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The Roots of "Perspectives on Contemporary Legend" : The 1960 Rhodes-Livingstone Institute Conference, "Myth in Modern Africa"[*]

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Critics of the "contemporary legend" scholarship of the 1980s (e.g. Jason 1986, 1900) have commented on how key figures like Gillian Bennett, W. F. H. Nicolaisen, Paul Smith, and myself found it difficult to define the key terms and concepts of our research. The inconclusive nature of this research, and the reluctance of scholars to build on it, could lead one to believe that these earlier meetings, however exhilarating for those participating, were quixotic[1] in more ways than one. These theoretical tangles, however, were anticipated by similar difficulties encountered twenty-two years earlier by participants in the 14th Conference of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute for Social Research, held at Lusaka, Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia). This conference, held in 1960 at the beginning of the African nationalist movement, brought together a group of European scholars to discuss the theme "Myth in Modern Africa." The proceedings of this conference were published by the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute (RLI for short), though in mimeographed format, and while copies are widely held in academic libraries, they tend to be shelved with African studies resources and are rarely consulted today. This is a shame: the papers included should be better known to legend and rumor scholars, as the material discussed focuses on types of emergent narratives, particularly those with political implications that have since become recognized in Western societies as "urban" or "contemporary" legends.

This paper will note the continuities between the discussion among participants at the 1960 meeting and the themes that emerged among the Sheffield participants during the 1980s. Particularly interesting is the way in which both groups of scholars argued over the exact bounds of what should and should not be considered as the topic of study, whether its name is "myth" or "legend." This paper will survey the topics discussed, which ranged widely from Europeans' and Africans' misconceptions of the Other's habits to variants of the well-known "Body-Parts Theft" legend, along with the definitions and theories proposed to handle them. Using the RLI proceedings, we can gain a clearer sense of why contemporary legends remain difficult to theorize, as well as an alternative perspective on how to approach them. Moreover, since we know what happened in Africanist studies during the half century that has passed since the 1960 RLI Conference, we can see more clearly what ought to be happening in folkloristic discussions of similar cultural phenomena.

Urbanized Africa: The Background of the RLI Conference

While the focus of this paper is theoretical rather than descriptive, to bring the issues into focus some historical background is required. A term meant what it meant at a given time, after all, because people found it convenient to say something with it. And then as now, convenience was an essentially political issue. In the case of "myth" in the 1960 RLI Conference, the political context was the imminent demise of colonialism. Founded in 1937, the RLI was dedicated to promoting research in the social sciences in what were then Northern and Southern Rhodesia, and the adjacent colony of Nyasaland. Rather than focusing on rural, tribal culture, however, the RLI soon became involved with the emerging problem of urbanization. The Copperbelt, a mineral-rich area on the northern border of Northern Rhodesia, was becoming a focal point for the colony's economy, and a number of cities in the area had sprung up to accommodate the many Africans drawn to the area by the wages paid by the mineral consortia.

Southern Rhodesia (which became the nation of Zimbabwe in 1980) had a larger population of European settlers, and consistently advocated colonial policies of segregation, while Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland developed more liberal policies, making their ultimate independence less problematic. However, administrators more favorable toward the European-oriented Southern Rhodesia moved in 1953 to merge the other colonies into what was named The British Central African Federation. This act, imposed on Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland over strong African dissent, was intended to blunt the move toward sovereignty, and "the Federation" as it was called, quickly became a catchword among both Africans and liberal Europeans for "hegemony." In this context, the RLI developed a strong reputation as one of the few nonracial institutions in the Federation. While most research institutions gave native informants a second-class status as "African Research Assistants," the RLI accorded their informants the same title and status as European ethnographic assistants. In addition, such workers were given latitude to tailor their quarters like the African villages with which they were familiar and even to raise free range chickens on RLI grounds (Schumaker 2001:224-25).[2]

The RLI, now the Institute for Economic and Social Research of the University of Zambia, is still seen as central to the founding of Africanist social studies in this area. Among European social scientists, it remains best known as the cradle of the movement that became known as the Manchester School, centered on the work of Max Gluckman, originally a South African who became the second director of the RLI in 1949. Later the founding chair of the University of Manchester's department of sociology and social anthropology, he created a liberal approach to African fieldwork that avoided much of the patronizing of subjects and research assistants that compromised much of the early fieldwork in that continent. Gluckman strongly believed that official colonial policy-making should be continually informed by sociological data, and his impatience with administrators' ignorance of African culture frequently led him into conflicts with them.

Therefore the concept of a conference on "Myths in Modern Africa" was from the start focused on the need to detect and challenge old-fashioned stereotypes that led to colonial stereotypes and ultimately blocked responsible Africans from developing policies that looked ahead to independence. Among administrators, a key idea was "detribalization," a catch-word referring to social problems that allegedly occurred when Africans left the stable environment of their rural homes and became involved in a complex urban environment that they supposedly could not understand. In the eyes of European administrators, such persons became divorced from their culture and so they tended to become asocial troublemakers. Raymond Apthorpe, a former Senior Research Fellow for the RLI, recalled, however, that even the "primitive" status of African village life was poorly understood due to colonial stereotypes. Fifty years later he commented:

> I think all the months I lived in for example Mumbi village in the Petauke District [northeast of Lusaka] at intervals 1958-61, it is quite possible that 'poverty' was a concept that as such probably never arose for me as a principal research focus. yes of course I was concerned with income and household structure, yes I researched a bit into the ground nuts cooperative marketing society there, and perfectly plainly people were shall I put it not well off, but at the same time so much social and cultural and political richness was also evident—and crying out to be enjoyed and understood—that that was what took centre stage for me—and the RLI anthropologists (2009).

As for the urban setting into which such "tribal" Africans were moving in increasing numbers, Schumaker comments more objectively:

> . . . the African city that was developing was in many respects an unknown quantity. The colonial government possessed a vision of what the rural African was supposed to be and become, but because of its rural bias it had no strong vision of the future of the urban African. The mining companies also clung to a rural vision of Africans, even when they accepted that the workforce must be stabilized in the urban areas for a portion of its life cycle. Africans, too, maintained ties to the rural areas as long as their urban lives were made uncertain by government and mining company policy, but they created structures for urban survival that, though often expressed in traditional language, constituted new urban ways that also affected the ways they organized and understood themselves when in the villages. (2001:170)

Clearly the RLI's research found that African experience, both rural and urban, needed to be understood in African terms, without the biases generated by the European colonialist point of view. As a result, by 1960 it had had several decades of experience in examining the customs and traditions that had emerged in Africa, whether rural, urban, or hybrid, while American and British folklorists for the most part were only beginning to see the relevance of what Richard Dorson had begun to call "city legends" and other forms of contemporary folklife. Still a decade away from asking the question "Is There a Folk in the City?" folkloristics remained firmly colonial in defining its subject stereotypically as the Primitive Other, even decades after America had already become a pluralistic, multicultural society in both its rural and urban contexts.

Key issues in the "Myth in Modern Africa" discussion

Thus it is no surprise to find many issues raised at Lusaka, Northern Rhodesia, in 1960 that were not to be raised in Anglo-American folklore circles until fully two decades later. The conference began with a welcome by the British Governor of Northern Rhodesia, Sir Evelyn Dennison Hone (1911-79). Sir Hone asked the group to use the conference to determine "what you have found to be the most harmful myths in Africa to day." In asking this, he noted that the ones that appeared to him to do the most harm to society and community were what he called "political myths"—beliefs that "all Africans are liars," or, conversely, the "unwavering belief that nothing done by any Government in the Federation can be other than discriminatory or repressive" (Dubb, ed. 1960:ii). Sir Hone thus began the conference by defining two important questions: were myths intrinsically harmful (and if so, how), and what gave such belief-structures their extraordinary political importance?

