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THE LITERATURE OF PRIMITIVE PEOPLES

I

To speak of oral narratives or song-poems, particularly those of primitive peoples, as constituting true literature has until recently met with the greatest suspicion not only from the general public but from students of literature and, indeed, from most ethnologists as well. Their objections are basically of two kinds. No literature is possible, they contend, without writing, and the languages spoken by primitive peoples are inadequate both in vocabulary and the range of ideas which can be expressed in them to permit the development of what we call true literature. Both of these contentions are, I feel, quite incorrect. One has only to read such studies as those of F. Boas[1] and Edward Sapir[2] to realize on how slight a basis of fact such statements rest. There is no need, consequently, to spend any time refuting the theories of philosophers like Lévy-Bruhl[3] or E. Cassirer[4]

1. *Handbook of American Indian Languages*, Bull. 40 (Wash., D.C., Bureau of American Ethnology, 1911–1935).

2. *Language: an introduction to the study of speech* (New York, Harcourt Brace, 1921).

3. *Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures* (5th ed., Paris, 1922), pp. 151–257. Eng. ed.: *How natives think* (London, Allen & Unwin, 1926).

4. *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*. Vol. I, *Die Sprache* (Berlin, 1923). Eng. ed.: *The philosophy of symbolic forms* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1953).

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concerning the structure of primitive languages. The only thing that can be said in defense of their generalizations is that, given the manner in which many of the recorders of these languages presented their data and the many loose statements they made, it is easy to see how Lévy-Bruhl and Cassirer and those who were influenced by them arrived at their unsound generalizations. The first objection, particularly, that without writing no substantial literature can possibly develop, will, I am certain, be adequately disproved by the examples of prose and poetry which I am presenting in this essay.

The absence of writing does, however, entail a number of consequences for the forms which certain types of compositions assume and upon one of these I would like to comment. I am referring particularly to traditional prose narratives. These can best be understood if we regard them as dramas in which the reciter, the raconteur, impersonates the various characters of the tale or novelette he is narrating. His role as an actor is here more important than his role as transmitter of a specific traditional text, for it is by his skill and excellence as an actor that his audience judges him. His personality, his temperamental make-up, his style, in consequence, play a determining role. He may interpolate or omit, amplify or shorten, reorganize or reinterpret to an amazing degree without encountering any serious criticism as long as what is regarded as the basic core of the plot is not affected. These interpolations are rarely creations of his own, but consist of traditionally fixed episodes, themes, motifs, imagery, epithets. Interpolations of one kind or another, let me point out, have always been the privilege of actors. We find them in the classical drama of ancient Greece, in that of the Golden Age in Spain and in that of the Elizabethan Age. They are found even today, especially in comedy. An oral dramatic text is never as fixed as one which is primarily to be read.

We thus come to one of the essential problems of all traditional oral narratives. Does a fixed text in our sense of the term exist? The answer must be in the negative. The reasons for this are many, the two most important being that, first, the community demands of the author-raconteur fixity only for the basic plot and secondly that the actions and behavior of the figures in the plot are always supposed to be intelligible to a contemporary audience. This means that a text is being continually reedited. Under such circumstances one would expect considerable confusion in the structure of these narratives, which is indeed frequently true. However, accomplished narrators succeed in integrating their material with amazing skill although rarely is this integration perfect.

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Where the raconteur-actor-editor plays so all-dominating a role one might very well ask what is left for the audience. Does it, like the audience at our theatre, simply listen and pass judgment on the skill of the raconteur-actor? It does all this and more. Strange as it may seem to us, an audience in an aboriginal tribe is far better prepared to understand the implications of their literature than we often are of our own. Every person there—parts of Africa and Polynesia-Micronesia perhaps excepted—has an all-embracing knowledge of his culture and participates in every aspect of it; every person has a complete knowledge of his language. There are no "illiterate" nor ignorant individuals. An audience thus comes prepared esthetically, culturally, and critically, to listen to a narrative in a manner that can only be compared to an Athenian audience of the fifth century B.C.—on a different level, of course.

I have so far spoken primarily of the imaginative traditional prose narratives where, strictly speaking, there are no authors but only rearrangers, reinterpreters and editors. But there exist in each tribe, in addition to these traditional narratives which can be said to constitute the classical literature, other narratives constituting the contemporary literature, which have true authors and where the themes are taken from the life of the community and from personal events in the life of an individual. These two types of narrative differ fundamentally in subject-matter, in diction, and, at times, in vocabulary. In many tribes, especially in North America, they have special designations. Unfortunately ethnologists have neglected the contemporary because they have so largely concentrated their attention upon the classical and sacred literatures. However there is also a marked tendency for native priests, medicinemen, and tribal dignitaries, from whom, after all, most of our material is obtained, to place the contemporary literature in a lower category.

In these contemporary narratives, of course, much depends upon the skill and artistry of the author. Although he generally follows the style or styles laid down by older literary traditions he can also embark on experiments and attempt to create new styles. Such new styles are often due to contacts with other tribes. Here we have some controls. The recent contact with white investigators, for instance, has led to the emergence of a number of new literary categories. I am thinking particularly of autobiographies and the descriptions of the various aspects of culture, especially of religion and ritual. These never existed before the coming of the ethnologists. It is therefore of great significance for the history of primitive literatures to determine the degree to which the new categories and styles

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resemble the older ones. It is also of unusual interest for the student of comparative literature to realize that within less than two generations American Indians have developed the technique for composing well-rounded autobiographies which compare more than favorably with those of the ancient Greeks and Romans and can, indeed, stand comparison with some of the best in our own cultures. *The Autobiography of a Winnebago Indian*[5] which I collected some years ago can very well take its place by the side of that of so consummate a master as Benvenuto Cellini.

