

# **“THE PATH IS OPEN”:**

## **The Herskovits Legacy**

### **In African Narrative Analysis And Beyond**

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#### ***Introduction***

An unresolved tragedy is inherent in the task of translation. The translator knows that translation is at once impossible and necessary. That tragedy attains heroic proportions with anthropologists insofar as they are translators of entire cultures. Thus, anthropologists, at least the most honest and perceptive among them, are tragic heroes. This proposition became crystallized in my mind as an aphorism as I read the last sentence of Melville and Frances Herskovits's lengthy and challenging introduction to their Dahomean Narrative: “As spoken forms, the stories should preferably be read aloud.” It is not by chance that this sentence concludes 122 pages of substantial analytical discourse in cultural anthropology. I see it as an impassioned call upon readers to displace themselves, as an invitation to leave their own world and inhabit the Fon cultural world. We are invited to read aloud, in English, Fon texts of various genres that were supposed to have been performed orally, then translated into French by Dahomean interpreters, and finally translated into English by the anthropologist authors. Only a hero indeed could cross so many borders.

But we do know that no such crossing is possible within the epistemologies of anthropology as practiced then and, by large, now. The project of anthropologists as cultural translators is essentially intransitive, even as their intention is transitive. How could a discipline with a colonial

pedigree be transitive? Only naive scientism could expect anthropology to be transitive, that is, to actually promote an encounter on equal terms with an “object of study”--with the colonials--thereby renouncing the colonialist inspiration and agenda. As we move into the third millennium and hope to lay at last the foundations of a global human family, the foremost task confronting anthropology is, it seems to me, to courageously recognize and endorse its colonial pedigree in order to better exorcize it. In other words, it is by recognizing its intrinsic limitations as originally a colonial--therefore, ultimately endogamous--discourse, that anthropology, as translation of cultures, will create the optimal conditions for a new, second breath, indeed global breath anthropology, with the potential for effecting gradual and increasing transitivity and reciprocity between cultures. I am borrowing the concept of “second breath anthropology” from Michael Panoff's seminal work, *Ethnologie: le second souffle*, in which he suggested a second breath agenda for anthropology, defining it as “*a simple way of enlightening our action hic et nunc with a view to changing the world.*” (Panoff 1977 : page) Melville Herskovits no doubt would have agreed with this proposition, for 1959, one year after the publication of *Dahomean Narrative*, he delivered the Lugard Memorial Lecture in London, with the significant title “Anthropology and Africa: A Wider Perspective.” The works of Frances and Melville Herskovits are an anticipation of the second breath anthropology advocated above: in many respects, they constitute the highest degree of transitivity anthropological discourse could reach. These coexisting and contrary tendencies permeate the work and frame my discussions here.

### The Dahomean Narrative and its contradictions.

The distinctive feature of *Dahomean Narrative*, one that sets it apart among contemporary works, is that it is the issue of two disciplines and two sensibilities. It certainly would be simplistic to argue that *Dahomean Narrative* is the product of Melville the anthropologist and Frances the

literata. Both Herskovitses possessed to various degrees the analytical tools of the anthropologist and the sensibility of the literary critic, with the attendant potential for harmony and tension. The ambition of anthropology in those days was totalizing. In the tradition of early European travelers, anthropologists sought to tell everything about a specific culture. In an effort, as it were, to make up for coming late in an old world, they endeavored to encapsulate the totality of a given culture in a “big book” for all to know and admire, as Melville Herskovits put it in his celebrated 1959 Lugard Lecture. On the other hand, the literatus, always by definition a hedonist, sought simultaneously to exhibit exemplars of the gems encountered in Fon oral literature. Victims of the reflectionist paradigm of literature, contemporary critics of Dahomean Narrative paid little attention to the hedonist's impulse therein and consequently missed an essential dimension of the work, even as they pointed to some of its methodological flaws.<sup>2</sup> In its encoding as a project, as well as in its decoding by its contemporaries, the balance has not always been kept between anthropology and oral literature, between “Dahomeanness” and narrative, with the first terms of these pairs being privileged over the second. The fact is that dual impulses traverse Dahomean Narrative, resulting in what could be likened to an “unfinished symphony,” and therein lies its appeal to a variety of constituencies and its pregnant modernity.

Because anthropology is a discourse on the colonial subject posited as “the other” par excellence of the colonizer, a legitimate question of an anthropological work and a measure of its success is whether it presents a fair image of the ethnic group it set out to present to the Western gaze. Its firm metaphoric pedigree, or its telos as a “donner à voir,” is an essential criterion of its success. Forty years after its publication, it is pointless to ask the question of the metaphoric correctness of Dahomean Narrative. Whether it is an adequate microcosmic representation of the Fon world and world view is no longer the pertinent issue. Works of this kind, by virtue of their

very approximate nature, call for a metonymic engagement. To an extent they could not have envisaged, the Herskovitses were right to quote the Fon proverb “The path is open.” Indeed. A better translation of the proverb, more faithful to the Fon original, would have “paths” in the plural.

