

Arts and Africa

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ANNC. AND SIG. TUNE:

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Welcome to Arts and Africa. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and in today's programme we hear about folk tales and oral literature in Swaziland.

SIG TUNE:

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Oral literature in Africa is in danger of disappearing. With more and more people moving into the towns and the popularity of radio, the pattern of family life is changing. Increased urbanisation is causing a whole lot of new social problems, and the generation gap has been widening.

Oral literature has survived by being passed on by word of mouth from grandmothers to grandchildren.

What can be done to preserve oral literature in the climate of Africa in the 1970's? One person who is trying to find out is Jill Garb, a former lecturer at the University of Botswana, Swaziland, who's been doing field work in Swaziland for the past two years in oral literature and in particular, Swazi folk tales.

I asked Jill first how she would define oral literature.

JILL GARB:

Oral literature differs from written literature obviously in that it is spoken literature as opposed to something which is written down and it is a traditional literature basically, which is often used as well though, in a very modern context. Oral literature is used for political means, to entertain children, it's used in the form of myths and legends, riddles and proverbs. Oral literature encompasses a very wide range of things.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

And is it actually performed - does somebody stand on a platform or

in the open air

JILL GARB:

Well, it depends on what kind of oral literature - yes, I would say it is definitely performed. There's praise poetry which is poems in praise of self, or of objects, or of cattle or mainly of the chief or the king. And then of course, folk tales, which is my speciality, well, my special region of interest anyway. They are performed usually by old women to children, to other women, in the traditional setting round the camp fire at night. Tales are normally told in the evenings by old women to the children and to the members of the family. But the interesting thing about it is that there was a belief, but not anymore, and people from all over Swaziland tell me that the reason that tales are told in the evening is that there is a fear that you would grow horns if you told stories during the day and that, unless you put a very small piece of grass or stick underneath your headdress which would prevent the horns from growing, you would definitely wake up with horns the next morning ! And in fact, an interesting anecdote is that when I was teaching at the university, and we were having a tale-telling session one afternoon for a seminar, all the students came in with pieces of stick stuck under their headdress with one on my desk for me to make sure I wouldn't grow horns by the next day !

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

It's extremely interesting and probably at this point you could give us an example of this type of story.

JILL GARB:

Of the kind of tales told ?

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Yes.

JILL GARB:

Well tales on the whole I would say, are told for entertainment. There is a lot of controversy about what role tales actually have in a society. Are they told to teach kids something or are they told mainly to entertain children. Most of the Swazis that I spoke to and I spoke to many, believe that stories on the whole are for entertainment and to put kids to sleep or after a long days work, the women, after being in the fields all day, actually relax and enjoy sitting round telling stories.

But most of them do have a didactical moral element in them. What I was trying to do in my work in Swaziland was to actually see how far this went and whether the stories as a whole taught the children the cultural norms of the society and actually bolstered the traditional views and traditional beliefs by telling stories. Let me tell you an example of the type of story a grandmother would tell to young children with a moral in it and we have an example here.

Perhaps we'd like to listen to that.

SWAZI FOLK TALE EXTRACT:

JILL GARB:

Well, that of course is in Swazi language, so you'd like me to give you a small resume maybe in English ?

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Yes, if you would.

JILL GARB:

The story is about two daughters, two very beautiful girls and they go every day to draw water from the river. One day the older daughter falls and breaks the pot with which she is going to draw the water and is very afraid to go home because of the wrath of her mother. The younger daughter says "OK I'll go home and tell them you've broken the pot, but I'm sure you don't have to worry about it". Anyhow, the elder daughter gets very upset and makes off into the forest. On the way she meets various obstacles, she has to perform very unpleasant tasks. She has to help a strange old lady who's walking on her hands loaded with wood on her back and the woman says "well my child, for your help I'm sure you'll find a good husband when the time comes". Then there is an old lady (there are some very gory details to this story), further along who has infected eyes and she says to the girl "will you please help me my child to clean my eyes" and the girl cleans her eyes and the old lady says "well, I'm sure you'll find a husband in time and when you come to the next village you will have to prepare a meal and do what the people tell you, and everything will be OK".

Anyhow, this is what she does and she reaches the village and there is some corn given to her which she has to grind and she has to make porridge. Then she is told to go into a small hut and wait. Suddenly from the top of the hut is this great rustling which comes through with very good sound effects when you're watching the performance because of course, in Swazi tales, all oral literature is interspersed with what we call, idioms, sound words that you can't write down and which makes the performance so live and so vital. Anyway, to get back to the story, she's in this hut and a great snake comes slithering down and she's very frightened but she remembers what the old woman has told her and the snake says "don't be afraid, I'm to be your husband" and she controls the fear and finally gets used to the idea that the snake is going to be her husband and begins to live with him and tends to him. After a year or two they have a child and she still has not visited home since the accident with the pot. Finally she asks permission when the child is born, it's a very beautiful child, a human child, whether she can go home to

visit her family and the father of the snake, her husband, gives permission and she goes off home to visit.