In poetry the text, likewise, is not fixed, except for the larger epics of the Polynesians and some of the Malayan tribes and, generally, for religious chants as a whole. Naturally poems are composed in traditional forms, but within these forms the composer is permitted absolute freedom to a far greater extent, in fact, than even in the contemporary prose narratives. He can use any image he wishes and he can be as personal in his allusions as he desires to be. One of the difficulties of understanding many short poems, particularly those of the American Indians, is that they are often so personal as to be unintelligible without a commentary.

There are thus both varying texts and unalterably fixed texts among primitive peoples, although unquestionably fixity of text is not regarded as a virtue, as it has come to be in Western European civilizations, particularly during the last two centuries. We cannot emphasize too strongly the fact that the excellence of a literature has nothing to do with the number of fixed texts found in it. If I seem to overstress this point, that is because it has at times been contended that where there is so great a variability for a given narrative no possibility for the development of a significant literature exists.

We come now to the last of the basic questions to be clarified before we can turn to our specific task, the characterization of some of the main aboriginal literatures. How is an author-raconteur trained? How does he learn his art? And how does one compose a poem in the absence of writing, and, what is far more important, in the absence of privacy? Be it remembered that privacy can hardly be said to exist in aboriginal communities.

The first question is easily answered. A raconteur learns his art directly from an elder, generally a relative. Such training may take a long time and it is always expensive. As a result only those individuals who have real talent and ambition persevere. However, the recital of narratives is not

5. P. Radin (Berkeley, University of California Publications in American Archeology & Ethnology, 1920), Vol. 16, pp. 381–473.

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confined to specially trained individuals. Many persons know a few traditional narratives, own them, in fact, and can often tell these few as well as the "professional" raconteur. No training certainly is required for the recital of the contemporary narratives. In the Americas, in fact, and in most areas where no caste systems or markedly developed class organizations exist, there actually are no true special groups or guilds of professional raconteurs, i.e., individuals who spend a considerable part of their time at such a task. This is quite different in many portions of Africa, Polynesia, and certain parts of the Southwest Pacific. There we find well-organized guilds of professional raconteurs who alone know the narratives and have the right to tell them.

The second of our questions is more difficult to answer, not only because of the nature of the subject but because we have little information to fall back upon. Moreover it is complicated by the additional fact that most poems are enclosed in a musical framework. We know enough about the interrelationship of this musical framework to the words to state that sometimes the music is primary, sometimes the words, the exact nature of the relationship often being dependent upon the poet and his inspiration. I see no reason for believing, however, that, by and large, the situation encountered here with regard to the interrelationship between words and music is very much different from what existed in the case of the Greek lyric poets or what held for the choruses of the Greek dramas of antiquity. We are possibly also dealing here with meters, although this is still problematical.

There is often a native theory of inspiration. Among most American Indian tribes poems are supposed to come to individuals in dreams, dreams here meaning that they have come more or less unsought. An Eskimo named Orpingalik, known for his poetical gifts, gave the great Danish ethnologist, Knud Rasmussen, a well-thought-out theory of inspiration that leaves little unsaid on the subject. "Songs (poems) are thoughts,"[6] he told Rasmussen, "sung out with the breath when people are moved by great forces and ordinary speech no longer suffices. Man is moved just like the ice floe sailing here and there out in the current. His thoughts are driven by a flowing force when he feels joy, when he feels fear, when he feels sorrow. Thoughts can wash over him like a flood, making his breath come in gasps and his heart throb. Something like an abatement in the weather will keep him thawed up. And then it will happen that we, who

6. *The Netsilik Eskimos*, Report on Fifth Thule Expedition (Copenhagen, 1931), Vol. VIII, p. 321.

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always think we are small, will feel still smaller. And we will fear to use words. But it will happen that the words we need will come of themselves. When the words we want to use shoot up of themselves—we get a new song."

Similar in strain is the explanation of how songs are composed which was given Rasmussen by the Greenland Eskimo Kilimé. "All songs come to man when he is alone in the great solitude. They come to him in the wake of tears, of tears that spring from the deep recesses of the heart or they come to him suddenly accompanied by joy and laughter which wells up within us, we know not how, as we ponder upon life and look out upon the wonders of the world around us.

"Then, without our volition, without our knowledge, words come to us in song that do not belong to everyday speech. They come to us with every breath we take and become the property of those who possess the skill to weave them together for others."[7]

This is, of course, pure theory and tells only half of the story. The other part consists of the arduous labor required for fitting the words into their proper frame, and knowledge of the traditional rules, of the stereotyped images, and formulae. All this our Eskimos Orpingalik and Kilimé must have known, for their poems conform strictly to the rules, but this they forgot to tell us. Other less philosophically inclined poets fortunately give us a better clue as to how they go about the task of composing a poem. On the island of Buin in the Solomon Islands, for instance, there are professional poets who, according to Thurnwald,[8] all compose in the same way. A man goes into the forest to be undisturbed, selects a melody and then attempts to fit words to it. He will test these words repeatedly until he is satisfied that they conform to the rhythms of the melody. But to judge from the numerous song-poems Thurnwald has published this again is only half of the explanation and represents the portion that our Eskimo poets omitted. Poetic inspiration plays as great a role here as everywhere else. The professional poets of Buin are, after all, selected for their special gifts. That they often are commissioned to compose a poem for a particular occasion and are even told to include certain details, is of secondary importance. So was Pindar commissioned. As poets they wish to appeal to the listener's emotions and this they will do by striking imagery, by

7. *Grönlandsagen* (Berlin, 1922), p. 229. Translated from the German. Cf. his *The Eagle's Gift* (New York, 1932), pp. 8 ff.

