

## A CONVERSATION WITH S. A. BABALOLA

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S. A. Babalola is Dean of the Institute of African and Asian Studies and Professor of Oral Literature at the University of Lagos in Nigeria, and is the author of The Content and Form of Yoruba Ijala (London, 1966). He visited the Folklore Institute at Indiana University during the summer of 1972 under the sponsorship of a Fulbright-Hays Fellowship. His stated purpose was to become acquainted with current folklore scholarship which might help him analyze a vast collection of tortoise tales, recorded over a number of years from his own Yoruba-speaking countrymen. Since Dr. Babalola has no opportunity here for additions or deletions, I do not think any evaluative comment from me is warranted. This interview took place at the Indiana University library in August, 1972.

Cashion: I want to ask you about the newspaper interview you gave here because you said in that interview that there was no such thing as folklore in Nigeria. I was wondering if you were correctly quoted on that.

Babalola: I was incorrectly quoted. What I said was that in African universities there is no discipline designated "folklore." The point is that there is no discipline, that's all, in the university system designated "folklore." Not that there is no folklore. Of course there is folklore. I made the point that with the British educational system that we in Nigeria inherited and which was made the basis of our educational world after independence, we have this carry over, you see, where in Britain you don't have folklore as a discipline. You just have oral literature at best, so that it is in oral literature that we come into folklore. But the term, the term "folklore," that is not in use for our discipline as yet in African universities.

Cashion: That leads me to this question: would you agree with the British and American anthropological view that folklore consists strictly of verbal art, or oral literature?

Babalola: No, I think folklore is wider than that. I think oral literature is just part of folklore. I believe that folklore is the sum total of the traditional knowledge of a people and that it includes the knowledge of their customs and all aspects of their way of life.

Cashion: Then you would say that blacksmithing, or housebuilding, or ibeji figures are all a part of folklore?

Babalola: Yes, all that is part of folklore. Oral literature is only part of it.

Cashion: Robert Farris Thompson, the art historian, has seemed to me to be studying Yoruba art from the viewpoint of the individual artistic creative process, or the art object as manifestation of traditional

knowledge. Would you think that this is really a folkloristic type of study?

**Babalola:** Well, it depends on the way in which he sets about it ultimately. If he goes into the research with a view to finding out what the people believe, what the people accept about their own art works then I would consider that as folkloristic. But if he goes into it with a view to testing out some theories, preconceived theories of his own, just assembling evidence for the purpose of fitting it into some framework that he conceives on his own, then I regard that as outside folklore. If it is from within the community that the knowledge is ferreted, I regard that as genuinely folklore.

**Cashion:** Can a non-African and particularly a non-Yoruban validly study Yoruba culture? Can he go into studying Yoruba culture with an outside theoretical and logical basis?

**Babalola:** There is a tendency, that in what I'm saying, that if he is not careful he can pump evidence into his preconsidered ideas. It is also possible, I agree, for one to be quite objective -- do you follow -- going to the field with an open mind, ready to get the truth of the life of the people, from the people themselves. So that I think both possibilities are there. This is what makes the difference between the genuine scholar searching for the truth and the fake scholar who assembles his evidence to meet certain preconceived theories or concepts.

**Cashion:** Do you think that in your own University of Lagos there may be a more scholarly interest in folklore study as folklore, rather than as linguistics or anthropology or another discipline?

**Babalola:** It will come very slowly. You see, we find oral literature, which is a big chunk of folklore, oral literature so important that I think for a long time our efforts will still be on this and the rest of folklore will just be used as material shedding light on the oral literature. So that when the oral literature mentions something in the material culture, for example, knowledge of the material culture is then brought into the elucidation of oral literature. And if the oral literature mentions an historical personality, then of course we take what facts we have about the life of that historical personality -- suppose it's a warrior -- the knowledge of warfare and so on which we might use for the purpose of shedding further light on the oral literature material. I think having folklore as a discipline will come very slowly. The development of university-level studies in our own languages and the associated literatures is uppermost in our minds.

**Cashion:** Do you feel, then, that the oral literature aspect is more important than, for example, the study of the people through material culture?

**Babalola:** No. I'm only saying that in our college the Department of Anthropology, the Department of Sociology -- we would like them to continue with work on such aspects of the folklore. That means the prospect of bringing together all these aspects of folklore as a

new discipline in the curriculum is rather dim.

Cashion: If that were possible do you think it would be a good idea?

Babalola: Oh, yes.

Cashion: If you had the funds and support within the university?

Babalola: Yes, I think so because the work of the Folklore Institute in this university is very impressive and the development of folklore studies in North America I regard as manifest proof of the viability of folklore as a discipline.