A number of the papers spoke sensitively to these issues, and in terms that echo significant moments in the Sheffield contemporary legend seminars of the 1980s. Four presentations were especially insightful and deserve summary, as they are not well known to contemporary legend scholars. The first of these was given by Monica Wilson (1908-82), who was at the time chair of the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Capetown. Clearly a star of the conference, Wilson had for some thirty years been one of South Africa's most distinguished anthropologists. In the first page of her paper, "Myths of Precedence," which opened the conference, Wilson was careful to distinguish her use of "myth" from the popular understanding of it as a "purely fictitious narrative." Rather, she used the then current anthropological sense of it as "an account of past events told as fact, but which can be shown to be partly fictitious, or at least a grave distortion of historical fact." It contrasts with allegory or parable, she added, because such stories are seen as true in a symbolic sense, while a myth is a story "which most people believe, or have believed, to be an account of actual historical happenings." Functionally, she continued, myths justify an existing social system in terms of history, providing a moral basis for the status quo and implying that it is "right and just" (1960:1).

"It seems that myths are highly selective," she concluded her essay. "Certain historical events are picked out and exaggerated, perhaps sometimes even invented." This selectivity, she added, is not random: "the myths always, in some measure, reflect the existing social structure; but they are also potent forces for stability or change; they help to maintain an existing social structure or create a new one." Political leaders, she observed, took the lead in selecting facts to support such myths, as did editors and journalists. But this process took place "more fundamentally, I think, in gossip over beer or tea." In addition, myths did not arise out of nowhere; in order to become widespread, they "must express some social reality—the needs or aspirations of some group or community. Yet of the many mythical stories told, she noted, "only a few hold attention. We know very little yet about how this happens, and I think it would be a fruitful field of study" (1960:6-7).

A second paper, "The Mythical Dialectic in Central Africa" was by Father F. T. Sillett,[3] who was a parish priest in the Copper-belt involved in a cooperative venture with three churches, one made up of Europeans, the other two of Africans. His ideas were influenced by the anti-apartheid writings of anthropologist Laurens Van der Post (1906-96), whom Father Sillett quoted at length on the meaning of myth:

> I find it so tragic and ironical that the age in which we live should regard the word "myth" and "illusion" as synonymous, in view of the fact that myth is the real history, is the real event of the spirit. . . . The myth is the tremendous activity that goes on in humanity all the time, without which no society has hope or direction, and no personal life has a meaning. We all live a myth whether we know it or not. We live it by fair means or we live it by foul. Or we live it by a process or a combination of both (1960:9).[4]

Father Sillett in fact eagerly accepted that the religion he preached was a "myth" in the best sense of the word, a way of comprehending experience and moving toward harmony. He presented the following definition: "An image, or series of images, which finds at least a partial validation in experience, and which provides the means of rationalizing all aspects of experience" (1960:9). In clarifying this definition, however, Father Sillett made it clear that most myths outside of Christianity could not provide such a means of integrating existence. To this extent, he agreed with Monica Wilson and most other participants that myths, in practice, were false.

The body of Father Sillett's paper, however, is an interesting anticipation of the more recent work of Patricia A. Turner and Gary Alan Fine, in that it points out how the political tensions present in Africa were complicated by the opposing myths held by Europeans and Africans about each other. Europeans believed that Africans were fundamentally savage and incapable of handling their own affairs, while Africans, used to being betrayed politically and economically by Europeans, held a deeply rooted suspicion of their intentions and culture. The "mythical dialectic," Sillett's essay concluded, was the interplay between these two points of view, in which "the expression of the myth on either side stimulates and partially vindicates the other," making it less and less possible for the two to work and live together. He went on to compare the two cultures to two knights, using their myths about each other as visors and so remaining strangers. If they do not try to see beyond their blinding myths and recognize their common goals now, he warned his audience, the cultures in conflict will recognize their mutual brotherhood too late, after they have wounded each other mortally (1960:17).

A third contribution, "Mythical African Political Structures in Northern Rhodesia," was made by political sociologist Raymond Apthorpe (1932-). He had been Research Secretary for the RLI for several years and in fact organized a number of their conferences, including this one.[5] A veteran of field ethnography in several areas of Northern Rhodesia, especially Petauke Province,[6] he had in fact become a member of the United National Independence Party (UNIP) a grassroots nationalist movement led by the indigenous activist Kenneth Kaunda (later the country's first Prime Minister after independence). He preferred the more common social science interpretation of myth as "misconceptions . . . systematically at variance with the facts, and maintained with . . . conviction" (1960: 18). The paper used anthropological data to debunk the European preconception that all African tribal structures were essentially autocratic and anti-democratic, and an important section of his essay discussed why the myth was so far afield from the readily observable facts.

No one approach can claim to interpret myth definitively, he conceded, as "that would itself be a mythological claim." Instead, he went on to suggest a number of factors that supported belief in such misconceptions: the lack of accurate published information, limited social contact between Europeans and Africans, the extent to which the myth does in fact represent the present political system, and the fact that people naturally prefer a faulty explanation to no explanation at all. "All these considerations are relevant to the political myth," Apthorpe followed, "besides the staringly obvious one, its convenience" (1960:29-30). The essay concluded with a measured warning to the British Administration of the colony: assuming that African societies are "just vast tribal uniformities" has led to unwise political decisions "using criteria which may be irrelevant to the subject at issue, the issue being further clouded by the rarity of the occasions on which these criteria are stated" (1960: 32-33).

"Myth and Social Separation with Reference to the Luvale and to Portuguese Africa," by Charles Matthew Newton (C. M. N.) White (1914-78) with James C. Chinjavata, focused on a similar issue of social distinctness. Born in Preston, Lancashire, and educated at Oxford, White had initially come to Zambia after the Second World War as a civil servant with the intent of studying African birds. He developed an interest in indigenous linguistics and customs, and served as RLI director from 1955-56. He followed a common Institute practice of hiring Africans as research assist-ants, rather than fellow European civil servants, and crediting them as co-authors (Schumaker 2001:190-92).[7] The authors suggested that myths of mutual misunderstanding, such as those discussed by Father Sillett, reflect a stratified society, in which subcultures want to learn about the whole society in which they live, but cannot gain verifiable information about the Other because of political separation. When there is a sense of a common nationality, by contrast, such myths about the Other are minimized, although, White and Chinjavata observed significantly, such societies "may have myths not about other societies but rather about itself" (1960:56).

This observation led them to suggest that seeing "myth" simply as "misconception" may underestimate their significance, particularly in dealing with beliefs dealing with magic and the super-natural. They argued that these should not be seen merely as "discrete superstitions" but as "part of a systematic body of beliefs." It is important to see, they continue,

> that the basis of many African beliefs is essentially pragmatic. They are not so much philosophies about the nature of the universe or about metaphysical problems as answers to the more practical questions which affect the daily lives of individuals. . . . In short, then, Africans are much concerned to relate their beliefs to the total social situation within which they live and this often determines their essentially pragmatic nature. (1960:56)

For this reason, White and Chinjavata maintained, the common belief that demonstrating the fallacy of a given myth will make it disappear from culture is itself a misconception. "If a stratified society is prone to social myths," they added, "it seems likely that these myths will only be changed by changing or removing the type of stratification which gives rise to them." This is true both of myths about the Other and about oneself. "The danger in myths," they concluded,

> is that though they may be illogical and not in accordance with established facts, they are not comparable to illogical and systematic superstitions. On the contrary they are built into a systematic body of thought and belief about a given social system within which individuals live. (1960:57)

Overall, participants were concerned that the very term "myth" was so broadly conceived that it fit a broad range of stories, beliefs, and practices. The conference's closing discussion centered on this, with Monica Wilson attempting to "delimit the boundaries" of its meaning without, however "attempting any very precise definition." She noted in particular that Father Sillett's use of it to refer to an "ultimate reality" was exactly opposed to other speakers' use of it to refer to a "false statement." Ironically, while most folklorists today would understand "myth" to be a sacred story embodying what a culture considered ultimate reality, the consensus in 1960 was that the term referred to what folklorists would now term a "legend" or "fabulate." Certainly this was Wilson's primary sense of the term, as she sums up its gist as "history as it should have been" (1960:151-52). This comes close in spirit to Jan H. Brunvand's notorious definition of "urban legend" as "a story too good to be true."