8. R. C. Thurnwald, *Profane Literature of Buin* (New Haven, Yale University Publications in Anthropology, 1936), pp. 3–15.

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mythical allusions, by a special language and a special phrasing. The rhythmical units of the melody which Thurnwald emphasizes so strongly are pushed into the background. In short, our Buin poet's description of how he composes possesses no more validity than did that of the Eskimos Orpingalik and Kilimé.

In parts of Africa we find a description of the technique for composing song-poems strictly analogous to that given by the Buin. For example, among the Ila and Thonga of southeastern Africa there exists a class of song called *Impango*, sung only by women on any occasion when people gather together, at work, at a so-called beer-drink, in preparation for a journey, etc. There are in each village a number of women who are well-reputed composers of the music for such songs. Should a woman want such a song composed she first selects a subject for it and then the words. The words may be in praise of her husband, of her lover or of herself and will be connected with certain specific events such, for instance, as her husband's prowess in killing some fierce animal. She will then have some provisional melody accompany her words. With these she goes to the music-composer and sings the first half dozen words. The music expert, having ascertained whether, for instance, she wishes her song to start on a low or a high tone, then composes a few phrases of music which will conform to the first phrase as sung to her by the composer of the words. Then the music expert sets to work and composes the music for the whole song.

Yet here again the poems belie the theory. No fitting of words simply for the purpose of having them conform to the rhythm of a melody could possibly produce poems like the two following from the *Fan of the Congo*.

DIRGE ON THE DEATH OF A FATHER[9]

Father, my father, why have you left your hearth?
O father, did someone strike you down?
Someone whom vengeance demand that you slay?
And now your ghost has wandered to the other shore.

Father, my father, why have you left your hearth?
Though the skies have cleared, our vision is obscured.
From the trees the water falls in measured drops;
The rat has left his hole.

9. Translated from the French. Cf. Blaise Cendrars, *Anthologie Nègre* (Paris, 1947), p. 24.

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Behold our father's home!
Gather the grass for his grave
And spread it now here, now there.
Things once invisible he now can see.

SONG TO THE FIRE-GOBLIN[10]

I

Fire seen only at night,
The deep night;
Fire which burns without heat
And shines without burning;
Friendless, knowing no home and no hearth,
Bodiless, yet you fly.
Transparent fire of the palms,
Fearless, I ask for your aid.

II

Sorcerer's fire! Tell me
Who was your father, who was your mother?
Where do they dwell?
But, indeed, you are your father, you your mother!
You go your way and we see no mark.
Dry woods have not given you birth,
No ashes did you give to mankind.
Though you die yet you know not death!
Tell me, are you some wandering soul
That has taken your form unaware?

III

Sorcerer's fire!
O spirit of waters below, of the air overhead!
Light that shines from afar
Fly that illumines the marsh
Bird without wings, form without body,
Essence of fire, hear!
Fearless I ask for your aid.

Despite the fact that professional poets functioning very much as described for the Buin are to be found in many portions of the aboriginal

10. P. H. Trilles, "Les légendes des Bena Kanioka et le Folklore Bantou" in *Anthropos* (Vienna, 1909), Vol. IV, p. 965. Translated from the French.

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world, the composing of poems is definitely not an art confined to them alone. In all primitive civilizations there are occasions when every person will attempt to compose a poem. We find accordingly, many individuals in every tribe who have composed at least one or two. To do so some special skill and certainly special knowledge were required. Naturally when thousands of poems are composed in one generation few will have great merit, either from our point of view or from that of primitive peoples. Yet it is quite surprising how good some of these are from any point of view. Let me give a few examples from North America, composed by individuals who were not professional poets, to show the nature of their subject-matter, the technical knowledge which was required of the composer, and what a listener had to know in order to understand the allusions contained in them and to appreciate the meaning of the imagery, free and stereotyped.

I

ESKIMO[11]

The white hounds of dawn I see approaching.
Away, away, or I will yoke you to my sleigh!

This is a poem composed by an Eskimo woman as she lay dying and fighting death. Both these lines are well known stereotyped images, one for death, the other for life.

II

TLINGIT[12]

Drifting along toward the shore runs the nation's canoe,
With it my uncle. He is destroyed.
Never again can I expect to see him here.
To him it has happened just as to Kashkatkl and his brothers.
They waded out across the Stikine.
Their sister, disobeying, looked at them
And they became stone.

To understand this poem one has to know an episode in a well known myth. *Nation's canoe* means an important chief; *to become stone* signifies being drowned.

11. Unpublished.

12. J. R. Swanton, *Tlingit Myths and Texts* (Wash., D.C., Bureau of American Ethnology, Bull. 39, 1909), p. 410.

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III

TLINGIT[13]

Would that I were like her who was helped by Taxgwas!
If I were like the one he helped, that woman,
Indeed I could build my brother's house anew!
But he, my brother, I fear, has gone into the trail of the sun.
And that never again I will see him.

This song was composed by a woman about her drowned brother, Taxgwas. The first two lines refer to some incident in his life; the last three are stereotyped poetical formulae.

