

Linguistic culture

[Art & Culture](#)



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

When I finished reading Laura Bohannan's essay "Shakespeare in the Bush" I felt that I was smiling. Can you beat it: Elizabeth Bowen-Smith (who will become Laura Bohannan later), intelligent student of Oxford university, sits on the calabash, drinks beer and explain the story of Hamlet to a group of tribesmen. Some of them are a very experienced, old person who knows things. It seems that Laura met very interesting company: they are bilingual (but their English is much worse than their native Tiv language (Tiv-Batu subgroup of the Bantoid branch of the Benue-Congo subdivision of Niger-Congo)), they know only their own culture and believe that people in all world are the same.

This concept of "universal understanding" brought her audience to idea that this young European girl (because all whites should be Europeans) do not remember this history exactly. She made a lot of mistakes and some details of Hamlet history were so strange for Tiv traditions that they were even faint to acknowledge that Europe is really another world. Bohannan told about Hamlet in very simple words and Tiv understood Hamlet plot, but very generally.

Different cultural backgrounds not only make the Tiv and Bohannan have very different interpretations of Hamlet status ("son of chief") or the general ideas of life and death. But the Tiv people interpreted several specific aspects of the story much differently than the modern Western culture.

Almost from the beginning of Bohannan's tale, tribe members interrupted to question and disagree with her about most of the key elements in the story. There was the appearance of Hamlet's father's ghost, Claudius' marriage to Gertrude, the fact that Hamlet couldn't marry Ophelia, Hamlet's madness,

Polonius' death, Ophelia's drowning death and the poison for after the final duel.

The ghost of Hamlet's father appeared in the castle to inform Hamlet of the truth about his death. The most of modern people could easily explain what is a ghost. The Tiv thought otherwise. The tribesmen scoffed at the notion that Hamlet's father is a ghost because they don't believe that any individual part of human personality survives after death.

Tiv culture believes in witches and witchcraft, and then Hamlet's father image must have been a zombie sent by witches as an omen. I like this passage from Bohannan's essay: "The old men muttered: such omens were matters for chiefs and elders, not for youngsters; no good could come of going behind a chief's back; clearly Horatio was not a man who knew things" (Bohannan).

It seems that witches and their magic power were reality for Tiv people. You know that their religious beliefs were centered around the concept of *akombo*, defined as magical forces and their emblems. Between concepts of "ghost" and "akombo" we have intercultural gap. These words cannot be translated to other language without losing some sense. Any translation is approximation only. For full understanding people should be members of certain society.

Let's go on. In the story of Hamlet, Hamlet's uncle, Claudius, marries Hamlet's mother, Gertrude. This marriage was only two months after Claudius' brother, the King, was killed. The modern Western culture feels that this marriage was incestuous. It also took place too soon after the death

<https://assignbuster.com/linguistic-culture/>

of her husband. The Tiv, however, found no problem with it. It was a custom for the natives for the brother of a deceased man to marry his wife. This way, the fields could be taken care of and the farms could be managed.

Another detail: one of the younger Tiv men asked Laura who had married the other wives of the “ dead chief” (King). When she told that the King had only one wife they were surprised. “ But a chief must have many wives! How else can he brew beer and prepare food for all his guests?” (Bohannan). Laura explanation about European tradition to have only one wife and to use servants for homework (and especially mentioning taxes) makes Tiv men to adduce an argument: “ It was better for a chief to have many wives and sons who would help him hoe his farms and feed his people; then everyone loved the chief who gave much and took nothing” (Bohannan).

As you remember, in the Shakespeare’s play, Hamlet could not marry his true love, Ophelia, because he was royalty and she a commoner. The Tiv disagreed with this also. They felt that the marriage should be permitted because since Hamlet was royalty, then he could shower Ophelia’s father, Polonius, with gifts and money. This seemed to be very rational to the Tiv, although it seems to be an odd to the modern Western culture.

