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THE PATH IS OPEN:
THE HERSKOVITS LEGACY IN
AFRICAN ORAL NARRATIVE ANALYSIS
AND BEYOND
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Preface

This paper was commissioned by the Program of African Studies (PAS) as a complement to the new edition of *Dahomean Narrative* that was published by Northwestern University Press as part of the celebration of the PAS's fiftieth anniversary. The new forward to the volume places *Dahomean Narrative* within the history of the work of Melville and Frances Herskovits. *The Path is Open*, by Olabiyi B. Yai, an eminent scholar of African oral literature and especially the oral literature of Bénin, examines *Dahomean Narrative* as a contribution to the study of African oral arts.

Introduction

An unresolved tragedy is inherent in the task of the translator. She or he knows that translation is, at once, necessary and impossible. The tragedy attains heroic proportions with anthropologists insofar as they are translators of entire cultures. The tragic-heroic nature of anthropology was powerfully suggested to me as I read the last sentence of the lengthy and challenging introduction to *Dahomean Narrative* at the end of 122 pages of cultural anthropological analysis, “as spoken forms, the stories should preferably be read aloud.” I see this as an impassioned call to readers to displace themselves, an invitation to leave their world and to inhabit the Fon cultural world, as expressed in the following 155 transcribed narratives. And yet, in reality, what we are invited to do is to read aloud, in English, Fon texts of various genres that were supposed to have been orally performed. These performed Fon texts were then translated into French by Dahomean interpreters and, finally, translated into English by the anthropologist authors. Only a hero indeed could successfully cross so many borders.

But we do know that no such crossing is possible within the epistemologies of anthropology as practiced then and, by and large, now. The project of the anthropologist as cultural translator has been essentially intransitive, even as the intention is transitive. A discipline with a colonial pedigree can hardly promote an encounter on equal terms with its “object of study,” the colonized, thereby renouncing the colonialist inspiration and agenda. As we move into the third millennium, the foremost task confronting anthropology is, it seems to me, to courageously recognize and endorse its colonial pedigree in order better to exorcize it. In other words, it is by recognizing the intrinsic limitations of a colonial and, therefore, ultimately

endogamous discourse, that anthropology –as translation of cultures– will create the optimal conditions for a new, *second breath*. Indeed, a *global breath* anthropology with potential for effecting gradual and increasing transitivity and reciprocity between cultures. I am borrowing the concept of “second breath anthropology” from Michel Panoff’s seminal work *Ethnologie: le deuxième souffle* in which he suggested a *second breath* agenda for anthropology, then redefined as “a simple way of enlightening our action *hic et nunc* with a view to changing the world” (Panoff 1977, 119).

Melville Herskovits may well have agreed with this proposition. Let us recall that in 1959, one year after the publication of *Dahomean Narrative*, he delivered the Lugard Memorial Lecture in London, with the significant title, “Anthropology and Africa: A Wider Perspective.” While in some ways the works of Frances and Melville Herskovits are oriented to a colonial scientism, in others ways they anticipate the second-breath anthropology as advocated in the above lecture. In many respects, they aspired to the highest degree of transitivity anthropological discourse could reach. These coexisting and contrary tendencies permeate the work and frame my discussion here.

1 • *Dahomean Narrative and Its Contradictions*

The distinctive feature of *Dahomean Narrative*, one that sets it apart among contemporary works, is that it is the creation of two disciplines and two sensibilities. It certainly would be simplistic to argue that *Dahomean Narrative* is the product of Melville, the anthropologist, and Frances, the literata. Both Herskovitses possessed, to various degrees, the analytical tools of the anthropologist and the sensibility of the literary critic, with the attendant potential for harmony and tension. The ambition of anthropology, in the days of the Herskovitses, was totalizing. In the tradition of early European travelers, anthropologists sought to explain everything about a specific culture. Seemingly in an effort to make up for coming late in an old world, they endeavored to encapsulate the totality of a given culture in “a big book” for all to know and admire, as Melville Herskovits put it in his celebrated 1959 Lord Lugard lecture. On the other hand the literatus, always by definition a hedonist, sought to simultaneously exhibit particular exemplars of the gems encountered in Fon oral literature. Victims of the reflectionist literary paradigm, contemporary critics of *Dahomean Narrative* paid little attention to the hedonist's impulse¹ therein and, consequently, missed an essential dimension of the work, even as they pointed to some of its methodological flaws (to which we shall return). In its encoding as a project, as well as in its decoding by its contemporaries, the balance has not always been kept between anthropology and oral literature, between “Dahomeanness” and narrative, with the first of these term-couples being privileged over the second. The fact is that *Dahomean Narrative* is

¹ This hedonist impulse perhaps partly account for Frances Herkovits's reworking of Fon poems and their publication in a literary journal.

traversed by the dual impulses, resulting in what could be likened to an unfinished symphony. It is this unfinished characteristic that is appealing to a broad audience and is pregnant with modernity.

