

Introduction

When a scholar claims to be an Africanist he does not really mean that he studies all of Africa. The understanding and comprehension of so varied a continent with more than 800 different ethnic groups is too Herculean a task for any one mind. Instead an Africanist specializes in a part of Africa; for example, West Africa or East Africa. But even there the cultural scene is so diverse that further confinement is required. Thus attention is finally focused on a particular group; or more specifically, on a segment of one group in a particular cluster of villages. The Africanist then ultimately covers a very small area. If, as Richard M. Dorson suggests, folklorists are just beginning to discover Africa, they will first have to select a research area. They will have to narrow down the possibilities that Africa offers to a specific group. In this process many may come to know the Yoruba of Nigeria.

There are several reasons why the Yoruba may be picked over another group. First, the large population (the Yoruba number over 11 million) provides many potential research possibilities. The volume of cultural activity is so immense that a folklorist would be hard pressed to miss what he was looking for. Second, folklorists will find a vast array of scholarly works already done on the Yoruba (see the bibliography of this volume for a sample). Although not all of the scholarship is of the same quality, the cry for annotative materials will not be heard from the Yorubist. Third, the Yoruba will be of interest to folklorists concerned with Afro-American cultures. Distinct "Yoruba-isms" exist in Brazil and Cuba and some might be discerned elsewhere if more were known of the Yoruba in Nigeria. Finally, the fact that the Yoruba have long been urban dwellers makes them unique among the world's preliterate peoples. Special hypotheses concerning the effects of city life on folklore might be tested among the Yoruba. Thus the folklorist may find a number of advantages in choosing to study in southwestern Nigeria.

This volume is intended as a suggestive introduction to the possibilities for folklore research both in Africa and among the Yoruba. The growth of African folklore studies has long been shackled by a generic approach and by an emphasis solely on the verbal arts. Folklorists and folkloristic anthropologists and linguists have until quite recently persisted in sticking to the familiar subjects of tales, proverbs, riddles, and the like. Believing that anything other than these subjects is really ethnography, they have presented collections and little else. The perspective of this volume is that all traditional behavior is folklore. Hence, G. D. Hall has treated Yoruba numbers and investigated counting as a specific traditional system. Lida M. Belt illustrates how folklore finds material expression in her essay on objects connected with the worship of Shango, the Yoruba god of thunder. She shows that material culture may provide an alternative mode for expressing the same themes that are communicated verbally. My own contribution concerns the possibilities of analyzing the interaction of conventional genres. I have considered how proverbs are used within folktales, but the multi-genre approach might be applied successfully to other combinations such as riddles and jokes or songs and tales.

The potential for Yoruba folklore studies in the New World is demonstrated in two papers by Janet Langlois and Mary Arnold Twining. Langlois shows how much of the Yoruba tradition concerning Yemoja, goddess of the sea, has been preserved in Bahia, Brazil. Twining in like manner makes some

claims for survivals of Yoruba culture among Afro-Americans in the United States. Even though the connections seem clear, the question, as Twining suggests, requires further research. The last paper is actually the transcript of an interview with Yoruba folklorist S. A. Babalola. Gerald Cashion with some incisive questions allows Babalola to formulate an inclusive definition of folklore: "I believe that folklore is the sum total of the traditional knowledge of a people and that it includes the knowledge of their customs and all aspects of their way of life." Such an embracing philosophy is likely to lead to studies outside the verbal arts mold. Perhaps a wholistic folklife-folklore approach may develop. The essays in this volume indicate the potential for growth in that direction.

A few words must be said about the influence of Wande Abimbola on this volume. This issue developed out of a seminar on Yoruba folklore which he offered at Indiana University in the Fall of 1971. It was decided at the end of the semester that the seminar papers should be made available to a larger audience. Five of the sixteen participants elected to publish their papers. Cashion added his interview with Babalola in the summer of 1972. Professor Abimbola became a full-time member of the Folklore Institute faculty in January, 1973 and his presence has added impetus to the publication of these essays. His connection with this effort is underscored by his contribution of a Foreword.

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Folklore Institute
Indiana University
Bloomington, Indiana
April 10, 1973