REVIEWS


This book sets out to replicate Dumezil’s approach to Indo-European mythology in a study of Afroasiatic religious images and beliefs. However, there are differences between Baldick and the master. Where Dumezil detected in Indo-European mythology a basic triad of social functions corresponding to priests, warriors and cultivators, Baldick has identified an Afroasiatic logic which is dualistic and based in the opposition of male and female and around which various other oppositions are elaborated; black-white, active-passive, rain-sun etc. While Dumezil deliberately located the triadic structure in a particular original social organisation, for Baldick, the Afroasiatic duality is both a ‘logic . . . ingrained in the [Afroasiatic] languages’ (p. 5) and a matter of religious symbolism. To a certain extent this is a weakening of Dumezil’s comparative method and represents a return to an older, Frazerian, style of comparison of content rather than structure. Indeed Baldick dismisses structural analysis as an ‘outmoded fashion’.

The argument proceeds by, first of all, outlining a synthetic myth which describes a male storm god, black and violent, and a female deity of the sun, white and vulnerable. The latter, in the form of a maiden offered up in sacrifice, provokes violent rainfall from the former. Vital rainfall replaces the destructive storm (a young male hero kills the old black god) and possesses the sun (rescues and marries the maiden) in a fertile union (pp. 4-5). Ethnography and folklore are then scrutinised for particular instances of this elementary complex of ideas, and in the course of this a wide range of scholarly material has been carefully researched. Baldick begins with the pre-Islamic religion of southern Arabia, proceeds by way of ancient Egyptian religion, North African inscriptions and Berber folklore, pre-Islamic Hausa ritual and religion, and finally contemporary ritual and belief among the Oromo and related peoples in southern Ethiopia. Needless to say the mythical complex, or variants of it, are discovered in all the cases examined.
However, it is at this point that the sceptical reader becomes rather uneasy. While some of the rites and myths do appear to conform to the basic model of the Afroasiatic complex, as for instance aspects of the Hausa bori cult, others are less convincing. Indeed one sometimes feels that the synthetic model is inducing interpretations which might not otherwise have been made. For example, in south eastern Yemen young boys used to be circumcised on a river bank where they waved swords in the air as if in battle. 'Evidently the waving of the sword represents the killing of the water demon' (p. 37) and the etymology of the Arabic word khitin (circumcise) relates circumcision to the word for son-in-law and hence, by implication, the presence of a bride and a fruitful conjugal union. But is this evident only if we assume that the Afroasiatic complex is already well founded? Such data are supposed to be adduced as evidence for the complex, rather than the complex being deployed to make sense of the data. Moreover, in some of the Yemen folktales the water demon is a female figure and not a male, as is demanded by the 'Afroasiatic logic', and I am not sure that the sceptical will be convinced by the assertion that these folktales are a 'later development' and can therefore be discounted (p. 35).

Some of the ethnographic details are also subjected to symbolic constructions which seem unnecessarily forced. For example, the author wishes to establish that the maiden-bride is symbolically associated with vegetation and to this end cites traditional Yemen and Hausa wedding ceremonies. In the former the bride's head is covered with a green cloth and has a paste made from the henna plant applied to her feet and hands. According to Baldick, it is this supposed symbolic association with green vegetation which protects the bride from being devoured by the carnivorous (and female) water demon. But the point about henna is not its vegetal origin, and in any case it is washed off, but the fact that it stains the skin red, and it is this red quality, according to the people actually performing the rites, which offers protection from the evil eye. Green is an auspicious colour in Arabia and therefore an appropriate colour for the material veiling the bride. By the time the author deals with Hausa ritual it is assumed that the henna applied to the Hausa bride symbolises vegetation and corresponds not to the similar application of henna in the Yemen, which seems most likely, but to the Yemeni custom of throwing a green cloth over the bride's head (p. 111).

Even if the sceptics are convinced that Baldick has unearthed a complex of recurring images in the myth, ritual and folklore of speakers of Afroasiatic languages, a different problem arises when the same com-