

Reviews

Space and Time in Europe. East and West, Past and Present. Mirjam Mencej, ed. Ljubljana: Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, University of Ljubljana. 2008. ISBN: 978-961-237-248-4. 388 pp.

This book should serve as an example regarding research topics and material but as a warning regarding approaches.

The starting-points of the book are the widespread idea that, “in spite of conspicuous linguistic and regional variants, Europeans share a basic worldview”, and the observation that this idea “all too often [is] couched in rather vague terms” (p. 10). The book consists of 21 articles that attempt to be more specific about this by discussing the key categories time and space “in the kaleidoscopic diversity of their manifestations in folk lore and practices” (p. 10). The articles “have their root” in an international and interdisciplinary conference at the University of Ljubljana in 2007. The background of it was research collaboration between Slovenian, Serbian and Portuguese folklorists / ethnologists in the previous years. The authors of the articles are specialists in archaeology, cosmology, ethnology, folkloristics, history, literature, and linguistics; with folkloristics being the dominant background. More than half of the authors come from the Slavic Balkans; the rest from all over Western and Northern Europe.

The book contains a wealth of interesting questions, materials and interpretations: the relationship between cyclic and linear time; circular movement in the transition between the worlds; ideas that the otherworld is inverted; the role of carnivals in time cycles and power in the society; ideas of devolutionary time; the Old Norse female weaving room’s possible role in fate-shaping rituals; time and space in the rules of narratives; language as a source for cultural reconstruction; etc. All the articles are about pre-modern or ancient ideas. Most of the authors base their interpretations upon 19th and 20th century folklore, often in combination with medieval or classical written material or comparative material from all of these periods, and sometimes with archaeological, iconographic or linguistic material.

I am really happy to see so many attempts at cultural reconstruction on the basis of this kind of material. In my region, Scandinavia, very few folklorists / ethnologists do historical studies anymore, and in my field, Old Norse studies, there is widespread scepticism towards late material, and ignorance about it (although we now see a starting reconsideration of this). I am convinced that there is a huge potential in the supplementation of the

medieval material with folklore and other late material in the study of Old Scandinavian religion and culture. I also appreciate the comparative approach that most of the authors apply and that the whole project invites.

However, the outlined approaches are very demanding methodologically, and in my opinion the majority of the contributions to this book fail in this respect. To stay on safe ground, one may study folklore from a certain area as a late pre-modern tradition in that area, and some of the authors do this (e.g. Isabel Cardigos, Jūratė Šlekonytė) – or one may make use of medieval material only, and discuss material from separate areas separately. Some of the authors do this, too (e.g. Annette Kehnel). But most of the authors attempt to go back from later material, or make use of comparative material from other areas. Then one has to give explicit reasons why we should believe that this material can give information of earlier times or our area. Many of the contributors to this book seem to have a low awareness of these problems. For example, Emily Lyle launches a theory of Indo-European concepts of time. The theory is clever and interesting – but it appears to be based upon speculation rather than data, and we are given no arguments why these concepts would belong to the Indo-Europeans, thousands of years ago. Smago Šmitek's interpretation also seems somewhat speculative but not because of lack of data. He presents a lot of it, from many periods and parts of the world, but does not try to explain why it can throw light upon Old South Slavic beliefs. Lubomír J. Konečný says: "Ploughing at vernal equinoxes was seen as a sexual act between fertilizing heaven (sun, moisture) and procreator-earth...." (p. 260). By whom? When? Where? In many articles there seems to be an underlying assumption of such an undefined "used-to-be" cultural stage found throughout Western Eurasia and Europe. I believe that essential parts of human beliefs and notions can indeed survive through long periods of times and be shared by peoples over large areas. But if we assume that this is the case with a certain belief that we study, and if our arguments depend upon it, we should be explicit about this assumption and let our readers know why we believe in it.

The lack of methodological focus is often coupled with a lack of focus in presentation. In the majority of the articles, it is hard to apprehend what the author has to say because he or she never tells it to us explicitly or only when we have finished reading the article. This problem is increased by the unfortunate hiding-away of the abstracts in the back of the book, after the index, instead of including them in the articles. However, unfocused presentation is a general problem in academic writings, at least in the humanities. This is surprising because we all want to be read and not be misunderstood, so there should be a strong motivation to work hard on a clear presentation. In my opinion, all academic writings should open with in

principle this statement: "I have this idea, and now I am going to tell you why I believe in it". Starting in this way makes the article both easier to write and to read, and quite of number of the contributors to the present book do something in this direction (Lyle, Mencej, Racénaitè, Šlekonytè, Kehnel; partly Pócs, Bek-Pedersen, Belaj, and Koski).

Some of the authors are also good in dealing with the methodological problems. Éva Pócs states, on the basis of her earlier research, that there is a "fundamental unity of werewolf beliefs all over Europe" (p. 89), and therefore she finds it acceptable to use material from different areas in the same study. She also reasons that because the "werewolf systems" are so "fundamental, important and widespread", they probably are relic parts of a pre-Christian world view (p. 100). Katja Hrobat reasons in a similar way about certain Slovenian stone pillars with traditions of old women connected to them (p. 332). Karen Bek-Pedersen admits the problem of going back from 13th century Icelandic manuscripts to the Viking Age, although they often contain narratives that supposedly take place during that period. But, she points out, it seems feasible that the themes she explores were known in the Viking Age, and therefore the time gap should not be too much of an obstacle to her particular discussion. She is also quite dependent upon comparative material and willingly admits that this is a problem and that it makes her interpretation uncertain. This is OK; the important thing is that she is honest about the status of her results. Vitomir Belaj presents an interesting way of identifying pre-Christian South Slavic holy places: a pattern has been discovered in which there is a certain geometrical relation, derived from the sun's positions through the year, between places that can be connected to certain Old Slavic deities because the places are named after them. Because the names of the old deities have been replaced quite regularly with certain saints' names, this pattern makes it possible to identify old holy places – with a high degree of certainty, it seems to me. Belaj also mentions popular traditions that fit into this pattern. (Unfortunately he only presents his interpreted version of this tradition, so the reader is unable to judge the plausibility of this part.) In this approach, the landscape is used to anchor much later information to ancient times, with the help of place names.

It is possible to utilize comparative or late material, and it can be very fruitful. But if we do it in a naïve or unconscious way, it will lead to the (continued) rejection of such material. (Eldar Heide)