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*Narrative Structures in Burmese Folk Tales*. By Soe Marlar Lwin. New York: Cambria Press, 2010. xvi+178 pp.

Thanks largely to the collections gathered by Ludu U Hla and to the work of Maung Htin Aung, scholars have had a fairly representative inventory of Burmese tales in English translation to work on. Recent publications in this field are few, however, and many will find the volume by Abbott and Khin Thant Han (2000) neither accessible nor affordable. It was a pleasure to find in this user-friendly book a Burmese scholar analysing tales handed down by the peoples of her own country. Soe Marlar Lwin deals with seventeen Burman tales and ten from upland ethnic groups, all drawn from selections provided by Maung Htin Aung. However, it is annoying that she refers to him and to one other Burmese author as “Maung” and “Khin”, respectively, as if these were surnames; in fact each is simply the first element of a personal name. It is like attributing Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Raven* to “Edgar, 1845”. Given the opportunity, Soe Marlar Lwin herself should surely have corrected this.

Following analyses established by earlier studies, Soe Marlar Lwin outlines three aspects of folk tales: function, field and form. Generally, the function of a tale is either to entertain, with trickster tales being very popular, or to emphasize some aspect of the home culture — the importance of respecting one’s elders, for instance. Or it may be a mixture of both. Propp identified typical “functional events” in tales, and it is these that serve as the author’s starting point. She breaks the events into five “models”, the first three being reward/punishment, interdiction/violation and problem/solution. So far, so good. But the other two that she suggests are trickster tales and fairy tales. These terms do not describe functional events at all, but simply types of tale.

There has never been any clear boundary between function and field. The main constituents of the latter are the cast (whether human or not), the setting (the scenery and dwellings) and any significant “props” (such as magic lamps, weapons and potions). Analysts have identified a multitude of such components, the “motifs” in Thompson’s (1977) well-known index running into the thousands, for example. The task of picking out and comparing such elements

of folklore can be fascinating, but, rather than illuminating a living whole, it may produce a mere heap of components. As William Wordsworth (1798) put it,

Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;  
Our meddling intellect  
Misshapes the beauteous forms of things:  
We murder to dissect.

Wisely, however, Soe Marlar Lwin does not seek to emulate Thompson in this respect.

As for form, folk tales have long been recognized as linear in development, with an absence of flashbacks and with dialogue obeying the “rule of two” — that is, being limited to only two speakers at a time. Commentators also noticed long ago the so-called “law of three”, the fact that many tales have three main episodes and that there are often three main characters. Think of the bears in the Goldilocks story, the ugly sisters in Cinderella and so on. But these formal elements fall within the category of field, and Soe Marlar Lwin is concerned rather with form — the structure of a narrative as a whole, as the title of her book indicates. Looking at the structure of one sample tale, she finds “a highly linear plot structure with a beginning that builds to a middle and then is resolved in the ending” (p. 31). But this is surely what one expects in any narrative. A few lines later she writes, tautologically, that, although the events in one tale may differ from those in another, “a highly linear plot structure will still prove a tale to be a linear, coherent narrative” (*ibid.*). I fear that this repetition of what is obvious may be a way of compensating for some lack of assurance.

The most important part of this book comes towards the end, with the consideration of oral storytelling (pp. 128–33). In every part of the world, the folk tale originated not as written text but as oral performance. It was, and in some parts of the world still is, a dramatic monologue having more in common with the stand-up comedian’s routine than with the writer’s literary output. As the author points out, narrative effects include not only the storyteller’s vocal

signals but also the visible ones — for example, gesture and facial expression. Audience participation may possibly also play a part.

It would be wonderful if researchers in Myanmar or Burma could study such features in action. When I was teaching there in 1987–88, fieldwork of this sort was well-nigh impossible, but I hope the situation has improved sufficiently for some recordings to be made.

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