In the final page of her response, Wilson added that whatever else could be said about myths, "they have a practical effect on the present: they are the charter for an existing structure or for the creation of one." They seem to be most developed, she hypothesized, "in those societies where a minority attempts to maintain a dominant position." She called for a fuller discussion of the topic, noting that myths can incite ritualized collective behavior and that their circulation has been "enormously increased with the development of broadcasting and of widely circulating newspapers." In closing, Monica Wilson echoed White and Chinjavata's point, saying:

> One last point that I would mention is that it seems that myth has been equated with ignorance. The implication is that with knowledge myth would disappear. But I think that it is one of the characteristics of a lively myth that it will continue beside the facts, and that the demonstration of its falsity does not destroy it. (1960:152)

Lusaka and Sheffield: Points in Common

These four papers introduced many themes similar to those debated in the early Sheffield conferences. At this point it is useful to sum up the essential theoretical points that were being made at the 1960 RLI Conference, recasting them in folkloristic terms by replacing the dysfunctional and now obsolete use of the term "myth" with the controversial but at least familiar concept "legend." While this is not the place to sum up all the theoretical advances that took place during these meetings, I will also briefly link the Lusaka insights with similar ones from the formative Sheffield seminars of 1982-1990.

Legends by no means signal a culture's overall ignorance or primitiveness. In fact, the RLI participants conceded that as many important legends circulated among European members of the colonial government as among the allegedly ignorant Africans they managed. This is no new insight for folklorists, as Gillian Bennett pointed out in her 1987 work Traditions of Belief (since reissued as Alas, Poor Ghost!), for as early as 1894 Andrew Lang was calling for the study of beliefs affirmed by "educated living persons" as well as by "savages" (1987:102; 1999:158). Through the 1980s, the focus of attention among legend scholars turned from cultural Others and increasingly studied the ways in which material circulated and was used by individuals belonging to the educational and economic upper classes. In Once Upon a Virus, her work on the AIDS epidemic, Diane Goldstein (2004) showed that in many ways legends shaped the public policies that governmental agencies put together in response to the crisis.[8] Her work fully validates Raymond Apthorpe's warning, quoted above, that when bureaucracies fail to examine the criteria by which they accept "common knowledge," they tend to make decisions dangerously at odds with the practical facts of the situation they are trying to manage.

Legends are a form of public discourse, circulating not just orally, but also through popular media and ritualized public events. Legend scholars, led by Linda Dégh and more recently by Jan Harold Brunvand, have challenged the antiquarian definition of folklore in terms of face-to-face communication in small groups.[9] In 1992, Paul Smith, a key organizer of the Sheffield Seminars, affirmed that "in the real world, not just a single oral medium of transmission is utilized to communicate folklore, but any available and relevant media is employed (1992:41; emphasis his). In recent years scholars increasingly have investigated how legends are shaped and spread through popular print media and other non-oral means, such as the forms of collective behavior now analyzed in terms of "ostension." This concept, developed by Dégh and Vázsonyi (1983), has since been applied to rumor-panics and other forms of social behavior by myself (Ellis 1989b, 1992, 1996), Diane Goldstein (2004:29-30 and ff.), Carl Lindahl (2005), and others.

A legend embodies some controversial element of a culture's structure. While RLI delegates disagreed over the extent that a myth was believed or was actually true, they agreed that whether it was a story or belief provoked widespread discussion. This concords well with Linda Dégh's influential insight that the defining characteristic of legend is that it "entertains debate about belief" (2001: 97), a formative concept for the Sheffield Seminars. A legend circulates because it accurately and conveniently reflects some social reality that allows individuals to understand their experience. In my papers given at the 1985 and 1986 Sheffield Seminars, I adapted the approach of David Hufford, arguing that legends embodied culturally convenient language for describing experiences that were not as well "named" by institutions or authorities (Ellis 1988, 1989a). When a culturally ambiguous factor produces anxiety, that is, people are compelled to generate narratives that "name" and provide a shape to the unknown force. "One role of legend is to redefine reality in a way that restores the narrators' control over situations," I argued, calling this the "Rumpelstiltskin Principle" (2001:xiv).

Legends are part of a larger body of thoughts, beliefs, and activities that are deeply embedded in a subculture. At the 1990 Sheffield Seminar, in fact, I called this larger body of knowledge a "contemporary mythology" and discussed in some detail how the Satanism Scare grew out of a complex network of religious and political beliefs (Ellis 1991). This broad network of ideas, encompassing rumors and statements of general belief in a matrix of undeniable historical and cultural facts, means that individual legends, in themselves, cannot be debunked or even countered without fully understanding the body of knowledge that informs them.

Thus all legend-related actions are politically charged acts. In the special issue of Western Folklore based on the Sheffield-influenced special paper session at the 1987 American Folklore Society, "Contemporary Legends in Emergence," I affirmed that both legend telling and the academic act of observing and choosing to analyze a legend were essentially political acts (1990:2-4). And refusing to observe and analyze widespread and influential legends, I added more recently, is likewise an "equally and inescapably political" act as well (2001:243)

Legends are most intense when subcultures that lack regular means of communication have to come in contact with each other. In such a situation, legends often emerge in a dialectic relationship, with the two subcultures generating and circulating similar legends about each other. This is an insight made by Janet Langlois (1983) in her classic 1983 paper on "The Belle Isle Bridge Incident," and since developed into the Topsy/Eva principle, a central concept in the work done on Black/White folklore by Patricia A. Turner (1993; Fine and Turner 2001).

The ideas discussed in the Sheffield Seminars incorporated much-needed challenges to the myopic attitudes toward folklore that had held back the discipline politically. But they were only new to folklorists: because the issues that emerged then were genuine ones, earlier academics had stumbled across them in the same ways. And for this reason contemporary legend scholars need to pay attention to these cross-disciplinary discussions, even if the topics discussed do not directly intersect with the canon of "urban legends" familiar to European-based scholars. In this sense, Alan Dundes's somewhat mean-spirited critique of Bennett and Smith's Contemporary Legend: A Folklore Bibliography (1993) is exactly on target:

> The problem in coverage is, to be perfectly candid, that it is not worldwide or international in scope. There is virtually not even token coverage from Latin America, Asia, or Sub-Saharan Africa. Yet, legends abound there as everywhere. . . . Totally ignoring the scholarship devoted to legends among non-Western peoples is surely a serious lacuna. . . . (xii)

In defense of Bennett and Smith, the difference in terminology made it initially difficult to discern the relevance of papers such as those surveyed to legend research. If librarians generally knew that "urban myth" could mean the same thing as "urban legend," then one might more often locate material in bibliographies of inter-national cultural studies that could be applied to European materials. But even the term "myth" was not stable in 1960, as the RLI delegates commented in a discussion that seems similar to the intense but unproductive Sheffield discussions on defining the genre. As Bill Nicolaisen noted in the 1985 Seminar, "The strange problem is that the concepts are there but that, for once, we lack the terminology to express them. . . . it will get more and more difficult for us to talk to others about the narratives we have in mind or, what is even more frustrating, we will keep talking past each other" (1988:86). That is, contemporary legend scholars did not willfully ignore scholarship of non-Western cultures. Rather, the earlier scholarship used a vocabulary of its own that did not clearly connect with folklorists' vocabulary. And so the scholars of the 1960 RLI Conference and those of the Sheffield Seminars of the 1980s reached many of the same insights, but simply talked past each other.