Cashion: A question on The Content and Form of the Yoruba Ijala. You state that the best chanter, I believe, of ijala is the one with both the broadest repertoire and the best chanting ability. Are chanting ability and repertoire equally important or is one more important than the other?

Babalola: The repertoire is more important because no matter how good the chanter is, on a festive occasion when a performance is called for, the chap who drags on and has nothing more to say or makes mistakes in the repertoire will fall flat.

Cashion: And will the people then make comments from the audience?

Babalola: Oh yes, oh yes. As I said, usually you have several performances there -- a sort of competition -- so that if the chanting ability is, let's say, just about average but the repertoire is comprehensive that artist will get first place in competition with someone who has a beautiful chanting voice but knows little.

Cashion: Would all the people have heard most of that repertoire before, so that it would be the quantity that would impress them?

Babalola: Not all the people. Certainly not all of the people. It is the veteran chanters, really, who have passed their prime that are present in the audience who would be the judges. Then of course, apart from them, there would be a core of people who have been frequenting performances of ijala and who will have heard several chanters before and can compare, you see, how somebody has on one occasion chanted the salutes to the lineage with the present occasion. But not all the people.

Cashion: You seem to suggest that improvisation is not considered to be good.

Babalola: Oh, it is good. What I'm saying is that it's not rated at a par with knowledge of traditional ~~cores~~ of salutes to lineages, salutes to individuals, and so on. It's a matter of rating. It is important but I'm saying that in the overall rating improvisation comes last.

Cashion: The reason I ask that is because you mention in your book that you left out all references to the vulgar aspects in ijala. I was wondering why you did that if the audience reaction would be good, as you suggested it might be.

Babalola: Well, I think that at the time I was writing this -- you know it was my thesis for the Ph.D. originally, not for publication -- I just made a decision for the purpose of the dissertation. I thought of the scope of the distribution of the book. Well, some people may say that I am a puritan, but that's the only reason.

Cashion: If you were doing it now would you tend to include the references to the vulgar?

Babalola: Well, if I was writing a seminal paper for a university scholarly audience I would include it. But my book is being used as a reference book in high schools and I had this in mind. In the vast quantity of material I deemed this less important, although I did make reference to it.

Cashion: Now you are here at Indiana University working on tortoise tales?

Babalola: No, not alone. I'm here working on analysis of folktales. I came on this Fulbright-Hays program with that declared intention -- to get acquainted with the scholarly work done on the analysis of folktales -- and have been working with Dr. Dorson. So it's not only tortoise tales. I'm studying the folktales of the world, really. I've seen that the starting point of the study of folktales is actually the establishing of the traditional character of a given tale. The use of the key works for this I've now become familiar with -- the type and motif indices, Stith Thompson's work. The other type of analysis, structural analysis, which is in itself very fascinating and which I used to think was all important -- I can now see this in its proper perspective as just part of the study of folklore.

Cashion: At the moment you are most interested in motif analysis?

Babalola: No. I'm now interested in an overall study of the folktale. In other words, the genetic study as well as the analytic study. In my rating of analytic study, structural analysis has come down.

Cashion: Professor Wande Abimbola has suggested to us, some of his students here in the fall of 1971, that you had collected many hundreds of tortoise tales. From your study at Indiana, can you now attach more importance to these tales than you did before you came?

Babalola: Yes, as far as meaning is concerned I have some gleanings now of the psychological significance of trickster tales. This is something new in my experience. The whole question of finding out the function of the tale in the given community -- why do people tell stories and why a particular kind of story -- is now clearer to me. What I mean is that I now feel I have my hands on the handle, you see, the tool, for getting at the meaning of the tales for the Yoruba people.

Cashion: Do you think that they are less important in the hierarchy of folklore? Folklorists, or anthropologists, I should say, have suggested that tortoise tales, for example, are less important than ijala or Ifa or other types of oral lore in Africa.

Babalola: Why do you say "Africa"? Say, "among the Yoruba." Yes, in a way. Again, it's a matter of rating. Ifa tends to be put at the top because, you see -- this is the thing -- because with- in Ifa you have some tortoise tales. That is exactly what happens. Ifa is a veritable omnibus, the comprehensive corpus. It is a matter of rating. But the importance is still there. The tortoise tales are still important in the culture, for didactic purposes, mainly.

Cashion: The teaching of children?

Babalola: Yes, acculturation. It is bad to do this, it is good to do that, it is forbidden to do this, and then also education by way of entertainment -- the reason why the tortoise is bald-headed, the reason why he has a stubby tail, why the tortoise is used for sacrifice. That is the importance of tortoise tales. And, in fact, we have a proverb which says, "Everything one says for admonition, by and large, derives from tortoise tales." In other words, if once you illustrate a point, it wouldn't be difficult for you to find a tortoise tale to make that point.

Cashion: What is the occasion for the telling of tortoise tales?

