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Multimedia Research  
and Documentation  
of Oral Genres in Africa –  
The Step Forward

edited by

Daniela Merolla  
Jan Jansen  
Kamal Naït-Zerrad

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LIT



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## INTRODUCTION

*Daniela Merolla*

While the voices of performers now resound through speaker amplifiers and cameras flash among the audience, the performance of songs and tales continue to inform fundamental questions and the cultural experience of individuals and societies. The papers collected in this volume approach a central concern of oral literature studies worldwide: how to deal with oral genres in a world where new technologies have become available to more and more people?

Questions concerning the interface of 'classic' and 'new' oral forms in an increasingly technologized world are hardly new. What *is* new in the present book is that the spotlight is directed towards (old and new) 'interlocutors' who cooperate in the making of technologized oral genres. The production of technologized oral performances depend on performers and audiences, video-sound technicians, ICT experts, and quite often researchers and non-academic scholars who mediate between academic scholars, performers, technicians and audiences. Their interactions affect the performance as well as research; their roles and positions raise questions particularly when local/national identities and commercial interests are at stake. Methodological and ethical issues are further raised as researchers collecting and documenting oral genres become interlocutors in creating technologized oral performances.

Perhaps the catchword here is 'complexity'. Voices, graphic signs and electronic impulses compete and concur in intricate ways, with concepts such as 'technauriture', 'transmediality', 'technologized oral performances', 'oral/techno poetics' and 'technoscripts' trying to catch the multilayered, intersecting and composite workings of modes and technologies used by people to create, transmit, institutionalize, remember and lay claim to verbal art forms.

A relentless inquiry on the impact of technology on 'oral traditions' has characterized our field since the nineteenth century studies on folktales and folksongs.<sup>1</sup> Anthropologists, historians, sociologists, linguists and literary scholars have debated whether the technology of (print) literacy revolutionized human cognition or whether a continuum existed between modes of human communication. If – as famous scholars asserted<sup>2</sup> – writing manipulated visual space and cognition in ways that were impossible in oral communication, how did the 'shift to literacy'

<sup>1</sup> For definitions see Okpewho 1992.

<sup>2</sup> The classicists Parry & Lord (1954) focused on continuities and differences between literacy and orality, which were then debated by scholars such as Goody 1963, 1977, Ong 1982 and Havelock (1986). Parry & Lord found the basic mechanisms for oral composition to differ from those for literate composition. Ong and Goody argued literacy changed cognition. Havelock asserted that the ancient Greek Revolution pivoted on the invention of alphabetic writing.

affect oral cultures? Was orality disappearing? In contrast, the idea of a continuum between orality and literacy resides in the fact that orality persists in literate societies and is often adapted in writing. Moreover, the human voice can be conceived as a tool (and in this sense again as a 'technology') for communication.<sup>3</sup> On the whole, the orality-literacy debate served to redirect scholarly attention to 'performance' as characterizing oral communication – and to the interactions between orality, literacy and mass media.

New polemics followed. African studies for example has discussed radio and TV as either 'eroding' or innovating oral genres.<sup>4</sup> The negative interpretation of mass media's impact concerns both the content of what is transmitted as well as the audience's passive role following the demise of live interaction with performers.<sup>5</sup> Other scholars, however, have pointed to the 'counter-hegemonic' innovations of broadcasted oral genres that affect content as well as interaction with the public. For example, radio songs may innovate on both form and content to address contemporary social and political themes, thereby shaping broader national publics beyond the strictly local publics created by direct interaction with face-to-face audiences, such as the children addressed in storytelling sessions or the guests and hosts addressed by praise poems.<sup>6</sup> The shift in scholarly attention towards the effects of interaction between orality, literacy and new media have contributed to the theoretical reconstruction of the field of study, as reflected for example in *Orality, Literacy and Modern Media* (1996) edited by Scheunemann, and in the discussion on media in Africa in the *Journal of African Cultural Studies* (2003). Other recent studies have begun investigating forms of technologized oral genres on the Internet and through mobile phones,<sup>7</sup> showing that the remediation of oral genres through new media appears 'as a new specialization of the verbal arts/artists and their public, one which requires some technical knowledge and even a basic literacy from audiences' (Merolla s.d.).

Since 2006, a network of specialists in African languages, literatures, history and anthropology has again addressed the field of orality/technology interaction

<sup>3</sup> Counter-arguments included the criticism of the dichotomy between orality and literacy, see Finnegan & Horton 1972; Chafe & Tannen 1987; Gunner 1989; and the revised position of Goody 1987.

<sup>4</sup> The 'erosion' of orality was defined by Schulz 2001: 346.