William H. Friedland and the birth of "Urban Myth"

In the interest of showing what might have happened if the Sheffieldians had known about the RLI scholarship, I turn to William H. Friedland's essay "Some Urban Myths of East Africa," which ought to be better known if only because its title contains the first verifiable use in print of the phrase "urban myth."[10] To provide context for this crucial moment, I interviewed Dr. Friedland by phone and e-mail: he doubted that he was the first person to use the terms "urban" and "modern myth." Nevertheless, he also recalled that they were not common phrases in scholarship at the time, so even if he did not coin either term, certainly his use of them in the RLI Conference was an important moment in introducing them into academic discourse.

Friedland's essay leaves no doubt that most of the narratives he analyzes are indeed the sort of "urban myths/urban legends" that the Sheffield seminars discussed. In the first story he discusses, he comments,

> came to the writer in varying forms which would indicate the ubiquity with which it is held by Europeans here. The story is always told by someone who says that he had the story from a friend who got the story from another friend to whom the event is actually supposed to have happened. The placement of the story at this distance precludes, of course, any investigation as to its fundamental truth. (1960:86)

Further, he distances himself from most of the other delegates' definitions of "myth" by stating, "myth is not being used here in the sense of a 'false belief' but as a set of ideas which can be utilized as a basis for action" (85n). A myth, he contends, is a set of beliefs that may or may not be true; what makes a myth a myth is the extent to which it is used in a group to interpret events. They may function in many different ways, particularly in maintaining social boundaries during times of uncertainty. By extension, they may put colonial officials dangerously out of touch with political realities at a time when the move toward independence makes clear sight crucial.

Friedland's discussion thus looks ahead to the early studies of politically important contemporary legends that began in the late 1980s. However, neither this paper nor any of the other works written by Friedland in his distinguished career as a sociologist were ever cited during the first five years of the Sheffield Seminars.[11] For this reason it is useful to step back and ask: who is this William H. Friedland, and how did he come to cross the paths of the Sheffield researchers 22 years before their first Seminar?

It is an interesting story: William H. Friedland (or Bill Friedland as he is more widely known), was born in 1923 on Staten Island into a family of Jewish immigrants from Russia. Familiar with socialist-influenced activist activities from his youth, he dropped out of college after one semester to become active in Trotskyism, a radical movement at odds with mainstream Communism, holding that Stalin's totalitarianism had compromised the movement. Friedland deferred college education in favor of learning firsthand about the realities of American laborers, so he went to work in a Long Island factory. As Trotskyism became more involved with organizing and influencing unions, however, he moved to Detroit in the early 1940s to work in the automobile industry. He took a few courses at Wayne University (later Wayne State) but became active in the United Auto Workers, a C.I.O. affiliate, at the time split between a moderate faction led by labor leader Walter Reuther, and a more radical Communist faction.

During this time he developed an interest in working-class folklore. As assistant to Bill Kemsley, Education Director of the Michigan State C.I.O., Friedland collected a large number of trade union folksongs, particularly from the IWW, and taught himself guitar so that he could perform these as part of labor meetings. “Most performances really took the form of skits in which we would do all the writing and production, essentially for the in-group audience,” he later told folksong scholars Ronald D. Cohen and Dave Samuelson. “The material was very funny. As a matter of fact, some of it was brilliant stuff—all of it polemical in character” (Cohen and Samuelson 1996).

He was also becoming familiar with many of the customs of automobile plant workers for protecting their well-being. The normal routine, he recalled, was for the assembly line to process fifty motors per hour, but when the supervisor was running behind on his quota, he would often speed up the line, requiring the workers to assemble slightly more than this: fifty-two, fifty-three, perhaps fifty-five or more. The line workers were well aware of this practice, and when the pace rose above fifty-five, first one, then others, would take their tools and start beating them against the equipment. When the entire plant joined in, this would create a horrendous din known as “pounding the line,” forcing the supervisor to restore the usual rate of assembly. Friedland, curious about the factors that led to this apparently spontaneous rebellion, tried at times to start it by pounding on the equipment as soon as he detected a speed-up, only to find himself the only one doing so. Friedland was intrigued by the complexity of social codes and rules governing the relationship between management and labor, and among often dissident groups of workers, and in the late 1940s he conceived the idea of researching and publishing some of the folklore he was witnessing and performing.

The incident that followed marked one of the discipline’s great missed opportunities. Friedland wrote a letter summarizing what he had collected and sent it to an eminent academic folklorist at nearby Michigan State University. The folklorist’s response was chilling: the material Friedland had gathered had little or no value for scholars, he said; indeed, the folklorist doubted that the working class had any folklore worth studying. Friedland did not recall the name of the eminent folklorist, but given the period and the institution, this must have been none other than Richard M. Dorson, at the time involved in a bitter dispute with Benjamin Botkin, the former head of the Library of Congress’s Folksong archive. Botkin was committed to finding ways of using folklore to reach a broad, popular audience, and saw no problems with drawing materials from popular and even elite culture that illustrated “folksy” ideas and ways of life. Dorson, concerned that folkloristics was losing its academic legitimacy, referred to such material as “fakelore” and during the 1940s was instead advocating an approach focused on ethnographic authenticity.[12]

It is a shame that Friedland’s initiative went to Dorson at this time, instead of to Botkin or indeed to John Greenway, who was at the time researching his groundbreaking work, American Folksongs of Protest (1953). In any case, Dorson’s response to Friedland effectively closed his personal interest in academic folklore studies. However, he continued to seek an outlet for his growing collection of folksongs, which found another outlet within his labor work. In 1950, Friedland met the activist folksinger Joe Glazer, like him a native of New York City and the child of an immigrant Jewish family. Glazer himself had previously gathered a large collection of labor protest songs, particularly during his tours of the South as Assistant Education Director for the Textile Workers Union. In 1950, Glazer had recorded an influential protest version of “We Will Overcome,” and moved soon after to Akron, Ohio to become Education Director of the United Rubber Workers-C.I.O. Introduced to Friedland through his C.I.O. work, Glazer encouraged him to commit some of his unusual repertoire to disc.

In 1951, Friedland and Glazer recorded an album for a union-related album, titled Ballads for Sectarians, followed by a second titled Songs of the Wobblies based on the material Friedland had collected from the I.W.W.[13] Friedland soon became disheartened by his union work, and he spent most of 1953, the peak of the McCarthy era, in Europe under the auspices of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions. This was the origin of his interest in unionization in Africa, particularly in the Copperbelt region. Thus Friedland returned to Detroit in 1954 but, rather than returning to the U.A.W., he enrolled in sociology at Wayne University. Receiving a Master's degree in 1956, Friedland went to UC Berkeley for doctoral work, proposed a field project in the Copperbelt and was given a Ford Foundation grant to do this work. However, on the eve of his departure for Northern Rhodesia in 1959 he learned that he had been denied entry as a Proscribed Immigrant, presumably because of his activist past. Thus at the last minute he went instead to Tanganyika (now Tanzania), which was willing to admit him to carry out his fieldwork.

"Some Urban Myths of East Africa" was written soon after Friedland's arrival in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanganyika. He does not remember the exact context of the paper but assumes that he must have heard about the conference shortly after arriving in Tanganyika. His status as Proscribed Immigrant made it impossible for him to cross the border to Lusaka to deliver the paper in person but, being well aware of the RLI's work, and particularly Gluckman's work in getting anthropology to come to terms with the process of modernization, he wrote up some of his early experiences in the field and sent the paper to be given by proxy. As it turned out, it was his first academic publication.

