

BOOK REVIEW

S.B. AHMAD, *Narrator as Interpreter: Stability and Variation in Hausa Tales*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited (2002) paper back, 249 pages. ISBN: 9780291032. Distributed by African Book Collective Ltd. Price: £14.95 / \$24.95.

West African fictional narratives, often referred to as folktales, have featured in many an anthology, some dating from the nineteenth century. One of the most well known collections of Hausa tales is Rattray's 1913 omnibus collection of *Hausa Folk-lore, Customs, Proverbs, etc., collected and transliterated with English Translations and Notes*. The translation of these tales has been further subjected to particular editorial bias. Rattray in his introduction was concerned that some of the language in which the stories were originally told was not fit for nursery children. This kind of bias has persisted, as versions of traditional tales are more and more frequently being rendered as written texts for children. An interesting manifestation of this phenomenon is the insistence that there shall be a moral at the end of the tale, even though many tales end with some ambiguity within the indigenous tradition.

Thus, while Ananse, Gizo, and Ijapa (the Akan, Hausa, and Yoruba trickster figures respectively) may have become well known in West Africa and around the world, scholars interested in tales have recognized that there is far more to the tale than one particular version of the plot and that the traditional fictional narrative exists within the complex context of its telling. A range of interesting approaches have been taken. Many of them involve the identification of the narrator, details about the audience and their participation in the story telling event, the retention of the narrators' words even in translation as well as the provision of the original language version of the text. The contributions of Finnegan, Kilson, Kropp Dakubu, Pepper Clark, Okpewho, Owusu Sarpong, Yahaya and Yankah to scholarship on traditional fictional narrative in West Africa is notable in this regard.

S.B. Ahmad's work is an important addition to the above scholarly efforts. Of Hausa origin himself, he offers important insights from within the culture. He reminds us that unlike other cultures, Hausa society, Islamized since the fourteenth century does not accord *tatsuniya* a high status as an art form. It has essentially been relegated to the realms of the irreligious, only fit for the privacy of the home and the flighty entertainment of women and children. However through his study of one hundred and fifty tales and the context of their telling, he reveals that narration actually remains an art form of some complexity, particularly through the agency of the narrators.

Though essentially interested in the important phenomenon of stability and variation, the author provides a comprehensive background to the nature of the Hausa fictional narrative, its status and the tale-telling process. Two interesting features of the introduction to the book are the brief bio-data of the narrators involved in the study and the literature review. There are two 'house wives' (one literate and in a monogamous relationship), a teenager, a mature university student and a professional performer. The care taken by Ahmad in the selection of performers yields a fascinating selection of tales revealed in the ensuing chapters of the book and a convincing exposé on his main area of interest, being variation and stability.

By the time one gets through the brief literature review on Hausa tales, the importance of *Narrator and Interpreter* as a published text becomes quite patent, for, although there are some interesting studies almost all of them are unpublished endeavors prepared in pursuit of academic laurels.

Chapters five and six carry the main thrust of Ahmad's thesis. They are however preceded by three chapters in which he provides first a social context for tale telling in Hausa society,

followed by a thematic and then a structural classification of these tales. Chapter five concentrates on the application of the thematic and structural analyses to the notions of stability and variation. By comparing different versions of particular tales, the author shows that tales with apparently different characters and scenarios may have the same underlying structure and vice versa. He also amply demonstrates how both the Islamic and colonial experiences of Hausa society have introduced elements of variability into tales told in that society.

In chapter six, Ahmad moves on to demonstrate the many subtle ways in which the performer's personality and life trajectory can shape each tale and make it unique. To establish his case, he provides a background to the telling of a tale by each narrator, followed by a summary of the tale and an analysis of his/her narrative techniques.

Now, a few remarks about the organization of the book. Each chapter is divided into distinct sections and ends with helpful concluding remarks. It is sometimes difficult, however to follow the logic for placing certain pieces of information and analysis. Section 1.5.1 which highlights introductory and closing formulae, takes away from the fascinating introduction of the narrators. There is also that ever so slight whiff of an academic thesis about the text which this book could have easily done without. Table 1 on page 31 is a case in point, particularly because the classification criteria are reproduced uncritically by Ahmad even though the very thrust of his book indicates that these criteria have been superseded by a more trenchant analysis.

While summaries of tales are provided as appropriate, within the body of the book, the appendixes contain a delightful collection of twenty Hausa tales in both English and the original Hausa, presented with useful contextual information about the narrator and audience. The challenges posed by translation are nonetheless present. The language in which the stories are narrated is vibrant and organic. There is a tantalizing lyricism to the narrative which comes across graphically even for non Hausa speakers and reminds one of what one is missing in translation. Ahmad's translations are more literal and functional than literary. In one case, confronted with the ribald language in which some of the dialogue is rendered, he retreats into the footnotes to provide the literal translation. Thus, while he explains in footnote 13 that the narrator uses the abusive term *bura uba* – 'the penis of your father' liberally in the story 'The World is but a Well', he considers it 'gutter language' and substitutes the insipid 'you idiot' in the text. The moral of the tale? Thank God for footnotes.

The value of the book would also have been greatly enhanced by an updated bibliography featuring more recent references. For comparative purposes, studies and publications by other African folk tale scholars such as Wanjuki Warimu and Ciaruni Chesaina of Kenya or Kwesi Yankah of Ghana for example, taken in conjunction to Yahaya's reflections are likely to offer the reader an idea of the discourse that is developing on the continent around the changing shape of the art of story telling.

Clearly, there are far too few book-length scholarly publications about West African fictional narratives by indigenous scholars. *Narrator as Interpreter* by S.B. Ahmad contributes to contemporary debate around issues not only specifically in the area of narrative but also more broadly around issues relevant contemporary issues such as stability and change in Africa. It is worth repeating however that the book contains a real treasury of tales that should be a true delight to read.

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