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A MAGYAR TUDOMÁNY KÜLFÖLDI BARÁTAI AZ AFRIKA-KUTATÁS TERÜLETÉN
FRIENDS IN ABROAD OF HUNGARIAN SCHOLARSHIP ON THE FIELD OF AFRICAN RESEARCH

AFRICAN HUNTERS' NARRATIVES

BELCHER, Stephan

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Hunting and foraging have been central economic activities for many African societies. Indeed, they are the original human activities, now displaced and limited by developments such as pastoralism and agriculture. Until quite recently, parts of Africa offered groups who still subsisted in this manner. The best known may be the the Khoi-San peoples of the Kalahari Desert in Southern Africa and the various pygmy groups of the central African rainforests, who have become almost legendary as living embodiments of an ancestral way of life, but across the continent we find smaller, specialized hunting groups now assimilated into sedentary societies, preserving the traditions of a formerly nomadic way of life. Sometimes these groups retain a specific ethnic or professional identity within the larger culture; sometimes they are preserved only in memory. Elsewhere, hunting has become the profession of specialized groups whose members are subject to initiation and ritual constraints. Everywhere, hunting is associated with power of some sort, and hunters are figures of legend and adventure. They are credited not only with courage and skill, the qualities required to explore the unknown bush and to face large and fierce animals, but also with great occult knowledge and power, which are required to overcome the dangers of the unseen world and to protect men who deal in the death of other creatures.

Hunters' narratives thus range from the collective traditions of hunters' groups (all the narratives of the Khoi-San peoples of southwest Africa might in some sense be termed hunters' narratives, as

these groups constitute a classic example of the ‘hunter-gatherer’ way of life), to the specialized recitations of the hunters' associations, to the folktales about hunters told by the non-specialist. Hunters' narratives may also be incorporated into larger narratives: the Mongo cycle of the hero Lianja (central Zaire) includes a number of aetiological legends about certain techniques of hunting which also warn about the consequences of over-hunting, and the Sunjata epic of Mali also includes references to hunting, including one extended episode (the 'Buffalo-Woman of Du'). In the Sahel of West Africa a number of the founders of states are said to have been hunters: Sunjata, Dama Ngile, Biton Koulibaly.

Few hunters' narratives detail the technical or practical aspects of hunting save to describe their origin in aetiological myths. They center rather on the social condition of the hunter and establish an equivalence between the human order in which the hunter lives and the natural and chaotic order in which he risks his life. A typical story-line involves the confrontation of the hunter with some extraordinary beast, whose power is demonstrated by the defeat or humiliation of a series of lesser antagonists. But the hunter is not always victorious. In one story, recorded in Côte d'Ivoire, the elephant Kowulen kills the hunter Bamori, and one grisly Bamana (Mali) hunter's piece consists of a dialogue between a vulture, a hyena, and a wild pig over the carcass of a hunter. But the hunter does usually win, and often his wife is brought into the story. Conjugal relations are a particularly attractive theme. One widespread story tells how the animals resolved to trap a too-successful hunter, and sent one of their number, in the guise of a beautiful woman, to seduce him. Disregarding the warnings from his mother (or another), the hunter follows the animal-woman into the bush and is almost killed, but escapes thanks to secrets he had not revealed or to help from home. Another story requires that the hunter's wife help discover the secrets to the power of some monstrous beast through a partial seduction. The figure of the hunter thus becomes the vehicle for an opposition between the ordered world of human society and the dangers of non-social chaos. In many cases, the hunter becomes a primordial culture hero, differentiating the human world from that of the animals. This is the achievement of Kaggen (Mantis) in the Kalahari, and there is a certain resonance between his activities and adventures and those of more limited figures such as Moussa Gname or Fara Makan, the protagonists of different cycles of

narratives collected along the Niger river at the turn of the century. Moussa Gname and Fara Makan move through a mythical world, but are not its creators and shapers in the way that Kaggen is. The adventures of Moussa Gname are presented as a loose cycle which may overlap with the neighboring Mande hunters' traditions, in which the specialized performer's repertoire supposedly covers the stories of some forty-five master hunters. So far, however, so such complete cycle has been published.

The most complex examples of hunters' verbal art come from the associations found in West Africa, where the varying traditions of hunters' poetry and incantations have been compounded with traditions of ceremonial song and in certain cases with epic narratives. A typical occasion nowadays seems to be the funeral of a senior hunter, and hunters' dirges have been recorded for the Yoruba, the Akan, and a number of Mande groups. The Mande associations in particular have carried hunters' music out of its specialized context, and it is now a bestselling genre of popular music (in part perhaps because of the democratic organization of hunters' societies, in contrast to the socially stratified system outside the associations). Mande hunters' songs can also expand to become epic recitations, and a number of such recitations have been recorded and published from all parts of the Mande world: from northern Côte d'Ivoire, from Mali, from the Gambia. The late hunters' bard Seydou Camara is particularly well documented, but we have examples from other performers as well.

The performance of a Mande hunters' epic (for which we have the best information) occurs in a number of contexts, and increasingly may simply serve as entertainment. The master-singer (who may or may not play his own instrument, a form of harp-lute known as the *donso-ngoni*) is accompanied by colleagues or apprentices. One serves as a respondent, answering each line or rhythmic unit with an interjection or comment; others may play instruments. Charles Bird identified three modes of performance or vocal style while working with the celebrated Seydou Camara. The first is the basic narrative, the second the song mode (lyric digressions to the narrative) and the third the 'praise-proverb' mode in which the performer strings together aphorisms, proverbs, and especially observations on the condition of the hunter and the burdens of his status. The third of these modes is not so obvious in the published texts of other performers, but at least

one researcher, Karim Traore, while working with another prominent hunters' bard, Bala Jimbe Diakhite, found that in an evening's performance the narrative was almost never completed: the story was lost in the singing. The popularity of hunters' music, and the democratic structure of the association, may explain why modern pop music figures such as Salif Keita have turned to this style for inspiration and a certain measure of legitimation.

As the pace and the extent of modernization increases, it seems certain that the specialized narrations and song-genres of hunters will be absorbed into the larger culture, leaving the residual image of a by-gone era and a certain set of narrative modes and stock figures. A recent movie such as *Guimba the Tyrant* (from Mali) turns the hunter into something of a folk-hero: a virtuous master of the occult who finally defeats the corrupt ruler.

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