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NDONG, NORBERT. *Kamerunische Märchen. Text und Kontext in ethnosoziologischer und psychologischer Sicht* [Tales from Cameroon. Text and context in ethnosociological and psychological perspective]. Artes Populares: Studia Ethnographica et Folkloristica, No. 8. Frankfurt am Main, Bern, New York: Peter Lang, 1983. 444 pages. Paper sFr. 79.—, ISBN 3-8204-5411-X. (In German)

African folklore has come of age. No longer apologetic, it assumes its position among the literatures of the nations without any pleading for its literary value, nor with any defensive rhetorics to ward off unwarranted interpretations. Native scholars are taking charge of their own literatures with a commanding authority that combines profound knowledge of their own tradition with the breadth and depth of folklore scholarship. In doing so they are setting new scholarly standards that advance our research methods from a phase of participant-observation to a new level of indigenous scholarship, leaving behind the sisyphian task of interpreting traditional texts that non-native speakers face.

Norbert Ndong's work is a prime example of the strength indigenous scholarship has to offer. He is a Beti person from Cameroun who has studied in African and German universities. His erudition reflects both his native knowledge of Beti folklore and academic learning. In his study of eleven Beti tales. Ndong offers a synthesis of theories of folklore with knowledge of tradition that amounts to excellent essays in interpretive folklore.

The book consists of three parts: (a) a theoretical introduction, (b) the texts and their interpretations, and (c) an analytical evaluation.

In his introduction Ndong discusses the concept of the *Märchen* in relation to Beti generic distinctions, and the position of the *Märchen* in Beti culture and society; he

then surveys previous scholarship of Cameroun folklore and states his own theoretical position that serves as the basis for his subsequent textual analysis.

The use of the generic term *Märchen* in the book title makes the relativity of generic systems a central issue. Is there, in the Beti literary system, a narrative category that is equivalent to the German category of *Märchen*? Ndong himself recognizes the difficulty in the use of this term, though he attempts to skirt the issue. He points out that the basic generic distinction in Beti narratives is between a tale, *nlang*, and a cantefable, *nkana*, the latter being a subgenre of the former. However, instead of articulating in full the Beti literary generic system, Ndong entangles himself with a discussion that attempts to reconcile the differences between the European *Märchen* and the Beti narrative categories of *nlang* and *nkana*. In the course of this analysis Ndong singles out what appears to him the unique features of Beti and other African *Märchen*, particularly their focus on social and family bonds rather than material wealth. Such a thematic distinction reflects relationship between reality and fantasy: as the culture, natural and social environment change, so does the imagination of people. After all, imaginary constructs depend on the building blocks of a known world. The differences that Ndong has discerned between the genres therefore still do not address the issue of the hybrid construct "*African Märchen*," which is culturally relative to begin with, in spite of the fact that it has been incorporated into folklore analytical discourse. The relativity of cultural generic systems makes any attempt to synchronize between them futile. Ndong could have simply compared the German *Märchen* with the Beti *nlang* and *nkana* without trying to consider them as cognate literary categories.

In the survey of former scholarship of Cameroun folklore, the broken lines of communication between continental and American schools becomes apparent. In the 1972 the Literature Committee of the African Studies Association in the United States published *A Bibliography of Cameroun Folklore* by Virginia and Mark Delancey. This is an excellent bibliography that includes five hundred and one (this is not a formulaic number) items with generic and ethnic indices. Had this bibliography been accessible to Norbert Ndong, his survey of scholarship would have been more complete and he would have been able to accomplish it with greater facility. As it stands, the current research survey is rather brief, starting with the publications of Carl Meinhof and Karl Atangana in 1917 and 1919 respectively. An access to the Delanceys' bibliography would have enabled Ndong to date the beginning of Camerounian folklore research from the turn of the century, or at least from its first decade, and to examine more closely the burst of scholarship that followed independence in the sixties.

Ndong's own work is within the newly emergent tradition of indigenous scholarship. Although the texts of eleven tales are at the center of his work he devotes as much attention to the cultural context of Cameroun village society in which the tales are told. In his introduction he describes the occasions for storytelling in Beti life, the narrators and their world view; he devotes special attention to gender differences among storytellers, and the formal features of their narratives.

At the center of his study are eleven tales and their interpretation. Ndong refers to E. D. Hirsch Jr. *Validity in Interpretation* (1967) as the book that provides him the theoretical framework for his analytical commentary. To the best of my knowledge this is the first extensive use of Hirsch's approach, so widely accepted in literary studies, in folktale analysis. Such an application of hermeneutics to oral literature is certainly welcomed. Its significance is in the perspectives it provides. In his interpretation Ndong accounts for the cultural symbols, references and implications that the narrators include in their text and makes us understand the narratives as the Beti themselves

would. The emic approach in this case, does not require any particular methodology that demands further verification to establish its validity, since the researcher himself is a knowledgeable member of the narrators' society. He establishes the validity of his interpretation through references to language and cultural symbols that are an integral part of Beti tradition. In the concluding part of the study Ndong relates his analysis to several critical issues in current folklore scholarship. Such an examination is important, yet the most valuable contribution of his work is the insights he offers into the meaning the tales have in Beti society, how they mean, and how their meaning is perceived.

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