Review of Jack Berry's West African Folk Tales, ed. Richard Spears

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those languages, “making it difficult if not impossible to translate them easily” (xv). Yet the English-language articles they have selected analyze proverbs from such languages as Chinese, Finnish, Latin, Spanish, and Yiddish, among others. Translating proverbs effectively from one language to another might pose a difficulty because of the cultural embeddedness of the imagery and referents involved, or because of peculiar linguistic formulations that defy meaningful crossover to another language. If the authors have managed the difficult feat of effectively rendering the proverbs, it seems the task of translating the discussions in foreign languages would be no more difficult than it is in other disciplines, like philosophy, for example.

It is also significant that while the editors note “a virtual explosion of scholarship . . . in the field of paremiography (collection of proverbs) and paremiology (study of proverbs)” in the last decade (vii), they have not taken advantage of the opportunity that republication offers to update the volume by adding a sampling of the explosion. They do remedy this problem somewhat, along with the one regarding the exclusion of scholarship not originally published in English, by citing recent publications and works in other languages in the preface to the paper edition and in the new bibliographical addenda. Despite the caveats in the foregoing paragraphs, this paperback reissue of *The Wisdom of Many* will serve a new generation of students of the proverb as well as it has served others in the past. It is of interest to folklore scholars, especially students of the proverb; Africanists will be particularly interested in the excerpt “Proverbs in Africa” from Finnegar’s *Oral Literature in Africa* and in Peter Seitel’s “Proverbs: A Social Use of Metaphor,” which investigates Igbo proverb use with illustrations from the novels of Chinua Achebe.

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**West African Folk Tales**


**Chukwuma Azuonye**

As a breezy introduction to some of the major characters and landscapes of the wonderful world of African oral fiction, this collection and translation of folktale from parts of West Africa (mainly Ghana) may be of some marginal value in an elementary, multicultural educational program. But from the scholarly point of view, it seems grossly out of place, not only in content and form of presentation but in theoretical relevance. We have reached a stage in the recording, transcription, and translation of African oral literature at which popularizing efforts of this kind constitute a setting back of the hands of the clock. We now have more than enough offerings of this type in the book market to satisfy the curiosity of students.
and general readers who simply want to have a feel of oral traditional tales out of Africa, be it as part of a multicultural educational agenda or for any other purpose. Besides, offerings of this kind have become increasingly formulaic in ways that subvert even their potential multicultural educational relevance. The general formula is to suppress the cultural-linguistic and performance contexts of the tales in order to focus on bare plot lines, which are assumed will be more easily accessible to the foreign reader. Editor Richard Spears has applied this formula with ruthless abandon in this book.

The questionable use of the epithet “West African” for a random body of tales that are neither representative of any one language group of West Africa nor of the region as a whole will be passed over quickly. Going straight to the tales themselves, we find that variants of the same tale-types, such as no. 3 (p. 14) and no. 5 (p. 17) are presented with different titles and separated from one another by completely unrelated tale-types. Indeed, we move kaleidoscopically from animal tales to tales about the human world, and from tales about the human world to animal tales and thence to tales about creation, and so on. This lackadaisical approach is all the more irritating because an effort at classifying the tales, whether in terms of character or setting or in terms of other significant thematic patterns, is probably the least to be expected of an editor working from materials collected in the field, over several years, by another scholar.

The decision to present the tales in English translations only would have been passed over quickly but for the editor’s stunning rationale for this decision:

The tales have been edited and arranged to make them readable by, or tellable to, non-Africans with the fewest possible obstacles to the tellers or the audience. One of the goals of the arrangement has been to keep the actual texts of the tales as free of distracting encumbrances as possible. (1; emphases added)

All of which amounts to nothing short of the licentious bowdlerizing of the tales through the iconoclastic elimination of practically all those elements (italicized in the above quote) that have to do with their orality, traditionality, and Africanness! One needs only refer to Roger D. Abrahams’s decision to respect and highlight the same contextual-performance features in his own English-language presentation of African Folktales (New York: Pantheon, 1983) to fully appreciate the extent to which Spears’s offering represents a travesty of the artistic ambience of the tales and a subversion of its own potential value in multicultural education.

Clearly, the inclusiveness of the performance features of the tales are by no means distracting encumbrances, nor do they in any way represent obstacles to the tellers or the audience who may come to the tales through their English translations.