Since Hamlet was not permitted to marry Ophelia, he went mad. In the western tradition the positive imaging of love madness appeared probably in troubadours’ songs, probably in more ancient times. But for African tribe it was impossible to attribute madness to unhappy love affair. The Tiv felt that Hamlet’s madness was attributed to more serious cause – to witchcraft. They

said her that “ only witchcraft can make anyone mad, unless, of course, one sees the beings that lurk in the forest” (Bohannan).

Laura did the best to explain relations between Hamlet, his uncle and his mother. These episodes of the play were absolutely unclear for Tiv people. They had several arguments for their position. Hamlet scolded his mother for her sin but man should never scold his mother. Hamlet wanted to kill Claudius who killed his father but nobody can kill or attempt to kill his elders (in Tiv traditions). Tiv men said Hamlet should have contacted his father’s friends to avenge the murder of King but do not try and avenge the murder himself.

I found no Tiv reactions (and no explanation by Laura) to the moment when Hamlet went to kill Claudius but found him praying. He did not kill him because he believed that killing Claudius while in prayer would send Claudius’s soul to heaven. We know that Tiv do not believe in the beyond. So this motive should not be clear for them. Laura missed this episode. May be she felt that she had no chances to explain this for her audience? She also did not tell about Hamlet’s words about Polonius’ murder “ Heaven hath pleased it so / To punish me with this, and this with me” (Hamlet, III. iv. 157–158) and about Polonius’ body “ The body is with the king, but the king is not with the body” (Hamlet IV. ii. 25–26).

When Hamlet killed Polonius, Ophelia’s father, she was so distraught after hearing about this that she committed suicide by drowning herself. The Tiv were strongly opposed to this. They felt that only witches could make someone drown because water alone cannot hurt someone. “ It is merely

something one drinks and bathes in” (Bohannon). They understood that Ophelia’s brother, Laertes, killed her to sell her to the witches because he ran out of money.

Also, at Ophelia’s funeral, Laertes jumped into her grave to say his last goodbye. Hamlet then jumped into the grave to say his last goodbye, also. The Tiv thought that Laertes was trying to steal the body so he could sell it to the witches. Since Hamlet jumped in, then he saved Ophelia’s body from being sold. They felt that Laertes wanted to kill Hamlet because he prevented him from selling Ophelia’s body. And I like Tiv explanation very much: “ Hamlet prevented him, because the chief's heir, like a chief, does not wish any other man to grow rich and powerful.” (Bohannon)

About understanding the duel between Hamlet and Laertes. King Claudius gave Laertes a poisoned rapier (probably Laura translated it as “ machete”) so that Hamlet would die even if he was just scratched by the sword. Laertes has his sword poisoned in an effort to do Hamlet in once and for all. Claudius wanted Hamlet dead because he knew the truth about his father’s death. Just in case Hamlet survived the battle, a glass of poisoned wine was waiting for the victor.

The wine unfortunately fell into the wrong hands, and Hamlet’s mother drank it and died. The modern Western culture believes that the wine was intended for Hamlet in case he survived the duel. The Tiv believe otherwise. They felt that the wine was intended for the victor of the match, either Hamlet or Laertes. They thought that it would be used to kill Hamlet because he knew true about the murder of his father, or it would be used to kill Laertes so no

one would know about the conspiracy between him and Claudius to kill Hamlet.

I think that the main point of Bohannan's essay was to illustrate that different cultures interpret things differently. What we accept is influenced by our own cultural and linguistic values. Both interpretations of Hamlet are correct according to the cultural values of the two different cultures. (May be Tiv opinion is more correct because they proposed for Laura to tell them some more stories of her country.

They said " 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." (Bohannan)) It seems that the author intentions is not a matter. If our interpretation is different than that of the author, but the story still influenced our life, then that is all that matters. Word is just symbol and everyone can understand it how he can. But if you want to communicate with other people you should learn their culture and to speak their language.

References:

Bohannan, Laura (1971), from *Conformity and Conflict: Readings in Cultural Anthropology*, eds. James P. Spradley and David W. McCurdy Boston: Little Brown and Company.

EthnographicAtlas of the Center of Social Anthropology and Computing.
University of Kent at Canterbury

William Shakespeare. *Hamlet* The Oxford Shakespeare. 1914

<https://assignbuster.com/linguistic-culture/>