Nevertheless, his practical experience as an applied folklorist in labor movements made him more keenly aware of folk narratives and their importance, and he describes taking a simple empirical approach to the stories he heard. That is, having heard a given story about how Africans act, he made it his business to observe what they in fact did. Two of his "myths" are no more than unnarrated beliefs and were easily disproved by direct contact with the people about whom they were told. Friedland drew a similar conclusion from one of the narrative myths he had collected. The story involved an African servant who candidly told his master that when Uhuru or independence took place, they intended to kick all the Europeans out of the country and move into their houses. When the master observed that there would not be enough European houses to hold all the liberated Africans, the servant retorted that they would build the houses, and the money would be easy to find: "It will be our Government then. There we will own the Government Press. So ….. (and here a broad smile is supposed to break out on the African's face at the obviousness of the solution) ….. so, we will print the necessary money."

"This conversation is obviously mythical," Friedland continues, but then adds, unexpectedly, that by this he does not mean to say that the conversation had never taken place. "It represents a myth," he countered, "in that its ubiquity in the European community indicates that the story fills some sort of need on the part of that community." The essence of the story, he went on, was to reassure the European governing elite that they are indispensable, even at the moment when political movements make it clear that they will soon be replaced. Friedland did not argue whether or not Africans are prepared to operate their own Government, saying, "That is a question which will be answered shortly by living experience." The point is, he concluded, that the story is created and supported by a group trying to "bolster its position in an uncertain situation" (1960: 86-87).

During the ensuing discussion, RLI delegates found that similar legends about Africans preparing to evict whites from their houses were prevalent throughout Central Africa. Indeed it was still active in 1990, when it appeared as an allegedly authentic news story in a South African newspaper. A couple from Durban returned from a weekend vacation to find two Africans photographing their house. When asked what they were doing, they allegedly told the two that their domestic maid had been paying regular dues to a "Mandela Fund" administered by the ANC, according to which she would soon own the house and force the European residents out.

And in 1994, as related in South African journalist Arthur Goldstuck's Ink in the Porridge, it circulated through every level of South African European society as South Africa's first free elections approached. The standard form claimed that a friend's maid had told her employer, "Mandela said I can move into your house after the elections, and you have to work for me then" (1994:50-56).

Goldstuck could not prove that the conversation had never occurred, but he soon learned that the story had previously circulated in Zimbabwe (previously Southern Rhodesia) as it moved toward African self-rule in 1980. Another journalist recalled, vaguely, that the event had really happened in Zambia, "and that the house had indeed come to be occupied by a former servant." Goldstuck added that other correspondents confirmed that a similar story had been current in Namibia during the last days before its independence. The story, Goldstuck concluded, was "tailormade for the South African condition as the country moves toward a society based on equality of the races" (1990:21-27).

But Patricia A. Turner has documented versions of the story older than any of these African variants. During the early 1940s, American whites circulated rumors that African American domestics were forming "Eleanor Clubs," inspired by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt's opposition of segregation. These clubs would allow domestics to take over the households in which they worked and demand that the lady of the house take over their chores. One version held that the Eleanor Clubs planned to "put a white woman in every kitchen by Christmas"; another, that the domestic had already asked her mistress to come to her house in the black neighborhood to prepare breakfast next Sunday at 8 AM (Turner 1993:44; Fine and Turner 2001:48-49). Turner recognizes that the prevalence of these stories during the Second World War looked ahead to the period of the 1960s when African Americans obtained many of the civil rights of which they were deprived throughout the early Twentieth Century. "Blacks were being empowered," she comments, "by America's need for them" (1993:44). Thus a full international survey of this legend type would see it as marking a recurrent moment in the colonial experience, both in Africa and the American South, at which the ruling class recognizes the tenuousness of its hold over its subjects and begins to speculate about when and how this reversal of power will occur.

As a final example of an urban myth, Friedland included a detailed discussion of a narrative complex inspired by the belief that Europeans regularly kidnapped unwary Africans for a kind of ritual murder called chinja-chinja. Africans' blood was then drained out and transformed into a kind of medicine called Mumiani. Friedland gave a number of instances that proved that this myth was very much alive; for instance, he himself observed that many Africans would not walk directly in front of a fire station,[14] since the red fire engines were thought to be the vehicles used to kidnap and transport Africans to the places where they were slaughtered. In addition, even Europeans avoided owning cars colored red, as they were widely assumed to be mumiani cars used in this grisly trade. Friedland continued to relate a memorate from a colleague, who had tried unsuccessfully to give Africans rides in his car, until one group, somewhat bolder than the rest, accepted the offer and explained that the others had assumed that he was trying to abduct them for mumiani.

Finally, Friedland provided an account of a deadly riot that occurred that year in a suburb of Dar-es-Salaam. It took place at a stone (i.e., European-style) house that had been suspected of being a place where Africans were murdered and mumiani made. Earlier in the day a riot had taken place and three African policemen were sent to investigate. Although the situation had settled down by the time they arrived, they took one person into custody, and soon after a story spread that he had been abducted for mumiani. The three police returned to the scene in the evening and were surrounded by a mob; one was cornered and beaten to death on the spot. Significantly, when police investigated the incident, virtually all the residents of the neighborhood denied having seen or heard anything unusual that night.

Friedland concludes that this myth functions much like the Europeans' stories, isolating one cultural group from others. "The mumiani myth serves to maintain social distance for a group which feels itself at the mercy of another group," he stated, adding, "At the same time, it delineates the original group as the 'safe' one in which members of the society can find security" (1960:93-96). This section of Friedland's paper provoked an unusually long discussion at the conference, with participants noting that it was widely held throughout East and Central Africa. Other delegates confirmed that the same myth was active in Uganda and Nyasaland, while similar myths about Africans being abducted and cannibalized were reported from Southern Rhodesia, Madagascar, and the Belgian Congo. "It was felt that this interesting catalogue of manifestations showed that the mumiani type of myth was sufficiently widespread to be deserving of concentrated study," the proceedings concluded.[15]

"Urban myth" and "contemporary legend": Opportunities missed?

The proceedings of the 1960 RLI Conference is a bit of frozen history that survives, like an insect in a drop of amber, from an intensely dynamic moment. Step back from this moment, and see the British colonies, one by one, evolving into African-ruled nations: Tanganyika [Tanzania] in 1961, Northern Rhodesia [Zambia] in 1963, Nyasaland [Malawi] in 1964. The RLI Conference, for all its intellectual rigor, did not lead to a fruitful series of analyses of African/Colonial "mythmaking" based on further fieldwork and research. Doubtless this was because, in the political ferment of the time, the participants had other, more immediately pressing things to do.

So the RLI delegates met, exchanged ideas, published their proceedings, and went on to do other things with their lives. Monica Wilson continued her work at the University of Capetown where she continued to oppose South African apartheid until her death in 1982. Charles White once again took over the post of Director of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute a year later, but he soon after resigned in protest when it was placed under the control of a Southern Rhodesian concern with a reputation for segregationist policies. He remained a respected naturalist specializing in exotic birds in Indonesia as well as Africa, passing away in 1978.[16] Raymond Apthorpe, under official suspicion for his contacts with nationalist activists, was asked to join the colonial army "to defend" the Central African Federation; he refused, and was promptly deported. Working first in Nigeria, then in Uganda, he later went on to the United Nations, administering and evaluating human relief efforts in many trouble spots worldwide, most recently in the Middle East.[17] His current credentials include joint professorial appointments at the Australian National University in Canberra, the University of London and the Institute of

Social Studies, in The Hague. Reverend Sillett returned to the obscure Copperbelt parish from which he came.