A legitimate question of an anthropological work and a measure of its success is whether the work is a fair *image* of the ethnic group it set out to present to the Western gaze. Its firm metaphoric pedigree, or its *donner à voir telos* is an essential criterion of its success. Forty years after its publication it is pointless to ask the question of the metaphoric correctness of *Dahomean Narrative* or whether it, along with the other Herskovits publications on Dahomey, is an adequate microcosmic representation of the Fon world. World view is no longer the pertinent issue. Works of this kind, by virtue of their very approximateness, call for a metonymic engagement by each reader. Although they could not have envisaged the appositeness of their act, the Herskovitses were right to quote the Fon proverb, “*the road is open.*” Indeed, a better translation of the proverb which is more faithful to the Fon original and to the reader’s impulse, would be “*the roads are open.*”

Dahomean Narrative opens roads that intersect at various levels and in various realms which bifurcate each another, like Fon configurations inspired from Legba, the Fon *vodun*, Lord of the Roads, as well as a universal linguist and hermeneut. Written in English, the international/imperial language *par excellence*, *Dahomean Narrative* places Fon oral literature, and Fon culture in general, on the international orbit. In the absence of an imaginative Béninois/Fon literature in English, and its paucity even in French, that uses the elements of the rich Fon cultural resource base, *Dahomean Narrative* was, and arguably still is, the work that

most projects the Fon culture in the international literary world.² It should, therefore, have been appealing to students of mythology, folklore, religion, history, and oral literature. It is lamentable, however, that the roads of exploration have not been trekked, and that very few Fon intellectuals have read it. Its contradictory nature remains unexamined by African scholars and yet, paradoxically, it is these tensions that prevent it from seeming completely dated and offer an interesting challenge for the African literary scholar of the present. But first, the fundamental problems of methodology have to be faced.

2 • **Methodological issues in *Dahomean Narrative***

Contemporary critics identified methodological flaws in *Dahomean Narrative*. In his otherwise rather sympathetic review, W.R.G. Horton states, “*Dahomean Narrative* is likely to attract considerable criticism from field workers because of the conditions under which these stories were obtained and recorded” (Horton 1959, 311-313). Horton suggested that despite Melville and Frances Herskovits’s brilliant treatment of the subject matter of the stories their methodology might have led them to “an inevitable mauling of the style and idiom of the more original versions” (Horton 1959: 311). His criticism is echoed in McCall’s more caustic assessment, “The weakest part is that entitled *Notes on Methodology* and we are told nothing of whatever precautions may have been used to prevent that traducing of meaning which proverbially accompanies translation: *traduttore traditore*” (McCall 1959: 256).

²As I am writing (March 1998), I am notified of the publication of a new collection of Fon stories in English. His author is Raouf Mama, a Béninois of Yoruba extraction who teaches English at Eastern Connecticut State University. The title of the collection is *Why Goats Smell Bad and Other Stories*, North Haven: Linnet Books, 1998.

In fact, the Herskovitses' field work methods in *Dahomean Narrative* sharply contrast with not only contemporary practices in the literary/folklore domain, but also, and perhaps more significantly, with their own past fieldwork in the New World. The Herskovitses were, of course, aware of the virtues of live performance recording in anthropological fieldwork. Not only did they attend storytelling sessions during their stay in Dahomey, but some of their observations and intuitions in *Dahomean Narrative* anticipate theoretical formulations on performance and improvisation in the 1970s and 1980s. Their methodological shortcomings in collecting and translating *Dahomean Narrative* are, therefore, all the more inexplicable. The methodology is more akin to a demonstration, in the parlance of oral literature criticism, i.e. a situation at the antipodes of real life performance, whereby artists are summoned by the anthropologist to show off in an artificial context. Perhaps we should allow the practitioners of oral literature, for once, to opine on their Western critics. For example, the quasi-demonstration situation in which Frances and Melville Herskovits have recorded and translated Fon stories would have been characterized by Brazilian popular critique of Western approaches to popular oral performance as *para inglês ver* (i.e. *for the Englishman's gaze*, the English man being the paradigm of "the other" in Brazilian popular imagination of the nineteenth century, before the American took over this role). Similarly, the Herskovitses' informants were undoubtedly conscious that they were telling "*Yovo hwenuxo*," or "stories for the white man."

"Our method of recording," say the Herskovitses, "was to take the text directly on the typewriter as our interpreters translated the narrator's flow of the story, given in Fon, the language of Dahomey. Except for native terms, or some locutions phrased in Negro-French,

which was set down as given in order not to interrupt the flow of translation, we wrote in English” (Herskovits 1998, 6). This trinodal process comprises the narrator, speaking in Fon, the interpreter speaking in a local variety of French, and the anthropologist-literati, typing in English. Transcription in the original language of the narrative, a crucial though, by no means unproblematic stage of African oral literature scholarship, is altogether skipped in this process. Note also that the authors use the term *interpreter* not *translator* when referring to French-speaking Dahomeans. They therefore translated into English French interpretations of narratives told in Fon. Even under normal literary circumstances, “Poetry is what is lost in translation,” as the adage goes. In this case, the pertinent question is, With so many filters and noises in the process, what is the literary status of the end product? What is the nature of the final text in English? How “Dahomean” and, more importantly, how *literary* is the output product, judged against both local and universal standards? Given the standards of folklore collection, this omission of a directly-recorded stage is mysterious, and perhaps bespeaks of a lapse, whether or not the omission was for pragmatic reasons.