Dahomean Narrative opens paths that intersect at various levels and realms, and bifurcate from one another, espousing Fon configurations inspired by Legba, the Fon vodun (deity), Lord of the Roads and universal linguist and hermeneut. This oeuvre should have been appealing to students of mythology, folklore, religion, history, and oral literature. It is to be lamented that such paths have, paradoxically, not been taken. Written in English, the international/imperial language par excellence, Dahomean Narrative places Fon oral literature, and Fon culture in general, in the international orbit, even as very few Fon intellectuals have read it. In the absence of an imaginative literature in English using the elements of the rich Fon cultural resource base, Dahomean Narrative was, and arguably still is, the work that most projects Fon culture in the international literary world. Its contradictory nature remains unexamined, but paradoxically it is these tensions that prevent it from seeming completely dated and offer an interesting challenge for the African literary scholar of the present.

First, the fundamental problems of method have to be faced.

#### Methodological issues in Dahomean Narrative

Contemporary critics have identified some methodological flaws in Dahomean Narrative. In his rather sympathetic review, W. R. G. Horton states: “Dahomean Narrative is likely to attract considerable criticism from field workers because of the conditions under which these stories were obtained and recorded,” adding that, despite Melville and Frances Herskovits's brilliant treatment of the subject matter of the stories, their methodology might have led them to an “inevitable mauling of the style and idiom of the more original versions” (311). His criticism is echoed in McCall's

more caustic assessment: “The weakest part is that entitled 'Notes on Methodology,' and we are told nothing of whatever precautions may have been used to prevent that traducing of meaning which proverbially accompanies translation: traduttore traditore (Mc Call : 256).”

In fact, the Herskovitses' fieldwork methods in Dahomean Narrative contrast sharply not only with contemporary practices in the domain, but also, and perhaps significantly, with their own fieldwork tradition, particularly in the New World. The Herskovitses are, of course, aware of the virtues of live performance recording in anthropological fieldwork. Not only did they attend storytelling sessions during their stay in Dahomey, but some of their observations and intuitions in Dahomean Narrative anticipate theoretical formulations on performance and improvization in the 1970s and 1980s. Their methodological shortcomings in collecting and translating Dahomean Narrative are therefore the more inexplicable. Their methodology is more akin to a demonstration, in the parlance of oral literature criticism, i.e., a situation at the antipodes of real live performance, whereby artists are summoned by the anthropologist to show off in an artificial context. Perhaps we should allow the practitioners of oral literature, for once, to opine on their Western critics. For example, the quasi-demonstration situation in which Frances and Melville Herskovits have recorded and translated Fon stories would have been characterized by Brazilian popular critique of Western approaches to popular oral performance as “para inglês ver” (i.e., for the gaze of the English, the English being the paradigm of the “other” in Brazilian popular imagination of the nineteenth century, before the American took over this role). Similarly, no doubt, the Herskovitses' informants were conscious that they were telling “Yovo hwenuxo”, i.e., “stories for white man.”

“Our method of recording” say the Herskovitses relate: “to take the directly on the typewriter as our interpreters translated the narrator's flow of the story, given in Fon, the language of Dahomey. Except for native terms, or some locutions phrased in Negro-French, which was set

down as given in order not to interrupt the flow of translation, we wrote in English.” This trinodal process is comprised of the narrator speaking in Fon, the interpreter speaking in a local variety of French, and the two anthropologist-literati, typing in English. Transcription in the original language of the narrative, a crucial though by no means unproblematic stage of African oral literature scholarship, is skipped altogether in this process. Note also that the authors use the term “interpreter,” not “translator,” when referring to French-speaking Dahomeans. They therefore gave English translations of French interpretations of narratives told in Fon. Under normal literary circumstances, “poetry is what is lost in translation,” as the adage goes. In the case described here, the pertinent question is the following: With so many filters and noises in the process, what is the literary status of the end product? What is the nature of the final text in English? How “Dahomean”--and more important--how “literary” is the output product, judged against both local and universal standards? Given the standards of folklore collection this omission of a directly-recorded stage is mysterious, or perhaps bespeaks a lapse.

Besides these legitimate and significant questions of a literary nature (literariness, “literariness”), there are more fundamental issues pertaining to literary competence, in the Chomskian sense of the term “competence”. Our authors are, by their own confession, “students . . . of the spoken arts of nonliterate peoples” (Herskovits 3). The key word here is “art.” By implication, they are interested not in oral documents, but in oral monuments, i.e., aesthetically marked discourses by nonliterate people, to use Zumthor's pertinent distinction (39). It follows that not every “priest” or “cult member” would qualify as a storyteller, for oral art is produced by oral artists. It is therefore astonishing, if not ironic, to read the following from the Herskovitses: “Another methodological point may be mentioned. In gathering the narratives, we made no attempts to seek out men of reputation as storytellers” (8; emphasis added). It is equally ironic that the female voice is entirely

silenced, in a country that boasts thousands of heroic poems composed by the celebrated Dahomean Amazons about their wars and other exploits in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. If the “priests of cult or cult members of rank in the hierarchy of Dahomean worship,” the “heads of families,” and “political chiefs” chosen by the Herskovitses on no explicit literary criteria were not coincidentally endowed with poetic competence based on Fon aesthetic standards, we would be faced with a massive problem of literariness, as their stories would not pass the Fon test of “spoken art.” The “Dahomeanness” of the translation of such discourses, even in literary English, would thus become problematic. Most people can tell stories, so one would not know where these particular stories stood on the range of literary expertise.