IV

WINNEBAGO[14]

I, even I, shall die some day.
Of what value is it then to be alive?

This is a poem composed by an Indian after a day of drinking and debauchery. It subsequently became a favorite drinking song.

V

OJIBWA[15]

1.

A loon I thought it was,
Yet it was my love's splashing oar.

2.

To Saulte Ste Marie he has departed.
My love, he has gone before me
And never again will I see him.

VI

OJIBWA[16]

As my eyes search the prairie
I feel the summer in the spring.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 411.
14. P. Radin, *op. cit.*, p. 423.
15. F. Densmore, *Chippewa Music II* (Wash., D.C., Bureau of American Ethnology, Bull. 53), p. 129.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 254.

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VII

OJIBWA[17]

The odor of death, the odor of death,
I smell the odor of death
In front of my body.

VIII

TLINGIT[18]

If one had control of death,
Very easy it would be
To die with a Wolf Woman.
It would be very pleasant.

Let me compare a poem by an extremely gifted Eskimo with these poems by amateurs.

1.

A wonderful occupation[19]
Making songs!
But all too often they
Are failures.

2.

A wonderful fate
Getting wishes fulfilled!
But all too often they
Slip past.

3.

A wonderful occupation
Hunting caribou!
But all too rarely we
Excel at it
So that we stand
Like a bright flame
Over the plain.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 83.

18. J. R. Swanton, *op. cit.*, p. 415.

19. K. Rasmussen, *ov. cit.* in n. 6, p. 511.

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From this brief discussion one fact assuredly emerges clearly: that the conditions for the development of true literatures among primitive peoples exist in abundance. There are creative artists; there exist highly developed literary forms for both prose and poetry, and there exists a mature and educated audience. How varied these literatures can be, how in each area special literary styles and literary forms have arisen so that we can legitimately speak of an African literature, for instance, as set off against a Polynesian, Melanesian, North American Indian or Eskimo literature, how within each area, indeed, within each tribe, multiple styles exist, I shall now attempt to demonstrate, although I shall limit myself primarily to the African and Eskimo literatures.

II

Most of the older students of primitive cultures and, unfortunately, not a few of the more recent ones, have always tacitly assumed that aboriginal societies had no history or at least that they possessed no significant historical sequences. As these were a thousand or more years ago, so, essentially, they are today, or were until the appearance of the white man. Nothing could be more erroneous. The civilizations of few sections of the aboriginal world can be understood unless we realize that contacts with other tribes and other cultures took place long before the influence of the great European and African-Asiatic civilizations was ever felt. With these contacts must have come about numerous changes. In fact, indications of such cultural transformations, sometimes slight, sometimes profound, are clearly discernible. With the recognition of this fact—that all aboriginal civilizations have had a long history with periods of stability alternating with periods of crisis and change, and with periods of isolation followed by periods of contact—we must begin. Otherwise it will be impossible to understand why one area or one tribe has developed one type of literature, and another a second type, and what has brought about the special physiognomies of the various literatures. I do not, of course, mean that the specific traits of a given culture are to be regarded simply as a function of such changes. Other factors of equal and, at times, far greater importance must also be taken into consideration, such as the physical environment, the degree of culture integration achieved, and specific events occurring within each tribe. Bearing this in mind, let us now attempt our characterization of primitive literatures. I shall confine myself to just two such literatures, referring to the others only incidentally. I am selecting

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for comment those of Negro Africa and of the Eskimo because of the contrast they offer.

By Negro Africa I mean, roughly speaking, Africa south of the Sahara, always excepting the Bushmen. Its traditional imaginative prose literature is set off sharply in form and content from that of all other areas. Nowhere else, for example, do we find anything remotely approaching the sophistication which we encounter here. Nowhere else do we find man and human relations depicted with such stark realism. How are we to account for it? Explanations in terms of race or climate are out of the question. It must be the reflection of a particular social milieu, and here an understanding of the history of Negro Africa is vital. Rarely, in any area, have there been such frequent impingements of cultures upon one another, cultures often differing fundamentally in type and complexity. Moreover, nowhere in the aboriginal world were there so many crises, so much shifting of population, so much chaos and confusion. It is during the breakdown of a culture, in periods of transition, that man tends to be sophisticated, realistic, cynical, and sceptical and that certain aspects of the creative imagination find no expression. In Africa, for instance, it would seem that the mythopoeic imagination, using this term here in its broadest sense, is apparently no longer permitted to function freely, at least in the traditional narratives, and that where it does persist it has been given a new, essentially rationalistic, dress. To indicate what I mean by this statement let me compare the following short narratives, one from the Ojibwa of Ontario,[20] Canada, and the other from the West African Ekoi:[21]

I

Once an old man said to his children, "In two days he is going to pass, the white animal." The children were very glad that they were going to see this animal and one of them asked his father, "Father, is this the animal who brings the morning?" And the father answered, "Yes. After a while you will hear him coming along and singing."

So within two days' time he told his children, "Remember, today you will hear him just before dawn. Look! Look! He is coming now."

"*Awihihi, awihihi.*" Thus he passed along toward the west singing and it was morning.

20. P. Radin, manuscript.

21. P. A. Talbot, *In the Shadow of the Bush* (London, 1912).

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II

Mouse goes everywhere. Through rich men's houses she creeps and she visits even the poorest. At night, with her bright little eyes, she watches the doing of secret things, and no treasure chamber is so safe but she can tunnel through and see what is hidden.

