proverbs, with perhaps a few additional matters, such as cures for warts and the like. In reality 'the lore of the folk' has a much wider meaning, and, in the case of peoples with no book religion or priesthood and no written laws or literature, it may include the greater part of their customs and beliefs.

How important a knowledge of these is, I need hardly point out. The time has gone by when Krapf, honest and fearless if ever man was so, could see nothing in the rites about which tribal life centred but 'sinful doings' which had to be denounced in and out of season. It is true that, in a remarkable passage, written somewhat late in life, he expresses the view that native customs and institutions may have a certain value in keeping non-christian societies from utter disruption till such time as the truth can be preached to them. But in general, he seems to have thought that the whole framework of tribal life was the creation of the Evil One, and that existing laws and rites were mere sanctions for tyranny and sensuality.

As Dr. Haddon has pointed out, it is impossible to change in a few years—perhaps even in a few centuries—beliefs and practices which have taken thousands of years to develop, amid special surroundings, quite unfamiliar to those wishing to make the change. This is quite apart from the question whether the change is desirable—one too wide and deep to discuss here. But unless we believe that the same God who had educated and is educating us—in spite of and through our own mistakes and waywardness—has been indifferent to the fate of even His lowliest and most backward children, we shall be less eager than our fathers to rush in with the pruning-knife.

To take one among many ways in which estimates of character may be affected by a misconception of some elementary fact, I need only mention in passing the subject of systems of kinship. When the Pacific Islands were first visited by Europeans, it was thought that the natives had not the remotest idea of morality or family life, because they called every one belonging to their own generation 'brother' or 'sister' and every one belonging to the previous generation 'father' or 'mother.' Since those days the 'classificatory system' of relationship has been fully investigated and found to exist among people none of whom have the slightest doubt as to who are their actual parents. I am not pronouncing any opinion on the practical morality of the Polynesians at that period; but it does seem as if the most deplorable consequences had resulted from the misunderstanding of their theoretical code—aided, no doubt, by belief that their discoverers were supernatural beings. For there is evidence that the latter acted on the misunderstanding promptly and disastrously.

Again, how often has one heard, in South Africa or elsewhere—'What liars these natives are! My boy brought a man here yesterday that he said was his brother, and now I hear he is nothing of the sort, only he comes from the same kraal,' and so on. Or again, a missionary thinks an ingrained habit of deceit is proved by the fact that every native has at least three names. One may not be concerned to defend the veracity of these particular natives, but one may safely affirm that their three names have nothing to do with the matter, one way or the other. And if the censor, instead of dismissing them as evidence of dishonesty, had taken the trouble to enquire into the matter of the names, he would have learnt some very interesting things.

The purpose of this article is to bring to the notice of missionary workers a group of recently-published books on folk-lore, all, in one way or another, worthy of careful consideration.

Miss Samuelson's life-long experience of the Zulus has supplied her with a number of valuable facts, which she sets forth only too briefly in a little volume of eighty-three pages.¹ We have descriptions of the annual feast of first fruits, of the doctoring of an army for war, the ceremonies on the death of a chief, sacrifices to the ancestral spirits (*amadhlozi*), etc. It is to be regretted that some of the accounts are not a little fuller—e.g. fuller particulars about the *inkata yezwe* (p. 27) would be very welcome. Miss Samuelson does not appear to have seen this sacred object—which probably has never been shown to any European—and consequently does not give a detailed description of it, but it would seem to be a coil 'made of certain fibres which are very strong and binding,' of the same shape as the grass head-pads used by carriers, but large enough to form a seat for a man. It is made in secret, sprinkled with various medicines and finally bound round with the skin of a python.

When the Inkata is finished, all the full-grown men, as well as the principal women of the tribe, are summoned, and are sprinkled and given powders of various dried herbs to swallow. The men then go down to a river and drink certain mixtures, bathe . . . and return to the kraal where the Inkata is made. They are then sprinkled a second time and return to their homes. After this the Inkata is handed over by the doctor to the chief's principal wife and entrusted to her and to two or three others, to be withdrawn from the common gaze. It is taken great care of and passed on from generation to generation as part of the chief's regalia. The Inkata is looked upon as the good spirit of the tribe, binding together all in one and attracting back any deserter.