Babalola: In the culture it is on moonlit nights that you have the children assembling in the open courtyards of the compound. To start with, this is on a farm, a distant farm about twenty miles from the town, where the farmers go to live and work for, let us say, three weeks at a stretch and they come to their town just for, say, a festival or just to pay a visit to their relations. So that the children will live on the farm, the wives over them, and on a moonlit night the children will assemble. There may be a kind of manager, maybe a woman who will tell the tortoise stories to the children.

Cashion: Will a woman usually tell the stories?

Babalola: Yes, for the start. Now, some one of them will say, "Now you, tell us a tale." Over several months they will call the children to tell a tale and, of course, the child will usually tell a tale he has already heard from an adult. So gradually, over the years, a community develops. The state of the children being left to themselves, even when an adult is not present, they collect themselves and start storytelling, "You can tell a tale, I'll follow with a tale," and so on, the boys and girls together.

Cashion: Might a good storyteller later become an Ifa priest, perhaps, or an ijala chanter?

Babalola: No connection, no connection at all. Ijala chanting is a different art. The storytelling is a different art. No, there is no connection. The divination cult is a different exercise entirely. The storytelling is by itself.

Cashion: Storytelling is, then, more concerned with performance than broad knowledge, or than with great memory -- that the ijala chanter needs?

Babalola: It just requires the ability to tell a story, the storytelling ability which, in my own opinion, is merely manifested in the ability to enter into the incidents of the tale and to imitate the characters -- change voice, speak like a king, speak like a woman, speak like tortoise, speak like a lion, and also the ability to put in those details which make the narrative more realistic.

Cashion: Can you say that now, after having been here for a few months, you have arrived at a theoretical basis with which you can return to Lagos, and work on your collection of tortoise tales?

Babalola: Yes. It's along those lines of establishing traditional character, of probing the function of the tales, the meaning of the tales, and then the structural analysis. I've become acquainted with the methodologies to lead me to these ends.

Cashion: Do you think you can use the Aarne-Thompson type index to catalogue your tortoise tales, or do you think it is not valid for use in Africa?

Babalola: The answer is, of course, that it's not valid. In his introduction, Thompson himself declares this, that the type index should be seen as covering Europe, North America, and -- what did he say -- parts of Central America? For other parts of the world other indexes will have to be worked out in the light of the traditions of the area.

Cashion: Have you looked at Kenneth Clarke's work?

Babalola: Oh yes, I've used his dissertation.

Cashion: Does that seem to work?

Babalola: Oh yes, very valuable, and I'm looking forward to the publication of Crowley's index.

Cashion: I have just a few more questions. Can you tell us, apart from linguistics studies, what is going on in other parts of the University of Lagos that might be connected with folkloric study?

Babalola: As I've said, the work in the School of Social Sciences, in the Department of Sociology there, it's research into African customs -- such as the family, relationships within the family, relationships within groups within the village, within traditional society -- such studies are really part of folklore. Then, in the Department of Law we have a lot of research going on in customary law -- land law, inhabitants' law, the status of the child, the status of the elders, of the chiefs -- all of this really is part of folklore. In the College of Education we have research going on into African traditional education. The question of acculturation -- how do you get the youngster to conform, or to know what's acceptable in the community, home training, the methods of home training -- again, exhibiting that part of folklore.

Cashion: You seem to suggest that future folklore studies in Africa are likely unlimited in scope and would encompass all areas of traditional life.

Babalola: This is why at present we tend to leave them in the disciplines scattered here and there. This is why it would be most difficult for a proposal to have folklore as a discipline to be accepted.

Cashion: This question is a little unrelated but I want to ask it, anyway. Duro Ladipo and Wole Soyinka seem to make use of folklore throughout all of their work. Do you think that this could be good for the academic discipline in the future, showing the importance of folklore?

Babalola: Oh yes, in fact, we welcome it. It is a great asset to folklore studies. It extends the bounds of the knowledge of African folklore from the range of those who actually understand the original language in which the material is available to those who understand English and French. And also the "Africaness" of their works is borne out by this use of the traditional material, instead of their just writing new stuff all the time relating to the latest influence from Europe or America.

Cashion: One last question. What do you think would be the attitude of the Nigerian government toward American scholars or students who would like to pursue research in Nigeria?

Babalola: The attitude of the Federal Government of Nigeria is that so long as there is a warm welcome offered an American scholar by a department in any of our universities, there would not be any difficulty in an American pursuing research in Nigeria. They leave the scholars in our universities to make the decision as to the character and the type of person the scholar is, the quality of the proposal of the scholar, his motives, and so on. The government doesn't impose its own will. It leaves the decision to the division, from discipline to discipline.

Cashion: Thank you, Professor Babalola.