Africa has been concentrated on far too long in isolation; both by exploiters and by sentimentalists. It is only recently that African history has begun to be seen as a part of world history and that attempts are being made to correlate archaeological findings in Africa, Asia and Europe. A new series which is being published from the Oxford University Press[1] at last makes it possible to study African literary forms as an essential part of world literature.

The first four volumes of the series have now appeared.[2] The most important of these is *Somali Poetry*, by W. B. Andrzejewski and I. M. Lewis, both specialists of recognized distinction. The first sixty pages deal lucidly and surely definitively with the social and cultural setting of Somali poetry, the Somali language and the characteristics of Somali verse. Biographical notes on the poets are provided. The next ninety pages consist of Somali poems with the original on one side and the English translation opposite.

Somali verse has been transmitted orally; it is a great tradition and still a living one. The editors write of one class of lyric: 'While the origins of other types of poem go far back into the past the *heelo* is an innovation which was first introduced in 1945. Its creator Abdi Deeqsi, nicknamed "Cinema", was the owner and driver of a trading lorry and composed the first *heelo* when his lorry broke down near Zeila. In a desolate place he sang his love song, beating the rhythm on an empty petrol tin.'

Chronologically most of the poems in this volume belong to the twentieth century; as literature their nearest parallels are in thirteenth and fourteenth-century Wales. The patterns of chiming alliteration and the swift lines of mounting images are reminiscent of Dafydd ap Gwilym. A similar use of image occurs in Ethiopic poetry especially in the modern *Zafan*, the 'Women's Songs'. At least one volume of Ethiopic verse is soon to be published in this series. It seems likely that it will suggest obvious resemblances to the Somali volume. The fifteenth century songs of triumph on the slaughter of the Muslims of Adal are closely linked with the Somali chant that celebrated the killing of Richard Corfield in the summer of 1913. But as a whole Ethiopic literature has the wider range, notably in the *Mad Biet*, the household songs: the bitter satire on the miser, the mourning of the woman deserted by her lover, the animal *fabliau*. As all this suggests that much of modern Ethiopic literature still follows in the genres of thirteenth-century France. Ethiopia has always been differentiated from Somaliland by the presence of a rooted peasantry. Motifs drawn from peasant songs form much so of the literature in medieval Northern France.

The modern Bahima songs in West Uganda seem to belong to an earlier and more heroic age. In the twelfth century one of the last of the heroic Welsh poems begins with the couplet:

'The King of England came with his battalions.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1964.tb07399.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

Though he came he returned not with cattle.'

These could be two lines in an early twentieth-century Bahima heroic 'praise song'. The Bahima form a cattle-owning aristocracy that centres in Aniole. Dr Morris has published a collection of their current poems, with the Bantu text on one page and the translation opposite. There are some songs in praise of cattle herds but the main category is that of the *ebyevugo*, the song of self praise. As Dr Hatto notes in the foreword, 'in some important respects the language of *ebyevugo* finds its closest analogies in the inter-tribal heroic vocabulary of the Germani or in Beowulf and in related Old English poems, in the Hildebrandslied, in the Edda and in Skaldic verse. 'The poetic diction is dominated by the use of 'kennings' in the Icelandic fashion; the ritual use of a compound of two words to signify one object. An 'elephant-striker' is a rifle. 'Black-iron' or 'hammer-sharpened' is a spear. The standards and ideals are those of the Heroic Age. The setting is contemporary with our own:

'The rifles of Murumba brought me back from the Place of the Thatching with Earth
I found the Budo Hammers getting their rifles ready.'

The 'Place of the Thatching with Earth' is the Catholic Mission at Nyamitango. The 'Budo Hammers' are the Old Boys of King's College, Budo. The line that follows is an anti-climax in translation but perhaps not in the original:

'The motor cars spent the night in the Valleys making a noise.'

It is likely that many of the characteristics of Bahima verse are due to the aristocratic structure of the society that produces it. It will be of interest to compare them with the Masai songs chanted in combined solo and in chorus. For the Masai are also a cattle people but without an hereditary noble class. In contrast, Swahili poetry with its narrative ballads and its verses on Fortune's Wheel reflect the African town culture of the coast; essentially a small town culture, the little Mombasa of the past, vanished Pate, or, in our own times, Lamu.

The two other volumes already published deal with African prose. Neither was designed for the series. Both are edited by Dr Whiteley. Both are anthologies that extend across the Continent. The first deals with traditional oral texts, very often parables. It contains such small masterpieces such as the 'Story of the Toothless Widower', but like all anthologies it clamours to be criticized. It could be urged that the East African material is too predominant, that there should be more animal tales, that the work of the Court-Remembrancers is barely represented. But, even if all that were admitted, it remains an admirable introduction to African folk stories.

In his second volume Dr Whiteley set himself a task which was impossible of achievement. It deals with African written prose and covers all Africa south of the Sahara. It is limited to twenty-four extracts, two of which are wasted on the turgid colonial prose of J. E. Caseley Hayford who in 1928 described the stench of Accra

as an eyesore! It is perhaps best to regard this book as a prolegomenon to the later volumes of prose to be issued by the Oxford Library of African Literature. The first should consist of extracts from African prose earlier than 1800. There would be the beginning of the late medieval chronicle of Kilwa island off the Tanganyika coast. There would be extracts from the chronicles of the West Sudan. There should be as much as possible of the diary that the Calabar trader Duke wrote in pidgin English in 1787, with all its vivid social details – 'so we drank all day to my girl wife in Duke's sister's daughter's house'.

There would have to be at least two volumes on the African territories of French culture and probably two on Nigeria since the Yoruba grouping is best treated separately; at least South Africa, Ghana and perhaps Kenya would need a volume each. A mark of modern Africa is the pullulation of its fiction.

At first analysis it would seem that Christianity has had very little impact on this new literature though the great majority of the new African novelists would seem to come from mission schools. The nearest approach to a 'Catholic novel' that I can remember is the story by O. Ribas, in which St Anthony of Padua brings about a happy childbirth in order to free his statue from being bound by a piece of string. But on closer analysis it seems possible to distinguish between post-Protestant and post-Catholic writers; in South Nigeria Amos Tutuola perhaps represents the first category and Cyprian Ekwensi the second. It is tenable that the post-Catholics are marked by a more light-hearted acceptance of carnal frailty and of the survival of the ancient cults, and that post-Protestants show a deeper moral earnestness.

It would be important to discriminate between the European sources for the new African novels. In East Africa it may be significant for the future that *Gulliver's Travels*, *Treasure Island* and *The Swiss Family Robinson* are now in Swahili translations. *Pilgrim's Progress* has had an abiding influence in South Africa. West Africa is more contemporaneous. French African literature has always been knit to Paris, and *Brighton Rock* has an impact in Ghana. When such influences have been analysed and subtracted, and when allowance has been made for the inevitable wrench between two cultures, it should be possible to discern how far there are common African elements in modern African novels.

The Oxford Library of African Literature. General Editors: E. E. Evans-Pritchard, G. Lienhardt, W. H. Whiteley (Clarendon Press.) *A Selection of African Prose*, by W. H. Whiteley; I. *Traditional Oral Texts*, 21s; II. *Written Prose*, 21s; III. *The Heroic Recitations of the Rahima of Ankole*, by H. F. Morris, 30s; IV. *Somali Poetry*, by B. W. Andrzejewski and I. M. Lewis, 30s.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1964.tb07399.x Published online by Cambridge University Press