

AFRICAN STUDIES NOTES AND NEWS

ANNOUNCEMENTS

LATIN AFRICA RESEARCH BULLETIN

Owing to the predominance of anglophone countries in British research on Africa, those people working on other parts of the continent are somewhat isolated. The colonial powers of Latin Europe had a relatively homogenous culture, of which important elements have taken root in independent African countries, most notably language. Those doing research on 'Latin Africa' thus frequently face similar problems and situations. The purpose of a research bulletin would be to lessen their sense of isolation by enabling them to contact people scattered round the country, who often do not know what is going on elsewhere. Moreover, the School of Oriental and African Studies in London hopes to put on a series of small workshops to bring people together in this field, as part of the School's wider programme to develop studies on Francophone and Lusophone Africa. Thus, in May 1982, there will be a workshop on large business corporations in West Central Africa (Zaire, Angola, Cameroun etc). Madagascar and the Indian Ocean could be the focus for another workshop at a later date. The Research Bulletin could help to indicate in what areas such workshops would be most fruitful.

It is proposed to produce the Research Bulletin in a cheap roneoed form, and distribute it to all those listed in it. All who wish to be included in it should send their names, addresses, and a brief (single short paragraph) description of their research, to Dr W G Clarence-Smith, Department of History, SOAS, Malet Street, London, WC1E 7HP. Please inform all the people you know who might be interested in this project.

SEMIOTICS SOCIETY OF AFRICA

The prospects for African Semiotics and the needs for an African Association were discussed at the Claremont A LA 1981 Conference by Daniel Kunene (Madison Wisconsin, USA), Simon Battestini (Calabar, Nigeria), Valentin Mudimbe (Lubumbashi, Zaire), Medupe Broderick (Kano, Nigeria), Leonard Kodjo (Abidjan, Ivory Coast), Aliko Songolo (UCLA, USA), Robert Cancel (UC San Diego, USA). Simon Battestini was to draft the statutes of the association.

The draft constitution was discussed and amended at A SA 1981 Bloomington Conference by Valentin Mudimbe, Simon Battestini and Robert Hazel (Montreal, Canada). This text was considered by the next (provisional) Executive Committee on April 8th, 1982, Howard University, Washington DC, USA, and will be finally approved by the General Assembly which will take place in March 1983, at the University of Calabar, Nigeria, during the Inaugural Semiotics Society of Africa Congress.

Also at Bloomington, some participants of the 1981 A SA Conference were briefed by Michael Herzfeld about the launching of the American Journal of Semiotics, the Facilities of the Research Center for Language and Semiotic Studies of the University of Indiana, and about the prospects of developing

semiotic studies in and about Africa. Then Simon Battestini announced the launching of the Semiotics Society of Africa and described some of the planned activities notably in terms of meetings and publications of the new society.

For information write to: Dr Simon P X Battestini, Secretary-General, Semiotics Society of Africa, PMB 1115, University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria.

Dr Battestini sends the following message, outlining the work of the Semiotics Society of Africa:

On both sides of the Atlantic I have been talking to semioticians about the *raison d'être* of a semiotic society in Africa. All agreed on the necessity for such a society.

We have a theory and a methodology. Semiotics is definitely interdisciplinary and it may well be this fact which has engendered some hostility on the part of colleagues highly specialized and at ease in a fragmented educational system. One of the aims of the society shall be to inform non-semioticist colleagues that we are not aiming to create additional schools, departments - it would be contrary to our interdisciplinary approach. Rather, we need their research and findings to provide the substance of our epistemological quest. We should make it clear to them that in terms of status we are linguists, literary critics, medical doctors, but in terms of role we have chosen to be semioticians. In order to fully appreciate our function in our compartmentalized universities, we need to make the important distinction between method and theory on the one hand, and subjects of teaching and research on the other. Literary critics, for example, differ in their approaches, modes of study, leading principles, but they have a common field of research and teaching. Semioticians transcend methodological and theoretical divisions. They share the same theory and method whatever they are: literary semioticians, behavioural scientists, communicationists, anthropologists, medical doctors, and their subjects of teaching and research are almost unlimited except that they focus on the interchange of messages, their various forms, their ways of referring, of signifying.

