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Essays in African Oral Literature

Papers in French and English

Edited by

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With a Foreword by RUTH FINNEGAN



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CORRECTION and APOLOGY
Due to an unfortunate error
B.W. Andrzejewski (Bogumił
Witalis Andrzejewski) has
been incorrectly referred
to in this volume as
Bronislaw Andrzejewski.

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PREFACE

The papers contained in this volume were first presented and discussed at an Anglo-French Symposium on African Oral Literature which I convened on 6th-7th June 1981 at Wolfson College, Oxford. The meeting was generously funded by both Wolfson College and the Fondation de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme (Paris) and enjoyed the support of the Institute of Social Anthropology of the University of Oxford. I am especially indebted to Nick Allen, Edwin Ardener and Godfrey Lienhardt for their advice and help. Several members of the African Department of the London School of Oriental and African Studies responded enthusiastically to the idea of an organised exchange with some of the established specialists in African oral literature from across the Channel. Bronislaw Andrzejewski was kind enough to take on himself the task of arranging the necessary contacts within and outside the Department. In connection with this generous assistance was also offered by Ruth Finnegan. My French colleagues, all members of the Oral Literature Research Group of the *Equipe de Recherche Associée n°246* of the *Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique*, gladly accepted the opportunity to share their findings with those of their British counterparts. The success of the gathering and of subsequent efforts to finance the present publication owes much to the ever-thoughtful co-operation of Geneviève Calame-Griaule, head of the *Equipe*. Last but not least it is entirely thanks to the editors of *JASO*, who devoted themselves to overcoming numerous technical and financial hurdles, that these papers reach their prospective readers less than a year after their presentation. May they all find here the mark of my gratitude for their endeavours.

A few words must suffice to review the main topics and purposes of these studies, which are the outcome of separate individual research efforts; though some of the papers have been slightly modified in the light of the discussions. Three major problem-areas are focussed upon, but they have been differently stressed in the various papers. The first has to do with the exploration of the specificity of oral art; the second bears upon the delimitation and the classification of its genres; the third touches upon the various levels of analysis - both literary and anthropological - through which the meaning of the text can be revealed,

and (in the case of poetry) through which its formal features can be accounted for.

In one way or another all the papers refer to, reflect upon or make use in their argumentation of the essential factual characteristic of oral literature, which is the multiplicity of variants available for each work. It is assumed that only by a methodical clearing up of the attested transformations of motifs, forms, ways of reciting etc. of oral literary utterances, either within a given cultural domain or cross-culturally, that one can unmask the process of how their meaning is created and manipulated. Whatever this meaning may be, it is always conveyed in the framework and according to the conventions imposed by genres. In the European scholarly tradition, generic classifications and taxonomies were preferentially based on the contents or the message of works of art. Students of African oral literature, however, having observed *in situ* the uses of oral literacy, tend to explain and define genres through the whole range of the social conditions of literary performance - the time, place, status and quality of both performers and public, modes of reception etc. - quite apart from its subject-matter. The exploration of genres indeed often implies the study of the social functions fulfilled by the performance and by the literary work as such. These problems are tightly linked with the culture-specific characteristics of literary and, particularly, of poetic languages and with the cultural correlates of their usage.

These remarks should not suggest that the papers are bound together by common inspiration or common problem-solving devices. For one thing the authors belong to two very different academic traditions and are professionally engaged in more than two types of disciplinary pursuit. Moreover, however fast expanding it may be, the study of oral literature, let alone African oral literature, has far from attained as yet an intellectually unified stage. It is all the more notable that many papers (and not only the French ones, produced by members of a rather close-knit team) show a measure of similar analytical preoccupation.

It is to be hoped that further meetings and co-operative publications will contribute to develop even more integrated patterns of investigation in this field, beyond national, disciplinary or institutional boundaries.

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FOREWORD

The papers in this collection come from a memorable symposium on African oral literature held in Oxford in June 1981. The idea behind the meeting was not only to present some recent work on the subject, but also to provide a meeting-ground for British and French scholars working in this field and an opportunity for them to consider each others' methods and findings both through formal papers and informal discussion. In the past, work on African oral literature by French- and English-speaking scholars respectively has only too often seemed to be produced in isolation. The simple but brilliant idea of bringing the two together in a relatively small-scale and personal context has certainly led to a greater familiarity and understanding between scholars concerned with African oral literature.

I had the privilege of attending the symposium and hearing the oral presentation of the papers which follow (together with two others not included here). Like others, I suspect, I was fascinated not only by the detailed findings of many of the papers, but also by the question of whether there were indeed contrasts of approach and methodology between the French and the English contributions. Certainly in one sense it has to be said that there were: the language itself - and hence the style of presentation - gave a different flavour to the two sets of papers, especially for the participants (like myself, I confess) who may be able to cope with the written literary forms of the other language but still find sustained oral communication a little elusive, even when so elegantly enunciated as by some of our French colleagues (few who were there, for instance, could forget Christiane Seydou's beautiful oral delivery). Perhaps one should speak of a language 'haze' rather than an actual 'barrier' and we were all immensely helped by the organisers' efficiency in cajoling speakers to provide a brief translated synopsis. Still, for many participants it has to be admitted that the linguistic differences between one's 'own' first language and the foreign one did provide some contrast between what could therefore only too easily be perceived as two opposed sets of papers.

