

AFRICAN FOLKLORE CONFERENCE: A Review

Yes, Virginia, African folklore does exist. It is alive and well, and suffering from the same enthusiasm, widely scattered approaches and scholars, and definition dilemmas as the rest of folklore scholarship. A number of those concerned about its well-being recently got together for the African Folklore Conference held at Indiana University and sponsored by the Folklore Institute on July 16 - 18, 1970. Although occasionally resembling the French National Assembly with regard to vociferation, the Conference was still filled with the very real sense of excitement which often characterizes the emergence of a "new" field of study. This momentum culminated in plans for a journal devoted to the study of African folklore and in hopes for a separate society.

The most obvious feature of the Conference was the diversity of interests and backgrounds of the scholars attending both as participants and as observers. Fortunately, the various panels drew attendance from Africa, Europe, the Caribbean, and throughout the United States. The large number of scholars from sub-Saharan Africa was a welcome change from many conferences professing to deal with an area-based subject and only being attended by "foreigners." This diversity enhanced the differences in approaches to and concepts of African folklore. With the relative dominance of "literary" as opposed to "anthropological" folklorists, one often felt too much time was spent on the all-too-familiar issues of terminology and scope of folklore: e.g., written vs. oral, "folk" vs. "peasant"/"primitive"/"popular," etc. But perhaps it was just as well to reconsider these age-old dilemmas of folklore in the "new" setting of African studies. And for just this reason -- the diversity of scholars and approaches -- the Conference accomplished its goals of bringing together scholars of various disciplines and initiating the interchange of thought, so that the whole area of African folklore, however one wishes to define it, can only benefit.

The first paper presented, "Approaches to Folklore in African Literature" by Bernth Lindfors, provided a helpful frame of reference for the rest of the conference. He typified African literature critics as falling along a continuum running from "Impressionistic" to "Anthropological" to "Interpretative." This model essentially reflects the scope of the papers presented.

One is tempted to treat each paper separately. Despite a superficial similarity in panel topics and paper titles, there was in reality a large variety of new and important work presented, both in terms of subject matter and analytical approach. Although a majority of the papers dealt with various genres of verbal art, few touched on linguistic aspects per se. There were several papers dealing with genre and structural problems such as William Bascom's discussion of the little-studied dilemma tale forms found throughout Africa, Lee Haring's stimulating structural analysis of trickster tales told by blacks in Africa and the New World, Daniel Biebuyck's comprehensive survey of performance, text, and context of the epic in Congo folklore, and Ojo Arewa's overly-detailed suggestions for several new motif numbers.

Several excellent papers dealt with the use of language in verbal art. Lawrence Boadi discussed the levels of language usage in Akan proverbs, Ayodele Ogundipe presented her study of Yoruba tongue-twisters, and Daniel Kunene gave examples of symbolism and metaphor in the heroic poetry of several southern African peoples. What was most exciting about these three papers was the extensive use of the languages being discussed. This was, of course, facilitated by the fact that each was a native speaker of the languages involved, thus emphasizing the all-too-often ignored importance of speaking as well as "knowing" the language of one's subject. Only one "foreign" scholar, Philip Noss, effectively used the original language in his excellent paper on "Description in Gbaya Literary Art."

Although the artist was theoretically never forgotten, only a few papers attempted to deal with aesthetics and the crucial interplay of artist and audience in performance. Biebuyck and Noss noted performance and aesthetics in their comments, but only two participants spoke of individual artists: Dan Ben-Amos and Harold Scheub, on Edo and Gcaleka story-tellers respectively. Scheub inadvertently provided an interesting comment on the previously-mentioned labels of "Interpretative," "Anthropological," and "Impressionistic." For in contrast to Ben-Amos' detailed comparison of two story-tellers of Benin, and in greater contrast to his own excellent film of Gcaleka narrators, Scheub limited his analysis to an essentially literary (i.e., textual) commentary.

The relationship of oral traditions and social/cultural/political history was the subject of papers by Mona Fikry, Sayyid Hurreiz, and Joel Adedeji. The first dealt with the complexities of "emotional" vs. "factual" history in the varying oral traditions among the Wala of northern Ghana. A helpful addition to this talk was a map depicting the geographical representations of the social hierarchies in the town of Wa. Hurreiz surveyed the subtle reflections of Afro-Arab interaction in Sudanese folklore. Joel Adedeji's tedious analysis of the Obatala myths as portrayed in Yoruba drama also concerned itself with the differences of "real" and "mythical" history. Because these papers did attempt to come to grips with the myriad factors affecting oral traditions, some of the audience was lost amongst the esoteric detail. Thus reminding us that field work data should only be used to illustrate theories and problems, not the opposite.

Charles Bird's "Hunters' Songs and Epic Poetry in the Mande" dealt very comprehensively with an area plagued with misinformation and stereotypes. His discussion included comments on the social and cultural context of the performers as well as their material, and stressed the integral role of music -- a crucial and seldom absent element of African verbal art performances which, with the notable exception of Ben-Amos' paper and marginal notes in a few others, was barely commented on in the other presentations. Unfortunately, the only paper which considered the relationship of folkloric motifs in verbal art and other aspects of expressive culture, James Fernandez' "Motifs from Oral Tradition in Revitalization Visions: Both Enthusiastic and Narcotic Inspired," was available only in abstract.

