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Harold Scheub. *A Dictionary of African Mythology: The Mythmaker as Storyteller.* Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. xv + 368 pp. $30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-512456-9.

Reviewed by Stephen Belcher (co-editor,)

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Harold Scheub's *Dictionary of African Mythology* is one of the most useful books to appear recently in the general field of African traditional literature. African mythology is understudied for a variety of reasons, perhaps the most obvious explanation is the overwhelming amount of material available on a continent three times the size of the United States, populated by hundreds of distinct ethnic and linguistic groups. Other factors would include the prejudices of earlier researchers (the enthusiasm of field-collectors such as Frobenius was not shared by Joseph Campbell, who has done so much to define the modern study of myths) and the political fragmentation of the continent which has hindered appreciation of regional patterns.

There have been some commendable prior attempts to grasp the field. Raffaele Pettazzoni's *Miti africani* (1948) attempted a continent-wide anthology of myths, giving representation to most major linguistic and cultural groups; Henri Tegnaeus' *Le hÃ©ros civilisateur* (1950) offers a descriptive survey of major culture-heroes which remains useful. Alice Werner's *Bantu Mythology* (reprinted as *African Mythology*) provides a good overview of the mythical repertoire of southern Africa. Harold Courlander's *Treasury of African Folklore* remains perhaps the best available collection of this sort of material, limited largely by his reliance on English-language sources. There have also been less commendable efforts. Jan Knappert's *Dictionary of African Mythology* is relatively superficial, while and *Essential African Mythology* by Ngangar Mbitu and Ranchor Prime is untrustworthy.[1] Moreover, many of the available titles proposing a selection of African myths, legends, and tales are simply story-books best aimed at children.

This *Dictionary* is a substantial listing of mythical narratives, retold in abridged form from a wide range of sources. The narratives are alphabetized by the names of the main characters, and there are occasional general entries as well, along with little pop-up inserts on specific topics. It seems possible that a reader might wish simply to work through it page by page, absorbing the stories and information as it comes, but it is more probable that readers will use it for quick reference, to identify specific narratives or figures. To that end, the book is a collection of data which depends heavily on the indices at the back for coherence and usefulness. A list of sources precedes the excellent bibliography, and these are followed by appendices: a list of myths by country, by language and culture, and then the grand myth. This reader found it useful to add tabs to the indices, to allow quick thumbing back and forth.

The author's vision of the book's scope is perhaps best illustrated by the third appendix outlining the grand

narrative of creation mythology, from primordial beginnings (or divine creation) through the separation of the divine and human, and down to minor aetiological refinements. This appendix in some ways epitomizes Scheub's apparent approach to the material: it places the individual narratives in the context of a universalizing vision of the process and function of mythology, which in some ways subtracts from the conditions that define local expressions of myths. In this way, readers are encouraged to note the possible correlations of function (within this grand scheme) that link entirely disparate characters from different cultures, and thus to reflect more broadly on the fertility of the human imagination. But the approach does not encourage a vision of mythology that might be more dynamic, that sets narratives of past conditions against present realities, and that sees this category of narrative as a form of self-examination and occasionally self-criticism, although this function is perhaps the most interesting dimension of mythology from the oral tradition: it is what gives the myths their vibrancy and ongoing interest. By contrast, creation narratives such as Genesis are seen as the passive transmission of an account; the creative questioning that occurs will be found either in interpretive material or in the forward-looking prophetic narratives which always seem to focus on the evils of the present-day as their starting point.

Perhaps as a consequence of Scheub's vision, or perhaps as a realistic response to the mass of material available, the contents of the book are heavily based in folkloric collections, and there is relatively little historical material (i.e. traditions of origin of political derivation). The book's scope aligns itself with that of standard dictionaries of myth and legend (e.g. the *Funk and Wagnall Standard Dictionary of Mythology, Folklore, and Legend*). The flaw of such dictionaries has always been that there was too little African material in them; Scheub's work should ensure that Africa is better represented in the future.

Note

[1]. Raffaele Pettazzoni, *Miti Africani* (Turin, 1948); Henri Tegnaeus, *Le hros civilisateur* (Uppsala: 1950); Alice Werner, *Africa: Myths and Legends* (London: Senate, 1996 first printed as *Bantu Mythology* [London: Harrap, 1933]); and, Harold Courlander, *A Treasury of African Folklore* (New York: Crown Books, 1975; reprint edition, New York: Marlowe, 1996); Jan Knappert, *African Mythology* (London: Diamond Books, 1990); and, Ngangar Mbitu and Ranchor Prime, *Essential African Mythology* (London: Thorson's, 1997).

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