In olden days she wove a story child from all that she saw and to each of these she gave a gown of different color—white, red, blue or black. The stories became her children and lived in her house and served her because she had no children of her own.

Comment here is just as unnecessary as it is when we contrast the conventional opening of many Ojibwa narratives, "Once my story lived," with the conventional beginning of those of the Ashanti, "We really do not mean, we really do not mean that what we are going to say is true."

Two utterly distinct and different cultural and literary traditions are involved here. To say that in the first case we are dealing with a simple, undifferentiated culture where man is still completely under the sway of his dream life and his fantasies, as quite a number of scholars, notably psychoanalysts, would contend, is belied by the facts. No such people exist. Be it also remembered that in civilizations far more complex than the Ojibwa, in most of North and South America and Polynesia, for instance, the mythopoeic imagination is still functioning in full vigor. Nor should we forget that it is found in Aeschylus and in all the great sophisticated oriental civilizations.

What has happened in Negro African cultures then, and finds its expression in their traditional prose literature, is thus only to be explained by their history and the influence of historical conditions upon their attitude toward animals, man, society, nature, and God. In my *African Folktales* narrative upon narrative brings this out clearly. Animals, nature, God, they have all been thoroughly humanized and, having been humanized, can then be assessed as man is assessed. Perhaps that is why there is no special genre devoted to satire in African literature, neither in prose nor in poetry. Man is depicted as he is. That is a sufficient satire. So likewise are animals, God, and nature depicted. They cast no shadows; they have no protecting *personae*. However only destruction and tragedy can result when man meets his fellowman, nature, and God in such fashion.

Let us examine the plots of four narratives given in *African Folktales,*[22]

22. *African Folk Tales* (New York, 1953).

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The Bantu Bena Mukuni tale entitled *Let the Big Drum Roll*,[23] the Bena Mukuni *How an Unborn Child Avenged his Mother's Death*,[24] the Bantu Baronga *The Wonder Worker of the Plains*[25] and the Bantu Baila tale of *The Woman Who Went in Search of God*.[26] Basically there is no reason why, in the first, the king should be murdered, that in the second the husband should murder his pregnant wife, that in the third the whole tribe should be destroyed, and that in the fourth the old woman should not die. But if man insists upon approaching his fellowman, nature, and God naked, without protecting illusions or fictions, only violence can be the outcome and he is consumed and destroyed. Nor is it without significance that nowhere in any of these tales are the actors represented as penitent or aware of their crimes. Indeed it is wrong to call their actions crimes. Given the viewpoint that is reflected in these narratives, the actors are simply morally unaware.

Although themes reflecting this attitude toward man and the world are the dominant ones today, this does not mean that they always have been so. It is best, in fact, to regard the prevalence of these themes as part of a style, originally reflecting certain social conditions developed many generations ago, which has persisted in the traditional prose narratives and driven out other styles. Yet other themes and styles are still found today although they are not common. Take, for example, the Bantu Ambundu tale of *The Son of Kimanaueze* and *The Daughter of the Sun and Moon*.[27] That themes of this type were at one time much commoner we may safely assume. We can, in fact, still find them in many tales that have been today completely revised and reorganized in terms of the newer realistic style. This older viewpoint is also evident in many of the animal tales, particularly among the Southern Bantu.

The only respect in which the non-traditional narratives differ from those of other areas is in the development of formal semi-religious, semi-philosophical discourses such as those found in West Africa among the Ewe.[28] In the latter we find the same realistic appraisal of the world so characteristic of the traditional narratives. One example will have to suffice:

23. J. Torrend, *Specimens of Bantu Folklore from Northern Rhodesia* (London, 1921), pp. 24–26.

24. *African Folktales and Sculpture*, pp. 186 ff.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 229 ff.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 305.

27. *Ibid.*, pp. 73 ff.

28. J. Spieth, *Die Ewe-Staemme* (Leipzig, 1906), pp. 834–836.

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God made everything in the world. He alone has been great from the beginning of time. God made all men. . . . God is wise for he has created everything on the earth and accompanies men and animals everywhere. . . . No person can understand his wisdom. . . . He himself made the good and the bad people. He is compassionate. But he does not always know how to act justly for he gave us death.

God acts unjustly for he made some people good and others bad. I and my companions work together in the fields; the crops of one prosper and those of others fail. This proves that God is unjust and treats men unequally. God treats us, our children and our wives who perish, unkindly. If men behave like that we say nothing, but when God acts thus it hurts us. From this we are right in inferring that God is unjust.

In the other main branches of prose literature which have attained significant development, in aboriginal Africa, the riddles and the proverbs, sophistication and realism are also dominant. The realism of the proverbs is accompanied by a profound and detached philosophic insight and understanding in which love and compassion are given their due place, something which is strikingly absent from the traditional prose narratives. Perhaps nowhere in the world has the proverb attained a more artistic expression than here in Africa. Rarely has so much been said in so concise, pithy, and artistic a form. We have today a tendency to dismiss such a literary genre with a shrug of the shoulders. That, of course, is a Western European prejudice. The proverb is still a legitimate literary form in the Orient and it was not despised in ancient Greece.

In contrast to the prose, no generalizations can be made for the poetry that would hold for the whole continent. There exist a few stylistic forms that are found everywhere, such as the poems consisting of solo and chorus or those that serve as a text for a prose expansion, or the dirges for the dead. But apart from these each area and tribe has developed its own forms and stresses themes referring to its own interests and connected with its own special history. Where monarchies exist or where societies are complexly organized the poets often constitute a professional and privileged order. They play the role of poet-laureates whose duty it is to glorify the rulers and the particular interests and ideals of their nation. Let me select the Bantu Ruanda to illustrate what these poets take as their subject matter.

