

The Oral Tradition

The ramifications of what is generally referred to as the African oral tradition were discussed by Dennis Duerden, chairman, Dr. Godfrey Lienhardt, Cambridge anthropologist, John Nagenda, Ugandan writer, and Lewis Nkosi, literary editor of **The New African**. The transcript is reproduced by permission of Transcription Features Ltd.

DUERDEN: The traditional picture of the folk story teller is, I think, to be found in descriptions that have come to us recently of folk story tellers in Ireland, of men who sit at the fireside on long winter nights surrounded by a vast group of people who assemble to listen to their skills in telling very long, complicated, very embroidered stories, which have been handed down as part of the oral tradition . . . I would like to begin by asking whether their counterpart exists in Africa and whether any of you have actually seen or been present on the occasion of these performances?

NKOSI: Yes, I have. In my part of the continent, anyway, it is presumed that this kind of traditional folk culture has died, or has ceased to be of importance, and yet I can remember when I was young being told stories in the evening by not only my parents but by people who were our neighbours, because there used to be some kind of social organisation in which neighbours got together because it was good to find out what each neighbour had been doing during the day and so discuss the general life around the village or the urban area in which you lived; and in the process children used to flock to these places and you would insist on hearing a story. But there was also an interesting aspect to this, that the reason why children born in the cities, who might not have had any contact with this kind of cultural phenomenon, still wanted to be told stories was that in school teachers who might have grown up in the villages insisted that each student should come to school with a story to tell to the class, and so this was our way of amassing an anthology of folk tales . . .

DUERDEN: John, have you had similar experiences to the Irish one that I described and the ones that Lewis has been describing in South Africa?

NAGENDA: Well, my own experience has not been one of listening to professional story-tellers . . . but I do know they exist in Uganda and I know of friends who have listened to these men. My own experience of listening to folk lore, which after all does not only include the folk tale but also the customs and folk songs, has been with other people of my age and people slightly older, my parents when they had the time, sitting down during the evening, perhaps not around the fire but probably outside on the verandah and telling these stories, so that in fact it was people coming together and telling these stories to each other. A lot of these people who told these stories would themselves have learnt these stories from professional story tellers, but I must confess that I never really heard these stories from professional story tellers.

DUERDEN: The word "professional" is rather a difficult one is it not? Because the kind of people they are thinking of are presumably people who took great delight in entertaining other people, but were not like travelling musicians or travelling entertainers in that they presumably were not paid or did not make a profession of what they were doing.

LIENHARDT: I think the professional thing is absolutely essential for knowing more about what happens in African story telling because I think the performances of professionals, for example in Nigeria you do have professional entertainers, have been confused in the literature we have on this subject with the supposed performances of adult villagers amongst themselves. There is not one good and convincing account from my reading, of adults sitting together in an African village, telling one another stories for entertainment. Not one! And if one were found, it would be most valuable to have. This material simply has not been collected, I imagine, but on the whole people have copied earlier ideas that the English and the Irish had about their own folklore and referred it, to some extent, to Africa, and I have never seen a group of adult villagers solemnly sitting down to amuse one another with folk tales. They may have done so of course, fifty years ago.

NKOSI: I just do not know what is meant by amusing one another. I do know that during the times of ceremony amongst the Zulus — when I was growing up I lived for about two years in the countryside — there was a time of great ceremony when beasts were killed and there was one person who could recite praise poetry, even to my Uncle, to the Kumalos, and in the process of so doing would mention some aspects of Zulu history, some aspects which were not history at all; some were really legend and had no basis in fact, stories which I would include in the genre of folklore and these were told by someone who was an expert in telling stories. More than that, they had to be told in a certain specific place: that was in the cattle kraal. And beer would be moved into the cattle kraal and there would be women ululating to the music of say the drums and the men would chant songs, like the *Gida* songs . . .

LIENHARDT: But that is not the whole oral tradition of the people. You see, you said earlier that one of the motives for learning folk tales, from your own experience, was because you told them in school and they had to be interesting in school. Now what I would like to know — just as a matter of fact, from any part of Africa — is to what extent the folk tales which had undoubtedly been taken up by schools were taught to

children in the way you described and, therefore, handed on basically through children and to what extent, for example, if you went to school in the circumstances you described — one of the special ceremonial type of recitals which are of course part of oral literature which is not differentiated into fact and fiction and so on, to what extent that would have been acceptable as something to tell in schools.