Besides Bernth Lindfors' paper, the only treatment of the usage of folklore in contemporary written African literature was that by Carol

Eastman in which the relationship of context and usage of Swahili proverbs in written literature and real life situations was considered. The remaining papers could perhaps be best grouped in the "Impressionistic" category. Echoing Campbell's "monomyth," O. R. Dathorne provided a literary critic's Panafrican survey of some basic themes in verbal art forms. Taban lo Liyong offered a rather dramatic summary of African history since Zinjanthropus attempting to depict the multiple layers of internal and external influences on "the African." Roger Abrahams changed his topic. Instead of commenting on "'Soul,' 'Cool,' and 'Nonsense': African Aesthetic Patterns in the New World," he talked about something else.

But it is not really fair to leave Abrahams' presentation at that, just as one should, for example, look further into Lomax's work than his confusing charts and gross cross-cultural generalizations. For, as with Lomax, Abrahams attempted to deal with several crucial concepts that must be kept in mind when approaching cultures with fundamentally different conceptual orientations. But his comparison of "oral/aural" cultures (e.g., "African" [read "black"]) and "visual" cultures (E.g., "European" [read "white"]) became so over-generalized as to invalidate his points. Just as one can become so myopic as to miss the proverbial forest, so can one verge on the super-organic when attempting too cosmic an approach.

To summarize a paper, the author's intentions, and the audience interaction in a sentence or two hardly does justice to the "performers," besides being a pretty poor field method. (Note: most of the Conference is preserved on tape at the Archives of Traditional Music.) "You had to be there." My first reaction in retrospect was that for once I could tell the good from the poor papers, for often one leaves a conference unsure whether all were terrible or all were good. But despite the generally high quality of the papers and comments, there were several aspects of African folklore notably absent. The bias of the participants was obviously towards textual description and literary analysis of verbal art forms, even to the extent that some of the anthropologists attending presented textually-oriented classificatory problems (Bascom, Arewa) -- not that these are not necessary areas of investigation. But there were simply not enough papers of the type that Ben-Amos, Biebuyck, Bird, Boadi, Noss, and Ogundipe presented which attempted to treat the multiplicity of elements that come together in the act of verbal art.

In light of the morass of poorly collected, transcribed, and translated texts, we are really in no position to make sweeping surveys of themes of dramatis personae. Despite the values of structural analysis, specifically the suggestions found in Haring's paper, given the condition of collections, can one do such an analysis on anything but his "own" material? As African folklore has only recently been approached by serious scholars, what is to be done with earlier collections of verbal art? It would seem some method of evaluation must be established to deal with these works for we can neither duplicate the collections nor can we afford to discard them. Although not touching on this perhaps hopeless problem, the hand-out by Ben-Amos, "The Writing of African Oral Tradition: A Folkloristic Approach," is a valuable survey of methodology in the African context.

This brings us to the generic problem of conference papers: how to say "everything" in such a short time. Perhaps due to the esoteric nature of many of the papers, several participants became unnecessarily bogged down in excessively detailed commentaries or readings. Although certainly an indication of the vast amounts of valuable data available and issues to pursue further, the continual over-extensions on time became quite irritating, a factor which should have been apparent to those presenting papers.

Given the immensity of the possibilities in the study of African folklore, the scope of the Conference was surprisingly narrow. Besides Adedeji's brief comments on Yoruba drama and the showing the NET film on Duro Ladipo, nothing was mentioned of traditional drama, "folk theater," or the traveling troupes of performers found throughout Africa. Although there were a few scattered comments about gesture, mime, dance, music (without which few instances of verbal art occur), the "oral/aural" aspect that Abrahams so rightly stressed was essentially absent from the discussions. Not only were these facets of expressive culture absent, but there was no mention of the relationship of verbal art and material culture. The plastic arts were only noted in a brief introductory remark by Biebuyck. Although they continually arose in the presentations and discussions, issues of belief, usage, aesthetics, levels of intention and comprehension need to be much more fully considered in the future. It is always surprising that when folklore is limited to verbal art/oral traditions, there is so little reference to linguistics, and levels of language usage and behavior (only noted by Boadi and Ogunpipe at this conference).

But hopefully it will not be long before these and the other integral elements of African folklore are approached. Not only must the scope of collection, description, and analysis of African folklore be widened, but so must the presentation of such field work. With the phenomenal increase in quality of inexpensive field equipment there is no longer any reason for simply reading a paper on verbal art or attempting to verbally describe a visual object -- tapes, slides, films can and should be used. For example, despite Noss' excellent rendering of Gbaya ideophones, a tape sample would have been a valuable addition.

Due to the efforts of Richard M. Dorson and Camilla Collins Coleman (sic) as much as to the quality of the contributions of the participants the (First Annual?) African Folklore Conference was a success. Not only did the Conference provide an international and interdisciplinary forum, but hopefully it served to remind these diverse scholars of the similarity of their interests, and, most importantly, pointed to major areas needing further research.

Thus, despite the question lingering in some minds, "What is African folklore?", the fact remains that a conference was held and enjoyed by all. Who knows, we may yet be able to convince some to consider the African heritage of Black American folklore.

CONTRIBUTORS AND THEIR PAPERS

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- Arewa, E. Ojo, Ohio State University. "The Identification of New Mythological Motifs in African Collections"
- Bascom, William, University of California, Berkeley. "African Dilemma Tales"
- Ben-Amos, Dan, University of Pennsylvania. "Storytellers of Benin"
- Biebuyck, Daniel P., University of Delaware. "The Epic as a Genre in Congo Folklore"
- Bird, Charles S., Indiana University. "Hunters' Songs and Epic Poetry in the Mande"
- Boadi, Lawrence A., Northwestern University. "The Language of Some Spoken Art Forms in Akan"
- Dathorne, O. R., Howard University. "African Myth, Legend, and Folktale: The Interplay of God, Man, and Animal in Literature"
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- Vyas, C. L., University of Zambia

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