The record of the conference, while widely distributed to research libraries did not attract much attention, due to the esoteric nature of its topic for 1960 and the remote region in which it was discussed. Of folklorists, only William Bascom mentioned the collection, and then dismissively as “an extreme expression” of the “objectionable popular notion” that “myth” means “simply some-thing which is not true” (1965:7).

Bill Friedland took his work farther than most. He returned to Berkeley and never again published on a folklore-related theme, though he did expiate Dorson’s sin to some extent by encouraging Archie Green, whom he met early in his second career as a graduate student, to pursue his own interest in working-class folklore. Green later went on to become a major figure in occupational folkloristics and a leading figure in the founding of the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress. Friedland meantime received his doctorate from Berkeley in 1963 and was first employed at Cornell, where he became involved in studying the sociology and labor issues of migrant agricultural workers. In 1969 he went to UC Santa Cruz where he specialized in the sociology of agriculture. Retiring from teaching in 1991, he remained active in research and scholarly activity as a Professor Emeritus: for his ongoing research he received an “Excellence in Research” award from the Rural Sociology Society in 2005 and a Distinguished Social Sciences Emeriti Faculty Award in 2007.

It was particularly unfortunate that none of the delegates followed up the meeting’s consensus that the blood-theft or mumiani legend be documented or studied more thoroughly. The complex is easily recognized as a version of the internationally distributed “body parts” legend, in which common people are kidnapped so that their blood and/or body parts could be used in the medical treatment of a politically elite group. This complex evidently was first mentioned by the Roman author Pliny the Elder in his encyclopedic Natural History, in which he records the belief that whenever any of the Egyptian pharaohs contracted leprosy, he would have his servants kidnap and slaughter a group of common people and then bathe in their warm blood in golden bathtubs specially made for the purpose (xxvi. 2).

Similar legends emerged in Europe in Early Modern times, with one set attached to the Hungarian countess Elizabeth Báthory (1560-1614), whose enemies claimed that she enticed or abducted young lower-class women to her castle, then bled them to death, believing that bathing in their blood would maintain her youthful appearance. The historical countess Báthory was convicted in 1611 of a long string of crimes, including witchcraft, and sentenced to life imprisonment, but even the official testimony, though induced by torture or threatened torture, could not produce an eyewitness to the legendary blood baths (Thorne 1998). Significantly, an identical rumor swept Paris in 1750, alleging that the French king, then Louis XV, had young children kidnapped from lower-class neighborhoods and murdered, so he could bathe in their blood to treat his leprosy (Farge, Mieville, and Revel 1993). An identical story was collected in the 19th century in Belgium, claiming that a mysterious “richly clad” lady rode around in an elegant carriage, trying to entice children inside. When she succeeded, the little ones were carried off to a castle, where "Their blood is used as a bath for a great king" (qtd. in Bennett 2005:191).

Even as late as the 1980s a story held that children were being abducted by strangers (sometimes including a "nun" or upper-class woman) using a "Black Volga"; their discarded bodies were found later, drained of blood, which, according to some versions, was transported to the West for use in treating leukemia (Czubala 1991). The anti-Semitic version of this complex, the Blood Libel, which alleges that Jews kidnap children to use their blood as part of a religious ceremony, is even more durable. Folklorists including Alan Dundes (1991) and Gillian Bennett (2005) have extensively studied historical cases, and the complex, as the catalog of occurrences compiled recently by Bennett and Smith, has emerged more or less continuously in the West from medieval times up to the recent past in Middle Eastern anti-Israeli propaganda (2007:243-45). The various Latin American forms of the organ theft complex have been extensively studied by scholars, notably by Véronique Campion-Vincent, a participant in the early Sheffield Seminars. Her essay, "The Baby-Parts Story" (1990), introduced the Latin American child-killing panics to English-speaking audiences, and her mono-graph Organ Theft Narratives, published in French in 1997 and translated to English in 2005, remains a standard reference to the phenomenon. These narrative complexes, like those described by Friedland, have led to mob violence and even the deaths of several Western tourists unlucky enough to be the focus of similar rumor panics. However, analysis of the African ecotypes, until recently, remained scantily studied. W. Arens (1979) and Patricia Turner (1993) allude to these legends, but in a vague, impressionistic way.

The problem seems to be that, however intriguing the discussion, neither the 1960 RLI conference nor the Sheffield seminars of the 1980s generated a clearly defined theoretical approach that could motivate later fieldwork and scholarship. The terms "urban myth" and "contemporary legend" were, for this reason, misunderstood by scholars as a special kind of oral narrative, untrue by definition, distinct from forms of indigenous knowledge that were being observed by social scientists. As Bennett points out, anthropologist Nancy Schepfer-Hughes is correct in saying that Third World organ theft claims are not "urban legends" in the sense of being "stories too good to be true" and told as entertaining scare stories "just like good ghost stories" (qtd. in Bennett 2007:211). In response to this comment, Bennett shows that the observed dynamics of such stories exactly fit what the Sheffieldians have argued is the primary nature of contemporary legends: that they are claims that are not asserted as being true or false, but only as potentially true and in any case an effective metaphor for a deeply felt but difficult-to-express anxiety (2007:212). Donna Wyckoff, in an essay first published in Bennett and Smith's Contemporary Legend: A Reader (1996), likewise boldly extended the contemporary legend concept to "social narratives," accounts of child abuse "recovered" late in life by adults as part of support groups. These too would not be considered "urban legends" by professionals, as they are stories strongly asserted to be factually true and told in the first-person. But Wyckoff counters that their nature, which uses evidence that cannot easily be checked at first hand, models its structure on previously encountered stories, and relies on a communal sense of a "correct" story type, in fact characterizes them precisely as contemporary legends. In any case, Wyckoff ends by saying (unwittingly echoing the RLI delegates) "I would contend that claims (made in first person or third) that a story 'actually happened'—whether these assertions appear once or a thousand times—is far less relevant to legend classification than the social force of the story as a story" (1996:376; emphasis hers).

Gary Alan Fine, in an article written in 1988 and also included in the Smith/Bennett Contemporary Legend: A Reader stressed: "Too often American folk narrative research has limited its goals. By focusing on content and the immediate context surrounding performance, folklorists have missed opportunities to connect the discipline to political and social questions" (1996:322). Regrettably, even though the Sheffield participants had by the mid-1990s developed enough significant research to present itself as a self-aware theoretical approach to the topic, with important things to say to researchers in other fields, at this crucial moment the leaders of the movement seem to have evaded the challenge. Despite her strong response to Schepfer-Hughes, Bennett herself refused to formalize her approach, saying only, "I think the stories speak for themselves. . . . We don't need a theory to explain them or to explain ourselves to others. The stories are enough in themselves. The legends I have looked at in [Bodies] are dangerous and inflammable stuff, but theories don't help us to understand them. I believe that describing their spread is enough to reveal their nature" (2007:307).

This evasion, however, misunderstands what a theory is. Bennett may have warrant for saying that some folklorists' use of some theories, such as Dundes's Freudian readings or Fine's psychosocial interpretations, lead to facile and self-validating conclusions. But theory, properly seen, consists of the generalizations drawn by herself and others that can and should be tested in the light of unexamined or underexamined primary data. When one evades the task of reviewing the efforts of one's co-workers, then, as Fine cautioned in "The Third Force," the lack of a "recognized and labeled theory" reduces the credibility of scholarship already completed in the eyes of researchers in related disciplines. Simultaneously, this evasion leaves incoming students in the field without clear direction (1996:312). Like the provocative ideas of the 1960 RLI conference, which were quickly relegated to an obscure volume in the vaults of academic libraries, so too the insights of the early Sheffield meetings risk simply being overlooked. But this is to be expected, if the leaders of the movement itself do not think it worthwhile to formalize, test, and refine their hypotheses in a continuously self-critical intellectual process.

