

Professor Karin Barber PhD FBA

Professor of African Cultural Anthropology

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About

I am an anthropologist with a particular interest in popular culture, religion, and the verbal arts, both oral and written. Most of my research has been in the Yoruba-speaking area of Nigeria, and I am currently working on early Yoruba print culture.

Qualifications

- BA Cantab
- Dip.Soc.Anth.London
- PhD Ife

Biography

Karin Barber did her first degree in English at Cambridge. She then went on to study social anthropology at University College London before doing a PhD at the University of Ife, Nigeria (now Obafemi Awolowo University). Her doctoral research was based on 37 months' field work in Okuku, a Yoruba town, where she studied the role of oral poetic performance in everyday life. She then became a lecturer in the Department of African Languages and Literatures, University of Ife, where Yoruba was used as the teaching medium.

While working at Ife, she did research on Yoruba popular theatre, joining the Oyin Adejobi Theatre Company, travelling extensively with them and performing in their improvised Yoruba-language plays, both on stage and on television. After eleven years in Nigeria, Karin returned to the UK and was appointed to a lectureship at the Department of African Studies and Anthropology, where she is now Professor of African Cultural Anthropology. She has also had visiting appointments at Northwestern University, first as Preceptor of the Institute of Advanced Study and Research in the African Humanities (1993-4) and then as Melville Herskovits Distinguished Visiting Professor (1999). More recently, she was appointed a Mellon Foundation Distinguished Visiting Scholar at the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa (2014).

Several of her books have won prestigious prizes. Her first book, *I Could Speak Until Tomorrow: Oriki, Women and the Past in a Yoruba Town* (1991) won the Amaury Talbot Prize for African Anthropology, awarded by the Royal Anthropological Institute. *The Generation of Plays: Yoruba Popular Life in Theatre* (2000) won the Herskovits Award of the African Studies Association of the USA. *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics* (2007) won the Susanne K. Langer Award of the Media Ecology Association. Her most recent book, *Print Culture and the First Yoruba Novel* (2012), won the Paul Hair Prize of the African Studies Association of the USA and the Association for the Preservation and Publication of African Historical Sources.

Karin was appointed a CBE for services to African Studies in 2012. In the same year she received a University Award for Excellence in Doctoral Researcher Supervision. She served as the British Academy's Vice-President (Humanities) 2008-10, and Council Member 2007-10, having been elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 2003. Since 2006 she has been editor and later co-editor of *Africa*, the journal of the International African Institute. She was President of the African Studies Association of the UK (2000-2002). In 2001-3 she was awarded a 2-year British Academy Research Readership. She has been given a Yoruba chieftaincy title, and is the Iyamoye of Okuku.

Teaching

At undergraduate level Karin teaches courses on African popular culture, African religion and ritual, and Yoruba language and culture. Her Yoruba language course for beginners takes language learning as a point of entry into the culture of the Yoruba, and is built around her own course text, now revised in collaboration with Dr Akin Oyetade and published as *Yoruba Wuyi* (1999).

At postgraduate level she teaches a Masters level module on media and popular culture in Africa as well as contributing to the team-taught core module Research Skills and Methods for African Studies.

Postgraduate supervision

She is interested in supervising topics located in any part of Africa on oral and written genres in African languages; popular culture including music, visual art, theatre, media and the culture of everyday life; and African religion. Recent and current topics under her supervision include Tanzanian rap music; Ghanaian hiplife; religious ideas among BaKongo, DRC; Yoruba Ifa divination texts; Yoruba neo-traditional media and print poetry; the mass media and attitudes to the Osu Caste System in Eastern Nigeria; language use in FM radio phone-ins in Ghana; Ghanaian and Nigerian popular fiction; 'Black Englishmen', the press and associational activities in late 19th and early 20th century Lagos; Nollywood in Benin; online journalism in Northern Nigeria; popular music in Nigerian electoral campaigns; Nigerian travel writing in Yoruba and English.

Research

Karin's main interest is African everyday culture, with a central focus on verbal texts, both oral and written, in African languages. Most of her research has been concentrated on the Yoruba speaking area of southwestern Nigeria, but she has also done broader comparative work on popular culture across subSaharan Africa (see overview "Popular Arts in Africa" and *Readings in African Popular Culture*) and on approaches to texts in Africa and beyond (see *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics*). She led a collaborative project on everyday uses of literacy in colonial Africa, looking at letters, diaries, locally-published fiction and other texts; this resulted in the edited volume *Africa's Hidden Histories* (2006). Her current research, initially supported by an AHRC Research Leave award (2010) focuses on the Yoruba-language print culture of early 20th century Lagos: one strand of this research has been published as *Print Culture and the First Yoruba Novel* (2012).

Other activities

Karin is editor, with David Pratten (Oxford University), of *Africa*, the journal of the International African Institute, and is a member of the International African Institute's Council and Publications Committee. She has played several roles in the British Academy, serving on the Standing Committee of the African and Oriental Studies section, the BASIS Committee (responsible for 15 British Academy-sponsored Institutes and Schools), the Africa Area Panel, the Council and Management Advisory Committee, and the Publications Committee, and serving as Vice-President (Humanities) 2008-10.

Within the University, she is Departmental Head of Research and Departmental Head of Postgraduate Studies.