Equally questionable is the status of those the Herskovitses called “Dahomean interpreters.” What was their literary pedigree in Fon and French? Since they were supposed to render putatively aesthetic Fon texts in French, one can legitimately ask the question of their familiarity with the French literary register, canons, and styles. When, for example, in the divination stories translated by them, we encounter such words as “writing,” “destiny,” “prophet,” “line,” or “secretaries,” we can legitimately ask the question: Who is speaking? Is it the Fon source of the text, or the Fon “interpreter,” or could it be the anthropologist-translator? If one of the last two, how much of the voice of the traduttore and how much of the traditore is audible in these loaded words?

These are no idle interrogations, nor are they meant to “demolish” in a facile manner a four-decades-old pioneering oeuvre. Beyond the Herskovitses, the issues raised here challenge our current practices and critical imagination as students of African oral literature at the end of the second millennium.

Regrettably, few studies of African oral literature address issues of literariness and poetic competence within individual African cultures. The questions raised above suggest that, at least from the perspective of a student of African oral literature, the issues transcend the realm of methodology. The issues are, indeed, epistemological in nature. Insofar as the anthropologist's telos is most often the description and analysis of the cultures of colonized peoples, critics could simply fault the Herskovitses for not following well-established rules for collecting and treating the materials needed for the attainment of the goals of the discipline. But from the perspective of a cross-cultural analysis, which was emphatically avowed in the subtitle of *Dahomean Narrative* (*A Cross-Cultural Analysis*) and from the standpoint of the African student of African oral literature, the queries are situated “upstream” of the issues of method, as they seek to investigate the nature of the entity called “African oral literature” as an intellectual category, as well as the conditions under which that knowledge is produced.

Accepted African oral literature scholarship, under normal circumstances, harbors a built-in mechanism to silence the African voice. By concomitantly reducing African oral performance to writing, and their performers to the role of “informant,” the collectors/editors, with the best of intentions, promote themselves to the status of the heroic midwife of an exercise in literary parturition for the international, mostly non-African, gaze. With the methodology employed by the Herskovitses to produce *Dahomean Narrative*, the anthropologists positioned themselves simultaneously as midwife and mother, for the voice of the Fon is hardly heard here. The newborn literary baby cried through his midwife-mother's typewriter. Clearly we are in the presence of an unintentional, innocently violent, hence tragic, gesture of *prise de parole*, a confiscation of the Fon voice. The tragedy is further reflected in the unsurprisingly laconic section in which a discussion of style and structure is attempted (50-54). In the absence of the original Fon text in transcription on

which they could have applied their acknowledged analytical acumen, the authors uncharacteristically resorted to an escapist stratagem by artificially incorporating examples into their essays that were not even of Fon, but rather of Ewe onomatopoeic words culled from Diedrich Westermann's *A Study of the Ewe Language* (Herskovits 51), or by invoking the “stylistic importance of . . . the absence of the passive voice,” a strategy reminiscent of nineteenth-century fin de siècle studies of African languages where absence of grammatical features of European languages was lamented because they were thought to be universals and sine qua non markers of civilization.

Despite these major lapses, *Dahomean Narrative* was “an important book” and should be regarded, even today, as “a major contribution” (Horton 311). It might be the case that what accounts for the most innovative insights in Melville and Frances Herskovits's analysis of the Dahomean texts is from their familiarity with Dahomean culture in nonrecorded, noncommissioned performance situations. The authors themselves suggested this interpretation, in a passage unnoticed, perhaps wrongly deemed unimportant by their critics: “Familiarity with the total setting in which the tale is told was gained by attendance at storytelling sessions held in the compounds at night. Here could be noted the dynamics of voice change, the play of expression on the face of the story-teller, the use of gestures to vivify narration, the songs, the dance steps, in brief, all elements that give the tale stylistic unity and amplitude.” (Herskovits : 9-10) Those crucial elements of African oral performance were identified by the Herskovitses, even though they failed to give them the critical attention they demand.