A further evasion takes place in Bennett's insistence on defining legends as a given type of narrative, rather than (like the RLI delegates and most of the Dégh-influenced Sheffield seminarians) as a form of folk process, a communal means of defining and addressing culturally uncertain situations. In Bodies, she argues that contemporary legends "are 'stories' of some sort; they are not something vague, diffuse, and formless like a rumor, or a statement of folk belief, or a popular fallacy. They have structure (a beginning, middle, and end, though not necessarily in that order); they are texts rather than shapeless bits of discourse" (2007:xii). This, however, tends to focus attention on the content and style of collected versions of relatively stable, self-contained narratives and deflect attention away from the larger social context that both brings the stories into being and gives them their urgency. A text-focused approach, as Fine argued, risks limiting discussion to an "antiquarian" approach that is "literary and static" (1996:312) and also fails to consider the essentially interactional nature of the narratives that most politically sensitive observers find most important.

The fallacy of this approach is made clear when Bennett and Smith applied it to the 2007 survey of contemporary legend, significantly subtitled "A Collection of International Tall Tales and Terrors." The volume places primary focus on short, funny anecdotes or "good ghost stories" (in Schepfer-Hughes's words) and systematically underplays the more politically controversial materials discussed by other folklorists. No explanation for this omission was given, save the comment "The choice of which stories to include . . . reflects our own approaches to urban legend and the information about them reflects our own interests." Pointedly, the authors continue, "What interest us here is not what the stories 'mean,' but how they have been told, by whom, and what form, when and where" (2007:xix). Sadly, the result is precisely the "antiquarian" work that Fine warned was already out of date when the first Sheffield seminar was held. Small wonder, then, that when Gary Alan Fine and Patricia Turner, both participants in "contemporary legend" seminars (though not the early ones in Sheffield) chose to discuss the political role that legendry played in the negotiation of the race line in American society, they grounded their discussion entirely in mainstream sociological theory, using "rumor" rather than "legend" as their key concept.

But Linda Dégh's monumental Legend and Belief (2001) evades the challenge in a different way. To be sure, she, unlike Smith and Bennett, values the interactive nature of legendry and considers text as only part of the rich transactional nature of the phenomenon. And she too is well aware of the body parts legends: in fact, she quotes one Internet-derived text of the American ecotype, "The Stolen Kidneys," at length. But like Richard Dorson looking blankly at the proletarian folklore collected by Bill Friedland in the late 1940s, Dégh tragically sees nothing worth studying.

> . . . how long can the virulent rumor about criminal commodification of body parts persist? [she asks rhetorically] The legend seems so much based on the current rumor and its social circumstances, that in spite of its similarity to the early rumor and legend about body theft by physicians for medical experimentation, it may have difficulty entering the blood-stream of natural legend conduits. Many old legends appear in regenerated forms, but so far no continuity has captured the attention of folklorists. And without continuity and the formation of conduits, these stories succumb quickly. (2001:126)

It is tempting to chide Dégh for her short-sightedness here: in fact, as we have noted, folklorists have taken notice of the body-parts complex and documented a continuity of content and context from ancient times to the immediate present. But it is certainly true that folklorists themselves have not yet recognized the continuities in their research. As Fine cautioned, "By focusing on content and the immediate context surrounding performance, folklorists have missed opportunities to connect the discipline to political and social questions" (1996:322). And without a self-aware continuity of concepts and methods, or the formation of conduits that would bring this work to the attention of other scholars, this research succumbs quickly, or rather joins the vast archive of intellectual efforts that have generated a moment of excitement but no ongoing tradition of learning.

Luise White: An opportunity seized

I do not want to end this essay with pessimism but with hope that, even if folkloristics seems unable to advance its own most stimulating work, the brightest scholars in other fields will be able to use some of the ideas to produce formative scholarship of their own. For instance, Luise White's Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa (2000), is a comprehensive study of the mumiani complex in Central Africa, drawing on archival research and supplemented by fieldwork in Kenya, Uganda, and Zambia. By giving a much broader cross section of mumiani legends, White provides multiple examples of how research into contemporary legend types identified in Western societies could be advanced by examining previously unknown Central African versions. In one especially prevalent ecotype, for instance, the mumiani abduction is tied to the femme fatale theme familiar from many contemporary legend complexes. A typical version goes:

> I heard that a long time ago the wazimamoto [the Kenyan emic term for mumiani] was in Mashimoni [a Nairobi neighborhood noted for prostitution], even those people who were staying there bought plots with the blood of somebody. I heard that in those days they used to dig the floors very deep in the house and they covered the floor with a carpet. Where it was deepest, in the center of the floor, they'd put a chair and the victim would fall and be killed. Most of the women living there were prostitutes and this is how they made extra money, from the wazimamoto. So when a man came for sex, the woman would say, "Karibu, karibu," [Welcome, welcome] and the man would go to the chair, and then he would fall into the hole in the floor, then at night the wazimamoto would come and take that man away. When they fell down they couldn't get up again . . . . (2000:167-68)

This legend type is clearly cognate with the recently popular versions of "The Stolen Kidney," in which a male victim is enticed by a sexually attractive woman, then victimized by having his organs removed while in a drugged sleep. The pit under the chair, too, suggests the "urban cannibal" stories studied by Jacqueline Simpson and others, in which persons are randomly murdered, then made into sausages or meat pies to be consumed by the unwary. The most notorious example, the legends surrounding the serial killer "Sweeney Todd," likewise put emphasis on the killer's barber chair, which, like the Nairobi prostitute's, tipped over and deposited the victim in a subterranean pit (see Bennett and Smith 2007:275-76).

But White does not simply point out connections of African legend variants with European cognates. She patiently "unpacks" legend versions such as these, showing how the neighborhood, the alleged plan of the house, and even the distinctive chair and carpet are all socially charged objects in Kenyan culture. "Stories and rumors are produced in the cultural conflicts of local life," she reminds us, and so "they mark ways to talk about the conflicts and contradictions that gave them meaning and power" (2000:312) For this reason, she grounds the vampire stories she collects in a variety of contexts: the often insensitive way in which Western medicine was introduced, the ambiguous economic role of women in the new African cities, religious conflicts caused by Catholic missionaries' efforts to supplant traditional religions, the class struggles caused by labor disputes in the Copperbelt.

Studying contemporary legends like the mumiani stories is far from quixotic, she demonstrates; indeed, they are not only evidence for vital social conduits, but in fact the best evidence with which to begin a cultural history of them. They "make more connections than other kinds of evidence do," White says, adding, "The force with which vampire stories insert themselves into domains of power and regions of the body makes this point clearly: other kinds of evidence are not so invasive; they do not reveal the same breadth and depth of daily life and thought" (2000:312).

White models an effective way to fit research on contemporary legend by Fine, Turner, Brunvand, and others into a broader intellectual discussion. Coming at the same theoretical puzzles that this essay has reviewed, she arrives at answers that would sound familiar to participants in both the 1960 RLI conference and the early Sheffield seminars. In an introduction, she states a simple premise for her approach to legends: "people do not speak with truth . . . but they construct and repeat stories that carry the values and meanings that most forcibly get their points across. People do not always speak from experience—even when that is considered the most accurate kind of information—but speak with stories that circulate to explain what happened" (2000:30). This picks up one of Monica Wilson's 1960 insights, that to become widespread, myths "must express some social reality—the needs or aspirations of some group or community," as well as her closing affirmation that "a lively myth . . . will continue beside the facts, and that the demonstration of its falsity does not destroy it" (1960:152).