Among the Ruanda there are three main genres of poetry, all of them

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taking the form of odes or small epics, those in praise of the king, those in praise of the warrior and his deeds, and those in praise of their most prized possession, the cow. These odes are one of the distinctive achievements of Africa. Those in praise of the king consist of a long series of stereotyped complements, stereotyped images and allusions which only a member of the tribe could possibly understand and appreciate. As an example, let me quote part of an ode composed to celebrate the accession to the throne of the king Mutara in 1810:[29]

You are a vessel forged without defect,
Fashioned by hammers, chosen and select;
Born of Ruaniko's most sacred trees,
Your brethren, scions of Cyillima.
Indolence never touched you nor did sloth.
Your arms, unfailing, brought us victory
Just as it did your kin, Ruganda's ancient kings.

You are the happy searcher after game.
You nourish us and grant us your protection.
O king of great renown and without blame,
Have we not seen the deeds where you excelled?
A king of many virtues, hero you.
A jewel precious are you and so large
That from Buriza down to Buremera you stretch.

Ruler of Tanda, you, all-powerful,
From days of old your fief it was Rutanga,
Your ancient home Gasabo,
There where the heifers play.
Hero without fault and without blame,
Giver of laws, unalterable words,
Owner of lands that overflow with wealth,
Master and king, your subjects here we stand
And in Ruanda may you always rule. . . .

Equal you are to those that I have praised,
In no way second,
O clothed in joy and happiness!
These drums attest your gentleness and worth.
Young though you be, in valor you are clothed.

29. Translated from the French of the unpublished essay by A. Kagame, *La Poésie au Raunda*, kindly placed at my disposal.

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Your horns already stand erect and straight
Despite your youth, most precious calf!
Mighty will you become I know,
When you have come to man's estate,
Mighty and strong and proud, a bull.
Great conqueror of hungers.
Where will the nations flee,
Those who were slow to serve you?
Protector of our flock, lengthen this day,
Give me your ear that I may pay respect. . . .
I am not one who falters, whom slander finds;
Others may hesitate, this well I know, not I.

Pleasure and happiness reside within my breast
Since that rare day when to your home I came.
Giver of joy, our refuge,
Turn upon us the fulness of your power.
And now a happy message do I bring,
I who did find the chambers of our lord,
That gracious home, radiant and full of smiles,
Immaculate and clean as kaoline.
There did I see and come upon the king,
In semblance like a newly risen moon,
His features like a diamond without flaw.
Resplendent did his beauty flash on me
And there came a new afflatus added to the old.
Upon my head a garland there was placed.
And thus I danced crowned with the sacred badge,
Nor can the best of bards find me at fault.

Here we are in a world comparable to that of Pindar, a world in which heroic lays and odes are born, as the well-known French scholar, Père Laydevant, has justly pointed out.[30] The poetic inspiration found in these odes is not generally of the highest kind. Negro African poetry at its best is to be found elsewhere, in the elegies for the dead, in the religious "hymns," and in the short philosophic lyrics. Take, for example, the following "hymns" from the upper Guinea coast.[31]

30. "La Poésie chez les Basuto," *Africa*, Vol. III (London, 1930), pp. 523–535.

31. D. Westermann, "Gottesvorstellungen in Oberguinea," *Africa*, Vol. I, pp. 195, 204. Translated from the German.

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I

1.

The sun shines brightly, it burns down upon us.
In glory rises the moon, rises into the skies.
Rain falls on earth and, changing, the sun shines upon us.
Sun, moon and rain may change, but over them all there towers
God, from whose eye nothing escapes and is hidden.
Though you may stay at home, or though you may live on the waters,
Though under darkest shade of the trees you recline
Over it all dwells God.

2.

Did you think in your pride or believe an orphan was ever below you,
You could covet his wealth and secretly then betray him,
There would be none to behold and none to detect you?
Call but to mind the fact that God is there, ever above you
And in the days to come he will find and he will repay you,
Though not today, today, though not today it may be.
Yes, in the days to come God will find and he will repay you.
Was in your mind the thought, was in your heart the feeling
It is a slave I have robbed, only, indeed, an orphan?
But in the days to come God will find and he will repay you,
Though not today, today, though not today it may be.

II

O Sango, you, you are the master.
You punish in wrath, evil and guilty alike,
And you take in your hands the stones, the fiery weapons,
To crush those below; all these are broken.
Fires break out, the woods burn and all is consumed.
Trees fall, are destroyed, death threatens the living.

Or take again the following from the Ewe of West Africa:[32]

I

Death has been with us from all time;
The heavy burden long ago began.
Not I can loose the bonds.
Water does not refuse to dissolve

32. J. Spieth, *Die Religion der Eweer* (Göttingen, Vanderhoeck & Rupprecht, 1911), pp. 236 ff. Translated from the German.

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Even a large crystal of salt.
And so to the world of the dead
The good too must descend.

II

Large is the city of the nether world
Whither kings too must go
Nevermore to return.
Cease then your plaint, O mother of an only child!
Your plaint O cease, mother of an only child!
For when did an only child
Receive the gift of immortality?
So be it, mother of an only child,
And cease your wail, and cease your wail!

