THE MOTIF-INDEXING OF SUPERSTITIONS

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At the Midcentury International Folklore Conference held in Bloomington, Indiana (1950), several scholars present were skeptical of the practicability of indexing Sagen through Stith Thompson's Motif-Index of Folk Literature (New and Enlarged Edition, Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press; and Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1955-1958, Six volumes). By 1954 the revision of the Motif-Index was almost completed, and lecturers at the Folklore Institute were demonstrating the value of this method of indexing Sagen to archivist and scholar.

The new edition of the Motif-Index of Folk Literature, with its thousands of added motifs, provided a fresh challenge to the archivist. Sagen can be indexed by basic motifs, each of which constitutes a belief. Can superstitions be classified by the same method?

The material available to demonstrate this possibility consisted of several thousand superstitions, collected in Michigan by students of Richard M. Dorson. Each superstition, on a three-by-five card, bore the name and address of the informant and of the student collector.

Those superstitions from "native" Michigan informants were selected for the experiment. These were roughly divided under a general subject index: wishing, dreams, omens, divinations, good luck, bad luck, and subdivided into minor categories such as black cats, ladders, and umbrellas.

As work progressed on the index, it became increasingly evident that although superstitions run the gamut from A. MYTHOLOGICAL MOTIFS to Z. 599. Horror Stories, the greatest number of the common Michigan beliefs are found under C. TABU, D. MAGIC, and N. CHANCE AND FATE. This reflects, of course, the functional aspects of superstition in man's effort to control his destiny.

Major divisions are typed on yellow divider cards (for quick identification) and constitute functions: e.g. D 1761. MAGIC RESULTS PRODUCED BY WISHING. Minor divisions (typed on white divider cards) indicate magic objects used under the "verbal motif"; D 1761.1. Wishing by stars. Cross references are shown on the divider cards. Nonfunctional descriptive beliefs (such as "fairies are green in color") follow the regular motif listings: F 233.1. Green fairy.

The entire superstition index is easily manipulated. Special sections can be set up readily to accommodate special interests. For example, this archive has all superstitions pertaining to love under TO-T99, to marriage, under T100-T199. Occupational beliefs are separated under the Thompson Index numbers, such as P458. WOODSMAN. Under these general categories, of course, the indexing follows the exact pattern of the rest of the superstitions.

The indexing of superstition primarily by function has this advantage over a simple alphabetical subject index: it provides an analysis of the action involved in a superstition, and thereby throws a new light on the relationship between "magic" objects, and even on the functions themselves. It is hoped that this method of classifying superstitions in an archive will add to the general usefulness of the monumental Motif-Index of Folk Literature.

PUBLICATIONS RECEIVED

The Editor wishes to acknowledge with thanks the receipt of the following publications. Current publications will be reviewed when space permits.


Das Deutsche Volksarchiv. Freiburg, Germany: 1956.


The Folklorist. Vol. IV, No. 6, Summer, 1958. 2 shillings.


Macedonian National Songs III. Skopje, Yugoslavia: Kocho Ratsin, 1955. 77 pp. 100 dinar.

Macedonian National Songs IV. Skopje, Yugoslavia: Kocho Ratsin, 1956. 79 pp. 100 dinar.


Volksstanz im Tanzarchiv. Schrift des Arbeitskreises für deutsche Volkstanzpflege und -forschung zur deutschen Zeitschrift für Tanzkunst "Dast Tanzarchiv". Nos. 5-9, 1958. Hamburg. 70 DM.