

week, charging them for having connections with KONGRA-GEL (changed name for PKK-Kurdish Workers' Party) (BIA Net 06/09/2004).

⁷ A traditional Turkish drink similar to Greek *ouzo* and Arabic *arak*.

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"Nothing but ogre": Problems in the Conception and Practice of Folklore in Kenya

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In my days as a Graduate Assistant in the literature department where I now work, I registered students for their courses. Few students voluntarily signed up to study oral literature.¹ Common objections included: "besides teaching, what can you possibly do with oral literature?", "there is no place for oral literature in the job-market!", "can you please tell me why I should study oral literature?" and "after paying so much money for tuition, do I have to be forced to study oral literature?"

As is common wisdom in folkloristics, probing the mundane often helps to uncover profound meanings, and my yawn-filled clerking days led me to think about the conception and practice of folklore in Kenya. My students' disconcerting comments force us to revisit the place of oral literature in the Kenyan curriculum as well as our broader understanding of the discipline. Why, contrary to what has been commonly assumed, do young

people in and out of learning institutions insist on oral literature's "irrelevance" to their lives? During fieldwork I often encounter young people who proudly claim that they have not witnessed a single performance of a folkloric text, and that other than what was read to them in school, they have no idea whether "these things still exist!" Obviously, there are folklore texts in circulation every day, but can their users be blamed if their understanding of this material differs from our academic notions of how it ought to be described? Beyond this, is there something in the usage of such texts that academics have either over-looked or failed to grasp entirely? I seek to examine some problems associated with lay and scholarly uses of the term folklore. At a different level, I am interested in arguing for an expansion of the scope of the discipline to reflect the complex, ever-changing ways of folk expression.

"I want to study literature!" Some dilemmas of Kenyan folkloristics

Kenya's contemporary folkloristic enterprise is rooted in a tragic birth. It is perhaps passé to point out colonial

anthropology's role in bringing folkloric material to the attention of scholars, even if only to back missionary claims that such lore exemplified "the devils' work" amongst 'benighted savages' (e.g. Cagnolo, 1933). Nonetheless, this 'dark' presentation supplied a critical impetus for the first generation of Kenyan literary scholars who sought to challenge and correct this false presentation of African folk material. Such scholarship is arguably rooted within the ideological preoccupations of the Negritude movement that spawned in its wake a literary corpus aimed at reconstructing and legitimizing a 'black aesthetics'. The ideological charter for this approach for Kenyan folkloristics is best summed up by Kabira and Mutahi's nationalistic assertion that

for communities like many Kenyan communities whose culture, self image, history etc. was on the verge of total distortion and destruction by colonialism, the study of oral literature becomes very important. Through oral literature people can correct the false image and *distortions of their past* that have occurred through colonial experience. From there then they can recreate and create a more positive image of themselves and their culture [...] faith and self confidence in themselves and become better nation builders. (Emphasis added. 1993:3)

Was colonial power truly sufficient to destroy all representations but its own, and do we know for a fact that Kenyan communities at some point stopped having a "positive image of themselves?" Akivaga and Odaga agree with Kabira and Mutahi, adding that the study of oral literature should enable learners to "recognize the positive stream in their culture [and] look critically at their present day society, thereby developing a *true sense of nationhood and national pride*" (2004:ix). Implicit in these views is nostalgia for an authentic, primordial golden past. Without gainsaying the disruptive nature of colonial experience, still one must ask whether these scholars' views do not unnecessarily constrict folklore into a reactive function.

Indeed, if we consider the popular currency of this nationalistic view in the Kenyan academy, we may question why the agenda for Kenyan folkloristics should be yoked to a colonialism of which young people have no direct experience. Is it not even more pertinent to focus on folklore within contemporary material postcolonial Kenyan realities with whose vagaries (joblessness, political and judicial corruption, potholed roads, tough-talking I.M.F and World Bank bureaucrats) we are all too familiar? At any rate, how useful to nation-building—however that is defined—is a folklore project preoccupied with correcting past misrepresentations? It given the repeated use of possessive makers such as 'our culture' in school textbooks that harp on the theme of alien vs. indigenous. Indeed, romantic nationalism and the now widely discredited notion of authenticity are embedded in such terms as 'true Kenyan identity' and 'truly Kenya culture'. It must by now be clear to

anyone seriously interested in such matters that identity and culture make better sense when viewed and interrogated within the idea of plurality. Hence students' constant questioning of why the past—and the notions of identity conveyed by it—is being resuscitated.