III

(The singers approach)
A great thing we desire to do,
A *kposu* song, an *adzoli* song,
To sing we shall begin:
Awute here lies dead,
He now lies on his bier.
Death did announce himself to him.
O dead friend lying on your bier
Return once more, your bonds to loose!

(The deceased appears and speaks)
You all now know
Within my body the word has perished,
Within Awute speech has died.

Who was it destroyed my body?
'Twas death dragged it away;
A warrior snatched it from my body.

(Death appears and speaks)
Now my turn it is to sing!
I came and thundered,
I had my lightning flash upon the tree
And threw him down!
Come let us go!

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Footsteps I hear, people are approaching.
An evil brother does announce himself;
Inopportune he comes.

With these poems I shall leave African literature and turn to one which could not possibly be more different, that of the Eskimo. Here too a stark realism pervades both prose and poetry, but there is no oversophistication and, above all, no cynicism. Nowhere is death and starvation so omnipresent, nowhere is nature so cruel and nowhere is man, possibly, so violent. What then has made for the amazing contrast between the two types of realism? The answer, I feel, is simple. Cruelty, bloodshed, destruction among the Eskimo are not palpably man-made as in Africa. No conquests, with all their attendant horrors and with the demoralization which comes in their wake, have swept over this land. No aboriginal civilization is more completely integrated. It is this integration which has protected the Eskimo against inherently false emphases and evaluations and which has permitted him to retain one virtue which is seemingly absent in the civilizations of Negro Africa and many parts of Indonesia, Malaysia and Melanesia: humility. This humility brings with it a philosophic detachment which can critically evaluate man, yet still sympathize with him even in misfortunes he has brought upon himself. The Eskimos can do this because they see man in his proper proportions as a mote in an enormous universe and as a being forced by nature and life itself to do violence to other living creatures which have as much right to life as has man.

In no area in the world, civilized or aboriginal, is there more respect for life, for all life, human and non-human, and so much unadulterated enjoyment of life. The will to live under the conditions existing in Arctic North America is an achievement and as such the Eskimos celebrate it. Only because it is something that has to be achieved can they face life, acquiesce in what it offers of good and evil, of misfortune and happiness, and only because it has to be achieved does it mean so much to them. An informant of Rasmussen tells how she came upon a woman who, when she and her family were isolated during a terrible winter, saved herself from death by consuming the dead body of her husband. When discovered, half crazed, she shrieked at her rescuers not to approach her, that she was defiled and unfit for human companionship. The answer of the rescuers was simple and direct: "You had the will to live."

But life to the Eskimo means life at its best moments: youth and maturity, not old age. Old age is a time for recalling the past when one was

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happy and active. Such reminiscences form the theme of innumerable poems. Some of them have a touch of the sentimental which a delightful sense of humor generally corrects, for on truthfulness in such matters the Eskimo lays great stress. "Our narratives," an old Eskimo told Rasmussen, "deal with the experiences of man and these experiences are not always pleasant or pretty. But it is not proper to change our stories to make them more acceptable to our ears, that is if we wish to tell the truth. Words must be the echo of what has happened and cannot be made to conform to the mood and the taste of the listener."

Let me quote one of the best of such poems:[33]

1.

Often I return
To my little song.
And patiently I hum it
Above the fishing hole
In the ice.
This simple little song
I can keep on humming,
I, who else too quickly
Tire when fishing—
Up the stream.

2.

Cold blows the wind
Where I stand on the ice,
I am not long in giving up!
When I get home
With a catch that does not suffice,
I usually say
It was the fish
That failed—
Up the stream.

3.

And yet, glorious is it
To roam
The river's snow-soft ice
As long as my legs care.

33. K. Rasmussen, *op. cit.* n. 6, p. 509.

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Alas! My life has now glided
Far from the wide views of the peaks
Deep down into the vale of age—
Up the stream.

4.

If I go hunting the land beasts,
Or if I try to fish,
Quickly I fall to my knees,
Stricken with faintness.
Never again shall I feel
The wildness of strength,
When on an errand I go over the land
From my house and those I provide for—
Up the stream.

5.

A worn-out man, that's all,
A fisher, who ever without luck
Makes holes in river or lake ice
Where no trout will bite.

6.

But life itself is still
So full of goading excitement!
I alone,
I have only my song,
Though it too is slipping from me.

7.

For I am merely
Quite an ordinary hunter,
Who never inherited song
From the twittering birds of the sky.

In the traditional prose narratives purely human themes greatly predominate. These are really novelettes and are probably not very old. But the Eskimo places them in the category of narratives referring to events of the ancient past, to which also the comparatively few animal tales belong. They are often difficult to distinguish from narratives that belong to the second category, that of contemporary literature. However, the most char-

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acteristic compositions in their contemporary literature belong to the domain of their shamanistic experiences. They are really snatches of autobiography.

Yet, excellent as is their prose, the real achievement of the Eskimo lies in the realm of poetry. Here they have not been equalled by any other aboriginal people, with the possible exception of the Polynesians. That they should have as their subject matter the joy of living and the beauties of the world is not strange considering the nature of Eskimo philosophy.

All primitive peoples celebrate the happenings of their life, important or unimportant, in song, but such technical perfection as that of the Eskimo has been achieved by few others. This is manifest in every composition. Take, for example, the following poems:

I[34]

I arise from rest with movements swift
As the beat of a raven's wings,
Thus I arise
To meet the day.
My face is turned from the dark of night
To gaze at the dawn of day
Now whitening in the sky.