Besides these legitimate and significant questions in *literaturnost* (literariness), there are even more fundamental issues pertaining to literary competence, in the Chomskian sense of the term *competence*. Our authors are, in their own definition, “Students [. . .] of the spoken arts of nonliterate peoples”(Herskovits 1998, 3). The key word here is *art*. By implication, they are interested, not in oral documents but more so in oral monuments, in aesthetically marked discourses by nonliterate people, to use Zumthor’s (1980, 39) pertinent distinction. It follows that not just any *priest* or *cult member* would qualify as a storyteller, for oral art is produced by

oral artists. It is therefore astonishing to read the following from the Herskovitses, “Another methodological point may be mentioned. In gathering the narratives, *we made no attempts to seek out men of reputation as story-tellers*” (Herskovits 1998, 8; emphasis added). It is equally ironic that the female voice is entirely silenced, in a country that boasts thousands of heroic poems composed by the celebrated Dahomean Amazons about their wars and other exploits in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. If the “priests of cult or cult members of rank in the hierarchy of Dahomean worship,” the “heads of families,” and “political chiefs” chosen by the Herskovitses on no explicit literary criteria were not coincidentally endowed with poetic competence based on Fon aesthetic standards, *Dahomean Narrative* would be faced with a massive problem of *literariness*, as the stories would not pass the Fon’s own test of spoken art. The Dahomeanness of the translation of such discourses, even through careful attention, into literary English would thus become problematic. Most people can tell stories, so one would not know where these particular stories stood on the range of literary expertise.

Equally questionable is the status of those the Herskovitses called “Dahomean interpreters.” What was their literary pedigree in Fon and French? Since they were supposed to render putatively aesthetic Fon texts in French, one can legitimately ask the question of their familiarity with the French literary register, canons and styles. When, for example, we encounter such unlikely words as *writing*, *destiny*, *prophet*, *line*, and *secretaries* in divination stories translated by them, we can legitimately ask the question, Who is speaking? Is it the Fon source of the text or the Fon interpreter? Or could it be the anthropologist-translator? If it is one of the last two, how much voice of the *traduttore* and how much of the *traditore* is audible in

these loaded words?

These are no idle interrogations, nor are they meant to facilely demolish a four-decade-old pioneering oeuvre. Beyond the Herskovitses, the issues raised here challenge our *current* practices and critical imagination as students of African oral literature at the end of the second millennium. Regrettably, even now few studies of African oral literature address issues of literariness and poetic competence within individual African cultures. The questions raised above suggest that the issues transcend the realm of methodology alone. I would like to argue that the issues are indeed epistemological in nature. Insofar as the anthropologist's *telos* is the description and analysis of the cultures of mostly colonized peoples, critics could be satisfied with faulting the Herskovitses for not following well-established rules for collecting and treating the materials needed for the attainment of the goals of the discipline. But from the perspective of a "cross-cultural analysis" which was emphatically avowed in the subtitle of *Dahomean Narrative* and from the standpoint of the African student of African oral literature, the queries are situated upstream of the issues of method, as they seek to investigate the nature of the entity called "African oral literature" as an intellectual category, as well as the conditions under which knowledge thereof is produced.

Accepted African oral literature scholarship, under normal circumstances, harbors an inbuilt silencing mechanism of the African voice. By reducing African oral performance to writing and their performers to the role of informant, the collector/editor, even with the best of intentions, promotes himself to the status of the heroic midwife of an exercise in literary parturition for the international, mostly non-African, gaze. With the methodology employed by

the Herskovitses to produce *Dahomean Narrative*, the anthropologists positioned themselves simultaneously as midwife and mother. For the voices of the Fon themselves are hardly heard here. Clearly, we are in the presence of an unintentional, innocently violent, and hence, tragic, gesture of *prise de parole*, a confiscation of the Fon voice. The tragedy is further reflected in the unsurprisingly laconic section in which a discussion of style and structure is attempted (Herskovits 1998, 50-54). In the absence of the original Fon text in transcription on which they could have applied their acknowledged analytical acumen, the authors uncharacteristically resorted to an escapist stratagem by artificially incorporating in their essay examples not even of Fon, but of Ewe onomatopoeic words culled from Westermann's *A Study of the Ewe Language* (Herskovits 1998, 51), or by invoking the "stylistic importance of . . . the absence of the passive voice," a strategy reminiscent of nineteenth century *fin de siècle* studies of African languages where absence of grammatical features of European languages were lamented because such features were thought to be universals or at least, *sine qua non* markers of civilization.

Despite these significant weaknesses, *Dahomean Narrative* was "an important book" and should still be regarded, even today, as "a major contribution" (Horton 1959, 311). What may account for the most innovative insights in Melville and Frances Herskovits's analysis of the Dahomean texts, and that invite a new and different approach, comes from their familiarity with Dahomean culture in nonrecorded, noncommissioned performance situations. The authors themselves suggested this interpretation, in a passage unnoticed, perhaps wrongly deemed unimportant by their critics, "Familiarity with the total setting in which the tale is told was gained by attendance at storytelling sessions held in the compounds at night. Here could be noted the

dynamics of voice change, the play of expression on the face of the story-teller, the use of gestures to vivify narration, the songs, the dance steps, in brief, all elements that give the tale stylistic unity and amplitude” (Herskovits 1998, 9-10). Those crucial elements of African oral performance were identified by the Herskovitses, even though they failed to give them the critical attention they demand. Possibly, they anticipated that the obvious vitality and variety of the narratives that follow, even as recorded in this flawed fashion, would inspire further work.

