

head spirit associated with hunters."

Thus a brief consultation with the Niles bibliography already establishes a comparative and interpretive framework for further inquiry into this curious motif. In the introduction to this bibliography, Niles states that "the most striking trend in the study of South American Indian narrative folklore is the increased interest in the subject." This informative bibliography provides a welcome perspective on the current state of affairs in this area of study, and should contribute palpably to further scholarly efforts in the coming years.

**Sources and Analogues of the Uncle Remus Tales.** By Florence E. Baer. Helsinki: Folklore Fellows Communications # 228, 1980. Pp. 167, appendix, references. No price.

Reviewed by Eric Montenyohl

Joel Chandler Harris and his collections of Uncle Remus tales have been undervalued by American folklorists for quite some time. Part of it is certainly due to some boring and generally unenlightening work by "folklorists" like Stella Brewer Brookes. But the chief reason goes back to the complaint made by Elsie Clews Parsons in 1919 that the folktales were indeed folklore while the frames (with the character of Uncle Remus) were **not**. This arbitrary division has been echoed and supported through generations of folklorists (Richard M. Dorson, Robert Hemenway) without enough thought about it. This position, focusing only on the embedded tales, seems totally myopic. The frame contains the narrator Uncle Remus, the setting (not a plantation manor), and the audience (the two little boys and others) -- that is, a reconstructed context for the tales. If a folklorist or cultural historian wishes to argue that the context as written is inaccurate or misleading, let him or her do so. But let's encourage folklorists to consider **both** the product (the tales) and the context (the frames) so that folklorists' analysis and interpretation of the social and cultural history is valid.

Harris's Uncle Remus tales are long overdue for deeper scrutiny, as is his own role in American folkloristics. Baer claims that **Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings** (1880) is "the first serious collection of American Negro folktales." It is that, but beyond that, it is one of the seminal works in American folklore. The publication of the book in 1880, followed by further collections in 1883, 1889, and 1892 greatly helped to stimulate interest in American folklore, culminating in the founding of the American Folklore Society in 1888, with Harris as a member.

Baer's study focuses on the debate over the source of the Uncle Remus tales (and in a broader perspective, Afro-American culture in general) -- African, European, or American Indian? The question has been argued since the first Uncle Remus book (1). This topic, whether focusing on these or other tales, led to a spirited exchange between Richard M. Dorson and William Bascom. Alan Dundes joined the Bascom camp (2). Baer, a student of Dundes, has done an exceedingly thorough piece of research, seeking the immediate sources and analogues of the Uncle Remus tales. Her work on the origins of the tales is impressive, ultimately concluding that 66.3% of the tales are from African sources and distinct from European tales. In general, Baer's monograph seeks to settle the question as to the origins of Afro-American culture (and the Uncle Remus animal tales), and does so quite methodically and effectively. Few scholars not devoted to Harris's tales -- in folkloristics, literature, or American studies -- will sit down to read this work from cover to cover. It is an exhaustive work and an exhausting task. Reading the two introductory essays, the section pertinent to the collection to be used, and the appendixes will be sufficient for most users.

There are some problems with this study. First, and by design, Baer severely limits biographical data on Joel Chandler Harris (see pp. 13-25)(3). This decision to focus on the contents of the Uncle Remus books and ignore Harris's other publications or other activities can create some misconceptions. For instance, on pp. 137-8, Baer relates that Harris returned to publishing Uncle Remus books in 1905 with **Told by Uncle Remus**, but that Harris himself expressed misgivings about their quality, and,

therefore, "from this point on the Uncle Remus stories must be viewed with some caution." This introduction fails to consider **why** Harris took more than a decade-long break from Uncle Remus (1892-1905). Could it be related to his change in attitude toward American folklorists and American folklore? Nor does it take into account that during those years, not only did Harris continue as a newspaper editor (1892-1900), but that he published 15 books, including several for children without Uncle Remus and the Middle Georgia dialect. The second problem created by Baer's focus is that she has adopted Richard Chase's anthology of Uncle Remus tales for convenience. In doing so, she apparently adopts the stance of Parsons, Dorson and others that only the folktales are significant to folklorists. In compiling the anthology, Richard Chase omitted from the publication at least three sets of proverbs (4), several songs, and a whole sheaf of character sketches (5). There is certainly some justification for the focus of American folklorists' on the animal tales compiled by Richard Chase. But conversely, there is no excuse for **ignoring** these other genres. The implication offered by many American folklorists is that the animal tales are the only publications of Joel Chandler Harris which are clearly folklore, and that may not be so.

Even within the animal tales much more work remains to be done. Baer's "Afterwords" reflects upon the changes in the folktales over some twenty years, from direct African or European descent to "Americanized" versions. Here is fertile ground for study. But Baer barely mentions the tremendous change in narrative style demonstrated in the course of the Uncle Remus books. In the early books the framework is rather sparse; Uncle Remus is the narrator and the folktale is the focus. The entire narrative is precise. Fifteen or twenty years later, the narratives are verbose, with much more emphasis on the frame. Uncle Remus has become a narrator **and** a character.

This monograph provides scholars of American culture with a clearly written and methodically produced study of the origins of the Uncle Remus animal tales. But as Alan Dundes himself says, "not every scholar cares that much for origins... The important questions are how (the tale) functions for the people who tell it now and what does it

mean to them and what can it tell us about anxieties, ideologies, and world view" (p.11). It is ironic that Joel Chandler Harris's own view of folklore and folkloristics (by 1892) placed him well ahead of his time with respect to a concern for performance (p.86). Harris, too, grew tired of the search for origins of the animal tales. Instead, he tried to focus on good narratives and find performances. It is time we learned to adopt this attitude as well.

#### NOTES

1. See the Introduction to **Nights with Uncle Remus** (1883) for an indication of how many people had already contacted Harris with theories about the origins of the tales.
2. See the references in Baer's bibliography for Bascom, Dorson and Dundes for part of this debate. A good overview is provided by Adrienne Lanier Seward, "The Legacy of Early Afro-American Folklore Scholarship" in Richard M. Dorson (ed.) **Handbook of American Folklore** (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983).
3. This is compounded by the fact that Baer fails to cite in the bibliography either the standard Harris bibliography (R. Bruce Bickley, **Joel Chandler Harris: A Reference Guide**, 1978) or several other works on Harris which would seem obvious (Bickley's other works on Harris, for example).
4. The proverbs were published originally as "Plantation Proverbs," December 9, 18, 25 (1879) in the **Atlanta Constitution**.
5. For further pursuit of the character sketches and the development of the character of Uncle Remus, I recommend my thesis, "From Old Si to Plantation Storyteller: The Evolution of Uncle Remus" (M.A., University of North Carolina, 1975).