II[35]

The lands around my dwelling
Are more beautiful
From the day
When it is given to me to see
Faces I have never seen before.
All is more beautiful,
All is more beautiful,
And life is thankfulness.
These guests of mine
Make my house grand.

34. K. Rasmussen, *Intellectual Culture of the Iglulik Eskimos*, Report on Fifth Thule Expedition, Vol. VII (Copenhagen, 1929), p. 27.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

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III[36]

Ajaha, ajaha!
I journeyed in my kayak
To search for some land.
Ajaha, ajaha!
And I came upon a snowdrift
As it began to melt,
Ajahaija, ajaha!
Spring now I knew was near,
Winter was past.
Ajahaija, ajaihaija!
And I was afraid
That my eyes would become
Weak, far too weak
To behold all that glory.
Ajahaija,
Ajahaija,
Ajaha.

IV[37]

1.

Fear seizes me
When I think of being alone.
What a wish, to be far from men
As happy one sits among friends!

2.

What a joy it is to sense,
To witness summer's approach
As it comes to this world of ours;
To behold the sun,
The day-sun, the night-sun,
Going its ancient way!

36. K. Rasmussen, *Grönlandsagen*, text-translated into German by J. Koppel (Berlin, 1922), p. 238. Translated from the German.

37. K. Rasmussen, *Rasmussen's Thulefahrt*, translated into German by F. Sieburg (Copenhagen, 1926), p. 430. Translated from the German.

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3.

Fear seizes me
When I mark the winter's approach
As it comes to this world of ours;
To behold the moon,
The half moon, the full moon,
Going its ancient way!

4.

Whither does all this tend?
Would that my steps went eastward!
Yes, never again, well I know,
Will I see him, my father's kin.

The Eskimos have a large number of special genres of poetry, the most famous being the versified lampoon. On specified occasions men and women assemble to hear individuals, generally gifted poets, hurl insults at one another. These versified lampoons are highly stylized and very difficult to understand because they deal with incidents in the personal lives of the combatants. Such poetic duels can be quite long, lasting at times an hour. They consist of attacks and answers. In many of these poems it is regarded as artistic to compose in riddles, or only to give hints without stating clearly what is meant. The audience is thus kept in a continuous state of tension, although rarely for long, since among the Eskimo everyone's affairs are matters of community knowledge.

Let me quote snatches from one such poetic duel[38] where the meaning is clear. The contest is between a man named Marratse and one named Equerqo, who had stolen Marratse's wife.

MARRATSE'S ATTACK

Words let me split,
Small words, sharp words,
Like the splinters
Which, with my axe, I cut up.
A song I shall sing of old days,
A breath from the distant past,
A sad and a plaintive song,
Forgetfulness to bring to my wife,

38. *Ibid.*, pp. 235–236. Translated from the German.

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She who was snatched from me
By a prattler, a liar.
Bitterly has she suffered from him,
That lover of human flesh,
Cannibal, miscreant,
Spewed up from starvation days!

EQUERQO'S ANSWER

Only amazement I feel
At your preposterous words.
Only anger they cause
And the urge to laugh,
You with your mocking song,
Placing on me that guilt.
Did you think you could frighten me,
I who many a time challenged death?
Hei, hei! So you sing to my wife
Who once was yours in the days
When kindness you forgot.
Alone she was in those days.
Yet never in combats of song
Did you challenge your foes for her.
Ah, but now she is mine.
Never again shall false lovers like you,
Deceivers, come singing into our tent.

Eskimo poetry is exclusively lyrical, but within that genre what has been achieved is amazing Equally amazing is the Eskimo's awareness of their technique. As one of them once said, "The most festive of all things is joy in beautiful, smooth words and one's ability to express them."[39] It is not by chance, then, but because they have occupied themselves with the problem, that they attempt to explain what poetic inspiration is. I have already given one such explanation; let me now add another. "All songs," so an old Eskimo claimed, "come to us in the great solitary open places. Sometimes they come to us in the form of tears, at other times from the depths of our hearts or, again, they may come in the form of joyous laughter springing from the happiness which wells up within us as we behold the grandeur of the world and ponder over the meaning of life.

39. K. Rasmussen, *The Eagle's Gift.*

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Without our knowing how, words and melodies come into being, words we do not use in common speech."[40]

How are we to account for this amazing literary achievement? It is an important question to answer. A highly developed literary tradition must lie behind it, and we have difficulty, at first, in believing it was achieved in the inhospitable and frightful environment in which the Eskimo now lives. Is it conceivable, as they themselves claim, that song and laughter was the answer they gave to the challenge of nature? Possibly. But this is only part of the answer. To explain the Eskimo literary achievement, to completely explain the literary achievement of any aboriginal civilization, we must assume that all peoples, at all times, carry within them the possibilities of developing significant and mature literatures if social and economic conditions are not too destructive. Only on such an assumption can we explain the song cycles of the Australian aborigines of Northeastern Arnhem Land, cycles that are true epics—this song, for instance, that a "lowly" Australian poet sings:[41]

Tidal waters flowing,
White foam on the waves,
Fresh water flowing,
From rains into the stream.
Into the waters falling,
Soft bark of the papertrees,
Rain from the clouds falling,
The stream's waters swirling—
Thus she emerged
And walked upon the land.

40. K. Rasmussen, *Grönlandsagen*, p. 230. Translated from the German.

41. R. M. Berndt, *Kunapipi* (Melbourne, Cheshire, 1951), p. vii.

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