### Classification of Genres

An exogenous classification of oral literature of a given culture invariably presents a dilemma: How to classify entities and literary forms where features are unknown? In my own

view, a typology of genres should ideally be a closing, not an opening, operation, because a genre typology has little value as long as the features of the various types have not been thoroughly identified, studied, and compared. But anthropologists need a genre classification of the oral literatures of the peoples they study, however crude and tentative it might be, at the initial stage of their work. They often view their gesture as an inaugural venture, even as they might occasionally use a few local terms, as was the case with the Herskovitses. In the domain, standard practice by African and non-African students of African oral literatures is to posit a *tabula rasa*.

With this kind of mindset, the analysts tends to impose a foreign grid, the one with which they are more familiar, upon the African data, to work out a typology. The Herskovitses were sufficiently familiar with Dahomean traditions at home and in the diaspora, and their experience of other human cultures was sufficiently diverse and deep. They were, therefore, sufficiently attentive to local nomenclature in classifying Dahomean literature into types. Their binary classification of Dahomean narratives into broad classes, namely, *hwenoho* (sic) and *heho*, with subcategories distinguished within each class, was delicate when compared with contemporary treatments of African oral literature.

There are two major problems in African oral literature classification of which any analyst should be aware. The first has to do with the tension between the respective natures of classification, as an exercise and as oral literature. The latter, as a living tradition, is in permanent transformation, with features migrating from one genre to another, thereby reshaping types. Like any oral literature, African oral literature is protean. On the other hand, the urge to classify is predicated on an assumption of genre immobilism and boundedness, at least at the time of analysis. The implication of this tension is that analysts should be aware that classifications are by necessity provisional. This is not to say, of course, that they cannot or should not be ranked on a scale of accuracy or delicacy. This simply and importantly means that the best classification is perhaps the

one that acknowledges the limitations imposed on it by the very nature of the living tradition being classified.

The second problem has to do with further constraints imposed on the literary accuracy of a classification by the language and metalanguage of the analyst and the tradition(s) in which he inscribes his exercise. No human language is an innocent instrument of investigation, especially when used to apprehend phenomena beyond the boundaries of its birthplace. In this regard, the use of European languages to analyze African oral literatures could produce positive and negative results. It could challenge African notions and concepts and force Africans to revisit and question them. It could also effect a transfer of unnecessary and impertinent categories into the analyst's discourse, thereby obscuring the issues and phenomena being investigated. When these two hurdles have been removed, the crucial difficulty the student of African oral literature now confronts is the following: how to articulate the conceptual tools of European literary criticism, derived from the European experience in written literature, and their African oral counterparts insofar as the investigator thinks that such exist at all?

Realizing the complexity of the task, it would be prudent if such reputed universals as “myth,” “poetry,” “fable,” and the like should not be used in analyzing African oral literature without being problematized in the sense of testing their relevance in specific African cultures. The difficulty with the Herskovitses' classification in *Dahomean Narrative* is that while it uses indigenous terminologies to distinguish broad categories, it retreats into Aristotelian concepts for subcategorization, and does so gratuitously. Nowhere did they take the precautionary step to establish the relevance and acceptability of their categories in Fon culture. A plausible explanation for this is that the Herskovitses did not believe the Fon could have anything to offer but crude,

binary classification needing further “refinement.” Hence their decision to “go beyond the dual division of narrative which they [i.e., the Fon] have formulated.” In their view:

[I]t is the essence of scholarly investigation that while one holds as closely as possible to the lines drawn by the data, one also uses these as a frame within which more refined levels of classification are to be reached. In the case of the narratives, it is possible, in these terms, while accepting the categories of the Dahomeans, to distinguish within each category types of stories that, from the point of view of the materials, of which they treat and the point they make, constitute valid classes. (17; emphasis added)

The problem with this approach is that it is circular and literally literary--literally literary in the sense that it privileges the litera, the text as translated by the anthropologists in their own language. It is circular because the anthropologists “constituted” and “validated” subcategories precisely on the basis of the text they themselves produced, using criteria, we suspect, that could only be drawn from their own culture, not from the Dahomean culture. The Herskovitses were perspicacious in dwelling at length on Fon oral tradition as a “living tradition,” but evidently the possibility of the existence of a second-order discourse, a Fon living tradition of literary criticism, was beyond their epistemic horizon.

The possible existence of indigenous African traditions of oral African literary criticism, is still today beyond the epistemic horizon of the vast majority of students of African oral literature. The fact, however, is that such indigenous African traditions of literary criticism do exist. Absence of evidence in the area is no evidence of absence, as the saying goes. It reflects rather the poverty of our theoretical and methodological tools in addition to exposing our intellectual laziness and exclusive dependence on colonized, extroverted discourses and paradigms.

The idea of an oral literary criticism tabula rasa in Africa is a colonial invention. It is a fallacy that is perpetuated thanks to the cloning of specialists of African oral literatures who are educated in

institutions where scholars rely exclusively on non-African paradigms of literary criticism. An urgent task for students of African literatures is the investigation of indigenous criticisms of African oral literatures, ideally in African languages, in order to avoid unnecessary distortions, with a view to drawing inspiration from them for the construction of new, more powerful explanatory models of literary criticism. This is certainly a more promising direction than the current lazy overdependence on paradigms concocted by folklorists, medievalists, or Homer specialists. What is urgently needed is theoretical audacity, for many of our current theoretical presuppositions rest on doxa, not on episteme.

