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## REZENSIONEN / COMPTES RENDUS / REVIEWS

ADLURI, Vishwa / Joydeep BAGCHEE (eds.): *Essays by Alf Hiltebeitel*. Vol. 1. *Reading the Fifth Veda. Studies on the Mahābhārata*. Vol. 2. *When the Goddess Was a Woman. Mahābhārata Ethnographies*. Leiden : Brill, 2011 (Numen Book Series. Studies in the History of Religions. Texts and Sources in the History of Religions. Vols. 131–132). ISSN 0169-8834.

This huge two-volume publication (with a total of approximately 1300 pages) contains the reedition (occasionally the first edition) of some 41 papers written by Alf Hiltebeitel between 1977 and the present day, thus spanning some 35 years of this great savant's career. Some of the articles have been reworked to various extents to fit into the new collection.

The first volume (entitled *Reading the Fifth Veda*) contains 21 articles on the *Mahābhārata*, while the second volume (*When the Goddess was a Woman*<sup>1</sup>), contains 20 chapters dedicated to more “ethnographic” issues, especially to the character of Draupadī, as well as the cult of Draupadī and related deities in Southern India. Both volumes contain an Introduction, a Chronology of Works (i.e. a bibliography of Alf Hiltebeitel's publications), and are completed by a Bibliography, a General Index and a List of Authors referred to. While the Chronology of Works obviously provides the needed references, a note at the beginning of each reedited article, indicating where and when it was first published, would have been useful.

The first volume, dedicated to the *Mahābhārata*, is divided into three parts, containing “Position Pieces”, “Major Position Pieces”, and “Recent/Early Companion Pieces”. Thus, it mainly – though not only – contains articles related to theoretical issues. This choice of more “theoretical” articles is no doubt right, in the sense that Hiltebeitel's most significant contribution to epic studies is certainly his “rethinking”, as he puts it, of the epics, and especially his rethinking of the theories in vogue on the composition and manner of growth of the epic. The editors have specifically chosen pieces that complement Alf Hiltebeitel's *Rethinking the Mahābhārata. A Reader's Guide to the Education of the Dharma*

1 This slightly enigmatic denomination – for one feels provoked to ask “when was the Goddess *not* a woman?” – refers to Draupadī, a human incarnation of the goddess Śrī-Lakṣmī.

*King* (see vol. 1, pp. xxvi–xxvii), published in 2001, and Alf Hiltebeitel himself has written new pieces for this collection,<sup>2</sup> in order to give closure to certain topics, thus showing how narrow the collaboration has been between the author and his two editors.

The second volume, *When the Goddess Was a Woman*, “mainly seeks to address the relation between the classical *Mahābhārata* text and lived *Mahābhāratas* illuminated through ethnography.” (Vol. 2, p. xi). Like volume 1, it is also divided into three parts. The first, “Millennial Draupadīs”, contains articles dedicated to Draupadī, both in the Sanskrit epic and in modern folklore, thus containing some pieces which might equally well have fitted into the first volume. The second part, “The sacrificial Death of a Co-Wife’s son”, contains articles dedicated to the figure of Kūttāṅṭavar/Arāvaṅ (the son of Arjuna and of Draupadī’s co-wife, the snake princess Ulūpī) in South Indian cults.<sup>3</sup> The third part, “Companion Studies”, contains miscellaneous articles dedicated to various topics, ranging from Indus Valley seals, Tamil and Tulu literature, South Indian buffalo sacrifices, to Peter Brook’s unexpectedly callous attitude towards things Indian. The two volumes thus appropriately cover Alf Hiltebeitel’s two main areas of interest: textual and ethnographic, the *Mahābhārata* and the Goddess.

Choosing from among Alf Hiltebeitel’s articles must have been a harrowing task. Even if, on a personal level, one might perhaps wish that such and such an article had also been included, on the whole, Adluri and Bagchee make an extremely fair job of it, and their selection is entirely satisfactory and representative of Alf Hiltebeitel’s work. Besides, the articles are not randomly chosen and arranged, but provide a coherent whole and thus provide us with a clear picture of Alf Hiltebeitel’s interests and research over the years.

The introductions to the two volumes make very interesting reading, and betray great acumen and insight into Alf Hiltebeitel’s thinking. In the introduction to volume 1, Adluri and Bagchee trace the history of Alf Hiltebeitel’s research on the epics, and identify successive stages in this prolific writer’s approach. The first stage is his analysis of the Sanskrit epics “looking backwards”, to the Indo-European epic tradition.<sup>4</sup> The second stage is what Alf Hiltebeitel himself terms

2 See vol. 1, chapters 4 (Why *Itihāsa*?) and 5 (The Archetypal Design of the Two Sanskrit Epics).

3 Chapter 14 belonging to this section (Kūttāṅṭavar’s Cross: Making That Young Bride, Whoever She Is, a Widow) is an entirely new article.