3 • **Classification of Genres**

An exogenous classification of oral literature of a given culture is invariably confronted with a dilemma: how to classify entities and literary forms where basic features are unknown? In my own view, a typology of literary genres should be a closing, not an opening, operation because a genre typology has little value as long as the features of the various types have not been thoroughly identified, studied and compared. But anthropologists need a genre classification of the oral literatures of the peoples they study, however crude and tentative it may be, at the *inception* of their work. Often times, they view their gesture as an *inaugural* venture, even though they may use a few local terms, as was the case with the Herskovitses. Since African cultures are reputed *preliterate*, it is assumed that they thereby lack a tradition of literary criticism that provides key criteria and terminologies, the latter being –so it is still largely and strongly believed– an attribute of literate cultures. Thus it has been standard practice by African and non-African students of African oral literatures alike to posit a critical *tabula rasa*.

With this kind of mind set, the analyst tends to impose a foreign grid, the one he is more

familiar with, on the African data, to work out a typology. The Herskovitses were familiar with Dahomean traditions at home and in the diaspora, and their experience of other human cultures was diverse and deep. They were, therefore, sufficiently attentive to local nomenclature in classifying Dahomean literature into types. Their binary classification of Dahomean narratives into two broad classes, namely *hwenoho* (sic) and *heho*, with subcategories distinguished within each class, was delicate when compared with other contemporary treatments of African oral literature.

There are two major problems in African oral literature classification that any analyst should be aware of, that such an approach is insufficient to address adequately. The first has to do with the tension between the nature of classification, as an exercise, and the nature of oral literature. The latter, as a living tradition, is in permanent transformation, with features migrating from one genre to another, thereby reshaping the types themselves. Like any oral literature, African oral literature is protean. The urge to classify, on the contrary, is predicated on an assumption of genre immobility and boundedness, at least at the moment of analysis. The implication of this tension is that analysts should be aware that all classifications are, by necessity, provisional. This is not to say, of course, that particular performances or narrative genres cannot or should not be ranked on a scale of accuracy or delicacy. It simply and importantly means that the best classification is perhaps the one that openly acknowledges the limitations imposed on it by the very nature of the living tradition being classified.

The second problem has to do with the constraints imposed on the literary accuracy of a classification by the language and metalanguage of the analyst and the tradition(s) in which he

inscribes his exercise. No human language is an innocent instrument of investigation, especially when used to apprehend phenomena beyond the boundaries of its birthplace. In this regard, the use of European languages to analyze African oral literatures could produce both positive and negative results. It could challenge African notions and concepts, and force Africans to revisit and question them. It could also effect a transfer of unnecessary and nonpertinent categories into the analyst's discourse, thereby obscuring the issues and phenomena being investigated. When these two hurdles have been removed, the crucial difficulty the student of African oral literature now confronts is how to articulate *both* conceptual tools of European literary criticism, derived from the European experience in written literature *and* their African oral counterparts, insofar as the investigator thinks that such exist at all.

Realizing the complexity of the task, it would be prudent if such reputed universals as *myth, poetry, fable*, etc. were not used in analyzing African oral literature without being problematized, in the sense of testing their relevance in specific African cultures. The difficulty with the Herskovitses' classification in *Dahomean Narrative* is that while it uses indigenous terminologies to distinguish broad categories, it retreats gratuitously into Aristotelian concepts for subcategorization. Nowhere did they take the precautionary step of establishing the relevance and acceptability of their categories in Fon culture. A plausible explanation for this is that the Herskovitses did not believe the Fon could have anything to offer but a simple binary classification that needed further refinement. Hence, their decision to "go beyond the dual division of narrative which they (i.e., the Fon) have formulated. For it is the essence of scholarly investigation that while one holds as closely as possible to the lines drawn by the data, one also

uses these as a frame within which *more refined levels of classification* are to be reached. In the case of the narratives it is possible in these terms, while also accepting the categories of the Dahomeans, to distinguish within each category types of stories that, from the point of view of the materials, of which they treat and the point they make, constitute valid classes” (Herskovits 1998, 17; emphasis added). The problem with this approach is that it is a circular argument and literally literary, in the sense that it privileges the *litera* text as translated by the anthropologists in their own language. It is circular because the anthropologists constituted and validated subcategories on the basis precisely of the text they themselves produced, using criteria, we suspect, that could only be drawn from their own culture, and *not* from the Dahomean culture. The Herskovitses were perspicacious to dwell continually on Fon oral tradition as a living tradition but evidently, the possibility of there existing a second order discourse, a Fon living tradition of *literary criticism*, was beyond their epistemic horizon.