In a related sense, we notice the ascription of a nationalist agenda to folklore studies; "through the studies of the various Kenyan peoples, we shall identify and develop the values that unite us as a nation" (Kabira & Mutahi, 1987:1). To the contrary, if the idea of diversity is correctly understood, we see that an investigation of the cultural values of diverse Kenyan peoples can only reveal as many differences as similarities. Even as we agree that the myths people tell about themselves serve to define wished-for identities, the study of folklore in Kenya does not seem to have imparted any perceptible sense of nationalism, at least going by students' objections to being taught the subject. Just as it is correct that colonialism misrepresented African cultures, it is equally correct to argue that any insistence on a post-independence "Kenyanness" carried in folklore is also a misrepresentation. Nevertheless, we should not be entirely surprised at this convergence between political and academic agendas given the role played by the Kenyan school system in the construction of desired social values.

The problem raised above has a profound resonance for the discipline especially in a post-colonial context. Thus if we accept the wisdom that "the spoken arts are but one among many forms of cultural expression of interest to folklorists" and that "the traditional focus on rural peoples has given way to an acknowledgement of the necessity of studying folklore in urban contexts as well" (Peek & Yankah, 2004:x) then locally we have not seen much effort at researching non-spoken arts. Furthermore, there has been little attempt at interrogating emergent urban folklore, for instance that which emerges at the intersections of popular culture and tradition (in local rap music), or the mass media and folklore (in the electronic media).

These emergent forms—riding on the back of technological advances—not only challenge traditional definitions of genre but also call attention to the various ways by which social consciousness is aroused and disseminated. Young Kenyans, attuned to the popular practices of youth culture, understand their (national) identity differently from their elderly countrymen (Samper, 2002; Mungai, 2004). If in the 70s oral literature students could ask "why are we being taught this *now*? Hasn't their (*sic*) time passed?" (Liyong, 1972:vi), then we can see that, in the face of drastic social change, students today feel the folklore taught in schools as even more profoundly 'past'. In fact, Mwangi (1974:52) states with startling finality that oral narratives "have become a thing past", somewhat making nonsense of her own contribution to the discipline. Given the ubiquity of her text in Kenyan oral literature curricula we might begin to understand students' opposition to the subject.

Accordingly, there is often a firm distinction drawn between what is studied in school (“that is oral literature”) and other verbal-expressive practices (“this is *not* oral literature!”) with which they process their everyday experience. Thus, I see a clear disconnect between folkloristics’ and the folks’ understanding of the material of our discipline. For instance, where we understand the term ‘story’ to imply narrative, in Kenyan everyday contexts people often use it to refer to “lies”, “excuses” and “fabrications.” In the minds of most of my informants to date, the various sub-genres of folktale are lumped together and labeled “ogre tales.” Elsewhere, popular musicians liberally spice their songs with local proverbs and sayings but they are emphatic that their work “does not contain any oral literature!” In other words, there is a broad consensus that *if* oral literature still exists outside school, it is to be found amongst old men and women, particularly in rural Kenya.

Thus, if the well-known European romantic view of folk and folklore as rural has been discredited, it is important to ask why people in a non-Western context and who have had no academic exposure to the theoretical debates about rootedness and authenticity persist in viewing folklore in these very terms. In part, this arises from the fact that in contemporary Kenya, folklore is largely acquired in school, thus determining the institutional context and parameters within which people think or fail to think about folk practices. Owing to their intense exposure to broader cultural flows, educated urban Kenyans (including teachers) regard rural folk as a local other in whom ‘authentic’ tradition resides. Consequently, when teachers and students think about fieldwork nearly all of them head to villages. As a further consequence, in Kenya we are faced in with the disconcerting situation where public sector folklore is unheard of. Few folklorists seem to see a role for themselves outside the academy.³

This brings me to another aspect of the role played by Kenyan schools in the creation of a “Kenyan oral literature”. Strictly speaking there is no such thing. As Prazak (1999) has argued, the Kenyan school system is one of the critical avenues through which desired socialization (especially into ideas of modernity and progress) is achieved; the hand of the state in furthering specific ideologies is all too perceptible. In folklore’s case, researchers and authors of school textbooks have culled texts from local communities and elsewhere and given the material a general ‘made-in-Kenya’ label. While making such appropriations some of these widely used texts have not bothered to debate or even acknowledge the question of borrowing and adaptation. Two examples here will do.

Mwangi’s *Kikuyu Folktales* (1974) is one of the most widely quoted oral literature books in Kenya. In this text the story “Mr. Spider’s Courtship” is passed off as a Gikuyu narrative. Yet scrutiny reveals that spider was *not* a character in Gikuyu folklore; in the one known riddle where he features it is noticeable that there will be found either a school or a mission station or both. Miruka, in his *Encounter with Oral Literature* (1994), apparently quoting Mwangi, repeats the same spider

story, attributing it to a Kenyan community without stating which. How accurate the analysis of a text can be without a context is another matter. Suffice it to say that these kinds of misrepresentations have led some to view school-based oral literature with suspicion and bemoan schooling as a “‘corrupting’ foreign influence” (Sankan, 1978:vii). Perhaps, seeing the disconnection between their non-school experience and the “fabrications” they are taught in school, Kenyans are right in dismissing oral literature as “mere ogre tales”?

