

Narrating (Hi)Stories. Storytelling in/about West-Africa

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Linking to the highly successful conferences „Perspectives on Mythology“, organized by Esi Sutherland at the Goethe-Institut in Accra in 1998, and „German Colonialism in West-Africa: Implications for German-West African Partnership in Development“, organized by Bea Lundt at the University of Education in Winneba, Ghana, in 2011, and bearing testimony to the fact that, in 2012, the world was celebrating the two-hundredth anniversary of the German *Children's and Household Tales*, whose first volume was published in 1812 by the brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, Bea Lundt and Ulrich Marzolph organized a conference on storytelling in and about West-Africa at the Goethe-Institut in Accra, Ghana, together with the institute's director, Robert Sobotta, in October 2010.

The original call for paper¹ had particularly emphasized two points: First, West-Africa is a region in which oral tradition, contrary to large parts of the Western world, is still very much alive. And second, West-African oral tradition is not only of interest to scholars of narrative, since stories and history are more often than not closely related to each other. By relating history, African stories contribute decisively to the construction and appreciation of modernity, since they are both rooted in ancient tradition as well as constituting part of modern reality. The conference aimed to provide a platform for scholars from different disciplines to present their research, discuss current research topics and reflect new perspectives on narratives in and about West-Africa.

The call for papers was well received, and the resulting three-day conference in Accra was able to draw on the expertise of a con-

siderable number of West-African scholars, with the presence of a few Western participants whose research interest also focuses on West-African tradition. Besides Ghana, West-African participants originated from Benin, Nigeria, and Cameroun.

In the first presentation, Esi Sutherland (Accra, Ghana) presented her efforts aiming to create a comprehensive archive of Ghanaian Tales. The project has been running for over two years and has, at the end of the first phase, yielded a large harvest of stories and of scholarly papers. Besides summing up the state of storytelling in Ghana, Sutherland discussed research questions reflecting the apparent dilemmas of undertaking such an endeavor while highlighting emerging methodological and theoretical issues. As part of the presentation, famous Ghanaian actress and storyteller Adeline Ama Buabeng with select members of the Adehyeman Group of the Non Formal Education Division of the Ministry of Education gave a brief performance of „Kodzi“ – the ancient story-telling art of the Fante.

MERCY ADZO KLUGAH (Cape Coast, Ghana) demonstrated the fact that one of the most important ways through which the Ewe preserve and pass on their history, customs, and codes of behavior from one generation to another is oral tradition. The migration narrative of the Ho-Asogli traces their departure from Notsie to their present settlements in and around the middle sector of the Volta Region. The Asogli themselves call these narratives *xotunyawo*, literally meaning, „telling tradition“. By presenting variant versions of the migration narratives as they exist among the Ho-Asogli, Klugah analyzed the way how these people express their history through their migration narratives. Her research gains significance as it combines approaches from ethnography, folklore, narrative studies and local history.

MABEL MLIWOMOR KOMASI (Accra, Ghana) assessed storytelling as a vital constituent of traditional culture. Arguing from her extensive empirical experience with children in Ghanaian schools, Komasi elaborated on the fact that traditional stories would of-

¹ See: <<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/termine/id=18196>>

ten leave a lasting impression on the minds of children. As a result, stories transmitted by oral tradition serve an important purpose in preserving the traditions and customs enshrined in them while making those traditions come alive again. Komasi is convinced the preservation of cultural heritage through storytelling is essential for the preservation of a given community's constitutive characteristics. In exemplifying this statement, the presentation traced the storytelling traditions of the Anlo-Ewes in the southeastern corner of Ghana.

The evening ended with the presentation of a film on Ananse stories, the major genre of storytelling in West-Africa and Ghana, prepared by German filmmaker JOHANNES PREUSS (GIZ Media Production Advisor). The documentary quoted both professional and lay storytellers and their idea of what or who Ananse actually is. The wide range of various interpretations underlines the fact that Ananse still today is part of a vital tradition that keeps inspiring Ghanaian oral narrative.

MAWULI ADJEI (Legon, Ghana) pointed out that Ananse stories and their moral significance are not fully appreciated and known by the younger generation. Even though traditional Ananse stories are the most widely known and most thoroughly appreciated genre of storytelling in West-Africa, Ananse stories are on the decline in Ghana due to their neglect and preference for new forms of multimedia entertainment and the influx of American and European folktales. Against this backdrop, SELA ADJEI (Kumasi, Ghana) addressed questions such as: How can Ananse stories in Ghanaian indigenous societies be made more entertaining and educative to children? To what extent can still animation be used to present and preserve Ananse stories effectively? Can Ananse stories be developed and improved through animation? To demonstrate the relevance of these questions, he presented his still animated film of an Ananse story in which the trickster step by step gets the better of all those people who aim to harm him. The comic-book style of the images added much to the story's attraction for children, while the technique of still animation left room for the

viewer's imagination by supplying more or less a „draft“ outline of the story.

