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Mubina Hassanali Kirmani, Sanaullah Kirmani. *Oral Literature of the Asians in East Africa.* Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 2002. xviii + 120 pp. No price listed (paper), ISBN 978-9966-25-085-8.

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A Light Look at the Oral Traditions of East African Asians

The oral traditions of East Africa have been the subject of fairly intensive study by historians for over fifty years now, and in the process of sifting the oral record for clues to the region's past, scholars have developed a fairly sophisticated set of methodologies by which to do that sifting. In the field of literary studies, serious scholarly attention to orality is somewhat more recent, although in the past two decades the study of oral literature has become well established in the educational curriculum at all levels. To meet the demands of that part of the curriculum Kenyan, publishers have produced a number of textbooks on oral literature, and the volume under review is one of a series on that topic from East African Educational Publishers (EAEP). The series was initiated in 1983 with Naomi Kipury's *Oral Literature of the Maasai* and includes titles on the oral literature of the Luo, Kalenjin, Gikuyu, and Embu. Other titles, one presumes, are forthcoming.

Oral Literature of the Asians in East Africa, like others in the series, follows a set format. It begins by laying out the social and historical background of the community under discussion (in this case, the Asian community in East Africa) followed by annotated examples of that community's oral literature, organized by genre (in this case, the four categories of narratives, riddles, proverbs, and songs). Because it is intended as a school text, each chapter concludes with a series of discussion questions.

EAEP is to be commended for including a volume on the Asian community in its booklist, as this adds to the documentation of the important Asian experience in the region. As the authors note, in the East African context "Asian" and "Indian" are interchangeable if not entirely accurate terms to refer to "people who migrated from the Indian sub-continent, currently comprising India, Pakistan and Bangladesh" (p. 110). The Asian presence in East Africa is at least three thousand years old, but the recruitment of laborers at the end of the nineteenth century, to build the Uganda Railway, brought in a large contingent of Indians at that time. Many of East Africa's Asians are fifth-generation descendants of that influx. Two of the more interesting recent examinations of the Asian experience are Cynthia Salvadori's *Through Open Doors* (1983), which gives a rich overview of the diverse religious practices of the Asian community, and a fascinating exhibit at the National Museums of Kenya in 2000-2001. Curated by Sultan Somjee with extensive input from the Asian community, "The Asian African Heritage: Identity and History," provided a brilliant overview of the Asian experience in the region. Mubina and Sanaullah Kirmani's *Oral Literature of the Asians in East Africa* adds to the documentation of that experience even as it broadens our concept of East African literature. These are both worthy achievements.

In their first two chapters, the authors provide a general history of the Asian community, along with a discussion of the characteristics and typical performance practices of that community's stories, songs, riddles, and proverbs. Naturally, tales about the journey from Asia to Africa figure prominently in this tradition, as do stories about work on the railroad.

Chapters 3 through 6 discuss each of the genres in turn. The chapter on narratives includes twenty-three excerpts, most of them originating in India and including, for instance, accounts from the Ramayana and several stories about Birbal, the clever advisor to the Mogul Emperor Akbar. In the next chapter we are offered sixty-eight riddles on a variety of topics, for example, a favorite: "There are two brothers, born in the same house,

having the same name, exercising great power of life, yet they have no power of life in themselves," with the answer, "nostrils." A fifth chapter lists 124 proverbs. Some of these are self-evident ("twenty in hand are better than thirty borrowed"), whereas for others, the authors offer necessary commentary. For example, "the trees bend when they bear fruit" is a reference to the importance of remaining modest when one acquires education or knowledge. Finally, the chapter on songs sets out the lyrics to lullabies, play songs, love songs, marriage songs, work songs, songs of separation, songs of the sea, and funeral songs.

The book is at its best when it focuses on what is specifically East African in the Indian experience. For instance, the authors' account of Pir Baghali, a railway laborer who possessed extraordinary spiritual powers, is wonderful:

"He was an honest and hardworking man. He was always helpful to the needy and was kind to both people and animals. He was known to be strong and athletic, and could run fast enough to catch a peacock or a vulture before it could fly away.... It is said that during construction of the railway, the kerai or vessel filled with concrete and sand which the workers usually carried on their heads, floated a few inches above his head. Pir Baghali was a pious man. It was said that through his prayers, he could help keep the wild animals away and thus keep the labourers' camp safe. When he died, he was buried next to the railway line on Mackinnon Road. A mausoleum has been built there in his memory. Till today many travelers, regardless of whether they are Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs or Christians, stop by his graveside to pay their respects, give offerings and pray for their safe journeys. People say that they arrive safely at their destinations because they had stopped at Pir Bahgali's graveside. The trains running on the railway line he helped build customarily slow down at Mackinnon Road to pay tribute to this legend" (pp. 2-3).

The collection is hampered by two major flaws. The first is that it fails to describe and balance the many different traditions that constitute the Asian community in East Africa. To do a volume on this wildly heterogeneous group is much different from covering, for instance, the Luo. We're not always told which Asians a particular riddle, proverb, song or story pertains to. Rather than by genre, perhaps the authors should have organized the collection by ethnic tradition, with an emphasis on what is particular to that tradition. This would allow the authors to avoid blandness such as "birth is an important event in the homes of East African Asians" (p. 10), as well as generalizations that do not necessarily apply in all cases, such as "religious myths and legends are told in places of worship by priests" (p. 16).

The second problem is an unfortunate overemphasis on those oral traditions that originated (and still exist) in India to the detriment of those traditions that emerged from the Indian experience in East Africa. It is the latter that is more significant here and should properly be the focus of the book. We need more stories like those about Pir Baghali. The authors refer to other tales from the railway construction, including a number about the man-eating lions of Tsavo, but they do not actually include those tales. Dedicating precious space to retelling parts of the Ramayana seems a poor choice, since those stories are available elsewhere.

As the chronicle of an oral tradition, *Oral Literature of the Asians in East Africa* is seriously flawed in its scope and methodology. The collection is amateurish in the sense that its compilers clearly love their topic, but the collection is not grounded in the critical methodologies that have been developed in the fields of literature and history for dealing with the oral tradition. Scholars of African literature and culture may find the work of interest but of limited scholarly value.

We must keep in mind, of course, that the primary audience for this volume consists of secondary students in the Kenyan schools. Discussion questions at the end of each chapter ask students to compare the readings with oral traditions (narratives, riddles, story-telling moments, and so forth) of their own communities. One can easily imagine how in a place like Kenya, given the right set of students, this could provoke a wonderful learning experience.

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