The possible existence of indigenous African traditions of oral African literary criticism is still beyond the epistemic horizon of the vast majority of students of African oral literature today. The fact is, however, that such indigenous African traditions of literary criticism do exist. Absence of evidence is no evidence of absence, as the saying goes. Rather it reflects the poverty of our theoretical and methodological tools, in addition to exposing our intellectual laziness and exclusive dependence on colonized, extroverted discourses and paradigms. The idea of an oral literary criticism *tabula rasa* in Africa is a colonial invention. It is a fallacy being perpetuated thanks to the cloning of specialists of African oral literatures educated in institutions where scholars rely on exclusively non-African paradigms of literary criticism. An urgent task for

students of African literatures is to investigate indigenous criticisms of African oral literatures, ideally in African languages to avoid unnecessary distortions, and to draw inspiration from them for the construction of new and more powerful explanatory models of literary criticism. This is certainly a more promising direction than the current lazy overdependence on paradigms concocted by folklorists, medievalist or Homer specialists. What is urgently needed is theoretical audacity, for much of our current theoretical presuppositions rest on *doxa* not on *episteme*.

In the special case of Dahomey, and on the issue of literary typology, the Fon do have two orders or levels of classification. The first and elementary level could be characterized as crude and is meant for ordinary, uninitiated people. The second level is extremely sophisticated. It occurs among initiated literati. It is offered by Fon literati and/or oral poets when pressed for elucidations in post-performance situations. Even the crude level typology comprises three, and not two subcategories as postulated by the Herskovitses. The three subcategories, subsumed under *hwenuxo*, are as follows:

xexo: literally “bird stories,” “bird” here being a synecdoche for animal.

yexo: literally “ghost” stories, i.e., something akin to fairy tales.

tan: historical narratives, the word being a loan from the Yoruba *ítan* (history).

At the second level of classification, specialists usually provide a barrage of concepts and terms. Using ethnolinguistic criteria derived from the Fon discursive practice of oral literature criticism, Georges Guédou, a Fon linguist, identified no less than twenty narrative genres divided into two broad classes he christened “Didactic Narratives” and “Provocative Narratives.”

Although the two broad classes are Guédou's invention, they were arrived at by using Fon criteria, and in collaboration with Fon specialists. The genres and their names are used in the metalanguage of Fon critics/poets and their grouping under subclasses, with Fon terms translated into French, are the products of a lengthy interview with oral poets, in which the latter articulated their views, contrasting genres and subcategories (Guédou 1976, 831-892).

The main function of the didactic narratives is to augment knowledge and to help humans become what the Fon designate as *mexo* (or sage). The genres that constitute this broad class are invariably marked by the term *xo* (logos, discourse). The essential function of the provocative narratives is that they serve the purpose designed by their author. They are, therefore, subject-oriented; they are likened in Fon discourse, to "seeds of discourse" that are thrown or planted (*do* in Fon) and must generate another discursive reaction from their addressees. They are invariably marked by the word *gbè* (voice).

The Russian Formalists' concept of *dominant* could be evoked to emphasize that each broad class shares features of the other class, while foregrounding its peculiar social function. Precisely, social function is the important genre discrimination criterion. The Herskovitses' subcategorization based on the content of the stories, in addition to allowing for so massive overlapping as to be meaningless (almost half of each category could qualify as an "explanatory story" for example), would be counterintuitive to a Fon literatus. It is equally significant to add that the Fon insistently inscribe their classification of narratives within a broader regime of social and discursive practices that include weaving, painting, dance, and so on.

Yesi, a Fon sage, oral poet, and critic suggested the following classification of Fon

narratives, which I reproduce here in its entirety for two reasons. First, few among even specialists of African oral literature, believe that a sophisticated classification could exist in indigenous literary discourse. In addition, this is an opportunity to make available to specialists and nonspecialists alike precious information that has hitherto remained, and would otherwise have remained, hidden. Approximate equivalents in Western tradition, when they are sensed to exist, are offered within brackets:

1. *hwenuxo*,³ literally “time narrative” involving people.
2. *xexo*, literally “bird narrative” (folk tale).
3. *yexo*, literally “ghost narrative” (fairy tale).
4. *tanxo*, literally “historical narrative.”
5. *loxo*, literally “time resisting narrative” (proverbs).
6. *nubasoxo*, literally “lost and found narrative” (riddles).
7. *ma xogbe*, literally “divisive narrative.”
8. *jele xogbe*, literally “quarrel narrative.”
9. *dodo xogbe*, literally “mock narrative” (satire).
10. *de xogbe*, literally “prayer narrative.”
11. *nudome xogbe*, literally “curse narrative.”
12. *nuxwlexwle xogbe*, literally “vow narrative.”

³ For technical reasons and clarity’s sake, the principles of the Fon official alphabet and orthography adopted by the Béninois government in 1976 cannot be fully applied here.

13. *avi xogbe*, literally “cry narrative.”
14. *alexuxo xogbe*, literally “lament narrative.”
15. *bo xogbe*, literally “medicine narrative” (incantation).
16. *me mlanmlan xogbe*, literally “people folding narrative” (dynastic poetry).
17. *zun xogbe*, literally “abuse narrative.”
18. *gansise xogbe*, literally “rhythm understanding narrative.”
19. *mesisi xogbe*, literally “politeness narrative.”
20. *amuxoda xogbe*, literally “dew-on-hair narrative” (courtship poems: the protagonists spend a whole night outdoors exchanging vows through love poems chanted and sung, and consequently, gather dew on their hair).
21. *gbedome xogbe*, literally “salutation narrative.”

