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Review

Reviewed Work(s): The Blood Weddings. The Knanaya Christians of Kerala by Richard M. Swiderski

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Richman's discussion is all the more relevant today, since at least one author has recently demonstrated the didactic power of narrative in contemporary India (NARAYAN 1989). The book will certainly be of interest to an interdisciplinary audience. Scholars of the history of religions, women's studies, South Asian languages and literature, as well as folkloristics will each find data pertinent to their own fields in this study.

## NOTE:

1. Richman similarly criticizes folklorists for not dealing adequately with framed stories (50). To support this contention, she cites the outdated article in *Funk and Wagnall's Standard Dictionary of Mythology, Folklore and Legend* (1972), relegating more important and contemporary articles on this subject to a footnote (197). Once again, Richman's thesis could have been positively strengthened with a discussion of the work being done on discourse analysis under the general rubric of folkloristics.

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SWIDERSKI, RICHARD M. *The Blood Weddings. The Knanaya Christians of Kerala*. Madras: New Era Publications, 1988. vii+190 pages. Bibliography, select index. Hardcover Rs 100.

Though by and large unknown in other parts of the country, the Knanaya Christians

of India with their remote history and somewhat exclusive culture and tradition (with roots which they claim can be traced back to forefathers in Syria), nevertheless constitute a unique and relatively prominent group of Christians in the southern Indian state of Kerala. In this book, Swiderski attempts to probe what he refers to as the "uncertainty" of this community concerning their identity, and in the process he provides the reader with a comparatively detailed and colorful insight into the history, religion, social customs, and other quaint cultural aspects of these 150,000 and odd south Indian Christians (both Roman Catholic and Jacobite), whom he describes as a "proud" people. Despite their being fiercely protective of their racial purity and the fidelity of their womenfolk, Swiderski nonetheless points out that the Knanaya claim to dignity can hardly be described as unique in a multiracial society such as India. Though in his methodology he claims to have rejected the personal experience approach and investigative journalism, and opted instead for personal interviews in connection with his fieldwork on the grounds that a scientific ethnography was impossible, nevertheless he does narrate several detailed personal encounters, not a few of which are spiced with humorous episodes.

According to Swiderski, the primary concern of the Knanayas is to preserve their identity both as Knanayas and as Christians, a process brought about by what he terms "artifacts." These are symbolic of Knanaya character, history, and landscape. Such artifacts would include metal crosses worn by generations of grooms, the book of songs, and most of all their churches, since these churches serve to symbolize the security and verification of Knanaya history, and are so to say, "platforms for the display of identity." Swiderski notes that the Knanaya go to great efforts to assert their exclusiveness from the rest of the Kerala Christian community, or even from the Indians as a whole. They are for instance anxious to spread the myth of the Knanaya face (which is distinguishable from other non-Knanaya faces), and at times even point out to similarities between their own religious rituals and those of the Jews (a fact by which they attempt to indicate their Near-East origins). However, this physical distinctiveness, age-old endogamy, and Near-East origins are chiefly symbolized for them by a mysterious fluid called "blood" which contains so to say the substance of heredity. In other words, there is something in a person's blood which constitutes him a member of the Knanaya community. Swiderski interprets this insistence on blood as a form of racial superiority, and declares that unlike other Indian communities which attempt to rid themselves of their caste affiliation, the Knanaya go to great pains to affirm it, thereby projecting themselves as an exclusive group.

All in all one might classify this as an informative book, and one which appears to be relatively unbiased in its approach.

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WALKER, ANTHONY R. *The Toda of South India. A New Look.* Studies in Sociology and Social Anthropology. Delhi: Hindustan Publishing Corporation, 1986. xix+371 pages. Tables, figures, maps, plates, appendices, bibliography, glossary and general index. Hardcover US\$40.00.

Anthony R. Walker, a social anthropologist at the Department of Anthropology of the Ohio State University in Columbus, after nearly two decades of close contact with and