When on any African river a fisherman records a set of signs such as wave movements, the colour and shape of the clouds, the speed and direction of the wind and builds up a prediction concerning the weather, he is not far from being a semioticist. When an African traveller notices certain verbal and non-verbal interchange going on in a market place between people foreign to him and deduces from these observations certain ideas on the psychology, customs and social organization of the observed people's culture, he behaves like one of us except that he might be jumping to fast conclusions. As semioticians we are more interested in the process leading to such conclusions, than the conclusions themselves. African hunters, story-tellers, herbalists, collect facts, ideas, feelings, give them the status of signs, build a coherent system of significance out of them, and implement them. They share their skills with others, explaining how they, or their forefathers, came to certain rules which have to be followed. Apart from this normative aspect, devoid of criticism, they are far from lacking semiotic skills.

The analysis of knowing itself, of how knowledge is possible, of the actual process of making sense out of a configuration of signs is basic to semiotics which is a powerful instrument of criticism. A good example would be the semiotic study of a politician's speech.

After three decades spent in West Africa I am inclined to think that semiotics may well be the method Africans need most urgently to acquire the necessary opportunity to make their own sense out of their own rapidly changing world, invaded by so many foreign values. Techniques may be adopted and adapted. They are not culture-bound. Semiotics, based on differences, on transformations, condemns all forms of transcendentalism and positivism, operates its own criticism, and therefore may be the only realistic and ultimate aid to development. Semiotics promotes common sense to the level of a science but a common sense liberated from any, even hidden, ideology. It does not mean that a semioticist has no religion, no ideology, it means that he/she has been able to choose, in a true act of freedom, being fully informed of all the implications of his/her choice.

Studying any process of communication between human beings, animals, of interaction between objects and human beings, between deities, supernatural powers and human beings is the task of semiotics. The continent of Africa is full of signs and their patterings are numerous and changing fast. The diagnosis of a medical doctor, the interpretation of a literary critic, the understanding of animal communication, the mimics and gestures of a speaker, the rhetoric of a political speech, the bias of a historian's text, the analysis of the secret languages (gestural, spoken, written, ideographic, whistled, drummed...), the actual form and significance of a masquerade, the step by step and overall impact of a dramatic representation, an official

ceremony, a poem, a film, the numerous ways to communicate a message: arrangements of cowries, make-up, knots on a rope, clothing, language of the deaf, bodily attitudes, advertising, flag codes - all are studies by semioticians.

At the Universities of Ibadan and Calabar in Nigeria, semiotics has its place. Within Nigeria a dozen scholars have shown their interest in our SSA long before its creation. It seems that the number of those interested in African semiotics, both inside and outside Africa, would reach several hundreds. In the States a large number of Africanists are motivated by the semiotic approach in cultural anthropology, ethno-semiotics, literary studies, language sciences and aesthetics.

It is up to you from now on to give life to the Semiotics Society of Africa.

SIMON BATTESTINI

FORTHCOMING MEETINGS

BOOKWEEK AFRICA

A three-day exhibition of books and journals from and about Africa will be held at the Africa Centre, London, between June 8-10, 1982, jointly organised by the Africa Centre and the African Book Publishing Record, with financial assistance from Unesco and the Commonwealth Secretariat. The exhibition will coincide with the Unesco World Congress on Books, which is to be held in London, at the Town Hall of Kensington and Chelsea, between June 7 and 11.

Following the impetus created by the African focus at the 1980 Frankfurt Book Fair, the exhibition will aim to stimulate yet further interest in African published material, particularly in the United Kingdom, and among librarians, booksellers, academics, school teachers, students, as well as the general public.

VENUE

The Africa Centre, 38 King Street, Covent Garden, London WC2E 8JT. The Africa Centre is a charitable organisation set up as an independent forum for information and discussion on African affairs, and provides a meeting place for anyone interested in Africa. It has a restaurant and bar facilities on its premises.

The exhibition will open with a private viewing on the evening of Monday, June 7, and will be open to the public between June 8 and 10, from 12 noon to 9 pm daily.

It is hoped that after its initial showing at the Africa Centre in central London, the exhibition will go on tour for displays at other locations in Britain.

EXHIBITION OF AFRICAN PUBLISHED MATERIAL

The central exhibit will be devoted to books actually published in Africa and will feature more than 1,200 titles. It will aim to provide a representative picture of current African book publishing output, but it will have an emphasis on scholarly and academic works on the arts and sciences; monographs and reports in the field of science, technology, and agriculture; reference tools and bibliographies; creative writing by African authors and critical works on African literature, and children's books. It will cover books published in English, French, and Portuguese, and there will also be a section devoted to significant publications in the major African languages.

Supplementing the book exhibit, there will be a special display of sample copies of over a hundred important African periodicals and magazines.