

REVIEWS

A SELECTION OF AFRICAN PROSE. I. Traditional Oral Texts. *compiled by* W. H. WHITELEY.

The Oxford Library of African Literature. Oxford University Press, pp. 200. 1964. 21/-.

Members of the African Music Society will undoubtedly welcome the appearance of this series of books on African literature, having concentrated for so long on the oral traditions which are revealed in their lyrics and the music which accompanies them. This is all to the good, and it is interesting to learn from the publisher's introduction that "the task of recording oral compositions before they are lost to memory, and of providing a basis for future literary studies of Africa, is a specially urgent one for scholars of the present generation, for African literature which has appeared in print is only a tiny fragment of the whole."

The whole objective of our Society has been towards this end and we are, after sixteen years of existence, in a position to appreciate both the urgency of the situation and the pitfalls which accompany the work of collection and translation of oral texts.

In the first place the majority of transcriptions of African oral texts are abstracts of the original and by the time they have been committed to paper are already distorted. Cold print can only suggest the words and phrases and does not convey the animation and emotion behind the text except by ingenious manipulation. This applies primarily to the vernacular text, and in still larger degree to the subsequent translation into English or other world language. Although the publishers use the word "recording" in its non-mechanical sense, it is precisely here that the best guarantee of authenticity can be made, by the sound recording techniques which should in every case be made if the oral text is to carry its due weight and the element of oratory given its true perspective. This does not mean that every teller of tales should be recorded but that a number of the acknowledged authors and experts with a known genius for story telling should be sought out and placed before a microphone. The inadequacies of the transcription could then be largely overcome as several persons would be able to judge for themselves, directly from the sound recording, and especially the next and subsequent generations of African writers for whom the whole exercise is primarily undertaken.

It is in this direction that anyone with extensive first-hand knowledge and experience of African oral literature will appreciate the predicament of the compiler of this present volume. He has been forced to rely upon interpretations which reveal either inadequate knowledge of the vernaculars or equally inadequate command of language to convey the essential artistry of the original matter. Failure in either department does less than justice to the African story teller or raconteur. So much is admitted, and in publishing this first work on oral texts one becomes more keenly aware of the pitfalls which must be avoided in future.

Little attempt at editing the various contributions to this collection appears to have been made, and the quality of the stories varies from brilliant to commonplace.

In addition the very word "Africa", unqualified, has long since become an incubus and will need more careful differentiation if the publication of oral texts is not to become amorphous. The quality of the translators and their ability to convey an artistic representation of the original will have to be borne in mind if the depredations of the "Thou, O Chief" and similar schools of writers are not to destroy the whole charm and style of the original creators of the oral art. The use of English slang terms is always dangerous in works of this kind and on page 67 we are presented with "beaten up" and "dressing down" in consecutive lines.

Such expressions as "blew . . . the following air" (p. 23) and "to sing the following verses" (p. 180), would never be uttered by the truly illiterate. They are writers' clichés.

The printers also have an obligation to the writer or teller to space their paragraphs and lines in such a way as to suggest the telling of a tale. This fault is particularly noticeable in several of the examples given which do not suggest to the eye an oral origin.

Another trap for the unwary is the common fault of using archaic English to suggest primitiveness on the part of the African story teller, and an equally familiar blemish is the employment of superlatives and unnecessary adjectives which do not occur in the original vernacular.

Finally, for this series to be useful to scholars (as the publishers claim), it should surely have had an index of the subject matter. Also, it is clear that the publishers may know the compiler, who he is, and what his qualifications for the work. The general public and the new students who will want to consult this series are left entirely in the dark.

These perhaps are technical matters which will be ironed out as the series proceeds. However, the necessity for mechanical sound recordings from which to transcribe oral texts remains fundamental to the success of the whole scheme and is even more urgent than their publication which can then be tackled as and when the opportunity and the literary ability of the collaborators present themselves.

H. T.

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"SINCE SINGING IS SO GOOD A THING". Handbook for Music Teachers and Choir Masters. by GRAHAM HYSLOP. Oxford University Press, Nairobi, 1964. pp. 127.

