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Folklore in Africa Today

***Eredeti közlés/Original publication:***

*Current Anthropology*, 1984, Vol. 25, No. 2, April, pp 214–216. old.

***Elektronikus újraközlés/Electronic republication:***

AHU MAGYAR AFRIKA-TUDÁS TÁR – 000.000.724

Dátum/Date: 2014. február/February 20.

***Az elektronikus újraközlést előkészítette***

***/The electronic republication prepared by:***

B. WALLNER, Erika és/and BIERNACZKY, Szilárd

***Hivatkozás erre a dokumentumra/Cite this document***

Biernaczky Szilárd: Folklore in Africa Today, *AHU MATT*, 2013, **pp. 1–9.**

**old.**, No. 000.000.724, <http://afrikatudastar.hu>

***Eredeti forrás megtalálható/The original source is available:***

Nagyobb könyvtárakban

***Kulcsszavak/Key words***

magyar Afrika-kutatás, Afrikai Kutatási Program az ELTE BTK Folklore Tanszékén, Folklore in Africa Today – első nemzetközi konferencia 1982-ben, a Konferencia előadásainak az ismertetése

African research in Hungary, African Research Program at the Folklore Department (Eötvös University, Faculty of the Humanities), Folklore in Africa Today – First International Conference, short description of the Conference presentations

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AZ ELSŐ MAGYAR, SZABAD FELHASZNÁLÁSÚ, ELEKTRONIKUS,  
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## FOLKLORE IN AFRICA TODAY

Szilard Biernaczky

In the autumn of 1981, at the Department of Folklore of Lóránd Eötvös University in Budapest, under the direction of Vilmos Voigt, chairman of the department, and on my suggestion, an African Research Program was established. The most important aim of this program was to initiate organized ethnological/anthropological research in at least one scientific field essentially lacking in Hungarian cultural history for objective reasons (Hungary never had colonies overseas). We attempted to assemble experts interested in Africa from ethnography, folklore science, musicology, sociology, history, philosophy, archaeology, linguistics, literary and artistic criticism, etc., to hold regular meetings and issue various publications. The enthusiasm of these researchers resulted in the program's most important undertaking to date, a conference entitled "Folklore in Africa Today" held in Budapest November 1–4, 1982. Originally planned for 15–20 scholars, it ultimately drew more than 50, despite short notice. Of these, 34 presented paper., during the conference. Texts were submitted for the conference publication by 15 other researchers; extending this opportunity was especially important because many African colleagues could not afford the trip to Budapest. Although the title of the conference draws attention to Africa today, the majority of the papers presented dealt with traditional forms, some on the basis of recently conducted fieldwork. Thus these papers emphasize the traditional cultural creations in contemporary life, focusing on the special features of their contemporary forms.

A clearly differentiated group of papers treated the history of African folklore research. From the point of view of a Hungarian researcher and a student of world folklore, Vilmos Voigt, in his plenary paper "African Folklore Today as Seen from Hungary," shed light on what the field of world folklore science has gained from the increasing amount of research on traditional African culture. In the course of this account, consideration of collected texts dominated, but some attempts at analysis were also presented. Robert Cornevin ("Le folklore en Afrique Noire") introduced his audience to the world of the African folklore treasury approached through the French

language. He drew on elements of old and new research and collected work on the basis of the very rich source material known in part from his books (1970, 1976), emphasizing, among other things, the instructive ideas of the Enlightenment philosophers and Victor Equilbecq's role in the history of African folklore research. Olatunde Okanlawon's paper "On the Problem of Oral Literature Research in Nigeria: The Position Today" was important in showing the role of oral literature in Nigerian society, culture, research, and education from an insider's point of view. At the same time, he pointed to an impressive number of phenomena similar to those in modern European folklore. In his "Authenticité des collections des contes africains de Leo Frobenius sous l'aspect du folklore d'aujourd'hui," Janos Biernaczky undertook a reevaluation of Frobenius's contribution to our knowledge of African folklore. He denied the claim that Frobenius's findings are baseless and sketched a reassessment based on an analysis of the great German scholar's technique for collecting, recording, transcribing, and publishing African folklore texts. Jean Comhaire's paper "Vie et oeuvre d'une folkloriste haïtienne en Afrique" was of great value for being the first extended summary of the work of his late wife Suzanne Comhaire-Sylvain. Bea Vidacs's "Outline History of Hungarian Studies" summarized the activity of past and contemporary scholars.

