

## Culture



**Brenda E.F. BECK, *The Three Twins: the Telling of a South Indian Folk Epic*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1982. 248 pages, US \$22.50 (cloth)**

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rituals as they are performed from death to final disposal, perhaps years later. After describing each stage, he discusses it in the context of Berawan notions about what death is and what it means, both to the individual who has died and to his kin and community. The message at each stage is clear : mortuary performances are intended to protect the living.

Metcalf's analysis of Berawan death ritual draws heavily on the work of Robert Hertz, particularly his notion that in societies which practice secondary burial the conditions of the soul and corpse are linked, so that as the body decays the soul becomes increasingly miserable, jealous of the living, and malevolent. The malice of the ghost continues until the bones are dry and the soul is sufficiently pure to be admitted to the land of the dead where it is reunited with the benevolent ancestors. The logic of Berawan rituals is predicated on the assumption that this linkage exists and on the notion that death is a process, not an instant event : it is "a stage in the career of the soul" (p. 46). When these assumptions are understood, the rites make sense. For example, the drinking, gambling, flirting, levity, and noise which go on for days during a funeral do not mean that the rituals are an empty form. The manic quality of the festival is intended to distract the ghost and deflect its malice. One *may not* sleep. One *must* play, night after night, or a vulnerable member of the community—one's own child, perhaps—may die. Therefore the sociality that might suggest to an outsider that people do not take the rituals seriously is, in fact, an expression of their sacredness.

While the other members of the community drink, play games, and celebrate, the spouse of the deceased is dressed in filthy clothes and placed in a tiny cubicle behind a wall of mats where (s)he must remain isolated for days in filth and discomfort. The spouse cannot stretch or lie comfortably to sleep ; (s)he must defecate through a small hole in the floor ; (s)he is given only the poorest of meagre rations ; and (s)he must sit in the stifling heat beside the decomposing corpse for as long as eleven days. However, this discomfort is not a punishment but a defense. The spouse is particularly vulnerable to being taken by a vengeful ghost and must share the fate of the deceased in part so that (s)he will not share it in totality. Similarly, the mud fights, headhunting and other rites of mourning are intended to break the chain of death.

In his analysis of Berawan rituals Metcalf draws upon indigenous statements of dogma and syntheses of belief. There are, of course, difficulties inherent in eliciting this kind of data, and Metcalf explicitly

discusses these problems. Starting with a quote from Robertson Smith that there is no authoritative interpretation in ancient ritual (p. 10), Metcalf goes on to observe that there was no consensus when he phrased questions in terms of ideology ("what is a soul?"), and he comments that it would be a mistake to impose order and consistency where none exists. At time he was able to elicit indigenous analysis only after persistently pressuring his informants. Metcalf frankly discusses the occasions when he applied pressure in order to obtain information and notes the response of his consultants to this pressure.

The result of this study, which is one of a series entitled "Symbol and Culture", is a well written ethnography that is rich in detail and which provides a fascinating insight into the interface between a people's understanding of death and their response to it. It should be a valuable source for anyone interested in Southeast Asia, ritual and metaphor, or the subject of death and dying.

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About the mid-fifteenth century, agricultural groups seeking to colonize the interior of what is now Tamil Nadu in South India, encountered resistance from the indigenous, forest-dwelling hunters. A great battle ensued in which the hunters were defeated. The bards and poets of the agricultural people sang of the victory and down through the five centuries since the original events took place, a local epic tale has evolved. This epic is the focus of Brenda Beck's *The Three Twins*.

As the subtitle says, the book is concerned with the 'telling' of the epic. The opening chapters provide a synopsis of characters and action, time and setting. We are not given a translation of the epic, but enough detail is supplied so that the plot and personnel become familiar. The picture drawn is a composite of eight sources : the epic as performed and dictated by living bards, ritual enactments of the legend and printed versions. But quickly Dr. Beck tackles the meat of her matter : the epic in its historical and present socio-cultural context.

