Editors' Preface

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"This is my oldest project," wrote A. K. Ramanujan in his unfinished introduction to this collection of oral tales from Kannada, a south Indian language. "In my twenties," he explained "I collected tales from anyone who would tell me one: my mother, servants, aunts, men and women in village families with whom I stayed when I was invited to lecture in local schools, schoolteachers and schoolchildren, carpenters, tailors. I wrote them down by hand and, years later, when I could afford a tape recorder, recorded them. I had no idea what to do with them. I had no thought of writing books. I was just entranced by oral tales. I had read Grimm, Aesop, *Pañcatantra*, Boccaccio, the *Ocean of Story*, and devoured any tale that appeared in any children's magazine. I had no idea I was doing what was called folklore."

A. K. Ramanujan began collecting the tales in this book in the 1950s and continued to collect them until about 1970, by which time he felt he had a representative sample. When he died in 1993, the translations of the tales were complete and he had written notes for many of them; he had also planned to write a brief introduction and a long, interpretive afterword, but neither was completed. Ramanujan's translations and notes appear in the form and sequence in which he left them; his partial list of tellers and collectors and his essay in progress, "A Flow-

ering Tree,” are included. As editors we have corrected a few inconsistencies and misspellings in his translations, made minor revisions to his notes (providing full references and adding others where useful), and identified tale types and major motifs. We have also provided the bibliography, glossary, and list of tale types. Finally, the sparing use of diacritical marks is Ramanujan’s.

As both his first project and his final publication, this book spans the scholarly life of A. K. Ramanujan. He was born in 1929 in Mysore, in the Kannada-speaking state of Karnataka, where he attended school and received his B.A. and M.A. in English literature from the University of Mysore, in 1949 and 1950 respectively. During the 1950s, as a young college lecturer in several towns across south India, especially in Belgaum, Ramanujan began to collect the tales that appear in this volume. In 1956 in Bombay he met Edwin Kirkland of the University of Florida, who encouraged him to send his translations of Kannada tales for publication in the United States (Ramanujan 1956a, 1956b). A few years later, Ramanujan went to Indiana University to study folklore and linguistics. He received his doctorate in 1963, having already joined the faculty at the University of Chicago, where he taught for thirty years in the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations and was a member of the Committee on Social Thought. In those three decades he inspired a generation of scholars in Indian literature, folklore, and linguistics, while as a poet, translator, and humanist he reached even wider audiences. He is the author of eighteen books and many influential essays (see Ramanujan 1996), although his public lectures and informal conversations must also be counted among his many means of persuasion; one could not speak with him for five minutes without coming away with five new ideas. No other scholar in the twentieth century has fostered such a broad understanding of Indian culture among so many.

His stature was recognized both at home and abroad. In 1976 he received the Padma Sri, the prestigious cultural award from the Government of India, and in 1983 he received a MacArthur Fellowship. In 1990 he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Toward the end of his life, Ramanujan returned to his “oldest project,” the folktale, which in fact he had never put aside. He was interested in all forms of folklore, but as a miniaturist and a student of literature, he was especially drawn to the tale. He read widely and deeply in folktale scholarship, as his essays on an Indian Cinderella (Ramanujan 1982a) and on Indian versions of the Oedipus story (Ramanujan 1983)

demonstrate. His grasp of the immense corpus of Indian folktales, in their diverse languages, is shown in his masterful foreword to *Folktales of India* (1987) and in his own compilation, *Folktales from India* (1991a). *A Flowering Tree*, offering those tales first collected in the 1950s together with the insights developed over three decades of scholarly inquiry, represents a unique contribution to the study of the folktale in India.

Indian folktales played an influential role in the history of folklore scholarship, supplying nineteenth-century pioneers in the discipline with theories of origins, both Benfey's Buddhist and Müller's mythopoetic (see Dorson 1968). This "Indian School," so-called because it traced the origins of many folklore items to India, arose in part because Sanskrit literature contains the earliest references to some of the best-known stories in the world. The Indian school of folkloristics extended its influence well into the twentieth century because, as one of the mixed blessings of British colonialism, folktales were avidly collected by colonial administrators, missionaries, and their wives. These two strands in the Indian folktale record, Sanskrit story literature and colonial collections, were compared by W. N. Brown in 1919, which might stand as the beginning of the modern study of Indian folktales (Brown 1919). Throughout the twentieth century, tales continued to be collected and analyzed by a similar combination of Indologists and British civil servants, with considerable contributions by Indian and foreign scholars (e.g., Goswami 1960; Islam 1982; Narayan 1989. For bibliographies, see Kirkland 1966; Blackburn and Ramanujan 1986). Research on Indian folktales has also been handsomely assisted by an index of animal tales (Bødker 1957), a motif index (Thompson and Balys 1958), and a tale type index (Thompson and Roberts 1960; see also Jason 1989).

