

J.M. Schoffeleers & A.A. Roscoe, **Land of Fire: Oral Literature from Malawi** (Limbe: Popular Publications, 1986), 241 pp.

One of the problems that has bedevilled scholarship for a long time has been overspecialisation, reflected in the fact that literary critics, sociologists, historians and other social scientists have, by and large, tended to talk to themselves. In recent years, however, collaborative research by scholars working in different disciplines has become the tradition. The publication of **Land of Fire: Oral Literature from Malawi**, the most substantial collection to date of Malawi orature, follows this new trend in a welcome and refreshing manner. **Land of Fire** is the work of two distinguished scholars who have worked in Malawi for a long time: Dr. Schoffeleers, a social anthropologist, now Professor of Religious Anthropology at the Free University of Amsterdam, and Dr. Roscoe, a literary critic, now Professor of English at Massey University, New Zealand.

The tales in **Land of Fire** are not extraordinary in themselves: hundreds of similar tales have been published and are still being published all over Africa. What makes these unique is the elaborate commentary that follows each of the eleven chapters. It is here that we savour the value of an interdisciplinary approach to the study of African orature. What might have been a dry academic analysis comes across as a fascinating, vibrant and human exploration into origins and meaning; and the erudition as well as the enthusiasm which each of the authors brings to the task is formidable. The "Comments" after each chapter set the tales in the broad context of African and other orature studies, taking advantage of the latest scholarship in the field. The "Notes" on individual tales help the reader to interpret the tales, and to relate them to the variant versions available from within and outside Malawi.

Soaring costs of printing and publishing severely limit what is possible in a work of this kind. One wishes that a dual-language version of the tales were available. English-only versions lose a great deal in translation; and part of the delight of orature is being able to study the verbatim vernacular versions. One would also have liked more specific information about the sources of individual tales. Stories

come more alive when there are clues to the personality of the teller. In most cases we are told the language of origin of each tale. There are, however, unexplained exceptions: the last two tales in Chapter 2 and a number of others elsewhere in the book are "sourceless", even in terms of language. And "Brother Marries Sister" in Chapter 3, apart from being strangely placed under the heading of "Chieftaincy", is, we read, from "Chewa, unrevised". One wonders what "unrevised" connotes here; more seriously, does it carry any implication in terms of the "revision" of the other tales in the book? Occasionally, versions of songs in the tales, or of the refrains in some of the songs, are given in the vernacular. More often than not, they are presented in English. I would prefer consistency here - and it seems to me that a vernacular version of the songs would add greatly to the overall authenticity and aesthetic flavour of the tales, in the absence of a full dual-language version.

Research in Malawian orature has reached an immensely exciting stage. As well as being an important resource, **Land of Fire** is a direct challenge to other scholars in the field to emulate what Schoffeleers and Roscoe have so admirably achieved. With **Land of Fire**, Popular Publications have achieved a real breakthrough in terms of quality of printing. The cover is a masterpiece; and, the unfortunate list of errata notwithstanding, the overall quality of the book is superb.

Patrick O'Malley