

The Relationship between the Folk-tale and Culture Area in Central Africa

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The Congo culture area, an arbitrary geographical division in which similar cultures are found, covers an area which extends roughly from 8° N. to 15° S. Latitude and from 9° E. to 31° E. Longitude. It includes the political subdivisions of a portion of Nigeria, the Cameroons, Spanish Guinea, half of French Equatorial Africa, the Belgian Congo, Angola, and two segments of Northern Rhodesia.

The general cultural characteristics which differentiate the Congo culture area from the other cultural divisions of Africa have been outlined by Herskovits and others in several sources (2, 3). Briefly, the distinguishing trait-complex which differentiates the Congo culture area as a distinct geographic-cultural entity is as follows: (1) the absence of cattle; (2) the dependence upon an agricultural economy; (3) the use of rectangular houses, bark cloth, and raffia weaving; (4) the utilization of ceremonial masks; (5) the practice of body scarification; (6) the development of an art form exemplified by carved human representations; (7) the use of wooden drums; (8) the employment of the throwing knife as currency; (9) the importance of the secret society; (10) the flowering of political organization; (11) the presence of periodically held markets; (12) the importance of the craft guilds; and (13) the significance of the fetish in the religions.

The above list can be reduced by grouping the various elements into a more general scheme which points out that, by and large, the Congo culture area is distinguished mainly by its agricultural, political, and artistic characteristics. Since the folk-tale is considered to be an art form by some students, the obvious development of other art forms would lead the student of the folktale to suspect that a definite pattern of the folk-tales which occur in these similar cultures might be present to some degree. The above cultural characterization does not suggest or imply that there is any uniformity of style, type, motifs, function, or role of the folk-tale within the culture area. The generalizations which have been made have either included all of Negro Africa or that portion of Africa which has been long under European influences (5).

An examination of the literature reveals that this area, and the other areas which surround it, has been subjected to the spasmodic collection of the folk-tales of the indigenous groups which inhabited the area from a time coeval with the widespread interest aroused in Europe following the work of the early comparative folklorists. Concentrated efforts to collect tales, that is, efforts which have resulted in books

devoted exclusively to tales alone, have been limited, and the majority of the tales which have been recorded and put into print are to be found in the books, journals, and periodicals which are concerned with the numerous other aspects of African culture, or with folk-tales, proverbs, and lore from other portions of the world. The above mentioned fact emphasizes to the researcher that the bibliography of the material, of necessity, will be very extensive, and that the availability of the versions of the tales will be limited considerably by the relatively few tales which have been spread so thinly throughout a vast number of volumes. In a tentative bibliography of eighty four volumes, a total of 1,573 tales was counted. The largest collection in one volume equaled 170 tales, and nineteen volumes contained less than five tales each.

The bibliography also indicates that tales have been collected from approximately thirty-four tribes in the area, whereas Leyburn (4) lists 332 tribes for Angola, Belgian Congo, and Cameroons alone, while more recent publications give lists which are considerably longer (6). The above statistics merely point out that a vast source of material has been left untouched. Possibly the generalizations which were formulated were influenced by the seemingly simple pattern which other aspects of the cultures presented to the ethnologist, but in light of what has not been done, it is unlikely that the generalizations will maintain their validity.

A linguistic problem also presents itself. The tales have been recorded in German, French, English, and Portuguese, while a few have been transcribed phonemically in the native language of the tribe from which the tale was collected. Concerning this problem, Doke (1, p. 352) writes,

"In this part of Africa the choice of media and the development of literary work have suffered, as they have almost everywhere in Africa, through lack of cooperation by the pioneer missionaries with workers, in adjoining territories. Each mission worked independently and knew practically nothing of the language or language work of the neighboring mission. Additional artificial barriers of orthography, grammatical treatment, and vocabulary choice in translation were unknowingly raised, which today it is our effort to break down or lessen, so that more concerted effort in literature production may be possible in African vernaculars."

These are common problems to all researchers in folk-tale studies, but the difficulty is enhanced by a seeming disinterest in the folk-tale as an entity by numerous travelers, explorers, and traders who came into contact with the native populations. Those few who were interested and did collect tales were obviously biased by personal beliefs and desires to record stories of a particular type. Consequently, the tales which are in print do not give a complete survey of all forms of oral literature developed in the area.

Since the student of African folk-tales is confronted with the problem of establishing a systematic means of approaching an areal study of the various types of folk-tales which have been recorded, a plan is here offered to aid in the development of such a project. Arbitrarily, the geographical boundaries of the culture area which has

already been delineated for other aspects of the cultural picture of the region might serve as the limits of the initial effort of study. To insure a careful examination of the literature, all of the tales which have been recorded in this area must be brought together. Summaries of tales can be utilized in motif and type analyses, but little can be done with style from the summary alone.

To prevent overlapping, the distribution of the tribes from which the tales have been collected should be mapped, and the synonymy of tribal names should be reduced to a minimum. This problem is important, as the following synonymies indicate: Balouba, Baluva, Baqua, Kalosh, Baluba, Louba, Luba, Turruba, Waluba, (6) are all names given to one distinct ethnic group by the several authors who have reported and described them.

A single tale, or a group of tales, out of the context of the culture of which it forms a part, is of no more use as an aid in analysing the culture than is a cultural artifact which is found out of context. Thus an effort must be made to determine the function or role of the tale in the particular culture. This would influence, and be influenced by, the conditions under which various tales are told. Such information must be sought in supplementary material which might possibly contain data and descriptions of the information sought. This ethnographical material might also throw considerable light upon group and individual attitudes toward particular tales and specific raconteurs.

By utilizing the refined techniques which have resulted from the use of type-indexes, motif-indexes, and comparisons between trait-lists and tale-content lists, a more extensive approach can be made to this vast problem of unraveling the puzzle of the tale pattern of central Africa. In this way, the present generalizations will either be substantiated or discarded, and the description of the culture area may be complemented by the addition of a description of a folk-tale area based upon criteria other than generalized tale types.

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