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Oral Literature in Africa

Open Book Publishers

Preface

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Figure 2. The author on fieldwork in Limba country, northern Sierra Leone, 1964.

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When I first became interested in research into one particular form of African oral literature in 1961, I found to my surprise that there was no easily accessible work to which I could turn to give me some idea of what was known in this field, the various publications available, or the controversies and problems that demanded further investigation. In fact, I gradually discovered, there was an immense amount in print—but most of it was not easy to find, it was not systematic, and there was relatively little treatment of contemporary forms. It was true that there was plenty of work on *written* African literature (which has received a lot of publicity in recent years) and, of a rather speculative kind, on ‘primitive mentality’ or ‘mythopoeic imagination’. But on the oral side or on the actual literary products of such minds much less was said. There therefore seemed a place for a general work on oral literature in Africa, an introductory survey which could sum up the present knowledge of the field and serve as a guide to further research. It seemed likely that others too besides myself had felt the need to consult an introduction of some kind to this subject. It is hoped that the resulting book will be useful not only to those intending to do specific research on African oral literature but also to those with a general interest either in Africa or in literature generally.

The aim in presenting the material has been to strike a balance between general discussion and actual instances. It has been necessary to include rather more detailed descriptions and quotations than might be the case with a book on European literatures, as the majority of African examples are not readily accessible and too abstract a discussion would give little idea of the intricacy and artistic conventions of many of the oral forms. It is also an intrinsic part of the book to consider some of the social background

as well as the more purely aesthetic and stylistic features. With African as with other literature it is essential to treat both literary and social facets (if indeed these two are ultimately distinguishable at all) for a full appreciation, a point too often neglected by writers on this subject. This book is based only on the more obvious sources and is intended as an introduction, not as a comprehensive account. Only some examples are given from a huge field and experts in particular areas will be able to point to exceptions and omissions. Some of my conclusions too may turn out to be controversial; indeed one of my hopes is to stimulate further publications and study. On each chapter and each section more research could—and I trust will—take the subject very much further. But in spite of these limitations, the general purpose of the book will, I hope, be fulfilled—to show that African oral literature is, after all, a subject worthy of study and interest, and to provoke further research in this fascinating but too often neglected field.

Ibadan 1968