ELIAS KWAKU ASIAMA (Legon, Ghana) relied on the appreciation of story-telling as a traditional pedagogical instrument with various educational, psychological, socio-cultural, religious and other benefits beyond its value as sheer entertainment. Taking as an example the Ohinto myth collected among the Buem people in the Volta-Region, he demonstrated that the recovery, re-consideration and re-construction of story-telling can be put to greater use in a more significant manner than so far practiced. A second focus of his paper was the transformation of traditional stories into academic materials, in particular into material for the school curriculum, for national development or for the promotion of environmental theatre.

PATRICIA ENIMIEN OFILI (Lagos, Nigeria) aims to study the narrative and stylistic patterns of folktales of the Esan people of southern Nigeria. Her particular interest is to analyze how the tales serve as artistic instruments, as means of preserving the collective memory of the people in addition to being a source of socialization and education for members of the society, particularly children. Taking the Esan folktale „The Origin of the Spinal Line“ as an example, she argued that the effect and artistry of Esan tales lie in their intense orality and rhetorical features. Since children are particularly fascinated by these narrative devices, the tales help them understand the basic concepts of Esan culture. In this manner, the tales serve as a means of preserving the people's culture and maintaining historical, cultural and generational continuity.

HENRY KAM KAH (Buea, Cameroon) introduced stories about the *Ikuum* regulatory society that sanitizes the community of trouble makers and witches who were (and still are) a menace to community life. These stories are told among the Laimbwe ethnic group of Cameroon. Kah's paper presented the story of this society as obtained from social memory. It showed how the *Ikuum* society retains an important role in modern Laimbwe history, where it remains a symbol of authority. As a society of prestige, influence and initiation into the society, the *Ikuum* is selective about

its membership. Although the society strives to keep up with modern developments, its main goal is to preserve the traditional values long cherished in history.

SINSEINGNON GERMAIN SAGBO (Abomey-Calavi, Benin) started by reminding us that numerous international folklorists such as Dan Ben-Amos or William Bascom have requested to differentiate ethnic genres and analytic categories of the oral tradition. While analytic categories in folklore are part of the international scholarly norm, Sagbo pointed out that taking recourse to local classifications of folklore with its ethnic genres is similarly relevant and may, moreover, enhance the recognition and appreciation of Beninese narrative culture. Since Benin's population consists of many different ethnic groups, there are different ethnic classifications that need to be assorted, analyzed and compared to the international standards of classification.

AUGUSTINE UZOMA NWAGBARA (Lagos, Nigeria) widened the genre perspective by talking about contemporary African poetic art. This art, which is usually presented in the textual mode, also lends itself to varying degrees of orality, engaging narrative discourse modes into a subtle intertextual blend of speech and writing. The poetry of Ghana's Kofi Anyidoho and Nigeria's Niyi Osundare, two iconic West African poets, has introduced a particular poetic style through an intrinsic pragmatic interaction of the dynamics of the textual medium and the oral form. The paper also argued how these poets have used a purely artistic form to narrate experience and validate history. Tacitly and structurally, in style and texture, they have devised a means of sustaining traditional wisdom and folk art, thus dramatically re-linking the past and present, tradition and modernity.

LENA SIEMERS (Munich, Germany) specified that Mami Wata serves as an umbrella term for concepts of water gods prevalent within a large variety of West-African cultural groups. While the use of the same term does not necessarily imply similar concepts, these water gods or spirits have several points in common: they live in the water, and they are able to bring either luck or misfortune to humans. Besides being present in numerous nar-

ratives, Siemers argued that the popular belief in Mami Wata can at times result in drastic social and political consequences. In the Edo State in Nigeria, the madames or female pimps employ the belief in Mami Wata in the context of trafficking Edo girls to Europe as prostitutes. Traditional stories based on concepts of Edo religion as well as stories heard in churches and local rumors have a high influence on the girls, who fear the revenge of Mami Wata in case they would break the oath.

FLORIAN CARL (Cape Coast, Ghana) and JOHN WESLEY DANKWAH (Cape Coast, Ghana) presented Hiplife, a musical style that emerged in Ghana in the 1990s as a fusion style of popular West African highlife music and US-American hip-hop or rap. It soon developed a distinctive style in which a musical background of electronically programmed beats and loops merged with rapped performances in Twi and other Ghanaian languages, interspersed by „hook lines“ and sometimes sung choruses. Considering Hiplife in its socio-historical context, the presentation looked at Ghanaian rap music as media content. The analysis of exemplary Hiplife pieces revealed processes of genre construction within the broader framework of a „poetics of identity“. Various forms of intertextuality establish Hiplife as part of a transnational hip-hop culture while at the same time linking it to local forms of oral culture and traditional musico-linguistic genres.