Though Miss Samuelson explains that the Inkata 'is not at all the same thing as the ordinary grass pad . . . which goes by that name,' it is a remarkable fact that the grass pad is known all over Bantu Africa, and on the Gold Coast and Sierra Leone, by the same or a cognate name, and in some places (probably also in others where the

¹ *Some Zulu Customs and Folk-Lore*. By L. H. Samuelson (Nomleti). London Church Printing Co. 3s. 1912.

fact has not yet been revealed) has a certain ritual significance. Among the Ibibio of the Lower Niger, it is reduced to purely symbolical dimensions, being small enough for the adept to swallow—so that the sacred snake, when it takes up its abode inside him (or her), may have a cushion to sit on.

We have touched on this point—just one out of many—to show how it ramifies all over Africa and how much there is still to be learned in connexion with it. It would be easy to enlarge on others, did space permit. One remark, however, must be made. The best memory is apt to betray us sometimes, and it is not clear whether the writer has in every case taken sufficient trouble to verify hearsay statements. It is inaccurate and misleading to say that Cetshwayo, after the destruction of Ulundi, 'was saved and taken for protection to Etshowe, where he died early in the following year.' Some of the stories told of him are inconsistent with his known character for humanity and disbelief in witchcraft. It is difficult to believe that the custom of killing off old people (*ukugodusa*) was ever so general as Miss Samuelson would lead us to believe. No doubt the cases which occurred within her own experience made an impression so powerful as to colour her views on the subject, but it should be noted that, in one of them, apparently, an additional charge of witchcraft was needed before the heartless son could carry out his design. We have equally good authority for asserting that even non-christian Zulus would reprobate such a practice with horror, and that reverence and tender care for old age are far more prevalent than Miss Samuelson would allow. Mombera, the chief of the Northern Zulus (Angoni) in Nyasaland, used, Dr. Elmslie says, regularly to support a number of old men and women, whom he treated with the greatest kindness, and, instance for instance, perhaps this one may be allowed to take its place beside the tragedy of poor Madokodo.

From Zululand to Gujarat is a long leap, geographical

and otherwise. The *Folk-Lore Notes*¹ collected by the late Mr. Jackson, and edited, after his death, by Mr. Enthoven, make up a book, valuable indeed, but, like *The Golden Bough*, difficult to read consecutively. It is compiled from the answers to Mr. Crooke's 'Questionary,' which was circulated, through the Education Department, among the schoolmasters of Gujarat and the Konkan. The mass of materials obtained, which could have been sifted and digested had the compiler lived, is thus rather in the nature of *mémoires pour servir* than of a finished work. We can here learn what the country-folk of Gujarat think about witches, ghosts and sacred animals; how they show reverence to saints and ancestors and propitiate the malevolent dead, what they do when children are born, or there is illness in the house, and what local deities, outside the official mythology, are worshipped in the villages. Points of interest are too numerous to permit of quotation; but one remarkable fact, which repeatedly emerges, cannot be passed over. The hostility between Hindus and Mohammedans is often insisted on—this volume contains abundant evidence of a tendency to fraternize, even in their religious observances. This is expressly affirmed in a note by Khan Bahadur Fazlullah (p. 5), which is unfortunately too long to extract.

The second and third volumes of the *Village Folk-Tales of Ceylon*² contain 266 stories, the collection and editing of which testify to a high degree of industry and patience. We find several echoes of old friends, but with a difference due, no doubt, to race, natural environment and the Buddhist atmosphere, no longer to be found in the rest of India. Most of the animal stories, in particular, are unlike any I have met with elsewhere; e.g. No. 177, 'The Female Lark,' No. 180, 'The

¹ *Folk-Lore Notes*. Vol. i.—*Gujarat*. Compiled from materials collected by the late A. M. T. Jackson, Indian Civil Service, by R. E. Enthoven, C.I.E., I.C.S. Bombay: British India Press. London: Kegan Paul. 3s. 6d. net. 1914.

² *Village Folk-Tales of Ceylon*. Collected and Translated by H. Parker, late of the Irrigation Department, Ceylon. Vols. ii. and iii. London: Luzac & Co. Each, 12s. net. 1914.

Foolish Bird' and others. No. 189 is a variant of 'The Treasure of King Rhampsinitus' (Herodotus, ii. 121). The value of this book is greatly increased by the numerous and careful notes, and (for linguistic students) by the Sinhalese texts of several tales, inserted in volume iii. (pp. 413-432). Colombo is one of the commonplaces of travel—but how many of us know anything about interior Ceylon? These tales will certainly give a better notion of it than many volumes of travel.

