

nothing on the widespread Northern Athabascan "Bushmen" beliefs, or any discussion on the role humanoid monsters play in American popular culture, although an excellent paper addressing that topic was given at the conference. Finally, the most glaring, and in my opinion most significant, lacuna in this broad panorama of North American manlike monsters is the original Bigfoot tradition itself, so much a prominent and meaningful aspect of Pacific Northwest folklore. Green's dismemberment of the phenomenon virtually ignores the human element-- the eyewitness.

As both editors note, the subject can still be profitably studied, especially if one expands the contexts within which Sasquatch-like beings are considered. For the time being, this rather special inquiry into the nature and function of manlike monsters is a welcome and important work, relevant to the study of folklore.

**Israeli Humor: The Content and Structure of the Chizbat of the Palmah.** By Elliot Oring. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1981. Pp. ix+295, appendix of texts, bibliography, index.

Reviewed by Guy H. Haskell.

On May 19, 1941, seven years before the founding of the State of Israel, the National Council of the Haganah, the underground defence force of the Jewish community in Palestine under the British Mandate (the *Yishuv*), ordered the creation of a permanently mobilized striking force. The immediate reason for this order was the need to be prepared in the event of a Nazi takeover of Palestine by Rommel's Africa Corps, which was surging undefeated across the deserts of North Africa. This striking force was called the Palmah (acronym for *peluggot mahaz*, "assault companies") and through its role in the Allied invasion of Syria and Lebanon and Israel's War of Independence, it won a prominent place in the history of Israel's struggle for statehood. The force also entered Israeli consciousness and folklore as the symbolic embodiment of Israeli character and sacrifice during the heady years leading up to independence and the struggle for national survival thereafter. Yet it was not the Palmah's military

success against very large odds which set it apart in the Israeli mind, but its unique character as a fighting force, a character which finds no precedent in the annals of martial history.

This unique character developed out of the social, military and political realities of the **Yishuf** during its pivotal period. The Palmah was an elite corps made up largely of native-born Jewish Palestinians (**Sabras**). The Palmah was outlawed by the British mandatory authorities and had to maintain itself through a close working relationship with the **kibbuzim** (collective agricultural settlements). Groups of Palmahniks were assigned to various **kibbuzim**, working for the **kibbuz** half the month for their keep, and spending the other half in training, exercises and operations. This unusual way of maintaining itself and the highly motivated young men and women who formed its ranks helped give the Palmah its character.

Not only did the Palmah enter the folklore of the period in legend and song, it created a body of folklore of its own. One form of this lore, which defies traditional genre classification, is called the **chizbat** (Arabic: "lie"). It is this unique and complex oral form which Elliot Oring examines in this work, and which originally appeared as a doctoral dissertation at Indiana University in 1974 ("**Ha-Chizbat**: The Content and Structure of an Israeli Oral Tradition").

Oring begins his study of the **chizbat** with a chapter on the background and character of the Palmah, tracing its history back to the first Jewish self-defense group in Palestine (**Ha-Shomer**, "The Watchman") and examining its character in light of the ideological development of Zionist settlement. The Palmah was a product of the idealistically charged ethos of the pre-state period. As the Palmahniks viewed themselves, the Jews in Palestine were the elite of the world Jewry, and the Palmah was the elite of Palestinian Jews. The sense of common purpose, mission, kinship and camaraderie was one of the key factors in the Palmah's military success, and imbued the **chizbat** with its unique character.

Oring continues with a discussion of the nature of the **chizbat** itself, which does not fit into any of the traditional Jewish (or international) genre classifica-

tions. Oring never attempts a concise definition of the **chizbat**. Rather, he discusses at length several separate "basic constituents": The Performers; The Audience; The Setting; The Message; The Channel; The Code; The Attitude.

The third chapter deals with theories of and approaches to humor ("appropriate incongruity," "drive reduction theory") and their usefulness in analyzing the **chizbat**. Oring chooses the "social scientific" rather than "humanistic" approach in this analysis. An examination of the psychological and cultural contexts, interspersed with actual **chizbat** texts and explanations, make up the bulk of the chapter.

The last three chapters deal with the content, structure and message of the **chizbat**. Throughout the book arguments are illustrated or even initiated by the **chizbat** texts themselves. This alternation of explanation and example is done artfully, and constant contact with the data makes the discussion lively and the arguments convincing. Oring's sensitivity to and familiarity with the various factors which create the humor and meaning of the **chizbat** make for insightful analysis. There are several instances when Oring's outsider status may have obscured his understanding of some of the **chizbatim**. In general, however, this view from the outside and his subtle perception result in his finding connections and having insights perhaps not readily visible to the native Israeli.

One weakness of the work is that Oring makes no attempt to relate individual **chizbatim** or the **chizbat** phenomenon as a whole to the international repertoire of humor. He convincingly demonstrates throughout the work that the **chizbat** developed out of the particular circumstances of the Palmah and the Yishuv, and that the body of **chizbatim** and their contexts and characters are unique to the Israeli environment. Does this mean, then, that there are no parallels? For example, on page 83, Oring discusses a **chizbat** in which a newcomer to the Palmah is the object of numerous practical jokes by his comrades. When he has proven himself to them by enduring the outrageous insults without complaint, and is promised he will not be the subject of further abuse, he asks, "Do you promise?" They said, 'Yes!' He said, 'Well, in that case I won't pee in your coffee anymore' (331A)." Two variants

of this joke, one involving an old Jew and two Arab antagonists on an airplane, the other a Chinese coolie in a Canadian lumber camp, come to mind offhand. In the description and analysis of uncharted realms of folklore, the revealing of similarities to known explored regions is as important as the discovery of uniqueness. One of the important contributions of early folkloristics was the emphasis on the fact that even in those realms of expression each group believed to be completely its own, there was a universality which belied chauvinism.

Of the 342 texts presented in the work, 89 were orally collected by Oring, and 253 were copied from printed or manuscript sources. The **chizbat** can no longer be found as a living form of Israeli folklore. It died with the disbanding of the Palmah in 1948. The lore was no longer viable without the context which created and nurtured it. The name, however, has entered the Israeli lexicon in two forms: "**Al tesaper li chizbatim**" ("don't tell me stories, lies, nonsense, don't bullshit me") is one rather aggressive idiomatic usage; **lechazbet** (to tell stories, lies, talk nonsense, bluff) is a verb form derived from the four consonants of the noun **chizbat**. Although my own Israeli informants tell me these terms are no longer part of the active lexicon of the contemporary slang-producing generation (mostly high school and army age youth), the term **chizbat** seems to have developed, at least among some younger Israelis, an entirely different connotation. One twenty-six year old woman from Bat Yam told me that **chizbatim** are "scary stories told around the campfire at night in the scouts." The campfire remains, in any case, and perhaps we should be a bit more careful before finally burying any form of folklore. It is liable to scratch its way out of the grave and appear, like in the scary **chizbatim**, in another guise.

Oring's work is well-written and insightful. It enables the reader to grasp a sense of the spirit and character of the Palmah through its lore. Indeed, **Israeli Humor** is a fine example of a scholarly work which illuminates the nature of a time, place and group through its folklore, an illumination unobtainable only through historical and ethnographic description. Oring acts as our guide and interpreter, but lets the Palmahniks speak for themselves. **Israeli Humor** is among the finest works on Israeli folklore to date.