

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Raouf Mama. *Why Goats Smell Bad and Other Stories from Benin.* North Haven, Conn.: Shoe String Press, 1998. xvii + 138. Grades 5+, ages 10+. \$19.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-208-02469-5.

Reviewed by Peter Midgley (Department of English, University of Alberta)

Published on H-AfrTeach (January, 1999)

The Storyteller's Horse Stumbles, Yet Reaches the Stable Safely in the End

Compiling a collection of short stories is a thankless task: you have to sift through piles of equally worthy stories and select only a few; then you have to arrange these stories logically—knowing full well that there will be critics who don't agree with your selection or with your arrangement. If your selection includes folktales, you have to retell the narratives in an appealing manner. The list of obstacles is endless and it makes one wonder why there are individuals who still willingly submit themselves to such torture. Frankly, if you manage to negotiate at least a few of these hurdles you should be quite happy with the success of your book. It is obvious that Raouf Mama struggled with many of these issues as he was working on this project. In the end, it is his desire to please everybody that causes the anthology to stumble slightly.

Let me illustrate my contention systematically: the anthology is clearly divided into an introduction and four sections, each dealing with a different type of story. The first section contains stories about orphans, twins and other children, the second contains cautionary tales and spirit stories, while the third focuses on *pourquoi* tales and animal wisdom. The final section is devoted to tales about the Fon trickster, *Yogbo the Glutton*.

In the preface, Raouf Mama justifies his collection by stating that it is an attempt to "recapture through the written word a sample of Fon tales from one of the richest oral traditions in Africa. It has grown out of my concern about the danger of permanent loss facing my country's oral tales, a concern which has led to a major project for the preservation of Beninese folktales. This book is the first offspring of that project." This is a noble reason for collecting the stories, and indeed permanent loss is a real threat to many African cultures. However, this is not a new concern, nor are the problems associated with this methodological point of view: how can one hope capture an oral tradition in writing? Moreover, how do you do that in a foreign language—doubly foreign in the case of the Fon, since Benin was a French colony. One can-

not but wonder how this collection will ever reach a people that, if at all literate, have obtained that literacy in French, and not in English?

If Mama's primary concern in collecting these tales is to preserve the culture of the Fon in some way or another, then surely he should remain as true to the original as possible. However, Mama arbitrarily changes the stories, or adds to them to portray what he deems to be an additional element or more appropriate aspect of Fon culture. In this way he creates readable new variations, but loses much of the vibrancy and uniqueness of the originals. Take the story, "The Unwanted Child" as an example: the tale is a variant of the Native American tale, "The Boy Who Lived With Wolves." In the Fon original, *Hangan-Gba* refuses to help his father and allows him to be defeated by his enemies in order to pay for his sins against his son. In his version, Mama allows for reconciliation when the unwanted child saves his father. While this gives the story greater impact in the modern age of reconciliatory politics, it softens the condemnation of the king's cruelty to his son. By changing the ending, Mama effectively alters the underlying tenet of the folktale and imbues it with a moral that is more palatable to the western reader. When discussing the meaning of a tale, he uses a western folktale as a point of reference rather than explaining the Fon position. This undermines the authenticity of the original and places it in a subordinate position to the western version. For instance, any comparison to the Cinderella story immediately tells us that the Fon story is a copy, when in fact the stories probably date from the same period.

Despite the objection raised above, I found the stories very appealing. The writer has a good narrative technique and he knows how to manipulate the story to attain the desired effect. The notes at the end of each story are concise and informative. Together with the introduction, they provide the reader with sufficient information to gain the necessary insight into Fon culture.

In summary: this is a lovely book that will provide the reader enjoyment and insight into Fon culture. The fact that the author has changed the stories may raise concern among some readers, but the changes do not affect the stories significantly.

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Peter Midgley. Review of Mama, Raouf, *Why Goats Smell Bad and Other Stories from Benin*. H-AfrTeach, H-Net Reviews. January, 1999.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2691>

Copyright © 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.