Despite this impressive history of scholarship on Indian folktales—the early theories, later collections, analyses, and indices—several shortcomings are evident. First, the oral performance and social context of Indian folktales are not well researched; second, very few studies analyze multiple versions of a single tale (Troger 1966; Ramanujan 1983; Blackburn 1995); third, careful comparison with international parallels is often neglected; fourth, the emphasis is typically on collection at the expense of meaning; and, fifth, the current tale type and motif indexes are inadequate. Recent and continuing work in Indian languages and European languages has begun to redress these problems, and Ramanujan's scholarship has substantially influenced these efforts whatever the language or continent involved; not only are his books widely read

in India, but he personally trained many young folklorists in south India from 1988 to 1991. Although his work did not extend to the first problem listed above, it has contributed to improving the situation in each of the others. Only the work of Verrier Elwin (1902–1964), who collected tribal tales in central India from about 1930 to 1960, bears comparison with that of Ramanujan in that he, too, read widely in folktale scholarship and pursued cultural meanings in the tales; but then Elwin did not know Indian languages as Ramanujan did. Writing a generation later, with the benefit of improved collections and new theory, Ramanujan set a high standard in his scholarship on Indian folktales and stands as a model for others to follow (see Ramanujan 1996).

The genius of his writings on Indian folktales cannot be described in this preface, but a few observations are in order. His knowledge of Indian languages and culture is central, of course, but rarer still is his inventive use of theory (structural, psychoanalytic, and literary). Theoretically, one might say that his twin interests were the emotional drama and the cultural patterning of the tale, for these are the focal points of his two sustained analyses (Ramanujan 1982a, 1983). He had a keen interest in the folktale as a genre, yet he always positioned it within wider systems of meaning, such as India's classical literature and devotional poetry. Guiding everything, however, is what we might call Ramanujan's response to the folktale as an aesthetic form. Beyond the motifs and (Proppian) moves, though he attended to these as well, he saw the folktale as a whole, as a fully formed unit.

This coherence he would then break down into formal elements and patterns, such as the multiple meanings of a single word or the hidden structures of repetition or irony. No one reading this book or his other works, for example, will fail to notice his eye for detail, which enabled him, in his own words, to "reanimate" the tale type abstraction. Although motifs might appear to be interchangeable because they occupy the same slot in a plot, they are not identical. The clay mask, which substitutes for the clothes disguise in European Cinderellas, for instance, carries special cultural valences in the Kannada telling. Or, as Ramanujan comments in his essay "A Flowering Tree" (this book), the snake in a male-centered tale is not the same snake as that in a female-centered tale. Concern for the concrete also characterizes his use of theory. He was not interested in grand designs and never reduced a single tale to one conclusion, but he deftly applied theoretical ideas when they actually explained a specific detail in the tale. In this he was like a good storyteller who knows that the imagination loves preci-

sion. Perhaps he could be sparing with theories because he understood them so well.

Ramanujan's aesthetic embraced the social as well as the formal; although we pointed out earlier that Ramanujan did not study the social context of tales, this does not mean that he was unconcerned with their social impact. Surely, one of the enduring contributions of his scholarship will be that, with others, he drew attention to the importance of women's tales in Indian folklore and culture generally. Point of view, he said, could so alter the meaning of a tale that the "same" story told by a man and by a woman would be very different. In a widely quoted essay, he showed that women's tales are sometimes "counter-tales," revealing alternative understandings of such key Indic concepts as karma and chastity (Ramanujan 1991b). But one feels that his deepest insights tended toward the personal rather than the cultural, as revealed in the unfinished essay "A Flowering Tree" included here, in which he listens to female voices and leads us into the delicate pain of a young woman's maturation.