As to folk-tales proper, the attractive volumes before us are sufficient to prove that missionaries—and scholars who are not missionaries—no longer consider it a foolish waste of time to collect them. Dr. Bleek was one of the first to show the way in Africa; he was followed by Bishop Steere and Bishop Callaway, Heli Chatelain and M. Junod, with books which remain standard works of reference and delightful reading forbye.

Most of Miss Metelerkamp's stories¹ are to be found in Bleek's *Reynard the Fox in South Africa*, but it is clear that she has obtained them independently, and it is interesting to find these tales, set down over fifty years ago, still living in the folk-memory, though the tellers have lost their ancestral speech and know no language but the Taal. It was unavoidable, of course, that—above all, in a book intended for children—they should be rendered out of that 'quaint expressive language of the people' into English; but it is a pity that more has not been done towards preserving them in the original. Nearly all the stories here given belong to the Hottentots, but some are common to them and the Bantu, such as 'The Animals' Dam,' of which it would be easy to compile a long list of variants. But among the Bantu, it is the Hare who performs the tricks here ascribed to 'Jakhals'; and it is interesting to note that while 'How Jakhals fed Oom Leeuw' is told by the Pokomo on the Tana (not to mention

¹ *Omta Karel's Stories: South African Folk-Lore Tales.* By Sanni Metelerkamp. London: Macmillan & Co. 3s. 6d. 1914.

numerous intervening tribes) of the Hare, the Galla relate exactly the same incident about the Jackal. (It can be traced, strangely metamorphosed, in the West Indies, but that cannot be discussed here.) It is now pretty generally accepted that the Hottentots came from North-Eastern Africa, and are connected with the Galla both by race and language, and here is an additional link of evidence

Some of them, too, may be recognized as occurring in *Uncle Remus*. 'Saved by his Tail,' the sequel to 'The Animals' Dam,' is a version of the famous Tar-Baby story, and the episode of Jakhals stealing the fat and putting the blame on the Hyena recalls 'Mr. Rabbit Nibbles up the Butter.'

Just beyond the Bantu area is the home of the Ikom folk-stories collected by Mr. Elphinstone Dayrell.¹ Some of them are recognizable as well-known Bantu themes, but one does not know whether to think that they are very primitive forms, having their roots in a strange mythology, or have had explanations of local customs read into them. The curious story of the 'Man-Eating Drum' (No. xx) is a variant of the Shambala pumpkin which swallows the people and cattle of the whole country-side, and this, again, of the monster in the Sesutu 'Kammapa and Litaolane.' The distribution of this story over Africa alone—quite apart from its relation to obvious European parallels—would afford material for an interesting study, but one quite outside our present scope. Out of these thirty-three tales, a number are concerned with animals, the Hare, the Tortoise and the Spider being the most frequent figures. But in that world-wide fable of the race, in which the tortoise (or with us, in Europe, the hedgehog) plants his family out along the various stages of the course, the competitors are the Bush-Buck and the Frog.

In general, these stories (which come from the Cross River region of Southern Nigeria) have a character of

¹ *Ikom Folk-Stories from Southern Nigeria*. By E. Dayrell, District Commissioner, Southern Nigeria. London: Royal Anthropological Institute. 5s. 1913.

coarseness and ferocity which is not noticeable elsewhere ; something of the same sort comes out in Mrs. Talbot's book on the Ibibio and Efik of the same or neighbouring districts. It is impossible, without full knowledge of all the facts, to hazard a conjecture as to the reasons for this, though one cannot help remembering that here was one of the principal foci of the slave-trade. One cannot enter into the matter here, but a question of a wider bearing is suggested.

It is sometimes objected that the folk-tales of primitive people are often silly, pointless, crude and even indecent. This may be a reason against telling them in an unexpurgated form to children, but cannot affect their value as matter for serious research. Silliness is matter of opinion—or rather of the point of view. If we held the same views of the universe as some people do—perhaps, considering their means of information, cannot help doing—beliefs and practices which appear to us utterly senseless would have a logical justification. A story may strike us as pointless for various reasons—because it is imperfectly translated, or because the point depends on ideas unfamiliar to us, or because it is so old as to be no longer clear, even to the narrators. This, of course, adds to its interest, and its very obscurities will afford starting-points for further enquiry.

