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Shakespeare in the B!lsh

Laura Bohannon assumed that ultimately, the plot and motivation of Shakespeare's plays were universally intelligible, irrespective of cultural difference. Her reasoning centred on her own conviction that Shakespeare's plays addressed the universalities of human nature.

Whilst living amongst the Tiv, changing weather patterns led to a period of inactivity during which drinking and stotyelling became the principal leisure pursuits. In this illiterate society, the Tiv did not realise that the paper she was always looking at whilst alone was a story, since in their experience pieces of paper only ever pertained to bureaucratic matters. So, when she told them what it was, they asked her to tell them the story. Because the Tiv had elaborate oral traditions and story-telling skills, and because her Tiv language skills were less than perfect, she was anxious about her ability to relate to them the story of *Hamlet*, but endeavoured to do so nonetheless.

So this gave her a chance to prove that *Hamlet* was universally intelligible as she had previously claimed. However, Bohannon soon came to realise that the Tiv held different assumptions about human life, and that this made the Tiv-telling of *Hamlet* a difficult task indeed. They took issue with many of her assertions, which to them made no sense. For example:

- She was unable to express the concept of 'scholar' without implying that such a person was a witch, which was of course, contrary to her story-telling intentions (p26).
- The Tiv were surprised that a chief would not take several wives, pointing out that multiple wives and their offspring allowed for his land to be managed without him having to employ servants who would have to be paid from taxes levied from the people he ruled over. For the Tiv, the people loved chiefs who gave but did not take, making taxation a bad thing (p27).
- Their lack of a concept equivalent to a 'ghost' (p27), seriously confounded her ability to explain the post mortem visitations of Hamlet's father (p26 & 27). "These people didn't believe in the survival after death of any individuating part of the personality" (p27).
- For the Tiv, the only reasons why one might go mad were if one were the victim of witchcraft or had seen "the beings that lurk in the forest" (p28), thereby ruling out the possibility that Hamlet had been made mad by his own grief.
- Whereas Hamlet may have mistrusted the ghostly vision of his father, perhaps even accrediting it to the deceits of the devil, for the Tiv there was no such 'devil' concept. Consequently, the best way Bohannon could make the English language Shakespeare fit with Tiv language, concept and understanding, was to suggest that Hamlet thought the ghostly vision of his father might have been a witch-sent omen (p29).
- Hamlet had mistakenly killed Polonius, thinking him to be his father's brother and murderer. The Tiv could not countenance this. In such a situation, Hamlet should have appealed to his father's age-mates to avenge his father's murder.

This was because, for the Tiv, "no man may use violence against his senior relatives" (p29).

- Hamlet's murder of Polonius gave the great chief (the usurper) reason to banish Hamlet, who was to be accompanied by two of his age-mates who had been secretly instructed to kill him. Again, this caused outcry from the Tiv, since for them "one cannot take vengeance on a madman" (p30).
- Ophelia, having heard that her father (Polonius) had been killed by the man she loved, also went mad and drowned herself. But again, the possibility of suicide by drowning was an impossibility for the Tiv; "only witches can make people drown" (p30).

It also became evident that in the course of making concessions to the Tiv world view, her audience were led to draw false conclusions about the manner and authority by which stories are explained and understood in Bohannan's culture- they applied their own indigenous schemata, and thus assumed that 'the elders' could be the only possible source of authority regarding 'the correct interpretation' of a story. As they said: "You tell the story well, and we are listening. But it is clear that the elders of your country have never told you what the story really means" (p30). And also, regarding the proper telling of stories: "We, who are elders, will instruct you in their true meaning" (p31).

So, did Laura Bohannan's experience of trying to tell Hamlet's story to the Tiv confirm or deny the claim that Shakespeare's stories were of universal intelligibility?