Some preliminary questions for postcolonial Kenyan folkloristics

There is an urgent need to rethink the place of folklore in the schooling process, especially at the pre-university stage. In Kenyan schools there is generally a considerable effort at imparting folkloric knowledge—‘oral narratives’ and proverbs are the key genres used—especially in the teaching of Kiswahili. But, inevitably, one notices that the folklore forms thus introduced are not contextualized. The commonly used *Kaka Sungura* (literally ‘Brother rabbit’) stories come to mind. While trickster characters are common to much African folklore, in Kenyan schools the distinction between hare and rabbit passes without remark. Thus Brer rabbit folktales from Europe and America are presented as local material. Only in later years does it occur to the perceptive that indeed what is often imparted as ‘authentically’ local folklore at the early stages of schooling includes a refashioning of *Aesops’ Fables* blended with *Arabian Nights*.

That colonial interests were embedded in curricula is eidetic, has been much-studied (see Coe, 2004: 106-109) and is no longer an exciting subject. But we seem to have become complacent too soon with the mere introduction of oral literature into the curriculum. Post-colonial folkloristics must see as part of its agenda the vigorous unpicking of textbook folklore in order to interrogate its construction, reconstruction, uses and, especially, its falsehoods. Such a process needs to be more robustly engaged with theory. Indeed Masinjila (1992: 9) has observed the paradox that even though local research and publication in oral literature evinces “theoretical commitment”, such work tends not to state these commitments overtly. Needless to say, such boxing in the shadows is of limited use. At the same time researchers must guard against homogenizing paradigms such as the pioneers’ preoccupation with ‘Africanizing’ the discipline, which, useful as it has been, has clouded out other concerns. Questions of identity and consciousness must be re-opened in order to assess where the folk stand forty-two years after independence.

At another level, there is the need to seriously take up wider theoretical challenges. For instance, Okpewho (1992) has urged researchers to look into the folklore of Africa’s urban centers. Little evidence suggests that this call has been heard or taken up in Kenya. What stories do the throngs of jobless Kenyans tell as they while away the time outside factories in Nairobi’s Industrial Zone? What forms of folklore take place inside the vast Industrial Export Processing Zones in Nairobi City and Athi River town where low wages, sexual harassment and race politics between African workers and Indian employers

are routine issues? There is a vast corpus of unexamined occupational folklore.

Elsewhere, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) has argued that folkloristics can remain relevant by examining emergent sites of folklore. Again, it seems that Kenyan urban centers would be particularly productive grounds for such an undertaking. One only need look at the murals that adorn Nairobi buildings or the bright decorations on the public service vehicles known as *matatu*, or listen to the melodies as street families, preachers and assorted pavement entertainers perform for lunchtime crowds to realize what untouched grounds there are. Barrooms, TV and radio programs, as well as Internet cafes remain unexamined sites. I am not suggesting that Kenyan folkloristics needs to be re-shaped by either American or European folklore theories but that remaining attuned to research trends elsewhere can enable us to ask questions that might place us in more fruitful dialogue.

The implication of the foregoing is that locally, folk practices seem to jar against the key paradigms by which folklore has been traditionally interrogated and explained. There is thus an urgent need to re-assess the discipline's approaches vis-à-vis its objects if folkloristics is to remain a relevant way of continuously examining Kenya's cultural problems. Some of the obstacles might be overcome if oral literature scholars seriously take up ethnography as an integral part of the research process. Hitherto, the term 'fieldwork' has been bandied around with interviews and questionnaires being the staple tools of inquiry. These might be used but hardly form a basis for sustained reciprocal and illuminating relationships between scholars and informants. They merely succeed in achieving a sort of mechanical detachment (under the old positivist disguise of objectivity) between the folk and researchers. Yet this need not be the case: some voices have come out forcefully in support of a shift to redress the situation (see Okombo, 1992:19-32). Even as they remain sequestered in literature departments—with the frustrations, rewards, and anxieties about disciplinary identity that this might spawn—folklorists need to keep asking questions that will keep their work relevant. Then they will have a convincing answer to that perennial question "do I have to study oral literature?" the next time it is posed by 'lost' students.

Endnotes

¹ Oral literature, not folklore, is the term commonly applied in Kenya; here I use both. The bulk of this paper is based on material collected during fieldwork in Nairobi between 1999 and 2003.

² See Thiong'o 1978:145-150 for the full paper "On the abolition of the English Department". Arguably, few texts have been as influential in the broad field of post-colonial theory as Edward Said's *Orientalism*, but it needs pointing out that in this jointly paper Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Owuor Anyumba and Taban Lo Liyong articulate succinctly many of the key questions that later came to pre-occupy post-colonial literary theorists.

³ An exception worth noting is Ezekiel Alembi who works with his community to organize the annual Bunyore Cultural Festival.

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