

The Living Story

PETER MEGO OGBANG

African oral literature
— a Nigerian experience

MANY INTERESTING QUESTIONS were raised in the Transcription Centre discussion on oral literature, of which Mr. Dennis Duerden was chairman. Ama Ata Aidoo's article — "The African Literary Tradition I" (July 1966), more than the opinions of Messrs Nagenda and Nkosi, answers in full the issues raised by Dr. Lienhardt and Mr. Duerden concerning the worth and method of preserving the oral literary tradition. Miss Aidoo states, *inter alia*, "Up to the present day the telling of folktales is a major social activity among many African peoples." This applies to my own Obudu people in Ogoja Province in Nigeria.

For them (and for me) the traditional culture is not a nostalgic or romantic glori-

fication of the past but a living reality, the social focus that gives coherence and significance to their very existence. The oral tradition remains the main, as well as the most important, source for the history and literature of peoples without writing and the tradition itself is preserved by the way it is handed down.

My experiences are similar to those of Aidoo in Ghana and Nagenda in Uganda: it is not the professional story teller (I have never met one myself) who tells these stories; everybody does, except, of course, in the case of stories belonging to the esoteric tradition.

Folktales and other categories of oral literary expression provide a mechanism by means of which the people conceptualise and analyse their social set-up, and if one is sufficiently perceptive, one can glean the social attitudes and values of the people from the tales.

Every tradition evolves from and is preserved within a particular cultural matrix, so that it would be rather presumptuous to generalise on "the African" oral tradition; yet I have found a recurrent pattern of folk tradition in the rural areas, at least in the Ogoja, Efik, Ibibia, Idoma, Ijaw, Bini and Ibo villages that I have been to. Invariably, I have discovered that the oral tradition is not for these village people a special preserve of the "professional" but part of the common cultural heritage which they compete with one another to narrate with lively enthusiasm.

On 6th August 1966, I had a record crowd of 521 villagers in Obudu all eager to narrate one tale or recite an oral poem at my invitation. During the performance, people raised points of correction whenever they felt that the informant distorted the tale or forgot some important episode which has an important bearing on the plot; the informant would accept the correction in good humour and a spirit of healthy competition prevailed throughout the night-long performance. Conversely, credit was lavishly accorded to any informant who used his imagination to invent episodes that vehicled the plot or heightened suspense, or who employed his own symbolism and poetic allusions.

DR. LIENHARDT ARGUES: "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 . . . and I have never seen any group of adults solemnly sitting down to amuse one another with folk tales. They may have done so of course, *fifty years ago*." (*Italics mine*). My experience described above could probably inform Dr. Lienhardt and invite him to come to Obudu in Ogoja Province where he will find adults — indeed a whole village — *cheerfully* sitting down to amuse themselves with folktales and other oral recitations. ●

Continued from p.186

supported by Japan, New Zealand and some of the Latin American countries) and the views of the rest, when economic measures against South Africa were called for. This divergence hardened when the discussion turned in subsequent meetings to the question whether apartheid constitutes a threat to international peace. By the time the final meetings were in progress and the seminar was preparing to consider its conclusions and recommendations, it was satisfying that the United States and the United Kingdom had modified their stand on some matters; but it was clear that they remained divided from the rest of the seminar on the question of supporting the imposition of sanctions. Thus while they supported a proposal that "all member states should discourage closer economic and financial relations with South Africa, particularly in investment and trade," they declined to support the conclusion "that apartheid constitutes a threat to international peace and security and that the Security Council should turn urgent attention and give early consideration to the problem."

BUT THE SEMINAR PRODUCED unanimous conclusions on a number of important questions, and unanimous support for new measures. Among the former are the conclusions that: "all states should refrain from cultural and sports relationships with South Africa . . . (and) . . . encourage consumer boycotts of South African goods and products"; "United Nations should take immediate steps to co-operate with the Governments of Basutoland, Bechuanaland and Swaziland to guarantee their independence and territorial integrity . . . and invite its Member States to form a consortium of donor countries" to provide economic and technical aid for these territories; the United Nations Trust Fund and Defence and Aid Fund International should be supported by Member States. Among the latter are the proposal for the establishment of an Information Centre "to be financed from the United Nations regular budget," and the recommendation that an "international conference of non-governmental organisations such as trade unions, church, student and youth groups, drawn from countries trading

with South Africa, should be held soon to consider the problem of apartheid and explore ways and means of overcoming it."

The report as a whole deserves careful study as the most recent examination of the South African situation in an international context, with a strong emphasis on the urgent need for reinforcing the universal condemnation of apartheid with the application of concrete measures directed against the present government of South Africa. ●

WHAT IS HAPPENING IN AFRICA?

ASK PEOPLE WHO KNOW—THEY READ

Africa 1966*

(AS DO SIXTY-ONE GOVERNMENTS)

Africa 1966, the seven-year-old confidential newsletter, is read fortnightly by most businesses, embassies, government and university departments, and institutions who are interested in Africa.

In five continents people value its objective and exclusive reporting on African political and economic trends. Why not write for a sample copy yourself?

SUBSCRIPTION ENQUIRIES TO: AFRICA 1966,
33 RUTLAND GATE
LONDON, S.W.7
ENGLAND.

*25 issues for 7 gns. or \$ 25
including second-class airmail