<sup>5</sup> For example Adélewe-Fayemi 1994; Andrzejewski 1985; Diawara 1997; Kadima-Nzuji 1987; Mbembe 1992. The 'erosion' approach was influenced by studies of mass-media such as McLuhan 1989 and Adorno & Horkheimer 2002. In particular, TV and radio were seen as manipulative forms of communication that negatively affected human cognition, whether or not they were supported by literacy or orality. A revised analysis of such negative effects is in Habermas 1981 and in recent approaches to new and mass media such as Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod & Larkin 2002.

<sup>6</sup> See Bagalwa-Mapatano 2004; Barber 1997; Coplan 1995, 2001; Kaschula 1991, 1997, 2001; Kaschula & Mostert 2009; Tomaselli 1997; Vail & White 1991; Schulz 1997.

<sup>7</sup> For example Kaschula 2004; Kaschula & Mostert 2009, 2011; Lafkioui & Merolla 2008; Lamoureux 2010; Merolla 2005; Ricard & Veit-Wild 2005.

within the African verbal arts. The present volume is an outcome of activities supported by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) and multiple partner universities.<sup>8</sup> The common starting point is that the new technologies of audio-video recording challenge verbal arts performers and students, but also offer new possibilities, whether used as a medium for creation and diffusion by performers (Kaschula, Van Beek, and Pieterse in this volume), as a tool for study and documentation of oral genres by researchers (Bounfour & Naït-Zerrad, Van Engelenhoven, Jansen, Merolla & Ameka, and Seitel in this volume) or for teaching (Dorvlo and De Sterck in this volume). Critical of the classical anthropological aim of 'giving voice to' informants and aware of the narrative authorial/authoritarian voice of published collections,<sup>9</sup> all the articles collected here have shifted attention from recorded materials to the interaction of the 'interlocutors' in various phases of recording and research.

Russell Kaschula's contribution opens the theoretical discussion by proposing the term 'technauriture'. It integrates technology, 'auriture' (the aural aspects of producing and receiving oral literature) and literature and approaches their interaction in terms of 'appropriation' of the oral into the literate – and we could add, of both the oral and the literate into new media. Kaschula also speaks of technology as 'companionship' to oral heritage and community development (Kaschula & Mostert 2009). As an encompassing theoretical paradigm, 'technauriture' urges us to consider the position of the multiple 'interlocutors' in both processes of 'appropriation' and 'companionship'. As an example, Kaschula offers the case of the digitalizing of the oral performances of the Xhosa poet Bongani Sitole and the commercial technologizing of their verbal arts by poets and storytellers such as Zolani Mkiva, Lebo Mashile, Gcina Mhlophele and the Botsotso Jesters.

As Kaschula notes, a growing number of African 'artists of the word' now use new media technologies to create and spread their songs and poems. They perform

<sup>8</sup> The first project, 'African Oral Literatures, New Media, and Technologies: Challenges for Research and Documentation', was launched at Leiden University and was funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO), the University of Hamburg (Asia-Africa Institute), the University of Naples for Oriental Studies (IUO), the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales (INALCO) in Paris, and the Centre of African Studies at the School of African and Oriental Studies (SOAS) in London. The second project, 'Multimedia Research and Documentation of African Oral Genres: Connecting Diasporas and Local Audiences', has been funded until 2013 by institutions that supported the previous project and by the World Oral Literature Project (Cambridge). New institutional contacts have been established with African universities and researchers at the University of Bamako, the Language Centre of the University of Ghana, and the School of Languages of Rhodes University. Both projects were initiated by Daniela Merolla and coordinated jointly by Daniela Merolla and Jan Jansen (both from Leiden University). This network generated three volumes in the multimedia *Verba Africana* series (volume 3, 4, and 5) and the volume *From Oral Literature to Video: The case of Hausa* (edited by Joseph McIntyre & Mechthild Reh).

<sup>9</sup> For example Clifford & Marcus 1986, Fabian 1990, Geerts 1988, Rosaldo 1989, Rabinaw 1988, Spivak 1990.

in 'classic' oral situations but also for the radio and in music halls and make use of the microphone, audio-cassettes, digital cameras, camcorders and the Internet.

The essays by Van Beek and Pieterse reflect on storytellers and singers who continue to create their performances through oral improvisation, but increasingly record their texts (or others do it for them) and use recorded materials to teach, learn and recreate new oral performances in technologized environments.

