

Tales from Southern Africa. Translated and retold by A. C. Jordan; foreword by Z. Pallo Jordan; introduction and commentaries by Harold Scheub; illustrations by Feni Dumile. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978. Pp. i-xxiii + 277. \$3.95 paper.)

The book includes thirteen Xhosa (Transkei, South Africa) tales of various lengths, translated and retold by the late A. C. Jordan, a well-known writer and student of South African literature and languages. Thematically the texts belong to the *ntsomi* tradition, one of three categories of tales in which "the fictitious, mythological and fantastic" (p. xvii) predominate. In a useful foreword (pp. ix-xxiii), Z. Pallo Jordan provides background information about some central Xhosa institutions, the sociopolitical changes brought about since the middle of the seventeenth century, and their effect on the role and position of narrators. Particularly enlightening is Pallo Jordan's succinct data on the context of narration (the interplay between narrator and audience) and her characterization of the functional distinctions among historical and fictional tales.

In the introduction, H. Scheub (pp. 1-13), who himself has published several outstanding studies on the *ntsomi* of the Xhosa, interprets the use of the "expansible image" (a core-cliché, that is, a continually repeated song or saying with its associated details and image-segments; pp. 2-4) and the combinations of such images as "the key structural device of the *ntsomi* narrative-plot" (p. 9). The central images allow for much improvisation, addition, and drama-

tization. The general themes of the *ntsomi* are oriented toward the communication of the value system (stated positively and negatively) and the subtly conceived education of the youth. These features enabled Jordan and others to use the *ntsomi* narratives effectively as media for "protest against the existing order" (p. xxii) created by colonization in South Africa.

Scheub splendidly evokes the difficulties of translating and transcribing texts that are orally created in a dramatic context for an audience fully versed in the broader tradition (pp. 10-13). The problems certainly are not limited to the *ntsomi*, and there are methods for eliminating and circumventing at least some of them.

Jordan, himself a Xhosa thoroughly knowledgeable about *ntsomi* performances, has produced in English a number of eminently readable and beautifully written texts. These are not merely translated but also retold texts that attempt to compensate with words (descriptions of characters, explanation of actions, reduction of repetitions, etc.) what is otherwise expressed through dramatic performance. As Scheub points out (pp. 12-13), the general themes and some elements of structure of the *ntsomi* tradition are maintained, but much of the original flavor, color, and heterogeneity of style have necessarily dwindled. From the scholarly point of view, recast tales like these are important for their content and as documents of emerging new forms of a written African literature inspired by traditional models.

For ten of the thirteen tales, commentaries prepared by Scheub, together with his and Jordan's other published works on Xhosa oral literature, partly compensate for the loss of style and structure elements. Particularly interesting is the comparison of the tale entitled "Demane and Demanzana" (pp. 34-54) with the four versions of a similar narrative published and interpreted by Scheub (see *Research in African Literature* 1, 2, [1970], 129-142). The much longer version recast by Jordan clearly shows in the wordy description of actions and events and the extended dialogues how his text deviates from the terse *ntsomi* tradition, even though variants of the main theme and the core-images are preserved. Granted the quasi-limitless possibilities for expansion, addition, and combination that characterize the genre, the retold story appears as a somewhat cumbersome text whose excessive detail diminishes the vivacity. We must keep in mind that these stories are compiled for a wide reading public not familiar with Xhosa oral performance and culture. In this perspective, the retelling is most successful in attractively bringing to the unspecialized reader the essence of the stories distilled from the originals with a deep knowledge of and respect for Xhosa culture. Written versions of traditional tales, adapted for a broad new audience and conceived by Africans fully acquainted with a particular oral tradition, should be seriously considered as integral elements in the comparative study of oral literature.

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