

## REACTIONS TO REMARKS ON A VISIT TO AFRICA

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Recently I gave a talk to the American Folklore Society about my first trip to Africa this past March. My theme was the allure of Africa for the folklorist. Hitherto anthropologists had made extensive field studies of sub-Saharan African peoples, but now with the emerging national states the situation was ripe for the special tools of the folklorist, who seeks the countries where a national intellectual culture co-exists with vigorous traditional cultures. The month of hopping to six countries and visiting individuals and institutions works with oral traditions had electrified me, and I endeavored to communicate my enthusiasm to the audience of American professors and graduate students, few of whom had ever seen Africa.

So I singled out some of the trip's highlights, from the first morning in Dakar when I beheld the magnificent Wolof women parading the streets to my final stop in Cairo where I saw an Egyptian belly-dancer perform in a restaurant on the Nile. Gifted young African writers had deeply impressed me, men who could seemingly write in any form, whether the novel, short story, essay, drama, poetry, autobiography, and who were political intellectuals, sometime ambassadors, often now in exile in a sister country. There were Camara Laye, living in Dakar away from his native Guinea, author of L'Enfant Noir, translated into twenty-seven languages -- he showed me the Hungarian edition; John Pepper Clark, chairman of the English department at the University of Lagos, considered something of a Peck's bad boy by his Princeton sponsors in 1962 for failing to appreciate the glories of America, Their America, the title of his witty reportage; James Ngugi, known for his novels about Kenya in the throes of the Mau-Mau rebellion, directing an East African Writers Workshop I stumbled onto at Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda; David Rubadiri, first ambassador of Mali to the United Nations before falling out with Touré, now writer-in-residence at Makerere; Bai T. Moore, Undersecretary for Cultural Affairs of Liberia, poet, novelist, and active folklorist. They were exciting persons, articulate in French or English, world citizens as well as African nationalists, and at the same time immersed in their own tribal traditions. Laye told me he was leaving Dakar early next morning to record a griot with his tape recorder to obtain material for his next story: "Une legende, un roman." Clark had returned to his Ijaw people to record their week-long epic drama of the hero Ozidi's contest for the kingdom against his plotting brother whom Ozidi overcame with the supernatural aid of his mother. Clark had ~~fashioned~~ a stirring play, Ozidi, from his field recordings, and was about to publish the complete original texts in English and Ijaw and to release a documentary film of the tribal enactment of the myth. Slight and youthful, he told me he was the grandson of a chief who had 50 wives and 350 children, and the son of a chief with eight wives and fifty children who would have had many more of each had he not sacrificed, as he continually reminded his sons, to send them to college. John Pepper had one wife and two daughters. "What have things come to?" he asked wryly.

Bai T. Moore and his elder cousin, Jangaba Johnson, of the Vai tribe, had spent years collecting the historical traditions, folktales, songs and

proverbs of the Liberian tribal peoples. They gave me several mimeographed reports of these valuable materials, which as yet they had been unable to get published in book form. In addition they had conducted a weekly radio program on Liberian Songs and Legends for four years, and played me a tape. Bai as master of ceremonies introduced a visitor from the Gio tribe, and wonders at the broken shovel and old tin cans he has brought with him. Soon there is the sound of rhythmic music from these odds and ends, and the visitor is laughing at Bai's mispronunciations of Gio names and misunderstanding of Gio customs. Here is the process of cultural nationalism at focal point; the listening audience becomes acquainted with the traditions of the other tribal peoples. Bai played another tape recorded in the open square in a village north of Monrovia, of a celebrated Vai raconteur Bob Watson, whose rapid-fire narrative and interspersed verses drew delighted responses from the gathering. The usually serious Bai collapsed with laughter. He explained to me that the tale dealt with the nymphomaniac wife of a chief surrounded by a hundred servants who of a sudden pulled up their robes and pointed their penises at her. Bai added that the way Bob Watson told the story it gave no offense.

At the East African Writers Workshop the eloquent and vigorous discussions returned repeatedly to the question of how the African writer should relate to his own oral tribal literature. Should he keep writing in English and French or turn to the vernaculars? Should he write about Kampala, Nairobi, and Dar-es-Salaam or about the bush? Should he adapt the old legends or turn to the new life? One speaker asked if the Asian making his home in Africa could write an African novel, and seemed to think so. David Rubadiri in his novel No Bride Price had introduced an Indian girl friend of the African protagonist, although their romance was not consummated. No clear answers emerged from these vexing questions, but it was plain that these writers and critics felt an uneasiness at their foreign education and Westernization. One said English authors held an advantage over the African because they grew up and were schooled in their culture and traditions, with the sound of nursery rhymes and dialect phrases in their ears. As African nationalist writers, and revolutionaries against the imperialists, they yearned for their roots, and yet recognized the need to modernize their countries. In a later lecture in the United States Ngugi declared that if he were in a power position in an African state, the first thing he would do to ensure its stability would be to arrest all the intellectuals, beginning with himself.