When she gets home, her younger sister sees this beautiful child and becomes very jealous and she too wants to be married. So, the whole point is that the second daughter does the same thing, the same incidents happen again except the opposite thing happens, she doesn't help anyone along the way. She is very wilful, she's very angry, she's very proud and when she gets to the village at the end she prepares a meal in a very slipshod way and is very angry when she is put into the hut to wait for her husband, whoever he is.

Of course, when the snake appears she panics completely, gets very hysterical and starts to scream and runs all the way home with the snake behind her whipping her with his tail. And again, you have these terrific sound effects, the child running, the whipping noise of the snake. Finally she gets home and she's shouting to the people in the crowd "look out, I've a snake behind me" and they capture him, burn him and dig a big hole and put the snake in it.

In the meantime, the other daughter realises this is her husband, but doesn't say anything and when the snake has been killed and burnt (this is a synopsis, the story does go on for a long time!), she collects the ashes of the snake and buries them in her own hut and then about a week or so later, the hole opens up and suddenly this beautiful young warrior emerges and she's finally got her husband again and the younger daughter is punished for her obstinancy.

Well, this kind of story is told with a lot of vitality and effect and to teach young girls humility and, that if you are going to find a husband, you listen to your elders and you go about it in the prescribed way and your patience will be rewarded. But at the same time it is very entertaining.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Yes, I can see that.

JILL GARB:

So what happens is that the children, or the people listening to the story, become very emotionally involved. It's not like someones standing up and saying "this is the way you find a husband!" but it's involving the audience emotionally in the tale so that they become part of the tale. For example, in the snake chase all the kids stand up and yell and shout and get very involved.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well, we have an similar sort of thing done in Ghana.

JILL GARB:

I'm sure.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

In point of fact, the children are not only told stories by the elders, but they themselves tell it to each other.

JILL GARB:

In Swaziland that happens a lot too. In fact, one of the things I did notice this last time I was in Swaziland, was that there seemed to be a generation gap in the telling of tales. Grandmothers tell children tales, the mothers now, especially in the urban areas who have jobs and many of them told me that they don't have time anymore to tell tales, so the kids tell tales to each other, the tales they've got from their grandmothers. But one wonders what's going to happen in generations to come, because there is a whole sort of generational gap that seems to have been left out and how important these tales are to the children. The children, when asked, all love the tales and enjoy listening to them very much. The parents when asked, specifically in the towns, would tell me "well, these are things of long ago, they're not very important any more" and it seems to me a great shame because the tales are really very beautiful.

ALEXTETTEH-LARTEY:

At this point, I think I should ask you this question. Do you think there is any chance of these things being written down, in other words, of written literature produced out of them? Otherwise, as you say, in the course of time, they will probably die out altogether.

JILL GARB:

Yes, I think there is. I think one has to be very careful when writing down oral tradition. The fact that it's oral, it's a performance, it's full of sound effects, it's full of mime, gesture, it's very dramatic in a way. And to be able to write down a tale and yet still keep the flavour of it, I think one would have to use a lot of ingenuity. I think that African tales written down, can tend to be very boring.

For example, the way repetition is used in a tale, can build up suspense in a dramatic situation, while written down, the outline may seem very facile or very boring. But I think it can be done in a kind of way if the author uses his imagination and sticks to the authentic way of telling a tale as closely as possible and perhaps putting in and padding out the gestures in writing, to make the tale live still.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well, in order to keep the liveliness, the life-like quality of these tales, they only appear as very cold print on paper, isn't it then possible for some performances to be recorded on tape for posterity ?

JILL GARB:

Yes, I think in the last 10 years, the use of the tape-recorder has changed the field of oral literature entirely. I mean, tales used to be collected by missionaries, by travellers in the last century and were usually written down from informants, often very badly.

With the use of tapes, not only are you able to capture the very kind of things we've been talking about, but you are often able to ask questions to the audience as to how they feel about a tale or why it is told in a certain way. You can also collect the variance of a tale which is a fascinating study to see how the tales vary from area to area or from particular performer to particular performer. You can also weed out a mere story teller because everyone in Africa is a story teller as I'm sure you well know, from really good professional performers and you are actually able to capture the difference, because a tale is a tale but a tale is a very different tale when told by different people. I think a tape recorder is invaluable.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Is this going to be part of your research ?

JILL GARB:

Well, all my research that I've done, I've done with a tape recorder and with a Swazi assistant who's helped me. I've many varieties of many stories on tape and I hope to work with these and see if I can put a collection of tales together for the Swazi people, I hope.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Now African story telling is often accompanied by music - I mean music is as essential to the Africans being as a story itself.

JILL GARB:

I agree.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Have you any idea about Swazi music ?

JILL GARB:

As far as Swazi music is concerned, in folk tale narration there is always a song or chant as a focal point of the tale. There is of course, a lot of Swazi music played on different bow instruments, but this is something entirely different.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Jill, thank you very much indeed for an interesting review of oral literature in Swaziland.

MUSIC: Swazi music.

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