To analyze this classification and its use in full detail would be a book-length project. Suffice it here to indicate that sources exist to undertake such a project and that it remains one of the still-open paths forward.

4 • The Fate of *Dahomean Narrative* in Dahomey

A metonymic engagement of *Dahomean Narrative* demands a further reflection on the fate of this pioneering work on the African continent. Considering the entire oeuvre of the Herskovitses, Guyer and Easterbrook pertinently remarked, “As the key themes of scholarship change, and as the communities depicted in the research begin to take up the preservation, study and creative reworking of their own recorded traditions, collections take on a completely new

value and valence than they had for their original architects. A verbal image can be reworked into a song; a filmed sequence inspires choreography; a photograph carries a clue to a family history; an object testifies to technology; and the entire work provides grist for the critique through which scholarship examines and reshapes itself. We want to make these remarkable collections available to their new constituencies” (Herskovits 1998, 2).

Arguably, the Dahomeans are the most significant section of the “communities depicted” in Melville and Frances Herskovits’s research. Of paramount importance is the reception of their oeuvre, especially *Dahomean Narrative*, among the privileged constituency of the Dahomean intellectual community. The Dahomean intelligentsia is not only those intellectuals who trace their ancestry to the ancient kingdom of Dahomey, namely the Fon, but also the elite of the French colony of Dahomey and postcolonial Dahomeans, now Béninois. This new definition of “Dahomean intellectual community” is not an endorsement of French colonialism; it simply reflects the fact that the Fon elite, by and large, has been instrumental in the birth of the new elites of other ethnic groups and has served as a role model in colonial Dahomey and postcolonial Dahomey and Bénin. The Herskovitses – for whom the concepts of “living tradition” and “dynamic potential of a group” are a constant leitmotif– would certainly have endorsed our definition of “Dahomean intellectual community.”

What, then, has been the impact of *Dahomean Narrative* on the Dahomean intelligentsia? It is deplorable that, pioneering and comprehensive as they are, none of the Herskovitses’ books has been translated into French, the official language of Dahomey/Bénin. Apparently, the French colonial establishment did not encourage the translation of these major works, just as they did not

translate Captain Burton's *Mission to Gelele* (1864), with the wealth of information it contains. Obviously, there is a conspiracy of silence, a linguistic version of what one might call the "Fashoda syndrome" at work here. Given the importance of the Fon as a cultural group in their colonial possessions, it would have been expected that a French translation be made of *Dahomean Narrative*, a work heretofore unparalleled in depth and scope. One can measure the extent of the bias by contrasting this silence to the publicity mounted around the works of Marcel Griaule and his team on the Dogon (Griaule 1948). As a result, the Dahomean intellectual community has remained ignorant of the work of the Herskovitses. Presently, only a few dozen Dahomean intellectuals have read *Dahomean Narrative*.

Endogenous Knowledge, the recent book edited by the Béninois philosopher, Paulin Hountondji, includes contributions on traditional world views and orality by the Béninois intellectual cream yet fails to mention *Dahomean Narrative* in its bibliography (Hountondji 1994, 19). In the last two decades, major dissertations and books have been written on Dahomean thought systems and orality by such prominent Fon scholars as Adoukonou, Aguessy, Guédou and Kossou. Yet only Aguessy and Guédou mentioned *Dahomean Narrative* in their bibliographies. Guédou's dissertation topic was on the status of the spoken word in Fon culture, with a chapter on the classification of Fon literary genres. Within his work, he did not discuss the Herskovitses' classification, the only one preceding his.

Of all the aforementioned scholars, Aguessy is the only one who really engages the Herskovitses. He laments the paucity of stories involving Legba, his main interest in *Dahomean Narrative*; he includes a good discussion of the Herskovitses' analysis of the Oedipal theme in

Fon culture, on which he bases his own interpretation (Aguessy 1973, 4-23). However, there is no extended appreciation or critique. As can be seen then, *Dahomean Narrative* as a critical work of African oral literature has so far not been seriously engaged by Dahomean/Béninois intellectuals. More disturbing is that courses in African oral literatures are being offered at the Université Nationale du Bénin without any reference whatsoever to the works of the Herskovitses. This neglect reinforces, in a different way, the sense of tragedy we identified at the beginning of this essay.

The Dahomean intellectual community does not fare better in the realm of creative writing. The “creative reworking of their own recorded traditions. . .” evoked by Guyer and Easterbrook is virtually nonexistent. The rich mythopoetic tradition that is so vibrant as to even inspire foreign admirers and lure them into preying on Dahomean history in their creative writings,⁴ has surprisingly produced no new Dahomean schools in literature among the local elite. Paul Hazoumé’s celebrated *Doguicimi* (1978), rooted in the fertile soil of Fon history, myth, and folklore, has left literary orphans. To be sure, there are a few Dahomean writers in French, but they are of little talent, judged against endogenous Fon canons of literary excellence. Their literary imagination does not draw inspiration from the rich tradition the Herskovitses endeavor to record in *Dahomean Narrative*. While they, expectedly, make occasional allusions

⁴ We are reminded of *Agotimé*, by Judith Gleason for example. (Grossman, 1970).

to characters or situations of Fon folklore,⁵ the style and narrative techniques of the Fon oral artists is seldom visible in their writings. Their muse is French and their writings assume the absence of a Dahomean poetics. They can, therefore, in no way be described as heirs to the Fon literary tradition.

