"Not Yesterday, Not Yesterday, But Long Ago"

Hamlet and the Tiv

In which an anthropologist learns from the elders of a Nigerian tribe what Shakespeare really meant.

Human nature, she found, is not the same the whole world over.

by Laura Bohannan

I crawled through the low doorway of the old man's dwelling and found most of the men of the homestead huddled on stools, warming themselves against the chill of the rain around a smoky fire. In the center were three pots of beer. The party had started.

The old man greeted me cordially, and I accepted a large calabash of beer.

"It is better like this!" The old man looked at me approvingly. "You should sit and drink with us more often. Your servants tell me that when you are not with us, you sit inside your hut looking at a paper." I hastily explained that my "paper" was one of the "things of long ago" of my country.

"Ah," said the old man. "Tell us."

I protested that I was not a storyteller. Storytelling is a skilled art among them, their standards are high, the audiences vocal in their criticism. I protested in vain. They threatened to tell me no more stories until I told them one of mine. Suddenly realizing my chance to prove Hamlet universally intelligible, I agreed.

Chiefs and Omens. Men filled their long wooden pipes and, puffing contentedly, they sat back to listen. I began in the proper style: "Not yesterday, not yesterday, but long ago, a thing occurred. One night three men were keeping watch outside the homestead of the great chief, when suddenly they saw the former chief approach them:"

"Why was he no longer their chief?"

"He was dead," I explained. "That is why they were troubled and afraid when they saw him."

"Impossible," said an elder. "Of course it wasn't the dead chief; it was an omen sent by a witch. Go on!"

Slightly shaken, I continued. "One of these three was a man-who-knew-things"—the closest translation for "scholar," but unfortunately it also meant witch. The elder looked triumphant. "So he spoke to the dead chief saying, 'Tell us what we must do so you may rest in your grave,' but the dead chief did not answer. He vanished. Then the man-who-knew-things—
Horatio—said this event was the affair of the dead chief’s son, Hamlet.

There was a general shaking of heads. “Had the dead chief no living brothers? Or was this son the chief?” I asked. “He had one living brother,” I said, “who became the chief when the elder brother died.” The old man mumbled: such omens were matters for chiefs and elders, not for youngsters; no good could come of going behind a chief’s back; obviously this Horatio was not a man who knew things.

“Yes, he was,” I insisted. “In our country the son is next to the father. The dead chief’s younger brother had become the great chief. He had also married his elder brother’s widow only about a month after the funeral.”

“He did well,” the old man beamed and announced to the others, “I told you that if we knew more about Europeans, we would find they really were very like us. In our country also;” he added to me, “the younger brother marries the elder brother’s widow and becomes the father of his children.”

I was thrown off balance by having one of the most important elements of Hamlet knocked straight out of the picture. Determined to save the mother motif, I took a deep breath and began again. “The son Hamlet was very sad because his mother had married again so quickly. There was no need for her to do so and it is our custom for a widow not to go to her next husband until she has mourned for two years.”

“Two years is too long,” objected an elder’s wife. “Who will hoe your farms for you while you have no husband?”

“Hamlet,” I retorted without thinking, “was old enough to hoe his mother’s farms himself. There was no need for her to remarry.” No one looked convinced. I gave up. “His mother and the great chief told Hamlet not to be sad, for the great chief himself would be a father to Hamlet. Furthermore, Hamlet would be the next chief. Therefore he must stay there to learn the things of a chief. Hamlet agreed to remain, and all the rest went off to drink beer.”

I was confused, perplexed at how to render Hamlet’s disguised soliloquy to an audience convinced that Claudius and Gertrude had behaved in the best possible manner. I gave up, and resumed: “That night Hamlet kept watch. The dead chief again appeared, and although the others were afraid, Hamlet followed his dead father off to one side. When they were alone, Hamlet’s dead father spoke...”

“Omens can’t talk,” the old man said. “Hamlet’s dead father wasn’t an omen; seeing him might have been an omen, but he was not.” My audience looked as confused as I sounded. “It was Hamlet’s dead father. It was a thing we call a ‘ghost.’” I had to use the English word, for these people didn’t believe in the survival after death of any individual part of the personality.

“What’s a ghost? An omen?”

“No, a ‘ghost’ is someone who is dead but who walks around. People can hear him and see him but not touch him.” They objected. “One can touch zombies!” “No, no!” It was not a dead body; the witches had animated to sacrifice and eat. No one else made Hamlet’s dead father walk. He did it himself.