Again, crudity, or even indecency, is very much a matter of taste : 'savages' have their conventions and euphemisms as much as we have, though they do not necessarily take the same form. We must remember that even the original 'Grimm' requires a certain amount of editing for the nursery, and that all genuine European folk-lore contains, at least, evidence of the gradual dropping and transforming of cruder items ; also that there is great variety within Africa in this respect. Personally I have found nothing objectionable in the tales told to me, and the same may be said as to the collections of Callaway (with very slight reservations), Steere, Junod and others. If it be said that this is due to selection on the part of narrators or collectors, it may be answered that—there being no reason to doubt

either the genuineness or the popularity of the harmless and pleasant tales—it is ample proof that the native mind is not exclusively directed towards ‘the nasty side of things.’ I may remark, in passing, that after going through several collections of Swahili tales, I find that those which turn on the special wickedness and deceitfulness of women are clearly of outside, probably of Arabic origin. In genuine Bantu tales, the laugh is as often turned—in a perfectly harmless way—against men as against women.

One cannot quite accept the view of Dr. McCall Theal, great as is his authority on all matters connected with South Africa. In his *Yellow and Dark-Skinned Peoples of South Africa*, he says (p. 274):

The greater part of the folk-lore of the Bantu was neither of a moral character nor did it convey any useful lessons. . . . There was nothing that led to elevation of thought in any of these stories, though one idea that might easily be mistaken on a first view for a good one pervaded many of them: the superiority of brain power to physical force. But, on looking deeper, it is found that brain power was always interpreted as low cunning; it was wiliness, not greatness of mind, that won in the strife against the stupid strong.

None of us, if questioned, will maintain that the conduct, say, of Jack the Giant-Killer, or of πολύμητις Ὀδυσσεύς, is in all points to be commended; and every one, I think, more or less consciously, feels that the question is somewhat irrelevant. The truth is (I owe this suggestion again to Dr. Haddon) that we do not look for a people’s moral code in their folk-tales. These do not always even show what they admire—at least what the responsible part of them admires. It is a little difficult to express what I mean without seeming to uphold the doctrine of ‘Art for art’s sake,’ which nowadays is anathema. (Yet I hold that it contains a truth, in spite of the nonsense—sometimes pernicious nonsense—which has been talked in its name.) But we may recall the amusement mingled with admiration with which even conscientious and respectable people, some dozen years ago, received the revelations of Madame Humbert’s frauds. It was not sympathy with crime, but

an instinctive sense that cleverness is, in itself, a good and not a bad thing, though it may be turned to bad ends.

The distinction between 'brain power' and 'low cunning' is, in the present connexion, a little difficult to follow—how, for instance, does it apply to our beloved Jack? But, apart from this question, there is another element which Dr. Theal overlooks. In the Bantu tales, especially, intellect triumphs in the persons of the smallest and weakest creatures—the hare, the little *Dorcatherium* antelope, the frog, or the tortoise are only passively strong. It seems as though it were not so much by cleverness as by very weakness and helplessness that they triumphed—and there is a pathetic implication in this. After all, though stories are not primarily made up to embody convictions or to set forth what is admirable, yet the convictions of a race do penetrate into their stories, and a people who believed in the divine right of the strongest could never have invented Brer Rabbit.

For my own part, I am most attracted by these primitive, forest and desert products of the myth-making faculty; but a different kind of fascination attaches to the traditions of the ancient East. Herr Endemann has retold,¹ in a charming way, some of the most striking incidents in Chinese mythology, together with such stories as 'The Ghostly Chess-Players' and 'The Haunted House,' which belong more properly to the domain of folk-lore. With these may be compared the fantastic and poetic legends of Japan, told in Mr. Hadland Davis's prettily-illustrated volume,² and the Korean stories translated by Mr. Gale,³ which, in spite of geographical and ethnological relationship, have a distinct and very remarkable character of their own. They are genuine folk-tales, but were given literary form so long ago as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

A. WERNER

¹ *Sagen und Märchen aus den Reiche der Mitte*. Erzählt von G. Endemann. Berlin: Buchhandlung der Berliner evangelischen Missionsgesellschaft. M. 2. 1914.

² *Myths and Legends of Japan*. By F. H. Davis. London: Harrap. 7s. 6d. 1912.

³ *Korean Folk-Tales: Imps, Ghosts and Fairies*. Translated from the Korean by James S. Gale. London: J. M. Dent. 3s. 6d. net. 1913.