And yet, when one stepped beyond that obvious contrast, one of the possibly surprising memories that I have was that there was

not after all any clear-cut opposition between 'the French' and 'the British' approaches. Certainly there *were* some contrasts between specific papers - for example Geneviève Calame-Griaule's elegant text-based analysis of the structural themes in certain African versions of 'The maiden who seeks her brother' tale as against B.W. Andrzejewski's more contextual attempt to relate the characteristics of Somali versification to its possible cultural correlates. This kind of contrast might seem to fit well with one of the common pictures of French as against British scholarship in this field - the textual definitional French as against the empirical British, abstract structural themes as against locally-based understanding of folk models, the participation in the wider intellectual linguistic scholarship characteristic of the continental tradition as against the meticulous but sometimes more narrowly focussed ethnographic achievements of British social anthropology. Obviously there is something in this kind of stereotype and some pay-off in looking at the papers here in those terms. But it probably always was too polarized a contrast and certainly by now does not usefully represent current scholarship, on African oral literature at least. For one can equally well detect differing approaches or methodologies *within* each of the 'French' and 'English' groups or, indeed, ones which run counter to the expected stereotype. Contrast, for instance, the relatively formalist and textually-based listing of Swahili genres in Jan Knappert's paper not only with the more contextually-directed questions in Andrzejewski's or Veronika Göbrög-Karady's contributions but also with Dominique Casajus's explicitly social anthropological approach in which he begins from local Tuareg concepts and rituals in order to bring us to a deeper understanding of the role and meaning of their stories and myths. The expected divide between the French and the British contributions was not so very striking at all, whether because the presenters of papers had already worked on their own ideas so as to achieve more effective communication (one minor triumph of the occasion, if so) or because the field of African-oriented scholarship on each side of the Channel is anyway more complex and interrelated than the simplified stereotypes suggest. If so, another achievement of the symposium was to bring this home to us, and perhaps help to remove the doubtless irrational but possibly deep-seated hesitation that many scholars still feel in communicating confidently with their opposite numbers.

Indeed perhaps the most fascinating part of the whole symposium was the many *different* kinds of questions which the various scholars who spoke had found it fruitful to ask, whether explicitly or implicitly, questions which certainly did not fall neatly on one or another side of some English/French divide. Is it possible to find (or at least search for) universal laws of literary creation or oral performance or about the cultural conditions that give rise to literary development? Or, if not, are there commonly recurring patterns? Can one connect particular literary manifestations with particular cultural correlates? Do our own cultural assumptions sometimes lead us to misunderstand the literary experience of certain other cultures? How far is translation possible? The

wealth of differing questions - all in a sense applicable in principle to the 'same' kind of subject-matter - was one of the most productive points of the symposium, one which has doubtless sent many of the participants away with new ideas and curiosity about the possibilities of otherwise familiar material.

Interestingly enough, there also seemed to be certain recurring themes which tended to come up in a number of papers. One of these was to do with literary creation, in particular with the forms of composition of oral literature(s) in Africa and (in some cases) the relation of this to performance. I specially remember Elisabeth Gunner's account of the conservative yet 'profoundly innovative' use of imagery in Shembe's praise-poems, Jean Derive's perceptive analysis of the role of reformulation in oral performance, or B.W. Andrzejewski's elucidation of the processes of Somali metrical composition - but the same theme came up in several other papers. Related to this point was a second recurrent question: how do 'oral texts' differ from 'written' ones, and how far can they be analysed by the same methods? This question again came into Jean Derive's interesting contrast between the functions of reformulation in written as against oral literary forms and in Christiane Seydou's discussion of the significance of performance elements such as music and audience participation in African epics, and underlay Diana Rey-Hulman's thoughtful discussion of the classifications of oral genres in French and Anufo respectively. Shared too by practically all the participants, it seemed, was the implicit assumption that, whether with Bajuni fishing songs, Fulani epics or Tuareg stories, a *comparative* approach was a valid and fruitful mode of proceeding, supplementing the purely ethnographic. Encountering 'Beelzebub roared for his rum' in the final paper (in a comparison between association in an English and a Swahili literary context) brings home the way in which a comparative perspective can extend our own literary experience as well as our understanding of Africa.

The final point I cannot resist making is to comment on the success of the symposium not only in its formal objectives of communicating recent work and creating the confidence that we are after all studying the same kind of subject in a whole series of overlapping and mutually stimulating ways, but also on the personal level. As I suppose we all know, one of the most effective modes of communication is after all in a small-scale, informal and oral context in precisely the way made possible in the congenial setting of Wolfson College - the kind of personal contact and friendship that scores of letters or scholarly exchanges could never achieve. Nor will the participants forget the special quality added to the occasion by Veronika Görög-Karady's warmth and continuing intellectual generosity, the gastronomic enjoyment provided by courtesy of the French participants, or 'Goosh' Andrzejewski's demonstration that the art of oral story-telling is indeed not dead.