These papers drew attention to the fact that, although we have only incomplete or mistaken forays into the gathering of bibliographical data on the results of African folklore research (see Gaskin 1965, Scheub 1977, Gorog 1981), a new approach is emerging that takes into account the old research data, notes, transcriptions, published texts, and theoretical ideas. The basic aim of this endeavour is to realize, in the near future, a comparison of the old collected material with modern findings and an assessment of the usefulness for modern research of the earlier transcriptions and translations of African texts and the rare musical transcriptions. Only in this way can African folklore research achieve any historical depth. On the other hand, for example, in the case of oral genres, this is the best way of incorporating old and new data on traditional culture into the yet-to-be-written national literary histories of the various African peoples.

The richest topic of the conference was analysis of the most viable traditional forms of African folklore. Papers on African tales served to demonstrate various research methods. Denise Paulme ("L'image du menteur dans les contes d'Afrique Noire") and Ropo Sekoni ("Trickster Narrative Tradition among the Yoruba") dealt with the trickster, the most popular figure in African, especially West African, tales. Paulme pointed out

that the hero of African animal tales, who sometimes comes to grief and sometimes triumphs or even assumes the role of culture hero, is similar to a characteristic figure of European literature (the development of which can be traced from Jean Valjean through the Count of Monte Cristo to the modern private detective). With the help of a series of examples and on the basis of moral lessons found in the tales, Jan Knappert ("Some New Light on African Fables") attempted to demonstrate a relationship between various African narrative texts, including, for this broad comparison, elements from the Panchatantra. I. G. Kouchke explored the features of the Berber magical tale of Morocco ("Cultes et croyances en tant que source des motifs des contes magiques berbères") on the basis of Propp's work. S. O. Aje's valuable "Folklore and Tradition: The Judicial Setting of a Yoruba Village" showed how a mythical tale in a Yoruba village may be a fundamental element of local traditional morality and judicial mentality. Bade Ajuwon's "The Folklore of Myths: Yoruba Myths of Cosmogonic Gods as a Case Study" analyzed the contexts of the mythical conceptions and folklore texts and the characteristic forms of god-myths in folklore texts of various genres. Alice Jankowski ("A Twentieth-Century Amharic Tale of a Serpent-King") attempted to reveal the background of the so-called Solomonic dynasty as a vehicle for political intentions. Relying on the enormous corpus of Mongo tales collected by Belgian missionaries, Brunhilde Biebuyck ("The Symbolic Topography of Nkundo-Mongo Folktales") undertook the exploration of the symbolic system of topographical and geographical space division and its social references.

Many papers chose as a theme the problem of the African heroic epic, around which considerable debate has raged in recent years. Thomas A. Hale ("Kings, Scribes, and Bards: A Look at Signs of Survival for Keepers of the Oral Tradition among the Songhay-speaking Peoples of Niger") explored, on the basis of recent fieldwork and wide-ranging examination of the specialized literature, the background of the activity of the West African griot and the revival of its genres and performance. Faithful to the conference's original topic, he also sketched how the live performance is affected in turn by the recordings of various epic creations heard on radio and television, in whose texts we may often discover elements or stories preserved in written Arabic sources as well. Stanislaw Piłaszewicz, the author of a monograph on a Hausa poet (1981), applied data from the specialized literature to a description of the traditional forms of performance of the Hausa popular poet and his relation to his environment ("The Craft of the Hausa Oral Praise-Poet"). Jelena Sz. Kotljar ("Some Aspects of the De-

velopment of the Epic Genre: 'Sundjata-Fassa' [Manding], 'Nsong'a Lianja' [Mongo-Nkundo]" raised a very important theoretical question of genre when she labeled the Lianja, according to the classification scheme rooted in Russian folklore science, as an archaic epic (a type directly associated with the pre-state period). She judged the Sundjata a classic epic because it has a dynastic character and because the story is considered by the Manding part of their history. This folklore-type classification is very important in the case of the texts discussed because Jan Vansina, as a result of his oral history research and in the face of the results of recent investigation of epics, agrees with Ruth Finnegan that the equatorial Bantu epics, those of the Mongo, Fang, Nyanga, Bulu, Lega, etc. , are not true epics (in Vansina's terminology, "epopea") but long heroic- type mythical tales. In my "The African Heroic Epic Exists!" I attempted to contribute to the discussion presented, among other places, in many issues of *Research in African Literatures* with an examination of the structure of the African heroic epic. I showed the similarity of structural elements in the *Odyssey* and the Nyanga Mwindo epic, in both of which the hero at some point summarizes the things that have happened to him, arguing that this structural element is an organic part of the true heroic epic and not of the heroic tale.

The papers dealing with the folklore presented us with a series of theoretical problems. On the one hand, African folklore texts call for a different approach to analysis and interpretation from that appropriate to the European, Oriental, Egyptian, or Indian traditions that have already been absorbed into world culture. African folklore research methodology should combine social and cultural anthropological method, which focuses on contexts, circumstances, background, and the method of folklore science, which concentrates on the "text." Provision must be made for the collection and classification of local genre conceptions and explanations. African folklore genres such as the sung and recited archaic epic of the equatorial Bantu peoples and praise poetry must be approached as independent forms that cannot be evaluated on the basis of the categories of European genre theory.