In the special case of Dahomey, and on the issue of literary typology, the Fon do have two orders, or levels, of classification. The first and elementary level could be characterized as crude and is meant for ordinary, uninitiated people. The second level is extremely sophisticated and occurs among the initiated, the literati. It is also offered by Fon literati and/or oral poets when pressed for elucidations in postperformance situations. Even the crude level typology comprises three, not two, subcategories as postulated by the Herskovitses. The three subcategories, subsumed under *hwenuxo*, are as follows:

-xexo: literally, “bird stories,” bird here being a metaphor for animal;

-yexo: literally, “ghost stories,” i.e., something akin to fairy tales; and

-tan: historical narratives; the word *tan* is a loanword from the Yoruba *ítan* (“history”).

At the second level of classification, specialists usually provide a barrage of concepts and terms. Using ethnolinguistic criteria derived from the Fon discursive practice of oral literature criticism, Georges Guedou, a Fon linguist, identified no less than twenty narrative genres divided into two broad classes he christened “didactic narratives” and “provocative narratives.” Although

the two broad classes are Guedou's invention, they were arrived at by using Fon criteria, and in collaboration with Fon specialists. The genres and their names are used in the metalanguage of Fon critics/poets, and their grouping under subclasses, with Fon terms translated into French, are the products of a lengthy interview with oral poets, in which the latter articulated their views, contrasting genres and subcategories (Guedou 831-92).

The main function of the didactic narratives is to augment knowledge and to help humans become what the Fon designate as “mexo,” that is, wise (sage). The genres that constitute this broad class are invariably marked as “xo” (“logos”) discourse. The essential function of the provocative narratives is to serve the purpose designed by their author. They are therefore subject-oriented and are likened, in Fon discourse, to “seeds of discourse” that are thrown or planted (“do” in Fon) and must generate another discursive reaction from their addressees. They are invariably marked by the word “gbe” (“voice”).

The Russian Formalists' concept of “dominant” could be evoked to emphasize that each broad class shares features of the other class, while foregrounding its particular social function. Social function is in fact an important criterion for genre determination. The Herskovitses subcategorization based on the content of the stories, in addition to allowing for overlapping that is so massive as to be meaningless (almost half of each category could qualify as a “why story,” for example), would be counterintuitive to Fon literati. It is equally significant to add that the Fon insistently inscribed their classification of narratives within a broader regime of social and discursive practices that include weaving, painting, and dancing.

Yesi, a Fon sage, oral poet, and critic, suggested the following classification of Fon narratives, which are reproduced here in their entirety for two reasons. First, few--even among specialists of African oral literature--believe that a sophisticated classification could exist in indigenous literary discourse. Second, this is an opportunity to make available to specialists and nonspecialists alike precious information that has hitherto remained and would have otherwise remained hidden. Approximate equivalents in Western tradition, when they are determined to exist, are offered within brackets:

1. hwenuxo4 : literally, "time narrative" (involving people)
2. xexo: literally, "bird narrative" (folktale)
3. yexo: literally, "ghost narrative" (fairytale)
4. tanxo: literally, "historical narrative"
5. loxo: literally, "time-resisting narrative" (proverbs)
6. nubasoxo: literally, "lost and found narratives" (riddles)
7. ma xogbe: literally, "divisive narrative"
8. jele xogbe: literally, "quarrel narrative"
9. dodo xogbe: literally, "mock narrative" (satire)
10. de xogbe: literally, "prayer narrative"
11. nudome xogbe: literally, "curse narrative"
12. nuxwelexwle xogbe: literally, "vow narrative"
13. avi xogbe: literally, "cry narrative"
14. alexuxo xogbe: literally, "lament narrative"
15. bo xogbe: literally, "medicine narrative" (incantation)
16. Me mlanmlan xogbe: literally, "people folding narrative" (dynastic poetry)
17. Zun xogbe: literally, "abuse narrative"

18. Gansise xogbe: literally, “rhythm understanding narrative”
19. Mesis xogbe: literally, “politeness narrative”
20. Amuxoda xogbe: literally, “dew-on-hair narrative” (courtship poems: the protagonists spend a whole night outdoors exchanging vows through love poems chanted and sung and, consequently, gather dew on their hair--hence the name)
21. Gbedome xogbe: literally, “salutation narrative”

To analyze this classification and its use in full detail would be a book-length project. Suffice it here to indicate that sources exist to undertake such a project and that it remains one of the still-open paths forward.

