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Buchi Offodile. *The Orphan Girl and Other Stories: West African Folk Tales.* New York and Northampton: Interlink Books, 2001. xii + 260 pp. $15.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-56656-375-8.

Reviewed by Stephen Belcher (co-editor,)

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Buchi Offodile says that he "compiled this volume to help preserve a dying culture" (p. ix). This reader is not entirely convinced that this collection of retold folktales succeeds in that goal. The question is not so much the quality of the stories, their intrinsic interest, and the skill of the retelling, but rather the presentation and the background information which accompanies the stories. Readers who are looking for a representative and legible collection of folktales may well find this volume satisfying, although not as substantive as some of the many other collections of African folktales available on the market. Its distinctive merit might be that the author claims to be a story-teller, but the qualification does not seem to add any special element to the book. This review examines the book from the perspective of the academic presentation of folktales, for which there are certain norms and expectations which scholarly practice make clear.

The first is that the source and context of the recording of the tale should be identified. The author acknowledges some written sources (Jack Berry's collection and others), but certainly not all. Perhaps the question of the circumstances of recording is moot, since the author claims to be a story-teller (and thus a legitimate "source"), but the author, as a Nigerian, can hardly claim local authority for knowledge of the stories from the Wolof or the Fulani (of Mali and Senegal) or the Kono of Guinea. However, if the author did collect all the stories personally from the countries listed, the account of that process would be well-worth giving.

A second perspective is that principles of selection and organization should be identified. We have no idea from what corpus the author draws the stories that are selected, or why certain stories are chosen for particular countries. The organization of the book is by country, which is problematic. The expectation here would be that the stories would reflect the dominant cultures of the countries, but this is not the case. The story from Mauritania is not a Beidane or Hassaniya story, but from the Wolof (the dominant group of Senegal). The Wolof are shown on the map as inhabiting not the grand Jolof in Senegal but the emirates of Trarza and Brakna, where they have certainly been a tiny minority since 1989. The story from Mali is a Fulani story and, curiously, the story given for Senegal is also a Fulani story. This sort of attribution is misleading.

Third, background information should be relevant and apposite. Here we encounter the most significant weakness of the book. The stories are organized by country (an index at the back divides them by subject), and the countries are introduced with information from the CIA *World Fact Book* for 1998. Numerous red flags ap-

pear here. The information given is primarily statistical (population and area, major ethnic groups). The CIA's information may or may not be reliable, but it is worth noting that their signal failures in recent years have been in the area of human intelligence–which here means cultural awareness. The purpose and the relevance of the information excerpted from this reference source is doubtful. To fulfill its stated purpose, this book should offer more qualitative information relevant to the stories. It should take standard reference information for granted and go beyond it, providing more detailed information about local practices, foodstuffs, living conditions, and social organization. The provision of such information may be the purpose of the introduction, but the attempt is a failure. The introduction, covering such themes as "Stories and Tellers," "The People," "The Coming of the Europeans," and "The Role of Religions," homogenizes the west African demographic tapestry to the point of over-simplification. The vision of Africa presented is that of the expatriate forced by his/her new environment to speak for an entire continent. Naturally, distinctive features disappear, local specifics vanish, and the result is a sort of McDonalds serving of African culture.

It should be noted that the information on the back of the book (the publisher's blurb) is inaccurate. Not all countries are represented by "several" stories (some are, but ten are not), and there is no evidence the author searched villages for elders who remembered the old stories. Instead the author seems to have searched the library, and readers interested in academic study of this topic would do well to do the same.

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