This handbook is the work of a dedicated man. It is, in brief, a rewriting of every school textbook on the subject, but given a Nairobi setting, where the presence of African pupils and teachers demands

occasional asides in order to explain a foreign phrase or to give credit to the simpler and possibly more "acceptable" African melodies. This is done with a clear sense of the status of African musical idiom which the author considers may have a certain primal merit but can only be treated as a stepping stone to higher things.

The tenor of the book can be appreciated in the writer's own words where he discusses Music Festivals (p. 25):

"Much can be done through the wise choice of European music to be sung at festivals *to establish good taste*. This does not mean that the music has to be difficult. There is a great deal of very good music which is *quite easy* to sing."

Easy European music, in good taste, and always with one end in view, that the river dividing black from white must be crossed, sooner or later — by them.

This is a pity as there is much good material in the book which would be necessary instruction in any musical manual. As it is there is a constant feeling in every chapter, in spite of several excellent admonitions to improve the performance and quality of the indigenous idiom, that the only standard of musical merit must be European in its orientation, that the development of African music must ultimately include Western harmonies, and that African modality will some day give place to the more "civilised" tempered scale. This hybrid destiny may be on its way for some of Africa's music. Who can say how much will be affected by East or West?

There are some strange lacunae in the work. No mention is made of African crossed rhythms which are basic to most African compositions of merit and to much African ensemble playing; and only slight reference is given to the possibility of there being complex forms of African counterpoint and polyphony; and the few examples of indigenous musical instruments he gives are of the simplest, and ignore the wide range of xylophones, mbiras, tuned drums and horn bands, examples of all of which can be heard within a short distance from, if not within, the borders of Kenya itself.

The author does, in fact, advocate research into the complexities of the whole range of African musics:

"There can be few more urgent needs in the musical world in Africa today, than for as many musicians as possible to give their minds to discovering all they can about the traditional music of the country, its songs, musical instruments, systems of tonality, rhythmic patterns and its form."

He concludes that:

"some of this music is likely to disappear without trace in a generation or two, or become so influenced by music from other parts of the world, that it will be difficult to re-discover the original idiom in all its strength".

Apart from the fact that most European music also disappears without trace in a generation or two, this small book will undoubtedly fill a gap in the shelves of useful handbooks and, we hope, will be the forerunner of several more.

H. T.

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"AFRICAN SCULPTURE", by William Fagg and Margaret Plass. 160 pp., fully illustrated with photographs. Studio Vista. London. 18/-.

Here is a modest little volume, only 5" by 7½", which tells more about African sculpture in a comprehensive and understandable way than any previous art work on the subject which has come our way.

The script is continuous and the examples of carving or bronzes are illustrated on the same page as the descriptive text in every case. Throughout the whole anthology the joint authors give one complete confidence in the integrity of their judgement, their wide experience and their extensive background knowledge of both the British Museum and the University Museum, Philadelphia.

It is a great relief to find that all the examples presented are featured for the first time and that the authors have avoided what they call the usual "cannibalizing" of earlier illustrated works on the subject.

Their introduction is a small masterpiece of common sense in a field which has long been muddled by the romanticism of false imagination and the curio trade. One would like to quote whole paragraphs as the work has so large a bearing upon its sister study, that of indigenous music. If only music could be illustrated by photographs it would be grand; as it is, musicians will envy the ease with which the joint authors make their points and demonstrate their conclusions. There are naturally a few directions in which this book might have been improved but only few. The main difficulty I think, is in obtaining photographs of sufficiently high quality to bring out the full genius of the sculptors and carvers.

In most cases I find that photographs taken on the spot are better and more revealing than those taken in an alien land or a photographer's studio where the lighting has indicated the taste of a technician rather than the homely light under which the works were created. In this the authors suffer the same limitations as the music research worker with an inadequate recording apparatus or the after effects of poor acoustic reproduction by the mono-aural device of gramophone or radio. In each case the object of study cannot be fully appreciated in the round. This however does not detract from the comprehensiveness of the book which is well demonstrated in the final paragraph of their introduction which reads:

"Rarely in human history can a people have been confronted with an overt and conscious choice between having an art of their own — their greatest contribution to the richness of human culture—and adopting one from abroad, from a supposedly 'higher' civilisation. Yet this choice