#### The fate of Dahomean Narrative in Dahomey

A metonymic engagement of Dahomean Narrative demands a reflection on the fate of this pioneering work on the African continent. Reflecting on the entire oeuvre of the Herskovitses, Jane I. Guyer and David L. Easterbrook pertinently remarked:

As the key themes of scholarship change, and as the communities depicted in the research begin to take up the preservation, study and creative reworking of their own recorded traditions, collections take on a completely new value and valence than they had for their original architects. A verbal image can be reworked into a song; a filmed sequence inspires choreography; a photograph carries a clue to a family history; an object testifies to technology; and the entire work provides grist for the critique through which scholarship examines and reshapes itself. We want to make these remarkable collections available to their new constituencies. (2)

Arguably, the Dahomeans form the most significant section of the “communities depicted” in Melville and Frances Herskovits' research. Of paramount importance is the reception of their

oeuvre, especially Dahomean Narrative, among the Dahomean intellectual community as a privileged constituency. By Dahomean intellectual community is meant not only those intellectuals who trace their ancestry to the ancient kingdom of Dahomey--namely, the Fon--but also the elite of the French colony of Dahomey as well as postcolonial Dahomeans, now Beninois. This new definition of "Dahomean intellectual community" is not an endorsement of French colonialism. It reflects the fact that the Fon elite, by and large, has been instrumental in the birth of the new elites of other ethnic groups and has served as a role model in colonial Dahomey as well as in postcolonial Dahomey and Benin. The Herskovitses, for whom the concepts of "living tradition" and "dynamic potential of a group" are constant leitmotifs, would certainly have endorsed our definition of "Dahomean intellectual community."

What then has been the impact of Dahomean Narrative on the Dahomean intelligentsia? It is to be regretted that, pioneering and comprehensive as they are, none of the Herskovitses' book has been translated into French, the official language of Dahomey/Benin. Apparently the French colonial establishment did not encourage the translation of these major works, just as they did not encourage translation of Captain Burton's Mission to Gelele, with the wealth of information it contains. Obviously, there is a conspiracy of silence, a linguistic version of what one might call the "Fachoda syndrome," at work in this case. Given the importance of the Fon as a cultural group in France's colonial possessions, one would normally have expected the translation into French of a work of the scope and depth of the Herskovitses' on Dahomey. The extent of the bias can be measured by contrasting this silence to the publicity mounted around the works of Marcel Griaule and his team on the Dogon. As a result of this conspiracy of silence, the Dahomean intellectual community has been kept ignorant of the work of the Herskovitses: perhaps only a few dozen Dahomean intellectuals have read Dahomean Narrative to this day

A recent book edited by the Beninois philosopher Paulin Hountondji, entitled *Endogenous Knowledge*, with contributions by the Beninois intellectual cream on traditional world views and orality, failed to include Dahomean Narrative in its bibliography. In the last two decades, some major dissertations and books have been written on the Dahomean thought system and orality by such prominent Fon scholars as Adoukonou, Honorat Aguessy, Georges Guedou, and Basil Kossou. Of those, only Aguessy and Guedou included Dahomean Narrative in their bibliographies. Guedou's dissertation topic was the status of the spoken word in Fon culture, with a chapter on the classification of Fon literary genres, yet he did not discuss the Herskovitses' classification--the only one preceding his own, to our knowledge. Aguessy is the only scholar who really engaged the Herskovitses. He lamented the paucity of stories involving Legba, his main interest, in Dahomean Narrative. His work also includes a good discussion of the Herskovitses' analysis of the Oedipus theme in Fon culture, on which he bases his own interpretation (4-23). As can be seen, Dahomean Narrative as a critical work of African oral literature has not yet been seriously engaged by Dahomean/Beninois intellectuals. More disturbing is that MA courses in African oral literatures are being offered at the Université Nationale du Bénin without any reference whatsoever to the works of the Herskovitses. These facts contribute to the reinforcement of the sense of tragedy described at the beginning of this essay.

The Dahomean intellectual community fares no better in the realm of creative writing. The “creative re-working of their own recorded traditions” evoked by Guyer and Easterbrook is virtually nonexistent. The rich mythopoetic tradition that is so vibrant as to inspire foreign admirers and lure them into preying upon Dahomean history in their creative writings<sup>5</sup> has surprisingly produced no new Dahomean schools in literature among the local elite. Paul Hazoumé's celebrated *Doguicimi*, rooted in the fertile soil of Fon history, myth, and folklore, has left literary orphans. To

be sure, there are a few Dahomean writers in French. Their literary imagination does not draw inspiration from the rich tradition the Herskovitses endeavor to record in Dahomean Narrative. While they unexpectedly make occasional allusions to characters or situations of Fon folklore,<sup>6</sup> the style and narrative techniques of the Fon oral artists are seldom visible in their writings. Their muse is French and their writings assume the absence of a Dahomean poetics. They can therefore in no way be described as heirs to the Fon literary tradition.