The analytical approach was also taken by Laszlo Borsanyi in his paper "Traditions and Creativity: An Analysis of the Liberian Mask Collection in the Hungarian Ethnographic Museum" (a shorter version of which was published in *Current Anthropology* 19, 607-610). Saber El-Adly, in "The Ziir," undertook the description of this Muslim rite and the identification of the function of the amulets associated with it. Stephen J. M. Mhlabi, in "Ndebele Folklore: A Brief Note on Some Traditions of the Ndebele of

Zimbabwe," investigated and sought to explain certain taboos. Relying on several years of fieldwork, Peter Wirth ("The Traditional Architecture of the Igala People") identified a series of functional contexts in igala architecture.

Two significant papers treated the topic of so-called oral-history research. Aaron C. Hodza ("Shona Folklore: The Soko People of Zimbabwe") described and interpreted the oral historical tradition of a Shona group according to information from a local chief. This led him to reconstruct a genealogy of chiefs, completing it with information obtained from another Shona chief. In contrast, David P. Henige's method compares chronological data obtained from different informants. Győző Lugosi ("Le cas de l'Etat Merina de Madagascar precolonial"), relying on the Jesuit priest F. Callet's collection of historical traditions *Tantaran'ny Adriana*, pointed to features of the Merina state that in his opinion reflect the duality of power and oppression.

Music was given a prominent place at the conference. Simha Arom ("Les traits constitutifs de la rythmique centrafricaine: Esquisse d'une typologie") strengthened his earlier conceptions and sought a more precise definition of African polyrhythm. He remarked that the "improvisational character" so often seen in African music on the basis of superficial impressions is not present in all forms of it. Using Aka Pygmy instrumental music as an example, he demonstrated the existence of well-defined musical forms. Vincent Dehoux's Gbaya examples ("L'organisation polyphonique et polyrythmique d'un repertoire instrumental d'Afrique Centrale") basically supported Arom's thesis and went beyond it in describing the so-called idea song. This type of analysis is found in the literature only in John Blacking's work on Venda music. Similarly deserving of attention was Martinho Lutero's "The Music of Mozambique: East-West En-counter," which examined the effects of European (for the most part Catholic church) music on Mozambiquan traditional music. Gerhard Kubik's "Speech Connotations of Patterns in African Music" dealt with the rarely analyzed problem of the connection of text with music, partly on the basis of his own data. Finally, Mustafa Salah displayed the Sudanese form of a well-known Arabo-African musical instrument and illustrated his paper "*Waza*: The Musical Instrument of the Funj Tribe of the Eastern Sudan" with musical examples.

In a very important paper entitled "Folklore, Urbanization, and Modernization in Contemporary Africa," Sayyid H. Hurreiz attempted to summarize the results of urbanization in African folklore. He pointed to the disappearance of old narrative forms and their replacement by new ones and to the disruption of the traditional chronology by mass communication and

industrialization. Armand Duchateau, in his "Confrontation and Acculturation in Early African Myths and Legends," chose a topic recently raised by Gorog-Karady (1976) and gave some recent examples. Geza F. Nagy ("The Ethnic Situation in East Africa and the Folklore Figure of Liongo Furno") attempted to develop a method for extracting historical, linguistic, and ethnic data on Bantu Africa from Swahili Liongo songs. Lee Haring, in "Creolization in Malagasy Folklore," discussed linguistic change and French and English influences. Tibor Kiss examined the role of folklore in literature in his "The Role of Yoruba Mythology in *A Dance of the Forests*: An Attempt to Interpret Some Aspects of Wole Soyinka's Play." Imre Marton, in "Le devenir historique de l'identité nationale," dealt with the importance of traditional culture in the search for national and cultural identity in contemporary African societies.

Some suggestions were made with regard to research methodology. Tibor Vadasi contributed valuable points of view on the classification of African dances on the basis of his Ethiopian collections. I offered suggestions for an encyclopedia and a complex analytical bibliography of African folklore.

The conference, while experimental in character, was neither better nor worse than similar ones. One thing is certain, however, and that is that international research is very divided. Experts often live in isolation and work in a vacuum. Some kind of coordination or cooperation would be very useful, and a step was taken in this direction with the proposal of the establishment of an international association on oral literature in Africa and the publication of a newsletter. A steering committee was formed for this purpose, and the organizational work was entrusted to the Budapest organizers. A second conference on the same topic is planned for August 1984.

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