

## REVIEWS

A SELECTION OF AFRICAN PROSE. I. Traditional Oral Texts. *compiled by* W. H. WHITELEY.

The Oxford Library of African Literature. Oxford University Press, pp. 200. 1964. 21/-.

Members of the African Music Society will undoubtedly welcome the appearance of this series of books on African literature, having concentrated for so long on the oral traditions which are revealed in their lyrics and the music which accompanies them. This is all to the good, and it is interesting to learn from the publisher's introduction that "the task of recording oral compositions before they are lost to memory, and of providing a basis for future literary studies of Africa, is a specially urgent one for scholars of the present generation, for African literature which has appeared in print is only a tiny fragment of the whole."

The whole objective of our Society has been towards this end and we are, after sixteen years of existence, in a position to appreciate both the urgency of the situation and the pitfalls which accompany the work of collection and translation of oral texts.

In the first place the majority of transcriptions of African oral texts are abstracts of the original and by the time they have been committed to paper are already distorted. Cold print can only suggest the words and phrases and does not convey the animation and emotion behind the text except by ingenious manipulation. This applies primarily to the vernacular text, and in still larger degree to the subsequent translation into English or other world language. Although the publishers use the word "recording" in its non-mechanical sense, it is precisely here that the best guarantee of authenticity can be made, by the sound recording techniques which should in every case be made if the oral text is to carry its due weight and the element of oratory given its true perspective. This does not mean that every teller of tales should be recorded but that a number of the acknowledged authors and experts with a known genius for story telling should be sought out and placed before a microphone. The inadequacies of the transcription could then be largely overcome as several persons would be able to judge for themselves, directly from the sound recording, and especially the next and subsequent generations of African writers for whom the whole exercise is primarily undertaken.

It is in this direction that anyone with extensive first-hand knowledge and experience of African oral literature will appreciate the predicament of the compiler of this present volume. He has been forced to rely upon interpretations which reveal either inadequate knowledge of the vernaculars or equally inadequate command of language to convey the essential artistry of the original matter. Failure in either department does less than justice to the African story teller or raconteur. So much is admitted, and in publishing this first work on oral texts one becomes more keenly aware of the pitfalls which must be avoided in future.

Little attempt at editing the various contributions to this collection appears to have been made, and the quality of the stories varies from brilliant to commonplace.

In addition the very word "Africa", unqualified, has long since become an incubus and will need more careful differentiation if the publication of oral texts is not to become amorphous. The quality of the translators and their ability to convey an artistic representation of the original will have to be borne in mind if the depredations of the "Thou, O Chief" and similar schools of writers are not to destroy the whole charm and style of the original creators of the oral art. The use of English slang terms is always dangerous in works of this kind and on page 67 we are presented with "beaten up" and "dressing down" in consecutive lines.

Such expressions as "blew . . . the following air" (p. 23) and "to sing the following verses" (p. 180), would never be uttered by the truly illiterate. They are writers' clichés.

The printers also have an obligation to the writer or teller to space their paragraphs and lines in such a way as to suggest the telling of a tale. This fault is particularly noticeable in several of the examples given which do not suggest to the eye an oral origin.

Another trap for the unwary is the common fault of using archaic English to suggest primitiveness on the part of the African story teller, and an equally familiar blemish is the employment of superlatives and unnecessary adjectives which do not occur in the original vernacular.

Finally, for this series to be useful to scholars (as the publishers claim), it should surely have had an index of the subject matter. Also, it is clear that the publishers may know the compiler, who he is, and what his qualifications for the work. The general public and the new students who will want to consult this series are left entirely in the dark.

These perhaps are technical matters which will be ironed out as the series proceeds. However, the necessity for mechanical sound recordings from which to transcribe oral texts remains fundamental to the success of the whole scheme and is even more urgent than their publication which can then be tackled as and when the opportunity and the literary ability of the collaborators present themselves.

H. T.

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"SINCE SINGING IS SO GOOD A THING". Handbook for Music Teachers and Choir Masters. *by* GRAHAM HYSLOP. Oxford University Press, Nairobi, 1964. pp. 127.

This handbook is the work of a dedicated man. It is, in brief, a rewriting of every school textbook on the subject, but given a Nairobi setting, where the presence of African pupils and teachers demands