The old man quelled the babble of disbelief that arose immediately and told me with that insincere but courteous agreement one extends to the fancies of the young, “No doubt in your country the dead can also walk without being zombified.”

Again they objected. “Dead men cast no shadows.” “They do in my country,” I snapped.

Polonius the Elder. “Anymore,” I resumed, “Hamlet’s dead father said that his own brother had poisoned him. He wanted Hamlet to avenge him. Hamlet believed this in his heart, for he did not like his father’s brother. I took another swallow of beer. “In the country of the great chief, living in the same homestead, was an important elder named Polonius who was often with the chief to advise and help him. Hamlet was courted his daughter Ophelia, but her father and her brother warned her not to let Hamlet visit her when she was alone on her farm, for he would be a great chief and so could not marry her.”

“Why not?” asked the wife, who had settled down on the edge of the old man’s chair. He frowned at her for asking stupid questions and growled his answer, “They lived in the same homestead.”

“That was not the reason,” I informed him. “Polonius thought that Hamlet, being important, ought to marry a chief’s daughter, for in his country a man could have only one wife. Polonius was afraid that if Hamlet made love to his daughter, then no one else would give a high bride price for her.”

“That might be true,” remarked one of the shrewd elders, “but a chief’s son would give his mistress’ father enough presents to make them make up the difference, and patronize. Polonius sounds like a fool to me.”

“Many people think he was,” I agreed. “Meanwhile one day Hamlet came upon Ophelia. He behaved so oddly that she frightened her. Indeed, the chief and many others had also noticed that when Hamlet talked one could understand the words but not what they meant. Many people thought that he had become mad.”

My audience suddenly became much more attentive.

“The great chief wanted to know what was wrong with Hamlet, but Polonius assured him that Hamlet was mad simply because he had been forbidden to see Ophelia, whom he loved.”

“Why,” inquired a bewitched voice, “should anyone bewitch Hamlet on that account? Only witchcraft can make anyone mad, unless, of course, one sees the beings that lurk in the forest.”

Hamlet, according to the elders, had not been exposed to the beings that lurk in the forest. Therefore only his relatives in the male line could bewitch him. Barric relatives not mentioned by Shakespeare, it had to be Claudius who was attempting to harm him. And, of course, it was.

Storytellers and Omen Readers. “Now Hamlet,” I continued, “decided to have a famous storyteller tell a story about a man who had poisoned his brother. Hamlet was sure the great chief could not hear the story without making a sign if he was indeed guilty, and then he would discover whether his dead father had told him the truth.”

The old man interrupted, with deep cunning, “Why should a father lie to his son?” he asked. I hedged: “Hamlet wasn’t sure that it really was his dead father.”

“You mean,” he said, “it actually was an omen, and he knew witches sometimes send false ones. Hamlet was a fool not to go to one skilled in reading omens in the first place. A man-who-sees-the-truth could have told him how his father died, if he really had been poisoned, and if there was witchcraft in it; then Hamlet could have called the elders to settle the matter.”

The shrewd elder ventured to disagree. “Because his father’s brother was a great chief, one-who-sees-the-truth might therefore have been afraid to tell it. I think...”
it was a friend of Hamlet's father who sent an omen so Hamlet would know. Was the omen true?"

"Yes," I said, "It was true, for when the storyteller was telling his tale before all the household, the great chief rose in fear. Afraid that Hamlet indeed knew his secret, the great chief told Hamlet's mother to find out from her son what he knew. But because a woman's children are always first in her heart, he had the important elder Polonius hide behind a cloth in Hamlet's mother's sleeping hut. Hamlet started to scold his mother for what she had done."

There was a shocked murmur from everyone; a man should never scold his mother.

"She called out in fear, and Polonius moved behind the cloth. Shouting, 'A rat!', Hamlet took his mat and slashed through the cloth I paused for dramatic effect. 'He had killed Polonius!'

The old men looked at each other in supreme disgust. "That Polonius truly was a fool and a man who knew nothing! What child would not know enough to shout, It's me?" With a pang I remembered: these people are ardent hunters, always armed with bow, arrow and matchet; at the first rustle in the grass, an arrow is aimed and ready; the hunter shouts "game!" if no human voice immediately answers, the arrow speeds on its way. Like a good hunter Hamlet had shouted, "A rat!"

I rushed in to save Polonius' reputation. "Polonius did speak. But Hamlet thought it was the chief and wished to kill him to avenge his father."

