WHAT IS THE ALA?

The African Literature Association is an independent non-profit professional society open to scholars, teachers and writers from every country. It exists primarily to facilitate the attempts of a world-wide audience to appreciate the efforts of African writers and artists. The organization welcomes the participation of all who produce the object of our study and hopes for a constructive interaction between scholars and artists. The ALA as an organization affirms the primacy of the African peoples in shaping the future of African literature and actively supports the African peoples in their struggle for liberation.

JALA, the Journal of the African Literature Association is the successor to the ALA Bulletin, published by the ALA from 1981-2006. See page 1 of JALA for membership information.

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**Elisabeth Bokers, Sissy Helff, and Daniela Merolla, eds.,**

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This large collection of essays has many virtues. Like several other recent edited volumes (e.g., Ranka Primorac’s *African City Textualities*), it presents studies by a very able group of Europe-based scholars whom American colleagues may not yet know. Moreover, it surveys a fascinating range of African cultural experiences (“diacronic” or otherwise) across Europe, including in places we do not hear about it daily: the articles treat African cultural life in Belgium, Finland, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, and Sweden, in addition to the more usual sites in Britain and France. The articles treating the atypical sites on this list include bibliographies very useful as introductions to, say, the small handful of African writers in Spain.

The volume also displays a significant breadth of material and disciplinary approaches. Three of the twenty-eight texts included discuss visual arts and the institutional *habitus* of their display and curation in Europe, while another three treat film (both fiction features and documentaries), and two are themselves works of fiction. Several more take anthropological approaches, basing their arguments on fieldwork in the form of interviews of Africans dealing in various ways with life under Germany’s complex system of rules governing political asylum. The variety of material presented here is indeed wide.

In its editorial statement, the journal *Matatu* (of which this volume is number 36) declares that its interest in “African culture and literature . . . moves beyond worn-out clichés of ‘cultural authenticity’ and ‘national liberation’ towards critical exploration of African modernities.” In its declared ambition to discuss the “transcultural modernities” of African cultural production in Europe, this book participates in an analogous project, without actually moving terribly far in defining or theorizing what transcultural modernities might be. Several authors make explicit attempts to do so: for example Frank Schulze-Engler notes that meeting the challenge of such a definition would involve becoming “aware of the new, complex realities created by transnational and transcultural processes in the contemporary world” (Schulze-Engler 91). Somewhat more helpfully, he argues that the “primary subjects and actors in the transcultural scenario are no longer cultures but people, and the main interest no longer lies in the problem of how cultures shape social groups and their perceptions but, rather, in the question of what individuals and social groups do with culture in an increasingly globalized world (Schulze-Engler 91). Perhaps more than chance alone, then, leads to the stress on the individual cultural actor (painter, author, “refugee,” autobiographical protagonist, political activist) in the ensemble of the essays in this volume.
Edited volumes do not lend themselves to sustained argumentation, and this one presents none. It offers instead a broad range of individuals, studied as such and as diverse as the volume's authors and approaches, who are, as Schulze-Engler suggests, coming up with new “things to do with culture” in their particular circumstances. Although this volume may not be a library's first choice on Africans in Europe, it nonetheless repays study.

Seth Graehner, PhD
Washington University in Saint Louis


Unlike some of his unimaginative peers who collect African folklore in order to imprison it, Harold Scheub recognizes that the import of collection is to make possible interpretation, which expands on the possibilities inherent in the primary (oral) texts. My fascination with oral literature led me to the reading of Scheub’s recent work on oral tales from Southern Africa. This book can be seen as a scholarly return to a study of the nexus between folklore and literary criticism. Using oral tales culled from various ethnic groups in South Africa (San or Bushmen, Zulu, Nguni, Swati, and Xhosa), Scheub establishes an interface between oral traditions and contemporary African literature.

He starts off by underscoring the seemingly insuperable challenges that transcribers of oral literature may face in the task of translating orality into the written word: “The problems for the translator of oral materials into the written form are enormous, some of them insurmountable except by extensive multimedia productions, and even then the impact of the original performance is diminished” (116). Scheub further points out that the task of developing literary correspondence for oral non-verbal artistic techniques are staggering, more so because the translation of a single narrative performance involves profound transformations from the oral form to the written word.

Scheub notes that the transcriber of oral traditions must not only be aware of the images developed on the surface of the story but also of the metaphorical connotations embedded in the oral narratives. Better yet, the transcriber must be sensitive to the aesthetic principles that guide the creation of the work, for as Scheub would have it “what might appear on the written page as an awkwardly conceived-of fragmented story may not be so regarded during its actual performance” (118). In short, what initially appears as simply a matter of verbal equivalence may actually be that unique trope that the unwary translator would inadvertently bungle. Scheub resorts to the trope of ‘the uncoiling python’ to adumbrate some key features of South African oral performance.

He observes that the uncoiling python is a reference to those traditions that are necessary for the survival of autochthonous people. When traditions are broken, he posits, society as a whole is broken. The storyteller arrests time and brings the audience into the presence of history, the heart and substance of the culture. Storytelling is, therefore, not a memorized art: “Oral performers take images from the present and wed them to the past and in that way the past regularly shapes our experience of the present” (105). In short, storytellers are the repositories of the memories of the people.

Reference to the Xhosa story titled “The Magician’s Daughter”