The personal depth of "A Flowering Tree" both characterizes this book and separates it from Ramanujan's 1991 collection, which presented "a selection of oral tales from twenty-two languages" in India. Most of those tales were chosen from printed sources, some from the nineteenth century, and from translations of other collectors past and present. In this volume, Ramanujan is more completely in control of the stories because they are all collected from one language, Kannada. One of the four major Dravidian languages of south India, Kannada is spoken by about 35 million speakers, most of whom live in the state of Karnataka. Although less well known than its classical neighbor, Tamil, Kannada has a rich written literature, dating from the ninth century, of mythology, epics (especially Jaina texts), religious poetry, and, more recently, sophisticated novels and plays. Its folk traditions feature a remarkable variety of puppetry, including the life-size shadow puppets in the north, the lively drama of Yakshagana, groups of oral epic singers, and tales. Folktales in Kannada, curiously, have been collected and studied more extensively than tales in any other Indian language (for an overview, see Reddy 1991); dozens of doctoral dissertations have been completed (many published as books) and several thousand tales are now on record, primarily as a result of folklore programs at several universities, the most important being the University of Mysore. It cannot be coincidental that the author of this book was born in that very city.

Strictly speaking, Kannada was not Ramanujan's mother tongue

(Tamil was), but he knew the language intimately; he was born and educated in a Kannada-speaking area, and he used Kannada every day outside his home. Nor did Ramanujan directly collect all of the seventy-seven tales in this book. But he knew them well; he had heard many of them as a boy, had collected many as a young man, and, as a scholar, had discussed many with friends and fellow collectors. He also knew many of these stories on another level because he was a skillful storyteller himself and often recounted them in lectures and conversations.

These are Kannada tales, but they are not only Kannada tales, since many are also told in other Indian languages and in other countries. Separating the Kannada from the Indian from the international content of these tales is beyond the scope of this preface, and we refer the reader to Ramanujan's notes, where he occasionally comments on their overlapping provenances. Undoubtedly the author would want to qualify any claim that this book represents Karnataka or Kannada tales by pointing out that nearly all the seventy-seven stories were collected in the northern and southern districts of Karnataka; only a few tales come from the western coastal districts, where Tulu and Konkani are spoken, or the mountainous district, where Kodagu is spoken. The tellers, one should add, are disproportionately Brahmin and upper caste. A few of these tales might be characteristic of Kannada ("The Lampstand Woman," for example), but most are known beyond Karnataka. Indeed, these tales might represent Indian tales as well as those collected in any state, since Karnataka, although a "southern state," is quite central; its northern districts are in contact with Hindi and Marathi, while its southern and eastern areas interact with Tamil, Telugu, and Malayalam. Ramanujan would surely point out, too, that while many of these seventy-seven tales are known around the world, no fewer than thirty-two are unrecorded in the international indices. Compare this with Beck's calculation (1986:80) that only 3 percent of the tales in the index of South Asian tales are solely South Asian. Commenting on the inadequate representation of Indian tales in the indices, Ramanujan wrote (in the note to tale No. 10) that "the deficiency of our present tale-type indexes is clearly seen in the absence of all references to mother-in-law tales, a widespread Indian genre. Many of the tales need to be reclassified in Indian terms." In posing these problems concerning the linguistic boundaries of tales, their cultural specificity, and their inadequate classification, the author would surely wish this book to stimulate further research.

Interested though he was in these issues, Ramanujan's aesthetic vi-

sion of the folktale always illuminated the tale itself. He often commented, for example, that many Indian tales are “stories about stories.” This was not just a clever concept for him, for he included a section of these double tales in each chapter of his 1991 book, and he chose both to begin and to conclude the present work with one of these stories. Rather it reflects his belief that tales affect those who tell them as much as those who hear them. As mentioned above, Ramanujan did not seek the (notoriously elusive) performance context of tales and worked almost exclusively on a textual level. On the other hand, because he listened closely to Kannada tales, letting them tell their own story, he knew how they lived in their tellings, which is why he so loved the tales about tales. As the first story in this volume suggests, tale telling is a form of self-expression so vital that its denial can break up a marriage. In retelling these Kannada tales, A. K. Ramanujan leaves us a self-portrait. The unsentimental sympathy, the eye for detail, and the laughter in his translations make this a fitting final book from a brilliant and generous man.