This time I had shocked my audience seriously. "For a man to raise his hand against his father's brother and the one who has become his father—that is a terrible thing!"

I pointed out that after all the man had killed Hamlet's father.

"No," pronounced the old man, speaking less to me than to the younger men, "if your father's brother has killed your father, you must appeal to your father's agemates; they may avenge him. No man may use violence against his senior relatives." Another thought struck him. "But if his father's brother had indeed been wicked enough to bewitch Hamlet and make him mad... that would be a good story indeed, for it would be his own fault that Hamlet, being mad, no longer had any sense and thus was ready to kill his father's brother."

There was a murmur of applause. Hamlet was again a good story to them, but it no longer seemed quite the same to me.

"The great chief," I went on, "told Laertes, the son of Polonius, that Hamlet had killed Polonius. Laertes swore to kill Hamlet because of this, and because his sister Ophelia, hearing her father had been killed by the man she loved, went mad and drowned in the river."

"Have you already forgotten what we told you?" The old man was reproachful. "One cannot take vengeance on a madman; Hamlet killed Polonius in his madness. As for the girl, only witches can make people drown. Water itself can't hurt anything. It is merely something one drinks and bathes in."

I began to get cross. "If you don't like the story, I'll stop."

The old man made soothing noises and himself poured me some more beer. "You tell the story well, but it is clear that the elders of your country have never told you what the story really means. No, don't interrupt! We believe you when you say your marriage customs are different, or your clothes and weapons. But people are the same everywhere; therefore, there, are always witches and it is we, the elders, who know how witches work. We told you it was the great chief who wished to kill Hamlet, and now your own words have proved us right. Who were Ophelia's male relatives?"

"There were only her father and her brother" Hamlet was clearly out of my hands.

"Then from what you tell us, since Polonius was dead, it must have been Laertes who killed Ophelia, though I do not see the reason for it."

"Listen," said another elder, "and I will tell you how it was. Laertes had many fines to pay for fighting, and debts from gambling. But he had only two ways of getting money quickly. One was to marry off his sister at once, but it is difficult to find a man who will marry a woman desired by the son of a chief."

"Therefore Laertes had to take the second way: he killed his sister by witchcraft, drowning her so he could secretly sell her body to the witches."

I raised an objection. "They found her body and buried it. Indeed Laertes jumped into the grave to see his sister once more—so, you see, the body was truly there. Hamlet had to jump in after him."

"What did I tell you?" The elder appealed to the others. "Laertes was up to no good with his sister's body. Hamlet prevented him, because the chief's heir, like a chief, does not wish any other man to grow rich and powerful. Then Laertes would be angry, because he would have killed his sister without benefit to himself. In our country he would try to kill Hamlet for that reason. Is this not what happened?"

"More or less," I admitted. "The great chief encouraged Laertes to try to kill Hamlet and arranged a fight with matches between them. In the fight both the young men were wounded to death. Hamlet's mother drank the poisoned beer that the chief meant for Hamlet in case he won the fight. When he saw his mother die of poison, Hamlet, dying, managed to kill his father's brother with his matchet."

"You see, I was right!" cried the elder.

The Wisdom of the Tiv. "That was a very good story," added the old man, "and you told it with very few mistakes. There was just one more error, at the very end. The poison Hamlet's mother drank was obviously meant for the survivor of the fight whichever it was. If Laertes had won, the great chief would have poisoned him, for then no one would know that the chief had arranged Hamlet's death."

"Sometimes," concluded the old man gathering his ragged toga about him, "you must tell us more stories of your country. We, who are elders, will instruct you in their true meaning, so that when you return to your own land your elders will see that you have not been sitting in the bush, but among those who know things and who have taught you wisdom."

Anthropologist Laura Bohannan admittedly took poetic license in this account, which represents her efforts over several storytelling sessions to explain Hamlet to the Tiv, a tribe of Central Nigeria. She also tried King Lear on them, but was stopped when she reached Scene I: "Only a fool would give political power to women," pronounced the Tiv; Lear obviously deserved everything he got.

Bohannan was born in a taxi during a traffic jam on the Brooklyn Bridge, and her life has been interesting ever since. She took her D.Phil. in anthropology at Oxford in 1951, and spent the next few years alternating between England and Africa. She is the principal ethnographer of the Tiv and Professor of Anthropology at the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle. She is currently on a Guggenheim fellowship, writing a book on Tiv witchcraft and magic.