What will be said, another half century from now, about the participants in the first five years of the Sheffield Seminars? Despite the social and political importance of the issues involved, one's choice of research topic is, as I have noted, a controversial political act that risks bringing severe economic and social sanctions on researchers and their families. This is hardly unique to those who work in folkloristics, as Luise White candidly admits that much of her book was written during times of unemployment. Nevertheless, if "contemporary legend" research is to endure, those in this area need to face facts: however interesting the topic, how-ever enjoyable the discussion, if academics in other disciplines get the impression that folklorists are simply tilting at philological windmills, then they will, ironically, replicate in experience the political exploitation endured by the Others who once were considered the sole custodians of folklore.

The alternative given by Dégh, a well-trodden philological path toward intellectual isolationism, insists that the methodology used to discuss legends in their natural context "cannot be borrowed from another discipline; it must use the unique resources of folkloristics" (2001:203). But if researchers wish to inspire a new generation of folklorists—if indeed there is to be a new generation of "contemporary legend" folklorists—they must take this path only so far as it leads us into understanding politically important material and making genuine contributions to the constituencies academics should be serving. Bill Friedland, recently credited as "an outspoken critic of what he considered [his home institution's] narrow research agenda" (McNulty 2007), suggested a more fruitful direction during our phone conversation of July 2002. Academics of any discipline really should strive to carry out research, not just to interest themselves, he emphasized, but to carry practical consequences for the world we live in. If our research accomplishes this, even in modest ways, then it will gain and maintain a niche in academia, at least that faction that believes that the purpose of research is to change the world for the better. As soon as folkloristic research begins to evade the "essentially political" nature of con-temporary legendry and busy itself instead with self-referential, antiquarian matters, then legend scholars are fully justified in abandoning its "unique resources." They must use every methodology that is useful—whether its roots lie in folkloristics, the social sciences, or New History—to achieve their mission – the full explication of the social significance of the material they study.

Notes

[*] An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2002 "Perspectives on Contemporary Legend" Seminar hosted by the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research. The author thanks Bill Friedland and Raymond Apthorpe for sharing their memories of the event and its context. Dr. Friedland and Mikel Koven also provided helpful critiques of preliminary drafts.

[1] As conceded by Smith and Bennett in their "Introduction" to the fourth volume of "Perspectives on Contemporary Legend" essays, which they titled The Questing Beast after the focus of an unattainable quest in T. F. White's classic Arthurian novel The Sword in the Stone. Contemporary legend scholars, Smith and Bennett observe, find that their own quest after their object of study is a quixotic one, for it "will not stay still long enough to

have boundaries set round it. 'New' legends are constantly popping up and 'old' ones mysterious disappear or converge. Definitive work does not stay definitive long" (1989:21).

[2] Raymond Apthorpe, then a post-doctoral researcher for the RLI, kindly reviewed a draft of this essay for accuracy in July 2009. He commented that, up until around 1960, apartheid did prevail even in the RLI, though he recalled that under the previous Director, "the institute's African research assistants were allowed into his garden once a year, but never actually into his house." Under his successor, Henry Fosbrooke, however, many of these segregationist policies were liberalized at the RLI campus.

[3] The actual name also appears as "F. J. Sillet" in the table of con-tents, and the transcription of the discussion calls him "Rev. [or Father] Sillet." I have not been able to locate biographical information on Sillett/ Sillet, so I cannot verify which is correct. Since the essay also appeared in 1963 as Series II, number 9 of the Occasional Papers of the Department of Missionary Studies of the International Missionary Council under the name "F. T. Sillett," I assume that this is the correct form.

[4] Sillett references Van der Post's pamphlet Race Prejudice as Self Rejection, p. 18.

[5] When contacted by e-mail in 2009, Apthorpe admitted, with regret, that "of the event itself I can as yet conjure up precisely nothing - other than hosting the magnificent monica wilson."

[6] With fellow ethnographer John Blacking, he recorded and produced several recordings of indigenous African music, two of which were released by Ethnic Folkways in 1962 and 1965. They remain in print as FW04201-02: Music from Petauke of Northern Rhodesia, Vol. 1 and Vol. 2.

[7] Apthorpe recalled, in 2009, "Charlie White and James Chinjavata were friends . . , as well as co authors. . . . Because he had so many african friends, then something 'not done' by colonial officials, behind his back they called him Off White. . . . He was as near a genius as I have ever met anywhere, besides his language grammars and customary law accounts and ethnographies and birds and I think dragon fly and monkey monographs and I don't know what else he had a remarkable way with correspondence. He'd come into Lusaka from usually somewhere in Balovale say once a month, collect his mail, read it while being driven back, memorize 'anything important', throw the letter out of the window, then at the end of the journey immediately settle down and type or write whatever responses were deemed necessary."

[8] In discussion during the 2008 annual meeting of ISCLR, Dublin, Ireland, Diane Goldstein suggested the term "hegemonic legends" to refer to such narrative complexes, noting that when they are affirmed by persons who normally hold high political or intellectual status, they circulate and are debated in a different way from those who hold only an anonymous "friend of a friend" warrant.

[9] See especially the authors' handling of legends in the popular media in Dégh 1994 and Brunvand 1999.

[10] The introductory footnote on the same page also contains what may be the first recorded use of the phrase "modern myth." True, we might say that it was inevitable that these words would come together, if only by chance, since the urban experience and the impact of modernity on African culture were key concepts for this conference, and since the organizing concept of the meeting was "myth." But a close reading of the proceedings show that they never do, except in Friedland's essay, with participants choosing to refer instead to "political myths," "European myths," and the like. But the final presenter in the conference began his paper by com-menting that participants had by now "listened to many a modern myth" (Dubb, ed. 1960:136), suggesting that during the oral discussions of the papers at least, the phrase had begun to catch on as a useful one.

[11] As evidenced in the useful "Bibliography 4: Other Published Works Cited in Footnotes to Papers Read at the Sheffield Conferences," in Bennett and Smith 1990:111ff. No work by Friedland appears in their more extensive Contemporary Legend: A Folklore Bibliography (1993). This is not a criticism of Smith or Bennett, only an indication that Friedland's "urban myth" article was never referenced by any folklorist— nor indeed by any

sociologist who has written in the contemporary legend area, such as Gary Alan Fine or Jeffrey S. Victor. (It was, however, refer-enced by historian Luise White in her Speaking with Vampires [2000]).

[12] For an overview of this academic dispute, which influenced American folkloristics for the following generation, see Bendix 1994:189-95.

[13] A number of these selections were made more widely available recently through Songs for Political Action, a ten-CD release of radical folksongs from the period released by the German record company Bear Family.

[14] Friedland did this, he remarks, because when he was first told this story, he immediately suspected it was another European myth (1960:94).

[15] The discussion notes also add two press releases mentioning the rumor, one an “amusing” story about a European administrator who was briefly feared as a mumiani collector, the second a more tragic account of a ten-year-old who accepted a ride from an European, then jumped out of the vehicle and was killed when he suspected he was being abducted.

[16] His papers, including a huge unpublished taxonomy of the birds of Wallacea and his collection of bird specimens, were deposited with the Natural History Museum, London. See “Manuscript Collection of Charles Matthew Newton White (1914-1978): A Collection Description,” The Natural History Museum, 2002. Accessed 9 August 2009. Available: http://www.nhm.ac.uk/research-curation/collections/collections-management/collections-navigator//transform.jsp?rec=/ ead-recs/nhm/uls-a352884.xml.

[17] As a member of UNIP, the party that came to power in Zambia after independence, Apthorpe recalls, he probably would have been a candidate for the nation’s first Minister of Education. In any case, during the mid 1960s, while serving as Dean of Social Studies at Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda, the Zambian government offered him a position as Vice Chancellor of Zambia University. Apthorpe declined, “saying that it was time for an African, Zambian, appointment, which is then in fact what happened” (2009).

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