Walter Van Beek has documented the long 'sonorous chant' performed during Dogon funeral rites (*baja ni*) since 1973. The time span of the documentation allows a 'thick' description of the funeral songs, presented in the context of ritual performances, social interactions and mythical narratives. The description gives the reader a glimpse into the media practices of research (tape recorder, BBC film) and the smooth technologizing of Dogon funeral rituals and everyday life. Since the end of the 1990s, youths and hotel keepers use ghetto blasters and tape recorders, people listen to FM radio stations broadcasting in Dogon, and CDs are on the market. In Van Beek's words, such changes 'gently' affect the *baja ni* by accentuating the aspects of performance and show, not only to appeal to tourists or for monetary reasons, but by allowing performers to rehearse after listening to their recorded singing.

Technology and 'sedimentation' – or 'the echo of each [medium] into the next' – resolutely characterize the performances of South African poets. Annel Pieterse presents the video clips and webpages of the poets Jitsvinger (Quintin Goliah), Jethro Louw and Kgafela oa Magogodi – referred to online as 'spoken word author', 'vernacular artist' and 'praise poet'. Analyzing their video clips, Pieterse discusses how accessible recording devices allow the inclusion – in both researchers' and the public's consciousness – of what (in Charles Bernstein's footsteps) we could call 'the disattend track', i.e. the recording operator, the rest of the audience, and the space/location of the performance.

The following four papers address specific aspect of the rights (and obligations) of those who cooperate in the making of technologized oral genres, in particular when researchers are involved in the documentation of verbal arts.

Anne-Marie Dauphin-Tinturier presents an extensive historical overview of the discussion on authorship and its concretization in the French legal system, focusing on the systematic archiving of works through the Internet. In discussing the digital documentation of oral forms, she raises the problematic issue of the cultural rights of those who contribute as informants and translators, and of the local community at large – whose knowledge informs commentaries and interpretations of the researcher who de-composes and re-composes the recording and the digital document. She suggests using the notion of 'collective work' ('*œuvre collective*') owned by a local communal association as legal entity. Bernard Kleikamp, who discusses the problems of recording and documenting from his perspective as a

professional producer of 'world music', focuses on the issue of copy rights in the Anglophone world. His straightforward conclusion is that, whatever criticisms have been raised, 'the system works'.

The complex questions and strategies related to copy-rights 'in the field' are discussed in essays by Jan Jansen and Aone van Engelenhoven. Jansen focuses on the strategies of people who are – or retrospectively perceive themselves to be – 'forgotten' by the researchers when they ask permission to collect oral traditions. Researchers and documentarians know the difficulties of arranging (written, audio and visual) recordings in the Mande area; Jansen, who has worked with a family of 'griots' in Southwestern Mali since 1988, has personal experience of the discussions on 'who' has the authority to authorize the record. Analysing the preparations and the video recording he took in 2007, Jansen focuses on an 'interlocutor' who seems to behave in an inappropriate manner and convincingly interprets the apparently strange behaviour as a strategy to assert 'copy-rights' in the future.

The next article approaches, from a comparative angle, the question of individual and collective ownership and illustrates the commonalities with – but also the cultural specificities of – the question of copy-rights discussed for African cases in this volume. Van Engelenhoven's essay offers the example of multiple and competing rights concerning the 'Lord of the Golden Cloth', a funeral text for important clan members from the Lautem district of East Timor. Van Engelenhoven analyzes the long process of the funeral text's publication, which included numerous difficulties raised and finally settled by national institutions and East Timorese clans. He shows that the text's ownership is intertwined with the colonial and post-colonial history of Timor island and Indonesia, with the competing interests of 'stakeholders', the language community, national institutions, and with international, national and local (academic and non-academic) researchers and documentarians and the international organizations that support them.

If transcripts remain a key element in the textual analysis of oral genres, many scholars today consider the 'classic' written transcription of oral literatures to be too limiting for documenting performances (see Finnegan 1992; Okpewho 1992; Schipper 1990; Tedlock 1983).<sup>10</sup> New forms of video documentation and research give greater space to the intonation, the gestures and the eventual musical accompaniment, to the interactions between performer and public, and to all those elements that usually get lost in written forms of documentation and study. Films and new media technologies such as digital video recording, websites, mobile phones, weblogs and chat-boxes have indeed revolutionized the documentation of

<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, African oral genres are available almost exclusively in written form (Coulet Western 1975; Baumgardt & Bounfour 2000; Görög-Karady 1981; Westley 1991) and only a handful of current projects involve the digitalization and video documentation of African oral genres (see Kaschula's article).

oral literature and offer new perspectives for analysis.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, video documentation is not the 'ultimate solution' as it covers only a part of the performance; as is the case for written transcription (or whatever other format), it implies a process of selection. Moreover, audio-visual recording technology is not only a mechanical tool to record events; it affects what is documented and, by affecting what is recorded, constructs new possibilities, negotiations and realities.

