

Andrzejewski, B. ; Pilaszewicz, S. & Tyloch, W. (eds.) (1985)
LITERATURES IN AFRICAN LANGUAGES ; theoretical issues and
sample surveys.

Cambridge University Press, Cambridge,
Wiedza Powszechna, Warszawa.
672 pp.

This monumental reader compiles contributions on literature in African vernaculars like Fula, Mande, Twi, Yoruba, Hausa, Ethiopian and Amharic, Somali, Malagasy, Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho, Tswana, San and Swahili. Two theoretical contributions on oral literature (Andrzejewski) and the rise of written literature (Pilaszewicz) form the perspective from which the sample surveys are approached.

The editors state their purpose as follows :

"... in the minds of most people outside Africa the term 'African literature' means only that which has been written in European languages... The main aim of the present book is to remedy in some measure the lack of readily available information on African language literatures... by providing a number of surveys which, however, must be regarded merely as samples, since they are only a selection from a very large number of such literatures."(19)

Indeed, one of the few criticisms one may have on this reader, is the lack of information on literatures in vernaculars from the central part of Africa (e.g. literature in Lingala), or from the Bantu-group in general, of which only the Southern branches (Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho, Tswana) are amply presented.

Thus, the general picture emerging from this book is necessarily a partial one : the Central part of the "Sudan Belt", the Horn, the East African coastal strip, Madagascar and Southern Africa are well documented, while only sporadic reference is made to literatures from other parts of the continent.

However, the samples presented in the book (mostly by

British and Polish scholars from the S.O.A.S., resp. the University of Warsaw) represent an enormous contribution to the study of oral and written literatures in African vernaculars. All analyses are broadly conceived, well-documented, and in each of them the historical and socio-cultural factors influencing evolution, form and content of the literatures are given the serious consideration they so often lack in other surveys (e.g. Janheinz Jahn's (1966) "A history of Black Writing" ; compare the chapters on Hausa and Swahili literature with the contributions in this work). Even in places where the author's analysis could meet criticism, like R. Ohly's on Swahili literature when confronted with the opinions of Kenyan and Tanzanian scholars (e.g. Ulla Schild, ed., (1980) "The East African experience", contributions of P. Mbughuni and M.M. Mulokozi esp.), the documentary value remains considerable.

We can safely recommend this reader to any scholar interested in the study of African linguistics and literature. He will find an interesting corpus of text samples, a stimulating analysis, and extensive bibliographies on the subject.

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