Reflecting upon a similar absence of an African poetics in the works of Afro-Brazilian writers even when they engage an African theme, the Brazilian poet and critic Antonio Risério coined the suggestive expression “black out” to describe this unfortunate blindness to a rich tradition. It is appropriate, in our case, to suggest a Fon poetics black out in the works of Beninois writers. One can hardly resist a comparison with the situation in cognate and neighboring Yoruba culture, in which modern literary artists, from those in the traveling theater tradition to modern writers in both Yoruba and English, are known to continue imaginatively the tradition of precolonial oral artists. The fact remains that the Fon intellectual community has so far failed to operate what Ato Quayson, writing on the Nigerian intellectual community, aptly termed “strategic transformations” of their indigenous literary resources. We have no Fon equivalents of Fagunwa, Soyinka, or Tutuola, or a Beninois counterpart of Ben Okri, in a country so literate as to have held the title “Latin Quarter of Africa” since colonial times.

No monocausal explanation can account for this situation of a desert in creative writing in the middle of a luxuriant mythopoetic tradition. Differences in colonial cultural policies constitute no sufficient excuse for the total absence of a neo-Dahomean literary tradition.

The very fact that a vibrant oral literature coexists with a virtual absence of its criticism and an underdeveloped written literature in the cultural landscape of modern Dahomey/Benin poses a challenge to literary criticism. Could it be that the absence of a criticism of Fon oral literature is evidence of its irrelevance? After all, who needs that kind of exercise, as long as Fon oral literature asserts its vitality by absorbing new elements in its content and adopts new technologies for its expression? What are the status and relevance, and who is the public of a criticism written in French, of Fon oral literature?

If these are legitimate questions, Dahomean Narrative challenges us today, as critics of oral literature, in a more profound way. Critics must be critiqued and they must be asked to pass, in their domain of specialization, the test of literariness (*literaturnost*) and literary competence to which we want to subject oral artists and their works. Critics of oral literature, in other words, should be questioned about their critical competence based on criteria that are specific to oral literature, for our credentials, it is time to recognize, are based on unexamined aesthetic universalism. As critics, we reduce oral literature to writing and thereby restore it to the dignity of literature tout court. The prize we tacitly demand for this “ennobling gesture” is the submission of oral literature to the same kind of criticism as written literature, with the assumption that the difference between the two is one of degree, not of kind.

But are we right in that assumption? I doubt it. What cannot be doubted is that a metonymic engagement with Melville and Frances Herskovits's Dahomean Narrative opens our eyes to the natural limitations of our current approaches and challenges us to envision a more empathetic criticism of African oral literature.

### Tests and Benchmarks for a Future Literary Criticism of Oral Arts.

I would like to ask a few questions in the hope that attempts to answer them will lead to a programmatic redirection in the field toward the attainment of a more empathetic theory of oral literature criticism: Aren't we writing obituaries when we reduce African oral performance into writing and discourse on them? What is the nature of our criticism? Should not the theory and criticism of oral literature be answerable to a different, possibly divergent, episteme than those of written literature? For our discourses on African oral literatures to legitimately claim scientificity, they should be rigorously subjected to and pass a test of reversibility. In other words, the central question is: **Should our current disquisitions on African oral literatures be translated into African languages, how would African oral poets assess them? How would our discourses in European languages--or indeed in African languages--on their performances be categorized within their epistemic compass? Would African oral artists and their critics regard a book of African oral literature criticism as criticism? More specifically, did Fon informants regard them as critics? Would Fon oral critics like Yesi establish a parallel between their work and status and Dahomean Narrative and the Herskovitses, respectively? In a word, are we regarded as critics by the African oral artists? In brief, are we regarded as critics by the African oral artists? Under what circumstances in the future, and in what forms, might written criticism become relevant for oral art? What metamorphosis should critics and their discipline undergo, and what new fora need to be invented, in order for written criticism to begin to impact on composition and innovation in African oral art. The very fact that these fundamental questions are never asked by students of African oral literatures betrays a methodological and epistemological blind spot and an epistemic lapse comfortably shielded, I suggest, by the discursive and attitudinal preconceptions and arrogance of empire.**

These interrogations brings us to the issue of literary or poetic competence in African oral literatures. The notion of poetic competence first appeared in the writing of literary stylisticians in the middle of the 1960s. It unfortunately did not receive the critical attention it deserves and remained by and large unexplored by literary scholars, perhaps because they view competence in literary matters as a matter of course. This view is untenable, however, because it is based on a lay definition of competence and refuses to take cognizance of advances in the sciences of language. Poetic competence is obviously derived, by analogy, from the concept of competence elaborated by Noam Chomsky in the field of linguistics. Manfred Bierwisch defines poetic competence as “a recognition grammar” and a “differentiating algorithm which determines whether or not a given sentence is poetic” (105). He aptly establishes a link between poetic competence and the task of the literary critic: “The proper task of poetics is the reconstruction of the competence of maximal understanding, in Miller's words, 'the cognitive concepts that are the necessary armentarium of a poet and that enable the critic to recognize a poem when he sees one.' “ For Jonathan Culler, another literary critic who engages the notion at some length, literary competence is an “implicit knowledge” (34). Like Bierwisch, he emphasizes that “every critic, whatever his persuasion, encounters the problems of literary competence as soon as he begins to speak or write about literary works, and . . . takes for granted notions of acceptability and common ways of reading” (35). For him, “ the question is not what actual readers happen to do, but what an ideal reader must know implicitly in order to read and interpret works in ways which we consider acceptable, in accordance with the institution of literature” (34). Although these two critics' views of literature rest exclusively on written literatures, perhaps even on European and American literatures, as evidenced in their use of such words as “see,” “write,” “reading” in the preceding quotations, the notion of poetic competence can be appropriated and reconceptualized by students of African oral literatures. Indeed, the notion should be even more appealing to students of oral literatures in general insofar as