In my talk I inserted some comical episodes of travel. Sitting in the Bat Valley Restaurant in Kampala and musing about the last leg of my trip to the capitals of Kenya and Tanzania, I became aware of a familiar American face and anatomy and energetic mannerisms a few tables away. But whom did I know in Uganda? In a few moments I found myself walking over to his table and saying, "Dr. Selden, I presume?" He stopped his animated flow, put on his glasses, stared and gasped, "My God, Dr. Dorson!" It was my own Ph.D. in folklore from Indiana University, Sherman Selden, now teaching the native Tesos at a small college in Ngora in central Uganda. He had just driven the two hundred and twenty-five miles to Kampala to pick up a daughter at the airport. "You must come with me to the bush," he said. Since setting foot in Africa, everyone had told me to get off the beaten track and away from the big cities and see the bush, although no one had quite located the bush for me. Quickly I re-routed my trip and drove back with Sherman to Ngora, which seemed remote

and bushy enough for me. But the following day he insisted on driving me over a hundred miles further to an arid stretch of country where lived the Karamajong, who drank cow's blood, wore animal skins or nothing, and lived in compounds. Our target town was Moroto, at the back of beyond, but at its edge a sign proudly read, "Moroto, the heart of Africa." We went into a compound and talked with the hut families. While poor indeed, the Karamajong did display coil upon coil of colored necklaces and copper wires wrapped around their necks. Approaching one handsome young man thatching a roof, Sherman bargained with him for the shiny white necklace he was wearing. "It is made of cowrie shells," he told me, "and highly prized." He purchased it for two shillings, but it turned out to be strung with beads from the dime store. The audience laughed at this, and they laughed again when I told them that, after taking shots and pills for every tropical disease, I escaped them all, not even getting a mild attack of dysentery, but came down with gout in Ghana, an ailment presumably confined to eighteenth century novels of high-living, obese English squires.

The talk ended, the applause seemed hearty, and a number of people came up to indicate their enthusiasm for setting off speedily on a folklore-hunting trip to one or another African nation. Later in the day one of my former students, now a well established faculty member, took me aside. "Have you gotten any feedback on your talk?" he inquired cautiously. "Yes," I answered modestly, "but just the usual compliments one hears." "There is something you ought to know," he parried. I had no idea what he meant.

"There were American blacks there, you know," he went on, "and some anthropologists, and they objected to various of your remarks." He hesitated, but I urged him to speak freely.

"Well, when you talked about getting the folklorists to take over Africa, it sounded like the old colonialism."

I was taken aback. "But that is just a manner of speaking in behalf of a discipline. I meant to include African as much as American folklorists, and black as much as white American folklorists."

"Yes, but you have to be careful. It is all in the context. Why did you refer to Africa as the Dark Continent? One black girl said she nearly fell out of her chair."

"But it's just a cliché, like calling Ireland the Emerald Isle."

"Sure, but you have to be careful. You should not have mentioned eying the beautiful Wolof women. That links up with the old stereotype of the white man ogling the black females."

I was beginning to say. "But they are beautiful, and everyone says so. In fact that's the first thing you are told when you arrive in Dakar."

"You have to be careful. Then that folktale about the nymphomaniac -- that's the stereotype of black sexuality."

Now I grew warm. "But you know perfectly well those folktales are told

and enjoyed all over the world."

"Of course I do, but you have to be careful. That business about going into the bush, for instance. The bush is pejorative; it conjures up the whole image of naked savages drinking blood and making love to their many wives. Don't say bush."

My defenses drooped. "Everyone says bush. David Rubadiri clapped his hands when I told him I was going into the bush. True, I never did find out what the bush was. It was always where the other fellow lived." A bright thought occurred to me. "I did emphasize the brilliance of the intellectuals, didn't I?"

"Patronizing. What is so unusual about an African being able to write?"

I surrendered. "Where was my mistake?"

"In going to Africa. Couldn't you have gone somewhere else? No one would take offense at Asia."

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#### Interesting Responses from Final Examinations in Introductory Folklore

1. Two of the Four Functions of Folklore are Validification and Conversation.
2. That great Finnish folklorist (also Swedish, Danish and Malaysian) is variously named Kaarle Karn, Carl Crone, Aunti Karne, and Khole Kroan.
3. A well known Jewish (who in slang are known as "kites") custom is the Bar-Hutzpah.
4. Example of a proverb: "Cutting off your nose to smite your face."
5. "A good example of a superstition is sustaining from sex during exam week."
6. "Nicknames for certain groups are very common such as: Kikes for Jews, Wops for Italians, Spics for Spaniards, Frogs for Frenchman and Gooks for Gooks."
7. Two definitions of Antti Aarne: a) "She was the first person to publish a type," b) "The first motif in the index file."
8. "The way Jesus came into the world was known as the 'Emasculate Conception'" /obviously the student wishes to refer to the Virgin Mirth - ed. note./