SIMON KOFI APPIAH (Cape Coast, Ghana) referred to a recently increased interest in the study of ethics from the narrative perspective. This type of ethics concerns itself with questions of identity and arises from the belief that the stories we tell about ourselves, or those others tell about us, strongly influence what we do and how we identify ourselves. In African traditions, stories enact not only the reality of experience but also of personhood on rather profound and symbolic levels. Given the significance of narrative in Africa as a substantial ingredient for the formation of group as well as individual identity, narrative ethics considers the identity question to be essentially a moral question: Doing the good implies being good. Hence the connection between identity and morality can make or unmake traditional morality.

MESHACK ASARE asked whether we need old folktales in the post-modern world? He suggested that, essentially, over the centuries not much has changed in human beings to eliminate our need for stories. Rather to the contrary, our need has deepened and intensified. Essentially, Asare regards the difference between old 'folktales' and 'Star Wars' only as a matter of 'new clothing'. The main function of the 'story' remains the capture of the 'beyond and beside this moment' for us in the present. Linking his intention to the presentation's title, he suggested that since our ancestors wondered at their reflections in the pool and we too look in the mirror before we step outside, old folktales provide that mirror in which we see at once, 'all that we are' – far behind us, deep inside our psyche and into the unknown future, as old Janus might have seen.

Colleagues that had originally announced their participation but could not, for various reasons, be present, included DOTSÉ YIGBE (Togo) with a presentation about the perception of Ewe-tales by German evangelical missionaries, and ULRICH VAN DER HEYDEN (Berlin, Germany) with a paper titled „Jan Conny – a Fairy Tale or a Memorized Chapter of Prussian Colonial History in West Africa?“

In the closing session, Lundt and Marzolph once more drew attention to the need of creating a larger international audience for West-African traditions with its vitally alive traditions. As president of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research, Marzolph invited the participants to join the Society so as to profit from international relations in order to advertise their work and intensify mutual contacts to the benefit of West-African folk narrative and folk narrative research.

Conference Overview

Welcome: Robert Sobotta, Bea Lundt, Ulrich Marzolph

Panel I: Narrative Traditions in West-Africa between Oral Performance and Research

Esi Sutherland (Accra, Ghana): The Saga of an Archive of Story Telling

Panel II: The Role of Storytelling in West-African Contexts. Part 1: Storytelling in

Ghana

Mercy Adzo Klugah (Cape Coast, Ghana): The Migration Narrative of the Ho-Asogli State: The Role of Storytelling in Assessing Local History

Mabel Mliwomor Komasi (Accra, Ghana): Narrating as a Means of Preserving Tradition and Adapting it to Modernity

Mawuli Adjei (Legon, Ghana) and Sela Adjei (Kumasi, Ghana): Still Animation: An Alternative Means of Disseminating Ananse Stories in Ghanaian Indigenous Societies

Elias Kwaku Asiama (Legon, Ghana): Story-Telling: A Pedagogical Instrument

Panel III: The Role of Story-Telling in West-African Contexts. Part 2: Various West-African Countries

Patricia Enimien Ofili (Lagos, Nigeria): Esan Folktales as Expression of Art and History: a Stylistic Study

Henry Kam Kah (Buea, Cameroon): Ikuum and History Preserved: Story of a Regulatory Society Retold in Modern Times

Panel IV: Genres of West-African Narrative Traditions

Sinseingnon Germain Sagbo (Abomey-Calavi, Benin): Ethnic Genres and Analytic Categories of Oral Tradition in Benin

Augustine Uzoma Nwagbara (Lagos, Nigeria): Telling Poetry, Narrating Songs: Textual Orality in the Poetry of Kofi Anyidoho and Niyi Osundare

Panel V: West-African Narrative Traditions in an International Context

Lena Siemers (Munich, Germany): Mami Wata Tales in West Africa and in the International Context

Florian Carl and John Wesley Dankwah (Cape Coast, Ghana): Hiplife Music and Rap in Ghana as Narrative and Musical Genre

Panel VI: West-African Narrative Tradition in the Postmodern World

Simon Kofi Appiah (Cape Coast, Ghana): Continuity and Discontinuity in Traditional African Narrative Ethics: Can a Crisis of Tra-

ditional African Morality be Due to a Crisis of Narrative?

Meshack Asare (Accra, Ghana): As Old Janus Saw

Concluding Remarks

Bea Lundt, Ulrich Marzolph, Robert Sobotta

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