

Introduction to Folklore II: Folk Genres and Analysis

2010-03-09 Oring's Totemism and the A.E.F. Revisited"

FOLK AND FINA 113

WHAT DID *YOU* THINK?

TOTEMISM

- ✘ Orig.: a set of beliefs
 - + The belief that members of kinship groups are related to and descended from a particular species of plant or animal or class of natural objects
 - + Proscription against killing, eating, or harming one's totem species
 - + Use of that species as emblematic symbol for the group
 - + Ritual focused towards the totem
- ✘ Now, not a set of beliefs but a process of mind:
 - + The process of classifying social groups in terms of objects in the natural world
 - + Relations: metaphor, metonym, (related to Frazer's sympathetic magic)

AMERICAN EXPEDITIONARY FORCE

- ✘ Comprised of a variety of state regiments, with a number of differently coloured emblems
- ✘ Together, formed a “rainbow”
- ✘ “Rainbow” became nickname, then unofficial emblem, then emblem of the AEF.
- ✘ Rainbows became auspicious signs → rainbows were understood to be always present

ORING'S POINT

- ✘ The rainbow phenomenon was described as totemic by Linton (1924)
- ✘ Then cited by Levi-Strauss as evidence of American indifference to the complexity of totemism
- ✘ Now, return to it and more recent phenomena through the “process of mind” formulation

THE MONGOOSE AND THE AIRFORCE PARA-RESCUE SQUADRON

- ✘ Spotted on patrol successfully vanquishing a snake, claim was made it turned the tide of battle, brought back to camp
- ✘ Idea dismissed but difficult to shake
- ✘ Became “mascot”
- ✘ Brought on subsequent patrol and helped spot an ambush

(CONT.)

- ✘ Came to be seen as indicator/prognosticator of battle outcome
 - + “Mystical” relationship between group and mongoose
- ✘ Mongoose became emblem of group
 - + Truck-decoration, tattoos
- ✘ Referred to by other squadrons as “Mongoose”
- ✘ Similar to AEF phenomenon

BRUCE THE SKULL

- ✘ Different platoon had unburied a skull (common souvenir)
- ✘ Became joint property, wore hat and sunglasses, placed on stick
- ✘ Served as base-camp marker
- ✘ Carried during non-combat troop movements like processional object
- ✘ Brought out at parties, appeared in group photos
- ✘ Platoon was expressively antagonistic to all but other combat troops
 - + Inverted “peace” language of the era

MONGOOSE AND SKULL

- ✘ Differ in relationship to respective squads
 - + Former seen as being in mystical relationship
 - + Latter seen as member of platoon
- ✘ But both emblems to represent the entire group

MONGOOSE

- ✘ Starts as simile during skirmish
 - + Squad : enemy :: mongoose : snake
- ✘ Subsequent utility cements relationship irrespective of original association
 - + Squad *is* mongoose

SKULL

- ✘ Already has “ritual value” (extant symbol)
 - + Accounts in part for its desirability as souvenir by soldiers
- ✘ Explicit contrast between platoon and non-combatants / rear-guard
 - + REMPS : platoon :: living : dead
- ✘ Associative value is ongoing

PARALLELS

- ✘ High school / university mascots
- ✘ National emblems (Bald Eagle, Bear, Tiger, Beaver)
- ✘ Family crests / coats of arms
- ✘ All a metaphoric relationship that parallels the group in relation to the world with the totemic creature in relationship with its world
- ✘ (Which is why we study it in a section on proverbs)

QUESTION OF THE WEEK

- ✘ Is there a proverb (piece of conventional wisdom) that is of significance among your peers?
 - + Don't use these, but, for example
 - ✘ “Beer before liquor, never been sicker
“Liquor before beer, you're in the clear”
 - ✘ “What happens in New Glasgow
“Stays in New Glasgow”
 - + *or something more chaste*

GO AWAY FROM THIS PLACE

- ✘ Read “Folk Objects” by Bronner, from the *Reader*