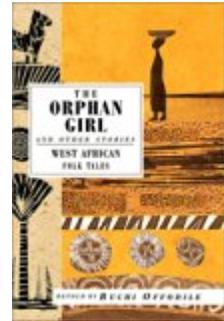


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Buchi Offodile.** *The Orphan Girl and Other Stories: West African Folk Tales.* New York and Northampton: Interlink Books, 2001. xii + 260 pp. \$15.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-56656-375-8.

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## A Paddle Pool Full of Interesting Information

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“Storytellers seldom rushed their art,” writes Buchi Offodile in the introduction to his collection of West African folk tales. Neither does Offodile. His introduction flows at an easy pace, pausing for effect here, reliving an example or two there, meandering at a leisurely, yet engaging pace along the terrain he wishes to map out. As idyllic as this might seem, one can’t help wishing at times that this was the Niger rather than a hillside stream.

Offodile’s picture of traditional West African society is pastoral romantic pastiche that avoids addressing any of the important issues it raises in any depth. In the preface, the author admits that he has been away from West Africa for a long time, and that his infrequent visits have revealed only one constant: change. However, virtually in the next breath, he contradicts himself, noting that despite the “rapid changes taking place in the cities and the marketing centers, much of the inner villages remains intact” (p. ix). On the one hand, there is change; on the other, the society he has known has remained intact. Offodile continues to offer a nostalgic reminiscence of a childhood past he feels has been lost or forgotten. In itself, this makes interesting reading, but the complete lack of self-awareness results in a critically threadbare introduction that fails to explore such contradictions and avoids any in-depth analysis of the stories in the collection. The introduction offers little by way of engaged analysis of the stories: he briefly discusses the role of women, and mentions a few stories that have this as a central theme, but offers no discussion of the

stories themselves; on more than one occasion, he talks about the impact of western education on traditional society, yet refuses to engage with this issue in any depth; and he touches on the important issue of translation, noting that it is problematic to transfer stories from one language and culture to another. And then he moves on. Offodile teases his reader, but stubbornly refuses to satisfy the curiosity he ignites. He offers no insight into his own mechanisms for dealing with the problem of translation, nor does he interrogate the question of transcribing an oral narrative into a written form. Although he speaks lengthily on the subject of performativity, explaining in detail how a storyteller goes about his practise, he does not expand on the tensions that arise and the challenges presented to the collector of such tales and performances.

The discussion of the people of West Africa is interesting, yet necessarily superficial. With so many cultures and languages represented in the region, it is almost futile to present a survey in a couple of pages. Although the introduction touches on important critical issues such as the arbitrariness of the boundaries and the effects of colonialism on traditional art forms, the author does not offer any significant discussions of these issues.

The discussion of West African religion is so vague as to render it meaningless. There is no mention of synthesis between forms of religion. The author presents everything in a binary opposition: as it was before colonialism, and the post-colonial phase in which the traditional arts are dying. He skirts the issues of the present: the interregnum years that span his binary opposites—the years

that produced much of the material he presents to his readers.

The background information that introduces the reader to each of the countries represented is interesting, yet singularly unhelpful. Knowing how many people there are in Mauritania, and how many languages are spoken is interesting, but offers no insight into the stories. And this information is probably already dated, anyway.

Perhaps the intention of the book is not that it be read by an academic audience, but this is difficult to establish. The narrative style suggests a general audience, yet the cover design and the structure of the material suggest a more academic approach. This was what I found

most disturbing—the way in which the presentation of the book was at odds with the content.

Despite frustrating omissions, the introduction contains plenty of useful information on the art of storytelling. Offodile is clearly a consummate storyteller who enjoys doing what he does. The stories themselves read fluently and are engagingly told, but few of them have not appeared before in other collections.

To return to my opening metaphor: is the mere sight of a hillside stream enough to make me plunge headlong into the water? No, I need to see whether the water is deep enough. *The Orphan Girl* won't allow you to do more than paddle.

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