The connections between the content of the tale and its context are subtle and many, and the author traces these with a sure hand. The most literal level

of the epic is shown to depict historical events between contending local social groups: one has “the sense of a war between castemen and tribesmen, or between two very different styles of life” (p. 150). But at another level the epic expresses more universal human themes. It is these themes, mainly focused on the issue of death, that underlie annual ritual re-enactment of the legend, during which participants enter trance and undergo a symbolic death and re-birth as they portray the roles of the epic heroes. For participants, the epic in ritual is a vehicle for exploring the boundaries of their own mortality. In Dr. Beck’s words: “The whole progression of events turns on defeating death. In so doing, the story takes on the structure of a ritual, a ritual with the power to overcome life’s normal limits” (p. 57).

At yet another level, the main protagonists of the epic (the twins) can be seen to have metaphorical qualities. The two brothers represent competing but allied socio-cultural traditions. The older twin represents the pan-Indian, Brahmanical tradition, while the younger stands for the agricultural Kavuntars of the Kongu region, the people celebrated in the epic. This representation acknowledges the priority (eldership) of the subcontinental tradition, but at the same time asserts a claim to deeper level equality (brotherhood). In the epic, the younger brother frequently outshines the elder, a message about the worth of regional cultural values that does not escape local audiences.

At all of these levels, Dr. Beck illuminates the relationship between this one expression of a folk tradition and the many dimensions of its context, showing how the tale has meaning and effect in terms of regional, national and personal human concerns. But every telling of the tale also has its own immediate context, with which it must achieve mesh. We are given several examples that show how the actual content of presentations of the epic is directly affected by the medium through which these take place. The author tape-recorded a bard’s live performance of the epic, then later had him dictate the same version to a scribe. While the bard swore that his two tellings were identical, the anthropologist identifies some critical differences. The length of the two versions varies significantly. In the dictated version, there is less artistry and embellishment, the metre of the verse is much more regular and the language employed is more that of standard literary Tamil. Dr. Beck speculates that the bard is mindful of the power and range of the written word.

And again, by examining two more literary versions of the epic (a radio play and a published

paperback) the author is able to show how the epic can be modernized. When traditional folk tales are presented in popular literary form, an established vein of local culture is being worked, but what tends to be extracted is ethical and philosophical issues especially of concern to an urban, more intellectual populace. Content is altered to fit the changing context.

The familiar Indian epics, the Mahabharata and Ramayana, are also known to the bards who sing of the three twins. Dr. Beck shows how aspects of these pan-Indian epics are worked into the local epic. Many parallels and distinctions are drawn, but the significant point she makes is that the local epic is fashioned in response to supravening cultural forces: “In constructing a local account, these bards have reassessed larger Indian ideals and reshaped them for regional consumption” (p. 136).

The excellence of this book lies in its demonstration that an epic, as any expression of culture, is inextricably interwoven with its cultural context, and can only be understood as such. It is the fit to its environment that sustains the expression. But in turn, it is the human and cultural context which provides the many threads of theme, characters, etc., that are woven into the fabric of the epic. As context varies, so too does content.

Dr. Beck combines the perspectives of the folklorist and ethnographer, and the merger is fruitful. We are led simultaneously into the study of a piece of folklore and the investigation of the socio-cultural group that has created and supported this expression. The result is a deep appreciation for the folk epic and its creators but also a clear insight into a social group, its self-image and values. Dr. Beck achieves her goal of demonstrating the importance of regional epics, which have been relatively neglected in the study of South Asian culture. But at the same time, she has succeeded in producing an excellent piece of anthropology which delves into the complex relationship between belief, behaviour, expression and social structure. Of exceptional value is her demonstration that through the transformation of its historical past into myth, the group depicts the patterns, ideals and conflicts which dominate its present. Analysis of the mythologized expression reveals the essence of the social group.