

“We Spend Our Years As A Taie That Is Told”: Oral Historical Narrative in a South African Chiefdom. By Isabel Hofmeyr. (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1993. Pp. xvi + 328, introduction, photographs, maps, appendices, notes, bibliography, index, ISBN 0-435-08099-7 cloth, ISBN 0-435-0895-X pbk.)

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Historical narratives had been given little consideration in African oral literary scholarship until Isabel Hofmeyr’s scholarly study of Valtyn, a Ndebele-Sotho chiefdom in Transvaal, South Africa. In the book *“We Spend Our Years As A Tale That Is Told”*, Hofmeyr, a renowned Professor of African Literature at the University of Witwatersrand, South Africa, brings to the reader an understanding of the status of African historical narrative as an important genre of oral literature. Combining methodologies and approaches used in sociology, history, anthropology, linguistics and oral literature, Hofmeyr skilfully outlines and analyzes three related areas: oral storytelling, literacy, and the oral historical narratives which derive their style and technique from storytelling.

The topics treated in the book are broadly divided into four related parts which are in turn subdivided into eight related chapters. In Part One, “Telling Tales,” (p. 23) Hofmeyr reconstructs — from accounts collected through interviews and ethnographic materials — the original form that the active storytelling tradition might have taken in the Ndebele-Sotho Chiefdom before this “oral” chiefdom was fractured and eventually swept away. The reconstructed model shows that oral storytelling traditions were divided according to gender and space. Women tended to tell fictional stories in hut-areas while men told mostly historical narratives in the courtyards (*Kgoro*) in the evenings. Considering the relation of male and storytelling traditions to each other, Hofmeyr reveals that the division is not watertight: the two traditions are similar in technique, style and plot segments.

In Part Two, “The Three Rs: Reading, Writing and Repression,” Hofmeyr outlines and examines literacy (purveyed by schools and missions), forced removals, fencing, migrancy, and literate bureaucracies as factors responsible for the considerable changes in oral storytelling — in particular, the almost complete disappearance of the male historical storytelling tradition (p. 39).

In Part Three, “Telling Historical Tales,” Hofmeyr uses as a case study the oral historical accounts concerning the cave siege of Gwasa in 1854 to outline and analyze the craft and meaning of oral historical narrative (p. 103). Central to the craft of oral historical narrative is the tellers’ narrative skills that draw on a variety of core clichés or images which they cluster together in various combinations, constructing their stories about the siege to suit particular contexts and audiences (p. 111). Oral accounts concerning this siege are usually narrated by males of royal standing who are knowledgeable in oral history and committed to upholding and maintaining the idea of Ndebele-Sotho

Chieftaincy. In her analysis of the meaning of two accounts narrated by two male narrators of royal standing, Hofmeyr points out that it is the context of oral historical narrative that determines its meaning. She also contends that although the notion of chieftaincy is not the only theme treated in the oral historical accounts, the idea of chieftaincy is “one of the horizons shaping” the narrators’ oral historical accounts (p. 131).

In Part Four, “The Three Ms: Memory, Manuscript and Monuments,” Hofmeyr discusses the changing phenomenon of oral history (p. 160). In particular, she deals with the transference of the oral historical accounts of the siege of Gwasa from verbal to written and monument versions, and the impact of these changes on the patterns of this oral history. The oral history has been altered as a result of changes in its situational and cultural contexts, types of audience and media of transmission.

Written versions of the story relating the siege of the cave of Gwasa by the Boers in 1854 contain certain aspects of the folkloric or oral storytelling traditions. This suggests that the oral versions of the stories formed the background for the manuscript and monument versions. It also further validates the notion that there is no absolute division between orality and literacy.

Hofmeyr’s book has many strengths, but some of them deserve special mention. The reader comes to realize and understand that oral history derives its techniques and styles from the wider context of oral storytelling traditions and hence it can be considered as one of the genres of oral literature.

This study does not focus exclusively on the text of oral historical narrative, as many scholarly examinations of African literature tend to do; it also considers the context, style, technique, the tellers and their points of view (thus, oral literary criticism). The main topics selected for discussion are presented chronologically and are well outlined and examined. This makes the discussions easy to follow. “*We Spend Our Years As A Tale That Is Told*” should be seen as an important addition to Africanistics, and, in particular, to the study of oral traditions.

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Folk Tradition and Folk Medicine in Scotland: The Writings of David Rorie. Edited by David Buchan. (Edinburgh: Canongate Academic, 1994. Pp. 317, references, bibliography, glossary, 19.95, ISBN 1-898410-01-1 cloth)

David Rorie, as David Buchan explains in his introduction to this book, had both literary talents and ethnographic skills. After training as a physician