Publications

Authored books

- 2012 *Yorùbá Print Culture and the First Yoruba Novel: I.B.Thomas's 'Life Story of Me, Seḡilọla' and Other Texts*. African Sources for African History series. Leiden: Brill. Winner of Paul Hair Prize 2013.
- 2007, *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics: Oral and Written Culture in Africa and Beyond*. Cambridge University Press. Winner of the Susanne K. Langer Award (2009).
- 2000, *The Generation of Plays: Yorùbá Popular Life in Theater*. Indiana University Press. Winner of Herskovits Award (2001) and shortlisted for George Freedley Memorial Award.
- 2000, *Yorùbá Dùn ún So: A Beginners' Course in Yorùbá (Part 2)*. Ibadan: New Horn Press. ISBN 978 2266 32 9. 119 pages.
- 1999 *Yoruba Wuyi (with Akin Oyetade)*. A revised and substantially expanded version of Yoruba Dun un So, Part I. London: Hakuna Matata Press (reprinted 2000, 2001).
- 1997 *West African Popular Theatre* (with John Collins and Alain Ricard). Indiana University Press.
- 1994 *Yorùbá Popular Theatre: Three Plays By The Oyin Adéjóbí Company* (with Báyo Ògúndíjò). African Historical Sources Series no 9: Atlanta: ASA Press.
- 1997 *West African Popular Theatre* (with John Collins and Alain Ricard). Indiana University Press.
- 1991 *I Could Speak Until Tomorrow: Oriki, women and the past in a Yoruba town*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. Winner of the Amaury Talbot Prize.

Edited books

- 2006 *Africa's Hidden Histories: everyday literacy and making the self*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press. Includes Barber, "Introduction: hidden innovators in Africa" (pp. 1-24) and "Writing, genre and a schoolmaster's inventions in the Yoruba provinces" (pp. 385-415).
- 1997 *Readings in African Popular Culture*. James Currey and Indiana University Press for the International African Institute.
- 1990 *Self-assertion and Brokerage: Early Cultural Nationalism in West Africa* (with P.F. de Moraes Farias). Birmingham University African Studies Series 2: Birmingham.
- 1989 *Discourse and its Disguises: the Interpretation of African Oral Texts* (with P.F. de Moraes Farias). Birmingham University African Studies Series 1: Birmingham.

Special (edited) issues of journals

- 2006, with Graham Furniss. *Research in African Literatures* vol. 37, no. 3: special issue on "Writing in African Languages". Includes introductory essay "African-language writing", with Graham Furniss (1-14) and "Oladejo Okediji on his writing life", with Oladejo Okediji (28-44).
- 1997, *Africa* vol. 67, no. 3: Special Issue on "Audiences in Africa".

Selected recent articles in scholarly journals

- 2013 "Yorùbá nilé àti ní ilú okèrè" (with translation, "Yoruba at home and abroad"), *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 25 (2).
- 2012 "Foreword" to special issue of *Research in African Literatures*, "Measuring Time: Karin Barber and the Study of Everyday Africa", ed. Onookome Okome and Stephanie Newell. *Research in African Literatures* 43 (4): v-vi.
- 2007, "When people cross thresholds", *African Studies Review* 50, 2 (111-123)(special issue on Jane Guyer's book *Marginal Gains*).
- 2006, with P.F. de Moraes Farias. "Archive as work-in-progress", *Current Writing —Text and Reception in Southern Africa*, 18, 2 (14-32).
- 2003, "Text and performance in Africa", *Bulletin of SOAS*, 66, 3 (324-333). Revised and republished in *Oral Tradition* 20, 2, 2005.
- 2001, "Audiences and the book", *Current Writing* 13, 2.

Selected recent chapters in edited books

- 2009, "I.B.Akinyele and early Yoruba print culture", in *Recasting the past: history writing and political work in twentieth century Africa*, ed. Derek Peterson and Giacomo Macola. Ohio University Press.
- 2009, "Orality, the media, and new popular cultures in Africa", in *Media in Africa and the Construction of Identity*, ed. John Middleton and Kimani Njogu, International African Seminars series. London: International African Institute.
- 2007, "Improvisation and the art of making things stick", in *Creativity and Cultural Improvisation*, ed. Elizabeth Hallam and Tim Ingold. ASA Monographs 44. Oxford and New York: Berg (25-41).
- 2006, "African histories of textuality", in *Studying transcultural literary history*, ed. Gunilla Lindberg-Wada. Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter (66-75).
- 2005 "Translation, publics and the vernacular press in 1920s Lagos", in *Christianity and social change in Africa: essays in honour of J.D.Y.Peel*, ed. Toyin Falola. Carolina Academic Press (187-208).
- 2004, "Literacy, improvisation and the virtual script in Yoruba popular theatre", in *African Drama and Performance*, ed. John Conteh-Morgan and Tejumola Olaniyan, Indiana University Press.
- 2004, "Literature in Yorùbá: poetry and prose; traveling theatre and modern drama", in *The Cambridge History of African and Caribbean Literature*, vol. 1, ed. F.Abiola Irele and Simon Gikandi, Cambridge University Press (357-78).
- 2002, "An archive of Yorùbá religious ephemera", *Africa Bibliography* 2000, ed. T.A. Barringer. Edinburgh University Press for the International African Institute (vii-xix). With P.F.de Moraes Farias.
- 2000, "Introduction: cultural negotiations", in *Contesting Forestry in West Africa*, ed. R. Cline-Cole and C.Madge. Aldershot & Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate (99-

- 2000, "The use of English in Yorùbá popular plays", in *Kiss and Quarrel*, ed. Stewart Brown. Birmingham University African Studies Series no. 6.

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