So, then, why this collection? Could there be a hidden pedagogic or theoretical focus beneath the veneer of the editor’s blandly unprofessional statements about its purpose and form? The book has, in lieu of a preface, a very dated paper, “Spoken Art in West Africa,” delivered by the original collector of the tales, Jack Berry, as an inaugural lecture at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, in 1960. By the time of the publication of Ruth Finnegan’s Oral Literature in Africa (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1970), most of the ideas expressed in Berry’s paper were already out of date, and today, Finnegan’s encyclopedic
survey of the subject is generally considered outdated and has now been displaced by Isidore Okpewho's more theoretically current survey of the field, *African Oral Literature: Background, Character, and Continuity* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1992). But even at that, Jack Berry's paper was considered something of a revolution in the critical study of oral literature in African and contains a number of ideas about the transcription of African oral texts which are still largely valid even today. But strange enough, these are precisely the ideas that editor Spears has chosen to ignore in his presentation of the tales, and he minces no words in saying so:

This collection *does not attempt to reproduce the performance elements,* which can be quite complicated and require a significant amount of specific knowledge of a number of different West African cultures and languages. *This is not because the collector of the tales, Jack Berry, was not conscious of or interested in these details*. A reading of his professorial inaugural address on December 8, 1960, reprinted as the preface to this book, will reveal just the opposite. However, *although these matters were of great interest to Berry, they are not the subject of this book*. The story lines of these folktales have been extracted from the storytelling setting and presented in a way that makes the folk motifs evident for simple reading pleasure. *By the way, such an extraction of the story lines of tales is not wholly foreign to West Africa: missionaries have used folktales in printed form for the purpose of literacy training for decades.* (3; emphases added)

This confession of professional incompetence and lack of the necessary historical sense to edit a book of oral narratives in a post-missionary era is so stunning that I was tempted to add an exclamation mark at the end of every sentence. So, then, are we being told that whatever the missionaries did several decades ago to West African folktales can still be used as a basis for the processing of texts today? But where will this post-missionary missionary zeal lead us? For what literacy training program is this book of bowdlerized English translations intended? Could it be for an American-based literacy program, since, as Spears tells us, he has undertaken to suppress the "storytelling setting" in the interest of making the tales "readable by, or tellable to, non-Africans" (1)? Does such an interest justify the subversion of Jack Berry's coherently stated objectives when he set out to collect the texts in the first place? So, then, what does the student or teacher of African oral literature stand to gain from this latest collection of African folktales? The composite index promised in the introduction turns out to be everything rolled into one—a type index, motif index, and glossary of African expressions—but in the final analysis, it remains unhelpful in locating anything at all in a meaningful way.

Why then this collection? Could it be that the editor means business when he says that he is gunning for "non-African readers"? What is the evidence? On pages 2 and 4, we find a number of claims other than those quoted above:

This book is unique in the *care and accuracy* that have been *applied to its translation and in the conversion from African to Western folk traditions.* These tales are *as enlightening for modern American adults and*
children as they are for African adults and children. In fact, in reading them, one can begin to see, not differences in our cultures, but similarities. (2; emphasis added)
Berry, unlike many of our earlier collectors and translators, was very much aware of the stylistic devices and folk motifs found in West Africa and could not allow any significant story element, no matter how subtle to be lost in the translation. (4; emphasis added)
How these contradictory aims could have been achieved is simply mind-boggling, and the less said about the incongruities, the better.
What does strike the reader of this book is that the editor found an opportunity to publish the materials collected by Jack Berry and simply did not want to miss the opportunity. Such opportunism would have been laudable if the editor had reached out for collaboration with a professional scholar in the field of oral performance or folklore, since, from his showing in this book, he is quite clearly not one himself. But failing to do this, he has gone ahead to compile an anthology that is nothing short of a dishonor to the more methodical and professional Jack Berry who collected the tales. The labor and expense consumed in the production of this book would have been better used in publishing one of numerous broadly-based, performance-oriented, and ethnolinguistically specific collections that are lying waste in the filing cabinets of their yet undiscovered collectors and editors!

Kiswahili au Kiingereza? (Nchini Kenya)


Jaffer Kassim-Ali

The diffidence displayed by the Kenyan political leadership in the realm of language policy has remained a source of deep concern for the nationalists. Arguments have been adduced to show that this seeming lack of political will for cultural transformation is not entirely out of choice but a combination of factors that are beyond state control. Critics of the status quo refuse to concede the extraneous factor perspective. They perceive the lack of initiative as a reflection of profound ambivalence manifested by the culturally alienated elites. The derision for indigenous traditions and institutions is openly flaunted in their pursuits of the sought-after Western lifestyle. It is this coterie appropriately labelled as “Wafuasi” (Disciples) that Professor Hassan Marshad implicates in his eloquent book, Kiswahili au Kiingereza (Nchini Kenya).

Kiswahili au Kiingereza (Nchini Kenya) is a book that is intended to be a comprehensive survey of the history of Swahili language in Kenya from 1895 to the present. Judging by the author’s choice of linguistic medium and the tone he