Noam Chomsky's original concept of competence stems from abilities of an “ideal speaker-hearer.” Literary competence in the context of African oral literatures is best viewed as a Janus-faced concept.

Passive literary or poetic competence is the ability to decode a literary message, whatever the genre, within a specific African culture. This competence is not a faculty, unlike linguistic competence. Rather, it is acquired by training and through interactions in the numerous festivals and cultural associations that punctuate the life of many Africans in villages and urban areas. A person who not only understands heroic poems of his lineage, but also those of other lineages in his cultural area, could be said to possess passive literary competence. Indeed, this ability constitutes the basis for the characterization of African oral literatures as “popular.”

Active literary or poetic competence, on the other hand, is not only the ability to understand oral literary texts when performed, but in addition, the ability to perform in a specific genre according to the conventional rules of the genre. It is therefore more restrictive. Not every person who has experienced a process of learning can boast of positive literary competence in a given community. Unlike linguistic competence, which is said to be innate, poetic competence is not only acquired, but it shows infinite gradation within a community, from the impromptu poet who can only perform in a genre for five to ten minutes in a particularly emotionally charged poetic atmosphere, to the professional and not-so-professional poet who “could speak until tomorrow.” Active poetic competence is therefore variable. It is on the basis of these elucidations that we can begin to meaningfully envisage the parameters of a theory of African oral criticism. Likewise, it is on the basis of these conceptualizations of the foundational notion of poetic competence in African oral literatures that we can begin to meaningfully engage the idea of a critical competence, roughly

defined as the ability of a person to be a critic of African oral literatures--by necessity a derivative concept. What cannot be doubted is that critical activity in African oral literatures is indissolubly associated with active literary competence. To be sure, there is hardly any situation of “pure orality” in contemporary Africa, if such ever existed. Contacts with other literary traditions, especially the written traditions of the Middle East and Europe, have triggered an intertextual waltz. Written texts are constantly being oralized, as oral texts are being transcribed and standardized in “textbooks” of . . . African oral literature! But the cohabitation of orality and writing in Africa is very old and provoked in the African consciousness and among African intellectuals neither a “great divide” nor a confusion in genre or role. As we are catapulted into a “global village,” it is clear that a consequence of globalization for students of African oral literatures is the need for a commitment to clarify who is who and who does what in the discipline, and not a new confusion of roles or a modern version of *mélange des genres* and, shall we say, . . . *des gens*?

As can be seen, a metonymic engagement with Dahomean Narrative opens our eyes to the natural limitations of our current approaches and challenges our frantic, unproblematized Homerization of African oral literatures. It was Talal Asad, I believe, who said in his famous critique of the concept of cultural translation in British social anthropology that “in order for criticism to be responsible, it must always be addressed to someone who can contest it.” His profound words are perfectly applicable to the situation of African oral literature criticism today, for in the domain today, as forty years ago when Dahomean Narrative was published, the roads are still open.

## NOTES

1. This hedonist impulse perhaps partly accounts for Frances Herskovits's reworking of Fon poems and their publication in literary journals.
2. As I'm writing (March 1998) I am notified of the publication of a new collection of Fon stories in English by Raouf Mama, a Beninois of Yoruba extraction who teaches English at Eastern Connecticut University. The title of the collection is *Why Goats Smell Bad and Other Stories*.
3. For technical reasons as well as for convenience, the principles of the official alphabet and orthography of Fon adopted by the Beninois government in 1976 cannot be fully applied here.
4. We are reminded of *Agotimé*, by Judith Gleason, for example.
5. The most successful attempts at recreating Fon tales in French since Dahomean Narrative are Jean Pliya's *La fille têtue* and Abdou Serpos-Tidjani's *Le dilemme*. Adrien Huannou, a Beninois critic, laments that Dahomean oral literature did not inspire any creative work in Beninois languages. His observation remains true for Beninois literature in French, as far as its form is concerned. While Beninois writers borrow themes from their rich traditions, none so far has drawn inspiration from Fon poetics. See *NOTRE LIBRAIRIES* N° 69 Mai-Julliet 1983. Special issue on Beninois literature.

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