4 This view, following the Dumézilian tradition, is mainly found in his modified Ph.D. dissertation : *The Ritual of Battle: Krishna in the Mahābhārata*. Ithaca : Cornell University Press,

his “literary turn” (vol. 1, p. xiii), starting in the 90s, in which he argues “that the *Mahābhārata* is a ‘product of conscious literary design’ and must hence be read with a view to this conscious artistry rather than being saddled with our scholarly expectations of what is *ought* to look like” (vol. 1, p. xiii). The editors note, further, Madeleine Biarreau’s<sup>5</sup> determining influence on Alf Hiltebeitel’s thinking, an influence which mainly concerns “her sense of the epic as a symbolic universe all its own – one that can neither be reduced to some ‘Indo-European’ / ‘Indo-Germanic’ *Urepos* nor adequately clarified through a theory of interference between indigenous ‘Vedic’ or ‘para-Vedic’ traditions and an Indo-European tradition” (vol. 1, p. xix).

These reflexions and influences resulted in the publication of Alf Hiltebeitel’s *Rethinking the Mahābhārata. A Reader’s Guide to the Education of the Dharma King*, which is representative of “Hiltebeitel’s ‘matured’ view of the epic” (vol. 1, p. xxiii), and in which he “‘urges’ that the *Mahābhārata* must have been written over a much shorter period than is usually advanced [...] by ‘committee’ [...] or ‘team’ [...], and at most through a couple of generations” (vol. 1, p. xxv, quoted from *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, 1).

In their introduction to the second volume, Adluri and Bagchee note Alf Hiltebeitel’s ground-breaking approach to modern manifestations of the *Mahābhārata*, including the cult of Draupadī. After completing and publishing his doctoral thesis (*The Ritual of Battle*, 1976), “Hiltebeitel made his first trip to India with a sense that the Indo-European connections he had argued for in that book were getting less and less compelling, and with a hunch that he might find the *Mahābhārata* known better on the ground there than in Western or, for that matter, Indian halls of academe” (vol. 2, p. xiii). Unlike many of his predecessors, he was ready to take seriously and to study on their own terms modern vernacular *Mahābhāratas* – even a “Tamil *Mahābhārata* of Śūdra farmers” (vol. 2, p. xiii), which, to most, seemed “geographically and historically remote from the epic’s hypothesized origins among Āryan tribes or kingdoms in north India in the early first millennium BCE” (vol. 2, p. xiv). Starting in the 80s, especially in his two-volume *The Cult of Draupadī*,<sup>6</sup> and in numerous articles, he demonstrates how deeply intertwined and interconnected are the literary and the

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1976. Reprint. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990; Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1991.

5 To whose memory these two volumes are dedicated.

6 See *The Cult of Draupadī*, vol. 1. *Mythologies: From Gingee to Kurukṣetra*. Vol. 2. *On Hindu Ritual and the Goddess*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1988, 1991.

“underground folk *Mahābhārata*” (vol. 2, p. xxi), and the pivotal role played by the goddess in that matter, even though he subsequently came to the conclusion that this “underground folk *Mahābhārata* [...] has no prototype outside the Sanskrit text” (see vol. 2, chapter 5, p. 124).<sup>7</sup>

It is perhaps regrettable that Adluri and Bagchee, taking as a pretext their answer to Alf Hiltebeitel’s critiques, should have developed at such length, and in very dense footnotes,<sup>8</sup> their rather aggressive and personal criticism of what they term “German epic studies”, or the “German text-historical method”. While it is true that Alf Hiltebeitel’s work has been going against such text-historical views – with its “‘layers,’ ‘strata,’ ‘rings,’ ‘nodes,’ ‘repetitions,’ ‘interpolations’” (vol. 2, p. xv) –, and true also that Adluri and Bagchee’s critique of German scholarship is detailed and well-researched, one gets the sense here that the two editors are mainly fighting their own battle, which should perhaps have been left for their forthcoming book on the topic.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, one cannot but feel that this defensive stance is made redundant by the sheer eloquence, persuasiveness, and argumentative force of Alf Hiltebeitel’s work, which makes it stand powerfully enough to deflect – if not, perhaps, turn into flowers! – the sharpest arrows of criticism.

This slight *bémol* should, however, not detract from the overall value of this publication. The two young scholars have performed a veritable labour of love in collecting and editing their mentor’s articles. These two volumes effectively replace whole libraries of journals, and give us easy access to the work of Alf Hiltebeitel – *Mahābhārata-vid* extraordinaire, if ever there was one – for which I personally extend my heartfelt thanks.

Danielle Feller

7 See also *Rethinking India’s Oral and Classical Epics*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999.

8 See vol. 1: xvi–xvii, and footnotes 22–26, 39–41 ; vol. 2: xiii–xvi, and footnotes 12–17.

9 *The Nay Science : A History of German Indology*.