Reflecting on a similar absence of an African poetics in the works of Afro-Brazilian writers even when they engage an African theme, the Brazilian poet and critic, Antonio Risério, coined the suggestive expression “black out” (1993) to describe this unfortunate blindness to a rich tradition. It is appropriate, in our case, to suggest a Fon poetics black out in the works of Béninois writers. One can hardly resist a comparison with the situation in cognate and neighboring Yoruba culture, in which modern literary artists, from the traveling theater tradition to modern writers in both Yoruba and English, are known to continue in imaginative ways the tradition of precolonial oral artists. The fact is that the Fon intellectual community has so far failed to operate what Ato Quayson (1997), writing on the Nigerian intellectual community, aptly termed *strategic transformations* of their indigenous literary resources. We have no Fon equivalents of Fagunwa, Soyinka, Tutuola, or a Béninois counterpart of Ben Okri, in a country so literate as to deserve the appellation of “Latin Quarter of Africa” since colonial times.

⁵The most successful attempts at recreating Fon tales in French since *Dahomean Narrative* are Jean Pliya’s *La Fille Tetue*. Editions NEA, 1982, and Abdou Serpos-Tidjani’s *Le Dilemme*. Paris: Editions Silex, 1983. Adrien Huannou, a Béninois critic, bemoans that Dahomean oral literature did not inspire any creative work in Béninois languages. His observation remains true for Béninois literature in French, as far as its *form* is concerned. While Béninois writers borrow themes from their rich traditions, none so far drew inspiration from Fon poetics. Cf. NOTRE LIBRAIRIE No.69, Mai-Juillet, 1983. Special issue on Béninois Literature.

No monocausal explanation can account for this situation of a desert in creative writing in the middle of a luxuriant mythopoetic tradition. Differences in colonial cultural policies constitute no sufficient excuse for the total absence of a neo-Dahomean literary tradition. The very fact that a vibrant oral literature coexists with a virtual absence of its criticism and an underdeveloped written literature tradition in the cultural landscape of modern Dahomey/Bénin poses a challenge to literary criticism. Could it be that the absence of a criticism of Fon oral literature is evidence of the irrelevance of one to the other? After all, who needs that kind of exercise, as long as Fon oral literature asserts its vitality by absorbing new elements in its content and adopts new technologies for its expression? What is the status, relevance, and audience of a criticism *written* in French of Fon *oral* literature?

If these are legitimate interrogations, *Dahomean Narrative* still challenges us today, as critics of oral literature, in a more profound way. Critics must be critiqued and they must be asked to pass in their domain of specialization the test of literariness (*literariness*) and literary competence to which we want oral artists and their works also to submit. In other words, critics of oral literature should be asked the question of their critical competence based on criteria that are specific to oral literature. It is time to recognize that our credentials are based on unexamined aesthetic universalism. As critics, we reduce oral literature to writing and thereby restore them to the dignity of literature *tout court*. The prize we tacitly demand for this *ennobling gesture* is that oral literature must submit to the same kind of criticism as written literature, the assumption being that the difference between the two is one of degree, not of kind.

But are we right in that assumption? I doubt it. What cannot be doubted is that a

metonymic engagement with Melville and Frances Herskovits's *Dahomean Narrative* opens our eyes to the natural limitations of our current approaches and challenges us to envision a more empathetic criticism of African oral literature.

5 • **Tests and Benchmarks for a Future Literary Criticism of Oral Arts**

I would like to ask a few questions in the hope that attempts to answer them will lead to a programmatic redirection in the field towards the attainment of a more empathetic theory of oral literature criticism. Are we writing funeral eulogies when we reduce African oral performance into writing and discourse on them? What is the *nature* of our criticism? Should the theory and criticism of oral literature not be answerable to a different, possibly divergent, episteme than those of written literature? For our discourses on African oral literatures to legitimately claim scientificity, they should rigorously be submitted to and pass a *test of reversibility*. In other words, the central interrogation is: If our current disquisitions on African oral literatures were translated into African languages, how would African oral poets assess them? How would our discourses in European languages, or indeed, in African languages, on their performances be categorized within their epistemic compass? Would African oral artists and their critics regard a book of African oral literature criticism as criticism? More specifically, did their Fon informants regard Frances and Melville Herskovits as critics? Would Fon oral critics like Yesi establish a parallel between their work, status, and *Dahomean Narrative* and the Herskovitses respectively? In brief, are we regarded as critics by the African oral artists? Under what circumstances in the future, and in what forms, might written criticism become relevant for oral art? What

metamorphosis should critics and their disciplines undergo, and what fora should be invented, in order for written criticism to begin to impact on composition and innovation in African oral art? The very fact that these fundamental interrogations are never asked by students of African oral literatures betrays a methodological and epistemological blind spot and an epistemic lapse that is comfortably shielded, I suggest, by the discursive and attitudinal preconceptions and the arrogance of empire.