The papers by Seitel, Bounfour & Nait-Zerrad, Dorvlo, De Sterck, and Merolla & Ameka examine the practical and theoretical consequences of this vital shift towards digital research, documentation and teaching. Such negotiations involve the presence and cooperation of video-sound technicians, ICT experts and researchers who become interlocutors in creating technologized oral performances.

Introducing the Synchronotext software, Peter Seitel's paper discusses in detail a variety of practices related to the documentation of oral performances and their related problems. Seitel's analytic reflections, starting from 'representation' and concluding with 'the safeguarding of performance traditions', show that computers have become an indispensable tool in the preservation of oral traditions and that the Synchronotext software implements 'ambitions and possibilities' of computer-based documentation and academic education. The technical presentation of the software in the second part of his article can be seen as a useful 'manual for users'.

Abdellah Bounfour & Kamal Nait-Zerrad's article is an instance of academic educational ambition implemented by Synchronotext. The authors used the software to enrich the 'literature' section of the website of the Centre de Recherche Berbère (CRB) with video, performance analysis and annotations. In presenting the CRB website – an example of digital information and documentation addressing researchers, students and the 'grand public' alike – Bounfour and Nait-Zerrad raise the important point that semi-scientific information and video documents marked by 'folklorization' (when oral genres become stereotyped, losing their social and aesthetic depth and/or monetized and manipulated) circulate in the community and on the Internet. They suggest researchers take a stand on unsound information by enlarging the section addressing the 'grand public' and by creating new video documents respecting basic scientific criteria.

Kofi Dorvlo's article discusses fieldwork practices and the specific case of documentation and use in context of the first volume of *Verba Africana*, a series of videos of African oral genres with translations and interpretive commentaries informed by scientific research. Dorvlo collected the Ewe stories presented in *Verba Africana I* and re-used the volume for testing language knowledge among

<sup>11</sup> For example, Barber 2008; Kaschula & Mostert 2009; Furniss 2006; Merolla's ongoing series *Verba Africana*. See also media projects by Veit-Wild (Humboldt University) and Fendler & Wendl (University of Bayreuth) mentioned in Kaschula & Mostert 2011.

Logbe-Ewe bilingual children and among children who have Ewe as a mother tongue. Using the video in the classroom 'rekindled' the interest in storytelling in both pupils and teachers, and Dorvlo suggests the creation of 'heritage libraries' to support the transmission and appreciation of the narratives and the conveyed artistic and cultural expression (proverbs, allegories and metaphors).

Marita de Sterck, a teacher and author of children's books, audio-recorded narratives from the Kajana – the descendants of West African slaves who escaped from plantations in Surinam – with the intention to publish them in Dutch and to use them as educational tools for children. The request to share and to reciprocate the knowledge acquired while collecting Kajana stories clearly emerges in De Sterck's article: she was asked to tell Kajana children her own stories and to teach them how to 'make children's books'. By illustrating how Anansi narratives are used among the Kajana and as educational tools in Belgium and the Netherlands, De Sterck shows the multiple interactions of text versions, video- and audio-recordings, animations and Internet sites.

The last essay addresses, in light of the interaction of local/global and oral/written (school) forms of knowledge, the question 'how does technology influence orality?' Discussing the making of the fourth volume of the *Verba Africana* series, Daniela Merolla & Felix Ameka consider the case when all persons involved in the oral performance and its video documentation are academics and teachers, albeit in different positions and roles, and the record is made available to a large public through academic sites on the Internet. In such instances, the forms, strategies and aims of the 'glocal' (local and globalized) knowledge of the storyteller need to be explained to the audience in a more mediated and critical way than is usual in the video documentation of oral genres. Ameka and Merolla see researchers as spokespersons for their interviewees: researchers select video fragments to mediate ('protect') the communication between interviewee and audience, and offer the text of the interview through writing and explicative commentary. In contrast to the idea of the egalitarian positioning of researchers and storytellers in research and documentation (Fabian 1990), the provocative idea of researcher-griots suggests that scholars take responsibility for their position as 'editors' who mediate between performers, audiences, and local and international scholars in more complex ways, both scientifically and ethically, than was previously advocated.

Schipper's epilogue restates that many unanswered questions are raised by intermediality and technology, which have created new genres and languages of oral literature as well as a new aesthetics. As in the past, she concludes, we will long struggle with the concept and practice of authorship as the verbal arts – 'classic' or 'technologized', explicitly or in hidden ways – are invariably the fruit of collaborative work.

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