NAGENDA: Well, if I may bring the Uganda experience in at this point. Undoubtedly at court — at the King's Court, the Kabaka's Court — there were professional story-tellers and this was repeated in the lesser courts (the County Chiefs) right down the line. They would have somebody who was a "hanger-on" and was given food and somewhere to stay, so that he could regale the court with a story. And that happened and I know a lot of people who have known this and my own grandfather had such a story teller. Men would get together in a village, drinking, and somebody would start plucking a harp, for example, as background to his story and then he would recite, probably in a manner of poetry, a folk tale, or a tale, and this happens even now in the villages. And there is, for example, quite a well-known story in Uganda, *Ugnamuama*, a man who was killed by a crocodile and this I have heard many times myself.

DUERDEN: Is there perhaps a sort of rather undefined boundary between praise poems and folk stories? The Irish folk stories, the Celtic folk stories seem to be really folk stories about heroes.

LIENHARDT: Yes, they are part — I think part of traditional history, however entertaining and fictional some elements may be. What I was really wondering about: the African material about which very little really is known, you have, say, the sort of stories which every child knows, like in England "Jack and the Beanstalk" or "Cinderella," those kinds of stories. Now what I would like to know is whether anybody remembers adults in an African village or town for that matter, sitting down to tell one another these stories. And as far as John's recollections go and Lewis's, obviously the whole occasion of the telling of what we would call a fictional narrative, you see, is one of some sort of entertainment or ceremony. Things have not been divided into history, literature or into creative or even inventiveness — after all there is simply no scope for inventiveness in a traditional tale which you have to tell the children. You can add bits to it until the child goes to sleep.

I'm quite sure from my own experience of the bit of Africa I was in, that is, the Sudan, that children go to be entertained by very often girls who amuse themselves in other ways before going to bed and they are told a story and then they want to hear more and as is not unfamiliar in telling children stories here, a bit more is added of a purely repetitive nature, which has not an artistic element in the story, until the child goes to sleep before whoever has been telling him the story has been

able to add a bit more to it, you see. Whereas the basic story is undoubtedly whole: it has a beginning and an end. As it happens here with children, a lot that is added to it eventually becomes part of the story.

DUERDEN: But you know, you have completely different kinds of folk stories, it seems to me. Characterise it as the difference between Grimm's fairy tales and the Nibelungenlied. One is a sort of folk memory which is handed down and the other one is a fairy story for children. Now how do these categories apply to African folk stories? Would, for example, the Anansi, the spider folk stories collected by Rattray or the Tortoise stories collected from the Yorubas in recent years — would these be children's stories?

LIENHARDT: I should like to ask you all a question on a matter of fact. That is — let us say among the Zulus or the Baganda or in your experience, Dennis, among the Hausa — do you find that the official preface, as it were, what is said before a story is told, takes a particular form when you have a fictional tale, that is a form of saying this is a story rather like a thing that appears at the beginning of English novels, or that the characters in this novel are fictional and any resemblance to any person living or dead is not intended. Now certainly with the Anansi stories, I think with the Yoruba stories and in the very specific names by which different sorts of stories are known in other parts of Africa, there is a clear distinction between what is intended to be accepted as fictional and what is intended to be accepted as fact.

NKOSI: There definitely is that kind of preface amongst the Zulus. I don't know how you can translate it into English but we usually had stories told to us by adults, and they would start these stories by saying: "*Kwasukasukela!*" The rough translation of that is: "It started from the beginning" or "This is how it began" and from there on you assume that this was a tale and did not necessarily have anything to do with facts.

LIENHARDT: I tell you why I mention this because, you see, the words "folklore, folk tale, pre-supposed early experience which mixes up myths, legends and what not, and has been presented in much writing about African literature. There are difficulties in finding myths and legends and so on and it is undoubtedly true that references move from one genre to another — much as Shakespeare's history plays refer to something by say, Froissart, and this refers to something which presumably happened in history. But as far as the treatment of African literature is concerned, I think there has been until very very recently, too little recognition that there was a genre which was specifically fiction, whatever was referred to in the fiction. ●