These interrogations bring us back to the issue of literary or poetic competence in African oral literatures. The notion of poetic competence first appeared in the writing of literary stylisticians in the middle of the 1960s. It unfortunately did not receive the critical attention it deserved and remained, by and large, unexplored by literary scholars perhaps because they view competence in literary matters as a matter of course. This view is untenable however, because it is based on a layperson's definition of competence and is uninformed by advances in the sciences of language. Poetic competence is obviously derived by analogy from the concept of competence in linguistics, which has been elaborated by Noam Chomsky. Manfred Bierwisch defines poetic competence as "a recognition grammar," and "a differentiating algorithm which determines whether or not a given sentence is poetic"(Bierwisch 1970, 105). He aptly establishes a link between poetic competence and the task of the literary critic. "The proper task of poetics," he says, "is the reconstruction of the competence of maximal understanding, in Miller's words, 'the cognitive concepts that are the necessary armamentarium of a poet and that enable the critic to recognize a poem when he sees one'"(Bierwisch 1970). For Jonathan Culler, another literary critic who engaged the notion at some length, literary competence is an "implicit knowledge"

(Culler 1981, 24). Like Bierwisch, he emphasized, “Every critic, whatever his persuasion, encounters the problems of literary competence as soon as he begins to speak or write about literary works, and that he takes for granted notions of acceptability and common ways of reading.” For him, “The question is not what actual readers happen to do, but what an ideal reader must know implicitly in order to read and interpret works in ways which we consider acceptable, in accordance with the institution of literature” (Culler 1981, 34-35). Although these two critics’ views of literature rest exclusively on written literatures, perhaps even on European and American literatures, as evidenced in their use of such words as *see*, *write*, and *reading*, in the preceding quotations, the notion of poetic competence can be appropriated and reconceptualized by students of African oral literatures. Indeed, the notion should even be more appealing to students of oral literatures in general insofar as Noam Chomsky’s original concept of competence stems from the abilities of an ideal *speaker-hearer*. Literary competence in the context of African oral literatures is best viewed as a Janus-faced concept.

Passive literary or poetic competence is the ability to decode a literary message, whatever the genre, within a specific African culture. This competence is not a faculty, unlike linguistic competence. Rather, it is acquired by training and through interactions in the numerous festivals and cultural associations that punctuate the life of many Africans in villages and urban areas. A person who not only understands heroic poems of his lineage but also those of other lineages in his cultural area, could be said to possess passive literary competence. This ability constitutes the basis for the characterization of African oral literatures as “popular.”

Active literary or poetic competence, on the other hand, is the ability not only to

understand oral literary texts when performed, but also the ability to perform in a specific genre according to the conventional rules of the genre. It is therefore more restrictive. Not every person who has undergone a process of learning can boast of positive literary competence in a given community. Unlike linguistic competence which is said to be innate, poetic competence is not only acquired but it has infinite gradation within a community. This competence ranges from the impromptu poet who can only perform in a genre for five to ten minutes in a particularly emotionally charged poetic atmosphere, to the professional and not-so-professional poet who “could speak until tomorrow” (Barber 1991). Active poetic competence is therefore a cline. It is on the basis of these elucidations that we can begin to meaningfully envisage the lineaments of a theory of African oral criticism. Based on these conceptualizations of the foundational notion of poetic competence in African oral literatures, we can begin meaningfully to engage the idea of a critical competence roughly defined as the ability of a person to be a critic of African oral literatures, a derivative concept by necessity. What cannot be doubted is that critical activity in African oral literatures is indissolubly associated with active literary competence. To be sure, there is hardly any situation of pure orality in contemporary Africa, if such ever existed. Contacts with other literary traditions, especially the written traditions of the Middle East and Europe, have triggered an intertextual waltz. Written texts are constantly being oralized as oral texts are being transcribed and standardized in “text books” of African oral literature! But the cohabitation of orality and writing in Africa is very old, and provokes neither in the African consciousness nor among African intellectuals a “great divide” or a genre or role confusion. As

we are catapulted into the global village, one consequence of globalization for students of African oral literatures is a commitment to remain clear as to who is who, and who does what in the discipline. The goal is not to create a new confusion of roles or a modern version of *mélange des genres* or rather, *des gens*.

As can be seen, a metonymic engagement with *Dahomean Narrative* opens our eyes to the limitations of our current approaches and challenges our frantic, unproblematic Homerization of African oral literatures. The issues and interrogations raised above, some would argue, logically invite the apoetic conclusion that a written criticism of African oral literatures is impossible, or is, at best, *hypocritical*, in the etymological sense of being a second order discourse that is intrinsically below the threshold of its corresponding first order's expectations and requirements. This is so only insofar as we have failed to work out a credible cartography of constituencies, legitimacies, roles and responsibilities in the field. In order for criticism to be responsible, it must always be addressed to someone who can contest it. Today, as forty years ago when *Dahomean Narrative* was published, the roads are still open.

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